Other Mothers

Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk, Klaver, Claudia C.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk and Claudia C. Klaver.
Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal.
The Ohio State University Press, 2008.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/27859.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/27859

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=1144905
Possessed by “Titan visions” (362) of “the first woman,” “heaven-born,” from whose “vast” heart “gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations” (360), Shirley Keeldar communes with her “mighty and mystical parent” (362) simply by lingering in the churchyard on a “warm summer evening”: “She is taking me to her bosom,” she tells Caroline Helstone, “and showing me her heart” (361). “Dreaming, too, in her way” (361), Caroline embodies her more modest “filial hopes” in “a gentle human form . . . unknown, unloved, but not unlonged-for” (362). Shirley’s Eve—strong, daring, and vital mother of all living things—is an “undying, mighty being” (361) besides whom any human mother would appear small; when such a mother does materialize, she is much as Caroline pictured her. And although Agnes Pryor is no Titan, she is still more than adequate to her daughter’s deepest wishes and speaks the sort of revivifying words Caroline had fantasized she might hear: “All the love you have needed, and not tasted, from infancy, I have saved for you carefully. Come! it shall cherish you now” (362).

The mother’s miraculous return in Shirley (1849) restores her daughter to health by giving Caroline the reason to live that she has sorely lacked.

* My thanks to John Plotz and Leah Price for occasioning the longer essay from which this material is drawn, to Kelly Hager for supporting its development, and to Deborah Denenholz Morse for improving it by her insight and intelligence.
Yet when we situate that return in the context of the two younger women’s distinct imaginings of maternal presence as creative power and sustaining love, Mrs. Pryor’s representation of her unnecessarily prolonged absence from her daughter’s life emphasizes by contrast her own failures. Having escaped an abusive husband, she indicts herself for a lack of “moral courage”: “It is that which has made me an unnatural parent—which has kept me apart from my child during the ten years which have elapsed since my husband’s death left me at liberty to claim her: it was that which first unnerved my arms and permitted the infant I might have retained a while longer to be snatched prematurely from their embrace” (492). Unlike Helen Huntingdon of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848), who removes her son from his father’s house without legal sanction in order to ensure his physical and moral safety, Agnes Helstone abandons her child to a fate she feels no ability to alter: “I let you go as a babe, because you were pretty, and I feared your loveliness; deeming it the stamp of perversity” (492). Once freed from “the yoke of the fine gentleman,” she cannot “dare to encounter his still finer and more fairy-like representative” (492), for Caroline has inherited from her father “a certain manner as well as certain features,” modified only by a gentle tone that he, too, could assume, but that, “when the world was not by to listen,” would give way to “sounds to inspire insanity” (491). “A form so straight and fine, I argued, must conceal a mind warped and cruel,” so that with “a strange, unmotherly resolve” (492), Agnes left her daughter in her brother-in-law’s care even though she might have sought to take custody of Caroline immediately after her husband’s death. Only now, in the novel’s present, does she reverse her judgment that her child was not her own, having discovered herself “to be the parent of my child’s mind” and deemed that “it belongs to me: it is my property—my right” (486; emphasis in original).

Like many actual nineteenth-century mothers, the fictional Agnes Helstone would not have had legal control of her child’s person in the face of statutes that assigned to fathers alone the “right” to filial “property.” Moreover, we can assume that, as a poor governess at the time of her marriage, Agnes would have had no access to the financial and familial resources that might have enabled her, like Helen Huntingdon, to hide herself and her daughter under the shelter of a brother’s protection. Yet by her own account, she relinquished the baby girl she “might have retained a while longer” and failed “to claim her” as soon as she could for reasons over and above these legal and material impediments. Agnes has so internalized her own powerlessness that she disavows any share in her child, wrongly reasoning from the “air of native elegance” (493) she sees in Caroline’s portrait that a child who displays all “the delicacy of an aristocratic
flower” (492) would, like her father, turn out to “conceal a mind warped and cruel” and so, perhaps, would turn against her: “I thought perhaps you were all his . . . I find it is not so” (486; emphasis in original).

Recognizing her own “right” to and “property” in her adult daughter is, in effect, a matter of Mrs. Pryor finally being able to see herself in her child; to learn that Caroline has not inherited all from her father; to acknowledge her own share as “the parent of my child’s mind,” even if her actual, practical experience of parenting Caroline has been radically limited. “Unnatural” and “unmotherly” though it may have been for Agnes not to cling to her child for as long as she was able, or not to return to her as quickly as she could, her narrative suggests that ideological conceptions of the natural and the maternal—or the vision of the two as one that Shirley’s Titan Eve instantiates—exist at some great distance from the experience of ordinary mothers. Their subjection to husbands, their limited means of support, and perhaps their own legacies of daughterly disinheritance may conspire to make mothers—even loving mothers—unable to understand themselves as having anything to bequeath to their daughters. What Agnes above all seems to fear, however, is that Caroline, in being her father’s daughter, would reject, despise, and torment her in unnatural and unfilial fashion.

