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“He is rather peculiar, perhaps”: Reading Mr Rochester’s coarseness queerly

Claire O’Callaghan

Abstract

This article re-examines the accusation of coarseness directed at Edward Fairfax Rochester, the male protagonist of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). Elizabeth Rigby condemned Rochester as coarse for challenging normative modes of male gender and sexuality. In re-thinking Rigby’s critique, this paper provides an original reading of Brontë’s novel that explores Rochester’s ‘coarse’ behaviours as representative of queer masculinity. Drawing on contemporary queer theoretical discourse, the article suggests that Brontë’s male protagonist articulates a range of queer masculine possibilities that valuably registers a resistance to dominant ways of being in the nineteenth century. As such, I propose that *Jane Eyre* offers insight into the flexible ways with which Brontë conceived of male subjectivity.

Keywords

Charlotte Brontë, queer, coarse, gender, *Jane Eyre*, masculinity, Rochester

In her notorious review of *Jane Eyre* (1847) published in the *Quarterly Review* in December 1848, Elizabeth Rigby famously condemned Charlotte Brontë’s debut novel as a ‘singularly unattractive’ and ‘anti-Christian composition’.¹ Brontë, Rigby declares, commits the ‘highest moral offence a novel writer can commit, that of making an unworthy character interesting in the eyes of the reader’, a complaint she makes in reference to Brontë’s leading man, Edward Fairfax Rochester (*R*, p. 166). Concerned that ‘lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour’, but finding no redeeming features in his character, Rigby denounces Rochester: he ‘is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws of both God and man [...] He is made as coarse and as brutal as can in all conscience be required to keep our

sympathies at a distance' (*R*, p. 166). The violation of which Rigby speaks refers, of course, primarily to Rochester's intended bigamy; his attempted unlawful union with Jane *despite* his marriage to Bertha Mason, his apparently unruly wife whom he has incarcerated secretly on the third floor of Thornfield Hall, the couple's marital home. But Rigby's harsh commentary also registers something else; namely, a wider concern that Brontë's portrayal subverts the dominant ideals of nineteenth-century masculinity and inappropriately participates in debates concerning male genders and sexualities. As Rigby laments: 'We would have thought that such a hero had no chance, in the purer taste of the present day; but the popularity of *Jane Eyre* is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature' (*R*, p. 166). Not only does Rigby explicitly decry Rochester as 'coarse', then, but as this paper argues, she inadvertently draws attention to Rochester as a queer masculine subject.

Queer, in the critical context deployed here, describes any gendered or sexual identity that does not correspond with prevailing heterosexual norms. As the literary critic and gender theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains, in its most flexible incarnation, the term 'queer' describes

the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.²

Sedgwick's definition values the flexibility found in expressions of gender and sexuality that resist traditional binary categories, as well as indicating that gender norms (such as marriage and reproduction) are not the only (or, indeed, primary) mode of being. Rigby's view, however, reminds us that, historically, gender roles were largely assumed to be 'products [...] of God' and 'of nature'.³ Accordingly, by 'violating' such natural 'laws' Rochester unsettles

conventional notions of masculinity based on heterosexual ideals and this gives rise to Rigby's charge of coarseness (*R*, p. 166).

This paper rejects Rigby's heterosexist logic and provides an original reading of Rochester's masculinity as queer. I argue that, in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë usefully resists orthodox modes of masculinity founded on normative, heterosexual ways of being. The novel, I suggest, helpfully challenges a narrow conception of masculinity by directing us to the diversity and flexibility of male genders and sexualities in nineteenth-century culture.⁴ Through Rochester, Brontë explores a range of queer possibilities for men and masculinities including, for instance, narratives of homoerotic and homosocial erotics, tourist masculinities, alternative expressions of family and fatherhood, tender expressions of "manliness" and male nursing, queer heterosexual courtship, *and* feminine masculinities. In re-examining Rochester's subversion of gender and sexual norms, this paper unravels Rigby's pejorative view of Rochester as 'coarse' and 'brutal' to suggest a more productive, even positive, reframing of Brontë's destabilization of gender and sexuality (*R*, p. 166). Through *Jane Eyre*, Brontë shows how even in a society that 'insisted strenuously on the differences between men and women, there existed institutions, customs, and relationships whose elasticity, mobility, and plasticity undid even the most cherished and foundational oppositions'.⁵

