ABSTRACT

Charlotte and Anne Brontë's Visions of Religion, Conventionality, and Morality

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In this thesis I explore how religion shapes moral awareness and agency in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. After briefly discussing the religious and philosophical framework of moral agency in the nineteenth century, I examine Jane Eyre's questioning of the relationship between religion, conventionality, and morality by examining key passages in which Jane's most decisive actions are framed within religious language and moral awakening. In the third chapter, I explore how Helen Huntingdon's view of feminine morality affects her agency, paying particular attention to her response to definitions of femininity which limit her spiritual integrity. In the fourth chapter and conclusion I compare the endings of the two novels and examine the ways in which reading the development of the female characters' moral agency through the lens of religion expands our interpretation of their radical individuality and social critique.

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The beginnings of this thesis were in a shorter project I completed during study abroad, entitled, "To what degree do Charlotte and Anne Brontë's heroines create independent identities by exercising moral agency within the social constraints of the spaces in which they find themselves?" I began writing about "moral agency" in the two works covered in this earlier project, and those ideas which began in germ form are more completely written about and expanded upon in this work. This project also departs from the previous work's emphasis on social, intellectual, and physical space by focusing on the effects of religion and conventionality.

CHAPTER ONE:

Introduction

In this thesis I am considering character development in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* through the lens of moral agency to add a consideration of religion as a factor in how we read feminine agency within these novels. I argue that to understand the development of the female protagonists in Charlotte and Anne Brontë's two novels, we should consider the role of religion in their development, specifically in their growth as independent moral agents. I argue that in questioning both convention and blind obedience to ostensibly Christian principles, the Brontës reevaluate society's understanding of morality.

My initial theme of interest for this thesis was the relationship between religion and social critique, specifically concerning the question of the "ideal woman." I was intrigued by women writers' concern with how the individual woman relates to social structures such as the church and gender hierarchies established through convention. As I read *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, I found the common theme of moral agency illuminated through scenes of the heroines taking counter-cultural action in reaction to particular moral, religious, or conventional constructs.

Defining Terms

Jane Eyre provides the clearest example of the author's concern with conventionality, morality, and religion as the terms are explicitly used in Brontë's preface: Brontë boldly states, "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not

religion (*JE Preface* 1).[1] In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* underneath blatant discussions of religion lie assumptions of gendered morality, and Anne Brontë characterizes her novel as a moral tale intended as a warning for readers: "I wish to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it…when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it" (*WH* 3). Drawing from both novel's stated moral and religious interests, I will analyze the female characters' development of agency, particularly *moral* agency. Moral agency, for the purposes of the present analysis, refers to a character taking personal responsibility and concrete action based on a recognition of themselves as an independent agent. Jane Eyre and Helen Huntingdon's agency is moral because both take action based upon moral principles and disrupt cultural standards of morality. Jane Eyre rejects the equation of conventionality and morality, while Helen Huntingdon rejects narrow definitions of feminine morality. Because they challenge conventional measures of morality, arguing that these measures are not truly moral, Jane and Helen act as independent moral agents.

Moral Agency

An agent is most simply defined as "a thing or person that acts to produce a particular result" (*Oxford Dictionary of English)*. Agency then is action for a purpose, a *telos.* Just as political agency is motivated towards political ends through political means, *moral agency* is action with a moral telos. It transcends economic, political or social considerations, although it certainly affects all of these. One point of distinction to make is between *moral* action and *ethical* action. Both terms have to do with judging the "rightness" of particular actions, but I have chosen the term *moral* because of its presence

[1]I will discuss Charlotte Brontë's preface more fully in Chapter Two.

in the period. Whereas the realm of ethics tends to deal with specific actions, morality differs from ethics in that it was commonly featured in conjunction with expectations of behavior in the nineteenth century. Individuality ties closely to morality, as it involves individual choice within or against the framework of society. In *The Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes, "Individuality means, among other things, choosing for myself instead of merely being shaped by the constraint of political or social sanction" (Appiah 5). Appiah's definition of individuality sheds light on why independent moral agency is a means of discussing gender conflict in the period; as women began resisting social standards, they were expressing themselves as independent agents, unhampered by the strictures of society.

Philosopher Charles Taylor's discussion of human agency and desire provides a theoretical foundation for my discussion of agency and character development. In discussing the human agent, Taylor associates "responsibility" with our understanding of selfhood: "In at least our modern notion of the self, responsibility has a strong sense. We think of the agent not only as partly responsible for what he does, for the degree to which he acts in line with his evaluations, but also as responsible in some sense for these evaluations" (Taylor 28). Taylor then identifies "second-order desires" as the locus of evaluation; these secondary desires which "engage our responsibility" closely relate to the tension between religion and society which shapes the character's sense of moral agency (Taylor 29). At the beginning of each novel, the heroines have undeveloped methods of decision making; they are what Taylor calls the simple "weigher," and both are moved by emotions (26). As the novels progress, they encounter pressure from the

misuse of moral and religious arguments used by other characters. The pressure towards narrow conformity makes them reevaluate their actions and decision making.

Faced with a choice between what society claims is right (often within a superficially Christian framework in the nineteenth century), and what religious principle or conscience claims is right, the heroines in the Brontë novels become moral agents through their acts of evaluation and ultimately their choices. The choice to act in a counter-cultural way is not religious by definition, but as I will demonstrate in the following chapters, religion plays a substantial role in the decision-making process. In both novels, religion serves as a catalyst whereby each woman claims a basis for moral agency independent of certain strictures of society.

As will be discussed in their respective chapters, these characters' actions challenge particular moralities and have implications for women as moral agents which were radical for the nineteenth century. I will explore the following questions: To what effect does Charlotte Brontë use religion to shape her heroine's moral awareness and agency? How does Helen Huntingdon's view of feminine morality affect her agency? How does religion reshape our understanding of the endings of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*? Given the centrality of moral agency to these questions, it is necessary to provide historical context to merit using the term for these novels, as well as a discussion of how religion has played a role in recent literary studies.

Women as Moral Beings in the Nineteenth Century

It is difficult to generalize about a period from a few novels' particular depictions, and thus it is useful to explore the larger cultural background with which the authors appear to take interest. I have contended that morality, a code for discerning right

conduct, is a central theme of interest in the novels I am exploring. However, when considering the nineteenth century, it is impossible to speak of morality without addressing religion, for the two went hand in hand at that time. Additionally, conventionality as a set of cultural norms was often reinforced by or at times even equated with religion and morality. All three of these realms merge when considering the role of women in the period, particularly in the expectations of how women should behave and to what (or to whom) they should look to guide their behavior.

Cultural conversations contemporary to the novels were very much concerned with the intersection of gender, morality, and identity in ways which shaped conceptions of women's moral responsibility. Two works which typify women's moral role are Sarah Lewis' *Woman's Mission* (1839) and Coventry Patmore's "The Angel in the House" (1854). Lewis emphasizes women's religious duty to reform, writing of women's reformative affection as, "Love, the most contagious of all moral contagions, the regenerating principle of the world!" (Lewis 110). She urged her contemporaries to take up their religious calling to reform society through moral education:

> Let women begin this good work; they are eminently qualified for the acceptance of the two great truths of the gospel, love and self-renunciation, which qualities are more or less placed in the hearts of all women; they are naturally disposed to reverence, to worship, to self-sacrifice, for the sake of a beloved object. (145)…The women, then, who are to be the regenerators of society must be Christian women,--Christian wives and Christian mothers (146).…Let Christianity then be the basis of women's own education…so shall they perform their mission, not with murmuring and repining at their inferior nature and narrow sphere, but with joy and rejoicing that they are agents in that great work" (Lewis 149).

Lewis conflates religion and moral duty in this excerpt by identifying women as the "regenerators of society." Their mission is social and educational, and Lewis explicitly calls women "agents" in the task of reform. In the preface to her work, Lewis explicitly

states “the fact of moral responsibility” (*Preface iv*). Lewis’ poem illustrates behavior and belief intertwined to produce standards of gendered morality; moral action in society is associated specifically with women through the use of religious rhetoric, as seen in Lewis’ elevation of Christian wives and mothers, as well as her elevation of Christian virtues of love and self-sacrifice as particularly feminine. These are themes which occur in both of the novels I will discuss in this thesis.

Additionally, Coventry Patmore’s iconic poem portrayed a woman’s role as a passive, pious “angel” whose sole purpose was to please her husband:

Man must be pleased; but him to please
Is woman’s pleasure; down the gulf
Of his condoled necessities
She casts her best, she flings herself.
How often flings for nought, and yokes
Her heart to an icicle or whim,
Whose each impatient word provokes
Another, not from her, but him;
While she, too gentle even to force
His penitence by kind replies,
Waits by, expecting his remorse,
With pardon in her pitying eyes;
And if he once, by shame oppress’d,
A comfortable word confers,
She leans and weeps against his breast,
And seems to think the sin was hers;
…
She loves with love that cannot tire;
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,
Through passionate duty love springs higher,
As grass grows taller round a stone
(Patmore 74-5, l. 1-16, 21-24).

This poem reflects themes specifically in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* and many scholars have discussed the tension between the novel and Patmore’s “Angel in the House” construction, specifically in reference to the poem’s portrayal of a woman’s subjugation of herself to the whims of her husband. In light of my discussion, two

themes emerge from this poem of note; first the woman taking responsibility for the "sin" of the man, and the concept of a woman as longsuffering and even more righteous than a man, as she extends "pardon." These are images of femininity which feature strongly in *Tenant* and serve as a point of tension in the heroine's development of her own identity. A plethora of other literary forms reinforced women's uniquely moral role; for example, as Mary Poovey points out, women's conduct manuals selected information for female readers based on the assumption of women as moral beings (Poovey 16).

In addition to socially constructed roles, religious shifts preceding and throughout the century significantly shaped ideas about women's inherent spirituality. For example, the spiritualizing of women through the rise of evangelicalism and the heightened importance of the domestic sphere deeply affected standards and expectations for female behavior.[2] In comparison with expectations for men, Suzie Steinbach remarks that "even as people endlessly debated the source, essence, and purpose of morality, it was generally agreed upon, as it had not been earlier, that women were naturally more moral than men" (Steinbach *Women in England* 133). This distinction was based in part upon the view that men and women had definably different spheres of influence, otherwise known as "the doctrine of separate spheres"—while men were out in the world, women were charged with the moral fabric of the home and future society, and as such, "men were socially and politically dominant; women were morally superior" (Steinbach *Understanding the Victorians* 166).

[2]For an overview of Evangelicalism's relationship to the spiritualizing of women and their sphere, see Chapter 1 of Mary Poovey's *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer.*

Religion in Literary Studies

Religion plays a central role in analyzing morality in nineteenth-century novels. Morality and religion were closely intertwined in the Victorian world, and thus, discussions about how female characters make moral arguments often have religious undertones. I would argue that scholarship upon aspects of feminine identity in the nineteenth century apart from religion often miss a salient element. Studies of the effects of religion across disciplines, and especially in literature, have become increasingly common, especially in "postsecular" studies as laid out by Lori Branch in *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Religion.* According to Branch, religious studies in literature have evoked resistance in the past because of "critical methodologies that assumed the truth of the secularization thesis—that religious institutions, beliefs, and practices decline with modernity" (Branch 3). Branch notes postsecular studies as "denoting scholarly methods that are genuinely emergent and cast a critical gaze on secularism" (4). The postsecular approach is not simply one that questions the trajectory of a complete secularization of society, but rather extends an awareness of the ways religion shaped texts in their historical context that have been overlooked in literary studies; the increased openness to look at religion is well summarized by Misty Anderson as a way to "read religion in rather than out of history" (qtd. in Branch 7). Branch notes an increased focus "to the ways gender and national identities have been mediated by religious ones" (Branch 2). Turning particularly to the subject of the self, which this thesis explores in the developing individual agency of each heroine, postsecular studies provide a way seeing the formation of the self as both a religious and moral enterprise:

> The organism...becomes a self by embarking with others upon the construction of an "objective" and moral universe of meaning…It is in keeping with an elementary

> sense of the concept of religion to call the transcendence of biological nature by the human organism a religious phenomenon…We may therefore regard the social processes that lead to the formation of Self as fundamentally religious (Luckmann qtd in Branch 7-8).

This connection between religion, morality, and selfhood plays a role in my understanding of the term *moral agency.* In the last decade, Mark Knight and Emma Mason have drawn particular attention to the importance of religion in nineteenth-century studies:

> Theological debate was almost inseparable from philosophical, scientific, medical, historical, and political thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. To insist on rigid boundaries between the sacred and the secular, as many thinkers have done from the eighteenth century onwards, is to demarcate religious space in a narrow and misleading manner…there is a continual slippage between the sacred and the secular. Religious thought and practice are present throughout nineteenth-century literature and culture, sometimes in surprising and unexpected places (Knight and Mason 3).

Knight and Mason make a further distinction which applies to my analysis of the Brontës, namely that a study of religion in literature and culture is not to "Christianize the past," but rather a recognition that, "despite a divergence of belief and practice among different denominations and traditions, the majority of people in the nineteenth century perceived British culture to be principally Christian" (Knight and Mason 4). My reading does not attempt to "Christianize" the Brontë novels, but rather to uncover a layer of meaning which the religious elements of the text provide.

Nineteenth Century Moral Agency and Individuality

Knight and Mason summarize Matthew Arnold's defining of religion in *Literature and Dogma* (1873) as, "a guiding light fueled alternatively by human understanding of what is right in a given situation and the translation of that conclusion into action" (Knight and Mason 2). This relationship between religion and right action

forms the foundation of my understanding of moral agency. Arnold's exploration of religion and morality in relation to "conduct" demonstrates the tight interweaving of the concepts of conventional conduct, morality, and religion:

> Religion, if we follow the intention of human thought and human language in the use of the word, is ethics heightened, enkindled, lit up by feeling; the passage from morality to religion is made, when to morality is applied emotion. And the true meaning of religion is thus not simply *morality*, but *morality touched by emotion.* And this new elevation and inspiration of morality is well marked by the word 'righteousness'. Conduct is the word of common life, morality is the word of philosophical disquisition, righteousness is the word of religion (Arnold qtd. in Knight and Mason 2).

Knight and Mason conclude that "Arnold's responsible citizen, then, anchored him- or herself in a state of moral emotion produced from a dialectic of rational and faithful feeling" (Knight and Mason 3). The tension between emotion and religion becomes apparent in the romantic struggles of the heroines in the Brontës' novels. Each heroine finds herself caught between her own desire and conventional behavior. Her moral agency comes into play as she must decide how to balance her individuality with the moral precepts of society.

Past themes of interest in Brontë scholarship

In Brontë criticism within the last century, religion has played a minor or secondary role, serving as a means of discussing psychological, sexual, or political issues. John Maynard rightly noted in 2002, "Critics of the twentieth century did not much view the Brontë's within religious structures of understanding. Issues of psychology, sexuality, feminism, social power, even the apparently far-removed worlds of colonial and imperial England preoccupied us far more" (192). Even a brief overview of significant scholars in twentieth century scholarship supports Maynard's claim; Gilbert

and Gubar's seminal feminist work analyzed various themes such as madness, colonialism, and anger, although they hinted at a spiritual element in Jane's "pilgrimage" as a "distinctively female *Bildungsroman*" (342, 339). Terry Eagleton and others led the discussion of feminism and power dynamics, discussing moral conflict in *Tenant* in terms of power and class.[3]

Scholars have long been fascinated with Jane Eyre's character and employed a variety of literary approaches. My reading of *Jane Eyre* does not fit directly within or contradict feminist, political, or psychological readings, but rather suggests a dimension of Jane's character development that gives insight into Brontë's contribution to the construction of feminine individuality and cultural criticism. While Jane's radical individuality as a female figure is well-covered in scholarship, the exploration of how religion specifically forms her moral agency is less a topic of discussion. Scholarly analysis of the overtly religious characters in the novel has focused on the characters' role in supporting a patriarchal system; feminist analysis, such as that of Helene Moglen, identify spiritual tension as gendered and Jane's self-assertion as an attack against "male authority" (Moglen 112, 113).

Anne Brontë has been universally considered the most religious of her sisters, in large part due to Charlotte, who wrote with a hint of disapproval, "She was a very sincere and practical Christian, but the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief, blameless life" (C. Brontë in Allott 274). Previous scholarship has analyzed Helen's behavior by focusing on power dynamics and spirituality rather than specifically

[3]For a discussion on the political (class-based) dynamics of morality in *Tenant*, see Terry Eagleton's chapter on Anne Brontë in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës.*

through a discussion of *feminine morality*. In other words, while there have been several analyses of Helen's use of religion to perform counter-cultural actions, my chapter will focus more on how Helen's questioning of a definition of *feminine* morality itself is an act of moral agency. My analysis considers religion's connection to gendered morality rather than Helen's doctrines or interpretation of scripture. I will discuss Jane's moral agency developing from her moral awareness that relies heavily on Jane's perception of religion, and I will analyze Helen's moral agency in response to feminine morality that relies on religion in freeing, rather than oppressive, ways.

