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The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*

Joyce Zonana

I proposed to myself to display the folly of those who use authority to bring a woman to reason; and I chose for an example a sultan and his slave, as being two extremes of power and dependence. [JEAN FRANÇOIS MAR-MONTEL]

ON THE DAY following Jane Eyre's betrothal to her "master" Rochester, Jane finds herself "obliged" to go with him to a silk warehouse at Millcote, where she is "ordered to choose half a dozen dresses." Although she makes it clear that she "hated the business," Jane cannot free herself from it. All she can manage, "by dint of entreaties expressed in energetic whispers," is a reduction in the number of dresses, though "these . . . [Rochester] vowed he would select himself." Anxiously, Jane protests and "with infinite difficulty" secures Rochester's grudging acceptance of her choice: a "sober black satin and pearl-gray silk." The ordeal is not over; after the silk warehouse, Rochester takes Jane to a jeweller's, where "the more he bought me," she reports, "the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation" (Brontë [1847] 1985, 296–97).¹

The shopping trip to Millcote gently figures Rochester as a domestic despot: he commands and Jane is "obliged" to obey, though she feels degraded by that obedience. At this point in the narrative, Jane is not yet aware that in planning to marry her Rochester is consciously choosing to

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¹ Hereafter, unidentified page numbers in text refer to the Penguin edition of *Jane Eyre*.

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become a bigamist. Yet the image she uses to portray her experience of his mastery as he tries to dress her "like a doll" (297) signals that not only despotism but bigamy and the oriental trade in women are on Jane's mind. Riding with Rochester back to Thornfield, she notes: "He smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (297). The image is startling in its extremity: surely Jane seems to overreact to Rochester's desire to see his bride beautifully dressed.

Yet by calling Rochester a "sultan" and herself a "slave," Jane provides herself and the reader with a culturally acceptable simile by which to understand and combat the patriarchal "despotism" (302) central to Rochester's character. Part of a large system of what I term feminist orientalist discourse that permeates *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's sultan/slave simile displaces the source of patriarchal oppression onto an "Oriental," "Mahometan" society, enabling British readers to contemplate local problems without questioning their own self-definition as Westerners and Christians.² As I will demonstrate, in developing her simile throughout her narrative, Jane does not so much criticize (in the words of Mary Ellis Gibson) "domestic arrangements and British Christianity from the point of view of the 'pagan' woman" (1987, 2) as define herself as a Western missionary seeking to redeem not the "enslaved" woman outside the fold of Christianity and Western ideology but the despotic man who has been led astray within it.³

² Although the feminist orientalism I discern in the novel is parallel to the "figurative use of blackness" earlier identified by Susan L. Meyer (1989, 250), it also has significant differences. Whereas Meyer focuses on the opposition "white/black," I examine the opposition "West/East." The two forms of opposition are related but not identical: the one privileges skin color or "race," and the other "culture," a phenomenon that may be associated with but that is not necessarily reducible to "race." Meyer's essay admirably demonstrates how *Jane Eyre* uses racial oppression as a metaphor for class and gender oppression. However, in systematically linking gender oppression to oriental despotism, *Jane Eyre* focuses on a form of oppression that is, from the first, conceived by Westerners in terms of gender.

³ Gibson, one of the few critics to note how the sultan image pervades *Jane Eyre*, makes the sanguine assumption that Brontë's critique of Eastern despotism "extends to British imperialist impulses themselves," leading Gibson, like many critics, to find the novel's conclusion "strange" (1987, 1, 7). As I shall show, however, Jane's concluding paean to her missionary cousin in India is thoroughly grounded in the novel's figurative structure. Gayatri Spivak, for her part, argues that Brontë's novel reproduces the "axiomatics of imperialism" (1985, 247) and that its "imperialist project" remains inaccessible to the "nascent 'feminist' scenario" (249). My argument emphasizes less the acts of political domination that constitute imperialism than how its ideology (and specifically its orientalism) infects the analysis of domestic relations "at home" and posits that orientalism is in fact put to the service of feminism. See also Suvendrini Perera's discussion of how "the vocabulary of oriental misogyny" became "an invisible component in feminist representations" in the nineteenth century (1991, 79). Perera's chapter on *Jane Eyre*, published after the research for this article had been completed, focuses on sati as the text's "central image" (93), while my reading emphasizes the use of the harem as the

Brontë's use of feminist orientalism is both embedded in and brings into focus a long tradition of Western feminist writing. Beginning early in the eighteenth century, when European travelers' tales about visits to the Middle East became a popular genre, images of despotic sultans and desperate slave girls became a central part of an emerging liberal feminist discourse about the condition of women not in the East but in the West. From Mary Wollstonecraft to Elizabeth Barrett Browning to Margaret Fuller and Florence Nightingale, one discovers writer after writer turning to images of oriental life—and specifically the “Mahometan” or “Arabian” harem—in order to articulate their critiques of the life of women in the West. Part of the larger orientalism that Edward Said has shown to inform Western self-representation, the function of these images is not primarily to secure Western domination over the East, though certainly they assume and enforce that domination.⁴ Rather, by figuring objectionable aspects of life in the West as “Eastern,” these Western feminist writers rhetorically define their project as the removal of Eastern elements from Western life.

Feminist orientalism is a special case of the literary strategy of using the Orient as a means for what one writer has called Western “self-redemption”: “transforming the Orient and Oriental Muslims into a vehicle for . . . criticism of the West itself” (Al-Bazei 1983, 6).⁵ Specifically, feminist orientalism is a rhetorical strategy (and a form of thought) by which a speaker or writer neutralizes the threat inherent in feminist demands and makes them palatable to an audience that wishes to affirm its occidental superiority. If the lives of women in England or France or the United States can be compared to the lives of women in “Arabia,” then the Western feminist's desire to change the status quo can be represented not as a radical attempt to restructure the West but as a conservative effort to make the West more like itself. Orientalism—the belief that the East is inferior to the West, and the representation of the Orient by means of unexamined, stereotypical images—thus becomes a major premise in the formulation of numerous Western feminist arguments.

The conviction that the harem is an inherently oppressive institution functions as an *a priori* assumption in the writing I examine here. Even

central image of gender oppression. Western feminist uses of both sati and the harem function equally, as Perera points out, to objectify the “colonized or imagined ‘oriental’ female subject” (82).

⁴ See Said 1979 for the definitive exposition of orientalism as a “Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (71).

