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Charlotte Brontë’s Use of Poems and Songs in *Jane Eyre*

Hiromi Kanenaka

Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* (1847) abounds with quotations from the Bible,¹ and poems and songs are also included in many places in the novel. For example, when the heroine Jane first encounters her master, Rochester, without knowing his identity, Brontë uses two lines from Thomas Moore to describe how Rochester rides away in a hurry (with a dog) after meeting her.² Similarly, most of the poems cited in the novel are borrowed from other writers, although some of them are Brontë’s own.

This paper contains an analysis of two poems in the novel as examples of the latter type—one is a ballad, the other a song—and a discussion regarding the function that Brontë gives them. Editors Margaret Smith and Sally Shuttleworth note that both poems are attributed to Charlotte Brontë; they are not considered as passages from the Bible or the works of other authors (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 462, 476). This interpretation means that the two poems have a different function from that of the passages quoting other authors’ works. In the latter case, it seems that by using works that were familiar to most of her contemporary readers, Brontë attempted to show what she wanted to represent more emphatically and impressively.³

Then, what is the function of the poems in *Jane Eyre* that are actually written by Brontë? Poems are advantageous devices because the author can write what she likes in accordance with her intention. That is, by writing an original poem, the author can more easily express what she wants to imply in the poem compared to using a passage from another author. This subject is examined in the following examples.

The first is the ballad starting with “My feet they are sore,” which Bessie sings

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¹ Warning about how “biblical illiteracy” has a harmful effect on reading *Jane Eyre*, Keith A. Jenkins points out that “Charlotte Brontë is undoubtedly one of the most biblically allusive of the major Victorian novelists” (69).


³ Jenkins associates Jane’s “using traditional materials [the Bible] in a new and decidedly untraditional way” (72) with Jane’s “radical vision.” (75).
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(Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 22). This is the second ballad Jane hears the day after she has a terrible experience in the red-room. From the fact that Bessie says, “Come, Miss Jane, don’t cry” (22) when she finishes singing, the reader understands that Jane was crying as she listened to the song. However, when Jane has heard Bessie sing the first ballad (which is, according to Smith and Shuttleworth’s note [Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 462], another author’s creation and not Brontë’s), she says, “But now, though her voice was still sweet, I found in its melody an indescribable sadness [. . .] ‘A long time ago’ [in the first song] came out like the saddest cadence of a funeral hymn” (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 21). From this observation, it appears that Jane’s crying was a response to the melody of the song (i.e., the musical part, not the lyrics).

As Smith and Shuttleworth note, “[t]he motifs of the lonely wanderer and false marsh lights [of the ballad], which recur in the experiences of both Jane and Rochester,” foreshadow similar incidents later in the novel (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 462). However, this knowledge comes as a kind of afterthought: for those who have just read the novel’s scene set in the red room and do not know the whole story yet, the song seems to represent the child Jane’s present predicament and future fate. Thus, it is noted that “the poor orphan child”—the refrain at the end of each stanza—refers to the child Jane in the reader’s eyes. Further, “Men are hard-hearted” in the second stanza may allude to Jane’s aunt or the Reed siblings. Moreover, “[t]hough both of shelter and kindred despoiled” in the last stanza may refer to the sadness Jane feels over the loss of her beloved parents and the possibility that she does not think the Reed family with whom she lives is her kin; nor does she feel at home living in their house. The functions of the poem (anticipation or allusion) depend on whether one is reading the novel for the first time or yet again.

On the other hand, we can look at another function of the poem from the singer Bessie’s point of view. From the third stanza on, the tone of the song becomes hopeful; at the end of each stanza, God is mentioned as a comforter and “a friend to the poor orphan child.” Though death could be suggested in “Heaven is a home, and a rest will not fail me” in the last stanza, the song ends with a comforting and hopeful tone. Moreover, despite Jane’s thought, “how could she [Bessie] divine the morbid
suffering to which I was a prey?” (Brontë, Jane Eyre 22), Bessie is not insensitive to Jane’s feelings. The words in the ballad are not Bessie’s, but she chose the song for its comforting effect. Though what the ballad alludes to is not yet clear to Jane at this stage of her life, Bessie seems to express her feelings to Jane by singing. A more detailed examination of this subject follows.

