Creative Saplings, Vol. 05, No. 11, November. 2026, **ISSN-0974-536X,** https://creativesaplings.in/

Textile Economies of Empire in *Jane Eyre*: Plain Dress, Luxury Fashion, and Colonial Marriage Markets

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Abstract

This article suggests that Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre (1847) is a novel organised through a new textile economy of empire, a new articulation of the production, circulation and consumption of cloth around the British industrial scene, the transatlantic slave economy, and the colonial marriage market. Set against the historical backdrop of early nineteenth-century cotton capitalism, the article discusses the famous plain attire of Jane, Rochester's projected satin and lace, the pearl-coloured wedding dress, and Bertha Mason's white shift, as a location in a chain of appropriate, 'impure' relations. Its function as a plot becomes a marriage market transaction that continues with that of Jamaica; Jane's sound exchange of luxuries and her later receiving of a bequest of Madeira are two sides of one currency exchange. Drawing on recent textile history and postcolonial criticism of the novel, the article concludes that Jane Eyre both exposes the violence encoded in imperial fabrics and remains, at the level of plot resolution, structurally dependent on the colonial economies its heroine's plainness appears to repudiate.

Keywords: *Charlotte Brontë; Jane Eyre; textile history; cotton empire; colonial wealth; dress and class; marriage market.*

Introduction

Few Victorian novels are so persistently dressed as *Jane Eyre*. From the child in the red-room who studies Bessie's ballad-singing and lace-stitching, to the Lowood scholar in her "brown Holland" pinafore, to the governess whose "sober black satin and pearl-gray silk" is brokered against her lover's fantasies of amethyst silks and priceless veils, to the widow of Ferndean who reports that no "brilliant" fabric can tempt her now—clothing is not decoration in Brontë's novel but a form of argument. As Anne Hollander observes of nineteenth-century fiction, clothes "always correctly express character," yet the specific meanings of a given garment or style can slip away across time (Keen 212). The task of reading *Jane Eyre*'s dress is therefore a task of historical recovery: the "Quakerish" plainness that has often struck critics as a sign of Jane's classlessness and sexlessness was, for Brontë's first readers, a densely legible code of dissenting religiosity, class aspiration, and gendered discipline (Keen 214).

But plainness in *Jane Eyre* is more than a provincial or evangelical idiom. The novel is set, as recent materialist criticism has shown, in the 1810s—a decade in which the textile industries of the East Midlands, Yorkshire, and the North West were convulsed by the Luddite disturbances that the novel itself registers when Rosamond Oliver alludes, "offhandedly," to the riots of 1812 (Oestreich 315). Brontë's seasonal and spatial details align Jane's story with

Article History : Received: 03 October. 2026. Accepted: 23 November. 2026. Available online: 25 November. 2026. Published by SAFE. (Society for Academic Facilitation and Extension) Copyright: © 2026 The Author(s). **Licensing :** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License **Conflict of Interest**: The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

the years in which the mechanization of spinning and weaving was restructuring the lives of Yorkshire labourers, and the author links her female characters' dress explicitly to "local and global labour issues, colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade" (Oestreich 318). The novel, that is, installs textile production at the very center of its social world: the frocks Jane sews, the cambric she launders, the satin Rochester buys, and the veil Bertha tears are all points on a global circuit whose furthest nodes are the cotton fields of the American South, the calico houses of India, and the sugar plantations of Jamaica.

This paper reads *Jane Eyre* as a sustained meditation on what we might call the textile economy of empire: the system by which cloth—cotton above all—carried value, labour, and ideology across the British imperial world, and by which the wearing of fabric registered a person's position within that world. Textiles, as Beverly Lemire argues of the long eighteenth century, "absorbed, reflected, and enacted 'differentiations'" in a period of imperial expansion; the anxieties layered onto new commodities were "routinely infused with racial thinking," and the domestication of once-foreign cotton "canonised hierarchies of race" (Lemire 42). Clothing, in this register, is not a surface phenomenon but a material technology of social ordering—equivalent, in the analysis of one recent theorist of material engagement, to an institution "that we wear," capable of imposing rigid limitations on movement and shaping custom (the corseted Victorian woman is the canonical instance) (Ransom and Gallagher 18). The wedding plot emerges as a marriage-market transaction continuous with the Jamaican fortune that underwrites Thornfield; Jane's celebrated refusal of luxury and her later acceptance of a Madeira bequest are two faces of the same negotiation with colonial wealth. Drawing on recent textile history and postcolonial criticism of the novel, the analysis demonstrates that *Jane Eyre* both exposes the violence encoded in imperial fabrics and remains, at the level of plot resolution, structurally dependent on the colonial economies its heroine's plainness appears to repudiate.

