

**“Fevered with Delusive Bliss”:  
Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and the  
Ambiguous Pleasures of The Turk**

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*Sultane* (1747), by Charles-Antoine van Loo (1705-65).  
Portrait of Madame de Pompadour taking coffee in her  
boudoir Turc at château de Bellevue. Oil on Canvas, 132 by  
162 cm. (Musée des Arts décoratifs).

After her first day as an “independent woman” in her austere little schoolmistress’s cottage at Morton, Charlotte Brontë’s eponymous protagonist, Jane Eyre, allows herself the indulgence of an erotic Oriental fantasy. She imagines herself as a harem slave in Rochester’s luxurious “pleasure villa” in a “southern clime,” having “surrendered to temptation; listened to passion . . . to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep in the flowers covering it” (306), “fevered with delusive bliss” (306) and “delirious with his love” (306).<sup>1</sup> In this sequence, perhaps the most erotic in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë uses the metaphor of the harem “slave” to infuse the passage with not only sensuality and eroticism, but Jane’s uncertainty of Rochester’s enduring love, and her fear of the sexual subjugation implicit in the Turkish tropes of sultan/master and slave. As argued by Joanna De Groot, Oriental tropes in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literature, with their elements of fantasy and disguise, enabled the

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<sup>1</sup> All page references for *Jane Eyre* correspond to the following edition: Norton Critical Edition, New York, 2001. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number.

expression of complex issues of sexual dominance and subordination between men and women that would have been impossible “at the level of realism” (De Groot 53). In this article I explore some examples of Brontë’s deployment of Oriental tropes in the creation of an erotic sub-text in *Jane Eyre*. This Turkish rhetoric illuminates the intense sexuality of the novel, specifically Jane’s erotic desire: her fascination with, and yearning for, Edward Rochester. By channelling Jane’s erotic ambiguity through these Oriental metaphors, Brontë foregrounds the conflict between Jane’s longing for the “bliss” of passionate surrender and her fear of sexual subjugation and abandonment—a conflict situated at the novel’s core.

Brontë introduces Jane Eyre in the opening pages, seated “cross-legged like a Turk” (5) in the drawing-room window seat at Gateshead. Similarly, in Jane’s (and our) first meeting with Mr. Rochester, Brontë signposts his “Turkishness.” After his fall from Mesroul—the black horse whose name is shared with the chief eunuch of Caliph Aroun Raschid from the *Arabian Nights*—Rochester entreats Jane’s help: “the mountain will never be brought to Mahomet, so all you can do is to aid Mahomet to go to the mountain” (98). These two significant moments in *Jane Eyre* are coloured with the “Eastern allusion[s]” (229) which Brontë uses throughout her novel to signal the presence of a sensual or sexual undercurrent in pivotal scenes. Aligning Jane and Rochester with “the Turk,” Brontë endows them both with the nineteenth-century Turkish stereotypes of exoticism, otherness, and the potential for great erotic passion and, at least in the case of Rochester, despotism (Brantlinger 220-21). This essay, in exploring Brontë’s deployment of Oriental tropes, offers a reconsideration of the sexuality of *Jane Eyre* and presents new ways of approaching the text in addressing this notable omission in the field of Brontë scholarship.

My argument depends on the understanding that Brontë’s use of the metaphor of slavery in *Jane Eyre* refers to Turkish slavery, that is, the slavery of the Ottoman Empire, the slavery of Barbary corsairs and the slavery of the seraglio, and that this is concerned with gendered and eroticised “white” slavery. With the exception of Joyce Zonana, feminist scholars have neglected the importance of this “Turkish” theme in *Jane Eyre*. Zonana, however, ignores the intense eroticism implicit in the Oriental rhetoric and instead focuses on what she terms “feminist Orientalism” (Zonana 71)—a racist, rhetorical strategy employed as a criticism of British patriarchy by eighteenth- and nineteenth-century feminists. From a quite different perspective, Gayatri Spivak has steered the *Jane Eyre* conversation toward British imperialism and Caribbean slavery, contending that feminist critics failed to pay attention to what she claims is the novel’s “ideology of imperialist axioms” (Spivak 248). Consequently, Brontë’s Turkish tropes have been largely overlooked by feminist critics, and under-studied by post-colonial scholars, whose attention is focused on the Caribbean. The West Indies figures as an aspect of the novel’s plot and relates to the creole ethnicity of Bertha Mason, her family’s membership of Jamaican plantocracy, and Rochester’s four years in Jamaica after his marriage to Bertha. Because of this West Indian register in the novel, Brontë’s use of the metaphor of slavery has been assumed by many scholars to be a reference to Caribbean, black slavery. In particular, Gayatri Spivak, Susan Meyer, Adlai Murdoch, Carl Plasa, and Sue Thomas read the novel in this way. What is common to these scholars is that, in exploring the metaphors of slavery present in *Jane Eyre* and assuming a relationship between the term “slavery” and black West Indian slaves, they have failed to recognise that the slavery metaphor is only one of the many *Turkish* tropes deployed by Brontë in the novel. The focus on Caribbean slavery has all but closed down the possibility of alternative readings of the references to harem slavery and occluded the significance of the novel’s many other Turkish allusions.