Rochester is queer

To read Mr Rochester queerly requires recognition of the way in which Brontë's first reference to Thornfield's squire foregrounds queerness. During Jane's initial conversation with Mrs Fairfax, in which she seeks an account of her new employer's character, Jane is perplexed by the housekeeper's contradictory statement that Mr Rochester is an 'unimpeachable' yet 'rather peculiar' man.⁶ When Jane probes further, the housekeeper flounders in her ability to articulate *how* Rochester's oppositional traits manifest. "I don't know — it is not easy to describe", she

informs the young governess, “but you feel it when he speaks to you: you cannot be always sure whether he is in jest or earnest, whether he is pleased or to the contrary; you don’t thoroughly understand him — at least, I don’t” (*JE*, p. 124). Brontë’s choice of adjective here — ‘peculiar’ — is, of course, a nineteenth-century synonym for the term ‘queer’ which defined that which is ‘strange, odd, peculiar, eccentric’ or described someone ‘of questionable character’.⁷ In either configuration, Mrs Fairfax implies that Mr Rochester is “not normal”. Jane, however, is frustrated by the housekeeper’s apparent inability to explain clearly whom her new employer is, remarking ungenerously that Mrs Fairfax has ‘no notion of sketching a character, or observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things’ (*JE*, p. 124). Yet on closer scrutiny, Jane’s ostensible response is presumptuous, as the ambiguity in Mrs Fairfax’s words is instructive, for in this seemingly obscure summary by this ‘good lady’ (as Jane also describes her), she affirms Mr Rochester as a queer male subject (*JE*, p. 124). The ‘lapses’ and ‘dissonances’ of which Sedgwick speaks can be found in Mrs Fairfax’s account of her employer; her struggle to provide a definitive sense of Rochester affirms the instability of his character, making apparent the plural possibilities of identity that Sedgwick’s definition describes. Through her account, Mrs Fairfax unwittingly exposes the inadequacy of binary oppositions to neatly designate identity. But Brontë’s portrayal also expands more broadly beyond an account of character to engage with the binary designations of homo and hetero that rigidly inform gender and sexual norms.

Indeed, one way in which Rochester’s designation as queer manifests is through his complicated marital designation, since he presents himself, for the most part, as a bachelor. As a role and status, bachelorhood is deemed queer because it is antithetical to family. As Howard Chudacoff explains, ‘in modern Western society, any choice of lifestyle that diverts or prevents a presumably marriageable person from the social obligation to settle down and start a family has been considered inappropriate’.⁸ In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester’s early status as a bachelor is

particularly complex because the novel turns on the sensational revelation of Rochester's wife and marriage. Accordingly, queer possibilities reveal themselves here in numerous competing ways.

Rochester's misrepresentation of self as a *volitional* bachelor is decidedly queer. Mrs Fairfax informs Jane that, although 'the ladies are very fond of him' and he is a 'general' society 'favourite', Rochester resists marriage: "I should scarcely fancy that Mr Rochester would entertain an idea of the sort" (*JE*, pp. 184, 186).⁹ In his study of nineteenth-century masculinities, John Tosh usefully explains how 'bachelorhood as preferred rather than enforced status' was particularly 'frowned upon' in the nineteenth century, 'since it suggested an abdication from patriarchy and an indifference to lineage and posterity'.¹⁰ Of course, there is a reason that Rochester adopts this status willingly: he is already married and wishes to conceal this information.¹¹ He goes to great lengths to give the illusion of an intended engagement to Blanche Ingram, but he is merely feigning interest, performing heterosexual roles, if you will, in order to divert any attention (or suspicion) from his "true" marital status. Later he does this with Jane too, when he cross-dresses as a gypsy and pretends to read Jane's fortune, a queer heterosexual exchange and form of feminine masculinity that I shall return to. In failing to adhere to a heterosexual "either/or" marital status, Rochester defiantly assumes control and authority over his romantic status, thus exemplifying Chudacoff's point that bachelor narratives often articulate tales of deviance and marital refusal. Rochester's public self-fashioning as a volitional bachelor draws a binary between a public and private status, and opens gaps and possibilities that expose queer bachelorhood in his public formation of self.