In Mrs. Pryor’s story, Charlotte Brontë revises and expands a plot that had been foundational to her earlier writing, not just by resurrecting the mother on whose absence so many of her narratives were founded, but also by giving her a voice that expresses a variegated view of maternal powerlessness. In general, however, most of Brontë’s writing from the juvenilia forward takes the parentless child as its focus rather than honing in on the perspective of the parent, shaped in part by generic models that foreground what Carolyn Dever has identified as “the structural advantages of maternal loss” for “Victorian melancholic fictions” (22). Heavily inflected by their literary and mythic antecedents, the multiple and various orphan stories that Brontë frames for her characters put those generic patterns to new uses in the narratives that unfold from them. Many of Brontë’s works participate in what Deborah Epstein Nord calls “a larger novelistic tradition of foundling or bastard plots, in which the hero of indeterminate or questionable origins discovers himself to be the (usually illegitimate) child of a well-born or aristocratic parent” (191). Thus in one of her early stories, “The Foundling” (1833), the protagonist eventually learns that he is the son of the Duke of York; he marries a noblewoman and inherits his rightful

1 For discussions of the foundling plot in Brontë’s fiction, see Clarke and Adams. Useful studies of the orphan plot include Howe and Peters.
position in an entirely conventional rendering of that paradigm. What’s distinctive about the plot of the restored mother in *Shirley*, by contrast, is that the change in the gender of its key characters—mother and daughter rather than father and son—coincides with a change in the terms of what the child inherits and the parent regains: Caroline reunites with a mother decidedly not aristocratic, belatedly accessing love and nurture rather than fortune and status, while her mother discovers a spiritual rather than a material heir, and in doing so is enabled to identify and articulate a legacy of her own.

In the fairy tale that is *Jane Eyre* (1847), in which the mother stays dead but the father metaphorically lives on in the different forms of patriarchal inheritance, the orphan heroine need not choose between mutually exclusive alternatives: Jane gets both her rightful position and loving nurturance from two new families by novel’s end. I will argue in what follows that it is primarily by successfully negotiating the structures that keep mothers dead and disempowered that Jane improves her fortunes. To establish a fuller context for images of maternal powerlessness and disinheritance in *Jane Eyre*, I juxtapose it with other orphan stories from the Brontë juvenilia, and specifically those that represent instances of cross-racial adoption in which a boy or girl, son or daughter, rebels against the imperial/patriarchal power structure with very mixed results, creating a series of cautionary tales for motherless children. In the juvenilia as in the adult fiction, orphans and adoptees clarify and criticize the racialized lines along which familial membership is drawn, in being differentiated from some families and affiliated with others. Gender, too, plays a critical role in determining the kind of access to racial and class privilege that adoptive and biological sons or daughters possess. But what most distinguishes Jane Eyre and, to a lesser extent, Lucy Snowe from their African antecedents is that despite a lack of power, these English heroines develop the means to tell their own stories, and thus rewrite the experience of being marginal to the family in ways that support the feminist critical contention that the mother’s absence underpins the daughter’s ability to shape her own path.² Although Brontë does create at least one dying African mother who articulates an anti-imperial legacy for her son and his adopted daughter, who aims to take up his mission, colonized adoptees are given much less access to narrative voice. Even if, as Susan Meyer suggests, the adoptees of the juvenilia both engage Brontë’s imaginative sympathies and enact her recognition of the class and gender limits on her own privilege,³ they are, in some sense, also

² Among a whole host of critical studies that consider motherlessness as a potentially enabling narrative structure, see especially Rich, Hirsch, Homans, and Dever.
³ This, in brief, is the argument of Meyer’s chapter on Charlotte Brontë’s juvenilia (29–59).
colonized by Brontë’s ability to appropriate other worlds for her fictional empire. That African orphans and adoptees are also identified as (or with) characters of color means that they enter into imperial families on even less advantaged terms than their European counterparts.

By juxtaposing figures from the juvenilia and the adult fiction, I aim to demonstrate nonetheless some important continuities in these orphan stories. Jane’s own quest for kin, we should remember, moves her from one adoptive family to another, from a house in which, like Heathcliff, she had experienced herself as degraded almost to the status of a servant to a dwelling where she gains the power to make a family of her own and to confer that power on her paternal kin. Exposing the limits of blood relation, *Jane Eyre* pays particular attention to how differences between maternal and paternal lines of descent shape the contours of the orphan’s plot by its juxtaposition of the mother’s relations, the Reeds, and the father’s relations, the Rivers. These symmetrical families of first cousins differ in almost every respect; moreover, in carefully distinguishing between those who do or do not “feel like” family, Brontë plays on two salient meanings of the term “affinity”—a natural “inclination or attraction” on the one hand, which Jane feels for the Rivers family, and a “relationship by marriage” on the other (*OED*), the customary obligations of which the Reeds do not honor. That Rivers and Reeds are differently and quite pointedly racialized also registers the experiences of exclusion and inclusion that Jane endures and enjoys, as a motherless daughter who eventually receives her patriarchal reward.

I.

The “really doleful” (22) ballad that Bessie sings to Jane Eyre laments the exile of the friendless orphan even as it allegorizes every Christian soul’s journey to an eternal end. Propelled on its road “so far and so lonely” by the “hard-hearted” men who have denied it earthly sanctuary, the “weary” body makes its way across a “moonless and dreary” landscape; though the track is rugged, the cloudless, starry skies signify God’s merciful “protection” (22). He will “take to His bosom the poor orphan child” should it stumble or stray from the path: “Of shelter and kindred despoiled” in this world, every orphan has a dwelling and a family in the next, for “Heaven is a home” and “God is a friend” (23). By learning to direct her thoughts upward on her own “dreary” journeys, Jane regains “shelter and kindred” in this world after leaving Gateshead, where she has felt herself “an uncongenial alien” (17) to her mother’s brother’s wife and children and rebelled against their authority. The ballad thus shapes the orphan’s path
by teaching her to read it as both an immediate paradigm of her experience and a figurative emblem for each individual’s spiritual pilgrimage, initiating what Penny Boumelha terms “the providential theme” of the novel, “the story dispensed and directed by Our Father” (69). Every orphan, like every Christian, has a father (but no mother) in heaven with a mansion of many rooms; only the fortunate few find that sanctuary here below.

