

Domestic Despotism and the Making of *Jane Eyre*

Imperialism, Reform, and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre. Sue Thomas. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. 170 pp.

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<1> Sue Thomas begins her richly sourced monograph on *Jane Eyre* (1847) with a quotation from one of Charlotte Brontë's letters in which the author apologizes for the novel's insignificance: "It has no learning, no research, it discusses no subject of public interest. A mere domestic novel will I fear seem trivial to men of large views and solid attainments" (1). The quote obliquely describes Thomas' agenda and method. *Jane Eyre*, Thomas insists, is much more than an ahistorical "domestic novel"; it is, rather, strewn with traceable allusions to the author's times and particularly to the overlapping public discourses about reform and imperialism. With an approach that combines thick description of the novel's context and speculative literary history, Thomas proposes an historical chronology for the novel's plot. This specificity about the story's temporality – outlined in an appendix – coupled with Thomas' analysis of a forgotten nineteenth-century Caribbean adaptation of the novel make this book valuable to Brontë studies. Thomas' mapping of colonial relations onto metropolitan domestic arrangements, an analytical commitment perhaps derived from her dual background in nineteenth-century British literature and post-colonial Caribbean studies, is the book's finest contribution to the field. Judith Halberstam once provocatively called "not Victorian studies but studies of 'Empire and Culture.'"(1)

<2> Like her recent article in *Victorian Literature and Culture* (an earlier version of the first chapter of this book), *Imperialism, Reform, and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre* is noteworthy for its erudite inclusion of primary historical sources and references to recent *Jane Eyre* criticism. In the first chapter, Thomas begins to outline her chronology for the novel's plot by linking Brontë's allusions to slavery in ancient Rome and Oriental seraglios to public discourses in England regarding Sam Sharpe's slave rebellion in Jamaica in 1831 and Parliament's refusal to interfere with zenanas in India in its renewal of the India Charter Act of 1833. Thomas argues that Jane's invocation of the seraglio is not evidence of Brontë's disavowal of West Indian slavery but a pointed critique of it. In the midst of debates over abolition in the early 1830s, Jane's "allusion implicitly draws attention to the hypocrisy of the British state in protecting 'domestic slavery' in India while abolishing slavery elsewhere in its imperial spheres of influence, and links that hypocrisy with the indulgence of forms of gendered despotism in the private sphere of England" (26).

<3> In chapter 2 Thomas offers a bold reinterpretation of Bertha not as colonial victim or rebel slave (as Carl Plasa, Susan Meyer, Jenny Sharpe, and Gayatri Spivak see her) but as an “ineducable despot.” Thomas examines contemporaneous ethnographic discourses about white Creole degeneracy to supplement post-colonial and feminist analyses of the novel that have been based on “insufficiently historical understandings of the racial formation of the British empire” (50-1). With great sensitivity, she locates Bertha Mason in a complex schema of imperial racialization, observing that Bertha is at once bestialized per English evangelical standards of genteel femininity *and* figured as a despotic mistress vis-à-vis the slaves in her household: she “stands for the domestic excesses of a recalcitrant despotism” (49). Examples of the cruelty of slave mistresses from abolitionist propaganda of the 1820s and 1830s illustrate how Anglo-colonial women were racialized as un-English (42). In this chapter Thomas also begins to elaborate an important thematic, that marriage law in England was structured by colonial race relations. From Rochester’s perspective Bertha is “ineducable”: beyond the reach of imperialism’s civilizing mission. And yet this is precisely the task Rochester “tries to assume in the privatized domain of marriage” wherein Bertha is divested of her civil liberties, her body made the legal property of Rochester (40). According to Thomas, Brontë “works to develop a historical allegory of British ruling-class masculine despotism and agency in the period, and the influence of degraded and degrading colonial femininity superseded by a purer English womanhood” (53).

<4> Taking up the question of “a purer English womanhood,” in chapter 3, Thomas challenges interpretations of the novel that associate Jane’s potential marriage-cum-martyrdom to St. John with *sati*, arguing that such an ideological critique is not only inaccurate but also divests Brontë’s sacrificial language of its significance within Biblical tradition. This chapter goes the farthest in linking the three titular terms of the book, explaining how *Jane Eyre* constructs Englishness as a particular evangelical mode of reform out in the empire. Christian missions to India, only permitted after the 1813 India Charter Act, were viewed by many as a moral duty. Through its insistence on the benevolence of English rule the novel promotes an ideal of Englishness in the same terms with which Beilby Porteus, Bishop of London, defended English imperialism in 1808 as a mode of rule concerned with ““assisting and protecting the distressed”” and ““meliorating the condition of distant countries, by communicating to them in various ways, the blessings of Christian Revelation”” (qtd. in Thomas 61). Brontë’s construction of Englishness as humanitarianism abroad is coupled with warnings of the threat of despotism in the English home. Marriage to St. John is figured through Old Testament language of burnt offering, and Jane refuses the prospect due to his potential for domestic tyranny. Indeed, Thomas suggests that *Jane Eyre*’s pedagogical purpose is to instruct readers that proper Englishness eschews domestic despotism.

