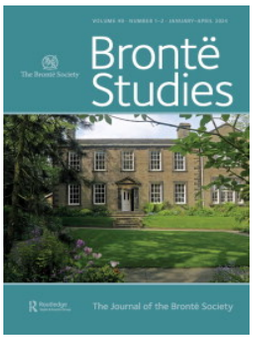

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'Odd and incorrect': Convention and *Jane Eyre*'s Feminist Legacy

Katherine Hobbs

Independent Scholar, Los Angeles, California, USA

ABSTRACT

This article investigates the Victorian reception of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) and the collision of literary criticism with political commentary. Brontë's novel has always had a reputation for being politically troublesome, but no one seems to know why. My essay develops two claims. First, I argue that the novel's political slipperiness stems from its critics' inability to agree on *what* the work actually is. *Jane Eyre* provoked contradictory judgements from readers who could not reconcile it with existing frameworks of literary convention. The stakes were high, as attempts to define the novel's genre fused with attempts to produce a coherent sense of literary and social history. Second, I argue that the liberal feminist subject that modern criticism projects backwards onto *Jane Eyre* did not exist for Victorian readers, and that Brontë's governess heroine instead activates a historically fraught relationship between character, type, and women's economic and legal roles. Rather than addressing *Jane Eyre* directly, I treat it as the absent centre of a debate over convention, waged in reviews, pamphlets and essays, that merged literary criticism with political commentary and set crucial precedents for mid-Victorian legal debates on the woman question.

KEYWORDS

Convention; feminism; *Jane Eyre*; governess; literary history

This is not an essay about *Jane Eyre* (1847). It is an essay about how no one, since 1847, has known what to do with *Jane Eyre*—especially when it comes to feminism. The novel has a reputation for being socially and politically troublesome, but we can never settle on how or why. In 1848, Elizabeth Rigby worried that 'the tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written Jane Eyre' (174). In 1855, Margaret Oliphant called it a 'wild declaration of the "Rights of Woman" in a new aspect' (557). But Charlotte Brontë herself confessed to W. S. Williams in 1847 that she did not think *Jane Eyre* addressed any 'subject of public interest' (Smith 1995–2004, 1:554). She told him the following year that she did not want her next work to 'resemble its predecessor' and that she was considering writing something to address 'the "condition of women" question', implying that *Jane Eyre* had not done this (Smith 1995–2004, 2:66). Likewise, many early readers of the novel saw nothing overly political about it.[1]

CONTACT Katherine Hobbs katherinehobbs35@gmail.com

Why is this important? Because we have inherited a sanitised, oversimplified narrative about *Jane Eyre*'s relationship to women's politics, fuelled by a general impression of the novel's unconventionality. *Jane Eyre*, the typical story goes, disrupted literary and social convention alike, and caused an uproar because its innovations struck prudish readers as morally and artistically vulgar. At the centre of this critical narrative is Brontë's decision to focus on the emotions and individual agency of a lowly governess—the consummate unconventional heroine. I refer here to readings of Jane as an embodiment of the liberal feminist subject, a critical tradition firmly established by the second-wave feminist criticism of the 1970s and still difficult to shake.[2] Brontë's heroine, as Margaret Homans demonstrates, has become shorthand for 'feminism in fictional form' (2015, 27), and *Jane Eyre*, as Gayatri Spivak and Cora Kaplan point out, keeps reasserting its position as a feminist 'cult text' or 'ur-text' even as reading practices and politics change (Spivak 1985, 243–61; Kaplan 2007, 15–36).[3] While Jane's individuality was the locus of political value for second-wave critics, this unified model of the female subject, which leaves many unrepresented, has become far less appealing in the wake of postcolonial criticism and recent conversations around race, gender and empire.[4] Brontë's 'emphasis on the feeling self', in Kaplan's words, is linked 'to a particularly problematic strand of feminist history, one whose pretensions to speak on behalf of "women" as a group masks its own considerable cultural biases' (2007, 25). *Jane Eyre* and an exclusive, even conservative, form of feminism are thus aligned in literary history.

But was this liberal feminist Jane ever the same as Jane-from-1847? As Kaplan's commentary implies, critiques of *Jane Eyre*'s politics over the last forty years seem directed less towards Brontë's heroine and more towards the imagined feminist subject the novel has come to represent in critical discourse. This is not to apologise for *Jane Eyre*'s now problematic depictions of race and class, or to disavow the structures of power that facilitate Jane's marriage plot. I suggest, rather, that reading *Jane Eyre* as an uncomplicatedly liberatory text tells us more about the 1970s than the 1840s, and that this individualistic reading is a legacy imposed *on* the novel rather than a legacy *of* the novel.

In this context, we should be less interested in assessing whether *Jane Eyre* represents a 'good' or a 'bad' form of feminism than in thinking through what the persistent discord around this novel tells us about the historically specific intersection of women's politics with literary genre and criticism. To do this, I focus on a single term: convention. *Jane Eyre* is at the centre of this story, but it is an absent centre, around which I investigate how literary convention took on specific, sometimes unexpected, political resonances. With a few important exceptions, I draw from reviews published in British periodicals between 1847 and 1855, when Brontë's death precipitated attempts to position both her and her work within literary history.[5] A closer look at how these nineteenth-century readers perceived the relationship of *Jane Eyre* and its eponymous heroine to shifting definitions of convention reveals how women's politics became tangled up in debates over literary form, and how the forms in question left very little room for the political subject of twentieth-century feminist theory. Tracking *Jane Eyre*'s perceived relationship to convention in the early criticism also shows us what is lost when we insist on classifying the book as

*un*conventional in the literary sense—in other words, as a 'great' novel, a timeless work that supposedly transcends the conventions of genre fiction.