The Christian allegory thus effaces maternal origins in directing the soul’s return to its true paternal home; whatever Jane’s status in this world, her father in heaven provides an authoritative parentage and a consoling vision. But in another “doleful” song by Brontë, drawn from the massive collection of the siblings’ juvenilia, “a dying woman’s moan” that sounds “like a requiem for the dead” (“African” 6, 4) becomes the medium for shaping the orphan’s story, entrusting her son not to heavenly refuge, but to earthly vengeance. In “The African Queen’s Lament” (1833), the eponymous speaker interprets each natural sound—the “wild moan” of the palm trees, the “faint mingled cries” of the river—as “a sign, a warning token” (4) of a desired future in which her child will avenge his loss of shelter and kindred by his own hand rather than being solaced by any god’s love. Widow of the murdered leader of the Ashantee forces defeated by the Twelves at the Battle of Coomassie, the mother implores her sleeping son to hear the “sound of prophecy / Which speaks of bloody recompense” (6) and enjoins him, once he reaches manhood, to “swift and bright as wand’ring star / Go piling heaps of dead” (5). Adopted by Brontë’s fictive Duke of Wellington, “from whom he experienced as much care and tenderness as if he had been that monarch’s son instead of his slave” (“Green Dwarf” 178), Quashia Quamina aims to live out the destiny his mother plans for him: “notwithstanding the care with which he had been treated by his conquerors”—most immediately, the duke and the rest of his adoptive family—“he retained against them, as if by instinct, the most deeply rooted and inveterate hatred” (179). Seeking to even the score for the double loss of a familial home and national autonomy, he raises an unsuccessful native rebellion against domestic/colonial authority and is executed by order of his foster brother Zamorna, biological son of the duke who had “nourished [Quashia] on his own hearth . . . with almost parental tenderness” (180).

Reading these two orphan stories together, we can see how Bessie’s ballad suppresses particular elements—the race, gender, and origins of the orphaned adoptee among them—in order to achieve a universalizing tenor. Jane may enact this narrative because it belongs to no one in particular; and she may successfully revise it through her own experiences, needs, and desires because it belongs to everyone (or at least to every Christian).
in general. Although Jane moves throughout the novel from one mother figure to another, each of them impresses her with a version of this same story: she is never without a heavenly father who counts her among his many children. The avenging mother of “The African Queen’s Lament,” by contrast, speaks from and about a specific experience of violence and destruction that both produces the orphan as orphan and foreordains him to carry on his dead father’s legacy to fulfill her wish that he will his “father’s mind [and] form, / His kingly soul inherit” (5); she creates her son in his father’s image, to be sure, but it is her mournful rage that gives “form” to the father he will never know. While Jane makes earthly homes and finds congenial kindred by subduing the anger she feels as “an interloper” (17) at Gateshead, enacting a script of submission to the divine father, Quashia ultimately acts out a comparable rage, transmitted through his mother, in an effort to destroy the adoptive family that constitutes his oppression. He stages rebellion from within the very structures of imperial domination that aim to allay his “inveterate hatred” with the parental “care and tenderness” that forge his “gilded fetters” (“Green Dwarf” 178). Though he heard his mother’s injunction to rebel as a child, when “he could not understand it” (“African” 3), Quashia “as if by instinct” internalizes the particular message of resistance, very different from Bessie’s ballad, that the queen’s voice conveys. If Jane’s way is made smooth in part by her ability to identify and embrace an alternative narrative to the one that Gateshead writes for her, then Quashia remains wholly within his dead mother’s paradigm; inciting rebellion among the Ashantees against the colonizers, who seek to produce the adoptee through “education and the upbringing in an Angrian court . . . as colonised subject” (Azim 126; emphasis in original), her story, which becomes his, figures adoption as itself a colonizing enterprise.

Jane expresses her resistance to the unloving authority of the Reeds with unbridled resentment, which enables both her aunt and Brocklehurst to damn her as a heathen, a rebel, and a liar, and Quashia Quamina’s hostility similarly functions for his adoptive family as a sign of a perverted nature that leads him to betray his benefactors. From the perspective of those who adopt him, the central motif of Quashia Quamina’s story and the keynote of his character is treachery: “his mother’s last advice will not, I imagine, be entirely lost upon him,” the Duke of Wellington predicts, and “he may give our nation trouble yet” (“African” 3). “His disposition was bold, irritable, active, daring,” and “at the age of seventeen” he had already “kindled in these wild savages a spirit of slumbering discontent and roused them to make an effort for regaining that independence as a nation which they had lost” (“Green Dwarf” 179). Although “A Leaf from an Unopened
Volume” (1834) portrays Quashia according to the conventions of noble savagery—as “a man in whose person all the virtues of savage life were so nobly united, even though it cannot be denied that he possessed likewise many of its concomitant vices” (326)—the overwhelming tenor of his representation in the juvenilia is as “the young viper,” “deeply treacherous” (“Green Dwarf” 179), who foments rebellion in the service of his mother’s dream of revenge against those who rescued and raised him. In the clash of perspectives that constitutes the Gateshead section of Jane Eyre, Brontë directs readerly sympathies toward the narrating Jane, but the particulars of Quashia’s interior life are left opaque; it is only by virtue of “his mother’s last advice” that we have access to an alternative story that counters the altogether negative representation of the adoptive child as an enemy within.

