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## The Madwoman and the Blindman

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## THE BLINDMAN IN THE CLASSIC

Feminisms, Ocularcentrism,  
and *Jane Eyre*

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THE IDEOLOGICAL BASES of *Jane Eyre* and Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed* (1891) are, according to a number of classic expositions, diametrically opposed. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar commend *Jane Eyre*, for instance, as a work of "rebellious feminism" (338), while George Holbrook Jackson asserts that the "keynote" of *The Light That Failed* is "the love of the masculine life" (234). Indeed, far from being commended as a belief in the equality of the sexes, Kipling's "pugnacious philosophy," with its "insistence upon clean health and a courageous and dangerous life," is said to make "men more like men and women more like women" (Holbrook Jackson, 234). In this chapter I probe the received ideological contrast between the two classic novels, emphasizing an alliance that becomes manifest in the characterization of the blindman. The contention is that many feminist commendations of *Jane Eyre* are underpinned by patriarchal attitudes toward visual impairment that are also found in *The Light That Failed*. What is more, though explicit in *Jane Eyre* and implicit in *The Light That Failed*, both are grounded in the same epistemology as John Milton's *Samson Agonistes* (1671). This intertextuality is notable because, notwithstanding the fact that Milton wrote his greatest works subsequent to the onset of his own visual impairment, *Samson Agonistes* is ocularcentric in the

extreme; it is indicative of a dominant visual discourse, claiming that light, the “prime work” of God, “so necessary is to life” that the existence of those without access constitutes a “living death” (lines 70–100).<sup>1</sup>

The functionality of these depictions may be explained in accordance with the Derridean perspective on disability suggested by Mairian Corker and Tom Shakespeare, that although normativism and disability are antagonistic in relation to each other, the definition of the former is dependent on that of the latter: “a person without an impairment can define him/herself as “normal” only in opposition to that which s/he is not—a person with an impairment” (*Disability/Postmodernity: Embodying Disability Theory*, 7). In these terms, alterity is fundamental to the construction of the Self because, as Jacques Derrida puts it in *Of Grammatology*, without the non-presence of the other that is inscribed in the meaning of the present, familiarity would not appear. Thus, following Corker’s and Shakespeare’s reading of disability as a construct that is not excluded from normativism but integral to its very assertion, I argue that the blindman in the classic is fundamental to the characterization of his sighted counterparts. After all, notwithstanding Rey Chow’s assertion that “In terms of plot structure, the fire removes the impediment, the mad woman” (145), the simultaneity of Bertha’s suicide and Rochester’s blindness is read by Julia Miele Rodas as a migration of one identity into another (“Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*”). The suggestion is that the blindman becomes for Jane what the madwoman has been for Rochester, a disabled Other in relation to which the normative Self can emerge.

Binary oppositions are famously criticized in Derrida’s *Of Grammatology* because of the way in which one term is privileged over the other, the second term being typically thought of as derivative, inferior, and even parasitic, meaning that the first term, the one more associated with the phallus and the logos, is rendered original and superior. As well as to binary oppositions such as man and woman, male and female, speech and writing, identity and difference, fullness and emptiness, mastery and submission, life and death, the criticism is applicable to normativism and disability—and, more specifically, for the purpose of this chapter, to the sighted and the blind. On the basis of the assertion that deconstruction is an openness toward the other (Derrida, “Deconstruction and the Other,” 124), I venture a deconstructive reading insofar as I invert these and a number of related binary oppositions, focusing on secondary constructs in order to reveal their functionality in relation to primary counterparts. Rather than being ignored, incidental

1. Milton (1608–74) lost his sight at the age of forty-four (c. 1652). He published *Paradise Lost* in 1667 and *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes* in 1671.

features such as those that describe Brontë's Rochester (423–24; ch. 36)<sup>2</sup> and Kipling's Dick Helder (155; ch. 16) as "stone blind" are exposed as a basis for a link between sight and vitality. I should stress that my criticism here is of the ocularcentric subject position and not necessarily of people who have unimpaired vision, for the sighted are a construct just like the blind.

Mapping the quasi lifespan of the blindman, the first section of the chapter focuses on alterity, the second on castration, and the third on melancholia, revealing ocularcentric assumptions about beauty, sexuality, and happiness, respectively. In the first stage of this tragic development, the blindman is differentiated and diminished in grotesque portrayals of haptic perception, the implication being that beauty is naturally—if not solely—perceived by visual means. This virtual castration becomes more Freudian in the second stage, for the blindman's disempowerment creates a spectacle that not only empowers but also arouses the unseen spectator. The resonance with Freudian theory deepens still further in the third stage, as the loss of the capacity for love develops into the various mental features of mourning and indeed melancholia. It is as though the blindman comes to internalize various ocularcentric beliefs, the result being an existential emptiness in relation to which the lives of the sighted characters appear full. Put briefly, interpreting stone blindness as a preliminary of sighted vitality, I subvert the hierarchies of attractiveness over unattractiveness, sexuality over asexuality, spectator over spectacle, happiness over misery, light over darkness, and life over death.

