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## FROM INDIA-RUBBER BACK TO FLESH

A Reevaluation of  
Male Embodiment in *Jane Eyre*

MARGARET ROSE TORRELL

AS ROCHESTER and Jane have one of their earlier fireside chats, he explains that he has become “hard and tough as an India-rubber ball” and asks whether she believes there is hope for his “re-transformation from India-rubber back to flesh” (125; ch. 14).<sup>1</sup> She opts not to respond directly to him, wondering if he has ingested too much wine, but the text itself, peopled with “hard” male constitutions-turned-flesh by narrative, participates in answering his question. This uncloaking of male bodies in *Jane Eyre* functions rhetorically to question both gender and ability hierarchies, thereby performing an intervention into cultural attitudes about masculinity and disability that gestures toward a nonhegemonic model of masculinity, one which is complemented as opposed to conflicted by physical disability.

That the novel, written and narrated by women, tells the story of women’s empowerment is nearly incontrovertible. However, that this empowerment occurs in concert with—not at the expense of—a progressive reconceptualization of masculinity and embodiment has not yet been fully recognized. As masculinity theorists have argued, masculinity and feminin-

1. The version of the primary text referred to in this chapter is Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2002).

ity are social constructions and exist in a binary relationship to each other. Alterations in feminine identity impact the binary and cause a corresponding shift in masculinity (Connell, 84). Thus, when the boundaries of woman's identity are redrawn in the novel, the borders of manhood, the other side of the binary, are also adjusted.

Because embodied status is one of the main dividing lines of gender, attributing disability and embodiment to male characters is a means of accomplishing this alteration. Gender and embodied identity are traditionally conceived along an axis where masculinity is associated with a denial of embodiment and femininity is connected to corporeality. Jane's narrative both represents and destabilizes this conventional pairing, calling attention to it and freeing the axis of gender and ability so that a greater variety of gendered and embodied combinations form, among them a reaffirmation of identity as embodied, regardless of gender. As a result of this intervention in discourse, alternate models of masculinity are offered, some of which can more easily pair with physical disability and embodied status. This revision of masculinity, like the rewriting of femininity, performs valuable cultural work. While some ableist residue persists in Jane's discourse, the various constructions of male embodiment in the novel make progress in offsetting gender binaries and reworking some of the pejorative terms of embodied and disabled identity.

This exploration of the novel's retransformation of men into flesh begins with a baseline study of the discourse of male disembodiment in theory and in the text. Jane's narrative forms a counterdiscourse to these constructions, indeed transforming "hard, tough," seemingly disembodied masculine exteriors into flesh by a rhetorical manipulation of the established terms of gender and embodiment. The second section of the chapter examines one of the discursive maneuvers through which such a change might occur, considering the possibility that Jane repurposes a patriarchal, ableist discourse to assert a position of privilege for herself. The final section of the chapter identifies another discursive maneuver that repositions the terms of gender and embodiment in a more emancipatory way: with a nod to the frayed and diffusive nature of discourse that allows contradictory readings of the novel to exist side-by-side, I perform a new reading of Rochester's embodied masculine identity that emerges out of the discursive friction between the competing notions of gender and embodiment showcased in the text. His embodied masculinity relies on a correlating construction of embodied femininity; as I show, when embodiment is attributed to both sides of the gender binary, the result is that both gender and ability hierarchies are offset, and the power generated by them is attenuated. This prepares the way for an embodied

manhood that is a rather radical alternative to the conventional model of disembodied and oppressive masculinity.

## THE DOUBLE BIND/ARY OF GENDER AND EMBODIMENT

*Jane Eyre* is a novel of competing discourses about gender and embodiment. This section foregrounds the significance of male embodiment in the novel by examining the construction of male disembodiment in theory and in *Jane Eyre*. The subsequent sections take up two possible ways of reading Jane's response to these constructions. For the purposes of this chapter, I use the word *embodiment* to mean the understanding of the self and/or other selves as bodies. Embodiment is conceptually developed by an awareness of various visceral realities such as bodily processes, sensations, physical manifestations of strong emotion, and pain. As reflected in the work of such theorists as Peter Stallybrass, Allon White, and Martha Nussbaum, embodiment is often associated with nebulous corporeal boundaries, with the leaky and permeable, with the excretion of bodily fluids and a susceptibility to various forms of penetration from the outside. Embodiment frequently is a reminder of the "animal" or "mortal" nature of humanness.

There is almost a complete overlap between embodiment and disability; embodiment is in fact often read as the opposite of an ideal state of health in which the boundaries of the body are under careful control and visceral realities would therefore be invisible to others and virtually unnoticeable to oneself. Embodiment and disability, on the other hand, both involve the conscious awareness of oneself as a body. If there is a difference between embodiment and disability, it is perhaps a matter of timing: embodiment is a universal state (we—all of us—are bodies) and disability is a current identity for some, an eventual identity for most others. Perhaps because embodiment and disability are often reminders of our animal and mortal status, they have been interpreted through discourse as highly undesirable, facts to be anxiously denied as opposed to embraced. As a means of accomplishing this denial, embodiment and disability are often conflated, perceived pejoratively, and, as Nussbaum demonstrates in "'Secret Sewers of Vice': Disgust, Bodies, and the Law," broadcast on marginalized people as a way of maintaining the privileged status of dominant social groups.<sup>2</sup>

2. Nussbaum attributes the existence of the disembodied/embodied binary to people's strong desire to eschew thinking about themselves as mortal. As a result, they project characteristics of embodiment onto others: "We need a group of humans to bound ourselves against, who will come to exemplify the boundary line between the truly human and the