Still more obliquely, Quashia’s “treachery” functions as part of a larger dynamic within the juvenilia that registers a series of tensions among the creole colonizers: the African adoptee figures one aspect of the rivalry between men that constitutes a recurring thematic in the representation of the family/empire, which also figures in different forms, as I will examine below, in the adult fiction. For Brontë and her erstwhile collaborator/competitor Branwell do not limit revengeful motives to Quashia alone, since Alexander Percy (later referred to as Northangerland) also figures as an internal enemy to Wellington’s son Zamorna (also known as the Emperor Adrian). Their political opposition notwithstanding, Percy and Zamorna are inextricably intertwined through the marriages they arrange and contract for themselves or others, in which both daughters and sons function as instruments for consolidating power. For example, when Mary Percy marries Zamorna, Percy becomes grandfather to their many children; subsequently, Zamorna’s eldest legitimate son by a previous wife marries another of Percy’s daughters, not only further extending the web of familial relationships between these two leading men, but also intensifying their competition. In “The Green Dwarf” (1833), Percy betrays imperial interests by warning Quashia of Zamorna’s plan to attack the rebels under cover of darkness. And when Zamorna’s army catches up with the African forces the next day, Quashia declares that “freedom would this night have received her death-stab from the hand of the White Tyrant” (Zamorna) “had not a traitor” (Percy) “arisen in the camp of oppression” (188), albeit Percy’s intervention only delays the rebels’ imminent defeat. As Firdous Azim observes, the “fear of danger from outside (the unexplored and unsubdued natives) and from within (internal dissension, rivalries and corruption) . . . do not remain so schematically marked off from each other” (119); nor do treachery and loyalty break down neatly along racial lines.
The betrayals that both adoptive brother and father-in-law perform in “The Green Dwarf” take shape in “the camp of oppression,” with their seeking to undermine the power of the Wellington line from within. The charges of treachery that cling to Quashia are thus made in turn against the other major rival to Zamorna’s power, who, like the adoptee (albeit for different reasons), cannot be said to be wholly outside the parameters of the imperial family. Viewed in this light, relations by marriage and relations by adoption both mark the boundaries and threaten the security of the familial/colonial state.

As an orphan who turns on those who adopt/oppress him, Quashia clearly anticipates Heathcliff (a more successful plotter) as well as the young Jane, who attributes her vision of John Reed as “like a murderer . . . like a slave-driver . . . like the Roman emperors” to her reading of “Goldsmith’s History of Rome” (11) rather than to her own creator’s earlier creation of a “White Tyrant.” And like those two other adoptees, Quashia also comes to function as an adoptive parent, bequeathing a legacy to his child that echoes his mother’s wishes for him, although the gendered and racialized differences between father and daughter issue in decidedly different outcomes. Put to death by the Emperor Adrian at the very opening of “A Leaf” for his resistance to white rule, Quashia leaves behind a motherless daughter who seeks to avenge his death. Zorayda’s narrative adheres to foundling conventions more closely than does Quashia’s: while Quashia had retained the memory of his mother’s injunction to revenge, Zorayda does not even know the story of her own birth, which is unfolded in the action of “A Leaf,” and identifies entirely with her adoptive context. Her mother leaves her nothing but a ring, which will subsequently provide evidence of her ancestry, while her allegiance to her African parent and her ultimate restoration to the care of her “true” father situate her as a counter within two competing patriarchal plots. Although Quashia’s fate, as Azim has argued (132–36), is far more fatally fixed from the outset than Zorayda’s, the specifics of her plot reveal a particularly feminine version of the orphan story in which the politics of racial identification and membership play a pivotal role.

If Quashia represents a sexual threat to white male prerogative both in Brontë’s “Roe Head Journal” (ca. 1836) and at the outset of the novella Caroline Vernon (1839), then Zorayda figures as a sexual object for white

---

4 Although Plasa writes that “Zorayda believes herself to be the mixed-race child of a liaison between Quamina and a white woman” (6), I do not see any evidence in the text to support this idea, as Zorayda never refers in any way to her birth mother.

5 For a reading of the eruption of Quashia into the “Roe Head Journal” passage, see Meyer 41–47. In a letter inserted near the beginning of Caroline Vernon, Quashia lays claim to
men. Her advent at court provides a further occasion for the extant rivalry between the emperor’s twin sons, aptly named Alexander and Adrian after their grandfather and father, respectively. As twins, Alexander declares, “[O]ur affection ought to be the stronger, but that circumstance, instead of generating an increase of love, has caused a greater degree of aversion” (“Leaf” 342): and it is this inexplicable “aversion” between what are arguably the closest of kin (comparable to the undermotivated antagonism of the Crimsworth brothers in The Professor [1857]) that affords the mainspring of Alexander’s plot to kidnap Zorayda from under Adrian’s nose and make her his own. Zorayda initially figures herself, however, as unavailable to either brother. She resists assimilation into the court, at which she arrives incognito just after Quashia’s execution with the secret intent of retaliating for it; the primary site of her resistance lies not on the battlefield, but in the boudoir, as she repudiates the possibility of marrying into the colonial élite. Adrian proposes a marriage “to which [she] will never consent,” representing her birth as “an impossible barrier to our union” (“Leaf” 343) and betraying what Carl Plasa calls “an anxious sense of racial mixing as profane” (11): “Never, never shall the blood of my race mingle with that of yours, Lord Adrian! It would not mingle! Dissensions and hatred of the deepest dye, the dissensions of near kindred, would be the result of such an unhallowed union” (“Leaf” 343–44). Blood that “would not mingle”—literal and metaphorical sign of an impassable, “impossible” gulf between African girl and creole colonizer—metonymically links up in this passage with “dissensions” among “near kindred,” such as the rivalry of the twins and the enmity of their father and grandfather. Although Zorayda suggests that any effort to cross the racial “barrier” would create divisions within the family, the broader framework of the juvenilia makes it clear that rivalrous antagonisms already divide the extended family that constitutes the empire. With Zorayda’s refusing a marriage she casts as potentially miscegenous and thus a source of conflict, the narrative simultaneously gestures toward the extant differences that pit members of the royal family against one another even though they are presumably of one blood.