Previous Discussion of Religion in the Brontë's Work

Broader literary scholarship on the importance of religion and the sacred played a key role in my interest in analyzing the relationship between religion, conventionality, and morality. The combination of these concepts has been underestimated in previous analysis on the Brontës, which has been concerned more with their counter-cultural take on women's sexuality and gendered power-dynamics. My interest in examining how religion might reshape how we look at a literary theme such as agency draws from literary scholars' recent shift towards analyzing the effects of religion as a significant formative factor. Knight and Mason have argued that that in separating the sacred from the secular we miss inextricable elements of nineteenth century novels such as *Jane Eyre*, and as seen in Lori Branch's observations of the "religious turn" in scholarship, recent literary scholars have begun attending to the portrayal and use of religion in the Brontë's work (Branch 1). [4]

[4]For a key discussion of the importance of considering religion in 19th century literary studies, see the introduction to Mark Knight and Emma Mason's *Nineteenth-Century Religion and Literature: An Introduction*.

The Brontë's religious background has been well covered in biographies by Juliet Barker and particularly Marianne Thormählen. This biographical material sheds light on the Brontë's engagement with particular contemporary religious debates; for example, Charlotte Brontë's anti-Catholicism and critique of dissent has especially been well noted.[5] Anne's interest in Methodism and supposedly more pious and introspective nature as noted by her sister and biographers alike, (although the degree to which we know this is an accurate depiction is questionable), has shaped recent analysis of character development in *Tenant*.[6] The Brontë's use of scripture as also been well noted.[7] While biographies and Charlotte's letters shed a great deal of light on the content and context of these works, less scholarship has been devoted to the way in which religion plays a role in how we consider moral agency within female characters.

The focus of secondary discussions in relation to the Brontë's religion takes several directions. In Marxist and feminist scholarship, i.e. Terry Eagleton, Helene Moglen, and Gilbert and Gubar, the key terms are concerned with relations of power. For example, Mr. Brocklehurst and St. John are often interpreted as symbols of patriarchy with narrow religious tendencies, making them repressive religious figures; Gilbert and Gubar describe Brocklehurst as a "hypocritical patriarch" and a "column of frozen spirituality," a description which would also aptly describe St. John Rivers (344). Scholars have repeatedly discussed Charlotte's caricaturing of denominational figures as

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[5]See "Charlotte Brontë and the Church of Rome" in Thormählen's *The Brontës and Religion* for detailed religious background as well as "Religion in the Novels of Charlotte and Anne Bronte."

[6]See Melody Kemp's "Helen's Diary and the Method(ism) of Character in the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*.

[7]For example, see Keith Jenkins' *Charlotte Brontë's Atypical Typology*.

repressive, especially those adhering to Evangelical and Calvinist doctrines.[8] Scholars often take a dim view of the portrayal of religious characters in the Brontës' novels; for example, Gilbert and Gubar describe Helen Burns as an image of "self-renunciation, of all-consuming (and consumptive) spirituality" (346). Discussions on relations of power have extended more recently to self-understanding, giving rise to literature on psychology, most notably in Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, which examines the role of psychiatry and phrenology in Charlotte Brontë's work as a way of "decoding the external signs of the body in order to reveal the concealed inner play of forces which constitute individual subjectivity" (Shuttleworth 3).

Much of secondary literature has sought to define the Brontë's religion with differing results. Charlotte's support of the Anglican Church despite her criticisms has been aptly noted, most recently by Sara L. Pearson in *Anglican Women Novelists*. Other scholars, such as John Maynard, have read the Brontë sisters more as secularizing forces who undermine religious institutions.[9] Even the Brontë's contemporaries characterized their religion as abnormal, as an unsigned review noted of *Tenant*, "The religious sentiments which the authoress puts into the mouth of her heroines are either false or bad, or so vague and unmeaning as to add to the unreality of the scenes" (qtd in Allott 268).

[8]For example, see Elisabeth Jay's analysis of an Evangelical response to Charlotte's criticism: "*Thornycroft Hall*: An Evangelical Answer to *Jane Eyre*" in *The Religion of the Heart: Anglican Evangelicalism and the Nineteenth-Century Novel*. pp 244.

[9]Maynard proposes that the Brontës "show ways in which a liberalising religion could also be reinscribed within a more secular culture, with inner experience replacing institution, ritual, and myth as the location of the sacred" (193).

Discussing Morality and Moral Agency in the Brontë's Work

Of course, adding anything new to discussions on the Brontës is a daunting prospect. While scholars such as Marianne Thormählen and others have considered religion, and those such as Terry Eagleton have considered morality, many scholars do not explicitly consider the two together as I attempt in this project, specifically through moral agency. My approach examines the relationship between religion and moral agency through considering the ways in which religion shapes the heroine's perception of conventionality and morality in *Jane Eyre*, and specifically feminine morality in *Tenant*. Religion is a ripe area of exploration in Brontë scholarship, although I am not assuming that every religious element of the novel aligns with a discussion of conventionality or morality; the Brontës wrote to a biblically literate audience and within a literary tradition which often employed biblical references.[10] My interest, then, is to explore how these heroines interact with religion to challenge conventions and definitions of morality which hinder their agency as individuals. I will show through my analysis of the text how religion is a crucial part of how these heroines develop their sense of identity.

Several scholars have taken different methods of approach to discussions of morality and religion within the novels. Deborah Morse speaks of Helen as a moral "witness" who uses scriptural references to promote "a new vision of social and moral possibility" (Morse 104). Lee Talley addresses moral education in terms of gender, "class and wealth," and brings in religion by identifying the influence of Methodism (142). Terry

[10] Work on the Bible in realist novels and particularly the Brontë's use of scripture and biblical imagery does not fit directly into my discussion of character. For those interested, see Jan-Melissa Schramm's "The Bible and the Realist Novel" for a wider discussion of the use of Scripture in realist novels, particularly within evangelical work.

Eagleton discusses the class aspects of moral conflict in *Jane Eyre* and *Tenant*: "Both encounters involve a libertine aristocrat and a morally conscientious woman" (Eagleton 132). He also notes, "Charlotte's novels dramatise a conflict between 'morality' and 'society'" (123). Eagleton frames the conflict in class terms, rather than inherently gendered terms: "Helen…needs to be morally disengaged by the novel from her own class" (133). What I am seeking to do in this thesis is examine character development in terms of *moral agency* as it was influenced by religion, specifically considering Jane and Helen's understanding of their relationship to God rather than their use of scriptural allusion or denominational influences, which have been addressed by the abovementioned scholars.

In the next chapter I examine Jane's questioning of the relationship between religion, conventionality, and morality. I argue that Jane's most decisive actions throughout the novel are framed within religious language and moral awakening. In the third chapter, I take a narrower focus by examining specific terms affecting feminine morality, exploring how Helen Huntingdon's critique of gendered morality at heart is about an individual's moral agency which transcends the boundaries imposed by "The Angel in the House." Ultimately, I will demonstrate that moral agency offers a lens through which to address underlying concerns in cultural criticism encompassing tensions between religion and constructions of femininity. I will conclude with a discussion of how reading these authors through the lens of moral agency and religion might complicate previous interpretations. Between the two Brontë novels, (not necessarily speaking to the entirety of two authors' works), the relationship between religion, individual moral agency, and a critique of woman's place in society emerges. Charlotte

and Anne Brontë, while sharing similarity in upbringing and religious struggles, verge into different paths which can be insightful in understanding their different approaches to femininity.

CHAPTER TWO

Religion, Conventionality and Morality in *Jane Eyre*: To what effect does Charlotte Brontë use religion to shape her heroine's moral awareness and agency?

Introduction

Scholars have applied many lenses of analysis which have shaped our reading of *Jane Eyre*; the vast array of scholarship interpreting Jane as a proto-feminist literary figure has made much progress in exploring the development of female independence radical for Brontë's time. While we are indebted to readings which emphasize Jane's assertion of independence from confining social constructs, the role of religion in Jane's feminine individuality has been widely understated. My question for this chapter, thus, is concerned with the development of the heroine through the lens of religion by considering how it shapes Jane's moral awareness and agency. I will make a case for this reading by examining key passages in which Jane's most decisive actions are framed within religious language and moral awakening. I will demonstrate that reading the development of Jane's moral agency through the lens of religion expands our interpretation of Jane's radical individuality.

Literature Review

Scholars have long been fascinated with Jane's character and employed a variety of literary approaches. My reading of *Jane Eyre* does not fit directly within or contradict feminist, political, or psychological readings, but rather suggests a dimension of Jane's character development that gives insight into Charlotte Brontë's contribution to the

construction of feminine individuality and cultural criticism. While Jane's radical individuality as a female figure is well-covered in scholarship, the exploration of how religion specifically forms her moral agency is less a topic of discussion. Scholarly analysis of the overtly religious characters in the novel has focused on the characters' role in supporting a patriarchal system and identified Jane's self-assertion as an attack against "male authority" (Moglen 112, 113).

As has been noted by John Maynard, much of twentieth century Brontë scholarship has tended to avoid direct analysis of the religious themes in Brontë and her sisters' work (192). More recent scholars have addressed the spiritual aspects of the text with different aims of emphasis than I address in this chapter. Although the theme of Jane's "spiritual awakening" has been identified and discussed in reference to Brontë's subversion of the "traditional courtship plot," analyses of the spiritual elements in the novel have more often focused on Jane's resistance to traditional gender roles rather than a development of her moral agency (Hoeveler and Jadwin 61).[1] Some of these analyses tend to focus on subverting gender roles, thus implicitly suggesting that religion can be an impediment to Jane's development. The theme of pilgrimage has also been identified in addressing the spiritual nature of Jane's character development with a view to Brontë's subversion of genre; for example, while Diane Hoeveler and Lisa Jadwin make note of spiritual

[1]In a discussion of Charlotte Brontë's use of the bildungsroman and "the narrative of spiritual awakening," Hoeveler and Jadwin discuss the theme of "spiritual growth and self-determination" (61). They read Jane's resistance as specifically against her sexually defined dependency: "Each of Jane's five homes presents a new challenge to her self-determination and sense of ethics. At each destination she is forced to resist a coercive patriarch's attempt to possess and subdue her by assigning her a degrading identity as his dependent" (66). Concerning other readings on morality, Delia da Sousa Correa offers insight on the moral aspect of Jane's decisions, which I will address in Chapter 4.

awakening, their analysis focuses upon narrative structure.[2] The tension between passion and reason within Jane's development as a character is well documented in secondary literature and an important theme in Jane's developing moral awareness, but I would like to focus on how religion particularly shapes her moral awareness.[3] Previous scholarship has tended to tie morality to gender and class and look at religion as an instrument of argument rather than identity.

In focusing upon the role of religion in *Jane Eyre*, I do not mean to suggest that Brontë intended a grand moral saga. Rather, I would like to present Jane's journey not only as subtle critique of the way society used both religion and conventionality for uncharitable ends, but also to suggest that Jane is compelling not simply for her acts of rebellion, but in her questioning of society's understanding of what constitutes morality. In this chapter, I would like to shift the discussion beyond well-established critiques of particular denominational excesses towards Jane's engagement with the tension between conventionality and religious norms and her developing moral awareness to decide her point of reference for agency.

Key Terms from the Preface

Brontë's preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* provides the starting point for my reading, indicating her interest in the concepts of conventionality, morality, and

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[2]Hoeveler and Jadwin note Brontë's "transformation of bildungsroman and pilgrimage-narrative conventions. *Jane Eyre*'s converging plots create a female coming-of-age parable that offers multiple interpretive options and implies that female experience is far too complex and varied to be contained within the limitations of the traditional courtship plot" (68).

[3]Kathleen Vejvoda draws upon the theme of idolatry to contrast Protestantism and Catholicism in the novel, which is particularly salient in discussing the problematic way in which Brontë excuses Rochester's behavior. Her reading focuses more on Jane's struggle with passion and human affection, one which has ties to Charlotte Brontë's own life.

religion, and signaling their relevance to the development of the novel. Brontë responds to accusations against *Jane Eyre* as a morally questionable book by critiquing her contemporaries' interpretation of a linear relationship between conventionality and morality.[4] She undermines her critics' charge by asking them to reevaluate their code for measuring morality. Brontë's concern with the attacks made on her work is that they rest on what she considers a faulty equivocation of conventionality, (expectations for behavior created by society), and morality (a code of behavior relevant to a higher power). She further declares that this code does not constitute true religion: "Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last… appearance should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ" (*JE* 1).[5]

Brontë's claim is quite bold for a time when any questioning of conventionality, especially in reference to gender norms or family structure, was tantamount to an attack on the pillars which upheld society.[6] Let us be clear however, that Brontë is not attacking conventionality simply for its own sake. Rather, she attacks conventionality understood as the foundation of morality.[7] Brontë questions a socially implicit understanding of

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[4]See Allot, p. 88-92. From an unsigned review, *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848, xv, 396-409.

[5]Brontë, Charlotte. *Jane Eyre: An Authoritative Text, Contexts, Criticism.* 3rd edition, edited by Richard J Dunn. London: Norton, 2001. Textual references are hereafter cited as *JE*.

[6]Martha Vicinus notes, "The woman who broke the family circle, be she prostitute, adulterer or divorcée, threatened society's very fabric" (Vicinus xiv).

[7]Although Brontë speaks rather disparagingly of social customs in her letters, and Jane's behavior challenges conventionalities surrounding the role of the governess, her main concern lies in drawing moral absolutes from man-made conventions.

morality and conventionality which she identifies ultimately as detrimental to individual moral agency. To distinguish between the two allows her to critique society without being perceived as attacking religion. Brontë also critiques an understanding of religion in which religion serves as a means of justifying social expectations.

Brontë thus begins her novel with the assertion that convention should not serve as an indication of morality, and outwardly righteous behavior does not always indicate true religion. These concepts offer a useful frame in which to read Jane's development of moral awareness; the crux of Jane's development as a character rests in her discernment of when conventionality transgresses morality, and upon what manifestations of religion she will decide the basis of her morality.

Moral awareness and agency

Moral agency in *Jane Eyre* is the development not only of the character's moral awareness, but of her actions through the novel; in the early portions of the novel other characters tell Jane how she ought to behave, but in the transition to Thornfield, Jane finds herself both acting as a moral guide to Mr. Rochester and evaluating her own sense of moral direction. While Jane develops maturity in expressing dissent from established forms of religion, this does not mean that religion does not play a role in the development of her moral agency. On the contrary, it is through Jane's own formulation of her religious beliefs that she finds the grounds to reject repressive conventions. Jane's understanding of her moral basis develops through encountering characters from religious extremes and in conversation with her own thoughts and feelings. Her questioning of

society's moral framework leads to points of crisis wherein she discerns a stable moral basis which empowers her sense of self-directed agency.[8]

Jane's childhood homes form her moral awareness and signal the development of her contra-social moral agency. As Jane interacts with individuals who exemplify the self-righteousness Brontë criticizes in her introduction, she comes to question the relationship between conventionality and morality. The chapter will progress through each place Jane lives, examining her key frustrations which point to tension between conventionality and morality. An examination of the way religion plays a role in the formation and resolution of those tensions follows, concluding with the development of Jane's response to those tensions through her perception of her moral duty and increased individual agency.

Gateshead and the Awakening of Moral Awareness: "Unjust!"

Although given a shorter portion of the novel in comparison to the other locations, Gateshead provides a reference point for Jane's successive abodes and struggles. I will first examine two passages which are key to Jane's development: Jane's thoughts in the Red Room and her reflection upon her rebellion against Mrs. Reed. Although these scenes have been often explored because of their psychological themes, they contain a discussion on conventionality and morality which is perhaps overlooked in the focus on Jane's rebellion as a proto-feminist character.[9]

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[8]As Jane herself is the narrator, the reader observes at great length the shaping of Jane's moral awareness through reading Jane's reflections. Brontë spends more time in Jane's head than in her actions, a distinction I have delineated by discussing Jane's moral awareness in reference to her mental framework of evaluating actions, and agency as specific action which she takes.

[9]I am not arguing that these passages could not be read as examples of proto-feminism, but rather, that these key moments contain questioning of the nature of morality which contribute to our understanding of Jane's radical character.

