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READING CHARLOTTE BRONTË READING

by

Madhumita Gupta

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READING CHARLOTTE BRONTË READING

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University of Nebraska, 2018

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This essay considers the significance of undirected childhood reading on an author's mind and the reason some authors reference specific real books in their fiction. I argue that independent reading (as against schooling or formal education), and the direct and indirect references to certain books in *Jane Eyre*¹ were deliberate, well-thought-out inclusions for specific purposes at different points in the story. When a title pointedly says *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, it is probable that a significant part of the author's life has seeped into her creation which makes it essential to consider the relevant parts of her life to analyze my claim. To do this, this essay considers the childhood reading in the Brontë family and focuses on some of the Brontë siblings' favorite readings, which happened to be popular in the Victorian era. It then considers their powerful impact on Charlotte Brontë's mind. After briefly considering the general attitude towards the reading woman in the era and how the Brontë family was different in that regard, this essay considers the long-lasting impact of *Arabian Nights* and Thomas Bewick's *The History of British Birds* on *Jane Eyre*. Both books were the Brontë children's favorite

¹ I have used the text of *Jane Eyre* from *A Norton Critical Edition* edited by Richard J. Dunn, referred here onwards as *JE*.

readings and had a significant impact on their writings from the juvenilia to the novels that they wrote as adults. By referring to these books in *Jane Eyre* Brontë was paying a tribute to the act of reading and to those specific books. While acknowledging that there are always multiple influences on a writer's mind, I will be considering the impact of *Arabian Nights*² and Bewick's *The History of British Birds* as two major influences on *Jane Eyre* because these issues have not been theorized as much as some other aspects of Brontë's work. The Eastern link and debt to the *Arabian Nights* is especially interesting to me as an Indian.

² For this essay I am using Sir Richard Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which would not be the one the Brontës read; nonetheless the essential stories would still be the same. They may have read the earlier versions which Burton derides in the introduction to his translation.

Reading Charlotte Brontë Reading

‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I am an automaton? —a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? Do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! —I have as much soul as you, —and full as much heart! ... I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh; —it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, *and we stood at God’s feet, equal, — as we are!*’
[emphasis added] (*JE* 215)

In the passage quoted above, is it Jane Eyre addressing Rochester or is it Charlotte Brontë addressing, nay, railing at “unjust society”; challenging the “Dear reader” to look beyond the damsel in distress and understand the damsel who deals with her own distress and demands equality? If Jane is breaking all conventions in fearlessly addressing Rochester’s towering figure, Brontë, through Jane, is doing much the same in challenging the society which bound the women of the nineteenth century to a patriarchal notion of ‘decency.’ Is Jane’s breaking away from Rochester’s powerful but beguiling embrace equally the writer’s surreptitious attempt at breaking the invisible chains around women? She does claim through words and actions throughout *Jane Eyre* that “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me; I am a free human being with an independent will...” (*JE* 216).

The strongest claim of this paper is that Jane’s path to self-actualization was through the author’s and the protagonist’s independent readings. Though *Jane Eyre* has

often been interpreted as proto-feminist, and rightly so, Charlotte Brontë, nonetheless never was an overt rebel, nor an iconoclast. Neither her awareness, nor her intellect, make her a rebel who disparaged the need for men or wanted to overthrow the patriarchal society for good. Brontë spent a fairly sheltered life and the few times she did leave home, she chose always to return. She could have rebelled against some of her father's absurd demands such as his demand that she not marry Arthur Bell Nicholls initially, but she chose not to alienate her father. As Felicia Gordon says "Patrick Brontë's response seemed excessive even by the dictatorial standards of the Victorian paterfamilias" (56). At the same time, though, Brontë's observant and analytical mind could not have failed to perceive and form strong opinions regarding the injustices and inequality to women of the times. When she says via her heroine that "The vehemence of emotion, stirred by grief and love within me, was claiming mastery, and struggling for full sway, and asserting a right to predominate, to overcome, to live, rise, and reign at last: yes,—and to speak" (*JE* 215), she is vocalizing the needs of women of the century. This sentiment echoes in her own words just after the row regarding Nicholls in her letter to Ellen, in which Brontë says: "If I had loved Mr. Nicholls and had heard such epithets applied to him, it would have transported me past patience; as it was my blood boiled with a sense of injustice..." (Charlotte Brontë to Ellen Nussey, 13 Dec. 1832). These strong opinions, however, did not oppose marriage as the socially accepted 'prospect' for a woman. *Jane Eyre* is more a stand on equality in a marriage, especially the equality of a woman — a plain, marginalized woman. The novel insists a number of times that such a woman, no matter how bleak the prospects, will have a choice between submitting to destiny or ascending to the agency. The dictatorial Aunt Reed insists: "But you are passionate, Jane,

that you must allow: and now return to the nursery—there's a dear—and lie down a little." Jane responds with spirit: "I am not your dear; I cannot lie down: send me to school soon, Mrs. Reed, for I hate to live here" (*JE* 31). Similarly, she stands up to Rochester or even St. John's wishes to 'own' her. These instances show quite clearly that Jane has a mind of her own which does not submit docilely to destiny.

In a way, Brontë and her creation, Jane are both about living, rising, and reigning but the reign is still envisioned in home, with a doting and dependent male counterpart. In those times of unchallenged patriarchy and the expectations of 'virtue' from women of conforming to being the "omnicompetent housewife providing for and feeding the household literally by night and day" (Patricia Ingham 138). Jane had persevered, hacking her way out of thorny path from a marginalized, unloved orphan, preparing herself to fight her destiny through education and the guidance of the mother-figures of Mary Ann and Miss Temple at Lowood. She fights against her own attraction for Rochester, as well as against what we will see as the hidden 'sultan' in Rochester; she resists the needy but equally dictatorial St. John and finally becomes the mistress of her chosen domain, after vanquishing all the financial and social ghosts.

Admittedly, as an author, Brontë used contrivances to make Rochester lose his property and sight; and Jane gain economic ascendancy. But the novel underlines the need for financial freedom, if not superiority, to gain equality and respect. The only thing Jane expects from Rochester, she says, is 'Your regard; and if I give you mine in return, that debt will be quit' (*JE* 230). Expressing this complexity was perhaps more difficult than overt rebellion as it involved challenging the society and long -established norms,

and do that without ruffling societal feathers. Subversion, the iron hand in kid glove, is far trickier than an outright rebellion as it needs deliberation and tact in equal amounts.

As many critics have noticed, in this semi-autobiographical novel real life people and experiences became Brontë's grist for her mill. However, Brontë's accomplices in the act of subversion were her own books. One of the most crucial aspects all her biographers comment on about her childhood is the books she and her siblings grew up with. As in the case of many celebrated authors, books formed a major influence in shaping and coloring the vivid imagination of not just Charlotte but Anne, Emily and Branwell Brontë.

Her vast oeuvre of reading guided and provided her with her tools of resistance. The Brontës grew up somewhat secluded, "bereft, in a singular manner, of all such society as would have been natural to their age, sex, and station" (Elizabeth Gaskell 43). At the same time, Gaskell adds that "the children did not want any society ...they were all in all to each other" (Gaskell 43); their reading became their window to the world. Maria read the newspapers, and reported their intelligence to her younger sisters and though Gaskell was right to suspect a dearth of "children's books" in the household, the children's "eager minds browsed undisturbed among the wholesome pasturage of English literature" (Gaskell 43). It is logical that as Brontë's first novel which, as Mary Armstrong says, "is a novel intensely concerned with reading and being read. It is a text fixated on acts of literacy and states of legibility, and it produces reading as a compelling, multivalent locus for narrative pleasures" (107). In this essay, I argue that the direct and indirect references to reading and independent reading (as against schooling or formal education) in *Jane Eyre* were deliberate, well-thought-out inclusions for specific

purposes at different points in the story. From the very beginning of the novel where Jane hides herself away from the Reed family with her book, her keen observation of the book's content, to the repeated references to her books, for example, the allusions to "Roman kings," "sultans," "harems" or "seraglios" or even "Bluebeard like castle" signal reading as a favorite pastime. Her references to the Bible, "I like Revelations, and the book of Daniel, and Genesis and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, and Job and Jonah" (*JE* 27) do more than signify that she read critically. They also show little Jane's decided preferences and her keen intellect. Directly or indirectly reading plays a very significant role in Jane's life.

Brontë's references to reading in *Jane Eyre* work as a tribute to this act of reading which was possibly the biggest contributor to Charlotte, Anne and Emily becoming writers. They also signify that reading played a critical role in Jane's evolution. Brontë illustrates through Jane's example the tremendous contribution the act of reading as opposed to formal education, can have in changing a person's destiny. Apart from being a tribute to the act of reading, Brontë's use of the specific names of real books, some of which were in fact popular readings in the Brontë household, helps to underline her specific favorites and acknowledge her literary debt to them. As Gordon says "when still very young, they were enchanted by *Aesop's Fables* and *The Arabian Nights*" (86). These were the books that gave her the foundation, first, for the marvelous, magical land of Brontë siblings' juvenilia and later the for Charlotte Brontë's great novel, *Jane Eyre*.

Childhood reading, in any case, does leave indelible imprints on the mind; in the Brontë's case, the impact was stronger as their reading and writings were a continuous thread. The secluded life of the Brontës kept them ensconced almost all their lives in their

rarefied isolation, which seldom took them into the hurly-burly of the real world. We see that same detached world recreated in *Jane Eyre* and to an even greater extent in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. The ideas of an isolated Thornfield or Wuthering Heights clearly were influenced by the siblings' own books which imprinted themselves on the growing minds of the Brontës. Because their interactions with the real world were limited, these first impressions appear to have remained even more steadfastly fixed.