Having voiced the minoritized perspective of resistance to imperial oppression, both in her secret revenge plan and her overt resistance to marriage, Zorayda is ultimately restored by a twist of the plot to her birth family. “Abducted by savages” (365) along with her mother, now revealed to be the daughter of an Angrian noble who “died shortly after her capture,”

this young ward of Zamorna, who will subsequently become her guardian’s mistress (Five Novelettes 282–84).
“the infant was adopted by Quamina for his own daughter” (375), an act that reverses the circumstances of his own adoption. The white child is taken in by the Africans, but unlike the black child who rebelled against the imperial adoptive family, Zorayda is assimilated into the Ashantees’ culture and identifies with their cause. She learns her own history only after she has tried and failed to become “the avenger of the unjustly slain,” announcing herself as “Quamina’s daughter” (371) before the assembled court as she plunges a knife into Zamorna’s chest; ironically, however, in aiming explicitly to avenge her adoptive father’s fate, she unwittingly acts out the rivalrous wishes of her as yet unknown grandfather, too. For Zorayda turns out to be the noble Northangerland’s granddaughter—the child of a son he never acknowledged owing to his expressed “aversion to male offspring” (377)—and thus related by blood to Adrian, Alexander, and much of the rest of the imperial family. Meeting the unharmed emperor’s assertion that “Quamina was not your father” with “a glance of mingled surprise and indignation,” she becomes “abashed and bewildered” at the revelation that “it is to a white man you owe existence; such a form was never the daughter of darkness” (372): “weeping and ashamed, she was led by her father and grandfather out of the imperial presence” (373). Her “true” parentage thus lies not with Quashia and the Africans, but with the white tyrants, which establishes her place as a marriageable daughter within the white community.

At a stroke, the assertion of the adoptee’s “real” paternity, which confers on her a privileged majority status, blots out the racial identity she had been adopted into and which she had adopted for herself. With Zorayda stunned into silence and seemingly overcome by remorse, within three weeks’ time, her marriage to “Prince Adrian was celebrated over all Adrianopolis in a style of regal magnificence suited to the rank of the high contracting parties” (377): her adoptive identity is thus put at an even further remove once she is transferred from father to husband. In the resolution of her story, then, the discovery of her “true” lineage obliterates Zorayda’s “false” adoptive identity and the racialized identification with Africans that it has enabled, making her already a part of the imperial family whose internal ties her cousin-marriage will further consolidate, even if such a marriage does not resolve that family’s tensions. She is transformed from a resistant African daughter, honoring the legacy of both Quashia and his mother, to a submissive colonial wife whose place within the royal community dictates her obedience to “father and grandfather.” Within the tale, who Zorayda is and how she functions within the framework of whiteness, to which Brontë insistently calls attention, thus wholly depend on who her birth parents are, with particular emphasis on her paternal descent. Even
her attempt on the life of the emperor can be excused, undertaken as it was on the basis of a misconception as to where her familial/racial loyalties should lie.

Reclaimed by the white tyrants, Zorayda is also repudiated by the black rebels. The architect of the revenge plot on the emperor’s life, Shungaron, calls her his “last hope” for vengeance against Adrian the Magnificent, but professes not to be surprised that Zorayda does not succeed in her effort: “The royal blood of Quamina did not really flow through her veins and how could constancy or courage be expected from the daughter of a white man? . . . [I]n the hour of trial the pale alien has failed and been forgiven” (375). Unlike Quashia, represented as always at some critical distance from his adoptive context, Zorayda’s self-identification as “daughter of darkness” is so complete that she never grasps her adoptive status as a “pale alien” until the emperor makes his announcement; once that racial reclassification is accomplished, we hear almost nothing more from or about her. On both sides of the struggle, then, Zorayda’s biological inheritance trumps the identifications her upbringing has created; she crosses the “impossible barrier” between native African and creole colonizer not through marriage, but by a plot twist that severs her ties to Quashia and the legacy of resistance he imbibes from his dying mother. Restored to her “true” fathers and revealed to be “really” white, she becomes yet another instrument of forging relationships within the extended imperial family, married off as a Percy granddaughter to a Wellington son to bridge that gulf between two rivalrous male lines within the white kingdom. Only in the muting of Zorayda’s response to her change in status, fortune, and racial privilege do we hear a faint critique of the cost of the foundling’s return.

II.

To become some man’s daughter, some man’s wife, might appear to constitute the apex of the female orphan’s plot, but this is not always so in Brontë’s adult fiction. “[J]ust listen to the difference of our positions,” Ginevra Fanshawe says to Lucy Snowe “in an expostulatory tone.” Accomplished and admired, “I am the daughter of a gentleman of family, and though my father is not rich, I have expectations from an uncle”; lacking either looks or lovers, “[Y]ou are nobody’s daughter . . . you have no relations” (Villette 179). The obscurity of Lucy’s origins—or, to put it more precisely, the origins she deliberately obscures—may deny her access to Ginevra’s fantasy of feminine fulfillment, but being “nobody’s daughter” also keeps Lucy clear of the patriarchal loop exemplified in Zorayda’s narrative: “[T]his
very privation is also a kind of freedom,” Boumelha argues, “for it seems to place Lucy irretrievably outside the determining structures of class, family and patrilineage” (119). When, for example, Mrs. Bretton receives a disturbing letter in the first chapter of *Villette*, Lucy “thought at first that it was from home, and trembled, expecting I knew not what disastrous communication” (6). As it turns out, the letter is indeed “from Home,” declaring the break-up of his establishment—which follows closely on the death of his wife, “a giddy, careless woman, who had neglected her child, and disappointed and disheartened her husband” (7)—and announcing Paulina’s impending arrival. “This little girl . . . had recently lost her mother; though indeed, Mrs. Bretton ere long subjoined, the loss was not so great as might at first appear” (7): to lose a mother who has been no good woman is something on the order of a fortunate fall, comparable to Rochester’s “transplant[ing]” the orphaned Adèle Varens from “the slime and mud of Paris” to “the wholesome soil of an English country garden” (*Jane Eyre* 151). Polly’s subsequent devotion to father and future husband (“a bond to both, an influence over each” [*Villette* 546]) effaces all signs of her mother’s unsettled past and its potential influence on the daughter’s career. This motherless child is and always will be some man’s daughter, some man’s wife, in no small part because such a mother within the patriarchal economy can only be well lost.