Many have interpreted Jane's rebellion against her Aunt Reed as one against conventions of femininity imposed by a "patriarchal" society, signaling Jane as a feisty character who will not "suffer in silence" (Hoeveler 62-3).[10] While Jane certainly resents ostracization and the expectation that she should remain meekly silent, I would argue that Jane's frustration at Gateshead lies primarily in that her unconventionality is equated with immorality. Her rebellion is not merely against the conventions of meek submission, but rather against the injustice of moral accusations based on her lack of adherence to a conventional mold. Her first decisive act of agency--denouncing the hypocrisy of her aunt--signals Jane's awareness of society's twisted standard of morality. [11]

Reflection in the Red Room

Jane's train of thought in the Red Room before "superstition" makes her faint is a key moment in her engagement with tension between conventionality and morality, as Jane interrogates the norms which led to her unfortunate situation. Following her outbreak against her cousin's violent behavior, Jane declares her situation "Unjust!"- namely, that she is seen as wicked, while the behavior of her cousins is overlooked because they are conventional children (*JE* 12). She concludes that because she was "a

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[10]Martha Vicinus' work *Suffer and Be Still*, provides an insightful analysis of the silent role of governesses in the era and the expectations of feminine passivity and acquiescence in the era. See particularly Jeanne M. Peterson's chapter, "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society."

[11]It is worth mentioning that Jane's first moral pronouncement comes against her cousin John before her first act of resistance. In this passage, Jane makes an argument by analogy: "Wicked and cruel boy!...You are like a murderer- you are like a slave-driver—you are like the Roman emperors!' I had read Goldsmith's 'History of Rome,' and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence, which I never thought thus to have declared aloud" (*JE* 9).

heterogenous thing," she is excluded; had she "been a sanguine, brilliant, careless, exacting, handsome, romping child," in other words, a conventional child, she would have been treated differently (*JE* 12). Although in the moment she does not fully comprehend the concept, Jane is beginning to identify a disconnect between conventionality and morality, between outward characteristics being given more weight than inward disposition. For example, she is angry that Georgiana's "pink cheeks and golden curls…purchase indemnity for every fault," and Eliza, "headstrong and selfish…was respected" (*JE* 12). It is this realization which prompts Jane in a later scene to declare to her aunt that her cousins "are not fit to associate with me" (*JE* 22).

The second key moment occurs in Jane's first "triumph," when she denounces her Aunt Reed for accusing her of dishonesty in the interview with Mr. Brocklehurst. While commentators often emphasize Jane's vocal rebellion in this scene, her subsequent remorse signals her dissatisfaction with her lack of controlled agency.[12] Jane's agency lacks a stable ground because her moral awareness is as yet imperfect, as hinted in Jane's earlier description of her "undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings" (*JE* 9). When she allows her feelings to govern her response, Jane's agency lacks moral stability.

After being herself accused of dishonesty, Jane turns the tables by identifying her aunt's falsehood as the real act of moral transgression: "People think you are a good woman, but you are bad; hard-hearted. *You* are deceitful" (*JE* 30). Mrs. Reed's response shows that Jane has hit her mark, as she appears "frightened…rocking herself to and

[12]For a contrasting reading, see Hoeveler's assertion that "Jane has learned not to suffer in silence but to confront oppression calmly and openly" (Hoeveler 63). However, Jane's outbreak seems to conflict with this reading. Moglen also notes Jane's "new capacity for moral judgement" along with a "nascent sense of self" in this scene (Moglen 112).

fro…even twisting her face as if she would cry" (*JE* 31). Here is the exposing of the "whitewashed tombs" which Brontë references in her preface; Jane sees through Mrs. Reed's portrayal of Jane as wanting in good character as mere pretense for removing Jane from her home (*JE* 27). However, while the substance of Jane's moral accusation is correct, her method of response carries an unexpected consequence.

Jane's experience of "freedom" and "triumph" over her "first victory" could be delineated as the emphasis of this passage; however, her remorse over the manner in which she won her victory is a poignant revelation: "A child cannot quarrel with its elders…cannot give its furious feelings uncontrolled play…without experiencing afterwards the pang of remorse" (*JE* 31). Jane's feelings are more disturbing to her than her breaking of conventional politeness and deference to her elder: "Something of vengeance I had tasted for the first time; as aromatic as wine it seemed, on swallowing, warm and racy; its after-flavour, metallic and corroding…(*JE* 31).[13] Her elation at voicing her outrage subsides as she recognizes in her emotional outburst a lack of agency; her turbulent protest not only fails to change the hypocrisy surrounding her, but also indicates she does not control her own response. Brontë does not allow Jane's "protest against bigotry" to cross certain conventional boundaries without consequences, a key point which will shape how we ultimately read Brontë's approach to social critique.

Jane's regret indicates a wish for self-mastery and self-expression against injustice which does not transgress the proper bounds of conventionality. Her

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[13]Given Jane's stated preference for Old Testament books (*JE* 27), perhaps Brontë had in mind Deuteronomy 32:35, "Vengeance is Mine," indicating that Jane's concern for immediate justice is unbiblical. (Repeated in Romans 12:17-19): "Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." This corresponds to following discussion with Helen Burns, who comments that "Life appears to me too short to be spent in nursing animosity, or registering wrongs" (*JE* 49).

questioning of authority, although portrayed as a natural and unavoidable recourse to a repressed spirit in unjust circumstances, is presented as sinful in a sense. Jane's desire to be rational and calm rather than passionate and ungoverned reflects a desire perhaps to be well thought of, but primarily to find inner contentment and peace: "I would fain exercise some better faculty than that of fierce speaking; fain find nourishment for some less fiendish feeling than that of sombre indignation" (*JE* 31).[14] Brontë thus upholds a degree of conventionality in the sense of respectful behavior; she disagrees more with conventionality going beyond mere social conventions to being a means of imposing repressive constraints.

Jane's Encounter with Religion

Brontë reinforces Jane's developing moral awareness with a critique of instrumentalized religion. The servants use the threat of divine retribution as a tool to enforce what they deem appropriate behavior and attitudes for a child of her dependent position, forcing their own definition of wickedness (unconventional refusal to be passive) upon Jane; Bessie tells her to "try to be useful and pleasant" rather than "passionate and rude" or else "Missis will send you away" (*JE* 10).[15] Even more drastic is the warning that God "might strike her dead in the midst of her tantrums, and then where would she go?" (*JE* 10). Although these threats might seem extreme or ridiculous

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[14]Charlotte, especially in her early letters to Ellen Nussey, expressed frustration with her lack of control over her emotions; her feelings of guilt and despair of ever overcoming her faults feature frequently in her frank correspondence with Nussey. For example, see letter *To Ellen Nussey, [? Early 1837]* (Smith V. I, pp 162-3).

[15]See note 2, in Norton ed. *JE* p. 7 which describes the source of Bessie's nursery stories, which are based on 18th century moralistic tales: *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) and John Wesley's *The History of Henry, Earl of Moreland* (1781).

to a twenty-first century reader, the threat of eternal punishment was much more vivid and present in the minds of nineteenth century readers.[16] The point of these threats is that they shape Jane's perception of religion's relationship to morality, namely that conventional conformity ensures spiritual safety. Furthermore, Jane begins to think of herself as wicked through the repeated defining of herself as such by others, leading to a key moment of her moral development: "All said I was wicked, and perhaps I might be so: what thought had I been but just conceiving of starving myself to death? That certainly was a crime: and was I fit to die?" (*JE* 13).[17] Jane's terrified reflection on the mysterious and ominous unknown of death primes her imagination to perceive a ghost, but the crucial point of the passage is that Jane's desire to be good hinges on instrumentalized religion.

Although illusions to eternal punishment are somewhat veiled in the servant's threats, the clergyman and benefactor Mr. Brocklehurst makes no such efforts to soften the blow of religious force. His evident equation of conventionality and morality makes him perhaps the clearest object of Brontë's criticism of instrumentalized religion. In Brocklehurst's interview with Jane, he uses the threat of spiritual retribution to support the conventional traits expected of a dependent, reinforcing upon Jane the eternal ramifications of unconventional behavior. Mrs. Reed declares she would like Jane "brought up in a manner suiting her prospects…to be made useful, to be kept humble" to which Mr. Brocklehurst replies, "Humility is a Christian grace, and once peculiarly

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[16]See the following for a helpful overview of the Brontë's religious context: Maynard, John. "The Brontës And Religion." *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, edited by Heather Glen, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2002, pp. 192–213. Cambridge Companions to Literature.

[17]Jane's despair is well-noted recurring motif in the novel, particularly her wish to die and her fear and uncertainty of death and the afterlife.

appropriate to the pupils of Lowood" (*JE* 28). By "peculiarly appropriate" Brocklehurst implies this virtue is not as applicable to his own class, and most certainly not his own daughters.[18] Christian virtue and morality are thus equivalent with keeping to one's appointed place in society, especially for those whose position is inferior. Aberrant behavior is not only morally reprehensible, but also carries eternal repercussions and is seen as indicative of the state of the heart and soul; for Brocklehurst, Jane's comment that "Psalms are not interesting" is evidence that she has a "wicked heart," and he gives her a tract on "the sudden death of the Liar" (*JE* 27, 29).[19] In this interview and in subsequent passages, Brontë uses Mr. Brocklehurst's hypocrisy and selective, decontextualized use of scripture to criticize individuals of privileged position who use the force of moral guilt upon naïve members of the lower class to reinforce narrow conventions beneficial to themselves.[20] What is interesting however, is that Jane is not moved by Brocklehurst's threats; rather, as discussed earlier, she is outraged at the false accusation of dishonesty. At Lowood, Jane's next abode, her anger at the disconnect between conventionality and what she perceives as morality, further hones her moral discernment.

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[18]The distinction of class negates the universal applicability of this virtue. As an example of his "success," at Lowood, Brocklehurst relates his daughter's reaction to seeing the pupils, "like poor people's children" who "looked at my dress and mamma's, as if they had never seen a silk gown before" (*JE* 28).

[27]On a lighter note, Brontë seems rather sympathetic to Jane's apathy towards the Psalms; see *Letter to Ellen Nussey* [4 January 1838]: "I approve highly of the Plan you mention except as it regards committing a verse of the Psalms to Memory- I do not see the direct advantage to be derived from that" (Smith V. I, 174).

[20]Elizabeth Jay also notes Brocklehurst's fallacious use of scripture references in Lowood: "The occasion of their second meeting at Lowood provided her [Brontë] with an opportunity to illustrate the blind illogicality behind many Evangelical prejudices which were elevated, by the use of misapplied theological vocabulary" (Jay 255).

Lowood: "Self-righteousness is not religion"

At Lowood Jane encounters two distinct doctrines of morality and questions the basis of both. The first is a continuation of Brocklehurst's conventions-based morality. The second is Helen Burns' "doctrine of endurance," which makes Jane evaluate her own basis of moral agency, particularly her method of response to perceived injustice. Her encounter with Helen contains the most lucid moments of Jane's exploration of religion along with the height of her anger against moral judgment based on conventionality. At Lowood (and later at Moor House) Jane encounters figures whose self-righteousness is depicted as antithetical to true religion and morality.

As seen in Mr. Brocklehurst's separate rules for his pupils and his daughters, conventionality has a double standard; what is considered the height of insolence for a dependent girl is considered proper behavior for her wealthy equivalent. Jane's experience tells her that when conventionality is equated with morality, it changes based on social class. Jane wryly comments that Brocklehurst's daughters, "ought to have come a little sooner to hear his lecture on dress, for they were splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs" (*JE* 54).

Conventionality and Morality at Lowood: Meekness and Self-Abasement

Jane does not criticize the conventional virtues of humility and consistency advocated by Brocklehurst and Lowood per se. Rather she criticizes the interpretation of those virtues as passivity and rigid legality, and their elevation above the more pressing virtue of generosity. For example, Brontë contrasts the self-proclaimed charity of Lowood, which leaves the students in want of sufficient food and warmth, with the pragmatic and kind actions of Miss Temple (such as providing an ample tea for Jane and

Helen) (*JE* 61). Through this contrast, Brontë illustrates that "self-righteousness," proclaiming oneself to be doing good, does not count as religion, or in the terms of this discussion, performing outwardly moral deeds, such as running a charity organization on the principle of instilling Christian virtue, does not result in a truly virtuous act.

The structure of Lowood itself indicates narrowness and constriction, an "inclosure…with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect" (*JE* 40). The school's routine resembles a monastic regime, with regular intervals of reading prayers, bible reading, and the daily Collect (*JE* 37-38). The narrator's tone suggests a falseness in imposed religious practices; after a meal of burnt porridge, she describes the prayer as "thanks being returned for what we had not got," suggesting a merely perfunctory role of religion, one in which the children follow through the motions of religion while seeing little positive evidence in their day to day life (*JE* 38). Jane says nothing about the substance of the prayers or readings, but seems more concerned as narrator with the amount that is said, using descriptive language that implies passivity and rote behavior: "The day's Collect was repeated, then certain texts of Scripture were said, and to these succeeded a protracted reading of chapters in the Bible, which lasted an hour" (*JE* 38). While Jane finds the strictness of routine repressive, her anger against what she deems disproportionate punishment for trivial faults is central to her development at Lowood.

Brontë paints the instrumentalizing of religion as cruel, and in Helen Burns' extreme goodness questions a system which equates an individual's worth with their adherence to social expectations.[21] While Brontë arguably uses Lowood as a caricature

[21] Jane is particularly infuriated by Lowood's system of identifying minor disorderliness as marks of vice, particularly in the punishments inflicted on Helen Burns for being disorderly: "Eyes like Miss Scatcherd's can only see those minute defects, and are blind to the full brightness of the orb" (*JE* 57).

of oppressive social conventions supported by misapplied religious principles, the most formative aspects of Lowood are not the physical deprivations (these are of little account to Jane once her name is vindicated), but rather Jane's encounters with Helen Burns' faith and understanding of morality. The conversations with Helen are as informative of Jane's character as they are of Helen's. Although Jane conforms outwardly in order to detract attention from herself, she inwardly rebels and neither understands nor ultimately accepts Helen Burns' passive acceptance Lowood's doctrines. Rather, Helen provides a voice of one who has been shaped by the system into which Jane has entered and demonstrates the intended effects of Brocklehurst's social vision.[22]

Part of the inscription on the door of Lowood reads, "Let your light so shine before men that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven," referencing Matthew 5:16 (*JE* 41). Jane is "still pondering the signification of 'Institution,' and endeavouring to make out a connection between the first words and the verse of Scripture" when she meets Helen. At a moment where Jane tries to understand the nature of the relationship between religion and her experience, she looks to Helen for answers; thus begins a series of questioning in which Jane attempts to understand Helen's views of faith and moral duty, but struggles to implement the precepts which Helen claims are scriptural.

Helen's diplomatic answers to Jane's frank questions make the extent to which Helen believes what she says unclear; her responses sound automatic and rehearsed, yet a hint of irritation creeps in when Jane asks the directly personal question of whether Helen

[22]Jane remarks of the pupils at Lowood in their response to Brocklehurst: "Whatever he might do with the outside of the cup and platter, the inside was further beyond his interference than he imagined" (*JE* 54). While Helen verbally agrees with the precepts of Lowood, there are indications that she is not happy.

is happy, which Helen does not answer, retreating into her book: "You ask rather too many questions…now I want to read" (*JE* 43). When Jane directly asks if Mr. Brocklehurst is "a good man," Helen responds impersonally and passively, "He is a clergyman, and is said to do a great deal of good" (*JE* 42). Helen does imply however, that she would prefer Miss Temple's leadership to that of Mr. Brocklehurst, without directly criticizing him (*JE* 42). Helen makes sense of her situation in Lowood through self-abasement (admitting that she is rightfully accused of certain flaws) and by the precept that acquiescence to her lot, the road of least resistance, is virtuous. Helen sees conformity to conventionality as virtue, while Jane sees inaction as being untrue to oneself. She cannot bear to be misunderstood, misrepresented, or unjustly punished. Helen accepts punishment as just reward for careless habits, while Jane sees it as injustice. Helen Burns' "doctrine of endurance" is incompatible not only with Jane's desire for love and approval from others, but also her sense of merit.

In her eagerness to make a good impression, Jane represses outbursts of anger such as those she exhibited at Gateshead, yet she still deeply feels anger and resentment. Helen remonstrates her, identifying what Brontë might consider Jane's actual "sin," not merely that she is passionate, but that she allows her feelings and the desire for love and approval to come in between her and God. Jane tells Helen, "If others don't love me, I would rather die than live- I cannot bear to be solitary and hated" to which Helen responds, "the sovereign hand that created your frame...has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you" (*JE* 59). Jane mistrusts this sentiment, but as she journeys on, she learns to lean on divine aid. Interestingly, Jane echoes this very sentiment to Rochester later in the novel, showing at least the

recognition that moral agency cannot always be solved through the help of human guidance. Jane's reliance on feeling rather than on faith is a reoccurring struggle; it is only when Jane later learns to overcome feeling and follow her conscience and precept that she overcomes temptation. However, Jane never fully discards feeling, lending her an air of reality. Her tempestuous responses to adversity were unconventional, and Jane slowly learns to temper her response as she finds a basis for morality stronger than personal indignation against injustice.