Maryanne Ward argues that the nineteenth-century abolitionist discourse focused on black slavery is the most likely influence on Brontë's engagement with the metaphor of slavery in *Jane Eyre* because of the association of the leading abolitionist William Wilberforce with the Cowan Bridge School attended by Brontë, and his acquaintance with Patrick Brontë at Cambridge University. However, there is also ample evidence of contemporary awareness of the white slavery of the Ottomans, reflected in abolitionist discourse. While acknowledging the autobiographical aspects of Brontë's writing, and her abhorrence of black slavery and support of emancipation, it is important not to restrict the historical sources for the themes of slavery in her work so narrowly. My recent research into family connections through the maternal line, the Branwells,<sup>2</sup> reveals that the young Brontës in Yorkshire had ready access to a rich family history connected with eighteenth-century white slave-raiding parties in Cornwall, and specifically with British naval operations to free slaves from the Ottoman empire; these could well have provided inspiration for the Turkish tropes in *Jane Eyre*.

Brontë's motifs of the lustful Turk, the sultan, the corsair, the harem, and the female slave—all heavily inscribed with eroticism—emerged from the Ottoman Empire's centuries of white slavery, including the enslavement of tens of thousands of Britons by the Barbary pirates or corsairs, the naval vanguard of the Ottomans (Davis). White slavery was integral to the cultural and commercial life of the Ottoman Empire from the sixteenth century. In the east, raids by Crimean Mongols captured white Circassian women for the Sultan's seraglio, in the west the corsairs, mostly inhabitants of the North African Ottoman states, prowled the waters and coastal villages of the Mediterranean, the British Isles, and beyond, capturing ships at sea and raiding ashore for slaves. As Robert Davis has demonstrated, for the English, Irish, and Scots one aspect of the Ottoman slave trade had particular significance: the enslavement of more than 25,000 Britons by the corsairs from the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century. Michael Guasco argues that the fate of the English slaves of the Ottomans was better known and a more emotional issue than African slavery because the English were called on at parish level to raise ransom money for the captive slaves. This extract from a petition to the King in 1640 provides a glimpse of the British slaves' suffering:

. . . rowing in galleys, drawing in carp, grinding in mills; with divers such unchristian like works, most lamentable to express and most burdensome to undergo, withal suffering much hunger and many blows on their bare bodies, by which cruelty many not being able to undergo it, have been forced to turn Mohamedans. (Diggens, Archive 9)

The coastal counties of southern England, particularly Cornwall, the home of the Brontës' maternal line, were the hardest hit. For more than two hundred and fifty years the people of Cornwall lived in terror of the Turkish raiders (also known as Rovers of Sallee, named for the town of Salé in Morocco). In his history of Cornwall, Davies Gilbert (1767–1839) gives an account of a 1760 incursion that went awry when a heavily armed corsair ran aground near Penzance. The 172 privateers (who each came ashore brandishing a "scymetar" and pistol) were captured and imprisoned by a company of local volunteers. These exotic strangers aroused the curiosity of the entire neighbourhood:

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<sup>2</sup> My thanks to Melissa Hardie-Budden (West Cornwall) for her assistance with this part of the research, and to the Griffith Graduate Research School, Griffith University, Queensland, for travel and research grants.

Their Asiatic dress, long beards and mustachios, with turbans, the absence of all covering from their feet and legs, the dark complexion and harsh features of a piratical band, made them objects of terror and of surprise. (Gilbert 98)

Melissa Hardie-Budden, researching the Brontës' maternal line, contends that even though these events occurred when Thomas Branwell and Ann Carne, the Brontë maternal grandparents, were in their teens, "such an invasion of strangers from exotic places would linger long in their minds and conversations" (Hardie-Budden, email; see also her "Maternal Forebears of the Brontë Archive"). She suggests that both Maria Branwell (1783–1821) and Elizabeth Branwell (1776–1842), the mother and aunt of Charlotte Brontë, would have known the story from their parents, and could hardly have been unaware of the pervasive "apprehension of piracy" (Diggens) that existed in Cornwall for centuries. Although Maria died while her children were very young, they could also have heard such tales of Cornwall from their Aunt Elizabeth, who moved to Yorkshire to care for her sister's family. Certainly, Charlotte and her brother Branwell were aware of the North African enslavement of British captives. In Daniel Defoe's *Adventures of Robinson Crusoe*, referred to by Charlotte in a letter to her sister Emily on 29 May 1843 (Smith 320), Crusoe is captured by "A Turkish Rover of Sallee" (Defoe 20) and enslaved for two years in Morocco before escaping. In Branwell Brontë's *The Pirate: A Tale by Captain John Flower* his protagonist is kidnapped from Great Glass Town and taken to sea by the piratical Rouge, his distress mirroring the experience of many enslaved by the Corsairs: "thrown bound on board of this unknown and suspicious vessel—probably a pirate or privateer—there perhaps [to] die a violent death or be carried and sold in foreign lands" (Glen 333).