While the fortuitous return of *Shirley*’s Mrs. Pryor recalls the fairy-tale foundling plot, *Jane Eyre*’s mother and father, like Lucy Snowe’s, stay dead. Instead, what lives in *Jane Eyre* are inter- and intrafamilial conflicts and antagonisms of the sort dramatized in the juvenilia, stripped of their high-life trappings and transposed to a middling sphere in an ambiguously realist fiction, with many (though not all) of their racialized overtones displaced onto the Bertha/Rochester plot. If, as everyone notices, *Jane Eyre* begins with one set of cousins and cannot conclude until it finds another, it is less often observed that cousinship in Jane’s generation is overwritten by the in-law rivalries and jealousies of the earlier one, aversions and antagonisms among those who should, normatively, be affinal “friends” or “kin.” As in the juvenilia, these conflicts and rivalries, which shape relationships between women as well as men, have fractured the families that Jane enters into, first as a young child at Gateshead, then as an adult woman at Moor House. Dividing Jane’s mixed inheritance along maternal and paternal lines, the novel takes some pains to represent the tensions

---

6 Elsewhere in her excellent monograph, Boumelha usefully locates the drama of the male orphan in *The Professor* in relation to the narratives of homeless girls and women that Brontë usually creates, arguing that his story deploys “tropes of plot victimage more commonly associated with female protagonists” (47).
between and within what I will call first and second family—that is, one’s family of origin, whether biological or adoptive, and one’s family by marriage—as a critical factor in Jane’s history that shapes her narrative possibilities, fleshing out the universalizing orphan story of Bessie’s ballad with quotidian detail. Over its course, Jane’s narrative is gradually peopled with dead relatives—particularly male ones—whose living intentions make the seemingly singular plot a multifarious set of intersecting familial enmities and animosities, recalling and refiguring the intrigues of the Angrian court even as they also reposition Jane (like yet also unlike Zorayda) squarely within the father’s camp.

What Jane retains instead of her forgotten parents is another figure she cannot remember and whose former existence has secured for her only an insecure and uncertain place:

I could not remember him; but I knew that he was my own uncle—my mother’s brother—that he had taken me when a parentless infant to his house; and that in his last moments he had required a promise of Mrs. Reed that she would rear and maintain me as one of her own children. Mrs. Reed probably considered she had kept this promise; and so she had, I dare say, as well as her nature would permit her: but how could she really like an interloper not of her race, and unconnected with her, after her husband’s death, by any tie? It must have been most irksome to find herself bound by a hard-wrung pledge to stand in the stead of a parent to a strange child she could not love, and to see an uncongenial alien permanently intruded on her own family group. (16–17)

Uncle Reed’s early death deprives Jane of the surrogate father in whose goodness she continues to trust long after his demise: “I doubted not—had never doubted—that if Mr. Reed had been alive he would have treated me kindly” (17), which is to say “as one of [his] own children.” Mrs. Reed, however, appears to abjure the putative claims of kinship in relation to her husband’s niece and her sister-in-law’s child; from her point of view, Jane’s uncle’s death cancels any bonds of obligation between his second family, which she now heads, and his first family, to which he maintained fraternal ties. Although Mrs. Reed describes herself more than once as Jane’s “friend” (38, 42), to young Jane she remains, at best, “my uncle’s wife” (74) and, at worst, “no relation of mine” (38). Indeed, the “uncongenial alien,” “an interloper not of her [aunt’s] race,” represents herself as a stranger within the “family group” and finds “an inexpressible relief, a soothing conviction of protection and security,” in the presence of other strangers “not belonging to Gateshead, and not related to Mrs. Reed” (19).
The “insuperable and rooted aversion” (27) between them is (or becomes) mutual.

Aunt Reed and Jane each identify the other as “alien” or “not kin,” a motif that suggests a broader change in the contours of family membership as Brontë traces them. Juxtaposed to the assertion of friendship, the trope of “the stranger”—here deployed not only to exclude the unrelated from the family circle, but also appropriated by Jane to represent her experience of exclusion—indicates the difference between familial intimates and others. At an earlier moment in the history of English kinship, siblings-in-law had been “the closest of relatives” (Trumbach 413) in light of the mutual obligations and connections that pertain among these “friends”: how, then, does this aunt come to see this niece—daughter to her sister-in-law, and thus a portion of her husband’s flesh and blood—as not part of her own family? Ruth Perry’s analysis of “the great disinheritance” that deprived eighteenth-century women of access to work and property, with immense consequences for the shape of domestic fiction, demonstrates how a shift “in the definition of what constituted the primary kin group” (2) from consanguineal relations to conjugal ones “privileged the limited nuclear family of spouses with their immature children over the laterally defined kin group including the siblings of spouses (uncles and aunts) and the offspring of those siblings (cousins)” (31). Like some latter-day variant of John Dashwood, who regards his stepmother and her daughters “with as much kindness as he could feel towards any body beyond himself, his wife, and their child” (Sense 5), Aunt Reed pares down her “friends and family” to exclude those who fall outside the narrowly nuclear borders of her immediate circle (a decision she might well have come to regret once she discovered that Jane would be heir to her paternal uncle’s fortune). While familial connection in Austen’s era was not exclusively or even predominantly a matter of blood and biology, Brontë operates within a framework in which the fact of Jane’s being related to her Reed cousins only on her mother’s side—and thus more tenuously connected to them—makes it possible for Mrs. Reed to understand her niece-by-marriage as no kin to her.7

If Mrs. Reed limits the scope of her relations to just her conjugal family, then Jane also implicitly accepts that definition: even the way in which she phrases her complaint suggests that she thinks it not entirely unreasonable for Mrs. Reed, “bound by a hard-wrung pledge” exacted by a dying man, to “not really like” his sister’s orphan child. Most importantly, when Jane herself adopts the terminology of “alien” and “interloper” to gloss the dif-

---

7 See Corbett for an extended analysis of kin relations in Austen’s fiction.
ference between a relation by blood and one by marriage, she more or less posits that the absence of consanguinity, rather than the presence of affinity, governs her lack of family feeling for Aunt Reed and Aunt Reed’s parallel attitude toward her. Even though Jane might say just as truly of her Reed cousins what she later tells her Rivers cousins—that “half our blood on each side flows from the same source” (405)—she significantly underplays what she shares with John, Georgiana, and Eliza, opting instead to represent herself as unrelated not just to her aunt-by-marriage, but also to her cousins-german.