Jane W. Stedman speaks of Brontë's familiarity with Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*: "Both illustrations and text impressed themselves upon the receptive children" (36). Bewick's illustrations were minutely detailed wood-engravings which Stedman argues, appear to be the prototypes of the "adult Jane's strange water-colors" (36). Thomas Bewick's *A History of British Birds*, which was brought out in three editions in 1797, 1804 and 1821, is a book of natural history, published in two volumes "Land Birds" and "Water Birds." While the text is written with painstakingly accurate descriptions of birds and their correct scientific, it was admired mostly for fine details of Bewick's wood engravings. Originally it was the combined efforts of Thomas Bewick and Ralph Beilby; Bewick did the unbelievably intricate and life-like wood-engravings birds as the illustrations, while Beilby did the text. When Beilby tried to take all the credit at the time of the publication by naming himself the sole author, there was an angry stand-off between the two and Beilby's name was removed from the title page. Known for the beautiful wood-engravings the art-work of these books is considered one of the finest works in wood-engraving. In 1805, the journal *British Critic* extolled Bewick's vignettes as "ingenuous" because of the apt and accurate descriptions. Moreover, with that, the pictures from the book which young Jane describes have "desolate coast" or

“cold, ghastly moon” to foreshadow adult Jane’s surroundings. While Bewick’s haunting illustrations provide the Moorish setting for *Jane Eyre* from Bessie’s ‘doleful song’:

“Up where the moors spread and grey rocks are piled?

Men are hard-hearted, and kind angels only

Watch o’er the steps of a poor orphan child” (*Jane Eyre* 18),

to her desperate flight from Thornfield when she:

“saw deeply furrowing the brown moorside; I waded knee-deep in its dark growth; I turned with its turnings and finding a moss-blackened granite crag in a hidden angle, I sat down under it. High banks of moor were about me (*JE*, 275)

While Bewick’s detailed vignettes influenced the settings and symbols of *Jane Eyre*, *Arabian Nights*³ provided Brontë with the models for Jane herself, Rochester, and Bertha, as well as the foundation of the Jane-Rochester section of the book.

If Bewick’s windswept, haunting vistas provides *Jane Eyre* the landscape of loneliness in the life of the growing orphan, *Arabian Nights* provides the entire framework of the smart Shaharзад transforming the heartless king Shaharyar into a kinder human being. At the same time, it serves as a cautionary tale to Jane to protect herself from the wily Rochester. *Arabian Nights* is the story of clever Shaharзад who spins tales to prevent her murder by Shaharyar and eventually manages to transform the fiendish king. It is one of the world’s first episodic thrillers, and Shaharзад, perhaps the

³ Though it is known as *The Arabian Nights* also, for the purpose of this paper I refer to it as *Arabian Nights* and use the same spellings which Richard Burton used in his translation of the book. (See Appendix 2 for the illustration of the cover.)

first story-teller to realize the literally endless potential of a cliff-hanger. Though the Bible may also be called 'episodic', *Arabian Nights* uses the technique of ending a story with a scene of intense suspense. To save herself from the imminent execution in the morning, Shaharзад and her sister, Duniyazad, by necessity had to invent stories that were intricately linked to each other and would keep Shaharyar enticed enough to want to listen on for one more night. These stories also had all the appeal of the current pot-boilers as they included the elements of the *nava rasas*⁴ along with the irresistible allure of fantasy and magic. One can see how enticing such a chain of stories would be for children. For the Brontë children, in the seclusion of Haworth, *Arabian Nights* became the fertile ground for their own literary efforts.

Brontë pays homage to a significant formative influence during her childhood when she includes references to both Bewick and *Arabian Nights* in the opening chapter of *Jane Eyre*. *The History of British Birds* by Thomas Bewick was a childhood favorite; the beloved, well-remembered illustrations were the perfect ground to place her

⁴ According to the age-old Indian concept of entertainment, the Nava-rasas (Nine essences) are the nine types of emotional impact that an aesthetic composition from any art form can have on the viewer or audience. These relate very closely to the basic human emotions. The nine rasas are: Shringar (love and beauty); Hasya (comic); Karuna (sympathy); Raudra (fury); Veer (heroic); Bhayanak (fear); Vibhats (disgust); Adhbhut (wonder) and Shant (peace). The idea of the *rasas* was first propounded by Bharata Muni, the ancient theatrologist, the father of the classical dance Bharatnatyam, and the author of *Natyasastra*, a treatise in Sanskrit about the performing arts. The estimated years of its compilation vary between 500 BC and 500 AD.

protagonist and use the recurring bird imagery to the best advantage. Since reading had impacted Charlotte's mind the most among the Brontë siblings, as Gaskell asserted and as has been corroborated by other scholars, what better way was there to promote reading than commemorating the family's favorite books? Doing so allowed her to illustrate and establish reading as one of the first motivating forces behind Jane's ultimate ascendancy; the agency in the marginalized, unwanted orphan, the 'little toad', who did not have any other positive influence to support her. In young Jane's first hostile environment with her domineering aunt; her ineffective cousins and the cruel John Reed, books were not just her companions but guides. Brontë thus begins Jane's fictional "autobiography" with specific books and references which foreshadow and guide the protagonist's way. Books have always been known to have significant influence on molding psyches of invested readers, but they generally acquire the position of guiding beacons in the lives of many unguided, orphaned literary protagonists.

In the famous opening scene of *Jane Eyre* in the red room at Gateshead, Brontë writes, "With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. I feared nothing but interruption, and that came too soon" (*JE* 7). She also includes the following: "I took a book—some Arabian tales" (*JE* 31). I want to call attention to the way she particularizes these statements. Why is it not "With *the book* on my knee..."? Or "I took a book – some old tales"? For an author, self-trained as Charlotte and her siblings were, since their childhood, having "early formed those habits of close observation, and patient analysis of cause and effect, which served so well in after-life as handmaids to her genius" (Gaskell 68) meticulous writing was imperative. Brontë includes the name "Bewick" and specifies "Arabian Nights" for a purpose. She felt the burden as a female

author of being the equal of the best male writers. As Gaskell says “She especially disliked the lowering of the standard by which to judge a work of fiction, if it proceeded from a feminine pen; and praise mingled with pseudo-gallant allusions to her sex, mortified her far more than actual blame” (Gaskell Vol.2, Ch. 4). Brontë might have added the bold and challenging ‘Preface’ to the second edition of the book just to preempt the patronizing judgement which she had faced from the time she had heard from her own idol Robert Southey when he had commented on her initial literary attempts. In a kind but a decidedly patriarchal tone, he had said, “Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be” (Gaskell 125, Vol.1). The preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* identifies and tackles the probable attackers in no uncertain terms:

‘the timorous or carping few who doubt the tendency of such books as “Jane Eyre:” [sic] in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong; whose ears detect in each protest against bigotry—that parent of crime—an insult to piety, that regent of God on earth. I would suggest to such doubters certain obvious distinctions; I would remind them of certain simple truths’
(*JE* 1, Preface to the Second Edition).

That is the reason that every word, every inclusion, every twist in this tale had to be chosen with deliberate care for very specific purposes for this impassioned author to create Jane Eyre as one of literature’s fieriest and feistiest females. The book is not “a subjective act of a culturally isolated and intuitive genius but a thorough analysis and critique of male privilege and patriarchal powers concealed in a traditional romance” (Cervetti 50). Having suffered rejection from Southey and anticipating the “pseudo-

gallant” critique she picked the androgynous pseudonym of Currer Bell to ensure that her story reached the public. After that Brontë and her heroine, Jane, had to accomplish the mammoth task through “her plain tale with few pretensions” (*JE* 1, Preface) and serve the multiple purposes of telling an inspiring tale of an unprivileged orphan creating (as opposed to ‘finding’) her destiny, critiquing her society and its lopsided gender-politics, and finally, serving as the author’s own aspirational story.

Undoubtedly, this act of subversion became the biggest triumph for Brontë, since *Jane Eyre*, after having initially shocked the public, went on to become an influential classic. The sheer complexity of a woman writing a woman’s story, under an androgynous name, with the purpose of challenging but not overturning several patriarchal notions, says much about the hurdles the writer would have had to consider. The fact that she needed this subterfuge of publishing under an assumed, non-gendered name introduces us to double-standards of the society for which Brontë was writing. The Preface itself tells us how aware (and angry) Brontë was about the society she was a part of and yet, would not want to antagonize. Considering just the angry ‘Preface’ may give us a glimpse of the amount of deliberation that would have gone into telling this tale and selecting her rhetorical tools. Brontë’s anger does not make her heedless, instead she channels her anger into choosing her words with precision. For example, when she says “Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion” (*JE* 1), she is extremely aware of her conventional and righteous audience and its prejudices. Her dislike of, nay rebellion at, blending in, is evident in her words that the world finds it convenient to “let white-washed walls vouch for clean shrines. It may hate him who dares to scrutinize and expose—to raze the gilding and show base metal under it” (1).