The flight from embodiment, then, forms a discourse that is a foundation for ethnic, class, gender, and other oppressive social divisions. While many of these are active in *Jane Eyre*, the focus here is on the construction of gender. The conflation of “female” with embodiment and disability in patriarchal discourse is evident, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes, at least as early as Aristotle’s *Generation of Animals*. She powerfully explains the insidiousness of the double binary: “I want to suggest that a firm boundary between ‘disabled’ and ‘nondisabled’ women cannot be meaningfully drawn—just as any absolute distinction between sex and gender is problematic. Femininity and disability are inextricably entangled in patriarchal culture” (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 27). By extension, male privilege is gained by a comparative disassociation from the body. The mechanism works by way of discursive sleight of hand. Like the magician who directs his audience’s attention to his scantily clad assistant so that he can perform his trickery undetected, the emphasis on women’s embodiment detracts attention from the male body, encasing it in a protective cloak of invisibility and normativity. Calvin Thomas sketches out how this construction operates: “the repression of the abject vulnerability of the male body—as repression necessary for the construction of heteronormative masculinity—demands a displacement of that vulnerability and all that it materially entails, onto the feminine” (63). In fact, the practice of projecting corporeality onto women in order to emphasize male “hardness” and comparative disembodiment is so common that Paul McIlvenny lists it as one of the foundational elements of dominant masculinity:

[C]ontemporary hegemonic masculinity in relation to the male body often emphasizes ability, superhuman strength and stamina, physical violence, unemotionality, hardness, autonomy, potency, assertiveness, authority, the abjection of other bodies (the feminine, the homosexual, the grotesque), and the shame of failure. (103)

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basely animal. If those quasi animals stand between us and our own animality, then we are one step further away from being animal and mortal ourselves. Thus throughout history, certain disgust properties [associated with embodiment]—sliminess, bad smell, stickiness, decay, foulness—have been repeatedly and monotonously associated with, indeed projected onto, groups by reference to whom privileged groups seek to define their superior human status” (“Secret Sewers of Vice,” 29). Davis, in “Constructing Normalcy: The Bell Curve, the Novel, and the Invention of the Disabled Body in the Nineteenth Century,” notes that during the nineteenth century, such constructions were particularly active as various social changes triggered a desperate desire for people to assert that they were “normal.”

Even physical characteristics that are associated with the male body, such as physical strength and muscular power, become understood as features of the idealized body under perfect control. The “hard” male body is constructed, by way of comparison to other bodies, as disembodied—that is, less associated with the visceral realities of embodiment.

The insistence on male strength, toughness, and infallible physicality coupled with the connection of women to markedly weaker, faulty bodies has historically been a means of maintaining gender inequality. R. W. Connell notes that when advances in women’s equality or other social changes trigger a masculinity crisis, a characteristic response is for there to be a greater emphasis on the hard, muscular male body. This configuration of the male body, Connell argues, functions as a way to suggest “men’s superiority and right to rule” (84, 54–55).<sup>3</sup> *Jane Eyre* comes out of a time of particularly intense gender flux, one of those points in history during which there was a crisis in masculinity that resulted in the reinforcement of gender boundaries. In Victorian England, women’s equal rights movements, industrialization, and class redefinition among other factors contributed to rethinking of gender and thereby promoted the production of cultural narratives that emphasized female and denied male embodiment. On the one hand, dominant masculinity became associated with emblems of ideal health—for example, strength, vigor, physical and emotional control. On the other hand, there was an increased construction of women as embodied. Thus, as Helena Michie puts it, the Victorians didn’t just “inherit” the double binary of gender and embodiment but indeed “perfected it” (408–9) in response to a change in gender roles that threatened preexisting social hierarchies. As a result, differences in male and female embodiment were emphasized to maintain a clear division between the sexes. As Michie writes, there is “a historically unprecedented sense of the differences between the sexes that expressed itself, among other ways, in corporeal terms” in Victorian England (409).

A double binary is thereby set up in which a central difference between male and female identity occurs at the crossroads of disembodiment and

3. For more on the male/disembodied vs. female/embodied dichotomy as it plays out historically during times of crises in masculinity, see, for example, Breitenberg’s *Anxious Masculinity* which examines how social changes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries produce an acceleration of masculinist discourse and Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies* which explores the reinforcement of the gender dichotomy in Germany by men involved in the Freikorps movement in the wake of World War I. Bordo, in *The Male Body*, in addition to Thomas and McIlvenny who are mentioned above, are among the critics who observe this dichotomy in more contemporary times.