Interestingly, by using cross-dressing as a heterosexual courtship strategy, Rochester both subverts traditional gender roles and convention in the name of seduction and adopts a form of feminine masculinity. Referring to the gypsy woman by a female pronoun throughout, Jane is confused by the woman's image, noting the presence of domesticity ('she was bending

over the fire, and seemed reading in a little black book, like a Prayer Book, by the light of the blaze: she muttered the words to herself, as most old women do, while she read'), but perceiving 'strange' facial features, a slight feminine voice, and facial hair, an aesthetic trait typically associated with men (*JE*, p. 227). Brontë's portrayal demonstrates Marjorie Garber's assertion that cross-dressing is queer because it articulates clearly 'the constructedness of gender' norms, representing 'a crisis of category' that enables a 'permeable crossing between one (apparently distinct) category to another'.¹² Rochester's "identity crisis" is evident through the complex gender and sexual politics at play: here is an aristocratic, patriarchal man misrepresenting himself as bachelor and dressed in women's clothes, passing himself off as an older woman in an attempt to seduce a younger female. It works: Jane *is* seduced by the gypsy's queer charms, commenting that her 'strange talk, voice, manner, had by this time wrapped me in a kind of dream', words that capture her engaged response (*JE*, p. 231). Through the portrayal of Rochester's cross-dressing, Brontë offers a vivid example of Judith Butler's conception of gender as performative, a matter of "doing" rather than "being" that exposes how 'the essence or identity that is otherwise purported to be expressed' is a 'fabrication manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means'.¹³ The pursuit of heterosexual intimacy is at odds with the queer method that Rochester pursues and eschews traditional conceptions of male seduction. In this way, Brontë demonstrates an interest in dismantling a proscribed pairing of male and female bodies.

With the revelation of Bertha's existence, though, all prior accounts of Rochester's bachelor life presented to Jane are transformed, morphing retrospectively from the tale of hedonistic bachelor to the exploits of an adulterous husband. Very soon after she arrives, the reader, like Jane, learns that Rochester has not only incarcerated his wife, but avoids her by leaving the domestic sphere regularly, something Mrs Fairfax comments on when discussing the squire's 'rare' visits to Thornfield. The housekeeper expresses a wish that her master would

“reside here permanently” or, “at least”, “visit it oftener”, for “[g]reat houses and fine grounded require the presence of the proprietor” (*JE*, pp. 123, 118). Aptly, Tosh reminds us that, in the nineteenth century, the home was ‘widely held to be a man’s place, not only in the sense of being his possession or fiefdom but also as the place where he deepest needs were met’.¹⁴ With this in mind, Rochester periods of time away from the home are a transgressive but also sexually liberating experience for him, permitting the pursuit of alternate desires and needs that are unfulfilled at home, while evading (or postponing) any claims of domesticity placed upon him. Indeed, Rochester gives Jane an account of his particular relationship with a woman with ‘whom he had once cherished what he called a ‘*grande passion*’, the French opera singer, Céline Varens (*JE*, p. 165). Rochester suggests his feelings for Varens turned him into a ‘spoony’ (that is, one who makes a fool of themselves in amorous affairs), thus his overemotional investment led him to deserve the ‘fate of all other spoonies’ (*JE*, p. 165). Beyond this heterosexual narrative, though, Brontë’s text indicates queer possibilities in the detailed account of Rochester’s extended overseas travel by gesturing towards his promiscuous, polymorphous life. Indeed, through the invocation of Byron’s association of travel with sexual and homosexual freedom, Brontë opens up the possibility of Rochester’s homoerotic experiences alongside the heterosexual.

Numerous scholars have examined Brontë’s passion for Byron’s writings. Fannie Ratchford memorably describes Charlotte’s readings as ‘an orgy of Byronism’, while Christine Alexander suggests Brontë’s persistent return to the Romantic poet as ‘bordering on obsession’.¹⁵ In her momentous biography of the Brontë family, Juliet Barker also documents Charlotte’s ‘love for Byron’, dating her enthusiasm to her childhood days and showing how Brontë’s early poetry was often based on Byron’s verse.¹⁶ Barker also describes how Byron fueled Brontë’s imagination in other ways too, leading her, for instance, to reproduce portraits of the poet and illustrations of fictional characters.¹⁷ Existing readings of *Jane Eyre* have also

acknowledged Byronic echoes in the text, with Tanya Llewellyn, for example, persuasively arguing that Brontë's invocation of the Orient was inspired by Byron's 'Turkish tales' that privilege sexual diversity.¹⁸ Given Brontë's consuming familiarity with the poet's life and work, it is conceivable that she acquired wider sexual knowledge from Byron's oeuvre, a notion that challenges the stubborn image of Charlotte as saintly or prudish.¹⁹ While acknowledging the limitations of my own supposition here, it is apt that in her review of *Jane Eyre*, Rigby describes Rochester as a 'a bachelor *addicted* to travelling', for in these words, parallels to Byron's queer lifestyle can be traced in Brontë's portrayal of Rochester's life as a 'seducer' (R, p. 116; *JE*, p. 160 *emphasis mine*).²⁰