She speaks of the intrinsic worth of those who dare to criticize the sovereign powers, arguing that “Ahab did not like Micaiah, because he never prophesied good concerning him, but evil” and further “yet might Ahab have escaped a bloody death, had he but stopped his ears to flattery, and opened them to faithful counsel” (*JE* 2). Though her words are ostensibly about Thackeray, “the social regenerator of the day” whose words “are not framed to tickle delicate ears” (2), to whom she dedicates the second edition, these words are her foil as well. As an author, a *female* author Brontë was aware of *Jane Eyre* challenging the norms and the clever preface, which though not there for the first edition, become her shield and bayonet in one. At every point Brontë would have had a compelling reason to choose a particular tool for *Jane Eyre* to be a discourse of resistance while remaining within the ‘appropriate’ social boundaries, without being explicitly challenging.

Jane Eyre has been read by many feminist critics as a progressive novel; it also has been read many times as a psychological study, and a few times as an imperialist project.⁵ The critical consensus is that we can see it as an important critique of gender equality. As Cervetti says, “While Brontë did not have an enlightened consciousness regarding race, religion or nation, she did realize the gross injustices of women’s condition...” (50). If we look at the book from an imperialist perspective, we find numerous examples of Western superiority, for example, the way Jane takes offense when Rochester says “I would not exchange this one little English girl for the Grand

⁵ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar look at *Jane Eyre*, *Villette*, and *Shirley* in *The Madwoman in the Attic* with the feminist perspective while Gayatri Spivak looks at it as an imperialist project.

Turk's whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!" and bristles that "the Eastern allusion bit me again" (JE 229). *Jane Eyre* can undoubtedly be harvested for the imperialist project but looking at it from the point of the Eastern impact or debt, *Jane Eyre* gives perhaps its most overt tribute to *Arabian Nights*. Whichever version of the book we consider, whether from Arabia or from India, it was the formative force behind the story and Brontë clearly acknowledges it.

While it is possible to consider a book in some ways without considering the author, in Brontë's case it becomes nearly impossible as the two are so interconnected. Gayatri Spivak refuses "to touch Brontë's life" while discussing the imperialist project in *Jane Eyre*, because she believes that "The role of literature in the production of cultural representation should not be ignored" and the fact that "...imperialism, understood as England's social mission, was a crucial part of the cultural representation of England to the English" (243). However, it is difficult and perhaps wrong to divorce a writer from her creation, especially when the title emphasizes that it is "an autobiography." One must agree with Maryann C. Ward that "Brontë was by instinct and because of her education and rather limited experience; a highly autobiographical writer" (15).

From the way Brontë casts Jane in a "plain" mold rather than the usual beautiful one, to her secluded, unhappy childhood, to bad experiences at school, to her experiences as a governess, the book and the author merge often enough to make them distinctly related if not inseparable. In certain scenes and episodes, such as those depicting Lowood, the author draws heavily upon her own life. As Ward says, "The energy behind her texts was emotional rather than cerebral as opposed to the approach of George Eliot,

who was a tireless researcher” (15). In Brontë’s case, overlooking her life while interpreting *Jane Eyre* would be like looking at her composition willfully half-blind.

Reading in Charlotte Brontë’s Formative Years

It is evident from various accounts of Brontë’s childhood, starting with the first painstakingly recreated one in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* by Elizabeth Gaskell in 1857 to later studies such as Patricia Ingham’s *The Brontës* (2006), that Brontë absorbed copiously from her surroundings and put those absorptions back in her writing. The following excerpt from her biography serves as an example of Brontë’s keen observation and meticulous recreation from a very young age:

June 22, 1830, 6 o’clock p.m.

‘Haworth, near Bradford.

“The following strange occurrence happened on the 22nd of June, 1830:—

At the time Papa was very ill, confined to his bed, and so weak that he could not rise without assistance. Tabby and I were alone in the kitchen, about half-past nine ante-meridian. Suddenly we heard a knock at the door; Tabby rose and opened it. An old man appeared, standing without, who accosted her thus: —

“*Old Man.*— ‘Does the parson live here?’ (72)

Gaskell further quotes a letter from Brontë’s friend Mary about their school days at Roe Head: “She was an indefatigable student: constantly reading and learning” (82). As Gaskell notes, “the whole family used to ‘make out’ histories and invent characters and events” (82); their doing so points towards reading being considerably more than a

passive pastime in the Brontë household. Gaskell believes that the Brontë siblings “had no children's books and that their eager minds browsed undisturbed among the wholesome pasturage of English literature' (43). She further comments on the eager and intelligent minds of the “clever little children” (44) browsed and romped among all available literature, (in English primarily, but not all of it was just English literature) and proceeded to gaily mix their impressions with their imagination. That is how the “Duke of Wellington” was born for the “little plays of their own” (Gaskell 44). Their creativity in mixing their favorite fiction with the real world outside was a precursor to Brontë’s use of *Arabian Nights* as a framing story for *Jane Eyre*.

The impact of their readings showed up as early as in their juvenile stories, which demonstrate the Brontë siblings’ early writerly ambitions. Morag Styles makes the important distinction between how an ordinary reader reads and how an author reads. While an ordinary reader may read, enjoy and forget, “Published authors are, after all, among those rare groups of people who often keep detailed and revealing records of their reading and writing histories, who reflect on the significance of childhood reading, and who sometimes reveal their recollected early literary experiences” (160). Gaskell’s detailed evidence from the Brontës’ collaborative effort at their “printed magazine” works as evidence of their reading, their highly developed awareness, their interpretation, and also their interest in maintaining a detailed record of this reading. The Brontës, especially Charlotte, kept a detailed “catalogue of [her] books” (Gaskell, 63) between 1829-1830, at the age of thirteen and fourteen. Gaskell further speaks at length about the painstaking precision and dedication of maintaining such a record, clearly highlighting Charlotte’s investment and involvement. She says “each volume contains from sixty to a

hundred pages, and the size of the page lithographed is rather less than the average, the amount of the whole seems very great, if we remember that it was all written in about fifteen months.”

Another example from Brontë’s writing which Gaskell quotes in detail corroborates Brontë’s interest, active engagement, and intelligent interpretation of her readings: “We take two and see three newspapers a week. We take the ‘Leeds Intelligencer,’ Tory, and the ‘Leeds Mercury,’ Whig, edited by Mr. Baines, and his brother, son-in-law, and his two sons, Edward and Talbot. We see the ‘John Bull;’ it is a high Tory, very violent. Mr. Driver lends us it, as likewise ‘Blackwood’s Magazine,’ the most able periodical there is. The Editor is Mr. Christopher North, an old man seventy-four years of age...” (Gaskell, 67). When Brontë writes, even as a child of twelve, her attention to detail and her strong opinion are remarkable. As this thesis will next demonstrate, the same involvement went into the juvenilia and then into *Jane Eyre*. The most obvious change is that the strong opinion softens or perhaps gets disguised in her adult writing.

Bookish Children in a Bookish Household⁶: The Juvenilia

The Brontës went well beyond keeping a detailed record of the events around them. With their “precocious interest” (Ingham 38) in the political goings-on in faraway Westminster and London, their daily reading included everything from *Blackwood’s Magazine* to the usual books to be found in Victorian households such as the Bible, *Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Grammar of General Geography*, Aesop’s Fables, Thomas Bewick’s

⁶ I am indebted to Felicia Gordon for this catchy phrase. She calls the Brontë children “outstandingly bookish children even in a bookish age” (94).

History of British Birds and *Arabian Nights*, among many other more usual ones, such as the poetry of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, Byron, and Southey (Ingham 70).

Surrounded as they were with this variety of reading materials around them and their lively imagination to spur them on, they started the collaborative journey of *Angria* and *Gondal*, their juvenilia.

The Brontë's juvenilia, comprising Charlotte's meticulously preserved copies of Branwell and her own creation, *Angria*, and the few surviving sections of Anne and Emily's *Gondal* are significant to any study of the growth of the Brontë sisters as writers. These not only reveal something of their literary aspirations and preparation and the degree to which these children were affected by their myriad readings, but also how imaginatively they mixed facts around them to the fiction they read. Ingham talks about the benefit of Patrick Brontë's unconventional and pre-Victorian liberal ideas of reading which allowed the Brontë children to sample the otherwise forbidden literary treasures like the "dangerous poems of the dashing wicked Byron or.... the equally disreputable and atheistic Shelley" (8). Their father's healthy neglect proved to be a blessing in disguise especially for Charlotte. Since Patrick did not scrutinize or oversee what his children were reading, the Brontë children had access to more variety of reading than the other children of the era.

This rather eclectic informal education in combination with this freedom to select from a wide variety of books at the parsonage led Charlotte Brontë to the surreptitious consumption of some of the actually forbidden French novels as well. In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë writes "Got another bale of French books ...they are like the rest, clever, wicked, sophisticated and immoral," an acknowledgement which, as Felicia

Gordon notes, goes against her own preoccupation with how reading contributes to “one’s moral improvement” (Gordon 88-89). Nevertheless, such works and the siblings’ eager perusal of their aunt’s *Fraser’s Magazine* along with the *Blackwood’s Magazine* whetted presumably the Brontë sisters’ appetites for sensational fiction and drama; these influences also found their way into their juvenilia. In any discussion of the Brontë siblings’ works, the importance of the reading they did during their formative years should not be underestimated. In the intellectual seclusion of Haworth, books guided, formed, and sharpened the Brontë siblings’ intellect. And reading – starting from the Bible to their unrestricted access to all the books in their father’s library – influenced and helped form the Brontë children’s identities. All four read to actively educate themselves and started writing while still young by amalgamating their own stories with the ones in their books.