The principle of religion at Lowood is the denial of selfhood through the acceptance of rote behavior, which Jane vehemently rejects, and although her means of doing so are limited as a child in an institution, she is forced to acquiesce. Helen personifies this absence of selfhood, or rather a passive moral outlook, by accepting the teachings of resignation which Brocklehurst imposes. Helen's responses to Jane's queries are largely based on answers which have been pulled from scripture to suit the purposes of the benefactors of Lowood. Helen turns to criticism of the self to justify the treatment she receives, but Jane rebels against this precept, claiming that she ought to be treated according to reality, according to the truth of the situation, rather than upon falsely interpreted appearances.

In her time at Lowood, Jane learns to channel her emotions in order to survive, yet she does not stoop to the level of quiet submission which Helen personifies. It is through the lack of a direct divine presence that Jane takes personal agency in advertising for the position of governess. At first, Jane tries praying for liberty, but her prayer "seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing" (*JE* 72). Jane then prays simply for "change" but feels the same emptiness. She at last cries for "a new servitude" (*JE* 73).

"Can I not get so much of my own will?" She then throws herself into a flurry of mental activity to direct her next steps; rather than prayer, "a kind fairy…dropped the required suggestion on my pillow; for as I lay down it came quietly and naturally to my mind" (*JE* 72). While not explicitly a moral decision, Jane shows a kind of agency based on her own inclinations, searching for guidance within herself when she fails to discern a divine answer.

Conventionality and Morality at Thornfield

Although Thornfield yields much ground for analysis of the overturning of conventionality, it is ground upon which scholars have often tread. Suffice to say that through the depiction of how Jane is treated as a governess, Brontë shows that conventionality in the sense of following prescribed social roles does not equal morally sound behavior, as evidenced principally through the cruel behavior of Blanche Ingram towards Jane.[23] More important for this discussion than the evolution of Rochester and Jane's unconventional relationship is the moral aspect of their conversations. While critiquing conventions of social interaction, Brontë does not dismiss conventionality concerning sexual relations. Although she clearly argues for equality between men and women and also freedom to marry between classes, she is not calling for the dismantling of family structure. I will focus on key moments where Jane self-recognizes a change in her moral awareness and conclude with her dramatic departure as an act of moral agency in which Jane appeals to a code of ethics beyond human invention.

[23]On the surface level, Mr. Rochester's unconventional relationship with Jane serves as a social critique of the way governesses were conventionally treated. His breaking of convention to a certain degree is positive because he treats Jane as a human being in contrast to the disgust with which Blanche Ingram treats Jane as a nonentity.

The overcoming of convention in Rochester and Jane's relationship is important insofar as it causes Jane's moral awareness to deteriorate. Her basis for morality shifts from the conventions she has carried from Lowood to her own reason and nature. Her moral tension at first concerns whether is it is right for her to think romantically of Rochester. Reason and the doctrines of class (conventionality) which have been instilled in Jane initially keep her emotions under check (*JE* 137). But Jane later jettisons her well-reasoned checking of her feelings, calling her restraint a "Blasphemy against nature!" (*JE* 149). As her natural feelings take the reins of her judgment, her reason begins to fail her in accurately assessing Rochester's character and behavior. "I was growing very lenient to my master: I was forgetting all his faults, for which I had once kept a sharp look-out" (*JE* 160). Jane admits later that Rochester "stood between me and every thought of religion…I could not, in those days, see God for his creature: of whom I had made an idol" (*JE* 234). The language of idolatry is an important indication from Brontë that Jane's infatuation with Rochester has a negative spiritual impact, rather than simply emotional ramifications.

Beyond the clouding of Jane's moral judgment, Rochester himself subversively attacks conventionality as a basis for morality in order to excuse immoral behavior. He admires but also tries to wear away Jane's strict moralism and observation of propriety as an obstacle to his desire. He tests Jane with hypothetical situations, measuring the extent to which her love for him would be willing to transgress what he deems a conventional rather than moral transgression. When Rochester sets up hypothetical situations for Jane to convince himself and her that what he wants is not wrong, he asks, "Are you justified in overleaping an obstacle of custom- a mere conventional impediment, which neither

your conscience sanctifies nor your judgment approves?" (*JE* 186). Jane does not know how to answer, but when Rochester rephrases the question to suggest that he needs a "gentle, gracious, genial stranger" to restore his morality, Jane finds fault with the dependence upon any human effort for moral regeneration: "A sinner's reformation should never depend on a fellow-creature. Men and women die; philosophers falter in wisdom, and Christians in goodness: if any one you know has suffered and erred, let him look higher than his equals for strength to amend" (*JE* 186). Jane has effectively adapted Helen Burn's reproach that one should look beyond human beings for comfort.[24]

However, a key distinction should be made that Jane is not defending man-made conventionality as a basis for rejecting Rochester's proposed means of moral redemption. Jane does not object to undermining conventionality as a compass for morality, but in the wake of her emotions realizes her morality needs a stronger basis. She is not sure how to answer Rochester's question and has already affirmed that she approves of breaking certain conventional boundaries when they violate kindness towards others. Jane thus signals a clearer break from conventionality as a moral basis, while at the same time challenging the morality of Rochester's claim; although conventionality is not a basis for morality, she does not allow that he should create morality based on his own desires, but rather should look outside himself. In her moment of crisis Jane looks to moral absolutes as the basis for morality in the final scenes of moral struggle at Thornfield.

Before Jane acknowledges religious principle as the basis for morality, she clearly acknowledges that all other bases of morality that she has used or questioned previously do not stand the moral test. First, Jane's own conscience, her "mind" and "voice within"

[24]As noted earlier, "The sovereign hand that created your frame...has provided you with other resources than your feeble self, or than creatures feeble as you" (*JE* 59).

are characterized as brutal and cruel: “Conscience, turned tyrant, held passion by the throat” (*JE* 254). In the moment of moral crisis, as Rochester pleads with her, Jane’s inner guide fails her, as well as reason (which she used earlier to follow convention) and feeling (which led to her acceptance of Rochester’s proposal): “My very conscience and reason turned traitors against me, and charged me with crime in resisting him. They spoke almost as loud as Feeling” (*JE* 271). Bereft of any guide, Jane looks to moral absolutes, an ethical code, which seems based on scriptural revelation. This code is more powerful than convention; she does not refuse Rochester because it would be socially unacceptable to do so--as has been seen earlier, convention is apt to be twisted. However, Jane recognizes a higher moral code behind the particular convention of marriage and fidelity which she does not feel she is able to break with impunity, no matter what reason, her individual conscience, or feeling tell her:

> I will keep the law given by God; sanctioned by man. I will hold to the principles received by me when I was sane, and not mad- as I am now. Laws and principles are not for the times when there is no temptation: they are for moments such as this, when body and soul rise in mutiny against their rigour; stringent are they; inviolate they shall be. If at my individual convenience I might break them, what would be their worth? They have worth- so I have always believed; and if I cannot believe it now, it is because I am insane…Preconceived opinions, forgone determinations, are all I have at this hour to stand by: there I plant my foot (*JE* 270-1).

Jane has recognized in this passage that morality, and thus her moral agency, cannot be based fully on human invention, feeling, or reason, because each can be led astray. Jane’s inner strength in this moment is clearly emphasized; her assertion of agency proves insurmountable to Rochester who realizes there is no means of persuasion by which he can attack these principles.

This moment is a key act of agency for Jane, in which she chooses her basis of morality, and is important to bear in mind in considering the angst with which Jane leaves Thornfield. Although the language used to describe her actual fleeing of Thornfield suggests that Jane is driven out by an unseen power, it is this previous moment which gives Jane the inner strength to see her intention carried out. Her intention is further strengthened by a motherly vision later that evening, who tells her, "My daughter, flee temptation!" (*JE* 272). Compared to the virtual silence Jane has met in previous prayers, this seemingly divine voice indicates that Jane's decision is divinely sanctioned.

As Jane leaves, it could be asked whether she is an active agent, as she describes herself as being led and uses violent language of force: "In the midst of my pain of heart, and frantic effort of principle, I abhorred myself. Still I could not turn, nor retrace one step. God must have led me on. As to my own will or conscience, impassioned grief had trampled one and stifled the other" (*JE* 274). In thinking about Jane as an independent moral agent, however, it is important to step away from the idea of independence as being fully self-sufficient. Jane's need of divine intervention does not negate the fact that she takes an action which goes against her inner inclinations and breaks away from Rochester's domination.[25] Lest we think that Brontë is making a simple moralistic lesson, Jane's discovery at Thornfield is not simplistic; just as conventionality itself has turned out to be complex, Jane's assertion of independence is further explored at Moor House when she distinguishes between false divine guidance conjured through the manipulative power of religious language and her own access to a higher moral law.

[25]Jane affirms while at Moor House that her decision however mixed her emotions where in the moment of departure, were correct: "I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment. God directed me to a correct choice: I thank His providence for the guidance" (*JE* 307).

Moor House

At each location, Jane has met characters with a strong sense of their own moral compass. Brocklehurst relied upon conventional principles backed up by Christian precepts. Rochester justified his own morality based upon his own needs and desires. Yet at Moor House, Jane meets perhaps the most difficult figure to resist in St. John Rivers. He employs not only religious guilt, but also appeals to Jane's developing sense of moral direction and attempts to subvert it for his own means. Jane's ultimate rejection of his call to the missionary life on his terms signals her final statement of independent moral agency as she discerns between divine guidance and instrumentalized religion.

Even though Jane is unhappy, she knows she was right to leave Thornfield: "I feel now that I was right when I adhered to principle and law, and scorned and crushed the insane promptings of a frenzied moment. God directed me to a correct choice: I thank His providence for the guidance" (*JE* 307). Throughout Jane's time at Moor House, St. John builds upon her evident struggle to continually master her emotions, which she tells herself she shall "strive to overcome" (*JE* 306). However, sensing Jane's inner battle for self-mastery, St. John demands self-sacrifice by asking her to become a missionary and place her passion for Rochester fully behind her. Jane considers that "such a martyrdom would be monstrous" as well as detrimental to her very self (*JE* 345). The key aspect of Jane's refusal of St. John comes in her shifting from blind obedience to St. John to discerning that his outwardly Christian principles, while admirable in the abstract, have become twisted in the attempt to domineer her: "I felt veneration for St. John…I was tempted to cease struggling with him—to rush down the torrent of his will into the gulf of his existence, and there lose my own" (*JE* 365).

Jane's assertion of independence is framed in a scene highly imbued with religious imagery, which is subversive. As St. John repeats his proposal, Jane experiences sweeping supernatural feelings and sensations: "Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded—life rolled together like a scroll—the dim room was full of visions" (*JE* 357). However, Jane is not entirely convinced; perhaps given her previous doubts about St. John's religion, Jane questions whether these sensations brought on by St. John's constant exhortations, and she questions whether the experience: "Were I but convinced that it is God's will I should marry you," and in a final act of desperation she cries to Heaven, "show me, show me the path!" (*JE* 357). It is at this moment that Rochester's voice calls her, breaking the spell of religious frenzy.

Jane's response is a clear act of independence, commanding St. John to leave and realizing she is in possession of her own decision: "it was *my* time to assume ascendency. *My* powers were in play, and in force" (*JE* 358). While this could certainly be read as a pivotal expression of female independence from male authority, Jane's actions immediately afterwards are interesting in shifting the focus away from her power to exert her will towards a deep satisfaction that she has found a source of moral direction which does not enslave her to St. John's will:

> I mounted to my chamber; locked myself in; fell on my knees; and prayed in my way- a different way to St. John's, but effective in its own fashion. I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet. I rose from the thanksgiving- took a resolve- and lay down, unscared, enlightened- eager but for the daylight (*JE* 358).

This passage signals the culmination of Jane's individual empowerment through religion as she breaks free from a patriarchal power claiming religious legitimacy. Jane does not reject male authority on the basis of its maleness, but on the recognition that its religious

basis is flawed. By relying on her own religious framework to rebel, Jane demonstrates that she is her own moral agent by virtue of divine guidance which she herself has discerned.

After breaking free from St. John's religious argument, Jane triumphs in her own religious sense of agency, as she alone hears the voice calling her name, inciting her to challenges St. John's religious imperative, relaying that "it was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play, and in force" (*JE* 358). Jane appeals to a vaguely religious leading, or "inspiration," which comes from within her: "it seemed in me- in the external world" (359). But while her independent action is directly tied to breaking the spell of misused religious arguments, she finds comfort in a genuine spiritual connection; directly following her assertion of agency, she thanks God in a moment of individual and private worship: "[I] prayed in my own way—a different way to St. John's, but effective in its own fashion. I seemed to penetrate very near a Mighty Spirit; and my soul rushed out in gratitude at His feet. I rose from the thanksgiving—took a resolve—and lay down, unscared, enlightened—eager but for the daylight" (358).[26] This passage indicates that Jane attributes her clarity of action to divine aid, hence the gratitude. There is a realization of a greater power at work and this power serves to strengthen Jane's resolve in searching for Rochester.

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[26]Da Sousa has characterized this moment as having "potentially radical moral implications": "At this point *Jane Eyre* would seem to be a novel which rejects providence in celebration of its heroine's independence and her claims to passionate fulfillment" (da Sousa 114). She also characterizes the voice episode as secular, overlooking the following passage in which Jane prays: "It is Rochester's summons she obeys, not God's, inverting and secularizing inherited models," referring to John Bunyan's *Grace Abounding* (114). Da Sousa sees the decreased number of "biblical parallels" towards the end of the novel as an indication that the novel "rejects providence in celebration of its heroine's independence," a reading with which I will take issue in Chapter Four (114).

Conclusion

Disassociating morality and conventionality allows Brontë to question conventions, but she has to clearly separate the two before her audience will accept her critiques. Brontë goes so far as to say that conventionality and morality may even work against each other, writing in her preface that "These things and deeds are diametrically opposed," even "distinct as is vice from virtue…and it is a good, and not a bad action to mark broadly and clearly the line of separation between them." (*JE* 1). In other words, the discussion of moral agency as based on individuality freed from morally constraining convention leads to a discussion of *what* specific conventionalities Brontë is critiquing in society. Brontë's challenge that conventionality does not equal morality leads to an unconventional heroine who refuses to confine her faith or agency to the confines of established religion's mores.

Readings of Jane Eyre have often noted the journey or pilgrimage symbolism inherent in the different places Jane lives, categorizing the novel as a bildungsroman.[27] Jane's progressive awareness of her basis of moral agency is certainly an important element of her journey to becoming an independent moral agent, but whether she follows a traditional linear development is another question. In chapter four, I will examine elements of ambiguity which call into question the conventionality of the ending.

Jane reaches peace through repudiating instrumentalized religion and conventionality--all of which denied a central aspect of Jane's being--her individuality, her desires, perhaps her spiritual calling of caring for another human being. The ending leads to a further discussion of feminine morality, which I will explore in next chapter in

[27]Further explored in Chapter Four.

reference to the character of Helen Huntingdon. Helen provides dialogue with Jane, questioning the very basis on which Jane's moral position in relation to men around her is based. While the outcome turns out happily for Jane, Charlotte Brontë overlooks significant issues, principally in the character of Rochester; Anne goes a step further in her cultural critique by attacking the result of religiously imbued stereotypes of femininity. While Charlotte takes the first step in questioning conventionality and morality, Anne more boldly questions the moral basis of conventional masculinity and femininity in society.

CHAPTER THREE

Feminine Morality in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: How does Helen Huntingdon's view of feminine morality affect her agency?

Introduction

The thesis of this chapter is that the heroine of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* Helen Huntingdon, exerts moral agency through questioning the way in which male characters define, confine, and challenge her morality. The chapter analyses the text's portrayal of gendered morality and its particular consequences for a female character's moral agency. I will explore how Helen Huntingdon comes to understand feminine morality in relation to its cultural definition and her own sense of moral integrity. In continuation with the question of my thesis regarding how conventionality, morality, and religion affect representations of femininity in the Brontë's work, this chapter specifically addresses how Helen's perception of femininity is tied to religious concerns.

Secondary Analysis of the Novel

Anne Brontë is widely considered the most religious of the Brontë sisters, in large part due to Charlotte Brontë's characterization of her after Anne's death. Charlotte wrote with more than a hint of disapproval that Anne "was a very sincere and practical Christian, but the tinge of religious melancholy communicated a sad shade to her brief, blameless life" (C. Brontë in Allott 274). This "melancholy" presumably affected Anne's choice of subject matter, which Charlotte found regrettable. Although Brontë scholarship has until lately focused on aspects other than religion, Anne's religious concerns

permeate her work in a way that is difficult to ignore. Scholars have been quick to note her overwhelming religiosity in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall,* but differed in their analysis of her overt moralizing.[1] *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (hereafter abbreviated as *Tenant*), is the story of Helen Huntingdon, a morally upright, albeit naïve young woman and her trials through matrimony with a rakish man, Arthur Huntingdon. A significant portion of the novel is devoted to Helen's diary, which documents with legalistic accuracy the outrages of her husband, whom she ultimately leaves in order to save her son from moral degeneration.