⁵ Al-Bazei's excellent study does not consider the specifically feminist adaptation of this strategy. Interestingly, however, Al-Bazei identifies Byron's *Turkish Tales* as a crucial locus for the development of “self-redemption” as the dominant mode of nineteenth-century literary orientalism. Byron's influence on Brontë has been well documented, and further study might establish a link between his *Turkish Tales* and Brontë's feminist orientalism.

in the twentieth century, such an assumption continues to appear in Western feminist discourse, as Leila Ahmed (1982) and Chandra Mohanty (1988) demonstrate. Actual research on or observation of the conditions of the harem is rare, and what little that has been written tends toward either defensive celebration or violent condemnation. The defenses are written with an awareness of the condemnations: their authors must challenge the Western feminist imagination that unquestioningly perceives polygamy as sexual slavery and domestic confinement as imprisonment.⁶ The attempt to introduce a genuinely alternate vision is fraught with the difficulties both of documenting the actualities of life in the harem and of achieving a transcultural perspective, though some writers have made the effort.⁷

This article does not claim to demonstrate any truth about the harem that would definitively contradict or even modify the Western views presented here, nor does it systematically engage in the effort to achieve an objective estimate of the harem; rather, it seeks only to show how assumptions about the East have been used to further the Western feminist project instead of either spurring research and theorizing about the actual conditions of harem life or establishing genuine alliances among women of different cultures. For what is most crucial about what I am calling feminist orientalism is that it is directed not toward the understanding or even the reform of the harem itself but toward transformation of Western society—even while preserving basic institutions and ideologies of the West. Coming to recognize the feminist orientalism in *Jane Eyre* and other formative Western feminist texts may help clear the way for a more self-critical, balanced analysis of the multiple forms both of patriarchy and of women's power, and it may also, indirectly, help free global feminism from the charge that it is a Western movement inapplicable to Eastern societies.⁸

That *Jane Eyre*, like so many nineteenth-century British texts, has a diffusely orientalist background has long been recognized and for the

⁶ For a recent defense of polygamy in the context of Western Mormonism, see Joseph 1991. Earlier in this century, Demetra Vaka argued that women living in harems were "healthy and happy," possessing a "sublimity of soul . . . lacking in our European civilization" (1909, 29, 127–28). Ahmed 1982 argues that the harem can be construed as an inviolable and empowering "women's space" that enables Islamic women to have "frequent and easy access to other women in their community, vertically, across class lines, as well as horizontally" (524).

⁷ See, e.g., Makhoul-Obermeyer 1979; Gordon (1865) 1983; Delplato 1988; Croutier 1989; Gendron 1991; Leonowens (1872) 1991.

⁸ See Ahmed 1982 for a pointed analysis of how fundamentalist Islamic movements "target" feminism as "'Western' and as particularly repugnant and evil" (533). Similarly, Hatem 1989 shows how in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries "European and Egyptian women were influenced by modern national ideologies and rivalries . . . prevent[ing] them from using each other's experience to push for a more radical critique of their own societies" (183).

most part attributed to the influence of the *Arabian Nights*, a book known to have been a staple of the Brontës' childhood reading.⁹ The first simile in the novel, in the fourth paragraph of the first chapter, places Jane, "cross-legged, like a Turk" (39) in the window seat of the Gateshead breakfast room. Not much later, Jane takes down a book of "Arabian tales" (70); she reveals that she is fascinated by "genii" (82); and eventually she makes it plain that the *Arabian Nights* was one of her three favorite childhood books (256). Other characters in the novel also display a loose familiarity and fascination with the Orient: the Dowager Lady Ingram dresses in a "crimson velvet robe, and a shawl turban" (201); her daughter Blanche admits that she "dote[s] on Corsairs" (208); Rochester worries when Jane assumes a "sphinx-like expression" (329).

The specifically feminist quality of *Jane Eyre's* orientalism, however, has not been recognized, perhaps because feminist orientalism has remained until recently an opaque, underexamined aspect of Western intellectual history. (Ahmed 1982, Spivak 1985, Mohanty 1988, and Perera 1991 are important exceptions.) The feminist orientalism of *Jane Eyre*, furthermore, is only made explicit in the sultan/slave simile, and, although the chords struck in this passage resonate throughout the entire novel, they cannot properly be heard without an understanding of the full eighteenth- and nineteenth-century background that generates them. Before turning to that background, however, it may be helpful briefly to set in relief this key episode in which Jane not only compares Rochester to a sultan but engages with him in an extended discussion of women's rights and uses her comparison of him to a sultan as a means by which to secure more rights for herself.

Among the more interesting features of this passage is the fact that Jane does not tell Rochester that she is mentally comparing him to a sultan. She simply asks him to stop looking at her "in that way." Rochester is astute enough to understand Jane's unspoken reference, suggesting that feminist orientalist discourse is so pervasive as to be accessible to the very men it seeks to change: "'Oh, it is rich to see and hear her!' he exclaimed. 'Is she original? Is she piquant? I would not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand Turk's whole seraglio—gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!'" (297). Rochester suggests that he will take Jane instead of a harem, though Jane bristles at the "Eastern allusion": "'I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio,' I said; 'so don't consider me an equivalent for one. If you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul, without delay, and lay out

⁹ See, e.g., Conant 1908; Stedman 1965; Ali 1981; Caracciolo 1988; Workman 1988.

in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here' " (297).

When Rochester jokingly asks what Jane will do while he is "bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes," Jane is ready with a playful but serious response: "I'll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates among the rest. I'll get admitted there, and I'll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw as you are, sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands: nor will I, for one, consent to cut your bonds till you have signed a charter, the most liberal that despot ever yet conferred!" (297–98). Although Jane promises Rochester that she will "go out as a missionary" to "Stamboul," the focus of her remarks is the reform of Rochester himself within England. Her concern is that she herself not be treated as a "harem inmate," and her action, immediately following this conversation, succeeds in accomplishing her goal.

It is precisely Jane's experience of degrading dependency, playfully figured here as the relation of rebellious harem slave to despotic Eastern sultan, that leads her to take the step that ultimately reveals Rochester as more like a sultan than Jane had imagined. For it is at this point that Jane makes and executes the decision to write to her Uncle John in Madeira, in the hope that he will settle some money on her. "If I had ever so small an independency," she reasons, "if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr. Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now" (297). Jane's letter to John Eyre alerts Rochester's brother-in-law, Richard Mason, to Rochester's plans to become a bigamist, and Jane is freed from a marriage that would, in her own terms, have thoroughly enslaved her.

Jane's comparison of Rochester to a sultan proves to be no exaggeration. The narrative makes plain that it is because she sees him in this way that she later is able to free herself from a degrading relationship with a man who has bought women, is willing to become a bigamist, and acts like a despot. The plot thus validates the figurative language, making of it much more than a figure. This Western man is "Eastern" in his ways, and for Jane to be happy, he must be thoroughly Westernized. To the extent that Brontë has Jane Eyre present hers as a model life—"Reader, I married him"—she suggests that her female readers would also be well advised to identify and eliminate any such Eastern elements in their own spouses and suitors.

More than ten years ago, Peter A. Tasch observed that in having Jane call Rochester a "three-tailed bashaw," Brontë "was echoing the refrain in a song by George Colman the Younger for his extravaganza *Blue Beard*." Tasch further notes that "the idea of an English girl in the 'grand

Turk's' seraglio demanding liberty forms the theme of another stage comedy, [Isaac Bickerstaffe's] *The Sultan; or, A Peep into the Seraglio*" (1982, 232). Tasch may well be correct in identifying these specific sources for Brontë's allusions; yet the image of a harem inmate demanding liberty had by 1847 become so ingrained in Western feminist discourse that Brontë need not have had any specific text in mind; her audience, whether familiar with *Blue Beard* and *The Sultan* or not, would have had a full stock of harem images by which to understand and applaud Jane's sultan/slave simile.