<5> She reiterates this reading in chapter 4, “The Ferment of Restlessness,” dating the scene of Jane’s famous monologue on the leads of Thornfield to October 1832 and linking Jane’s protest against domestic subjugation to the numerous political rebellions in the early 1830s including the unrest around the 1832 Reform Act and revolts in France, Brazil and Italy. Challenging prominent post-colonial interpretations of the novel’s scenes of incendiarism as representative of slave rebellion, Thomas argues instead that *Jane Eyre*’s conflagrations index the Sheffield Massacre riots at the time of parliamentary elections in 1832. This reading brings to light the novel’s critique of class prejudice.

<6> Thomas' argument in chapter 4, that Brontë exposes class prejudice through Jane's seeming endorsement of revolutionary rights, is slightly undermined by her subsequent analysis in chapter 5 of John Courtney's melodramatic 1848 adaptation of the novel for the Victoria Theatre, *Jane Eyre or The Secrets of Thornfield Manor*. Thomas argues that the play's sub-plot involving the servants at Lowood provides an ironic commentary on Brontë's novel by continually staging cross-class sympathies: "Courtney's interpolation of a working-class sub-plot ... implicitly point[s] to some of the limits of the social imaginary of Brontë's *Jane Eyre*" (98). While Brontë ultimately preserves the distance between gentry and servant, as seen in the final exchange between Jane and Bessie, the play encompasses, "by contrast, the miserable working and living conditions of servants at Lowood under Brocklehurst's governance; serial sexual exploitation of maids by their male masters"; and "the destitution of servants after the fire at Thornfield" (98). In the play, Brocklehurst is the domestic despot and Lowood is compared to a penal colony – textual details that Thomas deftly uses to extend her argument that the "worlding" of *Jane Eyre* involves the mapping of colonial relations onto domestic structures of power.

<7> The final chapter, "An 1859 Caribbean Perspective on *Jane Eyre*," wonderfully expands our understanding of the novel's reception with an analysis of *Cousin Stella; or Conflict*, the first reworking of *Jane Eyre* to come from the West Indies, written by expatriate Jamaican author Henrietta Camilla Jenkin. This compelling chapter weaves together the disparate themes of the rest of the book: Jenkin's novel critically engages discourses of white Creole degeneracy, expresses disapproval of the evangelical ideals behind abolitionism while exposing the cruelties of plantation slavery, and resists simplistic parallels between the condition of white Creole women and enslaved people. Thomas' analysis of *Cousin Stella* uncovers the ways that tensions between metropole and the resident plantocracy in Jamaica over slavery are encoded in the courtship and marriage narrative. Stella's progressive anti-slavery ideals are tempered by her lover's adherence to liberal projects to reform plantation management. Like Jane, Stella initially rebels against domestic despotism but learns by the end of the novel to regulate her passions. Her beauty and virtue answer metropolitan prejudice against the perceived moral depravity of the plantocracy. Thomas' original research in *The Worlding of Jean Rhys* (1999) is repurposed in this chapter, where she convincingly draws parallels between Rhys and Jenkin. Both authors "mediate" aspects of their family's history as slaveowners in their novels (114). But whereas Kamau Brathwaite's critical work on Jean Rhys "essentializes" that author as the daughter of slaveowners and the bearer of inherited guilt, Thomas aims to restore to Jenkin the complexity of attitudes around race and plantocratic family history in the context of colonial struggles over the slavery amelioration measures proposed in 1823.

<8> As I have suggested, one of the most rewarding aspects of this book is Thomas' commitment to exposing some ways that colonial relations infused and shaped English domesticity. This is most clearly seen in an argument that Thomas makes thematically, if not always explicitly, throughout the book. That is, Brontë's novel shows an astute awareness of a basic paradox of Englishness: the fundamental axiomatic justifying British imperialism – that the British were rescuing the colonies from the despotism of native rulers – conflicts with various modes of domestic despotism. Thomas' book is littered with examples of domestic despotism, including Bertha's tyranny as a slave mistress excoriated by Rochester (chapter 2), Rochester's own tendency to sexual despotism evident in Orientalist fantasies about the seraglio (chapter 1), St. John's austere demands for Jane's self-sacrifice (chapter 3), and early feminist suspicions that

marriage was inherently a despotic institution (chapter 4). This analytical preoccupation with the novel's critique of despotic conduct in the private sphere surely merits a more explicit discussion in the book's introduction. And because the introduction is rather deficient it is disappointing that the book contains no conclusion. I wonder if this is a sign that its focus is too narrow: at what point does the monograph on a single literary work reach its horizon of utility? *Jane Eyre* is, after all, one of a number of nineteenth-century novels that broach the topic of colonial relations and their infiltration into metropolitan domesticity, of racial ambiguity and the gendering of Englishness: Collins' *Miss or Mrs?* (1871), Trollope's *He Knew He Was Right* (1869), and Dickens' *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870-71) come immediately to mind. Nevertheless, the book's significance to *Jane Eyre* scholarship, and to "studies of 'Empire and Culture'" more broadly, rests in its solid historical archive and the revelation of *Cousin Stella*.

Endnotes

(1) See Judith Halberstam, "The Death of English," *Inside Higher Ed* (May 9, 2005), 30 September 2008 <http://www.insidehighered.com/views/2005/05/09/halberstam>.(^)