Hearth and Heath

Inner and Outer Spaces in Jane Eyre

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I: The Wicked Stepmother

> "No wonder you have rather the look of another world [...] so you were waiting for your people when you sat on the stile?"
>
> "For whom, sir?"
>
> "For the men in green: it was a proper moonlight evening for them. Did I break through one of your rings, that you spread that damned ice on the causeway?"
>
> I shook my head. "The men in green all forsook England a hundred years ago," said I, speaking as seriously as he had done. "And not even in Hay Lane, or the fields about it, could you find a trace of them" (Brontë 1971: 107).

Charlotte Brontë's heroine, Jane Eyre, has a lively verbal skirmish here with the hero, Mr. Rochester. She speaks boldly to him because they can think along the same lines, whereas Mrs. Fairfax, the housekeeper, is at a loss. Her prosaic simplicity contrasts sharply with Rochester's quick perception of Jane, because he is the only person who detects an unearthly quality in her, "fairy-born and human-bred." Mrs. Fairfax cannot fathom these depths in her. The lack of empathy between a maternal figure and Jane creates the central conflict in the novel. This passage gives us a clue to the theme of inadequate mothers.

There are many fairytale themes like Bluebeard, Beauty and Beast and Rapunzel, but the paradigmatic one is Cinderella, recurring at five stages of Jane's progress from Gateshead to Ferndean. Jane triumphs over her stepsisters by her virtues. The purpose of this article will be to examine the repetitive patterns in the plot and see how wicked stepmothers alternate with fairy godmothers. Jane's conflict with this mother fails to reach a resolution. Until her final union with her true mother takes place, the novel cannot end.

Jane leaves Gateshead when she is rejected by her aunt, Mrs. Reed. Cinderella perhaps goes in search of Prince Charming, because competition between Jane and her stepsisters is an outstanding theme; but there is a fundamental conflict between a hostile mother-figure and Jane, temporarily thrown into relief by ephemeral godmothers.

Cinderella wins the heart of Prince Charming, but disappears at midnight, and later the prince identifies her by her glass slipper. The fairy-tale heroine wins after a detour into a forest or a palace. Jane also travels a lot, but her progress is hampered, because at each stage she meets a different set of characters and makes a break with her past. She triumphs over her stepsisters, but her wedding is interrupted after she visits Gateshead. Another set of stories follow, but she cannot settle down until she finds her true mother.

When we first see Jane, she is hidden at the window-seat, and she is unhappy because her seclusion is caused by exclusion. Mrs. Reed's rejection makes Jane very bitter. It is an unequal battle between an adult and a child who defies her, reaching a climax when Jane screams: "I declare I do not love you: I dislike you the worst of anybody in the world except John Reed" (31).

The reason why Jane hates John is because he has such a firm hold on his mother's affection, whereas she has none. Halfway through the novel, John Reed is killed off and at the end, another Saint John is approaching his death by self-sacrifice. Saint John has affinities with John Reed; the latter bullies her physically and the former bullies her psychologically, almost forcing her to go to India, which has a rough climate. The wicked stepbrother recurs throughout, with a pair of stepsisters, like Lord Ingram with Blanche and Mary, and Richard Mason with Bertha and Grace. Many critics note the plot's repetitive patterns, in the iteration of the name "Mary" in the pairs of good and bad stepsisters, along with the dominant sister who often has a classical or French name: Eliza Reed, Helen Burns, Blanche Ingram, Bertha Mason and Diana Rivers.

We remember Bruno Bettelheim's analysis of the tale as one based on sibling rivalry (239). The child feels resentment against younger siblings who usurp the mother's affection; as feelings of rejection grow, the child develops an ambivalent relationship with the mother. The good mother of the nursery is dead, and she is resurrected as a fairy godmother. The bad mother who adores her own offspring is the wicked stepmother.

Illustration by F. H. Townsend for Jane Eyre 1897, p. 30.

The confrontation between Mrs. Reed and Jane gives us a clue about this fundamental conflict in the novel. Mrs. Reed hates Jane because there is a total lack of affinity that sets them apart. Jane reflects later: "How could she like an interloper not of her race [...] an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group" (13). Mrs. Reed's antipathy stems from the difference between this "alien" creature and herself; it is Jane's otherness that she cannot recognize, because she lacks imagination and sensitivity. Jane scarcely recognizes it, when she looks at her own image in the Red Room: "The strange little figure there [...] had the effect of a real spirit. I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp, Bessie's evening stories represented as coming out of lone, ferny dells" (11).