Significantly, in the early nineteenth century, the British abolitionist discourse broadened to include the Ottomans' North African slave trade and their thousands of white Christian slaves (Löwenheim 30). Despite the terror experienced by Britons at the hands of the Barbary corsairs, the British Government's dependence on Algiers and Morocco to supply their Mediterranean garrisons had meant that the enslavement of British subjects throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was deliberately overlooked (Davis). Nevertheless, after the passing of "An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade" in 1807, the British began to apply diplomatic pressure on other European governments and the Ottoman states to end not only African slavery and the Atlantic trade, but also white slavery in the Ottoman Empire. With the defeat of Napoleon in 1815 the Barbary regencies ceased to be useful. This was at a time when Britain had assumed the mantle of "the world's most moral nation," portraying itself as an abolitionist state (Löwenheim 42). Following the Congress of Vienna in 1814, Admiral Sir William Sidney Smith (1764-1840) attempted to bring the attention of abolitionists to the problem of white slavery in North Africa, calling for military intervention against the Ottomans in the same way that British naval intervention was being used against French, Spanish and Portuguese vessels in an effort to end the Atlantic slave trade (Rodriguez 427). He exposed the atrocities of the corsairs and "created a new British interest" in white slavery (Löwenheim 41), and in the first half of the nineteenth century in the abolitionist discourse black and white slavery became inextricably entwined (Klose 111). The continuing focus of British foreign policy on the fight against the transatlantic slave trade drew increasing domestic and European attention to British inaction in respect of the Christian slaves in North Africa, with the result that their failure to adequately deal with this problem became a serious test of moral credibility (Klose 111). In 1816, in an effort to maintain the legitimacy of their call to abolish African slavery, a fleet under the command of Admiral Sir Edward Pellew (1757-1833) was sent to the Barbary states to negotiate the release of white slaves and to put an end to the corsair slave trade. However, the Dey of Algiers refused to co-

operate, and Pellew was again ordered to Algiers, this time to negotiate “only through the mouth of the gun and render the pirates incapable of kidnapping Christians into slavery and raiding European vessels and shores” (Löwenheim 31). The bombardment of Algiers on 26 August 1816 destroyed the entire Algerian fleet, leaving the coastal fortifications and much of the city in ruins. The Dey capitulated, releasing over a thousand white slaves and signing a treaty agreeing to end the enslavement of white Christians (Löwenheim 30; Klose 113; Taylor 292). The battle achieved a moral and a Christian victory for Britain, and Pellew was lauded at home and in Europe for his success. Edward Pellew was made a baronet in 1796, a Baron in 1814, and was created 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount of Exmouth and Canonteign in December 1816 in honour of his service in Algiers (Löwenheim 43; Taylor 293). He and his men became popular heroes, their exploits the subject of newspaper articles, operas, stage plays, and pamphlets, all of which demonstrated the British public perception of the Algiers operation as “a just cause, a moral war, and a face-saving operation” (Löwenheim 43). The bombardment of Algiers came to be viewed as one of the most brilliant victories in the classic age of British naval history (Taylor 294).

The hero of this episode, Edward Pellew, was related to the Brontë children through the Branwell family line. Pellew spent his boyhood in Penzance and would have been familiar with the Barbary corsairs’ history of terror on the Cornish coast and the many Cornishmen enslaved in Barbary. He would certainly have been aware of the enslavement of Captain John Pellow<sup>3</sup> and his young nephew, Edward Pellew’s second cousin, Thomas Pellow (1704–47), of Penryn in Cornwall (Taylor 244). All three were descendants of Captain George Pellow R.N. Thomas Pellow was eleven years old when he was kidnapped and enslaved for twenty-three years in Barbary before escaping. On his return to Cornwall he wrote a memoir of his years of enslavement, the first edition of which was published in 1739. Thomas Pellow’s slave narrative provides details of everyday life as a slave, his contact with the ruler of Morocco, and Pellow’s own experiences, including his time as a soldier. For Edward Pellew, preparing for his attack on Algiers, both his Cornish upbringing and his relationship to Thomas Pellow brought a personal element to Britain’s moral mission.

Admiral Pellew’s mission and Thomas Pellow’s enslavement have particular relevance to this essay, as they connect British white slavery and abolitionist discourse directly to the Brontë family history. I argue that the fame of their exploits played a significant role in Charlotte’s fascination with “the Turk.” In a letter to Ellen Nussey on 14 August 1840 Charlotte relates a visit of “cousin” John Branwell Williams to the Parsonage:

. . . we had about a fortnight ago—a visit from some of our South of England relations. John Branwell Williams and his Wife and daughter—they have been staying above a month with Uncle Fennel at Crosstone—They reckon to be very grand folks indeed—and talk largely—I thought assumingly I cannot say I admired them—To my eyes there seemed to be an attempt to play the great Mogul down in Yorkshire . . .  
(Smith 224-25)

Williams, who was second cousin to the Brontë children via his mother Alice Branwell, was also a descendent of Captain George Pellow and related to both Thomas Pellow and Edward Pellew (Lord Exmouth) through his grandmother, Grace Pellow. While Brontë appears to be no admirer of her “South of England relations” it is clear she is aware of their “grand” status,

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<sup>3</sup> There are numerous variants for the name: Pellew, Pellow, and Pellowe, to name only three. Family historian Dr. E. F. Pellowe (1964) points out that at Mylor, Cornwall, where the children of Humphrey Pellow were baptised, there are seven different spellings among the fourteen children.

and very likely she was aware of these distant but significant family connections with the white slave trade in Cornwall. Aunt Elizabeth Branwell, who treasured the Penzance family connections, would have ensured that this part of their mother's family history was known to the Brontës.

Throughout the 1840s the Anti-Slavery Society maintained its pressure on the government and in 1846 (at the time Brontë was writing *Jane Eyre*), when the goal changed from the total prohibition of slavery to ending the Ottoman trade in slaves, a modicum of success was achieved with the closure of the Constantinople slave market. Although, in deference to British demands, the trade in black slaves was officially abolished by the Ottomans in 1847, the lucrative trade in white women slaves continued until the fall of the Ottoman Empire after the First World War (Erler *passim*).