Jane and her author infamously heighten the rhetoric of exclusion from the family by representing the separation between the two “lines” in racial terms. Although the text eventually discloses that Jane’s patriarchal legacy itself derives from colonial oppression, Brontë invokes the metaphors of slavery to represent the Reeds’ treatment of Jane: casting the child as a slave means characterizing mother and son as slaveholders, as contaminated as the West Indian planter class by its position of power over subjugated peoples. Through this strategic disavowal and displacement of the contaminating effect of slavery on those who enslave others, Jane further distances herself from her affinal relations on the mother’s side, representing the “impossible barrier” between them in terms that clearly echo the racializing discourses of the juvenilia, and thereby dramatizing her lack of affinity for the Reeds. If, from the Reed perspective, Jane the adoptee, like Quashia, figures as a sort of enemy within, then the Reeds represent for Jane the enslaved orphan’s naturalized fate of dispossession.

Departing from the juvenilia, however, Brontë does give a genealogy to Aunt Reed’s “aversion” to her husband’s sister’s daughter, representing it as motivated by a rivalry that also suggests broader cultural changes within family formation. While Jane represents her circumstances at Gateshead as a matter of being excluded from the “family group” as “an interloper” to whom her uncle’s wife has no blood tie—a relative by marriage of another “race” or lineage for whom the Reeds feel no affinity—Mrs. Reed sees Jane as the living avatar of her husband’s dead sister, who stood between her and her husband and with whom she competed for his attention. When the niece asks her dying aunt why she wishes Jane Eyre dead, Mrs. Reed situates her animosity toward Jane within a longer familial history: “I had a dislike to her mother always; for she was my husband’s only sister, and a great favourite with him . . . when news came of her death, he wept like a simpleton” (243) and had his sister’s child brought to his house. The wife’s envy of her sister-in-law’s status as “favourite” is not slaked by her death, but rather finds a new object in Jane. The orphan also freshly occasions Mrs. Reed’s jealousy in relation to her own children: while she “hated [the
baby] the first time I set my eyes on it . . . Reed pitied it; and he used to nurse it and notice it as if it had been his own: more, indeed, than he ever noticed his own at that age” (243). Once perceived by Mrs. Reed to usurp her children’s rightful primacy in their father’s affections, Jane bears the brunt of her aunt’s displaced feelings of exclusion: Mrs. Reed cuts Jane out of the “family group,” we may speculate, because she has experienced herself as cut out from the first-family tie between brother and sister that her husband did not fully relinquish upon marriage. By withholding John Eyre’s offer of adoption, Aunt Reed exacts her “revenge” (251): “[F]or you to be adopted by your uncle and placed in a state of ease and comfort was what I could not endure” (251) because “I disliked you too fixedly and thoroughly ever to lend a hand in lifting you to prosperity” (250). But that antagonism has an earlier origin in her rivalry with another “favou-

III.

In the final analysis, Aunt Reed’s “revenge” against her sister-in-law only defers access to the “ease and comfort” she aims to deny her niece altogether: even though she never enters his presence, Jane comes to inherit her uncle’s estate by a circuitous route. Significantly, the absent uncle is a rich relation on the father’s rather than the mother’s side who has gotten on in the world at the expense of his own relations: and it is the disposition of the “colonial possession and wealth” accumulated by this childless man that will “restore [Jane] to the family of origin” (Azim 177). There is no such possibility of accession to fortune through the mother: already dis-owned by her parents for marrying a poor clergyman, Jane’s mother leaves “nothing to bequeath” (Jane Eyre 250) her daughter in material terms except the short-lived protection of her brother’s care. When Aunt Reed claims that she “would as soon have been charged with a pauper brat out of a work-house” (243), she expresses in the very starkest terms the extent of Jane’s maternal disinheritance.

That Jane inherits wealth and kin on the father’s side, however, has been subordinated even in those interpretations of the novel that emphasize the importance of Jane’s finding a new family. Maurianne Adams, for example, has argued that in moving from Gateshead to Lowood to Thornfield to Moor House, Jane Eyre “supplants bad foster-families with good” (172), emphasizing the narrative fact that “prior to establishing a family by marriage” with Rochester at Ferndean, “she regains and reunites a family
of origin” (173) at Marsh End. By contrast with the claim that Jane’s “rediscovery of her female cousins remains only a minor event, firmly relegated to the background of the novel” (Kucich 112–13), Adams suggests that it “prepares for the marital resolution with Rochester, in which affinity, monetary inheritance, social status and mutual interdependence are of a piece” (169). Accepting Adams’s reading, in closing I want to inquire more specifically into why Brontë identifies Jane’s true or good “family of origin” with her paternal relatives, and why it matters that she inherits kin and fortune from an Eyre rather than a Reed.