When Jane gets hysterical, Mrs. Reed brutally thrusts her back into the Red Room. Her dislike stems from the fact that Jane is incomprehensible. She recollects that Jane once resembled "a fiend" in her anger. When she complains to Mr. Brocklehurst, she does not call her a liar out of malice, but because she feels puzzled. Even at the end, no rapport is established between Jane and this mother-figure. She is very much wounded by her rejection: "My fingers had fastened on her hand which lay outside on the sheet: had she pressed mine kindly, I should at that moment experienced true pleasure [...] Mrs. Reed took her hand away" (202).

After Mrs. Reed's death, Jane's wedding is interrupted; the visit to Gateshead causes this, because she learns about her uncle, John Eyre. When she requests his blessing, he sends Richard Mason to prevent her marriage. Mrs. Reed, from her grave, seems to reach out a ghostly hand to throw an impediment on Jane's path. After this, there is a sharp break in the narrative, because Jane goes to Marsh End and starts a new life amidst strangers.

In the fairy tale, the stepmother impedes the wedding, but in *Jane Eyre*, a stepbrother like Richard Mason does it. Jane encounters this figure at every stage of her progress: John Reed, Theodore Ingram, Richard Mason, even John Rivers. Brontë renovates the original tale, by pitting a plain Cinderella against her beautiful and heartless stepsisters or switching gender roles in the recognition scene with Rochester disguised as a crone and Jane recognizing him like Prince Charming. However, the dominant figures are the stepmother and stepbrother; because she keeps meeting this unkind mother, she goes adrift. After leaving Gateshead, she meets two stepmothers at Lowood and Thornfield. Though she is happy in school, there is Miss Scatcherd who keeps persecuting her good sister, Helen. Helen accepts her punishments with resignation, but Jane is furiously indignant. The anger she feels is for herself as much as for Helen.

In Thornfield, Jane again feels pain, when her status as an alien creature is pointed out by Lady Ingram and her daughter. They regard Jane as an object of scorn. Jane does not participate in the conversation, and stays half-hidden by the window curtain, yet hears scathing remarks about herself. Competition between Cinderella and her stepsisters becomes fiercest when they try to win the heart of the prince. Blanche is the most dangerous of Jane's rivals, because Jane thinks that Rochester will marry her. Blanche shows an immense dislike of Jane. Blanche's hostility is evident, but Jane's covert jealousy is caused by the feeling that she is loved and cherished by her mama, a love from a mother that she longs for and has failed to find so far. Jane is sarcastic whenever the dowager addresses her daughter as "my queenly Blanche" or "my lily-flower." Jane realizes they lack breeding, notwithstanding their silks and jewels. She may feel superior, but there is anger at being shunned and left out of all activities. It reminds her of Christmas at Gateshead: "From every enjoyment, I was, of course excluded" (23). Her unhappiness is caused not merely by lack of money or beauty, but by the pain of not being accepted.

Jane triumphs over the Ingrams by virtue of courage and reliability. Blanche, flamboyant and proud, has little to justify her pride. She and her mother are agitated when they hear a scream at midnight, but Jane is poised

and calm, knowing that Rochester will rely on her and dismiss the Ingrams with contempt. However, while Cinderella may defeat one pair of stepsisters, another pair will thwart her wedding plans. Here, a strand from another fairy tale gets woven into the narrative. When Beauty visits her sisters, they prevent her from returning to the Beast, so that the latter nearly dies pining for her. Jane's visit to the Reeds ruins her plan to marry Rochester. Jane sets off on a different path, to Marsh End, and even there she fails to establish a harmonious relationship with a mother-figure. Hannah tries to drive Jane away, when she is about to die of exhaustion. Jane feels more anguish at being rejected than physical pain. Hannah begrudges shelter to a starving person, even though, as a matronly woman, she is supposed to be kind. The wicked stepmother refuses to feed the child and becomes evil like a witch.

In a village where these folktales originated, every mouthful for the stepchild must have been grudged by the stepmother, who had hardly enough to feed her own. The same theme of hunger pervades Brontë's novel, along with inadequate mothers. It is because Jane is so entirely waiflike who does not fit in anywhere, that she does not get sustenance from her down-to earth, insensitive mothers. Her folks are fairies and elves who haunt the countryside on a moonlit night, as Rochester puts it succinctly.