The stage was set for the Western use of the harem as a metaphor for aspects of Western life as early as 1721, in Baron de Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*. The letters in Montesquieu's novel, written primarily by two "Persian" men traveling in Europe, offer dramatic images of both Eastern and Western ways of structuring domestic and political relations. Usbek and Rica, the travelers who report on the oddities of Western ways, are in constant contact with the women and eunuchs they have left behind in the harem. The Western reader moves between defamiliarized visions of Europe and "familiar" images of Persia, eventually coming to see, in the words of one modern commentator, that in the seraglio, constructed as the heart of oriental despotism, "It is myself, and our world, finally, that I rediscover" (Grosrichard 1979, 32–33, translation mine; for further commentary on the self-reflexive function of Western representations of the harem, see Richon 1984 and Alloula 1986).

Montesquieu's work focuses primarily on the nature of political despotism, using images of the Eastern and Western domestic enslavement of women as metaphors for the political enslavement of men. The condition of women is not Montesquieu's central concern, but because the harem is his functional model of despotism, the novel repeatedly returns to the question of "whether it is better to deprive women of their liberty or to leave them free" (Montesquieu [1721] 1923, 107) and draws recurrent analogies between the status of women in the East and the West. In its closing pages, *Persian Letters* portrays a full-scale rebellion in the seraglio: in the absence of their masters, the women have taken new lovers and sought to undo the system of surveillance that has kept them imprisoned.

As Katie Trumpener notes, "the last—and perhaps most powerful—voice in the book is Roxanna's" (1987, 185), the voice of a formerly enslaved harem inmate who willingly accepts her death as the price of her freedom: "How could you think that I was such a weakling as to imagine there was nothing for me in the world but to worship your caprices; that while you indulged all your desires, you should have the right to thwart me in all mine? No: I have lived in slavery, and yet always retained my freedom: I have remodeled your laws upon those of nature; and my mind

has always maintained its independence" (350). Although Montesquieu may have had other applications in mind, the voice of his rebellious Roxanna came to be the voice adopted by later writers seeking to expose the oppression of women.

Thus, as Pauline Kra has shown, after Montesquieu French literature of the eighteenth century regularly used the "harem theme" to "demonstrate the subordinate status of women" in the West (1979, 274). Martha Conant notes that Jean François Marmontel's 1761 popular Moral Tale, "Soliman II," features the conquest of a sultan by a "pretty European slave, Roxalana," who appears to echo Montesquieu's heroine. Roxalana's heart was "nourished in the bosom of liberty," and her expostulations "against the restraints of the seraglio" succeed in converting the sultan (1908, 205–7). In English literature as well the harem came to function as a metaphor for the Western oppression of women. Samuel Johnson's 1759 *Rasselas* includes an exposé of the oppressiveness of the harem and a defense of women's rights to intellectual development;¹⁰ the heroine of the 1775 play *Tasch* identifies as a source of *Jane Eyre* (and which Conant traces to Marmontel) is named "Roxalana"; and Defoe's feminist heroine of *The Fortunate Mistress* calls herself "Roxanna" (Trumpener 1987, 187–88). The name of Montesquieu's rebellious harem inmate seems to have been so consistently associated with the demand for female rights that when Mary Wollstonecraft has a character in *Maria or the Wrongs of Woman* seek liberation from an oppressive husband, the man responds by invoking her literary model: "Very pretty, upon my soul! very pretty, theatrical flourishes! Pray, fair Roxana, stoop from your altitudes and remember that you are acting a part in real life" ([1798] 1975, 116).

To the extent that Montesquieu demonstrates for Western readers that the oriental institution of the seraglio can shed light on Western practices, one can say that his text inaugurates feminist orientalist discourse. But it is in Wollstonecraft's 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, the founding text of Western liberal feminism, that one finds the fullest explicit feminist orientalist perspective. Like many of the enlightenment thinkers on whom she drew—including, of course, Montesquieu—Wollstonecraft uncritically associates the East with despotism and tyranny. Her text is replete with images that link any abuse of power with "Eastern" ways: she is not above likening women who seek to dominate their

¹⁰ Jane Eyre's friend Helen Burns reads *Rasselas* at Lowood; though Jane's "brief examination" of the book convinces her it is "dull" (Brontë [1847] 1985, 82), the text's presence within *Jane Eyre* signals Brontë's familiarity with—and interest in highlighting—a key source of feminist orientalism. Kringas 1992 points out that *Rasselas* not only exposes the oppressiveness of the harem but, by juxtaposing the experiences of Nekayah and Pekuah, specifically links the lives of women in the harem with the lives of uneducated, middle-class women outside the seraglio (33).

husbands with "Turkish bashaws" ([1792] 1982, 125). Yet she reserves her fullest scorn for the gendered despotism that she sees as a defining feature of Eastern life and a perverse corruption of Western values.

Any aspect of the European treatment of women that Wollstonecraft finds objectionable she labels as Eastern. Thus, she finds that European women's "limbs and faculties" are "cramped with worse than Chinese bands" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1982, 128); Western women are educated in "worse than Egyptian bondage" (221); their masters are "worse than Egyptian task-masters" (319). Upper-class women, "dissolved in luxury," have become weak and depraved "like the Sybarites" (130); if women do not "grow more perfect when emancipated," Wollstonecraft advises that Europe should "open a fresh trade with Russia for whips" (319).

Yet it is "Mahometanism"—and the "Mahometan" institution of the seraglio or harem—that Wollstonecraft singles out as the grand type for all oppression of women. Any Western writer who treats women "as a kind of subordinate beings, and not as a part of the human species" is accused of writing "in the true style of Mahometanism" ([1792] 1982, 80). This is because what she believes about "Mahometanism" embodies for Wollstonecraft the antithesis of her own central claim: that women, like men, have souls. Although Ahmed asserts that she can find "no record . . . in the body of orthodox Muslim literature of the notion that women are animals or have no souls," she notes that views such as Wollstonecraft's are a staple of Western writing about Islam (1982, 526). Ahmed attributes the creation of this purported fact about Islamic culture to the same Western men who have insisted on the "inferiority of Western women" (523). Yet in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, a founder of modern feminism reproduces and intensifies the spurious "fact" about "Mahometanism," indeed, using it as a cornerstone of her argument for women's rights in the West.