First, though, I must acknowledge that several binary oppositions are subverted within *Jane Eyre*, as plainness triumphs over beauty, poverty over wealth, submission over mastery, and, insofar as the female protagonist narrates her own story rather than being secondary in relation to a male narrator, woman over man. Accordingly, the text has come to be "considered one of the first major examples of a woman overcoming patriarchal and class domination in modern times" (Chow, 144). Nevertheless, criticized by Toril Moi for leaving patriarchal aesthetics intact, Gilbert and Gubar's classic feminist commendation of the novel is problematized by Dale Spender's point about epistemology:

[F]eminist knowledge is based on the premise that the experience of all human beings is valid and must not be excluded from our understandings, whereas patriarchal knowledge is based on the premise that the experience

2. The version of the primary text referred to in this chapter is Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Popular Classics, 1994).

of only half the human population needs to be taken into account and the resulting version can be imposed on the other half. (5)

The problem on which I focus is that Brontë's portrayals of alterity, castration, and melancholia are patriarchal insofar as they are based on ocularcentric epistemology and thus unappreciative of the experience of people who have visual impairments. Male and female roles may well be inverted in the novel, but the underpinning hierarchies of normativism over disability and "the sighted" over "the blind" remain intact. The sustainment of this state of affairs in some feminist expositions is indicative of the fact that writings of the most eminent scholars may prove deficient in relation to disability, that as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson puts it, feminists, like everyone else, including disabled people, have been acculturated to stigmatize those of us whose bodies are deemed aberrant ("Feminist Theory," 286). That is not to say that I impose ideology on the text, a criticism aimed at some feminist and postcolonial readings (Beaty, 184). Instead, informed by the assertion that Gilbert and Gubar's reading of *Jane Eyre* "would be more formidable if it did not implicitly (and unnecessarily) claim that it is a reading of Brontë's 'intention'" (Beaty, 150), the focus is on intertextuality and character functionality.

## BEAUTY AND THE HAND OF THE BEHOLDER

Though the maxim that beauty is in the eye of the beholder pertains primarily to the debate about what constitutes attractiveness, it also reduces the likelihood of cultural associations with those of us who have visual impairments. Vision is supposed to be a necessary condition of beauty in *The Light That Failed* when the sightless protagonist Dick Helder responds to Bessie's advice about his appearance by saying, "Good gracious, child, do you imagine that I think of what becomes me these days?" (173–78; ch. 14). In writings from as far back as Plato the "straight profile of the Greek statue was usually assumed to be the ideal human face. One of its many assets was that it did not resemble the faces of rabbits, goats, apes, frogs, or any other ignoble animals" (Etkoff, 42). If beauty means not looking like a beast, Kipling's protagonist is extricated when he is said to have "hit his shins against the stove, and this suggested to him that it would be better to crawl on all-fours, one hand in front of him" (139; ch. 11). He is described by Torpenhow as being "like a dog" (139; ch. 11), by Bessie as a "beast" (130; ch. 10, and 133; ch. 11), and by the narrator as a "stub-bearded, bowed creature"

(173; ch. 14). Brontë's notion of visual impairment is similarly animalistic, because alluding to the way in which Samson is likened to an eagle (SA, line 1695), Jane thinks of Rochester as a "caged eagle, whose gold-ringed eyes cruelty has extinguished"; she is reminded of "some wronged and fettered wild beast or bird, dangerous to approach in his sullen woe" (426; ch. 37). The animalism is sublimated in a general appearance of unkemptness when, with allusion to the way in which the "redundant locks" of Samson are depicted "clustering down" (SA, lines 568–69), the "thick and long uncut locks" of Rochester suggest that he is "being metamorphosed into a lion, or something of that sort" and his hair is likened to "eagles' feathers" (431; ch. 37). Identified elsewhere as a problem with Brontë's portrayal of ethnicity (e.g., Spivak, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism"), the blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal invokes the notion of a lower evolutionary status; it implies a sense of animalistic alterity around the blindman and thereby defines the legitimate subject position in relation to the sense of sight.

The five senses are sometimes categorized in relation to a binary opposition between distance and contact. The distance senses of sight and hearing have objects that are spatially separate from the perceiver, while the contact senses of smell, taste, and touch have objects that impinge on the body before perception. The significant point that Jonathan Rée raises about the Aristotelian division is that, "epistemologically and ethically more respectable," the distance senses are "nobler, purer, more detached, and perhaps—by some standards—more masculine than the contact senses" (34). In accordance with this line of thinking, vision might be conceived as a necessary condition of not only the possession but also the perception of beauty. The logical outcome is embodied in the sightless-unsightly pair, a trope that, while not exemplified, is implicit in both *The Light That Failed* and *Jane Eyre*: much as Dick's loss of vision is followed by his union with Bessie Broke, the "wrong woman" (184; ch. 14), who is described as "singularly dull" (130; ch. 10) and a "little fiend" (136; ch. 11), and who is associated with "hussies, trollops; and the like" (176; ch. 14), Rochester's loss of vision is followed by his union with the original plain Jane. The tenor of such a union is that one partner's lack in conventional outward beauty is not an issue when the other lacks the sense by which it is perceived. In *Jane Eyre*, according to Gilbert and Gubar, the scenario offers an "optimistic portrait of an egalitarian relationship" because, "now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh" (368–69). Kate Flint departs only slightly from the classic feminist reading by claiming that visual impairment is portrayed as a "form of pun-

ishment” that ultimately proves to be a means of illuminating the “inward eye” (*The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, 80), but the problem is in the very premise that conventional outward beauty cannot be appreciated by those of us who have visual impairments. After all, putting aside the fact that most people who have visual impairments are able to perceive visually, that according to Allan Dodds, only five or ten percent of the legally blind are “unable to make out anything more than changes in light levels” (1), the notion that outward beauty cannot be appreciated via haptic means is patently erroneous. This idea of beauty is highly contentious, but people are frequently considered attractive due to the “curve of their lips or the slimness of their waists” (Etcoff, 71), qualities that, like the Grecian neck and bust of Brontë’s Blanche Ingram, may be perceived by touch as well as sight. This form of beauty is no less in the hand than in the eye of the beholder.