The homoerotic components of Byron's life have been widely documented. The definitive work of biographer Leslie A. Marchand drew attention to Byron's polymorphous life by presenting his use of coded language to discuss illicit sexuality, including sex between men.²⁰ Following this, Louis Crompton explored Byron's association of travel with sexual freedoms, especially homosexual freedom, citing personal letters where Byron discussed his enthusiasm for 'homoerotic adventures'.²¹ More recently, Clara Tuite and Fiona MacCarthy have revisited details of Byron's queer life with John Cam Hobhouse in the Eastern Mediterranean, exposing the queer signification in the pair's correspondence with Charles Skinner Matthews and drawing attention to how important sex was in Byron's life.²² Together these sources remind us how European travel licensed sexual diversity and practices that Byron needed to conceal at home, and it is echoes of exactly this image that are redolent in Brontë's text.

Rochester's own account of his time abroad — especially France, a location that Rudi Bleys has suggested was 'a privileged territory of homosexuals' — gestures towards the fullness of his emotional and erotic experiences.²³ It is worth noting here that in the chapters devoted to his account, Rochester describes his past in abstract terms, something that bewilders

Jane. An overt disclosure of the pursuit of pleasure is coupled with a defence of his erotic needs: “since happiness is irrevocably denied me, I have a right to get pleasure out of life, and I will get it, cost what it may” (*JE*, p. 160). In these highly sexualized words, Rochester implies a rebellious dimension to his pursuit of sexual please — “sweet, fresh pleasure” — that exemplifies Deborah Lutz’s reading of Victorian sex as a personal and political resistance to the constrained nature of normative erotics (*JE*, p. 160).²⁴ Suggestively, especially for a modern reader, Rochester also confides in Jane that he has “battled through a varied experience with many men of many nations, and roamed over half the globe” (*JE*, p. 157). The specificity of Rochester’s “varied experience” is not affirmed here and a conventional reading might assume that it describes his engagement with the expected behaviour in public life for a man of his class. But such a reading obscures the decidedly latent sexual expression in Brontë’s phrasing that connects Rochester’s dogmatic pursuit of sexual conquest (“I will have it”) and use of the term ‘battled’, with his use of the phrase ‘roaming’, a term that, for a modern reader, is redolent of ‘cruising’, a contemporary term to describe the “illicit” pursuit of gay sex in public spaces (*JE*, pp. 160, 157). Of course, no explicit affirmation of homosexuality is declared here, but the ambiguity in Brontë’s linguistic choices affirm Rochester’s sexual encounters in Europe as multiple and active, thus opening the possibility for bisexual experiences.

Notably, recent theoretical scholarship on queer travel has complicated the assumption that queer tourism functions merely as a subversive “binary” to heteronormative tourist practices. As Jasbir Kaur Puar’s work on queer globalization indicates, tourism, ‘as a form of both past and present globalization’, is fundamental to our understanding of sex and sexuality, and queer sexualities operate as an ‘intrinsic’ yet unrecognized component in its cultural and economic systems.²⁵ Rather than being subversive touristic practices, queer sexualities are, in fact, an ‘explicit’ and overlapping component of *all* tourist and migration narratives.²⁶ In relation to *Jane Eyre*, then, Rochester’s touristic masculinity and the suggestion of queer

practices is not solely subversive but, in fact, homonormative in context, with the novel showing how the economic, patriarchal, racial and colonial infrastructure of Empire enabled — or even underwrote — queer touristic behaviour.²⁷

Rochester's later disclosure that he has "a past existence, a series of deeds, a colour of life to contemplate within my own breast, which might well call my sneers and censures from my neighbours to myself" also reads suggestively (*JE*, p. 158). Like the previous statements, he elides the precise nature of the 'deeds' and 'past existence' of which he speaks, leaving the reader to infer meaning. In *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (2014), Tuite describes how Byron's mediated public scandal and notoriety by deploying and displacing erotic language to conceal the specificity of his sexual life.²⁸ Likewise, in her pioneering text, *Epistemology of the Closet* (1990), Sedgwick's considers the wider signification of Victorian homosexuality as 'unspeakable' as a means to enable covert discussion.²⁹ Brontë's novel employs both of these literary strategies, configuring a conventional reading that enables the façade of heterosexual respectability alongside oblique and indirect references to the queer erotic. Brontë — and therein Rochester — would not have been able to name the 'unnatural offence' of sodomy explicitly, for as Harry G. Cocks indicates, the early nineteenth century was a time of unprecedented prosecutions for the 'crime'.³⁰ An implicit reference, however, would navigate respectable social discourse and replicate the much-needed distance between personal and private matters and public life. To put this another way, Brontë does not fully conceal sexual knowledge, but she conceals what Cocks describes as 'knowledge of the knowledge' (e.g. homosexuality), thus leaving space for queer speculation.³¹