A peculiarity of language may have led to or enforced Wollstonecraft's conviction that Muslims believe that women do not have souls. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) notes that the Italian word *seraglio*, meaning "place of confinement," was used to render the Turkish *serai*, "lodging" or "palace." N. M. Penzer also observes that "the modern *seraglio* is directly derived from the Italian *serraglio*, 'a cage for wild animals,'" while the original Persian words, *sara* and *sarai*, meant simply "building" or "palace" (1936, 16). As late as the seventeenth century in England one finds *seraglio* used to refer to "a place where wild beasts are kept" (OED) as well as to the private apartments of women. Thus, when Wollstonecraft speaks of women being reduced to "mere animals" who are "only fit for a seraglio" (83), she invokes both meanings of *seraglio*.

and may have thought herself well justified in her view that "Mahometans" regarded women as animals.¹¹

Wollstonecraft is so committed to her notion of Islamic culture that she goes so far as to accuse Milton, demonstrably a Christian thinker, of writing in the "true Mahometan strain" when he specifies the nature of Eve, "our first frail mother": "I cannot comprehend his meaning, unless, in the true Mahometan strain, he meant to deprive us of souls, and insinuate that we were beings only designed by sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience, to gratify the senses of man when he can no longer soar on the wing of contemplation" ([1792] 1982, 100–101).¹² Although Wollstonecraft here locates what she calls Mahometan belief at the center of Western Christian culture, she does not waver from her conviction that the West is fundamentally distinct from—and superior to—the East, claiming that the "despotism that kills virtue and genius in the bud" does not "hover over Europe with that destructive blast which desolates Turkey" (131).

Thus, for Wollstonecraft, the English husband "who lords it in his little harem" (167) is more guilty than his Eastern counterpart, for the despotism incarnate in the harem is not natural to Europe. Unlike the "Turk," the English husband goes against the grain of his race and culture, as does any Western woman who accepts such "Eastern" treatment of her. For example, Wollstonecraft responds to Rousseau's wish that "a young Englishwoman cultivate her agreeable talents, in order to please her future husband, with as much care and assiduity as a young Circassian cultivates hers, to fit her for the harem of an Eastern bashaw" (183) by criticizing the woman who could accept such a life: "In a seraglio, I grant, that all these arts are necessary; . . . but have women so little ambition as to be satisfied with such a condition? . . . Surely she has not an soul immortal who can loiter life away merely employed to adorn her person, that she may amuse the languid hours, and soften the cares of a fellow-creature" (112–13).

Though the Western emphasis on the marriageability of girls makes "mere animals" of them, "weak beings" who "are only fit for a seraglio" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1982, 83), it is only "Mahometan" women who can accept such bondage: "If women are to be made virtuous by author-

¹¹ In this context, it may also be worth noting that *harem*, derived from the Arabic *haram*, designates places that are "holy," "protected," "sacred," "inviolate," and lastly "forbidden" (Penzer 1936, 15). In Western usage, the holiness of *harem* is elided, and the caging aspect of *seraglio* is introduced.

¹² Samuel Johnson had levied a similar charge against Milton, claiming in his 1779 *Life of Milton* that "there appears in his books something like a Turkish contempt of females as subordinate and inferior beings. . . . He thought woman made only for obedience, and man only for rebellion" (85).

ity, which is a contradiction in terms, let them be immured in seraglios and watched with a jealous eye. Fear not that the iron will enter their souls—for the souls that can bear such treatment are made of yielding materials, just animated enough to give life to the body” (311).

If the seraglio exists unchallenged as an Eastern institution, Wollstonecraft implies, it is because “Mahometan” teachings are accurate in their representation of Eastern women: their souls are barely “animated.” In the West, however, women are made of sterner stuff, and the seraglio—or anything that resembles it—has no place. The feminism of Wollstonecraft’s *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* ultimately reduces itself to what would have been in her time a relatively noncontroversial plea: that the West rid itself of its oriental ways, becoming as a consequence more Western—that is, more rational, enlightened, reasonable.

Whether through direct influence or simply because the ideas on which she drew were circulating freely within the culture, the feminist orientalist strategy introduced by Wollstonecraft came to pervade nineteenth-century feminist discourse. Said has noted that orientalism characteristically emerges in Western writing as a “set of representative figures, or tropes,” and he argues that to observe it “the things to look at are style, figures of speech, setting, narrative devices” (1979, 71, 21). In *Persian Letters* and *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*—as in *Jane Eyre*—the figures and tropes of the Orient are deeply woven into the fabric of the entire text. Other examples of feminist orientalist discourse are typically less elaborated and appear to be no more than random, casual allusions. Yet the very casualness of these allusions suggests that the writers are drawing upon a fully developed cultural code implicitly shared with their readers. There is no need to argue for or to prove any individual definition of Eastern ways nor any specific analogy between East and West, for the entire belief system that makes the individual references possible is taken for granted.

Among the elements that feminist writers return to again and again are three aspects of the Eastern treatment of women that Wollstonecraft had emphasized: (1) the central belief that women do not have souls, which justifies and explains the other practices; (2) the excessive sexuality of the harem, embodied partly in polygamy but also in luxury, indolence, and the trade in women; and (3) the enforced confinement, undereducation, and inactivity of women in the harem that reduces them to animals or children. A few more examples may help to establish the full context of the discourse that allowed Brontë to structure her novel as the drama of a Western woman oppressed by Eastern beliefs and practices.

One of the more extended instances of nineteenth-century feminist orientalism appears in the work of Wollstonecraft’s daughter, Mary Shelley. Although it seems that Shelley did not fully share her mother’s com-

mitted feminist activism, in her novel *Frankenstein* she nevertheless created a striking female character who insists on her existence as a soul.¹³ This character, Safie, not only echoes the words and philosophy of Wollstonecraft but is also dramatically figured as a “lovely Arabian,” a woman who barely escapes “being immured” within a harem:

Safie related, that her mother was a Christian Arab, seized and made a slave by the Turks; recommended by her beauty, she had won the heart of the father of Safie, who married her. The young girl spoke in high and enthusiastic terms of her mother, who, born in freedom, spurned the bondage to which she was now reduced. She instructed her daughter in the tenets of the religion, and taught her to aspire to higher powers of intellect, and an independence of spirit, forbidden to the female followers of Mahomet. This lady died; but her lessons were indelibly impressed on the mind of Safie, who sickened at the prospect of again returning to Asia, and the being immured within the walls of a haram, allowed only to occupy herself with puerile amusements, ill-suited to the temper of her soul, now accustomed to grand ideas and a noble emulation for virtue. [Shelley (1818) 1974, 119]

“Let woman share the rights, and she will emulate the virtues of man,” Wollstonecraft had written at the end of her *Vindication* ([1792] 1982, 319). Shelley echoes this sentiment in the person of her “lovely Arabian,” inscribing it in the same orientalist frame as had her mother.

Feminist orientalism emerges again in the work of Anna Jameson, whose *Memoirs of the Loves of the Poets* is designed to show “the influence which the beauty and virtue of women have exercised over the characters and writings of men of genius” ([1824] 1890, vii). Hardly a feminist of the order of Wollstonecraft, Jameson is nevertheless deeply disturbed by the belief that women do not have souls, attributing it to the “Mahometan” East, where women are “held in seclusion, as mere soulless slaves of the passions and caprices of their masters” (25). Like Wollstonecraft, Jameson also discerns Eastern values operating in the West: she calls Lord Byron the “Grand Turk of amatory poetry,” explaining that despite the beauty of his “female portraits,” there is “something very Oriental in all his feelings and ideas about women; he seems to require nothing of us but beauty and submission” (507). One is reminded of Wollstonecraft’s critique of Milton’s “Mahometan” prescriptions for

¹³ See Zonana 1991 for an extended argument that Safie in fact articulates *Frankenstein*’s thematic center. For a more qualified view of Shelley’s feminism, see Poovey 1984. See also Spivak 1985 for the view that *Frankenstein* resists its culture’s pervasive orientalism.