II: The Fairy Godmother

In the original tale, the fairy godmother steps in at a crucial moment, by giving Cinderella a silk gown, but she cannot protect her from tyranny. We find that pattern in Brontë's novel: Bessie Lee, Miss Temple and Mrs. Fairfax are ineffective, and they fail to satisfy Jane's needs.

Many images of hunger permeate the novel, serving as a metaphor for Jane's spiritual hunger for love. Jane recollects: "When thus gentle, Bessie seemed to me the best, the prettiest, kindest being in the world [...] and had a remarkable knack of narratives" (24). Bessie, with her capacity for storytelling, comes closest to sensing this trait in Jane, though she cannot define it properly: "You're such a strange child Miss Jane [...] a little, roving, solitary thing" (33). She is a simple rustic girl who nurtures Jane's imagination with tales of adventure and romance. Bessie cannot protect her from punishments, but she intervenes when she sends for the apothecary, Mr. Lloyd. Lloyd helps Jane to escape from Gateshead to Lowood. However, Bessie's comforting of Jane when she brings her cake, is too late. She cannot help Jane because she is powerless. Later, she visits Jane at Lowood and restores her confidence with her praises, but she disappears from the story like a fairy.

Miss Temple becomes a better mentor for Jane than Bessie, because she is judicious and calm, whereas Bessie has "a capricious and hasty temper." She defies Brocklehurst's injunctions to provide bread and cheese to famished girls, thus mitigating their lot; but her efforts are futile when the girls, due to lack of food and warm clothing, die of typhus.

When she offers tea to Jane and Helen in her room, she warms up the fireside with her benevolent presence. She performs an important act in vindicating Jane, when Brocklehurst disgraces her in the school as a liar. She disproves this accusation by bringing a testimony from Lloyd, thereby counteracting Mrs. Reed's harmful treatment of Jane. However, she does not understand her attitude, because her mind has little passion or fancifulness. She speaks in strictly legal language when she says: "Defend yourself to me as well as you can. Say whatever your memory suggests as true; but add nothing and exaggerate nothing" (62). Jane, warned by Helen, tells her everything in a subdued manner: "I told her all the story of my sad childhood [...] I infused into the narrative far less of gall and wormwood [...] I felt as I went on that Miss Temple fully believed me" (62).

Miss Temple has more of a kinship with Helen and Jane hears their discourse on Virgil with envy. The austere placidity of her countenance resembles a Greek statue. Helen and Miss Temple share classical features, not merely in their names but also in their intellectual capacities; even their brows are similar: Miss Temple's "pale and large forehead" resembles Helen's "intelligent and benign-looking forehead." Jane, however, is small and wraithlike. In her, the heart holds a greater sway than the head, which Miss Temple fails to notice, and Helen does deprecatingly. Helen effaces herself out of existence but Jane emerges triumphant, as a teacher at Lowood. Even a good sister, who has the first place in Miss Temple's heart, dies conveniently, so that Jane can supplant her, thus emphasizing the undercurrent of jealousy running throughout the plot: "Helen she held a little longer than me: she let her go more reluctantly; it was for her she breathed a sad sigh" (64). Though Jane can form a more permanent bond with Miss Temple than with Bessie, she loses her mother again when Miss Temple's marriage casts her out into the world.

When Jane meets Mrs. Fairfax and Adele at Thornfield, it seems that she can form an adoptive family among people without living relatives. This kind, matronly widow provides refreshments to a tired, hungry girl. Jane values her good nature and tranquil regard for herself. The prospects look bright, when Mrs. Fairfax, Jane and Adele form a close-knit group: "A sense of mutual affection seemed to surround us with a ring of golden peace, I uttered a silent prayer that we might not be parted far or soon; but when, as we thus sat, Mr. Rochester entered unannounced, and looking at us, seemed to take pleasure in the spectacle of a group so amicable" (216).