Convention and Classification

I will begin with a deceptively simple question: what genre is *Jane Eyre*? Brontë referred to it in letters and paratextual materials as a 'mere domestic novel' (Smith 1995–2004, 1:554) and 'a plain tale with few pretensions' (Brontë 1848, 1:vii). But she also discussed the book's use of 'Melodrame' in exchanges with George Henry Lewes (Smith 1995–2004, 1:559). Brontë published it with the subtitle 'An Autobiography', a suggestion she adopted from Smith and Elder shortly before publication (Smith 1995–2004, 1:540).[6] While we might thus simply call *Jane Eyre* a generically ambiguous work, that would not change the fact that almost two centuries' worth of critics have tried (and failed) to classify it. Examples of the categories applied to *Jane Eyre* in the 1840s to 1860s include domestic novel, autobiography, a work of 'reality', romance, 'domestic romance', sensation novel, melodrama and psychological fiction.[7] These designations were not always mutually exclusive. Most of these terms were also deployed at one point or another to explain what *Jane Eyre* was not. From the perspective of twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism, we can add more genres to the list: spiritual autobiography, domestic autobiography, Gothic novel, realist novel and *Bildungsroman*.[8] *Jane Eyre* has been surrounded by floating generic categories since the beginning, and none of these have definitively stuck.

This might seem like a pedantic exercise in list-making, but it is crucial to explaining *Jane Eyre*'s peculiar magnetism. The book has always facilitated multiple, contradictory readings and has done so to an extent that reaches far beyond the usual critical squabbles. Part of this is because it arrived in the right place at the right time. Brontë's novel, to borrow a phrase from Oliphant, 'stole upon the scene' at what readers and political commentators perceived as a time of transition in literature and politics alike (1855, 557). But even while critics saw *Jane Eyre* as standing at a literary crossroads, the novel's eventual canonicity was nowhere near a foregone conclusion. In the 1840s and 1850s, many of the novels we cite to retroactively define literary genres such as realism and sensation had not yet been written. Britain did not have what we would recognise as a coherent women's movement. For every reader who saw *Jane Eyre* as a great work, there was another who saw it as dangerous garbage. Likewise, for every critic impressed by Jane's psychological depth, there was another irritated by the pretensions of an uppity governess with 'pugilistic propensities' (*Mirror* 1847, 378). The novel encouraged readers to vehemently take sides and to attempt to articulate literary boundaries—between sensationalism and realism, propriety and impropriety, convention and originality—in a critical climate where none of these categories had yet solidified.

Accordingly, we must be careful not to read backwards through modern understandings of genre. It is tempting to impose a system of organisation in hindsight, especially because the early criticism of *Jane Eyre* is a disorienting mess. But it is a mess we need to honour. Victorian readers were actively constructing their own literary vocabularies, no less sophisticated than our own, and *Jane Eyre* was a

critical lightning rod. We can learn a lot from how early critics read Brontë's novel in relation to existing literary conventions—or how they tried to.

'Convention' was an immediate buzzword in the criticism of *Jane Eyre*. The term appears incessantly in commentaries on the book from 1847 to the present. Its ubiquity is useful for investigating practices of literary criticism as it predates generic categories that we now treat as standard for the era (e.g. realism) but persists alongside their development all the way into modern readings of *Jane Eyre*. Crucially, convention is also deeply imbricated with the novel's status as a second-wave feminist fossil. As I have noted, *Jane Eyre*'s reputation as an unconventional novel is often taken as evidence of its politically disruptive nature and as some sort of statement on the position of women. I would be going against the historical record to suggest that there are no nineteenth-century precedents for this reading. On the contrary, Brontë herself fostered this impression with her preface to the 1848 edition of the novel, in which she defended her book by reminding readers that '[c]onventionality is not morality' (1848, 1:viii). Her comments were directed towards those who accused her book of being anti-Christian and, more broadly, those 'timorous or carping few … in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong' (1848, 1:viii). Here, conventionality refers to artificial appearances, and Brontë invokes it to dismiss dull readers who prize the letter over the spirit. In a similar (yet hostile) vein, a review published in *The Mirror Monthly Magazine* in December 1847 complained about Brontë's impulse to 'overstep conventional usages' and 'trample upon customs respected by our forefathers' (376), attributing this impulse to a 'state of inquietude' in society (377), perpetrated largely by the present generation of writing women desperate to 'startl[e] a crowd of men by their new opinions' (377).

But this was only one way convention was weaponised in *Jane Eyre's* early days. In fact, the term fluctuated wildly. Sometimes it was used in this social sense: convention aligned with proper behaviour and good morality (or empty rules and hypocrisy, if one took Brontë's point of view). A closely related sense referred to the process by which these rules and expectations developed, with convention designating a structure—legal, political or social—that had solidified over time, arising out of use rather than codification (as with common law). Finally, it could be used in a literary sense: convention designated rules or generic features that helped define a particular kind of work. Just as important as these definitions was the fact that the term united two drastically opposed connotations. Convention could be construed as artificial and therefore bad, whether this meant a formulaic, mindless novel or meaningless social form(s), or it could be positive and prescriptive, designating rules that should be followed in order to maintain social cohesion or categorise works of art.

As readers debated *Jane Eyre*, convention also explicitly became a means of marking time. Convention could be used as an index of progress when old conventions—what a critic for the *Atlas* in 1847 called 'jaded, exhausted attributes of a worn-out vein of imagination' (Allott 1974, 67)—were discarded or revised, and new ones were adopted. However, the movement of convention did not necessarily correlate to forward motion. Some critics sensed something lost or even regressive when long-respected conventions were revised too boldly. Amid these warring understandings of convention, classifying *Jane Eyre* became an urgent matter of generating a coherent cultural history. There was

an impulse in many reviews to position Brontë's novel within recent history and to identify the role of the novel in the present age. Critics invoked heroic romance, historical fiction in the mode of Scott, eighteenth-century novels, recent 'fashionable' novels, contemporary works by Dickens and Thackeray, and lineages of women novelists to try to figure out where Brontë fit. The problem was that she did not.