Eve: "sweet attractive grace, and docile blind obedience" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1982, 100).

Jameson and Shelley echo one another when they repudiate the belief that women do not have souls. Yet they do not directly address the sexual practices that can be said to follow from this belief—polygamy and the buying and selling of women—though, as Alain Grosrichard has shown, polygamy tended to be a key feature of Western meditations upon the Orient (1979, 177–82). Later in the nineteenth century, however, while European male painters reveled in voyeuristic and vaguely pornographic representations of the multiplicity of female bodies available to masters of the harem, feminist writers learned to approach issues of sexuality by putting them in oriental terms. Prostitution, the marriage market, and the habit of keeping mistresses are all now figured as Eastern intrusions into a Western ideal of monogamous romantic love and marriage.

For example, when Jemima Bradshaw, a character in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1853 novel *Ruth*, contemplates the financial basis of her forthcoming marriage, she invokes a feminist orientalist image: "She felt as if she would rather be bought openly, like an Oriental daughter" ([1853] 1985, 240). In America, Margaret Fuller similarly compares the "selling" of English "daughters to the highest bidder" with "sending them to a Turkish slave-dealer." "You know how it was in the Oriental clime," she reminds her readers, though she defends the "Turkish" practice as less degrading than its Western counterpart, for "it is not done in defiance of an acknowledged law of right in the land and the age" ([1845] 1971, 139, 133, 139). What seems to be a healthy respect for difference is in fact a ratification of Western superiority. Like Wollstonecraft, Fuller accepts "Oriental" practices in the Orient—but not in the more temperate, enlightened West.

Likewise, when Elizabeth Barrett Browning justifies her discussion of prostitution in *Aurora Leigh*, she explains she is working to rid England of oriental prejudice: "I am deeply convinced that the corruption of our society requires not shut doors and windows, but light and air: and that is exactly because pure and prosperous women choose to *ignore* vice, that miserable women suffer wrong by it everywhere. Has paterfamilias, with his Oriental traditions and veiled female faces, very successfully dealt with a certain class of evil? What if materfamilias, with her quick sure instincts and honest innocent eyes, do more towards their expulsion by simply looking at them and calling them by their names?" (1897, 2:445) When Barrett Browning writes of "shut doors and windows" and "veiled female faces," she also indirectly hints at another central aspect of the life of Eastern women in the imaginations of Western feminists: the confinement of the harem. This is the aspect emphasized when Walter Besant, in 1897, comments on the "Oriental prejudice" that keeps British women

out of certain professions and that earlier in the century resulted in their "seclusion . . . in the home, and their exclusion from active and practical life" ([1897] 1989, 2:1653, 2:1652).

And it is this aspect that emerges most tellingly in the writing of Florence Nightingale. "If heaven and hell exist on this earth, it is in the two worlds I saw that morning—the Dispensary and the Harem," she writes at the conclusion of her 1849 tour of Egypt ([1849–50] 1988, 208). Nightingale's may be the most dramatic nineteenth-century feminist condemnation of the harem: it is for her literally hell on earth. What makes it so for Nightingale is not (at least not explicitly) its sensuality, nor its domination by a male despot, nor even the slavery of its women. Rather, what Nightingale finds horrifying about the harem are its all too familiar boredom and confinement: "A little more of such a place would have killed us . . . Oh, the *ennui* of that magnificent palace, it will stand in my memory as a circle of hell! Not one thing was there laying about, to be done or to be looked at" (208).

Although Nightingale is describing an actual visit to a harem, her description is conditioned both by her preexisting cultural images of the harem and the experience of her own life as a woman in England.¹⁴ Her words echo those of Pekuah in Johnson's *Rasselas*, even as they anticipate her own analyses of family life in England. Pekuah had noted of the harem that "the diversions of the women . . . were only childish play, by which the mind accustomed to stronger operations could not be kept busy. . . . They had no ideas but of the few things that were within their view, and had hardly names for anything but their clothes and their food" (Johnson [1759] 1977, 135). Nightingale herself writes: "The very windows into the garden were woodworked, so that you could not see out. The cold, the melancholy of that place! I felt inclined to cry" (Nightingale [1849–50] 1988, 208). In *Cassandra*, written a few years later, Nightingale condemns the "cold and oppressive conventional atmosphere" of women's family life, noting that women are forced to abandon "intellect as a vocation," taking it only "as we use the moon, by glimpses through . . . tight-closed window shutters" ([1852] 1980, 29, 37). Nightingale's description of domestic confinement, whether in Egypt or England, recalls one of Wollstonecraft's most chilling descriptions of women "immured in their families groping in the dark" ([1792] 1982, 87).

It is this image of domestic immurement that most obviously haunts *Jane Eyre* and shapes its very structure. Examining this narrative structure, one sees that each household in which Jane finds herself is con-

¹⁴ See Barrell 1991 for a provocative discussion of how tourists such as Nightingale brought their own fantasies and preoccupations to their descriptions of the sights in Egypt.

structed to resemble a harem; each of her oppressors is characterized as a Mahometan despot; and each of her rebellions or escapes bears the accents of Roxanna, the harem inmate declaring her existence as a free soul. At Gateshead, at Lowood, at Thornfield, and at Moor House, one discovers a series of communities of dependent women, all subject to the whim of a single master who rules in his absence as much as his presence and who subjects the imprisoned women to the searching power of his gaze.¹⁵ In each of these households, Jane finds her own power of movement and of vision limited; even when she is most in love with Rochester at Thornfield, she recognizes that he stands in her way, "as an eclipse intervenes between man and the broad sun" (Brontë [1847] 1985, 302).

The pattern of home as harem is established at Gateshead, where the household consists of John Reed, Mrs. Reed, Eliza and Georgiana Reed, Jane, and the two female servants, Bessie and Abbott. There are also a male "butler and footman" (60), though these are shadowy presences, nameless men inconsequential in the dynamics and management of the household. The "master" is young John Reed, a boy of fourteen who demands that Jane call him "Master Reed" (41) and against whose arbitrary rule Jane has no appeal: "the servants did not like to offend their young master by taking my part against him, and Mrs. Reed was blind and deaf on the subject: she never saw him strike or heard him abuse me, though he did both now and then in her very presence" (42).

Like the sultans described by Montesquieu and the eighteenth-century travelers, John considers the privileges of seeing and knowing to be his. What enrages him in the novel's opening scene is that Jane is out of his sight. Hidden behind the curtain of the window seat, reading and looking out the window, she has usurped his role as the "Turk." "Where the dickens is she?" John asks his sisters, and when Eliza finds Jane for him, John castigates his cousin not only for "getting behind curtains" but also for reading: "You have no business to take our books" (42). In the course of his tirade, John calls Jane a "bad animal" (41) and a "rat" (42); later she will become a "wild cat" (59). John's descriptions of Jane as beast and his wish to keep her from educating herself through books may recall Wollstonecraft's definition of the "true style" of Mahometanism: the view of women as "domestic brutes" ([1792] 1982, 101), "not as a part of the human species" (80).