Methodology

This article uses an interdisciplinary approach and reads *Jane Eyre* (1847) as a literary artefact that is part of the material network of early nineteenth-century cotton capitalism. It is tripartite and is entirely descriptive, interpretive and textual, with no quantitative data generated and is not claimed to be (empirically) generalisable. Primary evidence: the text of the novel (using a scholarly edition).

First, close reading. The analysis interprets the novel's reference to the text in terms of the loaded symbolic qualities of its objects: Jane's black stuff frock, the "satin and lace" Rochester promises, the pearl-coloured wedding robe, Bertha Mason's white shift. The examination of

passages focuses on diction, juxtaposition, and placement of the stories within the text to determine the meaning of cloth in the symbolic economy of the text.

Second, material-historical contextualisation. The following textual examples are juxtaposed with the documentary evidence of the British textile industry: the development of cotton production in Lancashire, plantation slavery of the Atlantic economy, the transfer of calicoes and muslins through trade and marriage networks, and the importation of colonial goods, like Madeira wine. The contexts of textile publications, customs and trade data and discourses of dress practice are measured against fictional fabrics. The novel describes the material of the fabrics and their origins and identifies those who wove them.

Third, postcolonial and new-historicist critique.Third, postcolonial and new-historicist critique. The reading is based on the critical tradition that locates the Brontes in imperial economy relations, especially readings of Bertha Mason and Throffield as a property that is funded by Caribbean wealth. The method is relational, interpreting dress as a place within a system of commodities rather than as an indicator of individual virtue, and so making Jane plain and Rochester luxury two coordinates of the same economy.

Interpretation is an abductive process and works back and forth between the text and historical evidence to fill in the gaps and create a reading that covers both the text and historical evidence. Obviously, the analysis cannot be complete, but it is not a claim to recover authorial intention, it is a claim to make it possible to see the coherence of a textile economy in the novel's language and action. The ending checks the reading against the resolution of the novel, reflecting whether the ending resolves or simply pushes aside the imperial dependency that the novel has unearthed.

The Fabric of Empire: Cotton, Calico, and the Labour of Cloth

To understand what *Jane Eyre*'s frocks mean, one must first understand what the cloth itself had come to mean by the 1840s. Cotton was the paradigmatic commodity of the modern world system: the first good, as Giorgio Riello and Prasannan Parthasarathi observe, to achieve a truly global reach, circulating for centuries as Indian muslins and calicoes through the Indian Ocean and eastern Mediterranean trading worlds before Europeans seized control of its circuits after 1500 (1–4). By the late seventeenth century the English East India Company's textile imports averaged between sixty and seventy per cent of its total trade and amounted to more than one million pieces a year (Lemire and Riello 889). The resulting "calico craze" profoundly unsettled European political economy: critics and government alike saw in cheap printed cottons a threat to domestic wool and silk manufactures and a disruption of social order, and prohibitions followed—the import of printed calicoes was banned in Britain in

1700 and their wearing in 1720, legislation that (however ineffectual) survives in cultural memory as the Calico Acts of 1700 and 1721 (Stobart; Swingen; Toland).