While those of us who have visual impairments may simply perceive beauty by haptic rather than visual means, a sense of alterity is evoked by the motif of the groping blindman, which refers to acts of searching, walking, and lecherousness. This motif is applied in *The Light That Failed* to portray the way in which Dick locates a lost item as well as the way in which he walks. He is said not only to have “groped among his canvases” (161; ch. 13) but also to have “groped back to his chair” (159; ch. 13) and to “grope along the corridors” (167; ch. 14). Insofar as walking is displaced in favor of groping, Kipling and Brontë unify in their application of the motif: akin to Kipling’s protagonist, Brontë’s Rochester is said to have “groped his way back to the house” (427; ch. 37). It is a sense of lecherousness, however, that underpins the moment when Rochester is said to have “groped” until Jane “arrested his wandering hand” (428; ch. 37). This intransitive use of the verb *groped* indicates that Rochester is searching “blindly,” but connotations of the more colloquial meaning are sustained by the reference to his wandering hand. Thus, although ignored as a means of perceiving beauty, the sense of touch is exaggerated to the point of grotesqueness as a signifier of alterity.

The lecherous aspect of the groping blindman is of concern because, more than evoking a sense of unattractiveness, it perpetuates the idea of a blind Other who is out to impregnate the sighted Self. Illustrating Terry Eagleton’s assertion that for Brontë “almost all human relationships are power-struggles” (*Myths of Power*, 30), the grope becomes a lecherous grip and results in a personification of contagiousness when Jane refers to Rochester by saying, “The muscular hand broke from my custody; my arm was seized, my shoulder, neck, waist—I was entwined and gathered to him” (428; ch. 37). The implicit warning against the dishonorable intentions

of the Other illustrates three elements of personified contagiousness: first, irregularity is evoked by the way in which Rochester's hand is objectified almost to the point of disembodiment, as if somehow able to reach further than those of a sighted man; second, strength is denoted by the adjective *muscular*; and third, aggression is conveyed by the fact that Jane is the object of Rochester's desire and therefore rendered sexually vulnerable in his grasp, as well as by the verb *seized*. This personification of contagiousness corresponds with a passage in *The Light That Failed*:

[Dick] was beginning to learn, not for the first time in his experience, that kissing is a cumulative poison. The more you get of it, the more you want. Bessie gave the kiss promptly, whispering, as she did so, "I was so angry I rubbed out that picture with the turpentine. You aren't angry, are you?"

"What? Say that again." The man's hand had closed on her wrist.

"I rubbed it out with turps and the knife," faltered Bessie. "I thought you'd only have to do it over again. You did do it over again, didn't you? Oh, let go of my wrist; you're hurting me. [ . . . ] I only meant to do it in fun. You aren't going to hit me?"

"Hit you! No! Let's think."

He did not relax his hold upon her wrist but stood staring at the carpet. (182; ch. 14)

First, irregularity is implicit when Dick is referred to as the man with a hold that he chooses not to relax but that closes on Bessie's wrist automatically, the man who cannot see and yet stands staring at the carpet. Second, Dick's physical strength is apparent in Bessie's assertion that he is hurting her. Third, reminiscent of not only *Jane Eyre* but also the way in which Samson feels a "sudden rage to tear" Dalila "joint by joint" (*SA*, line 953), Kipling invokes the threat of sexual assault by linking the cumulative poison of desire with anger, force, and violence. Dick's exclamation indicates that striking Bessie is not his intention, but the sexual aspect of rape being secondary to the violent, the point to note is that she is not released from his grip while the alternatives are considered. Put briefly, when portrayed as a characteristic of the blindman, touch becomes a grope and ultimately a lecherous grip.

The important detail to note about grotesque depictions of haptic perception is that they are not sexual but hypersexual, which is why Samson, the forebear of both Rochester and Dick, is described by Derrida as "a bit like all the blind, like all one-eyed men or cyclopes," as a "sort of phal-loid image, an unveiled sex from head to toe, vaguely obscene and disturb-



ing” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 106). The hypersexuality is predicated on the notion that the “hand of the blind ventures forth alone or disconnected,” that “it feels its way, it gropes,” “as if a lidless eye had opened at the tip of the fingers, as if one eye too many had just grown right next to the nail, a single eye, the eye of a cyclops” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 3). Because the hand of the blindman is animalistic, verging on the monstrous, and therefore classically adverse to beauty, it signifies alterity in relation to which vision appears antithetical and thus normative as a means of perceiving beauty. Hence, according to Freudian theory, the blinding of Oedipus is equivalent to castration, constituting the loss of the sense in which beauty resides and through which desire is excited. Grounded in such ocularcentric epistemology, as is demonstrable when Derrida adds that Samson is a “figure of castration, a castration-figure” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 106), the sexuality of the blindman appears distinct from that of his sighted counterparts. In effect, then, the grotesque depiction of haptic perception is a preliminary for the symbolic castrations by which the blindman is defined.