Previous scholarship has analyzed Helen's agency by focusing on power dynamics, often limiting discussions of Helen's spirituality to this frame of reference. Lee Talley attributes the influence of Methodism to Anne's actions, specifically focusing upon the "methodism of character" in the novel, as seen in Helen's reformative influence on her suitor Gilbert Markham through the medium of her diary, which Talley characterizes as a "Wesleyan journal" (Talley 208).[2] Terry Eagleton discusses moral conflict between characters in *Tenant* in terms of power and class, situating the discussion of the moral double standard in political rather than spiritual terms.[3] Feminist interpretations such as Elizabeth Berry's analysis of "consciousness" offer valuable

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[1]Maynard notes that Anne "brings religion into her novels with more directness and regularity than her sisters…with a dourness and seriousness not much present, as we shall see, in the rather fantastical, comic, or critical treatment of religious issues in her sisters' work" (196). Even Brontë's contemporary Charles Kingsley remarked sarcastically of *Tenant* that, "The superior *religious* tone in which alone it surpasses *Jane Eyre* is, in our eyes, quite neutralised by the low *moral* tone which reigns throughout" (Allott 272).

[2]Talley examines Helen's diary as a means of "character formation" based on Wesleyan ideals of "human perfectibility" (Talley 197). Talley, Lee A., "Anne Brontë's Method of Social Protest in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.*"

[3]For a discussion on the class-based dynamics of morality in *Tenant*, see Terry Eagleton's chapter on Anne Brontë in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës.*

insight into the psychological nature of the images of "angel" and "devil" used throughout the novel as indicative of "an undercurrent of spiritual and emotional strife" (75).[4] Deborah Morse reads Helen as a "witness" for right religion and a messenger for "the equality of all Christian souls, male and female, before God" (Morse 104).[5] Other scholars such as John Maynard have noted the heavy use of scripture in the novel as a potentially subversive force.[6] My analysis navigates between these approaches, by attending to the way religion is important to Helen but perhaps not her sole focus. Instead, I will draw attention to how Helen is most concerned with redefining feminine morality. As I will demonstrate, her push to base feminine morality on individual moral integrity rather than cultural conventions still depends crucially on religious conviction. I will suggest that Helen's arguments with her husband and Mr. Hargrave upon particular definitions of feminine morality relate deeply to her religious identity. Her moral agency ties to her reconceptualization of feminine morality from one based on the "Angel of the House" and cultural conventions of enhanced feminine morality to one based on individual moral integrity and religious conviction.

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[4]For further discussion of psychological aspects, see Berry's *Anne Brontë's Radical Vision: Structures of Consciousness*.

[5]Morse's argument includes an analysis of Helen's use of religion against legal constructs: "Brontë's pervasive use of the Bible as the undergirding structure of her novel points to the sacred Word as the legitimizing source of her own words, a Law that is above the laws of man and an authority that frees women from the strictures upon them that are imprisoning them under English law" (104).

[6]Maynard reads Helen's use of religion as a political act: "The betrayed wife accrues power from religion that compensates for her loss of power under husband Arthur's egregiously patriarchal control" (198).

Defining Feminine Morality

Scholars have analyzed many aspects of Helen's relationship with Arthur Huntingdon, especially the themes of abuse, alcoholism, and the sexual double standard as evidenced in Arthur's behavior.[7] In light of the interpretive lens of moral agency, I will examine how Helen's questioning of Arthur's defining and confining of her spirituality plays a key role in her reframing of feminine morality and thus her identity. Her interactions with Arthur ultimately lead to her reconceptualization of moral agency; rather than adhering to the moral ideal enshrined in the "Angel of the House" (1854) or Sarah Lewis' "Woman's Mission" (1839), Helen's preserves her individual moral integrity and spiritual independence.

Arthur and Helen's perception of each other indicates their respective categorizations of female morality. Helen's argument to her aunt that she will affect moral reformation in Arthur through her "sense" and "principle" constitutes Helen's moral awareness and categorization of morality (*WH* 126-7). She blames Arthur's upbringing, associates, and temperament for his behavior, crediting her own upbringing and thoughtfulness as qualifications for reforming him. In a poignant conversation, her aunt asks, "How is that you are so before-hand in moral acquirements?" to which Helen replies, "Thanks to you, aunt, I have been well brought up, and had good examples always before me, which he, most likely has not;--and besides, he is of a sanguine temperament, and a gay, thoughtless temper, and I am naturally inclined to reflection"

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[7]For a discussion on the importance of Arthur's character, alcoholism, and arguments for his incapacity for religion based on his phrenology, see Marianne Thormählen's "The Villain of Wildfell Hall: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon." Thormählen recognizes that Helen does not allow Arthur to use his supposed deficient moral capacity as an excuse to give up self-reformation: "All that matters, in her view, is that Arthur should serve God to the best of his ability, and she makes it perfectly plain that he must *choose* to do so" (835).

(*WH* 126).[8] Helen thus marries Arthur on the assumption that men are more easily corrupted because of their exposure to the world, and carries the following hope:

> To give him an opportunity of shaking off the adventitious evil got from contact with others worse than himself, and shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness—to do my utmost to help his better self against his worse, and make him what he would have been if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father…and a foolish mother (*WH* 149).

The cultural convention within the novel that women are morally responsible for reforming men arises not only from their separation from the world, but also from descriptive terms which delineate them as more spiritual than men.[9] Arthur uses the distinction between male and female morality to define and confine Helen for specific purposes.

The first purpose in defining Helen's morality is to convince Helen that her morality is necessary for Arthur's spiritual and moral edification. Arthur uses the argument of Helen's moral superiority to assuage her concerns about his behavior: "The very idea of having you to care for under my roof, would force me to moderate my expenses and live like a Christian—not to speak of all the prudence and virtue you would instill into my mind by your wise counsels and sweet, attractive goodness" (*WH* 147). This sentiment has two effects upon Helen—it gives her an elevated view of her own goodness, and it lays a burden upon her which she feels she must fulfill. This distinction between masculine and feminine morality is discursively strengthened by the dichotomy of fiendish versus angelic depictions of men and women.

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[8]See Thormählen's analysis of references to Arthur's phrenology as indicative of moral incapacity in "The Villain of Wildfell Hall."

[9]See discussion on Steinbach in the Introduction. The spiritualizing of women through the rise of evangelicalism affected the standards and expectations for female behavior.

Helen's Encounter with Feminine Morality

While Arthur's portrayal of his own "devilry" may well serve as an exaggeration for effect, [10] his use of the term "angel" as a means of controlling Helen's identity emphasizes the dangers of a gender-personified morality.[11] Given the centrality of descriptions of Helen as an "angel" and subsequently as a "saint," I suggest that the terms are foundational to Helen's reconceptualization of feminine morality.[12]

Helen's reaction to Arthur's definition of her as a "sweet angel" is the starting point of her moral agency (*WH* 124). Arthur refers to Helen as an angel throughout the novel, implying an ability and responsibility to reform him: "She is an angel, and I am a presumptuous dog to dream of possessing such a treasure" (*WH* 144).[13] Helen at first eagerly takes on the role of the "Angel in the House," seeing her reformative role as a heavenly calling: "What bliss to recall him! If he is now exposed to the baneful influence of corrupting and wicked companions, what glory to deliver him from them!—Oh! if I

[10]Several of Brontë's contemporary reviewers criticized her male characters as unrealistic or typifying the excesses of a previous period or literary stereotypes. One contemporary remarked, "Mr. Huntingdon, belongs to the squirearchy period of Smollett and Fielding's novels—the wife of the profligate to the sentimental, progress women of the present era" (From an unsigned review, *Literary World,* 12 August 1848, Allott 258). The preface clearly indicates that Brontë exaggerates the faults of the male characters for effect, that she is not painting a representative picture of the mid-Victorian male, but whether the exaggeration extends to her female characters is less clear. Helen's patience and fortitude are leveled by admissions of her own faults as will be discussed below, clearly indicating she is not the "angelic" figure which Arthur constructs.

[11]Berry notes the profuseness of angel and devil imagery throughout the novel and discusses the challenge Helen faces as "savagely abusive psychological onslaught" (95).

[12]Many commentators have analyzed Arthur's self-deprecating morality. For example, see Talley's assessment of the way in which Anne's Methodist ideals shaped her idea of moral responsibility, noting "the deleteriousness of pessimism about one's ability to improve one's own character" as evidenced in Arthur and his friends (203).

[13]Arthur's comments are spread throughout the text. For example: "I will do my utmost…to remember and perform the injunctions of my angel monitress" (*WH* 169), and also, "She (Lady Lowborough) is a daughter of earth; you are an angel of Heaven; only be not too austere in your divinity, and remember that I am a poor, fallible mortal" (*WH* 200).

could but believe that Heaven has designed me for this!" (*WH* 129). At this point, Helen implicitly defines her own morality in reference to the immorality of Arthur, drawing her moral agency, her purpose for action, in reference to reforming another.

At the same time, Helen begins questioning the definition of perfection which Arthur sets for her and which her aunt accuses her of presuming; she tells her aunt that she hopes Arthur's behavior will change "not from confidence in my own powers, but in *his* natural goodness" (*WH* 127). She rejects the dichotomy of their morality, yet still distinguishes between their moral abilities: "He is not an infidel;--and I am not light, and he is not darkness, his worst and only vice is thoughtlessness" (*WH* 150). Thus, early on, Helen refutes the definition of angel but accepts the premise which follows from it, namely that her sensibility can serve as a corrective to Arthur's "thoughtlessness." As the marriage progresses, Helen realizes not only that Arthur possess less "natural goodness" than she supposed, but that his ideal of her as an angel limits her moral agency as an individual and as a mother.

Feminine Religion in Relation to Feminine Morality

Arthur's encroachment upon Helen's religion causes her to further question her moral status as an "angel." Contrary to his use of the term "angel" to elevate Helen's morality, Arthur's definition of Helen as a "saint" in reference to her religion bears a negative and almost ludicrous connotation. For example, when Helen objects to Arthur's mockery of the local priest as an example of emotional, outward piety, he remarks, "Oh, I forgot, you are a saint too" (*WH* 147). Whereas Helen's role as an angel is initially used to convince her to overlook her fiancée's faults, her saintliness, or propensity to take her religion seriously, poses a threat to her submissiveness as an angel. While Helen

passively accepts the role of angel (initially), she makes a movement towards agency by refusing to limit her spirituality at Arthur's request. Helen's first moment of moral agency occurs when Arthur demands that she not elevate her spirituality above her wifely duties:

> It is nothing you have done or said; it is something that you *are*: you are too religious. Now I like a woman to be religious, and I think your piety one of your greatest charms, but then…it may be carried too far…a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord. She should have enough to purify and etherealize her soul, but not enough to refine away her heart (*WH* 173).

It is noteworthy that Arthur is displeased not with Helen's words or actions, but with her very being, an aspect of her identity. He is frustrated that Helen's religion goes beyond making her conventionally demure to claiming part of her affections. Helen's response that her heart is independent is a statement of moral agency because she places her moral point of reference with God rather than her husband: "I will give my whole heart and soul to my Maker if I can…and not one atom more of it to you than He allows. What are *you*, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and all I am…" (*WH* 173). Helen's religion thus forms a part of her identity that supersedes her identity as a wife.

Arthur's response that Helen is a "sweet enthusiast" indicates both that he does not take her seriously, and that a spiritual devotion which transcends her angelic role of reforming him is excessive (*WH* 173). Additionally, Arthur characterizes Helen's spirituality as an obstacle to his own salvation: "You were so absorbed in your devotions that you had not even a glance to spare me—I declare, it is enough to make one jealous of one's Maker—which is very wrong, you know; so don't excite such wicked passions again, for my soul's sake" (*WH* 173). Arthur subtly manipulates Helen's desire to be a

reforming influence as an "angel" in order to control the one aspect of her being which Helen refuses to grant him, namely, her spirituality. Helen's continued control of her religious practice and identity delineates her as an independent moral agent.

The second moment of agency occurs when Helen recognizes her inability to reform her husband and attributes Arthur's downfall to his own responsibility. As it becomes clear that Helen's attempts to reform her husband are useless, she no longer finds purpose in operating as an angel. Reflecting on Arthur's degrading actions, Helen refutes Arthur's early definition of her as an angel: "I am tired out with his injustice…I am no angel and my corruption rises against it" (*WH* 226-227). As Helen despairs of fulfilling the role of the angel, she subsequently extricates her moral agency from that of her husband:

> Since he and I are one, I so identify myself with him, that I feel his degradation, his failings, and transgressions as my own; I blush for him, I fear for him; I repent for him, weep, pray, and feel for him as for myself; but I cannot act for him; and hence, I must be and I am debased, contaminated by the union, both in my own eyes, and in the actual truth (*WH* 222).

After recognizing that she cannot be a moral agent on her husband's behalf, Helen next recognizes that rather than elevating him, she herself has been tainted. Her role as an "angel" has gone terribly wrong as she herself has, in a sense, fallen, not because she failed to reform her husband, but because she failed to recognize that her morality could not stand in place of another:

> I am familiarized with vice and almost a partaker of his sins. Things that formerly shocked and disgusted me, now seem only natural. I know them to be wrong, because reason and God's word declare them to be so; but I am gradually losing that instinctive horror and repulsion which was given be by nature…Fool that I was to dream that I had strength and purity enough to save myself and him! (*WH* 222).

Paradoxically, rather than affecting reformation, Helen has decreased in her own estimation through her efforts. She washes her hands of reforming her husband and turns her reflections towards her own moral integrity: “God might awaken that heart supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, and remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not” (*WH* 220).

Helen’s concern for her own spiritual integrity thus gives her a higher agency which transcends her first moral agency based on reforming her husband. Her transition from the first to the second moral posturing releases her to an extent from her sense of obligation to her husband. Although not a point of discussion in this essay, Helen’s role as a mother undoubtedly plays a role in her departure from her husband’s house, but in relation to my argument, Helen must first more clearly distinguish her moral status from that of her husband before she takes their son away. The maternal is undoubtedly a spiritual force for Helen, but she must transcend the spiritual connection of marriage first. Arthur and Helen’s interaction makes up a significant portion of her moral development, but it shapes Helen for her subsequent interactions with Mr. Hargrave, a friend of her husband who admires her, and Gilbert Markham, whom she ultimately marries following Arthur’s death. Both men appeal to Helen’s feminine morality, but with different intents. As men outside the bounds of marriage, they present moral arguments against which Helen contends and ultimately maintains her independent moral agency.

The independence of Helen’s heart in relation to religion ties to her idea of marriage and morality. While other Victorian heroines, such as Jane Eyre, struggle with their heart in a state of singleness, Helen offers the unique situation of a woman who has bound her heart in matrimony. Helen first recognizes she is not responsible to change

her husband through questioning her position of angel but also through a recognition that his authority and corrosive influence limits her spirituality. Having reached a state of autonomy in her marriage because of her spiritual autonomy, the next test she faces is an offer outside of marriage- one meant to appeal to her spirituality but in a very different way. Helen's principle is based on the Biblical understanding of marriage rather than the legal; and while the legal certainly comes under attack, the underlying critique is in the understanding of marriage as a spiritual union. This relationship's relevance to a woman's agency is key.

Hargrave's Attack on Helen's Religion

As Helen takes a stand of moral independence from her husband, Mr. Hargrave appropriates a similar definition of angelic, reformative feminine morality to subtly cause Helen's morality to deviate. Mr. Hargrave presents his advances towards Helen as justified by Arthur's repulsive behavior and also indicates that he would be a more tractable and worthy recipient of Helen's remonstrations: "If I had…but *half* the inducements to virtue and domestic orderly habits that he despises…" (*WH* 210). Given Helen's previous struggle of being associated with her husband's sin, the guilt which Hargrave's attentions engender in Helen provides a warning: "I have sometimes been startled by a subtle, fiendish suggestion inciting me to show him [Arthur] the contrary by a seeming encouragement of Hargrave's advances" (*WH* 267). She is immediately overwhelmed however with "horror and self-abasement" at her "sinful thoughts," revealing not only intense moral self-evaluation, but a recognition of her own primary moral agency despite her circumstances: "Instead of being humbled and purified by my afflictions, I feel they are turning my nature into gall. *This must be my fault as much as*

theirs that wrong me. No true Christian could cherish such bitter feelings as I do against him and her" (*WH* 267, *emphasis added*). Helen resists moral dependency not only by refusing to let her morality be defined by others, but also by taking her moral responsibility into her own hands; she refuses to excuse an affair with Hargrave because of her husband's unfaithfulness. This could be read as a rejection of the self-abnegation that nineteenth-century society championed, as seen in the Angel of the House poem in my introduction, wherein the wife considers her husband's faults to be her own: "She leans and weeps against his breast, and seems to think the sin was hers" (Patmore 74, l. 15-16).