The gender of this consumption was explicit. Calico was demanded "by women consumers," and middle-class women became, in the colonial Atlantic, the emblematic buyers of imported fabrics—directors of household purchases of luxury textiles "in order to shape their families' identities as members of the middle class" (Swingen; Toland). Fashion history is thus "entwined with the global spread of capitalism": clothing industries helped make the modern world, and their growth was "predicated on exploiting workers," from the transatlantic slave trade and the cotton fields of America to the factories of industrial Britain (Brooks and Rigby 72). Sven Beckert's synthesis—much discussed as the canonical account of this process—argues that the emergence of industrial capitalism was rooted less in constitutional innovation than in three centuries of "war capitalism," defined by "slavery, the expropriation of indigenous peoples, imperial expansion, armed trade," and the state-enforced coercion of workers (Szreter 1025). Cotton, the "white gold," was the most valuable of the commodities involved; between 1780 and 1800 British cotton-textile output grew on average by more than ten per cent a year, and by 1900 roughly one and a half per cent of the entire world's population worked in the industry, "mostly of course as planters, pickers, and factory hands" (Szreter 1025). Textiles, in short, sat at the junction of every significant imperial economy of the period: "Textiles became essential to trade, being one of the reigning forces of imperialist England," and the great eighteenth-century shift from the sugar triangle (sugar, slaves, guns) to the cotton triangle (cotton, slaves, manufactured goods) rerouted the entire Atlantic system (Natalia et al. 105).

This is the material history that Brontë's novel quietly assumes. On one side stands the industrial north, where the production of cloth absorbed the labour of women, children, and the dispossessed: after the loss of common rights and the obsolescence of handlooms, the textile workforce was "disproportionately composed of single women," and the early mills ran largely on child labour supplied by Poor Law authorities (Szreter 1025). On the other side stands the plantation world, where slave-grown cotton fed Manchester's mills and where, in the words of Trevor Burnard and Giorgio Riello, "slavery is part of a narrative of substitution of Indian cotton textiles by mixes of linens and cottons and by pure cotton cloth produced in the British Isles," with consumer demand for plain, printed, and chequered cloths driving the raw-material market in cotton and sugar alike (231). *Jane Eyre* touches both poles: its Yorkshire setting is threaded with the memory of Luddism, and its most glamorous interiors are furnished by West Indian money (Oestreich 320). The black stuff of Lowood and the satin of Thornfield are, in this reading, not opposites but the two ends of a single commodity chain.

Crucially, the textiles of empire were also technologies of race. As Lemire demonstrates, the layered anxieties around new commodities were "routinely infused with racial thinking," and the negotiation of those anxieties "tracks the creation of imperial culture in the British Isles"; the very fashion priorities of the eighteenth century "canonised hierarchies of race" (54). When Victorian fiction robes its heroines in plain white or sober black, it is drawing on a vocabulary of cleanliness, modesty, and moral transparency that had been elaborated in part through contrast with the racialized world of colonial goods—the calico, the shawl, the cashmere, the "Indian stuff" that Daniel Defoe had already in 1708 complained "crept into our houses, our closets, and bedchambers" (Stobart 88). Plain dress, in this context, is never merely plain: it is a refusal, a differentiation, a claim about which fabrics and which labourers may be acknowledged. To understand *Jane Eyre*'s wardrobe is to understand what her cloth excludes.

Plain Dress and the Politics of Plainness

The puzzle of Jane's wardrobe is stated perfectly by Suzanne Keen's question: "Why are *Jane Eyre* and Dorothea Brooke clad by their creators in 'Quakerish' garb?" (211). The conventional answer—that plainness signals classlessness, sexlessness, and evangelical restraint—has obscured what contemporary readers would have understood: that "Quakerish clothing expresses both a promise of spirited sexuality and an admonition about the class-crossing potential of the respectable female contained within it" (212). Dress codes in conservative religious groups function because dress is understood as "symbolic of religiosity" and therefore as a mechanism of social control; but in the Victorian novel plain dress is also a provocation, a form of self-assertion that cuts across the hierarchies it appears to accept (215).

Jane's plain dress is established early and maintained with unusual rigor. At Gateshead the child is dressed in a "red moreen" frock and ridiculed by her aunt for her inadequately ornamental person; at Lowood the uniform—the "black stuff" frock, the brown pinafore—strips the pupils of individual display while simultaneously disciplining them into a community of equals: "the black stuff Lowood frock," as the novel's 1857 editor recalls, is the garment that the wedding clothes literally displace from Jane's closet in chapter 25 (Miles 244). One of Jane's first things she does is to mend and sew, to make her own way of dressing, show her prowess as a member of the needle and thread guild even in the modest confines of Morton. Jane is not above fashion but her engagement with cloth is productive, rather than consumptive; her affair with fashion is also rooted in her capacity to make things up to purchase things, which charts her moral economy throughout the novel.