### COMPLEX CASTRATION

Bearing in mind that in *The Light That Failed*, although “the blindness has made him rather muscular” (144; ch. 12), Dick pictures Maisie “being won by another man, stronger than himself” (140; ch. 11), it is notable that one of Charles Rycroft’s various definitions of the word *castration* pertains to “demoralization” in respect of the masculine role (15). The applicability of this definition to *Jane Eyre* is evident in Georgina Kleege’s description of Rochester as a “mighty man” who is “brought low”: “Once allpowerful, and rather arrogant about it, he is left feeble” (70). Donald Kirtley goes so far as to assert that the castration theme is pronounced, that “until his sight returns, Rochester’s masculine vigor is largely held in abeyance, after the fashion of the defeated Samson, with whom Jane identifies her sightless lover” (66). These references to being brought low and held in obeisance may be said to incriminate Rochester’s sighted counterparts, thereby revealing a conceptual link with Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Bozovic), the essence of the idea being that control can be affected by the very notion of an unseen seer.

That the controlling figure of the Panopticon is not only housed but also represented by a phallic inspection tower invokes another aspect of second-wave feminism from which this chapter departs. I do not deny that the power relationship raises an instructive parallel with Laura Mulvey’s

concern in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” about phallogentrism, that it is paradoxically dependent on the image of the castrated woman, for the political power of ocularcentrism depends on the symbolic castration of the blind. But the dynamic is more complex in *Jane Eyre* and *The Light That Failed*, where it is the blindman’s lack that produces vision as a symbolic presence. Indeed, because ocularcentrism is advantageous to the sighted female characters, yet dependent on the castration of the blindman for order and meaning, the very application of Mulvey’s feminist theory creates something of a paradox.

The fact that Jane associates Rochester with Samson, a man whose downfall is brought about by a woman, foreshadows the most patriarchal of all psychoanalytic notions, for in “the first instance” the term *castrating* applies to “women who suffer from PENIS-ENVY and therefore disparage or compete with men” (Rycroft, 15). Bearing in mind the claim that it is Jane’s aim “simply to strengthen herself, to make herself an equal of the world Rochester represents” (Gilbert and Gubar, 368), we might be tempted to respond to any suggestion of a castrating figure by pointing out that the diminishment of vision is linked with that of strength by male and female characters alike: the Innkeeper tells Jane that Rochester is “helpless, indeed—blind” (424; ch. 36); Jane says, “[T]he powerlessness of the strong man touched my heart to the quick” (434; ch. 37); and Rochester confronts Jane by saying, “You know I was proud of my strength: but what is it now, when I must give it over to foreign guidance, as a child does its weakness?” (441; ch. 37). The point to remember about these and other such assertions of weakness, however, is that all appear within Jane’s narrative. This scenario resonates with *The Light That Failed* insofar as it is Maisie who finds Dick “down and done for—masterful no longer, but rather a little abject; neither an artist stronger than she, nor a man to be looked up to—only some blind one that sat in a chair and seemed on the point of crying” (159; ch. 13). Kipling’s intransitive application of the verb *crying* connotes the same infantilization as the simile that Brontë draws between blindness and the “weakness” of a child (441; ch. 37). Likewise, a comparison with the emotion that touches Jane’s “heart to the quick” (434; ch. 37) can be found when, “filled with pity most startlingly distinct from love,” Kipling’s Maisie is “more sorry” for Dick than she has “ever been for any one in her life” (159; ch. 13). Thus, corresponding with the patriarchal notion of the castrating woman, in both novels it is the blindman’s prospective lover who conjures up his disempowerment.

The notion of a link between vision and the masculine role raises issues of spectatorial identification, for Mulvey’s work on cinema has defined the

male protagonist as the bearer of the spectator's gaze, meaning that he frequently emerges as the representative of power in relation to woman as the spectacle. When applied to Brontë's novel this dynamic becomes inverted because Jane, rather than Rochester, emerges as the representative of power, the sighted character with whom the sighted Implied Reader identifies. This power relationship is alluded to in Sally Shuttleworth's study, as well as in Kleege's assertion that for Jane, "Rochester's blindness allows her to rise to power" (71), representing a deviation from Gilbert and Gubar's claim that Jane's power is drawn from within, "rather than from inequity, disguise, deception" (369). The departure from the classic feminist reading is sustainable because, implicit when Jane refers to Rochester by saying, "I stayed my step, almost my breath, and stood to watch him—to examine him, myself unseen, and alas! to him invisible" (426; ch. 37), it is through disguise and deception that the unseen spectator ensures not only inequity but also authority over the unseeing spectacle. The nature of this authority invokes a conceptual link with the Panopticon because, just as anyone who entered Bentham's central inspection tower could automatically assume authority over the unseeing prisoners (Bozovic), Jane assumes authority over Rochester and Kipling's Bessie does likewise over Dick: "There were droppings of food all down the front of his coat; the mouth, under the ragged ill-grown beard, drooped sullenly; the forehead was lined and contracted; and on the lean temples the hair was a dusty, indeterminate colour that might or might not have been called grey" (177; ch. 14). Dick's lack of concern for his appearance is typical of the blindman and provides a spectacle for Bessie's evaluating gaze. He is reduced to what Michel Foucault calls an "object of information" (*Discipline and Punish*, 200). Thus, although the scenario might be interpreted as subversive, a feminist reversal of the female character and the evaluating male gaze by which she is rendered passive, a concurrent implication is that people who do not have visual impairments are active and authoritative in relation to those of us who do have visual impairments.