embodiment. Although embodiment is natural and normative, the preference given to masculine disembodiment is actually quite binding—that is, both stubbornly reinforced and severely restrictive. That this double binary is active in *Jane Eyre* is clear: the most central male characters are mouthpieces for masculinist narratives that elevate the status of men by emphasizing male disembodiment and female embodiment. For example, as the novel opens, John Reed verbally assaults Jane. In fits of patriarchal posturing through which he enacts his position as “master” of the household, he tells her she is a “bad animal” (9; ch. 1) and later reports that she is a “mad cat” (26; ch. 2), emphasizing her ties to her animal nature. The embodiment of Jane is carried forward by Mr. Brocklehurst, who announces to the pupils and teachers at Lowood that Jane is a source of contagion and sickness: because Mrs. Reed is afraid that Jane’s “vicious example should contaminate” the purity of the Reed children, Jane is discharged to Lowood so that she can “be healed, even as the Jews of old sent their diseased to the troubled pool of Bethesda” (63; ch. 7). Rochester also emphasizes Jane’s embodied status and is curiously more forthright about linking her with illness when he is in the guise of the gypsy fortune teller: “You are cold; you are sick; and you are silly,” he insists, reading her lonesomeness as a type of sickness and feminine folly (187; ch. 19). Other comments about Jane by Rochester associate her with something for him to control and own, such as his configuration of her as “pet lamb” to his “shepherd” (204; ch. 20), a construction that—like John’s—associates Jane with the animal. Even St. John’s religious beneficence is built on such constructions: for example, when Jane all but rejects his marriage proposal and prepares to return to Rochester, St. John slips a note under her door in which he exhorts her to pray to avoid temptation. He cautions, “the spirit, I trust, is willing, but the flesh, I see, is weak” (393; ch. 36).

It is worth noting that at moments when Jane threatens the position of male characters, they increase their emphasis on her embodiment. These instances are microcosms of cultural dynamics in which movements toward female independence trigger a crisis in masculinity that leads to an acceleration in embodied constructions of women. For example, it is when Jane acts independently of St. John’s wishes for her and opts not to spend her life in India with him that he connects her decision to a weakness of her flesh (393; ch. 36). Later, he is still concerned about whether Jane is following spirit or fleshly desire even after he receives news of her marriage (420; ch. 38). The embodied construction of women is likewise exacerbated when men are in the threatened position of having their cloak of invisibility cast from their bodies. For example, when Jane confronts Rochester about the shadowy fig-

ure who tramples her wedding veil, Rochester discredits Jane by suggesting fallibility in *her* perception. When she asks who the woman is, he reassures her that she is merely Jane's hallucination: "The creature of an over-stimulated brain; that is certain. I must be careful of you, my treasure: nerves like yours were not made for rough handling" (268; ch. 25). His response is to suggest, rather forcefully, Jane's inherent unreliability, easy excitability, and general frailty, a sense he maintains even as she argues against it (266–67; ch. 25). Through the discursive sleight of hand which emphasizes her embodiment, Rochester's flaw remains hidden, his cloak still intact.

### BACK TO FLESH:

#### JANE'S COUNTERNARRATIVES OF MALE EMBODIMENT

The main male voices in the novel thus reproduce traditional patriarchal configurations by drawing on a double binary that emphasizes male disembodiment through an ableist and masculinist rhetoric that associates women with embodiment. However, Jane's narrative disrupts such oppressive configurations: the story she tells is one in which embodied status is attached to men as well as to women. Her narrative thereby functions as a counterdiscourse that troubles gender and ability binaries active in the text and culture.

In the two remaining sections of this chapter, I explore two ways that such a counterdiscourse might be deployed in the text. This section considers the possibility that Jane draws from a discourse of embodiment that is used to marginalize women and applies it to men (as well as to other women<sup>4</sup>); in essence she repurposes tools of gender oppression to situate herself in a less embodied and therefore more socially privileged position. This reading of the novel is in line with the recent disability studies inspired scholarship of David Bolt and Chih-Ping Chen. In the final section of the chapter, I probe Jane's counterdiscourse for more emancipatory configurations of gender and embodiment.

As we explored in the previous section, John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, Rochester, and St. John tell a tale of Jane's embodiment through their spoken words; however, the story she tells in her narrative is one which empha-

4. The depiction of female "others" in *Jane Eyre* has received comparatively more critical attention than the construction of male characters. For more on the gendered politics of the portrayals of women in the novel, see Spivak, who considers Bertha as "a figure produced by the axiomatic of imperialism" ("Three Women's Texts," 247) and Chen, who examines Bertha and Blanche through the dynamics of the freak show.



sizes their corporeality and human fallibility. This embodied construction of them attenuates the power inherent in their embodied construction of Jane. For example, seemingly in response to John Reed's "bad animal" comment, Jane connects her cousin with corporeal characteristics, telling us "he was not quick either of vision or conception" (9; ch. 1) and depicting him in highly physiological terms that verge on the grotesque: he has "a dingy and unwholesome skin [ . . . ] heavy limbs and large extremities. He gorged himself habitually at the table, which made him bilious" and is generally in "delicate health" (9; ch. 1). This portrayal is continued throughout the novel, as John is aligned with other embodied and more female attributes of the time, such as excessive, uncontrollable impulses, eventually leading to his presumed suicide and his family's ruin (209; ch. 21). Mr. Brocklehurst's mission is to perform a type of disembodiment on his all-too-corporeal female charges—"to mortify in girls the lusts of the flesh" (61; ch. 7). However, the telling arrival of his own very well-coifed daughters and his stingy, hypocritical treatment of the Lowood pupils suggest, to turn his own discourse on himself, a heavy inclination toward the lusts of his flesh (61; ch. 7). Likewise, at the novel's close, St. John is not the spiritual, work-driven, unfeeling machine he makes himself out to be, but he is instead mortal, fallible, and enfleshed (422; ch. 38).