There is a clear, social sense of such simplicity. In terms of the Victorian governess, a "socially ambiguous" person—neither servant nor lady—dress was a powerful means of negotiation: headwear research on Brontë's novels attests to "the socially ambiguous nature of the governess's position" and the way in which the genteel class employed "dress to advance one's class" into identities both within and against the domestic hierarchy of "servant's identity vs. women's identity" (Louvier 146; Lyon 55). Jane's plainness in the schoolroom is not an erasure of class but its most delicate management: it advertises respectability, refuses the accusation of vanity, and simultaneously declines to compete with her pupils' wealth. The same logic governs the more sinister chapters of the novel's social world: in a culture in which "dress supposedly betrayed class status and moral standing"—in which clothing served as "a preventative social tool" for identifying sexual 'Others'—the plain woman's clothes functioned as a certificate of probity, and their deliberate control could itself be a form of power (Geary-Jones 92).

Yet Brontë complicates the virtue of plainness by tethering it to the very economy it seems to disavow. The cloth of plain dress was, overwhelmingly, cotton—the fabric whose production history was the history of slavery, and whose industrial processing was the history of child and female labor in the mills (Szreter 1025). When Jane wears her "sober black satin," she wears a fabric that the eighteenth century had made iconic of the refinement of European taste against Indian manufacture (Burnard and Riello 234); when she hesitates over Rochester's amethyst silk, she is not exiting the commodity system but relocating within it. Plainness, in other words, is a position—a stance taken within the textile economy, not a transcendence of it. And as the next sections argue, the novel's most luxurious garments are precisely the ones that expose this economy's colonial underside.

Luxury Fashion and the Imperial Commodity: Rochester's Bridal Provisions

If plain dress is Jane's idiom of self-possession, luxury fashion is Rochester's instrument of dispossession-by-adornment. The famous shopping expedition of chapter 24 makes the dynamic explicit. Rochester insists on making "the world acknowledge" Jane "a beauty" and promises to "attire my Jane in satin and lace... and I will cover the head I love best with priceless veil"; he wants to buy her "a rich silk of the most brilliant amethyst dye, and a superb pink satin," in which she might appear, in his phrase, "glittering like a parterre" (Dahy 115). Jane objects, and the negotiation that follows is a textbook of the novel's ethics of dress: she succeeds in brokering "a sober black satin and pearl-gray silk"—luxury, but sober luxury; silk, but dark silk (116). The scene is usually read as Jane's victory for modesty; it is equally a

figure of her position within the marriage contract, where she must bargain even for the costume in which she will be given away.

The bridal wardrobe itself, when it appears in chapter 25, is saturated with the uncanny. Jane finds in her chamber the trunk containing "garments said to be hers"—the "pearl-coloured robe, the vapoury veil pendent from the usurped portmanteau"—and she shuts the closet "to conceal the strange, wraith-like apparel it contained; which... gave out certainly a most ghostly shimmer" (Miles 246). The wedding dress is not Jane's own making but a purchased, ready-made self: the address cards, written by Rochester in advance, read "Mrs Rochester, —— Hotel, London," and Jane muses that "Mrs Rochester" does not exist and "would not be born till to-morrow" (247). The garment here functions exactly as the critics of consumerist bridal culture describe: the pressure placed on brides by the wedding and fashion industries—the expectation of "a lavish ceremony and an expensive designer dress"—threatens the independence and identity of the woman who wears it, and the lavish wedding must fail before a second, "quiet" ceremony can release the bride from the consumerist ideology of the first (Varadi 270). Jane's bridal finery is, in the strictest sense, a costume of dispossession: clothing "dressed to be dependent," the sartorial equivalent of the corset that robs its wearer of free movement (Ransom and Gallagher 22).