Critics were perplexed, and not because the novel was unconventional. They were perplexed because it *was* conventional—just in weird, unsettling ways. Readers in the late 1840s could identify inherited tropes in the novel, but these could not be parsed according to the ordinary rules. As a bemused writer for *Sharpe's London Magazine* commented in 1855, already parodying the critical flurry of the late 1840s, 'the strange thing [about *Jane Eyre*] was, that no two people could agree in their opinions of it, so full was it of contradictions' (339). This reviewer playfully characterised the 'clamo[ur]' around the novel as a major political event. At a time when 'events were few' on the world stage—revolution had not yet shaken France, conflict in the Crimea was several years away, and the 'invincible Wellington' was ageing peacefully—the arrival of Brontë's novel filled a vacuum for the 'easily excited' public. Debates over the novel took on a political or sectarian tone: 'Parties ran high about it; there were Jane Eyre-ites and Anti Jane-Eyre-ites' (*Sharpe's* 1855, 340). Remarkably, however, these 'party' tensions did not arise because the book preached a particular policy. They arose instead out of a palpable sense that the book's conventions did not cohere.

Brontë, many readers sensed, was working with incompatible sets of literary rules. More specifically, critics who otherwise had very different views of the novel shared a conviction that there was a jarring mismatch between plot and character.[9] *Sharpe's* indicated this as one of the most glaring 'contradictions': 'imagine a novel with a little swarthy governess for heroine, and a middle-aged ruffian for hero. As well perform a pantomime with a wooden-legged cripple as Harlequin, a rheumatic old maid as Columbine, and a Methodist parson for Clown' (1855, 340). To align Jane and Rochester with the stock roles of a romance—as the comparison to a failed *commedia dell'arte* performance suggests—breaks all respectable rules of typecasting. The characters are unsuited to their plot. 'All this', the *Sharpe's* writer explained, 'was very odd and incorrect' (340).

Was this clash in conventions part of Brontë's social commentary? Or was this combination simply made in bad taste? These were points that left critics in disagreement. Brontë told W. S. Williams in 1848 that 'the standard heros [*sic*] and heroines of novels' had never interested her, and that she never had any desire to 'imitate' them; if she were 'obliged to copy any former novelist … even Scott … [she] would not write' (Smith 1995–2004, 2:118). But however much Brontë herself may have protested derivative heroes and heroines, she could not prevent critics from reading her characters along the lines of 'standard' templates. Critics did just that, and it led to conflicting responses. Helen Burns was alternately praised as the most realistic element of the book and dismissed as an obnoxious, contrived type.[10] The 'far from pleasant' St John Rivers was for some reviewers a 'finely delineated' character and for others detritus from the 'circulating-library' (Fonblanque 1847, 757; Bagshawe 1850, 223; Lewes 1847, 692).

Where this pattern becomes most interesting, however, is with the hero and heroine of the novel. Even while *Jane Eyre* did not necessarily announce itself as a romance—a term that in Victorian criticism is used broadly to designate imaginative fiction of the sentimental, middlebrow, unrealistic and implicitly feminine variety—reviewers read Jane and Rochester according to templates for popular romantic heroes and heroines.[11] This created inevitable problems, not least because Jane and Rochester were, to put it bluntly, ugly. Tellingly, Brontë informed W. S. Williams that she did not want *Jane Eyre* to be released in an illustrated edition in 1848 because she thought that her 'mostly unattractive' characters would look bad compared to their 'handsome' counterparts in works by writers such as Bulwer-Lytton and Byron (Smith 2000, 2:41). Her worries were not unfounded, with critics by this point already amusing themselves by analysing Rochester, that 'crochetty old libertine', as a romantic hero (*New Monthly* 1847, 374). Many reviews find him disappointing in this capacity and cite Jane's overwhelming yet inexplicable attraction to him as sure evidence that the book was written by a woman.[12] Some are more entertained than disturbed by his ability to disrupt what a *New Monthly* commentator calls 'the etiquette of post-octavo and thirty-one-and-sixpence', associated with 'the dove-cots of the Minerva Press', the infamous late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century publishing house known for lowbrow Gothic fiction: 'What *could* Rosa Matilda do with such a creature', this reviewer asks, 'unless to scream for the police, or destroy her manuscript?' (1852, 299).[13]

While critics laughed at Rochester, they found a more difficult case in Jane. Like Rochester, she transgressed 'novel rules', and her 'homely' name and appearance signalled 'a departure from the sickly models of the Minerva press' (Eagles 1848, 473; Allott 1974, 81). But this homely transgressor was also a commanding narrator, whose centrality provoked critical commentary about psychological detail and the role of literature as the representation of human experience. Was Jane simply an ugly (and therefore disappointing) romantic heroine, or was she something qualitatively different?[14] The answer to this question determines how we read the relationship of the fictional to the real, as well as how this 'little swarthy governess' (*Sharpe's* 1855, 340) fits into contemporaneous discourses of women's political agency.

Jane Eyre: Feminist Icon?