A political signification to the dualism in Rochester's wording can also be traced here. As indicated, Jane confesses that she struggles to follow the abstract manner in which Rochester speaks of his past, informing her employer that, "to speak truth, sir, I don't understand you at all", and reminding the reader that 'my interlocutor was beyond my

penetration' (*JE*, pp. 161–62). The first-hand commentary of her bewilderment evades reference to an explicit subject matter, but again enables Brontë to indirectly comment on queer politics. Despite her confusion, Jane discerns that whatever Rochester is speaking of, it would require 'a new statute to legalise' the behaviours he describes (*JE*, p. 161). With Bertha in mind, a conventional reading of the statement infers a call for the reform of divorce laws, which, at this point in history, would have required a Private Act of Parliament to be considered, a rather lengthy and costly venture. A queer reading, however, makes possible Brontë's call for the reform of legislation relating to homosexuality, for at this time all acts of sodomy were punishable by death in England.³² If, as mentioned earlier, public prosecutions for sodomy grew exponentially in the period in which she was writing, perhaps Brontë extended sympathy to those who, like her hero, Byron, would have faced capital punishment for homosexual desire and outlawed sexual acts. Certainly, Rochester's response emphasizes the necessity of urgent political change, telling Jane that the behaviours would "absolutely require a new statute: unheard of combination of circumstances, demand unheard of rules" (*JE*, p. 161). Brontë's repetition of the phrase 'unheard of' textually reinforces the 'unspeakable' nature of homosexuality in nineteenth-century culture (*JE*, p. 161).³³

Sadly, Rochester goes on to discuss himself as a 'degenerate' when 'fate wronged' him (*JE*, p. 159):

I turned desperate; then I degenerated. Now, when any vicious simpleton excites my disgust by his paltry ribaldry, I cannot flatter myself that I am better than he: I am forced to confess that he and I are on a level. I wish I had stood firm — God knows I do! Dread remorse when you are tempted to err, Miss Eyre; remorse is the poison of life. (*JE*, p. 159)

This moment of self-criticism expresses regrets for a lifestyle that led Rochester away from heterosexual "normalcy". The derogatory equation of homosexuality with degeneracy also lingers here, since Rochester's phrasing registers shame and disgust towards his past,

reminding us of Rigby's pejorative view of Rochester as 'coarse' (*R*, p. 166). Yet, despite the moralizing tone, it is worth remembering that Rochester is conscious of Jane's innocence ("Do you wonder I avow this to you?", he asks her) and, as briefly discussed earlier, controls their conversations (*JE*, p. 159). Aptly, Cocks notes that, in the nineteenth century, 'one of the principal methods employed to distance' the "respectable" (heterosexual) and "non-respectable" (homosexual) worlds 'was to control knowledge and speech'.³⁴ Moreover, in her discussion of Byron, Tuite discusses Byron's 'outrageous appetite for lies', noting how they enabled the social façade of "normalcy".³⁵ Later in the text, Rochester's manipulation of his sexual past and marital present is revealed. Perhaps, then, Rochester's confession here anticipates this falsehood by navigating the hetero/homo binary that informs gender and sexual norms.

Queer positivity

While Brontë's indirect references to Rochester's queer past conclude with the familiar (and rather problematic) equation of homosexuality with degeneracy, she *does* offer alternative and more helpful portrayals of non-heterosexual and non-traditional bonds that situate queerness at the very heart of Thornfield Hall. Elsewhere, Sharon Marcus and Holly Furneaux's work on queerness in Victorian literature and culture has opened up new ways to explore the expression of queer possibilities in the nineteenth century. Central to these readings is a move away from abject conceptions of transgression to focus on more flexible and positive affirmations of non-marital, non-reproductive, and same-sex bonds. In reading wider expressions of queerness in Brontë's portrayal of Rochester, it is apt that she too includes such liberating possibilities.