Rochester's introduction in the text, when he falls from the horse and must rely on Jane's help (109; ch. 12), is a model for several other moments that emphasize his connection to his body and situate Jane as a type of caregiver. For example, when Bertha sets fire to his bed, he is at first just a body—that is, he is inert flesh, completely unable to be aroused despite Jane's efforts to wake him. He is then soaked in fluids from his ewer and basin. Both are full—the ewer (or pitcher) with water, the basin with what must be "used" water—and so whatever bodily residue the basin water has washed off Rochester, Jane now casts back at him, a rather appropriate reminder of his embodiment. Finally, with a temporary realization of his own frailty, Rochester understands that he is helpless without Jane's intervention (142; ch. 15). Later, Rochester's shock at the news of Mason's arrival affords Jane another glimpse beneath the armor of his disembodiment. Unable to speak in full sentences, his breathing undergoing spasms, his face extremely pale, too weak to move by his own power, he again relies on her physical support (193–94; ch. 19). Rochester's blindness and amputation maintain these dynamics (and are the focus of the last section of this chapter).

Further, Rochester's earlier family and personal history also situate him outside of more traditional masculine roles. He is a second-born son who is not poised to inherit his father's fortune and the reputed victim of his father

and brother's manipulations. As such, he is somewhat removed from the system of masculine privilege. In addition, his early marriage to Bertha and his various affairs belie a character aligned with strong physical passion, one that he cannot completely offset by projecting illicit sexual natures onto his assorted female partners. Likewise, although he defends his treatment of Bertha by depicting her as insane and monstrous, details in his own depiction reveal, as Julia Miele Rodas argues in "Brontë's *Jane Eyre*," that he is very similar to his first wife.

Thus, if John Reed, Brocklehurst, St. John, and Rochester all don similar discursive masks of masculinity in an effort to render their bodies transparent, Jane's accounts reveal the flesh that lies beneath their discourse of denial. Rochester may request Jane's help with escaping from his India-rubber exterior; however, her narrative suggests that his disembodied identity, like that of the other male characters who put on a cloak of invisibility in their attempts to embody her, has been maintained by a social discourse that by its very nature is unstable and illusory.

For most of the novel, Jane's reconstruction of John, Brocklehurst, St. John, and Rochester appears to be predominantly accomplished through an inversion of the gender binary that maintains the hegemonic structure of the ability binary. When the privileged side of the gender binary is associated with embodiment, the seemingly stable terms of the double binary become unfixed, allowing alternative models of gender and ability to establish themselves. Embodied status is attributed to men and, following the pattern, Jane is by comparison situated in a less embodied and therefore more socially valued position. Because both sides of a binary exist in synergistic relationship to one another, the construction of men as embodied refashions both male and female identity. As Calvin Thomas argues, in fact, there is a "certain feminist urgency" in "the project of male embodiment" because the association of men with their bodies undermines a construction that has historically powered oppressive gender divisions (71). According to this reading, the masculinist discourse governing gender difference is thereby interrogated, but ableist assumptions about embodiment appear to remain firmly in place.

This argument is taken up by disability studies scholars who are rightly suspicious of how disability is portrayed in the novel. They convincingly contend that the process of reassigning gender positions results in a perpetuation of ableist thinking. For example, Bolt, in his study of Rochester's blindness, powerfully demonstrates that the text reconstructs women's positions by placing the stress on male as opposed to female embodiment: "Male and female roles may well be inverted in the novel, but the underpin-

ning hierarchies of normativism over disability and ‘the sighted’ over ‘the blind’ remain intact” (271). Along a similar line, Chen insightfully argues that by the end of the novel, Jane is not only in the more masculine and able position but that, as the narrator, she puts Rochester on display, almost like the host of a freak show would exhibit and capitalize on the physical alterity of the performers: “The subversion of freak show power relations concludes with the reinstatement of power hierarchy. Gender inequality and social marginality faced by a woman are ‘corrected’ only by the reversal of the gendered roles of the host and the exhibit” (383). For both Bolt and Chen, then, *Jane Eyre* questions gender hierarchies but raises the status of Jane by way of attributing more embodied identification to men. Jane’s role as caregiver to Rochester, active at their first meeting and carried through to the novel’s end, especially supports such a reading. The caregiver is in a position, as Garland-Thomson observes, of using the disabled body to “organize a more empowered and prestigious selfhood” (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 90). In this reading, *Jane Eyre* thereby replaces social discourses that suggest women’s inferiority with a counterdiscourse that suggests male inferiority. In doing so, it transmits and perpetuates disempowered, pejorative conceptions of disability.

This reassignment of embodied identity to empower women has also been observed in other nineteenth-century literature. For example, Hugh McElaney’s study of disability and freakery in Louisa May Alcott’s work suggests that the disability of male characters in Alcott’s and other nineteenth-century American women’s writing is often a punishment for a male child’s “excessive manifestations of masculinity” (148). By disabling young males, McElaney posits, the female writer asserts the comparative supremacy of women who are written as able-bodied and therefore less embodied than these male characters (156–57).

Rochester’s own shifting status from blind man to partially sighted man replicates the ability binary in another way, as Elizabeth Donaldson and Bolt both demonstrate. Donaldson reads Rochester’s return to partial sight as a reassertion of normalcy after his blindness (“The Corpus of the Madwoman,” 110). As such, Rochester’s disability becomes a point of assuring readers of their own wholeness, both because he gets some sight back, thereby allowing the reader to envision a happy ending, and because he remains disabled, thereby ensuring the presumably nondisabled reader of her own wholeness and normalcy. As Bolt also argues, “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 who

Rochester becomes” (285). These readings underscore the insidious connections between embodiment and disempowerment. Rochester’s status as a blind man is used to privilege the relative disembodiment and consequently elevated status not only of Jane and the reader but also of the partially sighted Rochester.