We are accustomed to reading *Jane Eyre*'s disruption of romantic stereotypes as inherently political. Brontë's *un*conventional heroine and narrator has come to represent a progressive move, breaking from artistic and social tradition by focusing on the emotions of an unattractive governess. But where did this idea come from? It is instructive here to briefly sketch out the version of Brontë's heroine that we have inherited from the late twentieth century. I say 'Brontë's heroine' rather than 'Brontë's novel' because the most famous second-wave accounts of *Jane Eyre*—namely, those by Elaine Showalter as well as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar—focus on the title character to the point that all other aspects of the novel are practically overwhelmed by her person. The novel's 'narrative devices', physical spaces and recurring motifs become representative of different facets of Jane's personality

(Showalter 1977, 112–13). Helen and Bertha are, respectively, 'mother' and 'avatar' of Jane (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 344–47, 359–62). Jane herself becomes conceptual shorthand in archetypal readings of Victorian fiction: her journey to selfhood is an Everywoman's *Bildung*; her expressions of emotion unleash modes of agency (psychological, sexual and personal) assumed to be unheard of in Victorian society; and her defiance of social convention liberates her from patriarchal constraint (Gilbert and Gubar 1979, 339; Showalter 1977, 100–132).[15]

Ironically, this line of archetypal feminist criticism finds its clearest nineteenth-century precedent in a source that is hardly proto-feminist: George Henry Lewes. Lewes, to give him due credit, did articulate a relationship between literary convention, convention-breaking and women's history, but this involved significant acrobatics of generic classification, deliberate misreading and dubious political claims.

Lewes, who reviewed *Jane Eyre* in 1847 for *Fraser's Magazine* and again in 1852 for the *Westminster Review*, tried very hard to make *Jane Eyre* a realist novel.[16] He even attempted to stage a literary intervention on this point. After he read *Jane Eyre*—but before publishing any reviews—he wrote to Brontë, advising her to 'to beware of Melodrame' and instead 'adhere to the real' (Smith 1995–2004, 1:560).[17] Brontë informed Lewes that she had received the opposite advice from publishers, and that her dedication to 'Nature and Truth' had resulted in the rejection of her first novel. Even *Jane Eyre*, she implied, was only barely melodramatic enough to find a popular audience (Smith 1995–2004, 1:560). Yet Lewes remained disturbed by the novel's reliance on artificial incident. In his review, he complains of 'too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating-library' (Lewes 1847, 692) and emphasises that his standards for good fiction are 'truth in the delineation of life and character' (687). Despite these melodramatic defects, however, Lewes suggests that *Jane Eyre* is redeemed by the fact that it depicts 'actual suffering and experience': 'Reality—deep, significant reality—is the great characteristic of the book', he notes reverently (691).

Lewes's realistic reading of Brontë's work necessitates a wilful disavowal of what he calls 'machinery' (i.e. melodramatic plot conventions) to prioritise the heroine and her perceived authenticity (691). He pushed this interpretation for years. In his 1852 article, he suggests that Brontë, along with Elizabeth Gaskell, has made an impact because of 'the union of rare yet indispensable qualities' in her work, and that Brontë and Gaskell 'have both given imaginative expression to actual experience—they have not invented, but reproduced; they have preferred the truth … to the vague, false, conventional notions current in circulating libraries' (Lewes 1852, 138). 'Actual experience' here aligns with realistic character. Brontë succeeds, in Lewes's analyses, where she resists what is contrived or 'conventional' and fails where she caters to the 'requirements of fiction', meaning standardised plots and bland character types (138). Jane is 'a woman, not a pattern', and the psychological portrait of this character outweighs the mindless use of convention (Lewes 1847, 692).

It would be easy to assume here that this highly individualised portrait, chafing against the constraints of convention and imbuing the governess with emotions and interiority, has political value. After all, this idea resembles second-wave readings of Jane's striking individuality. In the 1852 review, Lewes associates the tension between

convention and 'experience' with women's place in history. He muses that the position of women in literature is the 'correlate of [woman's] position in society'; argues that women's literary contributions should be recognised rather than ridiculed; and predicts that women are destined to find their own mode of writing, which will be generated from their own life experience instead of emulating that of men (132).[18] This idea is so promising that Elaine Showalter opens *A Literature of Their Own* with a quotation from this review, explicitly taking up Lewes's call to define a tradition of women's writing (1977, 3–4). But there is a catch.

What is women's genuine experience, according to Lewes? It is the domestic sphere (Lewes 1852, 133). These 'domestic experiences which form the bulk of women's knowledge' are best suited to novel-writing, which in turn is formally suited to representations of love (133).[19] In Lewes's formulation, 'detail' along with 'pathos and sentiment' are the literary province of women, whereas 'construction of plots' and 'delineation of character' belong to men (133). For women, emotion overtakes plot, and anything outside the bounds of this individual view is at risk of being dismissed as borrowed machinery. Jane Austen is Lewes's ideal, as 'George Eliot' did not yet exist. Austen's world, Lewes admits, is circumscribed, but what she produces is perfect within her small means (134). Austen, moreover, sticks to 'her own womanly point of view' (135). Conveniently, this involves not being '*doctrinaire*' and having 'not a trace of woman's "mission"' visible in her works (135). This assertion should give us pause, and not just because Lewes repeatedly disavows direct discussion of women's rights. While he does advocate for women's writing, his advocacy is itself a form of constraint. Women writers, Lewes suggests, may surpass men in documenting the details of daily life and feeling, but this is the furthest they may go. Writing good, non-imitative fiction means writing realistic fiction. Writing realistic fiction means (for authenticity's sake!) focusing on emotion, living in miniature. The unconventional in art correlates to the utterly conventional in the world of social experience.