There are several theoretical usages of the word *castration* that pertain to sexual matters explicitly, for, as well as to the removal of testes, the concept refers to "loss of the capacity" for erotic pleasure, or loss of the penis, as in the threats used to deter boys from masturbating (Rycroft, 15). The naming of Dick Helder (i.e., penis handler) invokes the cultural link between blindness and masturbation, but both Kipling and Brontë evoke diminishments in respect of the capacity for erotic pleasure in their construction of the blindman. When extending the analysis of Rochester's castration into the area of erotic pleasure, then, one might consider Derrida's assertion

that Samson loses “every phallic attribute or substitute, his hair and then his eyes” (*Memoirs of the Blind*, 104). This reference to Rochester’s forebear is illustrative of the way in which phallocentrism and ocularcentrism are not only comparable but also interchangeable. In the unconscious, Karl Abraham claims, the “fixed stare” is “often equivalent to an erection” (352), a notion that informs and is informed by the idea that blindness is equivalent to castration. This dynamic is illustrated when Jane stays her step, almost her breath, and fixes Rochester in her stare:

He descended the one step, and advanced slowly and gropingly towards the grass plot. Where was his daring stride now? Then he paused, as if he knew not which way to turn. He lifted his hand and opened his eyelids; gazed blank, and with a straining effort, on the sky, and toward the amphitheatre of trees: one saw that all to him was void darkness. He stretched his right hand (the left arm, the mutilated one, he kept hidden in his bosom); he seemed to wish by touch to gain an idea of what lay around him: he met but vacancy still; for the trees were some yards off where he stood. He relinquished the endeavour, folded his arms, and stood quiet and mute in the rain, now falling fast on his uncovered head. (426; ch. 37)

Given that he has already “stretched forth his hand as if to feel whether it rained,” it might seem rather perplexing that Rochester should proceed with an “uncovered head,” that he is referred to as “a man without a hat,” but in psychoanalytic terms any such lack can be interpreted as a symbolic castration. It is therefore quite pertinent that Jane’s “sightless Samson” (426; ch. 37) is rendered quiet and mute, that he is said to have descended without daring, to have moved slowly and gropingly. This castration is integral to its symbolic opposite in Jane because, while interpreting Rochester’s behavior as helplessness, she refuses to assist him. Rather than relinquishing her fixed stare, her unconscious erection, she ponders and assumes spectatorial authority, as is illustrated by *her* assertion that Rochester *knew not* which way to turn—that is, by her ocularcentric appropriation of his epistemology.

The curiosity factor of the unseeing spectacle is evidently not always as overt as when Samson is forced to make “sport with blind activity” (*SA*, line 1328). The fact that Rochester is fixed in Jane’s gaze as he merely steps outside his home illustrates that the most routine behavior of the blind-man is a source of pleasure for the unseen spectator. This pleasure is also illustrated in *The Light That Failed* by Maisie’s reluctance to betray her presence:

Dick rose and began to feel his way across the room, touching each table and chair as he passed. Once he caught his foot on a rug, and swore, dropping on his knees to feel what the obstruction might be. Maisie remembered him walking in the Park as though all the earth belonged to him, tramping up and down her studio two months ago, and flying up the gangway of the Channel steamer. The beating of her heart was making her sick, and Dick was coming nearer, guided by the sound of her breathing. She put out a hand mechanically to ward him off or to draw him to herself, she did not know which. It touched his chest, and he stepped back as though he had been shot. (158; ch. 13)

While it is unlikely that someone who has a visual impairment would drop to her or his knees in order to identify a rug, especially in such a familiar setting, the point is that when Dick, the blindman, does so, Maisie is not only fascinated but also disgusted to the point of nausea, so overwhelmed that she can “hardly move her lips.” Indeed, having “pressed herself up into a corner of the room,” when she does “put out a hand,” she does so “mechanically” (157–58; ch. 13). More than illustrating what Foucault calls the power of Panopticism (*Discipline and Punish*, 200), this combination of silence and visibility may be explained in terms of *jouissance*, which Bruce Fink defines as a pleasure that is “excessive, leading to a sense of being overwhelmed or disgusted, yet simultaneously providing a source of fascination” (xi). In these terms, Maisie’s gaze—that is, her unconscious erection—lasts until the climactic point at which Dick responds as though he has been shot.