Helen at first draws upon her biblical union with her husband to deflect Hargrave's criticism of Arthur, remarking, "Bad as he is, he is part of myself, and you cannot abuse him without offending me," echoing earlier sentiments of associating herself with her husband's guilt (*WH* 232).[14] However, when Arthur's behavior reaches the point at which Helen denies "allegiance," considering herself "free to do anything but offend God and my conscience," Helen's resistance thus stems not only from her obedience to God, but also from her individual conscience (*WH* 269).[15] Hargrave seizes the opportunity presented by Helen's disassociation with Arthur to claim her affection. He belittles her moral ideals and questions her interpretation of morality:

> Provided your conscience be not too morbidly tender, and your ideas of God not too erroneously severe…can you suppose it would offend that benevolent Being to make the happiness of one who would die for yours?—to raise a devoted heart

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[14]As noted in the *OUP* edition, Helen here references Genesis 2:24 ('and they shall be one flesh'). Hargrave later refences a similar passage arguing for his union with Helen, noted in *OUP* edition as Matthew 19:5, Mark 10:8 and Ephesians 5:31 (*WH* 303).

[15]Clear proof of adultery is a biblical reason for divorce, and although Helen does not reference this precept directly, it is possible that Brontë had it in mind as justification for Helen leaving her husband (Matthew 19:9).

> from purgatorial torments to a state of heavenly bliss when you could do it without the slightest injury to yourself or any other (*WH* 269).

Hargrave's appeal rests on the assumption that Helen's moral interpretive framework is too narrow and that her idea of God erroneously takes precedence over a man's happiness. For Hargrave, these two precepts ought to be reordered. Curiously, his argument parallels Rochester's plea to Jane Eyre that a liaison would not be sinful because it hurts no one else and to deny him would jeopardize his morality.[16] Helen, however, repulses his advances. After Hargrave asks her forgiveness, her Christ-like attribute of extending pardon and commanding Hargrave to "go, and sin no more," is reminiscent of the biblical passage in which Christ forgives a prostitute brought to him by the Pharisees (*WH* 271).[17]

In vilifying Arthur, Hargrave cites Helen's moral superiority as both necessitating and justifying separation from her husband: "I knew you were too high-minded and pure in your own nature to continue to regard one so utterly false and polluted with any feelings but those of indignation and scornful abhorrence" (*WH* 280). In order to persuade Helen to an immoral outcome, he uses her very moral indignance to establish a morality outside the norm. Hargrave finally changes tactics by claiming that Helen's religion verges on madness: "*You* may call this religion, but *I* call it wild fanaticism!" (*WH* 284). Helen's response indicates the strength of her religious identity: "If I were alone in the world, I have still my God and my religion, and I would sooner die than disgrace my calling and

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[16]Hargrave's argument echoes Rochester's plea to Jane to remain with him following the discovery of his wife: "Is it better to drive a fellow-creature to despair than to transgress a mere human law-no man being injured by the breach? For you have neither relatives nor acquaintances whom you need fear to offend by living with me" (*JE* 270).

[17]*WH Notes* provide reference to John 8:11.

break my faith with Heaven to obtain a few brief years of false and fleeting happiness" (284). Helen thus transcends her second temptation through her identity as a Christian. She refuses to allow Hargrave to define her femininity or her faith based upon his own desires. Contrary to the convention of the day, Helen does not find her identity in reference to a man through marriage, but rather through her individual relationship to God.

Gilbert Markham: Spiritual vs Physical Love

Finally, I would like to briefly explore Helen's interaction with Gilbert Markham, as it provides the final development of her individual moral agency. In her struggle to refuse Markham's affection, Helen stands fast to her moral integrity. While her denial could be read as an example of an Angel of the House who wants to protect the ideal of marriage, Helen's responses seem to suggest instead that she wishes to preserve her self-respect. Helen relies upon her religious principle and integrity, even though she is likewise attracted to Gilbert. Helen suggests "a spiritual intercourse without hope or prospect of anything further" (342-3). Helen tries to convince Gilbert of the worth of this spiritual rather than physical connection, yet the outward demonstration of Helen's inner turmoil speaks to the battle between desire for love and her moral conviction; she assures Gilbert that they will be reunited in heaven, but "in a tone of desperate calmness" with eyes that "glittered wildly" and a "deathly pale" face (342). Gilbert is little pleased with the idea of disembodied love, but Helen holds forth the ideal of "perfect love in Heaven" and admonishes him that his love is "*all* earthly" (343). Helen thus preserves her integrity by rejecting conventional ideas of love and pointing instead towards the realm of the spiritual as her guide. Even though Helen struggles the most with her initial

rejection of Gilbert, she finds peace in the thought that she will be rewarded in eternity: "I do know that to regret the exchange of earthly pleasures for the joys of Heaven, is as if the groveling caterpillar should lament that it must one day quit the nibbled leaf to soar aloft" (345). Helen's struggle between choosing unconventional love and staying faithful to her moral compass is more than simple a struggle against laws of marriage or against passion. Rather, her struggle is to preserve her individual moral integrity.

Conclusion

This chapter has addressed Helen's agency in challenging male definitions and limitations of female morality. Her ultimate moral independence indicates a distinctive feminine morality operating outside of male control; rather than being dependent upon her husband or any other man who offers her an alternative moral purpose, Helen ultimately makes key decisions based upon her own moral integrity. By refusing the demands of her husband to limit her spirituality and lower her standards, Helen denies the definition of a passive feminine morality. Helen's agency consists in a form of denial, of withholding something each man wants from her because their respective requests violate her spiritual and moral identity. In so doing, Helen asserts a new feminine morality, one which makes her accountable to God and no other.

CHAPTER FOUR

Religion and Reinterpreting the Novels' Conclusions: How does religion reshape our understanding of the endings of *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*?

Introduction

In the previous chapters I have contended that moral agency shaped by specifically religious concerns contributed to both Brontë heroines challenging conventional measures of morality. However, both novels have conventional Victorian endings as Jane and Helen's journeys conclude in a state of matrimony. Jane herself recounts that her marriage is blissful, while Helen's reader is left to surmise the success of her second marriage by her husband's account (*JE* 383-4, *WH* 417). Both endings have left a number readers and literary critics dismayed or confused, in particular creating a "long-standing schism between popular and academic readings" of *Jane Eyre*, in which popular readings find it an "affirming romance with a happy ending" while "the latter read it as a questioning narrative of unresolved struggle," which Sara Lodge identifies as the starting point of feminist criticism (Lodge 61). Readers of *Tenant* have likewise voiced dissatisfaction with Helen's second marriage.[1] In light of the recurrent theme of religion in my thesis, the question of this penultimate chapter is how religion adds to our interpretation of the novels' respective endings and the genre of the Brontë novels.

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[1]According to contemporary E.P. Whipple in the *North American Review* in 1848, Gilbert "seems to be a favorite with the author, and to be intended as a specimen of manly character; but he would serve as the ruffian of any other novelist. His nature is fierce, proud, moody, jealous, revengeful, and sometimes brutal. We can see nothing good in him except a certain rude honesty; and that quality is seen chiefly in his bursts of hatred and his insults to women" (Whipple in Allott 262). It is worth questioning whether the reader should trust Gilbert Markham's account. What should readers make of Helen's final state given the disparagement with which many commentators have treated Gilbert?

The Role of Religion in Jane Eyre's Marriage and Ultimate Silence

In light of the ambiguous nature of the novel's ending and Jane's religious experience throughout, the question arises as to what role religion ultimately plays in Jane's final development. In my previous analysis I suggested that religion shapes Jane's moral decisions; religious principles bolster her resolve to leave Rochester rather than to become his mistress and her sense of religious clarity results in her refusing St. John's religious argument to marry him. However, the ending of the novel provides an abrupt shift from Jane's prior engagement with religion; rather than Jane speaking of her own religious experience, it is Rochester and St. John who have the final religious words of the novel. The ending is also ambiguous as to whether Jane finds her chief reliance in herself, religious principle, or simply in the love of Mr. Rochester. The latter assertion is perhaps uncomfortable for both feminist and skeptical readers alike, for while Jane's ability to join Rochester is based upon financial independence and her assertion of will against St. John, she finds fulfillment in marriage rather than isolated self-reliance, encapsulated in the famous (or infamous), "Reader, I married him" (*JE* 382).[2]

As briefly discussed in a previous chapter, Jane's return to Rochester is not without moral implications; Jane has no idea that Rochester's wife is dead when she hurries back to him after hearing his supernatural voice. While this could be read as a moment of weakness in which Jane fails to keep her earlier resolve, as suggested by Delia

[2]Several scholars have noted echoes of Eden in Jane's description of her marriage, with varying interpretations. Patricia Beer views the religious undertones as unsettling and perhaps incongruous, given their connection to a biblical presentation of marriage, when heretofore she claims that the "religious content of *Jane Eyre* is misleading": "Jane's dedication in marriage is rhapsodically described…but the passage makes it clear that it is not only a question of ecstasy but also of equality (though the reference to Adam and Eve is disquieting)" (Beer 129, 107).

da Sousa, several aspects of the text complicate this reading.[3] First, Jane does not return in a moment of passion, but rather after a calming prayer (*JE* 358). Secondly, the text indicates that Jane returns to Rochester not from an impulse of passion, but rather through one of pity; Jane indicates in her last interaction with St. John that she intends to follow him to India only after she has ascertained that Rochester is safe and well:

> "My spirit," I answered mentally, "is willing to do what is right; and my flesh, I hope, is strong enough to accomplish the will of Heaven, when once that will is distinctly known to me. At any rate, it shall be strong enough to search—inquire—to grope an outlet from the cloud of doubt, and find the open day of certainty…I too have some to seek and ask after in England, *before I depart for ever*" (*JE* 358-9, *emphasis added*).

This passage indicates that Jane's intention in returning is not a reversal of her religious resolve in refusing to become Rochester's mistress. Even though in her moment of return Jane begins to give in to her earlier emotions, it is possible that Jane would have kept her resolve: "Could I but see him!—but a moment! Surely, in that case, I should not be so mad as to run to him? I cannot tell…And if I did—what then?...who would be hurt by my once more tasting the life his glance can give me?" (*JE* 361). Jane's discovery of the death of Rochester's wife is thus a relief to her agony and prevents her facing a morally complicating choice; the reader is left to surmise whether Jane would have kept to her resolve and left for India, or if she would have been tempted to comfort a distraught yet still married Rochester.

Once Jane finds that Rochester's wife is dead, the door opens for her to care for the now maimed Rochester. She impetuously offers to act as his nurse in the initial confusion and embarrassment of reunion, but then worries whether the suggestion is

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[3]See note on Da Sousa's reading of this passage as a moral undermining from previous chapter (Da Sousa 114).

proper: "Perhaps I had too rashly overleaped conventionalities" (*JE* 370).[4] She ultimately waits for Rochester to propose marriage, willing to deny her strongest feelings in order to serve him. This demonstrates the height of Jane's self-denial and perhaps saint-like disposition. It also presents the final development of Jane as a character possessing self-mastery; all throughout the novel she has struggled to master her passions and has finally overcome her desire for marriage in pursuit of a spiritual, self-giving love.[5] If the novel had ended at this moment, Jane might have joined the ranks of self-sacrificing heroines such as those in the religious novels of her contemporary Felicia Skene.[6] As a point of comparison, Charlotte Brontë described "Duty and Religion" as the medium of discernment to her friend Ellen Nussey. Her advice is interesting as it came a year before the first edition of *Jane Eyre* (1847): "The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest—which implies the greatest good to others—and this path steadily followed will lead I believe in time to prosperity and to happiness through it may seem at the outset to tend quite in the contrary direction" (Smith v. I 483).[7] It could be that Jane's initial sacrificial offer is thus rewarded with bliss, but the ending suggests that Brontë's heroine was more complex.

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[4]This is an interesting concern, as Jane earlier seemed to disregard conventionality when it came to her relationship with Rochester (*JE* 115). However, there is no question of immorality in her mind as Rochester is no longer married, removing the impediment of religious principle.

[5]Many scholars have discussed the passion/reason struggle within Jane's development; in reference to Jane's refusal of St John, Helene Moglen interprets Jane's actions as reasonable: "She rejects sexual passion that derives its force from masochistic self-denial and insists that duty and obligation must be placed within the context of a generous and reciprocal human love" (Moglen 140).

[6]For example, consider the character of Millicent in Felicia Skene's novel *The Tutor's Ward* (1851). Millicent secretly nurses the blinded Aylmer, her unfaithful lover, pretending she is the woman for whom he forsook her, described as "the ultimate act of sacrificial love" (Pond 87). For further analysis, see Kristen Pond's "'I Mistook the Faint Shadow": The Tractarian Ethos in Felicia Skene's Sensational Realism."

[7]See letter: *To Ellen Nussey, 10 July 1846* in Smith v. I p. 482-3.

The subsequent turn of events, as well as the convenient removal of moral difficulty through the death of Rochester's wife, seems to exclude Jane from becoming a model of saintly self-sacrifice or perfected virtue. Jane's own humanity, which she has often admitted as narrator throughout the novel, perhaps sheds light on the concluding lines of the novel which extol St. John's single-minded perseverance and ultimate death in missionary work. Although Jane herself achieves much progress, Brontë does not make her progression so linear that Jane is an uncomplicated figure who could be held up as a clear example of saintly behavior.

While Jane's character flaws and struggles are open to the reader, Rochester views Jane's marriage to him as a saintly act. It is curious then, that Jane denies sainthood and affirms the fulfillment of her desires instead. When Rochester equates Jane's acceptance of his proposal to sacrifice, a typical feminine virtue in Victorian religious writing, Jane claims self-fulfillment: "What do I sacrifice? Famine for food, expectation for content. To be privileged to put my arms around what I value—to press my lips to what I love—to repose on what I trust: is that to make a sacrifice? If so, then certainly I delight in sacrifice" (*JE* 379). Her response is the very opposite of conventionally religious female heroines, who were marked not only by exaggerated shows of piety, but also by self-sacrifice to the point of self-abnegation.[8]

The religious language which Jane uses in describing her marriage coupled with her emphasis on self-fulfillment and earthly happiness indicates not simply a saintly protagonist, but rather the completion of Jane the character's *bildungsroman* journey. The way in which Jane describes her married life indicates that she believes God's hand

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[8]See excerpt from Sarah Lewis in Introduction.

was active in bringing her marriage about, contrasting with her doubt earlier in the novel. Firstly, Jane characterizes the marriage as a divine reward: "If ever I did a good deed in my life—if ever I thought a good thought—if ever I prayed a sincere and blameless prayer—if ever I wished a righteous wish,—I am rewarded now" (*JE* 381). The suggestion that Jane might have merited the marriage is interesting contrasted with Jane's earlier elevation of fulfillment. However, the motif of reward for righteousness might perhaps make the ending fit within the characteristics of the *bildungsroman* genre. For example, L.M. Green notes the role of the *bildungsroman* in affirming convention (although it is not a universal characteristic), which might also make sense of why Jane, a hitherto unconventional character, ends the story in a very conventional state of marriage: "Resolutions in vocational and marital success have given the Victorian Bildungsroman a critical reputation as a normalizing genre, one that moves toward the goal of reintegrating an initially erring, rebellious, or simply inexperienced protagonist with his or her societal norms" (Green par. 2). Brontë could very well have used this element of *bildungsroman* to soothe any indignation in her readers regarding Jane's hitherto emotional and turbulent journey by making Jane the narrator to reflect upon her mistakes and past inexperience, and entering a marriage that conveniently falls within moral bounds. Green also notes "moral and emotional development" as a key characteristic of the *bildungsroman*, which fits with Jane's progressive mastery of her turbulent emotions and control of her moral actions (Green par. 1). In the final scenes, Jane's use of religious language, reinforced by that of Rochester and St. John, helps the reader recognize that Jane's development has led her to be more trusting in her faith, even if she has not reached the saintly level of St. John.

Jane's marriage might also be seen as a religious vocation; while Green notes vocation as a sign of "arrival at maturity" for a bildungsroman protagonist, Jane's marriage might be more than the crowning achievement of self-control (par. 1). The language of mercy and forgiveness evident in Rochester's reflections after they are married suggests that Jane serves a spiritual purpose in rehabilitating the repentant Rochester and that her journey and transformation fit into a larger picture of redemption not only for herself, but for the wayward and obstinate Rochester, who vows to "lead henceforth a purer life" (*JE* 382).[9] An interpretation that places the role of spiritual guide on Jane bears striking similarities to the role which Helen shuns in Tenant and clashes with Jane's earlier denial of being an angel: "I had rather be a *thing* than an angel" (*JE* 223).[10] However, it does suggest a redemptive role for Jane in light of the ending's shift from her voice to that of St. John.