The short answer, as Perry’s work suggests, is that mothers are themselves symbolically dispossessed and disowned by marriage (as Jane’s mother actually was) so that to be a girl child without parents or portion in the home of “rich, maternal relations” (399) is quite literally to be, as Ginevra Fanshawe would say, “nobody’s daughter.” A closer look at the circumstances of the Rivers of Moor House, who also suffer a reversal through a failure of maternal kin, further confirms the point. The origins of the siblings’ loss of fortune, like Jane’s loss of family, lie in the unresolved conflicts and patrilineal bias of the generation that preceded them. Diana tells the story of how her maternal uncle (i.e., Jane’s father’s brother) led his sister’s husband to ruin:

“...we have never seen him or known him. He was my mother’s brother. My father and he quarreled long ago. It was by his advice that my father risked most of his property in the speculation that ruined him. Mutual recriminations passed between them. . . . It appears he realised a fortune of twenty thousand pounds. He was never married, and had no near kindred but ourselves, and one other person, not more closely related than we. My father always cherished the idea that he would atone for his error, by leaving his possessions to us: that letter informs us that he has bequeathed every penny to the other relation. . . .” (376–77)

Although he is the figure within the extended Rivers family who stands in a parallel place to Uncle Reed, this “mother’s brother” does not take a protective role toward either his sister or her children. Financial ruin entails a family falling-out, and while the father of the Rivers children clearly believed that recompense was due them for what he had lost by

---

8 Perry (38–76) provides an extended analysis of what she calls “the great disinheritance” of daughters owing to changing economic circumstances in the eighteenth century that concentrated transmissible wealth in the hands of eldest sons. Although her study concludes with Austen, the narrative patterns of family and kin formation that she traces are, I would suggest, still very much present in nineteenth-century fiction.
“speculation,” those “mutual recriminations” over a deal gone bad would presumably have played some part in Uncle John’s making his brother’s child his sole heir. More broadly, however, leaving his fortune to Jane Eyre alone indicates Uncle John’s commitment to the male line: although Diana describes her as yet unknown cousin “as not more closely related than we” to their common uncle, that Jane is a brother’s daughter while Diana, Mary, and St. John are only a sister’s children makes a crucial difference. Here again, although in another key, differences in the treatment of affinal relations—and specifically those on the mother’s side—expose the asymmetries in gendered privilege, leaving that sister’s children with nothing while endowing a brother’s child with ample means.

Ultimately placed in a position where she can compensate the disregarded Rivers siblings by making the amends their mother’s brother would not, Jane undoes the fate of disinheritance that her own mother had endured and symbolically repairs the broken link between a brother and a sister. In doing so, Brontë also suggests that Jane’s kinship with her Rivers cousins is effected from the outset by their as yet unknown consanguinity. Her effort to make things right follows in part from her established friendship with Diana and Mary Rivers: initially glimpsing them through the windows at Moor House, she reports that “I had nowhere seen such faces as theirs: and yet, as I gazed on them, I seemed intimate with every lineament” (350). With each of them alive to “the pleasure arising from perfect congeniality of tastes, sentiments, and principles” (368), “our natures dovetailed: mutual affection—of the strongest kind—was the result” (369). Here what Jane certainly casts as a natural “inclination or attraction”—an affinity arising from a certain sameness—precedes the discovery of biological relationship, so that Jane may subsequently remark that even “when I knew them but as mere strangers, they had inspired me with genuine affection and admiration” (405). Such “congeniality” may also lend credence to Jane’s much earlier assertion that “sympathies” exist “between far-distant, long-absent, wholly estranged relatives”; but the force of that claim itself rests on the fact of biological likeness, in that what is said to promote “sympathies” between the otherwise alienated is “the unity of the source to which each traces his origin” (231). The discovery, then, that “half our blood on each side flows from the same source” retroactively goes to show why Jane, Mary, and Diana get on so well together from the outset, even if, as I have already indicated, shared blood does nothing to unite Jane, Georgiana, and Eliza. If the initial affinity among these cousins is in some sense predicated on their common biological inheritance, then it also makes the sharing of the monetary inheritance a critical element of the “integration of blood and kinship ties” (Adams 169)
that paves the way for all three women to marry and for their brother to
embark on his Christianizing mission in India. And while the dark Reeds
do not prosper or propagate themselves, and St. John dies in bringing light
to the dark places of the earth, the lustrous Rivers sisters no doubt become
mothers who people their conjugal homes with happy children, as does
Jane herself.

These mothers of the next generation, then, will presumably not share
the fate of their own mothers, or that of the other Brontëan mothers con-
sidered here: the dying African mother who motivates her son’s resistance;
Zorayda’s Angrian mother, whose very lack of a name suggests the incom-
pleteness of her daughter’s maternal legacy; and even Mrs. Pryor, restored
to her child, but not without some lingering anxiety as to her proper share
in her daughter’s portion. As Boumelha has observed of Jane Eyre, Brontë’s
daughters exist largely within “the patriarchal determinations of kinship
and inheritance” (64) so that they may be restored to a quintessentially
feminine place as some man’s daughter, some man’s wife—a place that is,
however, implicitly marked out for white women alone, whose relations
to their father’s kin constitute a critical element in their narrative fortunes.
For if I have made clear that Jane’s story can only begin to end once her
creator has afforded her the narrative means to repair and reconcile the
gendered inequities of maternal disinheritance, then I hope also to have
illustrated that the patriarchal and imperial interests in which this mother-
less daughter is implicated and from which she profits both privilege and
problematize the ties of blood.

Works Cited

Adams, Maurianne. “Family Disintegration and Creative Reintegration: The Case of
Charlotte Brontë and Jane Eyre.” In The Victorian Family: Structure and Stresses. Ed.


Brontë, Anne. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. 1848. Ed. Herbert Rosengarten. Oxford and

Christine Alexander. Oxford: Published for the Shakespeare Head Press by Basil

———. “The African Queen’s Lament.” In Early Writings. 3–6.

1971.

———. “The Foundling.” In Early Writings. 43–125.