From the Renaissance onward a vast body of literature was inspired by the Ottomans, including Samuel Johnson's *The Story of Rasselas Prince of Abissinia*, and various English translations of *The Arabian Nights*, both of which are referred to in *Jane Eyre*. Brontë's fondness for Byron's *Turkish Tales* is also well known (see Llewellyn). Another favourite of Brontë, William Makepeace Thackeray, wrote of the Orient in *Notes on a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo*. Another source closer to home, for Brontë, would have been the travel writings of John Carne (1789-1844), a cousin of Elizabeth and Maria Branwell. Carne began his travels in 1821, journeying through Constantinople, Greece, the Levant, Egypt, and Palestine. His *Letters from the East* (1826) and *Recollections of Travels from the East* (1830) included detailed accounts of Turkish domestic and harem life. He published an account of his travels in the *New Monthly Magazine* which was reproduced in a volume dedicated to Sir Walter Scott, and went to a third edition (Boase). His writing also appeared in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, subscribed to for a number of years by Elizabeth Branwell, and read avidly by the young Brontës.

Representations of the "harem" and "the seraglio"<sup>4</sup> proliferated throughout popular culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Following the Corsairs' demise they became the subject of music hall entertainment, evidenced by the "Corsair song" Blanche Ingram, who "doat[s] on Corsairs," commands Rochester to sing "*con spirito*" (153) at the Thornfield house party. By the beginning of the nineteenth century Oriental harem fantasies were represented by French and British artists in a multitude of paintings, lithographs and engravings. Joan Del Plato's *Multiple Wives, Multiple Pleasures: Representing the Harem 1800-1875* and Ruth Bernard Yeazell's *Harems of the Mind* are both richly illustrated and give detailed understandings of the effect of, and the genesis of, this Western art genre. Scenes of Turkish eroticism depicting enslaved women—almost invariably white—naked and semi-naked, languishing on cushions in the harem, or being sold in slave markets to dark-skinned "pashas" were ubiquitous in Britain in the form of widely available cheap prints, also receiving acclaim as "high" art. Brontë's awareness of at least one of these is evidenced in the semi-reclining *Cleopatra* viewed by Lucy Snow in *Villette*; assumed to have been inspired by Édouard Bièvre's painting *Une Almeh*, exhibited in the *Salon de Bruxelles Triennial Exhibition of 1842*, and viewed by Charlotte during her sojourn in Brussels (Charlier 388). Brontë demonstrates her awareness of the "erotic despotism" of the Turkish harem in one of her Angrian tales: "Caroline Vernon" (1839). There, the lecherous image of

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<sup>4</sup>The seraglio was the compound within the Ottoman Sultan's Constantinople palace, Topkapi, where wives, slaves and concubines lived (Yeazell). In the nineteenth century the term "harem" and "seraglio" were conflated with "harem." My use of the term "harem" in this study generally refers to the seraglio.

the Turk is introduced in the form of the Count of Zamorna, who, intent on seducing Caroline, tells her: “If I were a bearded Turk, Caroline, I would take you to my harem.” His words strike her with “a thrill of nameless dread” (Alexander 482).

In short, the motifs of the Turk, the sultan, the corsair, the seraglio, and the slave—all heavily inscribed with eroticism—were associated with centuries of white slavery within the Ottoman Empire. By the time of *Jane Eyre*’s publication in 1847, the idea of the harem as a place where enslaved white women were possessed by men and bound to slake their sexual needs was entrenched in the British imagination. As both Madeline Zilfi and Reina Lewis suggest, the stereotype of the lascivious Turk and the association of Oriental motifs with lust and female sexual enslavement, and the harem as a site of sexual pleasure for both master and slave, would have been well known to Brontë’s readers. The novel’s Oriental sub-text colours otherwise chaste scenes with eroticism and sensuality, yet, even at moments of intense sexual desire, a pervasive sense of female containment, and sexual or bodily subjugation is present.

From the first page, with the introduction of Mrs Reed “reclined on the sofa by the fireside” (5), Brontë weaves “The Turk” into the fabric of the novel. Moments after Mrs Reed’s introduction, Brontë presents her protagonist, Jane Eyre. Concealed by crimson curtains (a recurring motif in Oriental and *Turquerie* paintings), in the window-seat of the adjoining breakfast room with a favourite book, the ten-year-old Jane sits “cross-legged like a Turk” (5). Here Brontë conjures something beyond a visual image requiring familiarity with a certain style of sitting. Contrasting the upright energy of the Turk-like Jane with the passivity of her reclining aunt, Brontë metonymically endows Jane with the stereotypical qualities of the Turk, sensuality—even lasciviousness, and, of course, “otherness.” With this compelling Oriental image, Brontë foregrounds the immanent personality traits that will generate tension in the incidents and interactions that flow from them: Jane’s timidity, modesty, and powerlessness, her “otherness” and her overriding need to belong, coupled with a fierce assertiveness and the capacity for great sexual passion.

Jane’s brutal cousin John Reed disrupts her seclusion. Demanding her book, he hurls it at her, causing her to fall and cut her head. Bleeding she turns on him: “you are like a murderer—you are like a slave driver—you are like the Roman emperors” (8), the first mention of Mediterranean slavery in the novel. She startles herself with this unwonted vehemence, her own “Turkishness” responding to the “Turkish” despotism she recognises in Reed. Nevertheless, his power prevails. The domination and subjugation of Jane to “Master” John Reed, and the fear aroused by his habitual abuse, resonates through Jane’s consciousness so that her experience of Reed’s violence is not empathic or metaphorical but that of an *actual* slave owned by a volatile and cruel master. Punished with incarceration in the red-room, Jane becomes the chastised “rebel slave” (9).