Another perhaps small but significant impression on their literary aspirations could have been the fact that both their parents wrote. While Patrick had published substantially in “verse and prose” their mother had also written some religious works (Ingham 9). The inspiration of their parents as well as the subconscious “imprinting” and mimicking of the writing might have been the factors which made the Brontë children write as early as they did. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau says in *Emile*, it is in the nature of the child “to want to create, imitate, produce, give signs of power and activity.”⁷ “It will

⁷ “The ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Mr. Day on education had filtered down through many classes and spread themselves widely out. I imagine, Mr. Brontë must have formed some of his opinions on the management of children from these two theorists” (Gaskell 40).

not take two experiences of seeing a garden plowed, sowed, sprouting, and growing vegetables for him to want to garden in his turn” (98). Further, Patrick Brontë’s habit of evening oral lessons on “history, biology and travel” which he made the children write up the next morning gave rise to their “lifelong habit of thinking out their stories in bed” (Barker 30). Maligned as he was for being a negligent father, Patrick might have had a more substantial influence on nurturing his children’s latent talents than he is given credit for.

Another significant aspect of the growing years of the Brontë siblings which often comes up in critical studies is their seclusion. While Gaskell would have us believe that Haworth was a lonely place to grow up in, Juliet Barker challenges the idea of Haworth’s isolation: “Haworth was not a small rural village but a busy industrial township. Even though the Brontës pandered to the idea that they lived in rural and social isolation, it was simply not the case” (15). Barker goes on to establish that Haworth was a growing industrial town and hence not as isolated as Mrs. Gaskell portrays it. She further gives evidence of the Brontës’ social interactions but she herself refutes them by saying that “none of this [the examples of social interaction are] evidence of actual intimacy between the Brontë sisters and their neighbors” (20). Despite the newly recognized fact that Haworth was well-populated and that the Brontës had acquaintances, the fact remains that they were growing up in intellectual if not physical isolation, as Gaskell suspected and emphasized. Like many children growing up alone, books became their trusty companions, conspirators, and guides. In the Brontë siblings’ collaborative efforts at juvenilia, their plays, and even the novels they wrote as adults, the sheer claustrophobia of their characters’ existence is difficult to explain in any other way.

Elizabeth Gaskell's exaggeration, painstakingly establishing Haworth as "lonely" and "isolated" town, can be excused somewhat by viewing it as a defensive gesture. She was doing everything possible to vindicate her friend and prove wrong the unkind reviewers who had claimed that *Jane Eyre* was shockingly improper. By painting Haworth as a Land's End kind of a place, Gaskell was implying that the Brontës' uncouth surroundings were the reason that "they reveled in coarseness for coarseness sake" (Barker 14). She portrays Haworth as a crude, primitive place which, she claims was reason behind the primitive, raw emotions and locales of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*.

However, as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar rightly assert, the public's strong reaction to and rejection of the novel was not directed against Jane Eyre's passion; rather, the "Victorian reviewer [was]" shocked by the book's "anti-Christian" refusal to accept the forms and customs of society--in short, its rebellious feminism. They were disturbed not so much by "the proud, Byronic sexual energy of Rochester as by the Byronic pride and passion of Jane herself" (780). They were disturbed as much by her passion and her illicit love. The reason why Brontë was able to create this strong protagonist in the era when a "novel was thus associated with the (supposedly) female qualities of irrationally and emotional vulnerability" (Lyons 319) was that the Brontë children had already been exposed to literature that fired opinion and perhaps, rebellion. When women were supposedly reading fluffy romances "because they were seen as creatures of the imagination, of limited intellectual capacity, both frivolous and emotional" (Lyons 319), the Brontës saw the novel as a possible vehicle to peddle their convictions.

Reading as a Leisure Activity in the Victorian Era

While the Brontë children were growing up surrounded by all kinds of books within easy reach, in some quarters, especially Evangelical ones, reading as a habit was still looked down upon. Nineteenth-century women were confined to home and hearth and forbidden from venturing any opinions. As Nancy Cervtti explains, legally women were not even full-fledged persons and considered first as their father's possessions and then their brother's or husband's possessions and "signs of affluence" (1). Reading was frowned upon, generally education was utilitarian and writing by women was often considered insupportable. Cervetti further claims that the few women who did break out "were mentored and thus influenced by fathers, husbands and clergy" (1). Science joined hands with society, both male domain, and tried to prove through the scientific study of skeletons that smaller skulls of women proved intellectual inferiority. Society did its best to ensure that women remained at a disadvantage. (see Appendix 1 for illustration)

Bold women writers who dared to challenge norms suffered the brunt even more. Mary Poovey quotes Lord Dillion's observation upon meeting Mary Shelley: "Your writings and your manner are not in accordance" (Poovey 1).⁸ Mary Shelley was upbraided for writing *Frankenstein* and she refers to have been asked "how I...came to think of and dilate upon so very hideous an idea" (Mary Shelley's Introduction to *Frankenstein*, 2nd edition). However, women writers continued their struggle for recognition, and despite all efforts to subdue the feminine pen, women kept resisting and writing. According to Ian Watt most of the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century "novels came from the female pen" (Cervetti 2). From Mary Wollstonecraft, who

⁸ Mary Poovey quotes Lord Dillion's comments in *My Hideous Progeny: Mary Shelley and the Feminization of Romanticism*.

championed the cause of women's education in her *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* as early as 1792, to her largely self-taught daughter Mary Shelley, who came up with the iconic *Frankenstein*, to Jane Austen's strong female protagonist in *Emma* and Elizabeth of *Pride and Prejudice*, to the Brontë sisters, who created the feisty women of *Wuthering Heights*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and a host of other women authors who were writing about resisting, subverting and sometimes openly challenging patriarchal society. Many of them were championing education as the ultimate tool to emancipation and speaking about books and reading in their works. However, even though the circulating libraries, serial publications, and shilling magazines became instrumental in popularizing reading, novels were still thought to be a corrupting influence which could make subjugating women difficult. Thus, even as literacy and reading gained popularity there were stringent expectations for what women should read. "Improving" books sometimes passed the strict parental and societal muster but reading novels was often frowned upon. Virtuous women were supposed to spend their time and leisure tending to their families' needs. Women, however, kept writing and subverting male expectations. As the title of Dale Spender's book asserts that women were *The Mother Of The Novel: 100 Good Women Writers Before Jane Austen* and they did not stop writing just because it was expected they do so. These were the women who made the greater contribution to the novel's development. This claim becomes all the more significant with the realization that they were writing those novels while battling the contemporary society's "inordinate fear and condemnation" (Cervetti 9) of their novels.

Interestingly, many novels written in the period deal with the theme of education for women. Perhaps it was because these women, having experienced the power of

reading themselves, wanted to spread the good word. And to do that, some women writers chose subversion rather than overtly challenging the established societal norms. Charlotte Brontë, at the forefront among other women writers, may well have chosen to do so because of her extensive early exposure to different kinds of books, her own engagement with them, and her interpretation of them.

The Power of Independent Reading

Thus, while formal education and the specific subjects that girls were allowed or supposed to take continued to coerce them to the nineteenth-century ideals, personal reading -- often without an elder's guidance--led the way to a more complex sense of self in imaginative readers. The astute readers moved from the basic enjoyment of a good story to the realization of the endless educational possibilities of these novels, these unstructured vehicles of agendas. Even though Brontë was reading before Queen Victoria's crowning, one agrees with Jennifer Weeks when she argues that "Victorian schoolgirls took what they desired from their favorite novels without consulting the authors for direction on the shape of their own lives" (6). When these girls grew into writers themselves, they went on to influence multitudes. They frequently designed and disguised their protagonists to enact the agency which they were denied themselves by their families or society. Some among those writers, having experienced the power of certain books, chose to give a tribute to those books and use them as tools for as various purposes as foregrounding or foreshadowing the turning points of their stories or sometimes guiding the actions of the protagonists.

Not having a restrictive elder around proved to be a boon to highly intelligent and imaginative writers like Mary Shelley and the Brontë sisters. In both these cases, self-

education led to iconic landmarks of literature like *Frankenstein*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Wuthering Heights*, and others. There may then be a deeper connection of reading to formative minds than it has to formal education. Personal reading has a stronger impact because it is not enforced nor does it have a societal or political agenda. Most importantly, since it is chosen and unenforced, such reading is self-motivated and can actually have a long-lasting effect. Jennifer Weeks makes a case for the girls of the Victorian period for whom this self-education played an important role in creating a cultural identity. She notes “It [reading] is a vital part of education, but it extends beyond education in every direction, flirting with each horizon” (Weeks 8). Self-motivated, agenda-free reading may be more valuable than structured school education. Structured education, though arguably effective, was actually not a pleasant memory for the Brontë sisters, as can be established from the way Charlotte Brontë describes Lowood, seemingly a selective recreation of her school days at Roe Head.

From Juvenilia to *Jane Eyre*

Independent reading is the powerful tool that unlocked the Brontës’ creativity and it is probable that it provided Charlotte not just the foundational material for *Jane Eyre* but also the perfect opportunity to give a twin-tribute. By writing about reading and by naming the books and authors, Brontë pays her tribute to the act of reading and to the actual books which were instrumental in inspiring her story. While the readings of all three Brontë sisters influenced their writings from their childhoods to their adult novel-writing, Charlotte was perhaps the one who tried to break from the fantastic world of the juvenilia, which borrowed heavily from the melodrama of the Gothic literature. *Jane Eyre* tries to blend the real with the fantastic. Jane’s experiences at Lowood or even at

Moorhead are closer to the real world than her life at Thornfield. Emily Brontë's world of *Wuthering Heights*, for example, remains an island curiously divorced from the real world.