It is important to recognise the political implications of this reading. Brontë and her heroine, despite Lewes's admiration, are anything but free, limited in Lewes's reading to one genre (the domestic novel) and one social realm (the domestic sphere). Yet it is this individual, emotional focus that we have come to associate with the idea of Jane as a feminist subject. Emotion and individuality, however, did not automatically equate to political value for Victorian reformers. For instance, the characteristics that Lewes praises—intense emotion, a plot focused on love—gave Harriet Martineau reason to worry that Brontë's writing would be actively harmful to women's political and economic advocacy.[20] Even Elizabeth Rigby (whose review of *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly* is best remembered for her class snobbery and wrongful insistence that Currer Bell was a man) expressed genuine concern that Brontë's powerful heroine was not doing real governesses any favours and that the novel overlooked the economic and structural problems underlying the 'peculiar' position of the governess (Rigby 1848, 176–85).[21] It is simply anachronistic, and the product of selective reading, to assume that *Jane Eyre*'s individual focus was automatically progressive.

Instead, we must investigate how the reception of *Jane Eyre* interacts with the proto-feminist discourses of Brontë's time. This, too, occurs through the language of

convention, although not always in the ways we might expect. From the 1830s through to the 1850s, middle-class women were becoming increasingly visible in the public sphere through paid work and philanthropy. Commentators on all sides grappled with how to acknowledge women as economic agents within a system not built to accommodate such a role. Women inhabited what many referred to as an 'anomalous' position: they were moral agents but not economic agents, individual legal persons who suddenly lost all legal status when they married, crossing-points of all manner of political fictions and contradicting realities—in short, embodiments of logical flaws in the system.[22] And the governess was an anomaly among anomalies. Indeed, as Mary Poovey established, the governess was a threatening combination of supposedly incompatible roles (e.g. mothers, prostitutes and servants), and her existence revealed deep fault lines in middle-class domestic ideology (1988, 126–63). This tension among contradictory roles is crucial, but there is not a clear path from here to feminist agency.

I will show what I mean through a brief example from the work of Anna Jameson (1794–1860), a central player in mid-century efforts to expand women's work opportunities and a mentor to Barbara Bodichon and other members of the reform-oriented Langham Place Circle in the 1850s. An art critic (and erstwhile governess) who turned to political activism late in life, Jameson combined structural analysis of women's roles with a long-running interest in articulating theories of women's character, literary and otherwise.[23] The year before *Jane Eyre*'s publication, she applied this interest to governesses in her essay *The Relative Social Position of Mothers and Governesses*. This idiosyncratic work, half social-economic commentary and half advice manual, addresses the position of governesses in structural and personal terms. Jameson describes how some economic roles are 'necessary', catering to 'needs' in human nature, but others are 'not natural, not necessary, arising out of a very luxurious and complicate[d] state of society', unrecognised and unprotected by the law ([1846] 1848, 3). She argues that '[o]f these merely conventional relations, one of the most artificial, the most anomalous, is the existence of a class of women whom we style private governesses' (4). Governesses and mothers might come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds, but they are bound by a 'contract without equality' (8), and thus exist in a 'peculiar' relation to one another (32).[24] While Jameson laments that the artificial position of the governess cannot be remedied without large-scale economic change, she offers her own advice on how to ameliorate these sufferings at the individual level.

Jameson explains that roles, such as the governess, that are purely 'conventional'—which is here synonymous with 'artificial'—have an uneasy relationship to human nature. This is dangerous. If a woman is not careful, such artificiality might warp her personality. As Jameson suggests, a 'sensitive and imaginative' governess, caught between competing interests of employers' family members and worried about maintaining her income, will likely be 'tempt[ed] to obliquity' (42). Jameson warns of the 'deterioration of character which gradually creeps on in consequence' of this behaviour (42). Even if a governess is not morally bankrupted by her job, the alternative is not much more appealing. A 'sensible woman' sees the 'inequality' of the governess position for what it is, and understands that 'she is to be regarded as an agent—an instrument: yet if she allows this to be true, the character hardens under the conviction' (9–10). Women who are nothing more than governesses, are,

in Jameson's terms, reduced to the status of 'machine' (17, 19). The constraints of the governess's economic role, in both of these examples, have palpable effects on personality, either 'harden[ing]' it into something mechanical or causing it to 'deteriorat[e]' into something immoral. 'Imaginative' women turn into liars, whereas 'sensible' women become robots. Jameson's analysis comes strikingly close to the negative caricatures of governesses Jane overhears in the drawing room at Thornfield Hall, and we see both extremes translated into later novels such as *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862), with its murderous, lying, one-time governess title character and her former colleague Miss Tonks, that 'self-feeding machine for the instruction of young ladies' (Braddon [1862] 2012, 200). A conventional role, when interacting with the individual, threatens to reduce her to a conventional type—or at least what was to become a conventional type in fiction.

But the governess is not entirely without recourse. After admitting that the governess will inevitably be treated as a mindless 'instrument', Jameson clarifies that she does not intend for the woman to passively 'allow' this to happen. She urges the governess to embrace her lot as a spiritual vocation and to put her 'whole heart' into her duties:

> Whatever others may think of your work, *you* must think nobly of it … I know there are women who will sneer at such a *romantic* view of the case; but I can only say those who persist in regarding their work as mere drudgery, will inevitably remain drudges to the end of the chapter. ([1846] 1848, 41)

Jameson is encouraging women to romanticise their already artificial roles in order to make the best of a bad situation. Admittedly, Jameson's advice might at first seem to support standard second-wave readings of Jane's intense emotion as liberatory. Jane even invokes some of the same vocabulary when she asks Rochester, 'Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings?' (Brontë 1847, 2:208–9) directly before he proposes marriage, a move that (after the requisite melodramatic complications) elevates Jane from barely paid nonentity to beloved wife.