In further considering *Jane Eyre*'s similarities to the genre of religious literature, Da Sousa suggests that the novel as a whole exhibits characteristics of the "spiritual autobiography," especially in light of Jane's "self-interpretation" (95):

> "The conventions of spiritual autobiography generate certain narrative and moral expectations in the reader, above all the likelihood that the protagonist will grow in moral stature, developing a growing trust in God's providence and thankfulness for delivery from temptation. You can probably identify ways in which this mode is relevant to parts of Brontë's novel" (da Sousa 95).

This description certainly would apply when considering Jane's earlier pondering over being saved from temptation while at Moor House as well as her reflection over the

[9]Several scholars have noted the language of mercy and forgiveness in Rochester's closing speech. See for example, Jenkins 81.

[10]Moglen notes Jane's role as maternal in her restoration of Rochester: "His [Rochester's] is a comatose soul, unable to cry out for rebirth. It is not a lover he requires, but a mother who can offer him again the gift of life. And it is this function which Jane will gratefully assume…the partial restoration of Rochester's vision cannot reverse the pattern of relationship" (Moglen 143).

mystery of the voice which spoke to both her and Rochester. However, if we identify spiritual autobiography, as does da Sousa, with self-reflection upon one's spiritual and moral progress, then Jane's emphasis on the spiritual fortitude of St. John at the end rather than herself still seems problematic, a topic which I will further consider below.

Rochester finishes the penultimate chapter with thanks to God that "in the midst of judgement He has remembered mercy," a descriptive contrast of the merciful divine hand sanctioning their marriage with what Jane earlier described as a "revengeful fury," which drove her from an illicit union with Rochester earlier in the novel (*JE* 360, 382). Jane's initial reflection on the force which drove her from Rochester seems resentful, yet it is important to keep in mind that this is her description before she discovers Rochester's new position. Jane's ultimate focus on mercy demonstrates an arc from frustration and ambiguity to a sense of God's overarching providence, however difficult that spiritual force seemed at the moment. Rochester's turn towards recognizing God's mercy also indicates a developmental arc, as it contrasts with his earlier position of hoping God would merely condone Rochester's appropriation of an unconventional moral code.

Da Sousa notes Jane and Rochester's final religious turn in writing that the "novel remains 'providential' in that the way is cleared for Jane's legitimate union with a humbled and newly pious Rochester" (115). She also brings up the interesting question of whether the novel is ultimately "an endorsement of romantic rebellion, or of something far more conservative" (da Sousa 115). She asks the reader whether Jane's "situation at the end of the novel" is best described as "fulfillment of romantic individualism, of domestic romance, or as something more disturbing" (da Sousa 131). I would argue that

there is no clear answer to Da Sousa's query; while Jane certainly exhibits moments of "romantic rebellion," her ultimate state of domesticity suggests that Brontë felt far more comfortable with a conventional ending. However, Jane's open declaration of her personal happiness and satisfaction does suggest that regardless of Jane's conventional status as a married woman, her motivation for marriage and her journey up to that point are far from conventional.

Jane's ambiguous and amorphous religious experience in many ways mirrors the mutability of genre within the novel, especially in her portrayals of religious presence, which range from threatening "revengeful fury," to mystically gothic interventions. While her confidence in the rightness of her marriage to Rochester is bolstered by an aura of divine providence, this providence is strangely troubling to Jane. In reflecting upon the convergence of the mysterious voice which called her with Rochester's similar experience, Jane evokes both Gothic sensibilities as well as scriptural allusion in a way which nuances our final understanding of her religious development:

> Reader, it was Monday night—near midnight—that I too had received the mysterious summons…I listened to Mr. Rochester's narrative; but made no disclosure in return. The coincidence struck me as too awful and inexplicable to be communicated or discussed. If I told anything, my tale would be such as must necessarily make a profound impression on the mind of my hearer: and that mind, yet from its suffering too prone to gloom, needed not the deeper shade of the supernatural. I kept these things, then, and pondered them in my heart (*JE* 381).[11]

Just has Jane has mixed genres in her romantic development, as narrator she also blurs the lines between conventionally direct guidance from God, (such as that which Bunyan's

[11]The Norton edition recalls the similarity in wording describing Mary's reflection on the words of the shepherds concerning the angels' announcement of Christ's birth in Luke 2.8-19.

Christian experiences), and an indeterminate and mysterious "otherworldliness."[12] The unpredictable changes in Jane's religious experience stand in contrast with the conventional and unchanging faith of St. John; Jane's experience of the divine as unclear and sensational contrasts strongly with St. John's certainty in the closing lines of the novel: "The last letter I received from him drew from my eyes human tears, and yet filled my heart with Divine joy: he anticipated his sure reward, his incorruptible crown" (385). St. John's eternal security contrasts with Jane's own questioning of eternity earlier in the novel in her conversation with the dying Helen (*JE* 69). Jane's own religious journey is thus highlighted by her interaction with deeply religious characters whose sense of future reward leads them to deny themselves and take up crosses which Jane herself finds unbearable and even unreasonable. This is seen in her critique of St. John, her "ascetic" cousin Eliza who becomes a Catholic nun, and in her childhood assessments of Helen's faith and ultimate death (*JE* 194). However, Jane recognizes that surety in faith has its benefits: "No fear of death will darken St. John's last hour…his hope will be sure; his faith steadfast" (*JE* 385).

Jane's agency develops through the novel in tandem with her developing perception of God. Jane's explosive temper and uncontrolled agency parallels her unsettled questioning of Helen's faith, and her battle between passion and reason parallels her distance from God as she seeks an alternate basis for moral decisions.

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[12]Moglen and others have noted the repeated presence of fairy imagery (Moglen 118), and Moglen characterizes the voice speaking to Jane as evoking the maternal: "The authority which Jane has sought is female: the moon, maternal nature, the mother within herself—a cosmic and personal principle of order and control" (119). While these might further indicate an unorthodox view of God, the maternal voice in particular is not clearly identified with God, but rather as an alternate form of Jane's conscience.

Finally, with both Rochester and St. John, she gains clarity for action in the midst of mental and emotional confusion through prayer or divine intervention.

Helen's Transformation Through Religious Principle

Tenant concludes with another kind of return, providing a point of contrast between the two novels which places the authors' views of religion and moral agency in relief. Both heroines return to their earlier love interests, yet with different purposes and responses. While Jane returns out of loving care and concern to a repentant Rochester, Helen returns to an unrepentant Arthur out of duty. God's mercy and forgiveness feature predominantly in both endings, but to very different purposes.

Although Helen's extrication of herself from her marriage was morally justifiable in her eyes and those of her brother in the moment, towards the end of the novel she regains her sense of responsibility as a wife when her husband reaches imminent death. Helen's return could be read as a point of tension with my earlier argument for her agency in challenging the definition of femininity as angelic; is her compassion and sense of duty to her husband merely another form of servitude and self-abnegation? Has she returned merely to resume the mantle of "the Angel of the house?" Helen indicates through her letters to her brother that should her husband recover, she will remain with him: "I am exerting my utmost endeavours to promote the recovery and reformation of my husband, and if I succeed what shall I do? My duty, of course,--but how--?" (*WH* 367). Helen's perception of duty, however, is perhaps not as incompatible with her previous stance towards moral independence as might first be supposed. Her return is complicated, as at times she seems to wish to reform her husband, yet ultimately, she rests her hope on God's mercy rather than her own responsibility. Helen thus avoids the

usual pressure placed upon the angel of the house by serving on her own terms. Her return to Arthur, which serves as the climax before the novel's ending sets the stage for her second marriage. Helen's stance towards Arthur in his final days helps make sense of Helen's passive and unencouraging response to Gilbert Markham after Arthur's death; her interpretation of her role as a wife and as a woman in Arthur's final days solidifies her position as an independently minded woman who maintains her agency alongside her Christian convictions, refusing to give in to pressures from either man in her life, Arthur or Markham.

Firstly, while Helen still indicates a desire to see her husband reform, after facing Arthur's intractable disposition her primary motivation is duty to the minimum of her marriage vows, rather than a repetition of her earlier attempts to reform:

> It is well for me that I *am* doing my duty…for it is the only comfort I have; and the satisfaction of my own conscience, it seems, is the only reward I need look for…I *did* hope to benefit you: as well to better your mind, as to alleviate your present sufferings; but it appears I am to do neither—your own bad spirit will not let me. As far as *you* are concerned, I have sacrificed my own feelings, and all the little earthly comfort that was left me, to no purpose (*WH* 365).

Helen finds comfort in her faith as her primary resolution in marriage is no longer to save or reform her husband, (although she does suggest she is willing to try only if he is receptive), but rather to fulfil the role that God has given her: "I can perform the task that is before me now, and God will give me strength to do whatever He requires hereafter" (*WH* 367). Helen's "sacrifice" of her feelings and comfort lends her an air of saintliness, in spite of her husband's vindictive characterization of her as such. In a turning of tables, Arthur now uses the definition of "angel" against Helen; he calls her his "immaculate angel" who will ignore his distress in hell (375-6) and mocks her "Christian

magnanimity" (364).[13] He even berates her patient service to him, telling her she can "enjoy it with such a quiet conscience…because it's all in the way of duty" (365). The irony is that Helen is far from an angel in the sense in which Arthur first used the term to describe her; Helen rather exerts herself to fulfill what she deems the morally correct course of action, yet without reference to pleasing her husband for his own sake. In a different reading of these passages, Elizabeth Berry speaks of Helen's return as form of servitude and dependence: "Helen's emotional entrapment is related to his [Arthur's] continual manipulation of her maternal Christian feelings" (Berry 79). For Berry, Helen's Christian principles are a source of weakness rather than strength. However, Helen's subsequent actions suggest that she has no intention of being taken for granted.

Helen's sense of duty has its limits, and she indicates that she will exert greater autonomy in her marriage should Arthur recover, intending to act in accordance with her conscience rather than her husband's whims. For example, her son's moral preservation takes precedence over her husband's wish to see him; she refuses her husband access to see little Arthur until he signs an agreement granting Helen legal custody of their son, reserving herself the right to take him away if needed (*WH* 363). Even more significantly, Helen spurns her husband's attempts at physical affection, perhaps an indication that her emotional attachment is not as strong as Berry suggests (*WH* 369). Although Helen's great attention to and patience with her husband could be read as pure self-sacrifice, Helen also takes care to preserve her own strength rather than wear herself into oblivion to please Arthur; she notes that her heath "would be entirely neglected were I to satisfy his exorbitant demands" (*WH* 369). Helen thus exerts an authority and

[13]Elizabeth Berry also notes Arthur's reversal of his terms as a form of psychological manipulation in response to Helen as a "powerful female presence" who frightens him (Berry 78).

mastery over herself and her son which she had been unable to exert earlier in her marriage.

While Helen in a sense acts as an "angel of mercy" to a sinner who arguably does not deserve her pity, she ultimately does not take responsibility for his salvation and eternal state: "I do pray for you—every hour and every minute, Arthur; but you must pray for yourself" (381). Helen continues encouraging her husband yet retains the principle that only he himself can actively turn towards righteousness. Helen refuses to allow her good works to "stand in" on behalf of Arthur. Arthur's awareness of his sole responsibility light of his wife's new role is evident as he wavers between scoffing at the idea of death, and crying in desperation, "Helen, you *must* save me!" (376). Helen, nevertheless, remains firm, urging him towards dependence upon God rather than upon her: when Arthur wishes that Helen could accompany him in death in order to "plead" for him, Helen replies that this is not in her power, as "no man can deliver his brother, nor make agreement unto God for him" (380).[14] Helen Huntingdon in many ways mirrors Helen Burns of *Jane Eyre*, explaining the idea of God to the doubting and anxious Arthur, although her listener does not prove as receptive as Jane.

Anne Brontë turns her heroine away from a conventional trope (found in a segment of religious novels), that women were responsible for saving wayward men towards total trust in the mercy of God. In so doing, Helen appeals to the concept of purgatory and universal salvation, ideas which were unorthodox in Anglican doctrine:

> How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment?...But thank God I have hope—not only from a vague

[14]Marianne Thormählen speaks extensively on this subject in *Aspects of Love*, identifying Helen's "arrogation to herself of the power to save another human being's soul" as "an act of religious hubris" (Thormählen 157). See a similar assessment by Morse (109).

> dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that, through whatever purging fires the erring spirit may be doomed to pass—whatever fate awaits it, still, it is not lost, and God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, *will* bless it in the end! (*WH* 382).

These beliefs speak to Helen's idea of God as all-merciful, a portrayal which she shares with Jane Eyre. Helen thus relies, as does Jane in her relationship with Rochester, on her own image of God outside official Church doctrine.[15] Helen's eschatology is in itself an act of moral agency; by choosing to believe that God will not condemn her husband to Hell, in spite of church doctrine's refutation of this belief, Helen clears her conscience from residual guilt or responsibility for saving her husband. By pleasing God rather than men and rejecting the demands of her husband, Mr. Hargrave, and initially Gilbert, Helen's faith allows her to challenge a demeaning conception of feminine morality. Helen frees herself from the burden of the angel of the house and challenges the idea of feminine responsibility, claiming it is not in her power to correct men but rather asking them to correct themselves by pointing them towards God. Religion is thus fundamental in Helen's final interactions with her husband and later with Gilbert Markham.

Helen's story, however, does not end in a patient yet strained relationship with Arthur Huntingdon and the reader is not left with this disappointing shift in Helen's situation. As in *Jane Eyre,* Anne Brontë saves her heroine from a degrading end by the

[15]Lee Talley has noted the connection between Methodism and Helen's shifting view of reform: "*Tenant* works to instruct readers about the difficulty (and often impossibility) not just of conversion, but of changing another individual's confirmed pattern of behavior…Like the young converts whom the contributors of the [Methodist] magazine felt compelled to warn, Helen begins to 'fall' because of the hubris of believing she can change Arthur" (Talley 142). While Helen notes that Arthur is responsible for his turn towards salvation, yet her hope in universal salvation provides her not only comfort, but a means by which to further disentangle herself from a role of reform and responsibility for the eternal security of another. Helen's attendance at her husband's death shows that she still considers her role as a wife as a means to benefit her husband, *if* he be willing to accept her admonitions, but she no longer feels the burden of responsibility. The anger, frustration, and personal guilt which characterized her early marriage are thus replaced by pity and hope.

death of the character who poses a moral impediment to her happiness. After Arthur's death, Helen is free to love Gilbert Markham without impunity. While many readers have expressed disappointment with Helen's second husband, Helen shows signs that she has no intention of repeating the mistakes of her first marriage. Firstly, Helen is patient, waiting for Markham to extend a clear sign of affection. While this could be read as simple passivity, it could also indicate that Helen will only accept Gilbert if he demonstrates courage, honor, and conviction in pursuing her. Given his earlier tendencies to judge her without waiting for an explanation, she waits for him to visit her. Even then, Gilbert nearly loses his opportunity to ask Helen's hand in marriage; overwhelmed by her new-found wealth, he turns back from visiting, only to come upon her carriage. He also speaks indirectly and hesitates when Helen indicates her affection by offering him a rose. Although he finally speaks of his intentions, Helen does not lose the opportunity of telling him that his concern for convention rather than respect for her feelings might have cost him her love:

> If you loved as *I* do…you would not have so nearly lost me—these scruples of false delicacy and pride would never thus have troubled you—you would have seen that the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls (*WH* 413).

Helen's repeated emphasis on the connection of souls indicates her awareness, learned through her earlier marriage, of spiritual equality in marriage, what Marian Shaw calls "spiritual egalitarianism" (qtd in Morse 104).[16] Helen has no intention of being "unequally yoked" a second time (2 Corinthians 6:14).

[16]Shaw, Marion. 'Anne Brontë: A Quiet Feminist'. Brontë Society Transactions 21.4. 1994, p.127.

Through her return to her husband's deathbed, Helen shows charity and mercy in line with the same charity and mercy she expects God to extend towards her husband. In light of her second marriage, Helen marries for affection, but tempers this affection with prudence; she tests Gilbert by making him overcome his weaknesses on his own and she takes ownership of herself by setting the date for their marriage. Helen places reasonableness and consideration for others before immediate physical satisfaction, authoritatively setting the date of her wedding later than Gilbert's immediate wishes: "I will not be such a hypocrite as to pretend that I desire to wait so long myself, but as my marriage is to please myself alone, I ought to consult my friends about the time of it" (*WH* 413). This connotes the spiritual virtue of patience, virtue, and self-denial which Helen has exhibited throughout the novel. How then does religion affect our reading of the ending in light of conventionality and moral agency? Through appropriating religion into her actions, Helen undergirds her identity upon Christian principles such as duty and moral integrity over and above conventions of femininity. Helen denies her role as an "Angel of the House" who passively submits to immoral behavior and accepts sole responsibility as the moral leader in marriage.