However, the imprint of childhood reading is evident in the plot construction and the protagonists in *Jane Eyre*. As Maryann Ward notes:

‘Out of the Gothic and the Byronic comes the contrast between the light hero and the dark anti-hero, the latter preferred by the Brontës. The dark, brooding Byronic figure of Brontëan juvenilia is Rochester's ancestor. He, like Emily Brontë's Heathcliff, is ‘colored’ by his passion, sexuality, and flawed humanity, and is pitted against the colorless, cold morality of Rivers and Linton’ (Ward, 18).

When Jane first comes across the dashing figure of Rochester at the moors, he is “in a riding cloak, fur collared and steel clasped,” he is of “middle height and considerable breadth of chest,” and has a “dark face, with stern features and a heavy brow” (96).

Though Jane immediately asserts that he was not “a handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman,” there is a vivid contrast between him and the insipid though classically good-looking St. John. His similarity to an “antique” and a “statue” is cleverly implied even as Jane speaks of “his face [that]riveted the eye.” His “large and blue eyes, with brown lashes; his high forehead, colorless as ivory” and his “careless locks of fair hair” (*JE* 294) pale into insignificance when compared to Rochester's dark masculinity.

When Brontë decided to write the bildungsroman of *Jane Eyre* she chose to emphasize that undirected reading at a personal level played a large role in forming the identity of Jane Eyre and led her to fulfill her destiny. From Bewick to *History of Rome*

there are definitive references to specific, actual books in the novel instead of scenes of reading unidentified books. For a writer as analytical, precise, and deliberate as Brontë, there had to be compelling reasons to do so. From Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* to the fairy-tales told by the Brontë children's housekeeper and mother-substitute, Tabitha, fiction read and heard left a deep impact on the siblings and repeatedly found its way into their writings. From the juvenilia to *Jane Eyre* to *Villette* to *Wuthering Heights* the effects of those readings are visible in the Brontë sisters' writings.

First titled as '*Jane Eyre: An Auto Biography*' this tale of quest and triumph owes much to the reading, both for the author and the protagonist. Sarah Gilead, speaking of liminality, says of the orphans of the Victorian novel as "socio-cultural reformers" who are:

'... outside of society, but typically undergo a rite of passage that either reconciles him or her to that society or that reveals and then purges the community of conflict. The orphan's life-process crises singly and as a series punctuate the narrative with key dramatic scenes having the cumulative effect of transforming not only the character but the novel itself' (303).

She further speaks of Jane as "inventing a new mythos out of the shards of the old" and mentions "the Bible, fairy and folk tales such as "Cinderella," "Bluebeard," "Little Red Riding Hood" (sic), Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*(sic)...". While it is true that the impact of all these popular readings is visible in *Jane Eyre*, but there is the curious omission in Gilead's list of the significant effect of *Arabian Nights* which is a significant 'shard of the old' which helps Brontë create the new mythos.

Reading, as we see in multiple novels, helps in locating as well as creating a sense of self for these fictional readers and influences their lives as well, and as such reading or self-education becomes significantly more important in the lives of these protagonists than formal or guided education. Quite a few protagonists grow intellectually unaided. Jane Eyre was an orphan in an inhospitable family; Elizabeth Bennett's mother in *Pride and Prejudice* has no interest in her education or interests; Catherine Morland in *Northanger Abbey* had also discovered *Udolpho* on her own. Laetitia Matilda Hawkins' Rosanne in *Rosanne; A father's labor lost* (1817) learns virtually everything from self-directed reading. But the critical difference is that while Austen talks satirically about the effects of reading in *Northanger Abbey* – Catherine's humorous but rather childish interpretation of the Abbey is absurdly colored by Ann Radcliff's Gothic fantasies, Brontë uses reading as a real tool to carve out Jane's future. *Pride and Prejudice* has reading in the margins and it makes Elizabeth delightfully witty, however, the story still remains a *Cinderella* in the sense that Darcy is just taciturn, not villainous, and he does rescue Elizabeth from the 'curse' of spinsterhood.

The Brontë sisters allow their relatively unguided protagonists to earn a happy ending. Jane's story is a bildungsroman which tracks the journey of an outsider who eventually guides her own fortune and triumphs over her past oppressors and in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Maggie's is the story of a woman who goes ahead and creates her life with her offspring after her marriage fails. Both these heroines have their reading to provide them direction. There are frequent direct and indirect references to reading sprinkled in the books which also show the impact of reading on their authors. I now consider just two of Charlotte's favorite readings to understand the immense and lasting

impact these two “selected” childhood readings, and how these two books contributed to the iconic novel.

From Text to Context⁹: *The History of British Birds* by Thomas Bewick

In her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell quotes from a letter Charlotte wrote to Ellen Nussey in 1834 about the books she should be reading. Brontë recommends different authors for different genre and says “For natural history, read Bewick and Audubon...” (104). Though she held many books and authors in high regard, Brontë’s great affection for Bewick may come from her love for this childhood favorite which literally colored the siblings’ joint-project of the juvenilia. Bewick’s book has enthralling and intricate art, eerie and fascinating at the same time. These wood-engravings as Jane W. Stedman mentions, were copied as closely as possible by Anne and Emily in their early drawings, including “his vignettes of dilapidated towers or egg-filled nests [which] were no doubt models for ‘the picturesque ruins and rocks’ ... which Jane Eyre as a school girl looks forward to drawing” (36).

From the very first scene in the red room to the bird imagery as a motif throughout the book, the novel features frequent descriptions of the rolling moors, the storm-tossed, lonely vistas; even the fantastic paintings made by Jane evoke Bewick. In

⁹ Morag Styles uses this interesting turn of phrase in her essay which quotes Robert Darnton's suggestion ‘that it should be possible: ... to discover the social dimensions of thought and to tease meaning from documents by relating them to the surrounding world of significance, passing from text to context and back again until a way has cleared through a foreign mental world (1985, p. 14)’”.

fact, the whole migratory theme in *Jane Eyre* may owe itself to Bewick. As she flees from Gateshead to Lowood, from there to Thornfield, then to Moorhead and finally, to roost at Ferndean, Jane resembles, perhaps, a migratory bird.

In *Jane Eyre*, there are three explicit mentions of Bewick's book; the first is followed by considerable detail in which Jane tells us about the book:

‘I returned to my book—Bewick's History of British Birds: the letterpress thereof I cared little for, generally speaking; and yet there were certain introductory pages that, child as I was, I could not pass quite as a blank’
(*JE* 6).

What follows is the description of the illustrations which reappear, unacknowledged this time but strongly reminiscent of Bewick, when Rochester looks at her water-colors:

These pictures were in water-colors. The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was no land. One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam; its beak held a gold bracelet set with gems, that I had touched with as brilliant tints as my palette could yield, and as glittering distinctness as my pencil could impart. Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water... (*JE* 107)

The other two paintings are equally haunting and if we go back to the first scenes of Jane with “Bewick on her knees”, we discover the uncanny similarity between these water-colors and the illustrations (see Appendix 3) which had held the little Jane in their thrall:

The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking. I cannot tell what sentiment haunted the quite solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of eventide (*JE* 6).

The descriptions from Bewick and adult Jane's paintings are parallel. It appears that Charlotte intended to both highlight a favorite book from her childhood and demonstrate the powerful impact of her own childhood readings by underlining the similarity of adult Jane's water-colors with her favorite reading as a child, especially because of its Gothic thrills.

Apart from these references to Bewick, references to birds are strewn across the novel. Brontë refers to Thackeray as an 'eagle' and Fielding as a 'vulture' in the Preface itself, while in the book Rochester and Jane frequently refer to each other as birds. Jane is the "linnet," "dove," or "skylark" where Rochester is the "fierce falcon" or, when blinded, a "caged eagle" (Stedman 38). Stedman further rightly contends "It is unlikely that Charlotte Brontë intended the reader to be aware of the continuing subliminal influence that British Birds had on Jane Eyre's mind. Charlotte herself was very possibly unaware of the connection" (40) but going by Charlotte's punctiliousness in choosing her words with care, I believe it is very likely that she meant to write in such loving detail about Bewick.

Arabian Nights

While many scholars have been interested in the reading habits and its impact on authors, few scholars seem to have considered the long-term impact of childhood reading on Charlotte Brontë's writing. Fewer still have considered the substantial impact of eastern literature on western authors. Many scholars may have shied away from acknowledging or researching the Eastern debt because of their limited exposure to it. While *Arabian Nights* has been a favorite for Asian authors for centuries and they have tweaked its thousand stories to fit their purposes, Morag Styles found concrete evidence that it was as much a favorite with authors in the eighteenth and nineteenth-century across the oceans as well. She says that along with the usual suspects in the eighteenth-century, the *Bible*, *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Iliad and Odyssey*, *Scott's fiction* and *Gulliver's Travels* "the overwhelming favorite proved to be one that had its origins in the Middle East, was written in Arabic and read in translation" (159). Style claims there is "overwhelming proof that a numerous and diverse group... including some of the best known British authors from the eighteenth to the twentieth centuries read, loved and admired it." Her list includes stalwarts who cross oceans and eras like Jonathan Swift, Sir Walter Scott, Joseph Conrad, Graham Greene, Virginia Woolf and Salman Rushdie. She speaks about the book's influence on novelists, poets, historians, dramatists and even illustrators. Even Elizabeth Gaskell figures in her long list and she quotes Harvey Darton describing its effect spreading "like an epidemic" over the eighteenth-century Europe.