The scene of the veil-donning redoubles the motif. Alone in her room on the eve of the wedding, Jane takes the "square of unembroidered blond" from the drawer—the veil Rochester has chosen for her—and puts it on; the being who then enters and tears it is, as the novel gradually reveals, Bertha Mason, whose own claim to the textile is prior and proprietary. The famous "white and straight" dress—"I know not what dress she had on: it was white and straight"—that Jane sees on her intruder makes Bertha the spectral double of the bride (Reynolds et al. 84). Translations of the passage have only sharpened this symmetry: in the Estonian rendering, the narrator's insistence on visual proof of the intruder's dress "gives more credibility to Bertha, both as a person and as a truthful (or at least lawful) owner of the wedding veil," allowing "the two female rivals to be recognised as equals" (85). The veil, that is, is a title-deed: it names who may lawfully occupy the position of Mrs Rochester, and Bertha's assault on it is not madness but a legal claim, however grotesque its execution.

What connects the bridal provisions to empire is the origin of the money that buys them. Rochester's wealth—the "colonial wealth" that Tracy identifies as materially sustaining "the society with which the novel concerns itself"—comes from Jamaica, through the sugar and slave economy that made the Mason family rich (Tracy 350). The amethyst silk and pink satin of the wedding plot are thus the terminus of a commodity chain running from a West Indian plantation to a Yorkshire bridal trousseau; and the "priceless veil" is priced, precisely, in

colonial currency. Luxury fashion in *Jane Eyre* is imperial fashion: its glitter is the glitter of an economy the novel will stage, in the attic, as the horror it has been concealing all along.

Bertha Mason and the Textiles of Colonial Guilt

The centrality of the colonial motif in *Jane Eyre* has been firmly established, and it "must begin by making sense of Bertha Mason Rochester, the mad, drunken West Indian wife whom Rochester keeps locked up on the third floor of his ancestral mansion" (Thomas, "Representation" 2). Bertha is introduced in Richard Mason's deposition as the child of "Jonas Mason, West India planter and merchant, and Antoinetta Mason, identified only as a Creole," and in Rochester's account the "germs of insanity" are passed down through the Creole mother (Thomas, Imperialism 14; "Representation" 3). Sue Thomas's groundbreaking reading puts this representation as part of late eighteenth- and mid-nineteenth-century ethnographic discourse on white Creoles' "degeneracy," arguing that Brontë "mark[s] the feminized and the rases in imperial and racial terms, and erode the boundaries" between them ("Representation" 4); resonating especially is the novel's connection between the "degenrate moral and intellectual character" of white Creoles and the cruelties of the slave labour system in Jamaica, "historical Jamaican slave rebellions" (shown) metaphorically and allusively. Bertha isn't just a madwoman in the attic; she's the re-emergence of the violence of empire in its most repressed form, this figure in whom the violence of empire has become visible.

Her dress is one of the items in evidence. The white shift in which Jane runs into her—the "white and straight" piece of wear that acts as a replica of the wedded attire of the bride—is replicated by the colonized woman, the 'white' and 'straight' garment (87) (Reynolds et al. 87). Bertha's white is the white of the bed, the shift, the cell: whiteness drained empty of any significance, the body donning it line by line in the novel which systematically dehumanizes it. Where the bridal pearl coloured robe represents purity and purchase, Bertha's white is that of the bed, the shift, the cell, whiteness emptied of meaning worn by a body which is systematically dehumanized line by line of the novel. Postcolonial and subaltern criticism has shown how the narrative "authority is manipulated to construct an imperial reading of Bertha as an irrational and uncivilized character," a construction that draws on the hegemonic portraits of the colonized as violent, irrational, culturally inferior (Almenia 48). Gayatri Spivak's seminal reading of Wide Sargasso Sea—the rewriting in which Jean Rhys keeps "Bertha's humanity, indeed her sanity as critic of imperialism, intact"—insists that "so intimate a thing as personal and human identity might be determined by the politics of imperialism," figuring Antoinette as "a white Creole child growing up at the time of emancipation in Jamaica... caught between the English imperialist and the black native" (247). The Rhysian revision, in which Bertha attacks Richard Mason not from innate bestiality but upon hearing

the dissimulation in the word "legally," restores to the figure the political intelligibility that Brontë's Gothic machinery strips from her (249).