Helen is thus transformed from a young woman with a simplistic view of marriage and men and women's roles; she gains humility in recognizing that she is not able to reform another, and she gains strength in reframing her identity to be centered on service to God through moral integrity rather than service to a man. Although Gilbert's overall character has been turbulent and erratic at worst and immature at best, the reader may perhaps take comfort in Gilbert's earlier assertion to his mother's traditional claim that a woman's domestic duty is to please man: "When I marry, I shall expect to find

more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive" (*WH* 50).

Situating the Brontës within Genre

To answer the question how Jane's use of religion helps in considering Brontë's use of genre, I would suggest that Brontë uses different modes of genre to express Jane's (and perhaps Brontë's own) fluctuating experience of faith. The Brontës' work does not easily situate itself within a single genre, and much has been written on the literary influences that shaped their artistic sensibilities, particularly those of Charlotte. The Brontës' literary heroes shed light on the model for their literature; for instance, Charlotte notes her admiration for Thackeray, a noted realist and satirist, in her preface to *Jane Eyre*, praising him as a "social regenerator" who "would restore to rectitude the warped system of things."[17] Anne likewise takes on the tone of a "social regenerator" in her own preface, in which she claims that while she is not "competent to reform the error and abuses of society," she "would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense" (*WH* 3). The Brontës' desire to communicate truth suggests their tendency to fit within the emerging realist fiction of their day. The Brontës' preoccupation with moral development is reminiscent of their contemporary George Eliot's views on realism: "The thing for mankind to know is, not what are the motives

[17]"There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned Kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital—a mien as dauntless and as daring. Is the satirist of "Vanity Fair" admired in high places? I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst whom he hurls the Greek fire of his sarcasm, and over whom he flashes the levin-brand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time—they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Rimoth-Gilead…I think I see in him an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized…I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day—as the very master of that working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things" (*Preface to Second Edition of Jane Eyre*, 1847).

and influences which the moralist thinks ought to act on the labourer or the artisan, but what are the motives and influences which do act on him" (qtd in D'Albertis 123). In other words, the Brontës' writing reflects realistic struggles between what society says is religion and how the individual experiences religion.

Speaking of the "later realism" of Gissing and George More, George Levine notes a preoccupation "for the whole tradition of English realism, as a self-conscious rejection of certain conventions of literary representation and of their implications. Purporting, like all realism, to speak the truth, it in fact invents a truth defined by its almost perfect inversion of mid-Victorian conventions" (Levine 5). The Brontës' two novels which I have discussed certainly attempt a degree of "inversion" of conventionality, and they are not afraid to exaggerate and make use of different modes of genre in order to communicate an underlying truth that they deemed was overlooked in society, namely, the individual woman's responsibility and right to make moral decisions independent of social conventions appropriated by men for their own convenience. The Brontës' preoccupation with truth does not correspond with a strictly "realistic" portrayal of character. For example, while the thoughts and feelings of characters certainly express realism, Anne does not pretend to give a representative picture of society; Anne notes in her preface that she exaggerates in order to make her point: "The case is an extreme one…but I know that such characters do exist" (*WH* 4). Anne certainly employs realism in her description of the Helen's real struggles as a young woman; she is nearly as emotional as Jane, and also quite stubborn in her refusal to be confined by her husband.

The Romantic genre also plays a part, particularly in the "introspective qualities" and "celebration of the individual imagination" within *Jane Eyre* (da Sousa 92).

Charlotte's childhood love of Romantic heroes is well documented by Caroline Franklin, especially her idolization of Byronic heroes which affected her portrayal of Mr. Rochester. Romantic individualism may have contributed to Jane's independent moral agency; although in moments of agency she rejects individual feeling in favor of principle, Jane's romantic rebellion and emphasis on authenticity are the starting point of her rebellion against social convention. Charlotte's romantic tendencies, as well as her use of gothic and sensational elements, noted by many scholars, make *Jane Eyre* a much more amorphous and complex novel than *Tenant.*[18]

The *bildungsroman* is another important category to consider for both novels, especially in light of my discussion of character development. Many have noted the symbolism of journey and progression in *Jane Eyre,* and Charlotte's interweaving of the bildungsroman and popular marriage plot has been noted by scholars such as Diane Hoeveler and Lisa Baldwin, George Levine, and Gilbert and Gubar, who note Jane's "pilgrimage" as a "distinctively female *Bildungsroman*" (342, 339).[19] Jane's exact destination at the end of the journey has often been a point of contention. Even a brief overview thus indicates that the Brontës' fiction was shaped by a variety of influences, but I would suggest that ultimately the realist tradition and elements imitating or contrasting with characteristics of religious fiction is most helpful in analyzing the endings. The mixture of genre in Jane Eyre contributes to an unconventional

[18]For an overview of different expressions of genre, see Da Sousa, "Jane Eyre and genre."

[19]These discussions address how the religious imagery in Jane Eyre, particularly in relation to Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* has been associated with experimentation in genre. See Levine, "Jane, David, and the *Bildungsroman.*"

representation of religion whilst a more continuous and austere religious strength legitimizes Helen Huntington's unconventional behavior.

As noted in my introduction, literary theorists have been less frequent in characterizing the Brontës' work as religious novels, (although Charlotte has been recently included in the ranks of "Anglican Women Novelists" in a monograph of the same title).[20] Religious novels can be both overt or thematic, as "social helpfulness novels" (Margaret Maison qtd in Hapgood 330). While the Brontë's novels are not written for explicitly Christian ends, religion does serve as an important catalyst throughout the novels. Several scholars have also noted the role of Biblical imagery, particularly in *Jane Eyre* as a means of subversion.[21] Religious context has become particularly salient for scholars of Anne Brontë, as seen in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë,* in which scholars pay attention to connections between her writing and her religious reading, including her annotated Bible and the Methodist magazine.[22]

Religion thus serves as another layer of genre in Brontë scholarship. Just as scholars have read elements of realism, romanticism, and the gothic within the novels, we add nuance to interpreting the novels by adding religion as another category. Jane's departure from Thornfield could be read as a necessity within a narrow society or as a

[20]See Sara L. Pearson's chapter "Charlotte Brontë (1816-55): An Anglican Imagination" in *Anglican Women Novelists: From Charlotte Brontë to P. D. James.*

[21] See Keith Jenkins' chapter entitled "From Eden to New Jerusalem and Back Again" in *Charlotte Brontë's Atypical Typology* for an in-depth analysis of Brontë's use of scripture in novel ways.

[22]Maria Frawley, "Contextualizing Anne Brontë's Bible" and Melody Kemp's "Helen's Diary and the Method(ism) of Character in the *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*" in *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë.*

moment of feminine strength; it could also be read as a moment of intense spiritual struggle within a female character who is struggling to find moral direction in a situation in which she has no guide but herself and her conscience. Likewise, Helen could be read as a moralistic wife who leaves her husband to live independently whilst developing her craft as a painter and raising her son in the way she deems proper. Considering the religious elements of the text, however, suggests a woman struggling not only for financial and physical independence, but an individual craving the freedom to be true to her faith, leaving the sacred bonds of marriage to honor a higher bond.

Conclusion

Although both Brontë sisters create radically unconventional and independent female protagonists, they use religion in slightly different ways to achieve this end. Both novels have religion interwoven throughout, but *Jane Eyre* provides a much more exotic and unconventional view of an individual's religious experience; Charlotte makes use of several genres to explore a young woman's perception of faith and morality. This perhaps contributes to the continuous fascination Jane has held for readers. In contrast to Jane, Helen's experience of faith is quite traditional. She experiences moments of confusion and despair, but these moments are quickly followed by reassurance (*WH* 258). Jane, on the other hand, constantly vacillates between confusions and clarity, remorse and anger, and is often filled with doubt and fear. Even though Helen espoused doctrines unorthodox in the nineteenth-century Anglican church, her piety would have been difficult for her readers condemn. Furthermore, while leaving her husband was a shocking act, Anne Brontë gives her heroine indemnity because she is such a pious character.

This chapter has sought to reevaluate the endings of the novels in light of religion. While they do not fall within the category of explicitly religious novels, thereby avoiding the ranks of authors such as Charlotte Yonge, Felicia Skene and others, Charlotte and Anne Brontë reflect a religious sensibility in their work for which scholars have begun to give them credit. In my final chapter, I will consider further implications of moral agency and religion for the Brontës' legacy as writers and as a potential for further scholarship in the work of Victorian women writers.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by considering the Brontës' potential aim in their social critique. Whilst many scholars have focused on the legal, psychological, economic and political aspects of the works in light of gender studies, I have argued that religion helps us further understand the two works in question. Given the height of religious discourse during the Brontës' lifetime, and their own concern with religious matters, (in part due to living in the home of an Anglican minister), their works provide an example of how religion interweaves with social critique in the period. Despite the fact that neither author makes her novel explicitly theological, they employ religion to support unconventional female behavior through the medium of moral agency. By wresting the definition of religion and morality from the mouth of society, both sisters created heroines with powerful religious support for their moral arguments. This in turn allowed them to address gendered standards with an authority greater than philosophy or science. While they left their contemporary readers in uproar as to whether their heroines were examples of strong Christian women or heretics, the power of their novels could not be easily discounted. In these last few pages, I will conclude by briefly addressing the Brontës' legacy, issues with their portrayal of faith, responses to religion in their novels, and the possibilities for future research.

The Brontës' Legacy

One of the Brontës' overwhelming concerns was the portrayal of morality and the unmasking of pretense to reveal truth. The tension in their heroines' lives thus revolves around their unmasking of moral falsehood; Jane unmasks the ulterior motives of Rochester and St. John as false sources of moral stability, thereby enabling her to flee temptation and maintain self-respect and moral integrity. Anne exposes the gendered moral double standard as an abusive, manipulative means by which to degrade and subjugate women. As I have demonstrated their respective chapters, both women reach their peak agency through moments of spiritual clarity.

The Brontës were cautious yet innovative in their critique. They critiqued society's double moral standard, and yet provided nuanced and complicated protagonists. Neither Jane nor Helen are perfect characters, and while they are both deeply religious, the authors use religion to develop their characters' independence. The benefit of reading these novels through the combined lens of conventionality, and morality, and religion, is that we see how Jane and Helen's actions are shaped not by absolutes, but by shifting social definitions. They emerge as strong individuals because they are forced through adverse circumstances to challenge society's definitions of conventionality, morality, and religion. This could perhaps affect how we interpret the Brontës' legacy; not only did they champion equality and opportunity for women, but they did so within a religious framework that had the potential to restructure their society's definitions of femininity.

It is curious then, that the Brontës wished to be known as writers, not specifically as women writers. As Anne wrote in her preface, "All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit

himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming to a man" (*Preface* 5). Given this sentiment, their use of religion to craft strong female characters invites the question of how they viewed their role as writers. While their era of writing was not predisposed towards women, their crafting of strong female autobiographical voices within their works had the potential to lend credibility to the woman writer. While space did not allow for a discussion of the topic in this current project, an exploration of the Brontës' context within and response to more explicitly religious female writers, such as Charlotte Yonge, would be well worth further exploration.

The Brontës' social critique is inextricable from religious concerns. It is through exploring these religious concerns that we reach a more nuanced understanding of their views on the "Woman Question." Based upon the work in this thesis, I would suggest that the Brontës' chief concerns were women's spiritual independence and moral integrity in spite of social convention. However, their aims as such were not in order to undermine or destroy convention per se, but rather to reorder it to make it subservient to what they viewed as spiritual truths. For Charlotte Brontë, conventionality and religion had the potential to be "as distinct as is vice from virtue" (*JE Preface* 1). Thus religion, rather than society, was the proper basis of an individual's moral choices.

The Brontës' Portrayal of Faith

Despite their appeal to religion, as I have noted at several points, the Brontës' portrayal of faith itself was unconventional at times and Jane and Helen do not present an idealistic view of Christianity. They were both unconventional Christian characters for their time, espousing doctrines about salvation, forgiveness, and biblical interpretation

that surpassed the comfort of many Victorian reviewer and readers. Both heroines also struggle with despair, and Jane with doubt. While several cases have been made about the Brontës' possible theological interpretations, (i.e. Keith Jenkins), I would suggest that these be read in light of what I have suggested to be the Brontës' primary concerns. In reading through their letters, the Brontës do not seem to have been intentionally "heretical," but rather their theological experimentation is rooted in their concern for how an individual lives out his or her moral and spiritual life. In that sense, the Brontës could be characterized much more as *religious* writers rather than explicitly *theological* writers. Their writings speak more to an individual's spiritual experiences than coherent doctrines about the characteristics of God. Charlotte and Anne Brontë supported the institution of the church while also criticizing, at times quite cruelly, what they deemed its excesses, eccentricities, and aberrations through their critique of particular denominations. Their use of religion has sparked much controversy and has potential for continued analysis in light of the religious themes in their other works, especially their poetry.

Responses to Religion in Jane Eyre

There have been a variety of responses to the portrayal of religion in the two novels, particularly amongst the Brontës' more conscientious contemporary readers. Several of Brontë's readers found Jane's expression of individual faith both unconventional and disturbing.[1] While some contemporary critics took issue with the morality and religion in her novel, others found religion to be of little consequence:

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[1]George Campbell, a Scottish minister in 1861, "found the novel's religious quotations and allusions unsatisfactory; Brontë seemed to lay little emphasis on church worship and Christ saving the sinner; rather she emphasised the individual's pursuit of her own moral truth…Campbell suggested that Brontë, in invoking the superiority of religious spirit to religious doctrine, was pursuing her own quasi-Biblical mode of argument, defining her terms to suit herself" (Lodge 12). Campbell claimed, "She means

> The novels deal with no particular forms of religious belief, or social questions, which the author would doubtless have regarded as accidents of which she cared to take no account; and hence we may affirm that after the lapse of fifty years her works would read as freshly as when they made their appearance. It was humanity she strove to produce; not its creeds, crotchets, or peculiarities; and it is for this reason that the labour will triumphantly stand the test of time (*Cornhill Magazine* 71).

While it is true that Charlotte does not champion certain creeds, the previous pages have attempted to demonstrate that the novel is concerned with how religion plays out in the life of the individual in her moral choices, which is ultimately a very human experience.[2] It is also true that Jane is not easily attributed to any sect, but yet she draws from religious experience in her development. Religious principle makes Jane shun temptation and religious sensibility leads her to retrospectively identify the clouding of reason and judgment by feeling through the image of idolatry (*JE* 234). Even Jane's moments of religious doubt play a part, giving Jane outside perspective through which to critique instrumentalized religion's social constructions.[3]

Looking forward

The approach of considering religion and moral agency has potential not only for further Brontë scholarship, but also in the wealth of literature which does not quite fit the explicit category of the religious novel, but nevertheless heavily engages with religion. Robert Wolff, echoing others, notes that "almost all Victorian novels…touch upon

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the same things as when she says morality is not conventionality; that is to say Christianity is morality, and *vice versa.*" (qtd. in Lodge 12).

[2]Charlotte wavers between a spirit of "mutual tolerance" (*To Ellen Nussey, 31 March [1846] Smith v.1 459-60)* and sharp critique of Catholicism and Calvinism, which many have noted. Her critique of St. John's style of preaching and topics of preoccupation in his sermons is thinly veiled criticism of the doctrine of predestination, which others have noted.

[3]See Chapter Two's discussion of Jane's puzzling about the purportedly Christian mission of Lowood.

religious matters. Although Dickens, Thackeray, the Brontës, never wrote a novel that dealt chiefly with religion, modern readers will find it impossible to understand key passages in their novels," without knowledge of their historical religious landscape (Wolff 3). Scholars have noted and explored the religious elements in *Shirley* and *Villette* in reference to historical religious context—for example, considering Brontë's contempt of the Oxford Movement and Catholicism—but there is room to analyze how the heroines of these novels might be shaped by religious sensibilities as they emerge as independent agents.

While there has been much scholarship distinguishing between morality and religion and pointing to the "secularization" of the nineteenth century and the turn to individual measures of morality divorced from collective religion, *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* show that religion, although at times separated from the church, was a powerful force that could serve both to preserve and challenge the order of society in the nineteenth-century.[4] The vehemence with which characters in these novels use religious arguments speaks to the underlying tension between religion, society, and the individual in the Victorian era. The question of the century was not only about whether individuals should be able to practice religion according to their conscience, but whether society would continue to support its conventions on the pillars of religion. As seen in the Brontë novels, this was a moment of paramount importance to the individual, and those hitherto oppressed by social conventions saw the opportunity to wrest from society its most powerful justification for authority.

[4]See Owen Chadwick's *The Secularization of the European Mind in the Nineteenth Century,* pp 231-5.

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