In the translator's "Foreword" of *The Book of the Thousand Nights and a Night*¹⁰, also known as simply *Arabian Nights* Richard Burton calls these stories "The most fantastic flights of fancy, the wildest improbabilities, the most impossible of impossibilities." These stories were initially handed down orally. Speaking of the elder 'Whitebeards' who retold these stories, Burton credits them with making the stories so natural that they appeared to the listeners "mere matters of every-day occurrence" (p viii, vol. 1). Despite Burton's gentle denigration of the earlier popular translations of the book as "in no wise represent[ing] the eastern original" or finding them too "diffuse and verbose," he acknowledges that existing translations of *Arabian Nights* used to be "a nice present for little boys" (Foreword, ix). The book evidently had been around to enthrall little boys and girls alike long before the Brontës. Their fascination with these 'improbable' stories would be as much as with the fantastically eerie illustrations of Bewick. *Arabian Nights*, the beloved childhood reading for many eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authors, would have charged many minds with its fantastic stories. Styles also comments about some famous authors growing up in the early nineteenth century:

‘despite huge diversity in what they produced, seem to have had remarkably similar preoccupations in terms of the reading that captivated

¹⁰ For this essay I am using Sir Richard Burton's translation of the *Arabian Nights*, which would not be the one the Brontës read; nonetheless the essential stories would still be the same. They would have perhaps read the earlier versions which Burton derides in the introduction to his translation.

their imaginations as children and that may well have inspired them to become authors themselves' (160).

Though their circumstances and the way they incorporated these readings differed greatly, *Arabian Nights*, perhaps because of the wealth of ideas and intrigue in it, showed up time and again in works across eras. Further, as Styles argues, it was *Arabian Nights* "that captivated their imaginations as children and that may well have inspired them to become authors themselves' (160).¹¹ The impact of *Arabian Nights* could be seen on the Brontë siblings from the juvenilia as well as their adult works.

Smart, well-read and a gifted storyteller, Charlotte Brontë was a veritable Shaharзад, the fictional teller of these fascinating stories, herself. Gaskell tells of her years at Roe Head when she enthralled the girls with her bed-time stories. It is possible that Brontë might well have seen herself as a Shaharзад, able to cast a spell on her listeners. Later in her so-called "autobiography" she cast parts of herself as Jane, the clever girl who was able to bring the Sultan like Rochester to his knees. Brontë uses the direct and indirect references to *Arabian Nights* to accomplish the triple task of establishing Rochester as the wayward Shahryar, the despotic king in *Arabian Nights*; of serving as a cautionary reminder from Jane's childhood to protect herself from becoming yet another of Rochester's conquests; and finally, of inspiring Jane to use her intelligence

¹¹ Richard Burton speaks of some of the available translations in the preface to his own translation *The Book of Thousand Nights and a Night*. He says in his translation of *Arabian Nights* about Shaharзад "Shaharзад had perused the books... she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred." The effect of this fictional character is evident in Jane's character.

like Shaharзад not just save herself but actually to save Rochester from himself and by doing so, cross a social barrier and establish herself as an respected equal.

Jane's irritation when Rochester forces her into trousseau shopping shows him as a "domestic despot" whose "commands" Jane is "obliged to obey" (Zonana, 592). Yet, as Zonana argues further "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'" (592). It is remarkable that in the first meeting of Rochester and Jane, Rochester is at a disadvantage as he has been thrown off his steed when he had suddenly come upon Jane on the wooded path. This relative power imbalance strongly foreshadows their ultimate relationship where Jane is in the position of power and Rochester is her dependent. To establish this twist of fate, though, Brontë first establishes Rochester as the master, especially as he tries to coerce Jane to agree to his wishes – whether it is to deck her up in silks or to enlist her as his mistress when the existence of Bertha is discovered. In the first instance Jane is irritated by Rochester and stands up to his bullying her into buying silks:

‘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 in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here’ (*JE* 229).

However, the same sultan-like bullying might well have alerted Jane to the despotic strain in Rochester as the "sultan" simile also must have been a clear reminder to her childhood reading of *Arabian Nights* and of Bluebeard. Brontë mentions the book twice: "I took a

book—some Arabian tales...I had usually found fascinating” (*JE* 31) and then again “Glancing at the bookcases, I thought I could distinguish the two volumes of Bewick’s British Birds occupying their old place on the third shelf, and Gulliver’s Travels and the Arabian Nights ranged just above” (194). Images from *Arabian Nights* and Jane’s impression of a “corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle” (*JE* 91) when she had lost her way at Thornfield in her guided tour by Mrs. Fairfax must have come together to create a premonition. The conflation of this impression along with Rochester’s Sultan-like demeanor would also have served as a reminder of her own position of a probable Shaharзад, and hence served the purpose of reminding her of both danger and possible defense.

Just one example of Jane’s Shaharзад-like cleverness is the way she manipulates an evening with Rochester, rather than being manipulated by him.¹² It is all the more to her credit as she is matching her wits against his vast experience, and winning. That particular evening when she is “duly summoned” by him, Jane has already “prepared an occupation” for him. He could have fooled her into a position of submission in “that hour of romance” if she had allowed him the “tête-à-tête.” Smart as she is, she averts that by expertly conning him into singing: “I was not fond of pampering that susceptible vanity of his; but for once, and from motives of expediency, I would e’en soothe and stimulate

¹² Shaharзад’s husband, the King, was notorious for killing his “wife for the night” at dawn but Shaharзад cleverly averts her own murder by telling long tales which she would end either leave midway at dawn, or end at a cliff-hanger. And the king would spare her life for another day and yet another till she told him the 1001 stories which form the *Arabian Nights*. By the end of which the King was supposedly reformed.

it” (*JE* 231). She further feigns inexperience and gets mocked as “a little bungler” and getting “pushed unceremoniously to one side—*which was precisely what I wished*” [emphasis added]. She had decided how to stop Rochester. “Soft scene, daring demonstration, I *would not have*” [emphasis added]. Jane’s determination is similar to Shaharзад when she “stood in peril of both: a weapon of defense must be prepared” and she engages this despotic king in banter to save herself.

From childhood, their baby-steps in the world of literature, the Brontë siblings, especially Charlotte, absorbed these possibly forbidden stories which they would have been allowed to read due to Patrick Brontë’s liberal views (or lax oversight). One can imagine the impact of these salacious stories, which expanded uninhibitedly on the scenes of seduction, on growing minds. Given Charlotte’s opinionated mind, these would also have struck to her as decidedly misogynistic in the beginning as they show women as creatures of easy-virtue. However, towards the end, equally decidedly, the frame story evolves into a supremely successful act of subversion. Years later Brontë would use the same frame story of the *Arabian Nights* to subvert her own society.

The frame-story of *Arabian Nights*, in brief, is that two brothers Kings Shah Zaman and Shaharyar discover that they have been cheated by their respective queens. Their self-exile brings them across another maiden who is cheating on a fearsome genii. Their successive encounters with these three cheating women make them conclude that all women are cheats and do not deserve to live. Both, of course, slay the unfaithful wives and their lovers (slaves) but King Shaharyar then proceeds to avenge his hurt manhood by “marrying” a virgin every night and slaying her the next morning. Soon there are no girls left. At this point, the minister’s daughter Shaharзад asks her father to give her away

in marriage to the king. She has a plan to save herself and eventually the king himself from his monstrous behavior. Her plan is to ask her sister to her bridal-room and pretend to while away her final hours in listening to her stories. These form the one thousand and one stories that make the *Arabian nights*. These stories, ostensibly for Shaharзад, are really meant for Shaharyar. Each of these serve the twin purpose of having a “moral” and ending on a cliff-hanger. Since Shaharyar gets addicted to these stories and he keeps postponing Shaharзад’s slaying and lets this wife live another and yet another day. At the end of the thousand and one days of these elevating stories he reforms and all of them live happily ever after.

The appeal of the many embedded stories in that era is immediately visible as these stories are, at the very least, extremely entertaining. The fantasy, magical elements and the fascination of it being from far-off land offer immediate lure; moreover, some of these stories often feature fascinating stories with talking animals. The young Brontës soon started adapting the stories to their plays and later to *Angria* and *Gondal*. Gaskell quotes one of the letters of Patrick Brontë about these fantasy worlds “When mere children, as soon as they could read and write, Charlotte and her brothers and sisters used to invent and act little plays of their own, in which the Duke of Wellington, my daughter Charlotte’s hero, was sure to come off conqueror” (44); and then he speaks of his role as an the arbiter when the childish feuds got out of hand and makes this comment which proved to be more than an indulgent father’s observation: “Generally, in the management of these concerns, I frequently thought that I discovered signs of rising talent, which I had seldom or never before seen in any of their age.” The Glasstown Sagas, as the children named their fantasy world, were perhaps the first examples of speculative writing as well

as fan-fiction as the four children modeled their heroes on real people. As Styles says, “the magic of these stories seems woven into the children's lives and retained in adulthood” (164-165). With Brontë’s facility in mixing fact and fiction to startlingly believable stories, it was just a matter of time before she would Anglicize the plot material of *Arabian Nights* into something more palatable for the Victorian society. Styles notes that Brontë uses “the stories as the starting point for some of her own writing... investing England of the early nineteenth century with all the magic of an Arabian Nights entertainment” (166). In the transition from the juvenilia to *Jane Eyre* Brontë makes her characters more real, tones down the melodrama, but retains for the locations, especially Thornfield, the same fantastic strains from *Arabian Nights*.