It is Rochester who breaks up their group later, by proposing to Jane. By courting Jane, he sows the first seed of alienation between her and Mrs. Fairfax. Jane mistakenly assumes that Mrs. Fairfax's disapproval is due to suspicion

of Rochester's dishonorable intentions toward her. Unable to stand this censure, she urges him to clear her of blame: "Communicate your intentions to Mrs. Fairfax, sir: she saw me with you last night in the hall, and she was shocked" (231). She entirely misses the significance of the remark: "Mr. Rochester, I daresay, is fond of you [...] I have been a little uneasy at his marked preference, and have wished to put you on your guard" (233). It is what Mrs. Fairfax fails to do; she only protests about the unsuitability of the match. Her objections might be due to her knowledge of his past. She and the village gossips had suspicions about Bertha, but she does not warn Jane that Rochester might be married already. When Jane writes to her for news of Rochester, she cannot supply it, because she is in an unknown region. While this failure is unintentional, it indicates her ineffectiveness. She fails to comfort Jane at a period of great crisis. After the interrupted wedding, Jane is devastated and feels keenly the lack of a comforting word from Mrs. Fairfax: "No message has been sent to ask how I was, or to invite me to come down" (262). Their last farewell is unspoken: "'Farewell, kind Mrs. Fairfax!' I whispered, as I glided past her door" (281).

After Mrs. Fairfax disappears, it is Rochester who comforts her as a surrogate mother. One may wonder that the hero can become a maternal figure; but there are subtle themes of cross-dressing and reversal of gender roles, as when Rochester dresses up as a gypsy woman. There are also fairy godfathers and wicked stepbrothers.

It is not surprising that Rochester can function briefly as a mother for Jane, for he alone proves to be to be the most perceptive reader of her character. One notices the implications of certain passages, especially Rochester's passionate remorse: "If a man who had but one ewe lamb that was dear to him as a daughter [...] had by some mistake slaughtered it at the shambles, he would not have rued his bloody blunder more than I rue mine." (262). In the scene where Jane is exhausted with starvation and misery, Rochester restores her with food and wine:

> I had become icy cold in my chamber. He put wine to my lips; I tasted it and revived; then I ate something he offered me, and was soon myself [...] he stooped towards me as if to kiss me; but I remembered caresses were now forbidden. I turned my face away, and put his aside.
>
> "What! How is this?" he exclaimed hastily. "Oh I know! You won't kiss the husband of Bertha Mason? You consider my arms filled and my embraces appropriated?"
>
> "At any rate, there is neither room nor claim for me, sir" (263).

It is not as if Prince Charming, by some error of judgement, has married the stepsister of Cinderella. There is the hidden theme of sibling rivalry that becomes manifest when Jane says there is no room for her in Rochester's embrace, just as in her mother's arms, there is a hated rival that has precedence. Even though John Reed and Helen Burns die, other

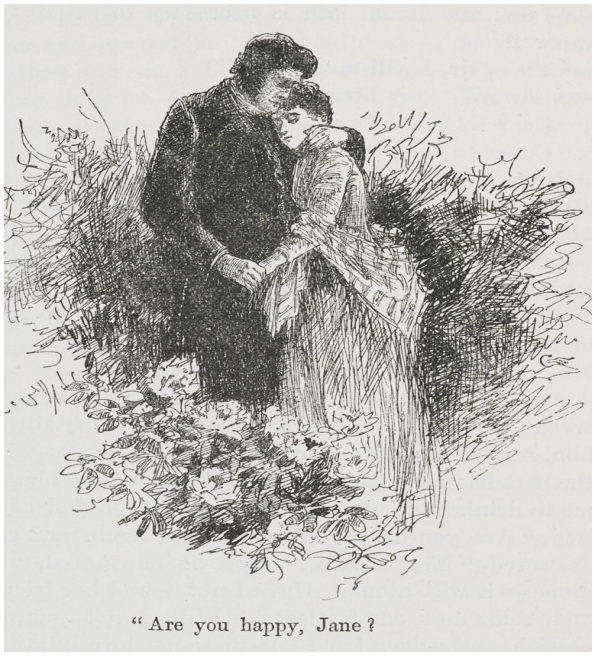

Illustration by Edmund H. Garrett for Jane Eyre, 1897.

rivals like Blanche or Bertha resurface. Jane cannot cleanse herself of this hatred until she faces the truth within herself; it is poor plain Jane, who is jealous of her stepsisters rather than vice versa. This jealousy has sown seeds of enmity between siblings and bitter alienation between mother and child.

As Bettelheim points out, there is an inverted form of envy in the Cinderella complex. Cinderella thinks her stepsisters are jealous of her, but she wants to exclude them from the maternal embrace by being the sole darling. Jane says there is no room for her in Rochester's arms. If other competitors for mama's love exclude Jane, then Bertha shuts her out from the embraces of the prince, as well as mama's. And who can function better in that role than Rochester, who understands her better than all the imperceptive mothers?