The reading of the novel I have been considering in this section suggests that Jane’s growth and empowerment are dependent on her ability to repurpose the tools of oppressive discourse to her advantage. While gender construction may become more mobile in her narrative, the pejorative terms of embodiment appear to be far more difficult to budge. However, they are not completely inflexible, and in the final section of this chapter I provide another reading of the novel that diverges from previous interpretations, one in which both the terms of gender and ability are reconfigured.

#### **DISPERSED DISCOURSES: TOWARD AN ALTERNATIVE READING OF EMBODIMENT AND GENDER**

My reading of *Jane Eyre* in this section demonstrates a model of gender reconstruction that agitates the abled–disabled binary at the same time that it questions the gender binary. In essence, when Brontë sets about to transform men back into flesh, the terms of gender and ability binaries are not reversed but indeed dismantled. The goal in this section is to explore how gender and embodiment identifications are altered when embodiment is attributed to both sides of the binary. After examining the shifting nature of language and the status of Jane’s embodiment, this section specifically focuses on disabled masculinity theory and its application to Rochester, since his embodiment and masculinity are especially remarkable pairings.

By way of transitioning into the final section of the chapter, I would like to call attention to the dispersive nature of language and discourse, both to theorize the sometimes oppressive/sometimes empowering workings of gender and ability in the novel and to qualify my reading of Rochester, even before I begin it. Language has an expansive quality—it can be used to advance a kind of emancipatory thinking necessary for social justice—and at the same time it is also limited (the binary nature of the linguistic structure itself presupposes the existence of latent hierarchal relationships). James Wilson and Cynthia Lewiecki-Wilson recognize the multivalent properties of language in “Disability, Rhetoric, and the Body”:

Language's effects are dispersed, uneven, and contradictory. People wield language for many purposes, but at the same time language's effects also spill or seep out, beyond the immediate container of the situation and intention for which it was crafted. Language can only be partly harnessed as an instrument of agency, never wholly so, for it always carries along many other material histories and purposes and the arbitrary and differential traces of its systematic functioning. If language can be said to transform economic systems, institutions, and social practices, then its power flows diffusively in uneven currents. (3)

Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson are both cautious and optimistic about the power of language. Language can be used in the service of emancipatory thinking, but “never wholly so”; it is almost always inflected by remnants of the power structures it is employed to interrogate. Likewise, liberatory models of identity can be advanced through counter discourses, but these are rarely free of the imprint of social hierarchies. In fact, the model of male embodiment in the novel I have so far discussed is liberatory in the sense that it reseats hierarchical gender identifications, but at the same time it is oppressive because it accomplishes its work by reproducing ability hierarchies. Similar inversions take place in the construction of socioeconomic class, where, for example, Aunt Reed's prolonged illness might be read as narrative backlash for her trenchant embodied constructions of her niece. Jane herself employs such a strategy to uphold her womanly virtue by way of contrast to the French Adèle, the Creole Bertha, and the continental mistresses of Rochester, forging “foreign” women's connection to various lusts of the flesh in order to elevate her white English womanhood.

These are just some of the places where oppressive thinking may “seep out” by way of the disembodied–embodied binary, even as the novel challenges such constructions of women by men and even as the narrative works toward situating embodiment as a more normative state. In acknowledging the “diffusive” and “uneven currents” of language, I hope to validate readings of the text based on the limits of discourse, as I have done so far, as well as to discover moments where discourse has more expansive potential, moments in the text where language does begin to work more holistically out of the oppressive master narratives of a culture, as I do below.

Before turning to the analysis of Rochester, I will briefly address the issue of Jane's embodiment because it has an impact on how her constructions of male corporeality might be interpreted. Specifically, the notion that Jane enforces her own disembodiment when she links men to their bodies might be reconsidered. To follow the India-rubber metaphor, when Jane shows

Rochester's hard, tough exterior to be merely a self-constructed discursive mask, she does not don that same mask to render her body invisible. In fact, her narrative suggests the futility and hypocrisy—indeed the danger—of denying one's connection to the body.

Thus, although Jane does not consistently align herself with disabled identity, her concept of herself is inextricably tied to her body. Because she tells her story by way of recollection, the plentiful moments of bodily awareness in her narrative reflect a fairly unified sense of her corporeal identity from the standpoint of a grown woman. Only six sentences into her narrative, as she recalls her experiences as a girl of ten, she remarks on her “physical inferiority” to her cousins and her painfully cold “nipped fingers and toes” (7; ch. 1). Soon after, the head injury caused by John's attack on her results in pain, bleeding, and unconsciousness and has long term effects on her health, making her feel “physically weak and broken down” (19; ch. 3). The deprivations she experiences at Lowood are likewise described in embodied terms. The cold “nipped” and hunger “gnawed” her (46; ch. 5). Exposure to the snow causes her torturous pain, and she describes her “wretched feet flayed and swollen to lameness” (72; ch. 9). Jane is also prone to a restless excitement that is described in physical terms. For example, she “felt the pulses throb in [her] head and temples” as she considers her options for departing Lowood (82; ch. 10). Several times during her narrative, Jane emphasizes her small frame, pale complexion, and her “irregular,” “marked” features (94; ch. 11). It is these that Jane compares unfavorably to Blanche Ingram's classic beauty to attempt to check her own growing interest in Rochester (153–4; ch. 16). This embodied portrayal is maintained through to Jane and Rochester's reunion, where, upon the anticipation of being with Rochester again, Jane's body is so uncontrollable she cannot hold her trembling frame still—emblematically, the water spills from the glass on her tray and her “heart struck [her] ribs loud and fast” (404; ch. 37). Her pregnancy and motherhood carry her embodied status to and beyond the novel's close. It is also worth noting that other female characters, such as Mrs. Reed and Helen, are configured as embodied alongside Jane.<sup>5</sup> To be sure, additional studies of Jane's embodiment (and that of other female characters) are needed to more fully articulate how the textual presence of women as bodies alongside of men as bodies can impact the gender-embodiment binary; these observations are starting points.