However, we must be wary of treating feeling as the opposite of the governess's status as automaton, or as the source of positive political and social agency. Jameson's suggestions to governesses are less about expressing emotion and more about *regulating* emotion (and self-gaslighting).[25] Controlling her responses to a particular situation, moreover, keeps the governess trapped within a limited set of choices. In Jameson's taxonomy, the governess can be only one of several types: a drudge, a saint, an automaton or a schemer. Not one of these types corresponds either to the heroine of a marriage plot or to the authentic, suffering individual Lewes identifies in Brontë's novel.[26] Indeed, the governess, as constructed by Jameson, is always dangerously close to Lewes's mindless 'machinery'. Hemmed in by her economic limitations and nonentity status within her employer's family, the governess is a walking tragic device whose life can be read along the lines of a bad, predictable book. She is doomed to be generic and individual agency, while present, only provides limited possibility for change.

But this is not all as bad as it sounds. I want to suggest, moving back to the early reception of *Jane Eyre*, that there is political potential in holding onto what is conventional about the novel and its characters. Indeed, some reviews locate real value

in reading Jane as a type rather than an individual and in dwelling on the mechanistic aspects of the novel's plot. A particularly revealing take is Sydney Dobell's 1850 article on 'Currer Bell' in the *Palladium*. Currer Bell, Dobell tells us, is one of the great authors of the age due to her 'faculty of imposing belief' (1850, 162). She must use this talent, Dobell argues, to illuminate 'truth' in the midst of a 'questioning age' (162). While Dobell is one of many reviewers who assigns a social responsibility to novelists, he presents this advocacy in a strikingly schematic form. He conceptualises 'social revolution' as the 'redistribution of elements in our conventional systems', a process that 'must inevitably transpose as many relative positions as have grown no longer consistent with the law' (169). Echoing Jameson in his language, Dobell refers to social hierarchies in the terms of convention and as a network of 'relative positions'. For Dobell, however, positions that are 'relative' can be 'transpose[d]', and over time, 'visible signs'—what he also calls the 'conventional rank of outward circumstance'—will catch up to the 'unseen mutations of reality' (169–70).

Fiction has an active role to play in this process. Brontë leads the charge, but Dobell notes that she still has a long way to go:

> to reconstruct society on the theory of an order of merit, something more is needed than the perpetual *pas de deux* between master and governess, mistress and tutor. … It is difficult to find in other positions than those she has drawn, the precise ideal of the two classes she would invert in situations where the machinery of inversion would be so natural and easy, and where she could exhibit, at so little cost of skill, the conventional rank of outward circumstance bowing before the absolute rank of intrinsic superiority. (170)

The economic positions of master and governess translate easily into literary types, which can then be plugged into the 'machinery of inversion' so seamlessly that it does not take much 'skill' to undermine the 'conventional rank' that separates them. This could not be further from Lewes's reading of the individual Jane as the antidote to the 'machinery' of plot. Literary convention, *because* it is machinery, can correct outdated social convention. For this process of literary form and reform to work, Jane must be read as an incarnation of a social type (rather than as a glorified individual), following predetermined paths that can be 'inverted' by the author. Although Dobell suggests that Brontë's future work will have to push further to enact real change, he implies that this same mechanistic manipulation of character would be necessary, simply with different roles substituted for master and governess. The generic becomes crucial here; because types can be aligned with abstract legal, social and political categories, Brontë has power in the ability to arrange and rearrange them.[27]

What Dobell's example indicates is that, even as we are trained to read Jane *against* type and to locate political value in her sheer individuality, a more generic, formulaic reading of Jane holds its own political potential. Accordingly, we must take seriously reviews of *Jane Eyre* that emphasise Brontë's use of conventional formulas and characterisation, as well as those aspects of the novel that bring it closest to melodrama, Gothic romance, sensation and other genre fiction that generations of critics from Lewes to Raymond Williams have tried to purge from its legacy.[28] If anything, *Jane Eyre* made certain pre-existing conventions—forced female incarceration, dramatic conflagrations, ghostly voices and, of course, governesses—even more iconic and recognisable. Indeed, anyone familiar with *Jane Eyre*'s

nineteenth-century afterlives knows that Lewes's suggestion that the novel is of enduring importance *in spite of* its melodramatic apparatus simply does not hold true. The supposedly worn-out, formulaic aspects of *Jane Eyre* are repeatedly rehearsed and rewritten. In Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Aurora Leigh* (1856), Romney, like Rochester, is dramatically maimed (and tamed) in a fire. *Lady Audley's Secret* (1862) merges the madwoman and the governess, which comes with its own opportunities for climactic acts of arson. Margaret Oliphant's *Janet* (1891) features a bright-eyed governess protagonist and a mad father in the attic. Appropriately, Oliphant herself looked back on *Jane Eyre* as a signal of 'true revolution', not because it was a proto-realist work depicting a woman's inner life but because of the way the novel updated the marriage plot and inherited conventions of 'romance', spawning the infinitely reproducible tropes and character types of sensation fiction (1855, 557–59; 1867, 258). *Jane Eyre* was born of convention and contributed in turn to a grand Gothic lineage.

Yet *Jane Eyre*'s very conventionality also undeniably contributed to its singularity, as the novel dared generations of critics to attempt to classify its conventions. While it may never be possible to fully answer the question of whether *Jane Eyre* makes a specific argument about women, or whether it can definitively be assigned to one genre or another, it is possible to identify the pervasive impression among early reviewers that the novel's conventions were profoundly mismatched. And this continuous readerly impulse to reckon with the novel's perceived oddness—more specifically, to map out relationships between character, literary tradition and political advocacy—is in itself crucial. *Jane Eyre*'s realistic, personal elements allowed early critics to see it as speaking to the experience of real women, which contributed to the sense of critical urgency in the 1840s and 1850s. Its melodramatic and romantic elements lent it an aspirational, revisionist component: the downtrodden governess could be a heroine and an heiress, and the obstacles to her cross-class marriage literally burned away along with the figurative ghosts haunting Thornfield Hall. *Jane Eyre* has always occupied a middle ground between realistic fiction and stereotyped romance, and disagreements over how seriously to take it as literature only contribute to its critical force.