When Jane faces a revelation that jealousy exists within herself, there is a new direction in her path of progress. She is now willing to forgive her stepsisters, as well as be forgiven. At Gateshead, she fails to establish a truce with her aunt, but she is no longer pained by the rejection of her initial pair of stepsisters. Although they disclaim her as a relative, they become amenable later, when Jane paints Georgiana's portrait and helps Eliza with the funeral arrangements. She learns from them a lesson about jealousy proving to be the ruin, not only of others, but also of one's own self. When Eliza delivers that tirade: "Georgiana, a more vain and absurd animal than you, was certainly never allowed to encumber the earth," Jane realizes: "True, generous feeling is made small account of by some: but here were two natures rendered, the one intolerably acrid, the other despicably savorless for want of it" (208). Eliza, through

envy of her sister's beauty, has put an end to her chances of a brilliant match. In a world where beauty is the only asset valued in a woman, spite has made Eliza fanatical and Georgiana vapid. Jane learns more from this exchange than from Helen about the destructiveness of being unforgiving toward others.

What follows the dialogue between the Reed sisters is a confession by Mrs. Reed, about the harm she has done to Jane, by lying to John Eyre about her supposed death. She has deprived Jane of the family she earnestly longs for; her uncle would have given her a comfortable home and acknowledgement as his adoptive daughter. Mrs. Reed's deed is very similar to Eliza's. She says as much:

> "I disliked you too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting you to prosperity [...] Bring me some water! Oh make haste!"
>
> "Dear Mrs. Reed," said I, as I offered her the draught she required, "think no more of all this" (210).

Jane learns the meaning of forgiveness, but her education is not complete. She must establish peace with her Reed cousins, show concern for her rival Blanche, and learn to pity the woman who is the obstacle to her happiness, before she can purge herself of her rages. When she first sees Bertha, her tone of hatred is unmistakable: "the clothed hyena stood up and stood tall on its hind feet" (258). Later, she shows pity, when she says that she cannot help being mad.

After this incident, a new movement begins, which culminates in the sororal trinity that she forms with the Rivers girls, enabling her to experience the joys of sisterhood instead of the pangs of jealousy. However, before this final reconciliation can take place, she must attain a union with her long-lost mother, without which she cannot begin to be a whole person, but must remain a fierce, rebellious child.

III: Mother Nature

When Rochester proposes to Jane, an ill omen appears in a tempest:

> What ailed the chestnut tree? It writhed and groaned [...] a livid, vivid spark leapt out of a cloud [...] in the morning, little Adele came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard, had been struck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away (225).

The lightning is perhaps the wrath of a being who is indignant at the deception of Rochester, trying to trap Jane into an illicit relationship. It is the wrath of Mother Nature, represented in the novel almost as a pagan goddess.

At the beginning, the landscape is a powerful symbol, representing the forces of nature. Jane enjoys looking at the bleak winter scene while reading, and her first encounter with Rochester occurs on a hilly path, and he proposes to her in the garden. She is happy out of doors, because she is nature's foster child. Rochester describes her, half-jestingly, to Adele:

> "I am to take Mademoiselle to the moon." [...]
>
> "She will have nothing to eat: you will starve her," observed Adele [...] "And her clothes, they will wear out: how can she get new ones?" [...]
>
> "How would a white or a pink cloud answer for a gown, do you think? And one could cut a pretty enough scarf out of a rainbow."
>
> "She is far better as she is," concluded Adele [...]
>
> "Mademoiselle is a fairy" (234–235).

This "badinage" has prophetic significance. Rochester says they will live in an isolated area like the moon; at Ferndean, a manor amidst a dense forest, they can find such a secluded spot.

The moon appears to be a kindly beacon that saves Jane from pitfalls and keeps reiterating as a goddess in classical and Biblical guises. The moon represents nature's benign aspect, when she keeps a vigil over Jane in the heath, or appears to her at a crucial moment, when Rochester tempts her. At this climactic moment, Jane receives her summons and views her long lost mother:

> She broke forth as never yet moon burst from cloud: a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then, not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It spoke to my spirit [...]
>
> "My daughter, flee temptation!"
>
> "Mother, I will." So I answered (281).

This is the first time in the novel that anyone addresses Jane as "my daughter" and she replies, "Mother, I will." Jane's wanderings lead her to remote regions, when she searches for her identity, her home and her mother. She even declares:

> I have no relative but the universal mother, Nature: I will seek her breast and ask repose [...] I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I, who from man could anticipate only mistrust, rejection, insult, clung to her with filial fondness. Tonight at least, I would be her guest—as I was her child" (284–285).