5. Interestingly, Helen's religious leaning allows her to accept her own embodiment and forecast a sense that all bodies are “corruptible” and mortal (55; ch. 6).

In this brief account of Jane's body, the suggestion is that when she contradicts masculinist discourses by asserting male embodiment, she leaves the discourses that equate femaleness with corporeality intact. The result is a narrative that tells the story of embodiment across gender identification, one that thereby rewrites the terms of corporeal identity alongside a reinscription of gender. No longer exclusively associated with the disparaged side of the binary, embodied status begins to shed its association with the anomalous, disempowered, and exclusively female and is situated as a more normal and natural condition of being. Attributing embodied status to men as the privileged side of the binary (while maintaining women's embodiment alongside of it) offers a recasting of masculinity apart from its association with social dominance and oppression. It is this formulation of masculinity in scholarship and *Jane Eyre* to which I now turn my attention.

It is challenging to conceive of an embodied masculinity because the gender/ability binary continues to remain in place, although not without increasing critical interrogation, in contemporary thinking. The root of the challenge is that masculinity and embodiment are understood as incongruous states. Thomas Gerschick explains the nature of this contradiction: "for men with physical disabilities, masculine gender privilege collides with the stigmatized status of having a disability, thereby causing status inconsistency, as having a disability, erodes much, but not all, masculine privilege" ("Toward a Theory," 1265). As a result, the contradictory nature of masculinity and disability has been known to cause disabled men to internalize a sense of failure at not meeting traditional masculine standards ("Sisyphus," 123). In fact, the relationship between female embodiment and masculine disembodiment is so potent that it is usually the case that a reversal of the terms of embodiment often presumes a correlating reversal of the terms of gender. Judith Halberstam elaborates: "The male body is feminized when sick and the female body is masculinized when healthy, invigorated, and active" (354). It seems that even in contemporary culture, physical disability is at odds with masculine identity and tends to act as a demasculinizing agent.

Yet as difficult as it is to conflate these socially contradictory identities, male embodiment has been singled out by masculinity studies and disability studies alike as an inroad to alleviating gender and ability oppression. Scholars working in these areas advocate for a type of male transformation into flesh—for the study of men as bodies that are fallible, mortal, leaky, and subject to cultural inscription. As Thomas explains, "*one* possibly productive way to analyze male power and hegemony, and to reconfigure male identification and desire, involves a specific sort of attention to the 'matter'

of the male body and to the materialization of that body *in writing*" (62). Connell goes further, suggesting that "a politics of social justice" for gender inequality necessitates "re-embodiment for men, a search for different ways of using, feeling and showing male bodies," including placing male bodies in more traditionally female situations and roles (233). The notion of masculinities—masculinity in many forms, especially as it intersects with other cultural identities—reinforces the potential multiplicity of this gender category. Disability studies researchers such as Gerschick, Adam Stephen Miller, and Russell Shuttleworth have shown how some disabled men successfully access such alternative notions of masculinity and embodiment. For example, they expand their "masculine repertoire" so that they can more flexibly accommodate feminine roles when it is advantageous to do so (Shuttleworth, 175), and they craft their masculine identity "along the lines of their own abilities, perceptions, and strengths" (Gerschick and Miller, 265). This leads to positive experiences of disabled masculinity—indeed, to a diversity of disabled masculinities.

These insights from masculinity studies and disability studies theorists begin to unravel the cloak of invisibility from the male body, establishing in its place a proverbial and emancipatory coat of many colors. Locating the male body in various experiences, forms, and conditions erodes the primacy of masculinity as a disembodied identity, showing these to be cultural constructs that have little bearing on lived experience. This conception of men as bodies, then, is a way out of the gender and ability binary because it makes progress toward detaching disempowerment and emasculation from embodied status.

These maneuvers are accomplished because of the dispersive nature of discourse. The double binary may seem so locked in place that masculinity and embodiment are an impossible pairing. However, the terms of ability, like the terms of gender, are based in discourse and can thereby be redefined by counter discourse. Judith Keegan Gardiner argues this point: "The conflation of emasculation, castration, feminization, and femininity is a political maneuver, not a psychological law, and masculinity and femininity have different meanings and uses in male and female bodies and in differing cultural contexts" (15). We have been trained to read the intersection of embodiment and masculinity as an undesirable loss of power because we have also been trained to associate embodiment with femininity and weakness. Gardiner reminds us that these constructions are dependent on culture and political system, noting also that their connection does not occur cross culturally. Thus, the grouping of disability, embodiment, femininity, weakness, and death, like the grouping of their opposites, is a function of a discourse



that maintains social hierarchies and can therefore be challenged through critique and counter discourse. With this in mind, the task before us is how to understand embodied masculinity not as disempowering and emasculating, but instead as a catalyst for more expansive thinking about gender and ability.