The theme of Jane’s fear of sexual subjugation, symbolised by and always present in Brontë’s Eastern allusions, originates in the red-room scene. Many of Brontë’s Oriental motifs fall under the rubric of *Turquerie*, the lavish material culture of the Ottoman Empire. *Turquerie* manifested in art, fashion, interior decoration, the decorative arts, and architecture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in France, and Britain. It was synonymous with luxury yet always with an undercurrent of eroticism and sensuality. In fashion, it manifested in colourful silks, furs (especially ermine), lavish jewellery, and perfumes such as musk and amber. In interior design, it appeared in the use of vibrant colours (particularly deep red), opulent fabrics, dinnerware and ceramics decorated with Turkish-style patterns, Turkish carpets, and furniture such as the well-named “ottoman couch”. Brontë uses *Turquerie* to

great effect in the red-room at Gateshead, a room which has received considerable attention from critics for its symbolic association with Jane's expulsion from childhood.

Brontë's red-room is a *boudoir Turc*, a symbolic portrayal of female sexuality represented by fanciful images of Oriental opulence. The creation of Turkish rooms, particularly bedrooms, in English country houses was fashionable in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, when the passion for *Turquerie* was at its height. Haydn Williams describes one such Turkish room in a Wiltshire country house, furnished with ottoman sofas, candelabra, "and piles of cushions":

The whole room is hung round with ample curtains of the richest orange satin, with deep fringes of silk and gold. Between the folds of this drapery, mirrors of uncommon size appear as openings leading to other apartments. The carpet, of reddish Etruscan brown contrasts admirably with the tones of the hangings. The windows are screened by blinds of orange silk. (159)

The red-room, a "large and stately chamber" (10), is decorated in just such a manner, and its connotations of sexuality are illuminated by Brontë's Oriental motifs. The red-room is both womb-like: "half shrouded" (10) in festoons of red drapery, carpeted in red; and vaginal: "the walls were a soft fawn colour with a blush of pink in it" (10). At its centre the great bed, like a tabernacle (10), a place of worship, but also a place of sacrifice, is supported on phallic "pillars of mahogany (10), and "piled-up" (11) with pillows and mattresses in the manner of fantasy harem representations in Oriental paintings. Spread across this voluptuously decadent bed is a virginal "snowy Marseilles counterpane" (11). The bed is hung with "deep red damask" (10); a fabric originating in the Ottoman Empire, its name derived from Damascus. The "deep red" (10) of the festooned draperies, the hangings on the bed, the carpet, and the cloth covering the table at the foot of the bed may well have been recognised by many Victorian readers as "Turkey Red," a "new" method of creating colour-fast red fabric which had originated in Turkey and been adopted in Scotland in the late eighteenth century, manufacturing cloth for overseas as well as British markets (Nenadic and Tuckett).

Elaine Showalter notes that in *Jane Eyre* "the sexual experiences of the female body are expressed spatially through elaborate and rhythmically recurring images of rooms and houses" (113), and none of these is more sexually charged or more potently realised than the red-room. The red-room has long been viewed as womb-like and representative of female sexuality. Carolyn Williams, for example, recognises the "whole range of uterine analogies" (71) in the maternal symbolism of the red-room, Melodie Monahan interprets it as the "literalized stage of the onset of menses" (590) and Elsie Michie views Jane's confinement in the red-room as an allusion to the manner in which medical (mis)understandings of menstruation were utilised within nineteenth-century middle-class society to confine or limit women's lives. I argue, further, that the bloody symbolism of the red-room, its representation of menstruation and menarche, and Jane's captivity there, are symbolic of the child's movement into sexual maturity, and that the richly symbolic room, the property of a man, engenders Jane's fear of bodily and sexual subjugation. Extending the feminist readings of the red-room is the Oriental sub-text, underlined by the terrified Jane "riveted to a low ottoman near the marble chimney-piece with the bed rising above her" (11) (emphasis added).

Jane leaves the terrors of the red-room at Gateshead for Lowood school, to join a household of sequestered girls, subjugated by a handful of senior women, in thrall to yet another tyrannical master, the insupportably harsh Reverend Brocklehurst. Lowood is a place of



ascetic privation, with none of Gateshead's opulence. Yet as Jane walks in the "convent-like" (40) garden within its imprisoning walls, Brontë interpolates a fragrant note of the Orient into the text, Samuel Johnson's *The Story of Rasselas Prince of Abissinia* (1719), which is being read by Helen Burns on Jane's first meeting with her (41). Although Brontë makes it clear the novel holds no interest for Jane, reference is made to *Rasselas* on a further two occasions (43, 46). Johnson's well-known novel relates the story of Prince Rasselas of Abissinia, his sister Nekayah, her maid Pekuah, and their escape from idyllic confinement in Happy Valley. In the tale-within-a-tale of Pekuah's abduction and immurement in the harem of an Arab chieftain, Johnson depicts the harem as a domain where enslaved women live in ignorance of the world, occupying themselves with "childish play" (Johnson 168). Their pitiful, deprived existence is one of excruciating *ennui*, devoid of intellectual stimulation, without any possibility of attenuation. These images, likely to be familiar to the novel's readers, resonate with Jane's inner monologue at Thornfield:

. . . women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; (93)

A significant element in *Rasselas* is Pekuah's revelation that the wives in the harem—despite their beauty—are not loved by their master. In fact, their very enslavement ensures his disdain: "to a man like the Arab such beauty was only a flower casually plucked and carelessly thrown away" (Johnson 140).