When Jane is in the "golden desert," all the betrayals she has experienced from human beings are washed away in the presence of this great mother. Her healing powers start a process of regeneration in Jane, a renewal of spring, after a winter frost has blighted all her hopes; it culminates in the final efflorescence of Ferndean. Jane's reunion with Rochester can only take place when her primeval mother can approve of it, because it is only from her that Jane can find the love that she could not find from her stepmothers or godmothers.

There is a complete submergence of identity in Jane, when she goes from door to door seeking food. She evokes suspicion because of her loss of identity: "an ordinary beggar is frequently an object of suspicion; a well-dressed

Oriana Georgiana Reinagle, A large chestnut (?) tree, 27 July 1860.

beggar, inevitably so" (289). After her illness, when she is slowly rehabilitated, she functions for a while under the pseudonym, "Jane Elliott." When St. John discovers her real name, he traces her origins, her relationship to John Eyre and the Riverses, so that she can acquire a family.

Before Jane acquires a family, she goes through a break with her past, until she rediscovers herself in the heath. There is a mighty revelation when she is alone with Mother Nature; astonishingly, she can achieve a sense of wholeness through a loss of identity. When she wanders around in the countryside as a waif, the otherworldly trait in her comes out, enabling her to form a lasting union with her earth mother. She cannot attain this union without going through a crisis, when she faces the most important conflicts in her mind. She is searching for her mother, who can give her a sense of belonging somewhere; so far, she has failed in her search. It is this sense of rootlessness that causes her conflict. Until her anger burns itself out like Thornfield, she cannot be free. When she forgets the ghosts from her past, the Reeds, Ingrams and Masons, a new movement begins with her arrival at the Rivers home, where finally she will receive maternal care.

When Jane is in a state of crisis, Nature always rescues her. The moon mother who comes to her aid is a representative of her. The Rivers girls also function as archetypal mothers who save Jane by their tender ministrations. Diana, the moon goddess in classical mythology is a virgin, and Mary, the Holy Virgin is the mother of Christ. Diana is the more vigorous character of the pair:

> Diana [...] broke some bread, dipped it in milk, and put it to my lips. Her face was near mine: I saw there was pity in it, and I felt sympathy in her hurried breathing [...] "Try to eat." [...]
>
> "No more at present sister. Try if she can speak now—ask her name."
>
> I felt I could speak, and I answered—my name is Jane Elliott" (296–297).

Jane Eyre has lost her name, but found a home with her sisters. The Rivers girls conform to the recurring pattern of good sisters, but they somehow represent Mother Nature; for after Jane has found her true mother, she will never lose her again.

At the end, Jane again needs her mother's aid, to resist temptations of the spirit, instead of those of the flesh; once again, Mother Nature intervenes, through supernatural agency. When St. John proposes to Jane, she lifts her eyes to heaven, pleading for guidance. It comes in a haunted moonlit scene, as if her moon mother must rescue her daughter from misconceptions about heroic self-sacrifice:

> "Show me, show me the path!" I entreated of Heaven [...] The one candle was dying out: the room was full of moonlight. My heart beat fast and thick [...] I heard a voice somewhere cry— "Jane! Jane! Jane!" [...]
>
> "Down superstition! " I commented, as that specter rose up black by the black yew at the gate. "This is not thy deception, nor thy witchcraft: it is the work of nature. She was roused, and did—no miracle, but her best" (369–370).

After this rescue by Nature, Jane never goes back to urban life and the novel acquires a rural setting. She steps into a wilderness until she arrives at her secure nook. Ferndean, overgrown with mosses and creeping vines, where Rochester resides like "a caged eagle," turns out to be a home of bliss, when she reunites with him. Jane, like Rapunzel, effects a transformation of Rochester, of his ruined spirit with the words that sum up the glorious fertility of Ferndean. Rochester can now be described in images of nature:

> "I am no better than the lightning struck chestnut-tree in the Thornfield orchard," he remarked ere long. "And what right would that ruin have to bid a budding woodbine cover its decay with freshness?"
>
> "You are no ruin sir—no lightning struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow" (391).

The riven chestnut-tree's image is softened into a benign one. Mother Nature herself approves of this union, which takes place in this green wilderness, where Jane will begin a new life of her own with Edward Fairfax Rochester. The changeling child has at last come home.

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