To be sure, the first accounts of Rochester's disablement suggest the presumed incongruity of masculine and embodied identity. The host of the inn (who was also butler to Rochester's father) provides the initial report, projecting severe pity on Rochester's current state. With one eye "knocked out," "the other eye inflamed [so that] he lost the sight of that also," and one hand crushed and amputated, Rochester is "now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple" and as such "quite broken down" (401; ch. 36). With no available alternative masculine identity to assign to Rochester, the host can only read his change in body as a loss of status. Rochester's life has become so tragic, so unplaceable in the schema of social value, that the host reports that "many think he had better be dead" (400; ch. 36). When Jane first observes the disabled Rochester coming out of the door at Ferndean, groping, uncertain, his movements fall short of any masculine ideal (403; ch. 37), reflecting Shuttleworth's observations that the nature of one's disability may make it impossible to perform the expected movements and comportment of dominant masculinity (167). Upon Jane's reunion with Rochester, we find that he himself has subscribed to the masculine ideal of his time. Unable to align his disabilities with his masculinity, he feels degraded and puts himself into social isolation. He can no longer think of himself as attractive or eligible for romance or marriage. Concerned that Jane would "suffer [. . . ] to devote [herself] to a blind lameter like [him]" (406; ch. 37), he fears his arm ("a mere stump—a ghastly sight") and his "cicatrized visage" will revolt her (408; ch. 37). Understandably, she does initially feel some sorrow mixed with pity at seeing him again, and she seems particularly taken by his sadness and powerlessness (410; ch. 37).

However, undercurrents in Jane's narration assert Rochester's masculinity and indeed his sexual desirability alongside his disability. To her, he is muscular, manly, and sexy. Despite a change in his countenance, she finds that he has maintained his "athletic strength" and "vigorous prime" (403; ch. 37). As she observes his aimless, uncertain movements on Ferndean's doorstep, she can barely keep herself from going to him and "dar[ing] to drop a kiss on that brow of rock, and on those lips so sternly sealed beneath it" (403; ch. 37). While he may not perform masculinity in his movements, his stoic face is inherently masculine, and she wishes to kiss both brow and lips—suggesting her sexual attraction to him as a disabled man. In a sub-

sequent construction of him, she writes of his crying in a way that also maintains masculine identification: “I saw a tear slide from under the sealed eyelid, and trickle down the manly cheek” (412; ch. 37). Here, she conflates the emotional and embodied (indeed the leaky) with the manly—as a result—a new composite of masculine traits begins to form.

Her desire for Rochester also accomplishes a rewriting of conventional notions of disabled masculinity. Under Jane’s pen, he is not asexual, an object of disgust, a person to be shunned, but is instead someone who stokes her desire and allows her an outlet to experience it. This is a concept that is built into the caregiver interactions that appear throughout the text and culminate in the final chapters. The moments in *Jane Eyre* where Jane acts as caregiver/rescuer to Rochester are particularly erotically charged. Physical touch between them, especially before any declaration of affection is made, would ordinarily be impermissible in Victorian society, but in Jane’s narrative it is sanctioned—made proper and presumably asexual—by the terms of the caregiver relationship. In the romance of Jane and Rochester, however, these moments are an outlet for the sexual desire Jane has for Rochester, allowing her the thrill of physical contact while upholding her virtue and purity under the guise of caregiving. For example, when Jane first encounters the intriguing stranger on the road, she says she “should have been afraid to touch a horse when alone,” but the rules of Victorian female propriety suggest that she certainly should be even more afraid to come into close physical proximity with—indeed to be touched by—an unknown man, if not for concerns about her own safety then surely for concerns about her reputation (109; ch. 12). However, under the guise of “necessity,” Rochester and Jane have their first physical encounter as he puts his arm around her and she helps him to his horse. This dynamic is repeated again at the other moments of her coming to Rochester’s aid. All suggest erotically charged eruptions in their developing relationship.

A similar dynamic permits Jane to narrate the eroticism of her reunion with Rochester. The touch of his “wandering hand” which a few lines later becomes his “muscular hand” on her “arm [ . . . ] shoulder-neck-waist” is just as longed-for by her as when he subsequently “entwined and gathered [her] to him” (405; ch. 37). She really means it (in more ways than one) when she tells him “I am glad to be so near you again” (405; ch. 37). His “groping,” “wandering [and muscular] hand” becomes a site of sexual virility and enacts an erotic touch that is desired by both Rochester and Jane. I therefore do not read this moment according to the stereotype of the blind-man as lecherous (where “touch becomes a grope and ultimately a lecherous grip”) as Bolt does (275), but instead as an erotic moment, desired by

both parties, from which new associations between disabled masculinity and female sexual desire may “seep out” (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wilson, 3).

Thus, Jane’s narration asserts Rochester’s masculinity and sexual desirability alongside his disability, imbuing male embodiment with new value. In addition, she also emphasizes a developing interdependence in their relationship that suggests a diffusion of the oppressive hierarchies attendant to both gender and ability. For example, on the second day of their reunion, as their love is confirmed through their dialogue, Rochester calls attention again to his “seared vision” and “crippled strength,” likening himself to a decaying, ruined, lightning-struck tree. Jane answers him back, reinscribing the image with the more positive association of a “green and vigorous tree”: “Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop” (415; ch. 37). Her reconstruction of him emphasizes his vigor, strength, and generosity, as well as his ability to be of use and support—all descriptors of masculinity, but not necessarily dominant, oppressive masculinity.<sup>6</sup> He thus may need her help (indeed, just a few lines later he says she will “have to lead [him] about by the hand” and “wait on” him), but he also will be her support.