Highlighting Oriental female enslavement also throws into relief Rochester's contemptuous dismissal of his former mistresses when he echoes Johnson's "Arab": "What was their beauty to me in a few months? . . . Hiring a mistress is the next worst thing to buying a slave: both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior: and to live familiarly with inferiors is degrading" (266). This revelation intensifies the conflict between Jane's love and sexual desire for Rochester and her fear that if she becomes his "slave" she will also become unloved and discarded:

I felt the truth of these words; and I drew from them the certain inference, that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me as—under any pretext—with any justification—through any temptation—to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory. I did not give utterance to this conviction: it was enough to feel it. I impressed it on my heart that it might remain there to serve me as aid in the time of trial. (266)

Brontë's text is unequivocal in figuring Rochester, with his "swarth" skin and "blackaviced" (171) features, as a "man like the Arab" with all the connotations of despotism, cruelty and licentiousness inherent in that image. He masquerades as a Gypsy, sings a "Corsair-song" (157) with Blanche Ingram, and wears a pearl necklace around his "bronze scrag" (380). His features are "Paynim" (156), he is variously likened to a sultan (229), "an Eastern Emir; an agent or a victim of the bowstring" (156), the Grand Turk (229), a "three-tailed bashaw" (230), a Levantine pirate (157) and King Ahasuerus (223); he talks "like a Sphinx" (118); and he compares himself to King Darius the Persian (118). By sign-posting Rochester's "Turkish" qualities, Brontë invites the reader to imagine him involved in the careless sexual domination of women, with a future for Jane that includes sexual enthrallment and even bigamy.

In a key scene in which Rochester—pursuing his seduction of Jane—sexualises their relationship by recounting the story of the infidelity of his French mistress, Céline Varens, Brontë's *Turquerie* layers the scene with sensuality. The opera-dancer Céline is the mother of Jane's pupil Adèle, and while the child may, or may not, be Rochester's daughter, that very possibility foregrounds their sexual relationship.<sup>5</sup> Rochester lists the extravagant gifts of *Turquerie*: jewels, lingerie, lace, and Turkish cashmeres, he has lavished on Céline—a sultan's gifts to his odalisque. He spices his story-telling with the rhetoric of intimate sensuality. It is Paris, the night is warm and the heady scents of flowers and “sprinkled essences” (120) fill the air. Crunching lustily on chocolate candies, Rochester waits impatiently on the moonlit balcony outside his mistress's boudoir, his heart beating fast as he breathes in Céline's intimate Turkish aroma of “musk and amber” (120). He tells Jane of Céline's admiration of his body—his “*taille d'athlète*,” and his own familiarity with hers: “I knew her instantly by her little foot, seen peeping from the skirt of her dress” (121). Even the description of the fleeting jealousy he feels as he spies Céline with her younger lover is cloyingly sensual, evoking the image of Oriental snake charmers:

When I saw my charmer thus come in accompanied by a cavalier, I seemed to hear a hiss, and the green snake of jealousy, rising on undulating coils from the moonlit balcony, glided within my waistcoat, and ate its way in two minutes to my heart's core. (122)

To underline the seductive force of this scene, as Rochester speaks of himself taking out a cigar—that potent symbol of male sexuality—he mirrors this in the present and, as the “Havannah incense” (120) drifts into the cold air of Thornfield, the discourse between Rochester and Jane merges with the sensuality of the moonlit balcony in Paris. In this scene Brontë's use of *Turquerie* amplifies the eroticism inherent in their conversation, foregrounding the sensuality of his illicit affair, while his sexual jealousy emphasises the subordination of Céline to his ownership.

Brontë saturates the house-party at Thornfield with *Turquerie*. Ladies languish, “half-reclining” (146) on the “crimson couches and ottomans” (89) in the drawing room, with its “Turkey carpet” (88), and “crimson curtain” (145). Female guests wear turbans, feathered plumes and “crimson velvet” (146).<sup>6</sup> The Turkish backdrop suffuses a conversation or situation with eroticism, introducing or emphasising an existing tone of sensuality and, importantly, amplifying the sexual tension simmering between Jane and Rochester. When Blanche Ingram with her “Oriental eye” (137) dons Oriental costume for charades with Rochester, who looks “the very model of an Eastern Emir” (156), Brontë colours Rochester's “sham” relationship with Blanche with an eroticism that brings Jane's jealousy to the fore.

As Rochester joins his guests after dinner, ignoring Jane, Brontë's atmosphere “*turc*” underlines the sultan/slave power dynamic in Brontë's depiction of Jane's lustful gaze, and the

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<sup>5</sup> Céline's occupation as an “opera-dancer” references the Orient. The *opéra-ballet La Caravane du Caire* (The Cairo Fair), which relates the story of a generous Turk and a noble Frenchman, brought the *opéra-comique* and ballet together for the first time in January 1784. By 1829 it had been performed almost five hundred times (Williams, *Turquerie* 85).