Mary Armstrong argues that for a novel as “intensely concerned with reading and being read, *Arabian Nights* is a text fixated on acts of literacy and states of legibility, and it produces reading as a compelling, multivalent locus for narrative pleasures” (107). Brontë had always been inspired by heroism and this led her to choose the Duke of Wellington as her hero in her Glasstown Saga. The Duke was the topical hero of the time as he had defeated the French at Waterloo in 1815. Shaharзад, the exotic intelligent young girl would also have held tremendous appeal for her. Shaharзад is described in the following way in the *Arabian Nights*:

‘Now he [Shaharyar’s minister] had two daughters, Shahrazad and Duniyazad, the elder had perused the books, annals and legends of preceding Kings, and the stories, examples and instances of by-gone men and things; indeed it was said that she had collected a thousand books of histories relating to antique races and departed rulers. She had perused the

works of the poets and knew them by heart; *she had studied philosophy and the sciences, arts and accomplishments; and she was pleasant and polite, wise and witty, well read and well bred*' (Burton 15). [emphasis added]

It is self-evident why such a person would appeal to Brontë and inspire her to cast her as her protagonist—it is the most ideal description of Brontë and her heroine, Jane.

Shaharзад as a well-read, intelligent woman appears to be the perfect model for Brontë's protagonist. Even as Brontë establishes Jane as a determined soul she maintains the eastern connection. In the opening scene of the book two facts are established rapidly that Jane is a reader and she is rebellious. Rather than meekly following Mrs. Reed's instruction to "remain silent" Jane chooses instead to leave the room: "[a] breakfast-room adjoined the drawing-room, I slipped in there. It contained a bookcase: I soon possessed myself of a volume..." (5). Also, this scene with the "red moreen curtains" and Jane sitting "cross legged like a Turk" gives the whole scene a decidedly exotic eastern ambience.

There are other numerous "eastern" references during Jane's spirited debates with Rochester which are evidently influenced by *Arabian Nights*. When Jane is piqued and angry that Rochester is treating her like a slave she registers her protest and stubbornly refuses to become indebted to Rochester as she keeps seeing him as a willful tyrant: "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" and she retaliates spiritedly: "I crushed his hand, which was ever hunting mine, vigorously, and thrust it back to him red with the passionate pressure" (*JE* 229). If Shaharзад's motivation was to save the future

wives of Shaharyar, Jane speaks of her ambition to free women from the harem: “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny” (*JE* 230). Like Shaharзад, Jane accomplishes her mission of reforming the tyrant by the end of the story.

If Shahrazade is the prototype for Jane, Shaharyar is the one for Rochester. Rochester’s physical description is heavily inspired by Charlotte’s fascination for Byron but she makes a point of highlighting that Rochester did not fit the Caucasian standards of handsomeness. More than simple physical similarity to a darker prototype, Rochester’s even more striking resemblance with the misogynistic king comes from the list of his “conquests”. When he speaks about the number of his mistresses in different countries, even though he garbs his quest as his legitimate search for the perfect soul-mate after his debacle of marrying the mad Bertha, he appears to be a successor of Shaharyar.

Shaharyar’s conviction behind his killing spree that there was not a “chaste” woman in the world comes from the three examples of his own wife, his brother’s wife, and the lustful woman prisoner of an “Ifrit” (a genie). The unfaithfulness of these three women had brought him to the conclusion that women are never to be trusted, and that thus gives him the moral right to slay his whole harem, and then go on his bloody mission: “He also sware [sic] himself by a binding oath that whatever wife he married he would abate her maidenhead at night and slay her next morning to make sure of his honour [sic]; “For... there never was nor is there one chaste woman upon the face of earth” (Burton 14). This is no different from Rochester who is married, or as he puts it “bound to a bad, mad, and embruted [sic] partner” (*JE* 249). He claims it was hidden

from him that his wife came from a “mad family; idiots and maniacs through three generations” (249). And his solution is to keep her under lock and key, much like the Ifrit’s prisoner damsel. The genie’s prisoner explains that Ifrit had put her “into a casket and set the casket in a coffer and to the coffer he affixed seven strong padlocks of steel and deposited me on the deep bottom of the sea that raves, dashing and clashing with waves; and guarded me so that I might remain chaste and honest...” (Burton, 11). Similarly Rochester locks Bertha up. Though he has Grace Poole as Bertha’s warden, he refers to Bertha repeatedly as a “beast,” “a clothed hyena” that “snatched and growled.” The calamity of Bertha’s madness apparently transforms Rochester into a veritable Shaharyar.

While Shaharyar “...continued for the space of three years... marrying a maiden every night and killing her the next morning” (Burton 14), Rochester makes up for his wrong marriage to the “fearful hag” (256) by philandering:

‘For ten long years I roved about, living first in one capital, then another: sometimes in St. Petersburg; oftener in Paris; occasionally in Rome, Naples, and Florence...I sought my ideal of a woman amongst English ladies, French countesses, Italian signoras, and German gräfinnen. I could not find her’ (265).

Rochester clothes his adventures in gentlemanly intentions and “absolutely rational” intentions to be ‘free to love and be loved’ (264). He says ‘Disappointment made me reckless. I tried dissipation—never debauchery: that I hated, and hate’.” However, the way he moves from one to the next alliance makes the reader and Jane suspect the purity

of his intentions. His callousness in leaving his paramours parallels Shaharyar slaying his, and of course, Rochester always finds a good reason to get rid of them:

‘Giacinta was unprincipled and violent: I tired of her in three months. Clara was honest and quiet; but heavy, mindless, and unimpressible: not one whit to my taste. I was glad to give her a sufficient sum to set her up in a good line of business, and so get decently rid of her.’ (266)

The only reason he did not ‘get rid’ of Bertha was because he was married to her, which incidentally, was more because of the stringent Victorian-era Catholic laws against divorce than any gentlemanly motives. Despite Rochester’s assertions of hating Bertha because of her character, her “pigmy intellect,” and “giant propensities” (*JE* 261), and not because of her inherited madness and his story of having been fooled into his marriage by his conniving father, it remains highly questionable whether he would ever have confessed to bigamy had he not been stalled at the altar by Mason who made Bertha’s existence public.

To win back Jane’s sympathy after having almost conned her into an illegitimate marriage, he claims self-pityingly that:

‘Last January, rid of all mistresses—in a harsh, bitter frame of mind, the result of a useless, roving, lonely life—corroded with disappointment, sourly disposed against all men, and especially against all womankind (for I began to regard the notion of an intellectual, faithful, loving woman as a mere dream), recalled by business, I came back to England.’ (266)

While there is a fleeting reference to Bluebeard in *Jane Eyre* when Jane compares the corridor of Thornfield to “a corridor in some Bluebeard’s castle” (*JE* 91), and of course

the similarity is unmistakable, the fact that she uses eastern references time and again almost as a motif – “harem,” “seraglio,” “slaves,” “mutiny”, “three-tailed bashaw”, “sultan” – it seems that *Arabian Nights* was more on her mind than Bluebeard’s tale.

Moreover, *Arabian Nights* would have had a stronger impact on Brontë than Bluebeard’s tale. The latter is a linear tale of intrigue and avengement with the simpler plotline of the heroine being fooled into marriage to a serial killer and then being saved by her brother. The heroine is still very much the damsel in distress who needs to be saved. One of the reasons that a mind as perceptive as Brontë might have found greater intrinsic worth in *Arabian Nights* is that there is a critically important agenda under its magical tales. The agenda of emancipation would have been all the more appealing because of its origin in an eastern, stiflingly patriarchal society. Brontë has been criticized for her imperialist streak, notably by Gayatri Spivak, because of her snooty references to the East but if we look at larger picture, Brontë is actually inspired by the resourceful Shaharзад. For a person who had her strong opinions even as a child, *Arabian Nights* is not just a superficially entertaining or a purposeless collection of stories. Despite some of the extremely misogynistic views in it, it eventually vindicates itself as the story of a supposedly frail woman’s triumph over a powerful tyrant through sheer intelligence.

Brontë uses the story which she loved as a child, very cannily, to arm her protagonist. She shows Jane reading *Arabian Nights* which she “usually found fascinating” to exemplify that she was forewarned, and hence forearmed. After establishing early in the book that *Arabian Nights* was Jane’s childhood reading Brontë uses the reference to alert Jane to the Shaharyar-esque pattern in Rochester. When

Rochester tells her about his misadventures in finding the ‘good and intelligent woman whom I could love’ (264) Jane is moved by his story and perhaps his oratory. Despite being deeply in love she “drew [draws] a certain inference ‘from his words and maintains a strong grip on her emotions. She is fully cognizant that “if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as—under any pretext—with any justification—through any temptation— [I would] become the successor of these poor girls’” (266). At the same time, she is canny enough to ‘...not give utterance to this conviction: it was enough to feel it. I impressed it on my heart, that it might remain there to serve me as aid in the time of trial’ (266). It is this fortitude and strength of character which leads Jane to her eventual triumph, aided and abetted by the author’s plot contrivances.

Thus, despite Rochester’s protestations of good intentions, Jane is aware of the dangers of giving in to his suggestion of becoming his mistress. While Shaharзад postpones and then prevents her murder with her stories, Jane accomplishes that by physically removing herself from the circle of Rochester’s influence. Unaware and untutored as Jane was, especially in contrast to the worldly-wise and experienced Rochester, one of the reasons that she still manages to avoid getting entrapped by him in a bigamous marriage is perhaps because of her instruction in *Arabian Nights*.