Ultimately, Jane does not need to be a modern feminist subject to perform a productive political function. When Jane is read as type or emblem, à la Dobell, she can draw attention to subtle social dynamics and the workings of economic systems that might be obscured by a more individualistic reading. Although invoking pre-existing tropes and types risks making a work seem mechanical or implausible to some readers and emotionally overwrought to others, it also provides a common language through which to articulate social issues, as well as a sphere for debate that allows the fictional to encroach upon the real. The governess is key to this process. As a type populating both the pages of novels and of reports from the Governesses' Benevolent Institution, she is a meeting point of fictional structures and real-life socioeconomic discourses. Following Victorian commentators such as Jameson, we should not shy away from treating the governess as something of a living convention herself, a critical hinge between fiction and reality who can shift among a defined set of roles, approaching recognisable literary types but never quite reaching the status of free individual.[29]

Jane Eyre's radical potential is thus buried within its conventionality. For years after its publication, *Jane Eyre* would persist in shaping public discourse around women's rights, but not because of Jane's inimitability. On the contrary, reproducibility was what gave her power. Reformers in the 1850s and beyond cited Jane as a type, model and social index, but this almost always depended on reading Jane as a reproducible, emblematic figure. For instance, Caroline Norton, whose famous marital struggles and prolific pamphleteering helped pave the way for more streamlined divorce procedures and additional legal protections for married women, described an 1853 case as 'resembl[ing] the romance of "Jane Eyre"'—even referring to the involved parties as 'plain' and 'obscure' in language suspiciously reminiscent of Brontë's (1854, 155). Bessie Rayner Parkes, a leading advocate for women's work and property rights and editor of the *English Woman's Journal*, aligned women's increased 'activity' in the 1860s with the literary type of 'the woman struggling alone', citing 'a fox-like Becky Sharpe' and 'a passionate and yet austere Jane Eyre' as her examples (1865, 54). Jane-as-type had a complicated, always-evolving relationship to the woman question, sometimes appearing benignly (as in Parkes's analysis) as a mark of economic change, sometimes vengefully haunting the pages of the sensation novels of the 1860s—not only in the guise of Lucy Audley, but also appearing as Isabel Vane in Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1861), or Lydia Gwilt in Wilkie Collins's *Armadale* (1864–1866)—resurrecting Jane Eyre's shadow to explore dark family secrets and harmful marriage laws.

'Swarthy', 'plain', 'odd', 'peculiar but fascinating', 'vulgar-minded' and 'singularly unattractive' though she may have seemed to her first readers, Jane Eyre was not unequivocally unconventional.[30] Nor did she give birth to the twentieth-century feminist subject. But she did something far more important: by drawing attention to the fraught relationship between literary convention and social convention, and by becoming a part of the conventional literary lexicon herself, she ensured that for decades to come, debates about women's work, marriage and political rights would be waged in her shadow.

Notes

1. A reviewer for *The Manchester Examiner*, for example, commented that the novel's 'interest' was 'entirely independent of contemporary commotions and discussions' (1847, 3), whereas a reviewer for *The Dublin Review* stated that Brontë's books (referring to both *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* [1849]) had 'no distinct moral' (Bagshawe 1850, 211). After reading *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë's friend Mary Taylor expressed surprise that Brontë had 'no doctrine to preach' and 'no protest to make against [the world's] absurdities' (Smith 1995–2004, 2:87).
2. See Gilbert and Gubar (1979, 336–71); Showalter (1977, 100–132).
3. Homans observes that 'the kind of feminism the novel is seen to represent has varied across time' (2015, 28) but suggests (by way of Nancy Armstrong) that the novel's 'most enduring [political] legacy arose from its creation and popularization of the desiring, strong-willed female subject—the subject of liberal feminism' (34).
4. See Burton (1994); Spivak (1985); Zonana (1993).
5. This range does not include Elizabeth Gaskell's biography or later nineteenth-century critical assessments of the Brontës. I also omit discussion of the early reception in other

countries such as France and America, where the novel received significant critical attention.