Bertha's relation to textiles is therefore overdetermined. She is, first, the owner of a fortune that is itself a textile fortune: her stepfather was a "West Indian Planter and Merchant from England," and the marriage to Rochester "passes her wealth from one Englishman to another," rendering her "the colonized, here suffering both a racial and gendered colonization"—the woman whose dress, dowry, and body pass, in the words of one critic, as "enslaved" property in the marriage market (Rymer 62). She is, second, the wearer of the white that the Victorian textile economy reserved for the morally legible: the "white and straight" of her shift mocks the vocabulary of purity that calico, muslin, and bridal blond had made the signature of respectable femininity (Reynolds et al. 88). And she is, third, the destroyer of textiles—the figure who tears the veil, gnaws and snatches in Jane's dream of the "child" in the passage that Spivak re-cites—the one who refuses to be merely dressed (251). In the novel's symbolic economy, Bertha's violence against cloth is the violence of the enslaved against the commodity: the refusal of the textile system that has priced her.

Recent criticism has been careful, however, not to overstate the radicalism of Brontë's text. As one Korean critic puts it, Bertha "stands for 'brutality' and 'sense of guilty,' which arise from the colonialization of the West Indies by England," and the novel—while sharply criticizing the repressive attitudes of colonialists—does not criticize "the intrinsic problems of the imperialism" (Yoon 152). Jane's feminist desire appropriates imperialist discourses even as her rejection of the role of the missionary's assistant, required by imperialism, creates "a crack in the imperialist discourses" (155). The white dress of the attic is thus also the novel's confession: the same textile economy that clothes Jane in the sober satin of conscience has undressed Bertha into the white of the cell. Whatever critique of empire *Jane Eyre* achieves, it achieves—as the novel's ending insists—through Bertha's textile-coded destruction, and at the cost of her life.

Colonial Marriage Markets: Buying the Bride at Thornfield

The marriage plot of *Jane Eyre* is best understood as a marriage market: a system in which women's persons, clothing, and fortunes circulate as commodities, and in which the imperial economies of the West Indies and of India are the ultimate underwriters. Rochester's account of his own marriage to Bertha is the novel's cleanest exposure of this market. Married young, for money, to a woman whose family fortune came from Jamaica, Rochester received with Bertha a dowry of thirty thousand pounds—"the colonial wealth" that, as Tracy notes, materially sustains the society in which Jane moves (352). The deposition that reveals the

marriage is a commercial document; the marriage certificate is a bill of sale. Katherine Rymer glosses the transaction precisely: Mason "helps arrange Bertha's marriage to Rochester, passing her wealth from one Englishman to another," and from the moment of the ceremony Bertha is "no longer entitled to her fortune" (64). The colonial bride is, in the most literal sense, converted into a textile and transferred: her wealth becomes Rochester's cloth, encasing Jane in turn.

This is the context in which Jane's refusal of commodification must be read. Her famous insistence that she is "no bird; and no net ensnares me" is the refusal of a bird-cage of satin and lace; her resistance to being "attired" and "covered" is a resistance to being bought (Dahy 118). Yet the novel is equally careful to show that Jane's position in the marriage market is structurally determined by empire. She is a governess—"trapped in a position of class ambiguity that prevents her rising to be equal with Rochester"—dependent for her very wardrobe on her employer's bounty (Rymer 66). The wedding preparations literalize this dependence: the trunks, the pearl-coloured robe, the vapoury veil are all Rochester's purchases, and Jane's only counter-move is to haggle for a soberer fabric, to displace the bridal finery into the closet where it shimmers like a ghost (Dahy 120; Miles 246). The wedding dress, in other words, is the marriage contract made textile: the woman who wears it is, like Bertha before her, being dressed into the market.