Rochester's relationship with Richard Mason, for instance, is both queer and affirmative, despite the fact that it is Mason who disrupts Rochester's wedding to Jane with the revelation of his friend's intended bigamy. Mason's arrival at Thornfield is unexpected, but his

presence offers access to Rochester's past (*JE*, pp. 220–21). He describes Rochester as an 'intimate', 'old friend' and offers tales of their past together, but Jane is (once again) bewildered by the insights afforded to her, concluding that a 'curious friendship theirs must have been' (*JE*, pp. 220–21). With news of Mason's arrival, Rochester is initially uncomfortable, giving Jane's 'wrist a convulsive grip', but his unease quickly passes and Jane soon notes Rochester's newfound contentedness, reporting that she hears him showing him to bed: 'I distinguished Mr Rochester's voice, and heard him say, "This way, Mason; this is your room". He spoke cheerfully: the gay tones set my heart at ease. I was soon asleep' (*JE*, p. 237). Rochester's transition to a gentler way of being reinforces his class status and reminds us of his capability as a welcoming host, but it also anticipates the decidedly queer moment to follow: Jane is woken in the middle of the night by a cry for help and Rochester at her door. The intimate bedroom scene that follows, however, is not one of heterosexual passion between Jane and her master, but of homoerotic nursing between Rochester and Mason.

In her readings of Dickens and other Victorian writers, including Brontë's contemporary (and very occasional dinner host), William Makepeace Thackeray, Furneaux demonstrates how nursing was an intensely eroticized practice in Victorian culture:

Nursing reformers, from the 1840s onwards, anxiously debated the sexual dangers and temptations of this new profession at the same time as respectable novelists deployed nursing as a staple courtship narrative and pornographers cashed in on the imaginative possibilities of medical drama.³⁶

Reflecting this, it is significant that Brontë also offers a scene of same-sex nursing in *Jane Eyre*. Following an attack by Bertha that leaves Mason gravely wounded, Rochester calls for Jane's assistance and seeks medical resources: "Have you a sponger [*sic*] in your room [...] Have you any salts – volatile salts?" (*JE*, p. 241). Returning with Jane to Mason's room, Rochester attends his patient's wounds:

‘Hold the candle,’ said Mr Rochester, and I took it; he fetched a basin of water from the washstand: ‘Hold that,’ said he. I obeyed. He took the sponge, dipped it in, and moistened the corpse-like face; he asked for my smelling bottle, and applied it to the nostrils. Mr Rochester opened the shirt of the wounded man, whose arm and shoulder were bandaged: he sponged away blood, trickling down fast. (*JE*, p. 242)

Male bedrooms in *Jane Eyre* are a permissive space that complicate gender boundaries, and the scene of male nursing here reverses gendered conceptions of care as a solely female preoccupation. Rochester readily takes on the role of medical caregiver, demonstrating intuitive efficiency through the short, succinct instructions he gives to Jane. Moreover, aware of Mason’s suffering, Rochester is sensitive and gentle in his touch, expressing what Furneaux describes elsewhere as ‘restorative male tactility’.³⁷ His compassionate actions are healing, and the physical attentiveness creates a homoerotic effect that deepens the bonds between the men, something gestured to in the reference to Rochester opening Mason’s shirt.

This is not the only scene in *Jane Eyre* where Brontë foregrounds Rochester’s tender masculinity, for in an oppositional context, a similar act of healing can be found in Rochester’s role as a surrogate (bachelor) dad. Much has been written about how the Brontës regularly depict domestic units comprising individuals bonded ‘neither through blood or marriage’.³⁸ Indeed, such is the frequency with which orphans and displaced individuals in defamiliarized family units appear in the Brontës’ writings, a case can be made for their inherent domestic queerness. Importantly, in *Friends of the Family: The English Home and its Guardians* (2002), George Behlmer challenges the dominant vision of the nineteenth-century family as stable, describing how ‘this reputed golden age of domesticity saw intense if inconclusive combat over the meaning of family and home’.³⁹ In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë suggests that the quest for family and domesticity offer a panacea to Jane’s social suffering, but Rochester’s experience of family, too, is equally defamiliarized. As Mrs Fairfax informs Jane, Rochester is an orphan of sorts: “he broke with his family, and now for many years he has led an unsettled kind of life” (*JE*, p. 150).⁴⁰ Yet through her portrayal of Rochester’s relationship with Adele Varens, Brontë offers

us an alternative presentation of family kinship that displaces the biological family as a “natural” given *and* challenges notions of fatherhood as based on heterosexuality, reproduction, and dominant ideas of masculinity.