The interchangeability of phallogentric and ocularcentric perspectives illustrates Mary Devereaux’s point that “the male gaze is not always male, but it is always male dominated” (339). Insofar as Jane’s stare falls on Rochester and Maisie’s on Dick, the traditional roles of the male gaze are reversed by Brontë and Kipling alike. However, the resulting depiction is ocularcentric and thus essentially patriarchal, because the reversal is predicated on the victim being unable to see. The subordinate role is feminine but allocated to Rochester and Dick owing to their symbolic castration; the dominant role is masculine but allocated to Jane and Maisie owing to their symbolic erections. Therefore, while the teleology of these inverted roles may be praised as a reaction to the objectification of women, we must recognize that a simultaneous point is being made about desire in men who have visual impairments. As if always scopophilic, love, the most profound of life experiences, becomes a superficial activity for which vision is requisite. Accordingly, Rochester tells Jane, “[I]f I were what I once was, I would try to make you care—but—a sightless block!” (430, ch. 37), much as Dick

thinks of Maisie and says, “I couldn’t be any use to her now” (140; ch. 11). The lamentation that underpins these claims is that Rochester and Dick are unable to deliver that in which Jane and Maisie are consequently unable to be caught: the male gaze. The patriarchal implication of this lament is that scopophilia is as necessary in male heterosexuality as is exhibitionism in the female counterpart—an example of ocularcentrism that renders male heterosexuality beyond the blindman.

The diminished capacity for erotic pleasure is a preliminary for the construct of dependency by which love is displaced in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester is “profoundly frustrated in his efforts to develop independence,” according to Kirtley, and “consequently becomes almost wholly dependent on Jane, who plays the part of the good nurse until his sight is restored” (65). However, it should not be forgotten that Jane “enjoys” her new power over Rochester, as Kleege points out, because “his dependence on her makes him all the more attractive” (71), meaning that her actions are not selfless, the dependency is not parasitic:

Mr Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near—that knit us so very close: for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature—he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words, the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam—of the landscape before us; of the weather round us—and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad—because he claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation. He loved me so truly that he knew no reluctance in profiting by my attendance; he felt I loved him so fondly, that to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes. (446; ch. 38)

Seemingly as a result of visual impairment, there are numerous services that Rochester requires of Jane, the execution of which she finds pleasurable in a “most full, most exquisite” way, thereby illustrating something of Albert Memmi’s assertion that “there is in almost every dependency, even if it is apparently parasitic, some sort of symbiotic relationship” (66). The trouble is that Jane’s conception of dependency does not accommodate Rochester’s subjectivity. Whereas the dialectic of dependency results from a relationship

in which the dependent is a provider and the provider a dependent, Jane does not recognize Rochester as a provider. The dependency is only reciprocal insofar as Jane receives pleasure and power in the act of giving. What lies beyond this dependency is a contentious point because, while stating with conviction that Rochester “loved” her “so truly,” Jane is somewhat tentative in saying, “[H]e felt I loved him so fondly.” Indeed, when articulating her own position in the relationship, Jane qualifies the verb *loved* with *felt*, displaces the adverb *truly* in favor of *fondly* and omits usage of the first person pronoun altogether. That is to say, she diminishes the emotion on three counts. Moreover, as is implicit in her dismay at the absence of “painful shame,” “damping humiliation,” and “reluctance in profiting” by “attendance,” Jane cannot respect the man whom she ascribes no self-respect.

In *The Light That Failed*, Dick’s diminished capacity for love is similarly exposed by a construct of parasitic dependency. Having lost his relationship with Maisie when he lost his sight, Dick initiates a relationship with Bessie by saying, “I’m afraid I must ask you to help me home” (174; ch. 14), reflecting later that she “can’t care, and it’s a toss-up whether she comes again or not, but if money can buy her to look after me she shall be bought” (179; ch. 14). What is more, echoing the moment in *Jane Eyre* when the eponymous protagonist addresses Rochester by saying, “I will be your neighbour, your nurse, your housekeeper” (430; ch. 37), Dick says to Bessie, “You’d better come and housekeep for me then” (180 ch. 14). There is some evidence that Bessie regards Dick as both provider and dependent when Kipling’s narrator says, “Early in the afternoon time she came, because there was no young man in her life just then, and she thought of material advantages which would allow her to be idle for the rest of her days” (180; ch. 14). But that is not to say that her dependency is unlike Jane’s, or that it is purely materialistic, for Dick’s loss of sight instills in Bessie a “keen sense of new-found superiority” (175; ch. 14), the “utter misery and self-abandonment of the man appealed to her, and at the bottom of her heart lay the wicked feeling that he was humbled and brought low who had once humbled her” (177; ch. 14). Thus, like *Jane Eyre*, *The Light That Failed* is indicative of the way in which the blindman’s dependency is integral to power and pleasure on which the sighted counterparts become dependent.

## THE MELANCHOLIA OF BLINDNESS

The loss of the capacity for love, which is a precursor for the conception of parasitic dependency, is listed by Freud as a distinguishing mental feature of

melancholia (“Mourning and Melancholia,” 252). This detail is significant here because Brontë’s Rochester is repeatedly ascribed “melancholy” (430, 433, 436; ch. 37), foreshadowing an assertion in *The Light That Failed* about the melancholy of blindness being a “weight of intolerable darkness” (140; ch. 11). In fact, not only the loss of the capacity for love but all the mental features of melancholia are relevant to the trope of the blindman. This list of mental features includes a profoundly painful dejection, an end of interest in the outside world, an inhibition of all activity, and what Freud calls a “lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment” (“Mourning and Melancholia,” 252). Rochester’s loss of the capacity for love is illustrated when he supposes that for Jane he can “entertain none but fatherly feelings” (430; ch. 37); his lack of interest in the outside world, when Mary tells Jane, “I don’t think he will see you,” adding that he “refuses everybody” (427; ch. 37); his general lack of activity, when he becomes a “fixture” (423; ch. 36); and his lowering of self-regarding feelings, when he says, “I was desolate and abandoned—my life dark, lonely, hopeless—my soul athirst and forbidden to drink—my heart famished and never to be fed” (429; ch. 37). Put briefly, the blindman suffers a miserable existence, an absence of joy in relation to which the lives of his counterparts are likely to appear joyful.