6. The first edition was printed as an autobiography 'EDITED BY | CURRER BELL', while the second edition dropped the editor designation (Smith 1995–2004, 1:541n7; Allott 1974, 13).
7. These labels are all drawn from reviews published in literary periodicals between 1847 and 1868. I use the term 'reality' rather than 'realism' because even critics such as George Henry Lewes, who read *Jane Eyre* in terms we would now associate with novelistic realism, do not yet use this word in the 1840s or 1850s. However, a later review in *The Victoria Magazine* associates *Jane Eyre* with the development of 'Realism' (St. John 1873, 519).
8. This is not to imply that these categories were never applied to *Jane Eyre* in the nineteenth century. For example, Linda Peterson gives a persuasive account of how the novel would have been read by nineteenth-century readers in terms of missionary narrative and spiritual autobiography (1999, 80–108). The previous list, however, only includes terms that I have directly encountered in Victorian criticism.
9. The 1847 *Atlas* review notes, for example, that 'The incidents [of *Jane Eyre*'s plot] are sometimes melo-dramatic, and, it might be added, improbable; but these incidents, though striking, are subordinate to the main purpose of the piece, which depends not upon incident, but on the development of character' (Allott 1974, 67–68). The *New Monthly Magazine* (1847) similarly highlights the contrast between 'improbable' action and 'true' passion (374). Others, including *The Christian Remembrancer* (1848, 399), *Dublin University Magazine* (1848, 614), *Jerrold's Shilling Magazine* (1847, 474) and *The Spectator* (Allott 1974, 74), also articulate a major degree of disjunction between character and plot.
10. See Allott (1974, 68); Bagshawe (1850, 218); *The Christian Remembrancer* (1848, 400); Lewes (1847, 692); *New Monthly* (1852, 30).
11. 'Romance' as a category encompassed several interrelated genres: the Gothic, sensation fiction, melodrama and some domestic novels.
12. See *The Christian Remembrancer* (1848, 396, 400); Dobell (1850, 163); Lewes (1847, 692); *New Monthly* (1852, 299–300).
13. Rosa Matilda was the pseudonym of poet and novelist Charlotte Dacre (1771–1825).
14. Harriet Martineau comments in her obituary of Brontë that Charlotte 'told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroines beautiful, as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on other terms' (1855, 5). *Jane Eyre* was an attempt to prove them wrong.
15. Showalter classifies Jane as a 'rebel' whose 'revolutionary' influence changed the way novelistic heroines were written but suggests that, eventually, a more 'passive, self-destructive' model of female characterisation predominated (1977, 112–31). Similarly, Nancy Armstrong suggests that the Brontës were instrumental in creating 'universal forms of subjectivity' and that they themselves forged the 'psychologizing tropes' through which their works are read today (1987, 186).
16. Although 'realism' was not yet an established literary term, Lewes insistently referred to *Jane Eyre* as a work of 'reality' and emphasised characteristics that would come to be associated with the realist mode. Lewes wrote an additional notice of *Jane Eyre* for the *Westminster* in 1848, when the second edition was published (Allott 1974, 87).
17. The quotations are Brontë's, restating to Lewes what he told her.
18. John Stuart Mill makes a similar point in *The Subjection of Women* (1869, 132–33). Incidentally, this is where Showalter obtained the title for *A Literature of Their Own.*
19. Lewes elaborates that 'Love is the staple of fiction, for it "forms the story of a woman's life." The joys and sorrows of affection, the incidents of domestic life, the aspirations and fluctuations of emotional life, assume typical forms in the novel' (1852, 133).
20. Martineau considered Brontë's works to be too single-mindedly focused on love as the centre of a woman's life and wrote about it on multiple occasions, including a negative review of *Villette*, which ended the two writers' friendship (1853, 2; 1855, 5; 1860, 269).

Martineau argued that the best way forward for women was practical involvement in public activities and employment: see Martineau, *Autobiography* ([1855/1877] 2007), 305.

21. Rigby observes that 'We cannot help feeling that this work [*Jane Eyre*] must be far from beneficial to that class of ladies whose cause it affects to advocate. Jane Eyre is not precisely the mouthpiece one would select to plead the cause of governesses … the real definition of a governess, in the English sense, is a being who is our equal in birth, manners, and education, but our inferior in worldly wealth … We need the imprudencies, extravagancies, mistakes, or crimes of a certain number of fathers, to sow that seed from which we reap the harvest of governesses' (1848, 176).
22. On the growth of women's work outside the home and its connections to women's politics, see Caine (1997); Hall (1992, 172–97); Vicinus (1985).
23. On Jameson's life and work, see Johnston (1997), Shanley (1989, 30–31); Stern (2016, 56–90).
24. Jameson elaborates on the nature of this contract: 'The misfortune is, that this mutual contract not only begins with an inequality, which leaves on one side no choice—it involves a *contradiction*. … The relation which exists between the governess and her employer either places a woman of education and of superior faculties in an ambiguous and inferior position, with none of the privileges of a recognized profession, or it places a vulgar half-educated woman in a situation of high responsibility, requiring superior endowments. In either of these cases … the result cannot be good …' (8–9; italics in original).
25. Brontë's and Jameson's treatments of the governess beg comparison to Marion Reid's 1843 claim that 'the majority of girls are subdued into mere automatons' by their education, and that 'their very excellencies are not made their own … [but are] rather the physical effect of example and habit' ([1843] 2018, 197). This rigid husk is easily threatened: 'if any strong passion, such as love, jealousy, or hatred, takes possession [of a young woman's] mind, she will allow it to burst forth with such fury, as manifestly to show that her former good conduct was quite mechanical' (197–98).
26. It is worth noting that Brontë herself acknowledged the structural difficulties of the governess's position yet did not necessarily see liberatory potential within the suffering, emotional individual. She suggested to W. S. Williams in 1848 that she did not see a clear opening for women in the present labour market, even though the 'evil' of the situation was apparent. She proposed that women 'isolate[d]' from their natural 'vocation' (i.e. family life) should 'complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible', but that 'when Patience has done its utmost and Industry its best … the Sufferer is free—is entitled—at last to send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief—if by that cry he can hope to obtain succour'. Here, individual emotion is a last resort and an effort at procuring individual 'relief' rather than lasting social change (Smith 1995–2004, 2:66).
27. Brontë approved of this review, even though Dobell somewhat aggressively insisted that she had also authored *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848): see Smith (1995–2004, 2:480).
28. See Williams ([1961] 2011, 86, 87–91).
29. Jane is no exception. She moves from one dependent position (governess) to another (wife).
30. For these descriptors (and more), see *Sharpe's* (1855); Lewes (1847); Rigby (1848).

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Notes on contributor

Katherine Hobbs is a freelance public historian and nineteenth-century scholar based in Los Angeles, California. Her writing has appeared in publications including *ELH*, *The Edinburgh Companion to T. S. Eliot and the Arts* and *Smithsonian*. Most recently, Katherine worked as a project historian for Thomas Edison National Historical Park, where she conducted archival research and developed new programming on Mina Miller Edison (1865–1947). She received a PhD in English from the University of California, Berkeley in 2023.

ORCID

Katherine Hobbs http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7894-5085

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