Adele is the daughter of Céline Varens, with whom, as previously mentioned, Rochester enjoyed an adulterous sexual relationship. He informs Jane that once the couple’s relationship ended, Céline gave him “this filette Adele, who, she affirmed, was my daughter; and perhaps she may be, though I see no proofs of such grim paternity written in her countenance: Pilot is more like me than she” (*JE*, p. 170). The comparison between the young girl and a dog, which stresses the absence of aesthetic similarity, emphasizes the queer bond between Rochester and Adele. But despite his belief that Adele is not his daughter, Rochester willingly *and* voluntarily undertakes an adoptive parental role. The account of his decision-making following Céline’s abandonment of her child is instructive:

I acknowledged no natural claim on Adele’s part to be supported by me, nor do I now acknowledge any, for I am not her father, but hearing that she was destitute, I e’en took the poor thing out of the slime and mud of Paris, and transplanted it here, to grow up clean in the wholesome soil of an English country garden. Mrs Fairfax found you to train it; but now that you know that it is the illegitimate offspring of a French opera-singer, you will perhaps think differently of your post and protégée. (*JE*, p. 170)

Rochester affirms here that he is *not* Adele’s father in biological terms, reminding Jane that there is no ‘natural claim’ between the pair, and despite his use of the term ‘it’ to describe the young girl, the adoptive role he assumed is based on sentiment (*JE*, p. 170). In Céline’s absence, Rochester implicitly questions the assumed moral superiority of the mother as a figurehead of the biological family unit, something signalled by his desire to ‘transplant’ Adele – a word that today holds a clinical connotation through association with *in vitro* fertilisation and alternative methods for pregnancy. While tradition (and echoes of imperialism) can be found in his description of a clean, wholesome environment to successfully raise a child in, the

space in which he has installed Adele is atypical of nineteenth-century homes and Rochester identifies Thornfield as a queer space to nurture. Rochester's words also reveal recognition of the stigma and prejudice towards non-traditional and non-biological relations, but he rejects the false logic that places marriage and the biological family at the heart of domesticity.

In conclusion, rethinking the accusation of coarseness levied at Brontë's male protagonist opens new possibilities for exactly what Elizabeth Rigby *might* have meant — but not explicitly stated — when she labelled Rochester as 'coarse'. In turn, this opens up possibilities for rethinking Brontë's portrayal of masculinity. As this essay has shown, *Jane Eyre* gestures to a range of queer masculinities in varied forms and guises, ranging from the overt (Rochester's feminine masculinity when cross-dressing or his adoptive parenting) to the indirect and suggestive (his touristic masculinity and homosocial friendships). Rochester's queer masculinities are always multiple and intersectional; they are reliant on the economic, colonial, racial, and patriarchal infrastructure in which he operates as much as his gender and sexuality. Such an interpretation of Brontë's male lead counters a conventional ("straight") reading of her romantic hero, and it also expands Brontë's Byronic configuration of manliness to include queer possibilities. Queerness in *Jane Eyre* is never solely coarse; to the contrary, it is often productive and, in our age of social justice and equality campaigns, decidedly positive. By eschewing normative ways of being in pursuit of a self-directed life, Brontë's proto-feminist and queer text exemplifies how, very often, heteronormative ideals inhibit men as much as they do women.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Rigby, 'Unsigned review', *Quarterly Review*, December 1848, 153–85 (pp. 162 and 173). Hereafter *R*.

² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), p. 8.

³ Catherine R. Stimpson, 'Foreword', *The Making of Masculinities*, ed. by Harry Brod (London: Allen and Unwin, 1987), xi-xiii (p. xii).

⁴ This paper builds on recent scholarship focused on queer Victorianism, such as Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens* (2009), Sharon Marcus's *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007); Ardel Haefele-Thomas's *Queer Others in Victorian Gothic* (2012); and Monica Flegel's *Pets and Domesticity in Victorian Literature and Culture: Animality, Queer Relations and the Victorian Family* (2015). With the exception of Teema Berg's invaluable article, 'Reading Amazon Fragments: Queering *Shirley*' published in *Brontë Studies* [41.3 (2016) 216–28], there are no detailed readings of queerness in works by the Brontë sisters.

⁵ Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), p. 22.

⁶ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Stevie Davies (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 146. Hereafter *JE*. It is worth noting that Brontë uses the term 'queer' six times in the novel, but the term 'peculiar' appears on twenty-five occasions.

⁷ The dual usage of these terms dates to the sixteenth century. It is only in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that the term becomes associated with homosexuality.

⁸ Howard Chudacoff, *The Age of the Bachelor: Creating an American Subculture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), p. 8.