When considering the psychology of the blindman in more detail, attention might be paid to the way in which it corresponds with Freud’s theory that the work of melancholia involves the internalization of the lost object, the result being a continuously critical presence in the ego: “the shadow of the object fell upon the ego, and the latter could henceforth be judged by a special agency, as though it were an object, the forsaken object” (“Mourning and Melancholia,” 249). In accordance with this theory, we might infer that the blindman refuses to accept his blindness and seeks to revive his sight by internalizing the notion that it is necessary. This conclusion may be drawn about *The Light That Failed*, when Dick is said to have learned not to stir until advised to do so:

[T]here was nothing whatever to do except to sit still and brood till the three daily meals came. Centuries separated breakfast from lunch, and lunch from dinner, and though a man prayed for hundreds of years that his mind might be taken from him, God would never hear. Rather the mind was quickened and the revolving thoughts ground against each other as millstones grind when there is no corn between; and yet the brain would



not wear out and give him rest. It continued to think, at length, with imagery and all manner of reminiscences. It recalled Maisie and past success, reckless travels by land and sea, the glory of doing work and feeling that it was good, and suggested all that might have happened had the eyes only been faithful to their duty. (167; ch. 14)

The features of melancholia that are implicit in this extract include the loss of the capacity for love, the profoundly painful dejection, the end of interest in the outside world and the general inhibition of activity. Continuing with the application of Freudian theory, then, we might infer that Dick revives his sight by internalizing the notion that it is necessary for love, an interest in the outside world and activity in general. In these terms, the melancholia of the blindman may be said to result from the internalized object of sight being at odds with the ego's sightless reality. The key point that is illustrated by this psychoanalytic reading is that the reality of sightlessness is not melancholic intrinsically, only becoming so when permeated by ocularcentric ideas, a scenario that is notable because the melancholia is integral to the notion that sight is a necessary condition of vitality.

The lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, culminating in a delusional expectation of punishment, is the most significant feature of melancholia, being the only one that is not also present in the state of mourning. The attribute is portrayed in *Jane Eyre* when, for example, Rochester says, "I supplicated God, that, if it seemed good to Him, I might soon be taken from this life" (441; ch. 37). Indeed, in *The Light That Failed*, the fact that the lowering of Dick's self-regarding feelings culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment is explicit in the assertion that there poured into his soul "tide on tide of overwhelming, purposeless fear—dread of starvation always, terror lest the unseen ceiling should crush down upon him, fear of fire in the chambers and a louse's death in red flame, and agonies of fiercer horror that had nothing to do with any fear of death" (167; ch. 14). The fear becomes manifest when Dick is said to have "bowed his head, and clutching the arms of his chair fought with his sweating self" (167; ch. 14), parodying the moment when "straining all his nerves" Samson "bowd" and "shook" the "two massie Pillars" (*SA*, lines 1646–50). The inclusion of this key feature is notable because prior to Freud's early twentieth-century blurring of the distinction between mourning and melancholia, the former was considered a normal effect of loss and the latter a pathological disposition. That is to say, *Jane Eyre* and *The Light That Failed* were first published at a time when

melancholia was widely defined in terms of alterity, indeed madness, a contextual factor that bolsters Rodas's suggestion that the identity of the mad-woman migrates into the blindman ("Brontë's *Jane Eyre*").

The melancholia of the blindman is sustained by blindness-darkness synonymy, for whether the word *darkness* is used to denote a lack of light or sight, the connotation of misery remains the same. Rochester's "all" is reduced to "void darkness" (426; ch. 37), for example, before he is said to ask, "Who can tell what a dark, dreary, hopeless life I have dragged on for months past? Doing nothing, expecting nothing; merging night in day; feeling but the sensation of cold when I let the fire go out, of hunger when I forgot to eat; and then a ceaseless sorrow" (432; ch. 37). The motif can also be found in *The Light That Failed* because, having said that he is "blind" and "the darkness will never go away" (137; ch. 11), Dick asserts that it is "hard to live alone in the dark, confusing the day and night; dropping to sleep through sheer weariness at mid-day, and rising restless in the chill of the dawn" (167; ch. 14). The problem with blindness-darkness synonymy is that it is ocularcentric, it takes the visual perspective as a measure by which all others are judged, for it can only be from the subject position of people with vision that darkness looks like blindness. In other words, the synonymy does not accommodate the fact that the existence of a person without vision is, by definition, no more dark than it is light, that when sight loss is total, the bearer ceases to see not only light but also darkness.