This interdependence powers Jane’s love for him even more, as she asserts: “I love you better now when I can really be useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector” (416; ch. 37). His dependence on her (perhaps because it is coupled by her dependence on him) allows a more equal distribution of power in the relationship and at the same time does not affect his masculine vigor, desirability, or strength. In fact, she tells him he has no deficiencies (416; ch. 37), an assertion that surprisingly counters ableist attitudes about embodiment. The ending chapter confirms their interdependence is still strong after years of marriage. She asserts, “I am my husband’s

6. There are several earlier readings of Rochester that understand his disability as an avenue toward freeing him from the pressures of dominant masculinity, but these analyses predate many insights later developed through disability studies. For example, Kendrick identifies the potential of Brontë’s text to redefine masculinity by placing Rochester in positions that are removed from dominant social discourses of gender and class. Kendrick argues that Rochester “represents a man who is quite at odds with the dominant narrative of being an ‘English Gentleman’ from the start (247), and from his final vantage point of social exile, he “rearticulates and redefines his position as a masculine subject” (235). Likewise, Wylie attaches a liberatory significance to Rochester’s disability. As Wylie argues, Rochester recognizes that the terms of dominant masculinity are impossible fictions to live up to and in doing so, he becomes “a new type of masculine hero: one who is more in keeping with the flawed humanity of [Brontë’s] own experience” (68).

life as fully is he is mine” and “all my confidence is bestowed on him, all his confidence is devoted to me; we are precisely suited in character—perfect concord is the result” (420–21; ch. 38).<sup>7</sup> It is a union based on interdependence in which no partner has greater privilege than the other, one that seems to have worked successfully out of the double binary.

Thus, three elements in Jane’s reinscription of Rochester suggest a nascent liberatory model of embodied masculinity in her depiction of him. First, through Jane’s narratives, Rochester’s masculinity is asserted alongside his disability and embodiment. Even as he himself cannot yet read his new status according to the models of masculinity available to him, she redefines the borders of masculine identity to admit male embodiment. This redefinition of masculinity suggests, if we return to disability studies theories, a type of gender flexibility or expansion of the “masculine repertoire” (Shuttleworth, 175). Rochester retains more masculine and Jane more feminine attributes, so there is not a complete removal of the conventional terms of gender, but there is certainly more freedom to access elements of masculinity and femininity as necessary. Second, Jane’s assertion of her desire for Rochester forges a connection between disability and sexual desirability that is absent in conventional thinking about disabled masculinity. Third, the interdependent nature of their union forecasts a dispersion of power that is a foundation for achieving greater social equality. Ironically, these new possibilities for understanding male corporeal identity may be more readily conceivable by Jane because she has experience with understanding herself as embodied, according to patriarchal constructions of female identity that have been projected onto her. Her narrative’s rather sweeping overview of their happy marriage suggests that Rochester has adopted such a positive understanding of himself, most likely through her influence.

It is curious that Brontë (or God’s mercy, according to the narrative) grants Rochester a return to partial sight in the last paragraphs of the novel as opposed to closing with him remaining blind. This is an admittedly ocularcentric turn, as Bolt asserts (285), and indeed represents an “uneven” current in the flow of the text and this reading (Wilson and Lewiecki-Wil-

7. Rochester and Jane’s strong interconnectedness is depicted in a highly positive way, with the possible exception of her admission that she finds his willing and total acceptance of her help “sad”: “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” (421; ch. 38). However, in the context of Jane’s narration, I favor reading her use of “sad” as evoking “grave” or “serious,” which were earlier uses of the word. In that sense, she finds her role as helper pleasurable but also serious (that is, important and bearing heavy responsibility) because he trusts her implicitly.

son, 3), but it is not a completely ableist one. Rochester's fulfillment, sexual attractiveness, paternity, and interdependent relationship with Jane predate the return of his sight, so he is granted such positive identifications as a blind man. Further, his identities as a disabled man (a vision-impaired amputee) and as a fulfilled person are intact at the novel's close.

Overall, Rochester's is an unusually progressive portrait of disabled masculinity. He has achieved an integration of identity characteristics that counters traditional understandings of gender and ability: he is vision-impaired and an amputee; he embodies elements of femininity that are intermingled with undeniable masculine traits; he depends on Jane, but she, too, relies on him; he is sexually active in a happy marriage—a perpetual honeymoon, as he refers to it; he is attractive; he is, Jane reports, fulfilled and happy.

Among the “uneven currents” of the competing discourses of *Jane Eyre*, then, is a rewriting of the terms of gender and ability. Some narrative strands use disability to invert gender binaries and reflect ableist thinking, especially in the transformation into flesh of John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers. Other narrative strands, particularly those that construct the embodiment of Edward Rochester, work to diffuse both gender and ability hierarchies and anticipate more emancipatory blendings of models of identity.

While Rochester's “re-transformation [ . . . ] into flesh” may serve as an avenue to Jane's empowerment, it is thus not necessarily an expressway to his disempowerment. Instead, it is an inroad to an alternative, nonoppressive model of masculinity. His life may have been altered by accident, and Jane's narration is somewhat affected by elements of conventional thinking about the body, but to presuppose that he remains disconsolate due to his impairments is to embrace the mainstream, pejorative understanding of disability, to uphold traditional definitions of masculinity, and to miss an alternate, emancipatory reading of the ending of Brontë's text. Through the lenses of disability studies and masculinity studies, Rochester's “re-transformation [ . . . ] into flesh” is really a transformation of cultural attitudes about gender and ability; just as the India-rubber stretches into flesh, so too does the model of masculinity stretch to encompass new, more inclusive possibilities for male embodiment.