⁹ It is worth noting that Mrs Fairfax's commentary on Rochester's marital status galvanizes Jane's fixation on her employer's romantic life.

¹⁰ John Tosh, *A Man's Place: Masculinity and the Middle-Class Home in Victorian England* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), p. 173.

¹¹ Interestingly, Rochester seems to forget his marital status momentarily when, after the revelation of Bertha's presence, he comments to Jane, "you have as good as said that I am a

married man — as a married man you will shun me”, words which seem to undermine the fact that he *is* a married man (*JE*, p. 346).

¹² Marjorie Garber, *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety* (New York: Routledge, 1992), pp. 10 and 16.

¹³ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), p. 173.

¹⁴ Tosh, *A Man's Place*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Fannie Ratchford, *The Brontës Web of Childhood* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1941), p. 41; Christine Alexander (ed.), *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 199.

¹⁶ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Abacus, 2010), p. 210. Barker discusses the influence of Byron's 'The Destruction of Sennacherib' (1815) in the production of Charlotte's juvenilia.

¹⁷ Barker, *The Brontës*, p. 248.

¹⁸ Tanya Llewellyn, 'The Fiery Imagination': Charlotte Brontë, the Arabian Nights and Byron's Turkish Tales', *Brontë Studies*, 37.3 (2012), 216–26.

¹⁹ This suggestion builds on recent scholarship that seeks to dismiss the stubborn image of the Victorians as straight-laced; see, for example, works like Matthew Sweet's *Inventing the Victorians* (London: Faber, 2001). A helpful summary of recent scholarly efforts to rethink Victorian sexuality can be found in Holly Furneaux's article 'Victorian Sexualities', *Literature Compass*, 8.10 (2011), 767–75.

²⁰ See Leslie A. Marchand, *Byron: A Biography*, 3 vols (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1957). It is worth noting that Byron's coded expression of same-sex desire was also acknowledged by other figures of the day. As Helena Whitbread has shown, Anne Lister recorded in her diaries that she regularly gave copies of Byron's poems to her lovers. For more on this, see Helena Whitbread (ed.), *I Know My Own Heart: The Diaries of Anne Lister, 1791–1840* (London and

New York: New York University Press, 1992). Likewise, Anna Clark has documented the wider manner in which Lister constructed her sexual identity through literary and cultural influence in her article 'Anne Lister's Construction of Lesbian Identity', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 7.1 (1996), 23-50. I am very grateful to the anonymous peer reviewer who reminded me of Lister's gift-giving.

²¹ Louis Crompton, *Byron and Greek Love: Homophobia in the 19th-Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 109.

²² See Clara Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Fiona MacCarthy, *Byron: Life and Legend* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003).

²³ Rudi Bleys, 'Homosexual Exile: The Territory of the Imaginary Paradise, 1800-1980' in *Gay Studies from the French Cultures*, ed. by Rommel Mendès-Leite and Pierre-Olivier de Busscher (New York: Haworth Press, 1993), 165–82 (p. 166).

²⁴ See Deborah Lutz, *Pleasure Bound: Victorian Sex Rebels and the New Eroticism* (New York: Norton, 2011).

²⁵ Jasbir Kaur Puar, 'Introduction', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* (Special Issue: Queer Tourism), 8.1–2 (2002), 1–6 (p. 2).

²⁶ Puar, p. 2.

²⁷ I am very grateful to the peer reviewer who encouraged my thinking on this point.

²⁸ See Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*.

²⁹ See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

³⁰ Harry G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Homosexual Desire in the 19th Century* (London and New York: Tauris, 2003), pp. 7–8.

³¹ Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, p. 4.

³² It is only in 1861 that convictions for sodomy were reduced to imprisonment of between ten years and life, a law that remained in operation until 1967.

³³ Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, p. 9.

³⁴ Cocks, *Nameless Offences*, p. 8.

³⁵ Tuite, *Lord Byron and Scandalous Celebrity*, p. 6.

³⁶ Holly Furneaux, *Queer Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 177.

³⁷ Furneaux, *Queer Dickens*, p. 177.

³⁸ Furneaux, *Queer Dickens*, p. 177.

³⁹ George Belhmer, *Friends of the Family: The English Home and its Guardians* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), p. 3.

⁴⁰ My use of the term ‘orphan’ here is informed by Laura Peter’s *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire* in which she shows how nineteenth century uses of the term not only described an individual without parent, but also described one who was ‘bereft of protection, advantages, benefits, or happiness, previously enjoyed’. See *Orphan Texts: Victorian Orphans, Culture and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press), p. 1.

Notes on contributor

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