Embedded with the melancholia of blindness is the Samsonian platitude that death is preferable to a life without sight. Accordingly, the eponymous protagonist of *Jane Eyre* is told that while Rochester is alive, "many think he had better be dead" (423; ch. 36), foreshadowing *The Light That Failed*, where it is asserted that blindness is "the living death" (126; ch. 10), a "death-sentence of disease" (129; ch. 10), that Dick is "dead in the death of the blind" (142; ch. 12) and that his life is "nothing better than death" (167; ch. 14). The allusion to *Samson Agonistes* is sustained by Brontë when Rochester says, "I supplicated God, that, if it seemed good to Him, I might soon be taken from this life" (441; ch. 37), much as by Kipling, when Dick is said to have "prayed to God that his mind might be taken from him, offering for proof that he was worthy of this favour the fact that he had not shot himself long ago" (170; ch. 14). Though corresponding in these evocations of suicide, Brontë differs from Kipling and Milton insofar as she does not depict the fatal act. It may seem as if Kipling is following suit when Dick persuades himself that suicide would be a "ludicrous insult to the gravity of the situation as well as a weak-kneed confession of fear" (170; ch. 14), which is why Kleege likens the character to Oedipus. How-

ever, bearing in mind the classic formula advanced by Emile Durkheim, that “the term suicide is applied to any death which is the direct or indirect result of a positive or negative act accomplished by the victim” (42), the detail to note is that Dick makes his final journey expecting to be shot, that on reaching his destination he says, “Put me, I pray, in the forefront of the battle” (208; ch. 15). In other words, because deliberately standing in the line of fire is every bit as suicidal as pulling down the building in which one stands, Dick’s fate is linked with Samson in a way that Rochester’s is not.

Although Brontë differs from Kipling and Milton insofar as she omits the suicidal act, the salient point is that the conclusion of *Jane Eyre* nonetheless endorses the ocularcentric belief that a person cannot live happily ever after without sight. For a “Christian God who is supposed to temper justice with mercy,” as Kleege puts it, permanent “blindness would be too harsh a punishment” (70). Furthermore, the conclusion illustrates that the blindman’s castration is integral to the sighted capacity for love and erotic pleasure, for Rochester recovers his sight sufficiently to produce a son: “[T]he sky is no longer a blank to him—the earth no longer a void. When his first-born was put into his arms, he could see that the boy had inherited his own eyes, as they once were—large, brilliant, and black” (446; ch. 38). This transformation invokes a parallel with Spivak’s assertion that the emergence of Jane Eyre as the white individualist heroine requires the sacrifice of the Other in the form of “the mulatto woman” (*In Other Worlds*), for the emergence of Rochester as Jane’s companion requires the sacrifice of the Other in the form of the blindman. Thus, by the end of the novel it becomes apparent that the misery of the blindman is integral to the happiness of not only the sighted woman but also the sighted man whom Rochester becomes.

## CONCLUSION

In considering the multitude of diminishment with which Brontë associates visual impairment, I have isolated some of the many ways in which the characterization of Edward Rochester corresponds with that of Dick Helder, as well as some of the ways in which both characters are foreshadowed by Samson. The ocularcentric basis of this unity and its resonance with psychoanalytic discourse have raised various feminist issues. Indeed, exemplifying Spender’s definition of patriarchal knowledge, the trope of the blindman is premised on the notion that the experience of only part of the human population needs to be taken into account and the outcome imposed on the whole. Like Kipling, Brontë portrays someone who has a visual impairment

but takes into account only the experience of people who do not have visual impairments. The result is a diminished character who augments the status of the sighted protagonist, a functionality that corresponds with feminism only insofar as the former is male and the latter female. That is to say, while inverting the patriarchal schema that Simone de Beauvoir has described as men taking the subject position and women being treated as an objectified Other, Brontë actively endorses the binary opposition of normativism and disability. This scenario has been found to be a concern for feminist as well as literary disability scholars because the subject position that Jane occupies is bolstered by the objectification of the disabled Other; it is indicative of disempowerment rather than empowerment.

In accordance with the Derridean assertion that deconstruction is an openness toward the Other, which is the basis for Corker and Shakespeare's reading of disability as an integral part of normativism, I have inverted numerous binary oppositions, analyzing the blindman's diminishment and exposing links with the augmentations of his sighted counterparts. I have suggested that the grotesque portrayal of haptic perception underpins the implication that physical beauty is appreciated by purely visual means, that the symbolic castration invokes the figure of the castrating woman and her symbolic erection, that the unseeing spectacle elevates the controlling status of the unseen spectator, that the dependency of the blindman necessitates the dependability of his sighted counterparts, that his melancholia defines their happiness and, finally, that the emptiness of his living death is fundamental to the fullness of their lives. In brief, I have privileged the construct of disability over that of normativism and, more specifically, the blindman over his sighted counterparts, the result of which is a new perspective on *Jane Eyre* that will supplement the corpus of feminist readings. Moreover, while there can be no denying Chow's assertion that the process of feminization must be understood as "the emergence of a discursive network in which forces of class and race as well as gender become imbricated with one another" (144), I have demonstrated that disability must also be added to the list of significant forces. Indeed, heralded by Kirtley, Kleege, and Rodas, among others, the conclusive point is that the taxonomy of feminist, Marxist, and postcolonial approaches to *Jane Eyre* can be supplemented by an approach that is appreciative of disability, from which we may infer that there must be an absence that, in a Derridean sense, requires supplementing. After all, Brontë may be excused for the regressiveness of her approach to disability on the grounds of historicity, but the same cannot be said of literary scholars who have written since the disability movement gathered momentum in the late twentieth century.