The sexuality of the harem is absent from the Reed home, but the indolent, pampered sensuality that so offends Wollstonecraft is not. In the opening scene, Mrs. Reed lies "reclined on a sofa by the fireside . . .

¹⁵ Grosrichard convincingly demonstrates that, in the Western construction of the seraglio, "To be the master . . . is to see. In the despotic state, where one always obeys 'blindly,' the blind man is the emblematic figure of the subject" (73, translation mine). See also Bellis 1987 for an exploration of the politics of vision in *Jane Eyre*.

with her darlings about her" (39). John is constantly plied with "cakes and sweetmeats," even though he "gorged himself habitually at table, which made him bilious, and gave him a dim and bleared eye with flabby cheeks" (41). John is the effete, attenuated tyrant made weak by his abuse of power, familiar from Wollstonecraft's characterizations of "bashaws." The Reed sisters are "universally indulged" (46) and "elaborately ringleted" (60); their mother dresses regularly in silks. The luxury of Gateshead, associated as it is with the degeneracy and despotism of the harem, is something Jane learns to abhor, and this abhorrence informs her later attempts to resist Rochester's desire to see her "glittering like a parterre" (296).

Jane, not unlike Montesquieu's Roxanna, rebels against her imprisonment within Master Reed's "harem." Her physical violence is expressed against John, but she reserves her strongest words for Mrs. Reed, the adult who has enforced the "young master's" wishes: "If anyone asks me how I liked you, and how you treated me, I will say the very thought of you makes me sick, and that you treated me with miserable cruelty. . . . You think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so: and you have no pity" (68). Like Roxanna, Jane exposes the hypocrisy of her keeper, insisting on the freedom of her mind and on her desire for and right to genuine love.

Jane's outburst leads to her departure from Gateshead, though she soon finds herself in another institution that even more closely resembles the harem that haunts the Western feminist imagination. Lowood, "a large and irregular building" through which on her arrival Jane is led "from compartment to compartment, from passage to passage" (76), perfectly embodies the confinement of the harem. The building is oppressive, dark, and gloomy, and the garden is no better: "a wide enclosure," it is "surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect" (80). These walls not only limit the vision of the institution's "inmates" but they are "spike-guarded" (107) to prohibit freedom of movement.

Within the confines of this dwelling, Jane discovers "a congregation of girls of every age. . . . Their number to me appeared countless" (76). Over this community of women rules the redoubtable Mr. Brocklehurst, "the black marble clergyman" (98) whom Jane perceives as a "black column," a "piece of architecture" (94). Like John Reed, Brocklehurst's characteristic gesture is to gaze searchingly upon his assembled dependents. When he makes his first appearance at Lowood, he "majestically surveyed the whole school" (95); a few moments later he "scrutinize[s]" the hair of the terrified girls. As with John Reed, Jane seeks to hide from this master's eyes: "I had sat well back on the form, and while seeming to be busy with my sum, had held my slate in such a manner as to conceal

my face" (97). Jane does not escape Brocklehurst's look, however, and is forced to suffer the humiliation of his description of her as a liar. Jane is freed by the good offices of Miss Temple, and later, when the scandal of Brocklehurst's despotic rule is revealed (significantly, it takes the death of a number of the inmates to cause this revelation) he is stripped of some of his power. Lowood becomes a fairly happy home for Jane, though a "prison-ground" nonetheless (117).

It may be objected that the ascetic aspects of Lowood accord ill with the suggestion that it is figured as a harem. Certainly Lowood harbors neither the sensuality nor the overt sexuality associated with the harem. Yet its structure, with one man controlling an indefinite number of dependent women, mimics that of the seraglio. Further, Brocklehurst's wish to strip the girls of all adornment, of all possibilities of sensual gratification, has its parallel in the sultan's wish to keep the women of the harem restrained from any sexuality not under his control. That Brocklehurst is figured in plainly phallic terms only underscores his identification as a sultan whose perverse pleasure here consists in denying pleasure to the women he rules. For his wife and daughters, however—women over whom presumably he can exert even greater control—Brocklehurst allows a greater sensuality: these women are "splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs" (97).

When Jane leaves Lowood for her "new servitude" at Thornfield (117), she happily anticipates entering the domain of Mrs. Fairfax, an "elderly lady" (120) whom she believes to be the mistress of a "safe haven" (129), a "snug" and secure realm of feminine "domestic comfort" (127). To her initial dismay, Jane discovers that this new household of women also has a "master," the absent yet omnipotent Mr. Rochester. Jane first meets Rochester on the moonlit lane connecting Thornfield to the town of Hay, unaware he is her master. She perceives this stranger to have a "dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow" (145); later she will call his skin "swarthy," his features "Paynim" (212). The man has fallen from his horse, and Jane offers to assist him. Before accepting her help, however, he subjects her to intense "scrutiny" in order to determine her identity (146).

Jane reveals that she is the governess at Thornfield; Rochester offers no information about himself, except to say, when Jane fails in her effort to lead his horse to him: "I see . . . the mountain will never be brought to Mahomet, so all you can do is to aid Mahomet to go to the mountain" (146). Though uttered in jest, these words do not bode well for Jane's relationship with her master. Rochester gives himself the one name that, to a nineteenth-century audience, would unambiguously identify him as a polygamous, blasphemous despot—a sultan. After such an introduction, it comes as no surprise when Rochester chooses to dress "in shawls,

with a turban on his head" for a game of charades, nor that Jane should see him as "the very model of an Eastern emir" (212).

The most striking identification of Rochester as an oriental despot—again a characterization that comes from his own lips—occurs when he begins to contemplate marriage with Jane. The intimacy between master and dependent has begun to develop and, in the course of guardedly discussing his past with the governess, Rochester admits that he "degenerated" when wronged by fate (167). As Jane and the reader will later learn, he is referring to his marriage with Bertha Mason, and his subsequent indulgence in "lust for a passion—vice for an occupation" (343). With no knowledge of the details of Rochester's "degeneration," Jane nevertheless encourages him to repent, though Rochester insists that only pleasure, "sweet, fresh pleasure" (167), can help him. Jane suggests that such pleasure "will taste bitter" (167) and warns Rochester against "error." Rochester, apparently referring to his wish to love Jane, replies that the "notion that flitted across my brain" is not error or temptation but "inspiration": "I am laying down good intentions, which I believe durable as flint. Certainly, my associates and pursuits shall be other than they have been. . . . You seem to doubt me; I don't doubt myself: I know what my aim is, what my motives are; and at this moment I pass a law, unalterable as that of the Medes and Persians, that both are right" (168–69).