<sup>6</sup> Wearing Turkish costume and “Playing the Turk” in masquerades and fancy-dress balls was popular among the French and British upper classes in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Williams, *Turquerie* 63).

sheer physicality of her attraction to Rochester. The following passage conveys the fierce intensity and pain of erotic yearning that Jane cannot resist:

I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking,—a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (149)

Jane is profoundly aware of Rochester's erotic dominance, even though he does not return her gaze. He "has an influence that quite mastered me,—that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his . . . He made me love him without looking at me" (149).

Having identified Jane with "the Turk" in the opening pages, Brontë layers the naive young governess with the heat of lust and passionate desire, ultimately leading her to an idolisation of Rochester that hints at the sacrilegious. Depicting Rochester through this Oriental lens elevates him beyond the banal, "everyday matter[s]" (124) of an Englishman with a French mistress. Instead, he becomes the "sultan," a man of fierce passion and a sense of erotic entitlement so intense that he considers bigamy an acceptable means of taking possession of the object of his desire.

From her arrival at Thornfield Jane has maintained an independent spirit but, once betrothed, her passionate love for Rochester endangers the mutuality Jane believes exists between them, and Rochester's despotic "Turk" nature fully manifests. When he takes Jane shopping, he rides roughshod over her modest "quakerish" selections, demanding she wear *his* jewels and *his* choice of brightly coloured "harem" silks. Now Jane at last becomes aware of what the novel's readers have recognised all along: Rochester is the "sultan" who will enslave her if he has his way. Deploying the imagery of the Turk, Brontë throws into relief the perils posed to Jane's sovereignty over her self, her identity and her sexuality in her coming marriage to Rochester. Within an Oriental context, jewellery contains several meanings, all of which pertain to sexuality and dominance. As Joan Del Plato points out "jewels are a means by which the material values of the outside world infiltrate the domestic world of love and sex within the harem" (146). The jewels exoticise and sexualise the wearer, and they directly indicate the ownership of the harem woman by the sultan so "we are reminded of who owns whom" (Del Plato 146). Contextualised by Brontë's Turkish tropes, Rochester's insistence on bestowing expensive gifts upon Jane and adorning her body with jewels against her wishes becomes an exercise of the dominance of his sexual power and the subjugation of Jane's.

On the journey back to Thornfield, Jane contemplates Rochester's smug expression: "his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (229). With resistance blazing, she threatens Rochester that if he looks "in that way" (229) she will eschew his silks and be married in the dress she is wearing. Brontë has an amused Rochester—as "the Turk"—obliquely declaring his belief that he would be sexually satisfied by Jane as he compares her with the concubines of the seraglio: "I would not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk's whole seraglio; gazelle-eyes, houri forms, and all!" (229). Her own "Turkishness" to the fore, Jane responds fiercely, leaving no doubt she is aware of Rochester's despotism, and has the courage to confront him:

The Eastern allusion bit me again: "I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio," I said; "so don't consider me an equivalent for one; if you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay;

and lay out in extensive slave-purchases some of that spare cash you seem at a loss to spend satisfactorily here.” (229)

When Rochester questions what she will do while he is purchasing slaves, her reply further challenges and subverts his dominance: “I’ll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved—your harem inmates amongst the rest. I’ll get admitted there, and I’ll stir up mutiny; and you, three-tailed bashaw as you are sir, shall in a trice find yourself fettered amongst our hands” (230).

Although she preaches “liberty,” Jane imagines Rochester enslaved to *her*, and fettered until he submits to her will. Nevertheless, this illusory dominance can only be short-lived as Rochester, coolly aware of the power that will be vested in him once they marry, reminds her on their return to Thornfield: “It is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently” (231). Clearly, as “Jane Rochester” her material being and independent identity will be subjugated to the demands of her husband. On the wedding morning the “self” she sees reflected in her bedroom mirror is an Oriental stranger, “robed and veiled” (244). Vulnerable, and fearful, Jane is no match for Rochester’s despotism. She is not ready to wed, and the revelation of Rochester’s attempted bigamy provides a necessary reprieve, precipitating Jane’s flight from Thornfield and her sojourn at Moor House and Morton in the company of the Rivers family.

Jane’s austere little schoolmistress’s cottage at Morton is the antithesis of Oriental luxury. Nevertheless, it provides Brontë with a setting for a scene of “Turkish” fantasy which reveals the ambiguity implicit in Jane’s love and erotic desire for Rochester. The fantasy scene discussed in the opening of this essay, comes as Jane compares her role of teacher and sense of desolation and degradation at Morton with an imagined life with Rochester “in a southern clime amid the luxuries of a pleasure villa” (306). Jane visualises herself as the English harem slave to Rochester’s sultan; having “surrendered to temptation; listened to passion . . . to have sunk down in the silken snare; fallen asleep in the flowers covering it” (306), “delirious with his love” (306). Jane’s ambivalence and the depth of her dilemma undercut this erotic reverie as she broods over the forlorn thought that “he would have loved me well for a *while*” (emphasis added) (306). She is torn between her passionate love and yearning for Rochester and her fear of fading love, abandonment, and subjugation as a fallen woman. “Is it better” Jane asks, “to be a slave in a fool’s paradise at Marseilles—fevered with delusive bliss one hour—suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next—or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England?” (306). As Rochester has never told Jane where in the south of France his villa is located, her self-description as a slave in “Marseilles” echoes the “snowy Marseilles counterpane” (11) on the great bed in the red-room, layering Jane’s erotic imaginings with the sense of fear and resistance to sexual maturity she experienced there as a pubescent girl. The question is asked in the present tense by the tearful young Jane, but the answer from the narrating Jane “Yes; *I feel now* that I was right” (emphasis added) (306) is undercut with the ambivalence of ten years of hindsight.