The colonial resonance of the marriage plot extends to the novel's most intimate scenes. The amethyst silk and pink satin Rochester craves are fabrics of imperial provenance—silks, satins, and muslins whose history is the history of European competition for Asian textiles and American cotton (Burnard and Riello 235; Riello and Parthasarathi 12). The "parterre" in which Rochester wishes to see Jane glittering is a flower-bed, a pleasure-garden: the language of conspicuous display that the eighteenth century had coded as the extravagance of colonial wealth. Critics of the wedding have insisted that the failure of the lavish ceremony is not incidental but structural: the consumerist pressure of the bridal industry "threatens the independence and identity" of the bride, and only a second, quiet ceremony—stripped of the "spectacular" apparatus—can allow Jane to marry "outside of the consumerist ideology behind traditional weddings" (Varadi 274). The second marriage, at Ferndean, is symbolically performed in a church with no wedding dress at all; Jane reports that she wore "nothing but" her traveling gown. It is a marriage, finally, un-bought—or so the novel asks us to believe.

The problem is that this un-bought marriage is funded, on Jane's side, by exactly the colonial economy the plot has exposed. And it is to that inheritance that we must now turn.

Inheritance, Madeira, and the Redistribution of Empire

The denouement of *Jane Eyre* is famously generous to its heroine: a fortune, cousins, the self-elimination of Bertha, and a Rochester free to marry (Valint 20). The "hefty twenty-thousand-pound legacy (of which Jane only keeps one-fourth)" bequeathed by her late uncle John Eyre allows Jane to return to the maimed Rochester and "gleefully proclaim, 'I am an independent woman now'" (21). Critics from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar to Nancy Armstrong have treated the inheritance as the mechanism of Jane's equality: it is "an endowment from Jane's wealthy uncle that makes her happiness possible," the event that allows her to "follow her own will" and marry "on terms of equality" (22). But the source of the money is a geographical and narrative gap. John Eyre is "repeatedly mentioned as being abroad. However, what he does there, by what means he amasses a great sum of money are gaps in the novel": he writes from Madeira, sending letters and notes that Mrs. Reed intercepts, but the novel "deals with what Jane does with this sum of money when she inherits it," not with "what goes on in Africa or how this sum is made" (Küçük 84). Jane's exclamation—"independence would be glorious"—is uttered over a fortune whose provenance the text refuses to specify (85).

The critical debate has centered on Madeira's colonial associations. Elaine Freedgood and Susan Meyer, as Alexandra Valint recounts, focus on the origin of the fortune and "suggest that such a colonially associated locale implicates Jane in the finances of colonialism and even of slavery" (24). Madeira was an island economy built on the wine trade—itself an Atlantic commerce entangled with the slave economy's shipping and provisioning networks—and the uncle's obscure mercantile wealth, like Rochester's Jamaican rents, belongs to the general category of fortunes "presumed to come from a colony" (Valint 25; Yoon 158). Valint's counter-reading claims, in contrast, "that Jane's complicated relationship to the inheritance distances her from the problematic taint of the money's colonial associations and marks her non-conformity with and resistance to the economic practices of the British Empire" (26). The evidence is the estate Jane shares equally among the four cousins, giving them all a quarter of the wealth, and the funds she used to purchase equality and not luxury for her family—independence, not adornment.

The key to the rescript in the textile inheritance epilogue. With Rochester making money satin and lace, Jane's money makes no money. She is not buying a trousseau, but an equality that is in turn understood on sartorial terms: I do not need to be “dressed” by Rochester, I can things and say (Valint 29) “I am an independent woman now.” The difference between the two economies of cloth can be no clearer: on one side are Thornfield's textiles which are gifts that take away, on the other are Morton's and Ferndean's, which are expenditures that take away. But the novel can't wash away his heroine's hands. Freedgood and Meyer challenge Madeira's rawness to an indictment of Jane's role in the money supply of colonialism, which is more or less indefensible in the words of the text. Jane's plain dress is bought in with colonial money

for what it deems to be moral value. The growth of the textile economy of empire proves unalterable, against the will of its protagonists, in the novel.