Rochester's aim is to find happiness with Jane; his motives are to redeem himself from his association with Bertha; the unalterable law that he makes his own has its antecedent in the one decreed by King Ahasuerus—"written among the laws of the Persians and the Medes, that it not be altered"—when he banishes his Queen Vashti and vows to "give her royal estate unto another that is better than she" (Esther 1.19). Ahasuerus, to whom Jane will later compare Rochester (in the same chapter in which she compares him to a sultan [Brontë (1847) 1985, 290]), had been angered by Vashti's refusal to come at his command. His counselors point out that the queen's refusal to be commanded might "come abroad unto all women" (Esther 1.17), and the Persian king passes his law so that "every man should bear rule in his own house" (Esther 1.22). Rochester's decision to banish Bertha and marry Jane is dangerously like Ahasuerus's replacement of Vashti by Esther; Jane's resistance signals her engagement in both the reform of her master and the liberation of her people.

The conversation between Jane and Rochester about Rochester's "Persian" law offers readers clear signals about how they should perceive Rochester's relationship to Jane. Expressed as a conflict between Judeo-Christian law and Persian arrogance, the conflict can also be understood as Jane's struggle to retain possession of her soul, to claim her rights as

a Western, Christian woman. Thus, when Rochester begins his actual proposal to her, Jane insists, "I have as much soul as you" (Brontë [1847] 1985, 281). Later, when she resists his wish to take her to a "white-washed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean," where, as his mistress, she would live a "guarded" life (331), she expresses her triumph in precisely the same terms: "I still possessed my soul" (344).¹⁶

It is at Thornfield, of course, that the confinement and sexuality of the seraglio/harem are most fully represented. Rochester has a wife whom he keeps literally caged in a "wild beast's den" (336), "a room without a window" (321). In her first explicit view of Bertha Mason, Jane depicts her in the ambiguous, nonhuman terms Wollstonecraft had applied to harem inmates: "What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight tell: it grovelled, seemingly, on all fours; it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal: but it was covered with clothing, and a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face" (321). Referred to by Jane as a "clothed hyena" (321), Bertha incarnates a brute sensuality that apparently justifies her imprisonment. Rochester calls her his "bad, mad, and embruted partner" (320), whom he married without being "sure of the existence of one virtue in her nature" (333).

When Rochester takes his first wife, he is himself acting purely on the basis of his own "excited" senses (332), not seeking a rational companion. He discovers in Bertha a "nature wholly alien" to his own, a "cast of mind common, low, narrow, and singularly incapable of being led to anything higher, expanded to anything larger" (333). Bertha is characterized here as a woman without a soul. This Western man has married a figuratively Eastern woman, an "embruted" creature who, through the marriage bond, becomes a "part of" him (334). When Rochester, responding to the "sweet wind from Europe," decides to leave Jamaica and "go home to God" (335), his behavior continues to be governed by the "most gross, impure, depraved" nature that is permanently "associated" with his own (334). Instead of remaining faithful to his wife, he roams Europe seeking "a good and intelligent woman, whom I could love" (337). Of course he finds only the "unprincipled and violent," "mind-

¹⁶ The other Old Testament reference to a "law of the Medes and Persians, which altereth not" occurs in chap. 6 of the book of Daniel. Here the Persian king Darius orders that anyone who petitions "any God or Man" other than the king "shall be cast into the den of lions" (Dan. 6.7). Daniel prays to the God of the Hebrews; the king casts him in the lion's den; Daniel's miraculous deliverance converts Darius to an acknowledgment of the "living God" (Dan. 6.26). Jane Eyre names Daniel as one of her favorite books in the Bible early in the novel (Brontë [1847] 1985, 65); Daniel's ordeal, as well as Esther's, serves as a model for her own resistance to her master's desire to strip her of "soul." I am indebted to Jimmy Griffin for bringing to my attention the relevant biblical passages.

less," and faithless mistresses his money buys him (338). Rochester knows that "hiring a mistress is the next worse thing to buying a slave" (339), yet he persists on this course—even with Jane—because, the narrative suggests, his association with Bertha has deformed him into a polygamous, sensual sultan.

Thus Brontë appears to displace the blame for Rochester's Eastern tendencies on the intrusion of this "Eastern" woman into his Western life. Though Jane protests in Bertha's behalf—"you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady" (328)—Rochester's account of his first marriage serves as the narrative explanation of his own oriental tendencies. The fact that he does not reform until Bertha dies suggests how powerful her oriental hold on him has been.¹⁷

Bertha, of course, is West Indian, not "Mahometan," and she scarcely resembles the conventional image of an alluring harem inmate—no "gazelle eyes" or "houri forms" here. Indeed, as Susan L. Meyer convincingly shows, she is consistently figured as a "nightmare" vision with "savage," "lurid," and "swelled" black features (1989, 253–54) and associated with the oppressed races subject to British colonialism. Yet, as Grosrichard points out, "The West Indies can end by rejoining, in the imagination, the East Indies" (1979, 32, translation mine). Bertha's characterization in other significant ways recalls the terms used by Wollstonecraft to depict the fate of "Mahometan" women: she is soulless, regarded as "not . . . a part of the human species," and her all-too-real imprisonment at Thornfield invokes the root meaning of *seraglio*: a place where wild beasts are kept. One might say that Bertha's characterization as a "clothed hyena" manifests the Western view of the underlying reality of the harem inmate, the philosophical view of women that underpins both their confinement within the harem and their more conventional adornment.¹⁸

Thus, to note Bertha's "blackness" and her birth in Jamaica need not preclude seeing that she is also, simultaneously, figured as an "Eastern" woman. Indeed, in Bertha's characterization a number of parallel discourses converge: she is the "black woman who signifies both the oppressed and the oppressor" (Meyer 1989, 266); she is Jane's "dark double" who enacts both Jane's and Brontë's repressed rage at patriarchal oppression (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 360); she is the Indian woman consumed in sati (Perera 1991); she is Vashti, King Ahasuerus's uncontrollable queen; and she is a harem inmate whose purported soullessness justifies and enforces her own oppression. Bertha is overdetermined; as

¹⁷ See Meyer 1989 for fuller discussion of how contact with the Other serves to besmirch the Englishman in *Jane Eyre*.

¹⁸ The reader may be reminded of Horace Walpole's comment that Mary Wollstonecraft was a "hyena in petticoats" (Wollstonecraft [1792] 1982, 17).

the “central locus of Brontë’s anxieties about oppression” (Meyer 1989, 252) and as the spark for the redemptive fire that clears the way for Jane’s fulfillment, she serves to focus a number of different systems of figuration that structure the novel.

Indeed, Brontë equivocates still further in her presentation of Bertha, never fully indicating whether she is inherently soulless or only made so by Rochester’s treatment of her. In a few significant passages, Brontë allows her narrative to suggest that Bertha, like Jane, is consciously aware of and legitimately enraged by her enslavement. On the eve of the doomed wedding, Bertha enters Jane’s room, not to harm her as Rochester fears but to rend the veil, which Rochester in his “princely extravagance” had insisted upon buying (Brontë [1847] 1985, 308). Jane sees in the veil an image of Rochester’s “pride” (309). When Bertha rends it “in two parts” and “trample[s] on them” (311), her action may be explained as emanating from her resentment of and jealousy toward Jane. Or, it may be viewed as a warning to Jane about the “veiled” existence she would have to lead as Rochester’s harem slave.