Jane Eyre is more than a bildungsroman and certainly much more than a love story. All the same, the love story is at the center of this story and one can scarcely think of Jane without Rochester or vice-versa. The reason it was thought “coarse and vulgar” when it first came out was the Victorian outcry against a woman out to subvert the established norms of “decent” women, as much as it was to what Gilbert and Gubar call

an outcry against the “Byronic passion of Jane herself.” The passion is as much, if not more, to make her (Jane’s) own place in the society as it is for finding her soul-mate.

As an author Brontë uses plot contrivances like the bequest from her uncle and Bertha’s arson to make Jane ultimately financially and physically superior to her beloved tyrant. However, somewhere under all these contrivances there is the constant stream of Jane’s evolution from the timid little orphan to the self-possessed woman. Her accomplices on this journey are her books. Mary Armstrong argues that “Books are not objects desired in and of themselves, but for the interpretive opportunities they present, and because of the pleasure inherent in those moments. And that pleasure is not universally available to everyone because the readable surface requires a literate eye, an interpreter capable of seeing and understanding” (108). Charlotte and her sisters were interpreters capable of seeing with the “literate eye”, understanding and then, internalizing what they read. We can perhaps apply what Jennifer Weeks says about Malcom X and reading that “... he is the figure of education denied, postponed, and deferred—until he began to read. In the ultimate position of (literal) disenfranchisement, he was able to build the foundations of his education through the humility of the written word. the very ease of the act, along with the ubiquity of books, is what makes reading a revolutionary technology” (8).

Of the numerous authors who owe their writing to their own reading, the Brontë sisters hold a special place as the ones who never quite let go of their childhood reading. They read, absorbed, and transformed their readings as they grew. Their favorite readings formed their creative base and they went on adding to that as they grew. Their investment

finally led to iconic novels and they paid back their intellectual debt in full by giving their favorite books special place in their own books, both directly and indirectly.

By referring to these and other real books, the popular books of the era, Brontë finds her story in them, and thereby pays reference to the immense contribution of these readings in the formation of her mind and intellect. Unsurprisingly, the chain of reading does not come to an end with Brontë or *Jane Eyre*. Reading *Jane Eyre* led Jean Rhys to the post-colonial *Wide Sargasso Seas* (1966), written as a prequel to *Jane Eyre* (1847), giving Bertha's side of the story more than a century after *Jane Eyre*.

Author's Note

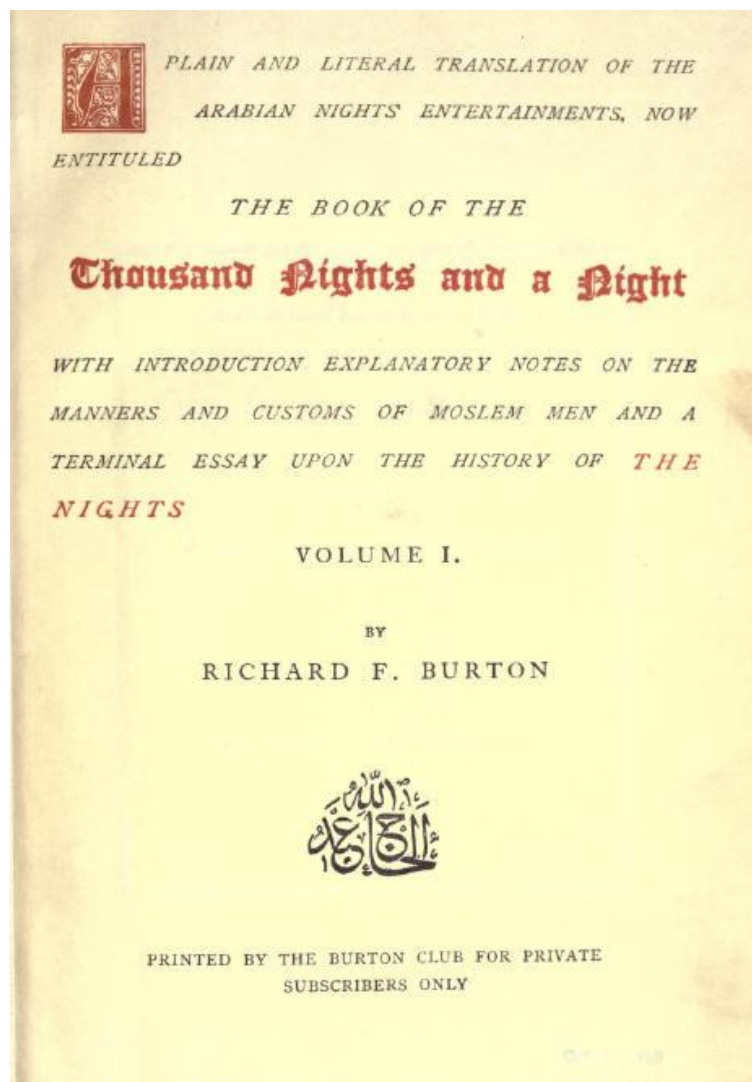
The words “The man who does not read has no advantage over the man who cannot read,” attributed to Mark Twain, have fascinated me from childhood. I could not understand people who could read and would gain so much from reading, but bull-headedly refused to. Reading and then reading about reading was but a step away, which then led to what writers read and how that motivated them. Why do writers reference other writers works in their own? When I read *Jane Eyre* years ago, I hadn’t registered that Thomas Bewick was a real author but a class discussion on Bewick’s illustrations led to the surprising realization of author’s using other authors’ works in their writings. Why did she do that? What layers of meaning can be added when the attentive reader recognizes these allusions? The journey to the answer to this question led to many other discoveries. One of those was that while many critics had studied the reading patterns of writers, much fewer had studied the “scenes of reading” in works of fiction, and fewer still the purpose of those inclusions of the writers’ favorite books in their fiction or the indelible impact of childhood reading on their work as adults.

Appendix 1



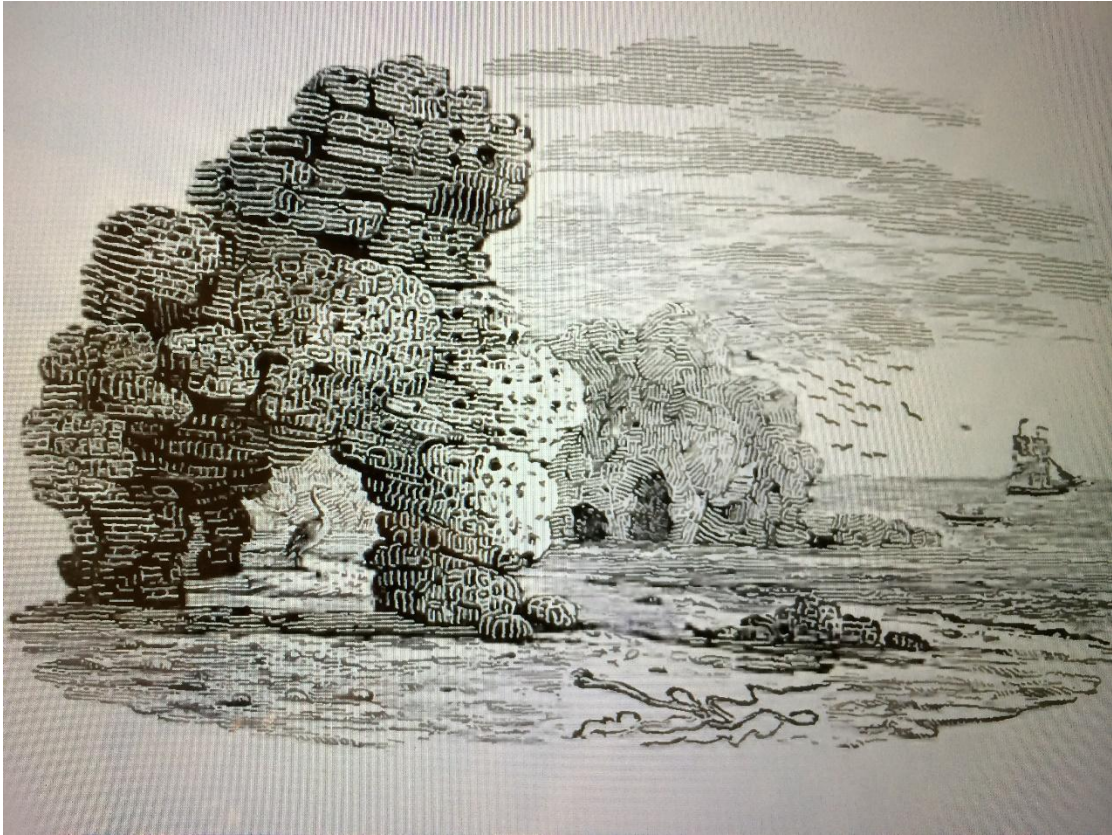
Currer and Ives, 'Stages of a Woman's Life from the Cradle to the Grave,' New York. 1850. An example of nineteenth-century didactic painting of women, such as Lucy (in *Villette*) saw in the Villette Portrait Gallery. Hand-colored lithograph, Indianapolis Museum of Art.

Appendix 2



Title page of “A Plain and Literal Translation of the Arabian Nights’ Entertainments, Now Entitled the Book of The Thousand Nights and a Night”. Translated and edited by Richard Francis Burton. 1885.

Appendix 3



Thomas Bewick's engraving of a lonely cormorant (Bewick 362)

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Appendix 2. (Title page of the above mentioned book)

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