Missionary Textiles and the Evangelical Empire: St. John Rivers in India

The novel's imperial architecture is completed by St. John Rivers, whose mission to India foregrounds "the imperial project... at the novel's end," in Tracy's account, and has led many critics to read the ending as "an affirmation of St John's evangelising mission"—an affirmation that would make *Jane Eyre* "Charlotte Bronte's own colonial appropriation" (356). St. John is the novel's figure of the evangelical empire: the missionary who proposes to take Jane to India, not as his wife but as his "curate" and comrade, demanding that she abandon her own desires for a life of "ceaseless" labor. The proposal is a marriage-market transaction of a second kind—a contract in which a woman's person is conscripted, not purchased, for imperial service. Jane's refusal is the refusal of the role "as an assistant of a missionary required by the imperialism," the role through which she would "give up physical pleasure" in dedication to empire (Yoon 160).

Textiles figure in the Rivers plot as the badge of this evangelical economy. The Rivers household—Moor House, with its plain furniture, its religious observance, and its threadbare table linen—is a domestic economy of use, the place where dress is mended, not bought: Jane arrives in rags and is re-clothed by her unknown cousins in "plain" garments of their own making. St. John's austerity is the austerity of the dissenting wardrobe that Keen identifies with the Quakerish heroine: the "strict dress codes" of conservative religious groups, in which "dress becomes a symbol of social control as it controls the external body," and the restraint of desire is the core function of modest clothing (220). In St. John, that restraint has been turned outward, into the discipline of empire: he will carry English cloth—and English religion, its ideological analogue—to India, in the same movement by which Lancashire cotton was carried there as manufactured goods (Natalia et al. 112). The missionary, in this reading, is the textile system's spiritual arm: the figure who converts the world to English dress along with English faith.

Jane's refusal of St. John is therefore also a refusal of the missionary textile economy—but it is a refusal conducted, characteristically, within that economy's terms. She refuses to be dressed by the empire of the spirit, choosing instead the empire of the pocketbook: the Madeira inheritance, the equality purchased with colonial money, the marriage at Ferndean. The novel's ending stages a triumph of the secular, domestic, private over the imperial, public, and missionary—Jane will not go to India, and will not wear the missionary's plainness as a vocation—but it does so by accepting the colonial economy's money while rejecting its cloth.

Tracy's question remains: whether the ending affirms or critiques the imperial project (360). On the evidence of the textile economy, it does both—and the ambivalence is the point.

Conclusion

Jane Eyre is a novel that dresses its heroine to think, and its thinking about cloth is a thinking about empire. The plain dress of Lowood and Morton, the luxury fashion of Thornfield, the white shift of the attic, and the invisible wedding gown of Ferndean are not a wardrobe but an argument: that in the 1810s and 1840s Britain, garments were the most intimate point of contact between the individual body and the global economy of imperial labor—the economy of cotton, calico, sugar, and slaves that made the cotton triangle the axis of modern capitalism (Burnard and Riello 238; Natalia et al. 115; Szreter 1025). It's the West Indian Creole Bertha Mason, whose "tropical extravagance" the text racializes and buries, but whose fortune—as the novel's torn veil reveals her fortune—the colonial marriage market at the heart of the English domestic plot (Almenia 51; Thomas, Imperialism 22; Thomas, "Representation" 6). So the novel's more famous "independence" is bought and paid for by that market; the bequest of the novel's own plane of exploration, its "madeira" property that it is never able to renounce is a trace of an imperial economy which it can never eradicate (Küçük 88; Valint 32).

So, what is "plain dress" in Mr. Rochester's case? There is no innocence and no escape. It's a nego-ting up till now, an ethics of cloth in imperio's system, a way to wear imperio clothes whilst refusing imperio claims. Great credit to Brontë, she makes it clear that even though the negotiation is serious, it is not thorough, that the black satin and pearl-gray silk are still the same fabric, still that of the worldwide cotton industries, which "helped make the modern world" on exploited workers (Brooks and Rigby 76). Such a last-minute compromise of the novel is a plainness acquired with colonial riches, a domestic happiness guaranteed by the plantation and the counting-house, a marriage that is gracefully conveyed without being overly impressed with dress or without being pompous about purchase, dressed and bought when it needs to be – without really ever being uncovered, undorned, or unwrapped (Tracy 362). *Jane Eyre*'s readers learn as much as they do about polite manners; like other members of the textile economies of empire, no fabric is simply a fabric, every thread of which, over time, leads to a field, a mill, a ship.

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