That Bertha kills herself in her attempt to burn down the house of her master can also be linked to Roxanna’s ultimately self-destructive rebellion in *Persian Letters*. Defying the master who has enslaved her, she asserts her freedom only to find death as its inevitable price. As long as the despotic system is in place, no woman can truly be free, yet the suicide of a rebellious woman serves as a powerful condemnation—and potential transformation—of that system.¹⁹ Thus it is no accident that Rochester is blinded in the conflagration caused by Bertha’s rebellion. Stripped of his despotic privilege to see, he can no longer function as a sultan. Despite her earlier promises to “stir up mutiny” in the harem (298), Jane owes her freedom not to her own rebellion but to that of the actual “harem-inmate,” the “dark double” who acts as her proxy.

After Bertha’s death, Rochester is free to reform, and this reform is significantly figured as a conversion: “Jane! you think me, I dare say, an irreligious dog; but my heart swells with gratitude to the beneficent God of this earth just now. . . . I did wrong. . . . Of late, Jane—only—only of late—I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation with my Maker. I began sometimes to pray” (471). The man who had passed a “Persian” law to justify his own behavior here acknowledges the authority of the Christian God who mandates monogamy and respect for the souls of women. Despite the many critiques of Christian ideology and practice that abound in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë’s feminist orientalism here

¹⁹ See Donaldson 1988 for a similar argument about the self-assertion implicit in Bertha’s suicide; Perera 1991, on the contrary, sees Bertha’s death as a denial of her subjectivity.

takes priority, as she obscures the patriarchal oppression that is also a part of Christianity.

And by ending her novel with the words of the Christian missionary St. John Rivers, himself one of the domestic despots Jane has had to defy, Brontë leaves the reader with an idealized vision of Christianity as the only satisfactory alternative to Eastern, "Mahometan"—and even Hindu—despotism. While this reversal in the characterization of St. John and the expressed attitude toward Christianity has struck many readers as a self-contradictory shift in Brontë's focus, it in fact confirms and seals the pattern begun with Jane's promise to "go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved" (297).

The novel's concluding paean to St. John and to Christian values takes place against the backdrop not of a vaguely conceived Middle East but of the Far East, India. The groundwork establishing India as another locale for gendered oriental despotism had been laid early in the novel, in the same chapter that features the "sultan/slave" simile. Back at Thornfield after the trip to Millcote, Jane objects to a "pagan" tendency in Rochester (301). Her master has just sung a song to her in which a woman swears "to live—to die" with her beloved (301). Jane seizes on the seemingly innocent phrase and asserts that she "had no intention of dying" with Rochester: "I had as good a right to die when my time came as he had: but I should bide that time, and not be hurried away in a suttee" (301).

Though this identification of India as another Eastern site for the oppression of women is not in my view extensively developed throughout the text, it returns in the novel's conclusion, as well as in the penultimate section of the novel, when Jane faces the threat of being "grilled alive in Calcutta" (441) if she chooses to accompany St. John to India. For during her stay at Moor House, Jane once again encounters a man with a "despotic nature" (434) who rules over a household of dependent women and who threatens not only to immure but also to immolate her (430).

At first Jane finds Moor House less oppressive than her earlier homes. Yet when Jane consents to give up her study of German in order to help St. John learn Hindustani, she discovers another form of "servitude" (423) and she experiences the kiss that St. John gives her as a "seal affixed to my fetters" (424). Jane's subjection to St. John is in fact stronger than any she has felt before. "I could not resist him," she uncharacteristically admits (425). Part of Jane's difficulty in resisting St. John's wishes is that they come cloaked in Christian doctrine. Jane recognizes the despotism in St. John, knowing that to accede to his wishes would be "almost equivalent to committing suicide" (439). Yet because St. John is a "sincere Christian" (434), not an "irreligious dog," she has a harder time extricating herself from the seductions of his proposal that she marry him and

accompany him to India: "Religion called—Angels beckoned—God commanded" (444).

Brontë here reveals the motive behind feminist orientalism as a mode of cultural analysis as well as a rhetorical strategy. Jane finds it possible to resist Rochester because he calls himself and acts in ways that clearly echo the Western conception of "Mahomet," not Christ. But a man who assumes the language and posture of Christ is harder to combat. Jane ultimately does find the strength to resist St. John, however, when he unwittingly sets her a challenge that obviously mimics the behavior of a Western feminist's notion of a sultan.

What St. John asks of Jane is that she abandon her already established love for Rochester. With this demand, he manifests what was, to Western feminists, perhaps the most threatening feature of "Mahometan" practice: interference with a woman's free choice of love object. Indeed, what had motivated Roxanna's rebellion in *Persian Letters* was not her desire to escape confinement nor her position as one of many wives. Rather, it was her desire to be free to love another man, coupled with her abhorrence of her sexual "master." In denying Jane her freedom to love (and in promising to impose the forms of sexual love upon her), St. John becomes the most brutal (and literal) of her harem masters and thus the one who evokes from her the greatest effort of rebellion.²⁰

Yet in the concluding paragraphs of the novel, St. John—the archetypal Christian man—is redeemed from the flaw in his own nature. By her resistance to his desire to enslave her, Jane frees him from his own oriental tendencies. If she is not a slave, he cannot be a master. Brontë makes explicit the implication behind Wollstonecraft's assertion that the women of the harem have souls "just animated enough to give life to the body." A woman of soul, as Jane has by now firmly established herself to be, has the power not only to resist the harem but to transform it: as Jane had once promised Rochester, "you, three-tailed bashaw as you are, sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands" (298).

St. John, like Rochester, becomes a true Christian after his encounter with Jane and thus is free to pursue her orientalist project. For St. John, as a Christian missionary in India, "labours for his race" with the same impulses as do Jane and her author: "Firm, faithful, and devoted, full of energy and zeal, and truth . . . he clears their painful way to improvement; he hews down like a giant the prejudices of creed and caste that encumber it" (477). Jane Eyre ends her story with St. John's words—"Amen; even so, come, Lord Jesus!" (477)—because they exter-

²⁰ See Leonowens (1872) 1991 for a fuller elaboration of this idea: the greatest horror of the harem, for Leonowens, is not polygamy, not confinement, not enforced sexual submission, but denial of the freedom to love.

nalize and make global what has been her own internal and local project all along: the purging of oriental elements from her society, the replacement of "Mahometan" law by Christian doctrine. In voicing these words, St. John is recommitting himself to the specifically Christian project of combating alien religious forms. Thus, although the novel's primary focus is the occidentalization of the Occident, it ends with the vision of the occidentalization of the Orient that simultaneously underlies and expands that focus. Readers, both male and female, are encouraged to follow both St. John and Jane in the task of clearing the thicket of oriental "prejudices" abroad, at home, and within their own souls. It remains for readers in the twentieth century to clear yet another thicket, the tangle of feminist orientalist prejudice that continues to encumber Western feminist discourse.

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