The time she spends with St. John Rivers and his sisters, away from Rochester, affords Jane the opportunity to recognise her need for sensual passion, and underlines the abhorrent nature of a loveless marriage in which sex would be a conjugal duty. This understanding will play a part in Jane’s recognition of the nature of the relationship between herself and Rochester, and ultimately lead her to overcome the fear that his love will fade, guiding her decision to return to him. Brontë provides readers with a final glimpse of *Turquerie* when Jane, liberated by her inheritance, creates a new red-room at Moor House: “A spare parlour and bedroom . . .

refurnished entirely with old mahogany and crimson upholstery” (334). Unlike the red-room at Gateshead, this is not a man’s room, but a feminine *boudoir turc*—a woman’s creation, representing Jane Eyre’s independent choices and her pleasures. This new red-room symbolises the free expression of Jane’s sensuality, and the empowerment of her sexuality outside of male domination. With this reiteration of the red-room in a new form, Brontë signals that Jane will not tolerate the suppression of her sensuality by St. John, and that if she returns to Rochester it will be without fear of bodily possession or subjugation.

In the novel’s closing scenes at Ferndean, Jane claims a confident equality of authority with the blind and maimed Rochester that is both personal and sexual. She kisses him freely, returns his embrace, and perches “pertinaciously” (377) on his knee. She loves him “better” (379) now she can be useful to him, when previously he “disdained every part but that of giver and protector” (379). Nevertheless, although he is no longer a despot, and without his “proud independence” (379), he has not lost his sexual mastery. Jane understands immediately that he fears the loss of his sexual potency when he bemoans his “seared vision” (378) and his “crippled strength” (378), and is quick to remind him of his virility: “you are green and vigorous” (379) she reassures him. “Ah! Jane,” he says, dismissing the idea that he could be in need of a friend, “I want a wife” (379). When he proclaims that “we must become one flesh without delay” (380) the implicit sexuality in this demand leaves no doubt that Rochester’s masculine energy is as vigorous as ever. As Laurence Lerner puts it “he is after all one of the most virile lovers in nineteenth-century fiction” (288).

Throughout *Jane Eyre* the metonymy of Brontë’s Oriental tropes provides a coherent, contextual hermeneutics that extends interpretations of the novel’s sexual politics and unifies the narrative. Brontë’s exacting attention to her choice of words, attested to by Elizabeth Gaskell and visible in the *devoirs* produced during Charlotte’s sojourn in Brussels, as well as a quick glance through her juvenilia—the lecherous Zamorna of the Angrian tales comes immediately to mind—demonstrate Brontë’s awareness of the erotic meanings implicit in her “Eastern allusions.” Nevertheless, Charlotte was incensed by the remark made by G. H. Lewes that there should be “sympathy” between the two, as they had “both written naughty books.” She is said to have responded with an “explosion” of “indignant eloquence” (Gaskell 246). Rightly so. The term “naughty” connotes both prurience and prudishness, entwined with a sense of immaturity that conjures an image of sniggering schoolboys. This is an altogether flimsy and inapposite description for Brontë’s finely wrought, nuanced, eroticism. Her acute awareness of the conflicted nature of Jane’s passion for Rochester is heightened by the erotic arousal existing between submission and desire; the play of object and subject, and master and slave, metaphorically located in the Oriental tropes and motifs in which Brontë situates desire. Brontë’s use of the erotically infused motifs of Turkish sexual slavery complicates a rhetoric that considers male sexual domination inimical to female sexual pleasure, and which, at the same time, denies the dynamic complexity of female sensual desires and pleasures that may derive from that.

However, I argue that female desire erupts in a multitude of expressions in *Jane Eyre*: in Jane’s lustful gaze at the Thornfield house party, in her heated longing of absence when Rochester is away from Thornfield, and in the verbal banter with which Jane keeps them both “from the edge of the gulf” (233) of passion once he has been identified as the sultan who will enslave her. Jane’s strategies to protect her virginity do not come easily—“I would rather have pleased than teased him” (234)—but she stifles and distances herself from her own sexuality in order to conform to societal constraints, and the danger the violation of these

constraints poses to a governess “slave” should she succumb to the pleasure of seduction by her master.

It is also present in the powerful eroticism of Jane’s dreams and fantasies during her separation from Rochester, and in the violence of her revulsion toward St. John’s proposal of marriage and its potential sexual duties. In all these contemplations of desire the Turkish tropes multiply its power and heighten sensuality, positioning Brontë to engage with the complex interplay of “master” and “slave,” ranging across despotism, domination, accommodation and resistance. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë’s Oriental rhetoric negotiates the nexus of subjugation, submission, and pleasure in Jane and Rochester’s relationship, and travels the complex terrain leading to the sexual empowerment of a passionate, middle-class, English woman in nineteenth-century Britain.

**Dr. Ann Erskine** completed her PhD with Griffith University in 2018, supervised by Associate Professor Jock Macleod. Her doctoral thesis, entitled “Representations of fear and the construction of text in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*,” argues that fear, not rage (and rebellion), is the primary emotion of the novel and is fundamental to the shaping and orienting of the narrative. Ann is an independent scholar, living in Bali.

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