Before singing, Bessie is shown to be unusually kind: “Bessie... addressed to me every now and then a word of unwonted kindness” (Brontë, Jane Eyre 20). Her “word of unwonted kindness” is not necessarily a direct consoling word to Jane, but the song seems to show Bessie’s sympathy for Jane. Brontë uses a technical device here to overcome the limitations of a first-person narrative. Jane, the first-person narrator, cannot describe other characters’ feelings without writing down their words or her conversations with them. However, by making Bessie sing a song (ballad), especially one of the author’s own composition, the author can show her feelings, thus compensating for the drawback of the first-person narrative.

The second poem is Rochester’s song reflecting his feelings on his engagement to Jane; it also alludes to and foreshadows the following incidents. As he has a secret from Jane (known by the readers), the song’s literal meaning is indicated as well as Rochester’s secret feelings. The singer’s secret feelings for Jane are more complex and seem to be described more exquisitely than in Bessie’s case.

At the early stage of Rochester’s and Jane’s relationship, before they become close, Rochester and his words are enigmatic for Jane. She says frankly to him, “To speak truth, sir, I don’t understand you at all: I cannot keep up the conversation, because it has got out of my depth” (Brontë, Jane Eyre 137). As Rochester has a secret and uses many implications in his words in an effort to hide it, what he says also seems enigmatic to her.

Though Rochester’s song is sung when they establish a close relationship by her accepting his marriage proposal, the lyrics still appear ambiguous and mysterious at first sight (especially to readers who are reading the novel for the first time). Again, Jane cannot understand the entire meaning of the song, so she only responds to it partially (in the last stanza): “My love has sworn, with sealing kiss, / With me to
live—to die” (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 272). She shows a repulsed feeling, saying, “What did he mean by such a pagan idea? I had no intention of dying with him—he might depend on that” (273).

However, from the point of view of readers who have read through the novel, the words “I dangers dared; I hindrance scorned; / I omens did defy” (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 272) in the sixth stanza seem to foreshadow later incidents at the marriage ceremony. For example, in “Nor care I now, how dense and grim / Disasters gather nigh” (272) in the eighth stanza, “disasters” alludes to the approaching revelation of Rochester’s marriage to Bertha. Consequently, Jane and Rochester, who are involved, are deprived of their present love and happiness because of Bertha’s public presence and the revelation of her marriage to Rochester.

On the other hand, as is shown in “Nor care I now” and “I care not in this moment sweet,” in the next stanza, Rochester’s defiant attitude, demonstrated by the repetition of words that mean “I [Rochester] don’t care” can be regarded as his desperate attempt to love and marry Jane. From these points, it is clear that the functions of this song are also allusion and anticipation.

Then, how are Rochester’s (secret) feelings represented in the song? Their origin can be traced to the proposal scene. When Rochester proposes to Jane and receives her acceptance, he says to himself:

> It will atone—it will atone. Have I not found her friendless, and cold, and comfortless? [...] Is there not love in my heart, and constancy in my resolves? It will expiate at God’s tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world’s judgment—I wash my hands thereof. For man’s opinion—I defy it.”  
> (Brontë, *Jane Eyre* 256)

In these words, his defiance toward the world is apparent; he does not care what other people think of the marriage.

This attitude is reflected in his song. A good example of similar feelings are the lines “For Might and Right, and Woe and Wrath, / Between our spirits stood” (Brontë,
Jane Eyre 272) in the fifth stanza. As the proverb says, “Might is Right,” the words of the stanza seem to represent that in defiance of the law, Rochester attempts to force an illegal marriage (i.e., “Might”) to Jane into a legal one (i.e., “Right”). His anguish and awe are recognizable; likewise, his defiance is evident in “Woe and Wrath.” In attempting to accomplish his aim, he not only appears defiant toward the world and God; he also exhibits pain and awe of them and Jane.

As these feelings are secret and hidden in Rochester’s heart, the narrator, Jane, cannot know or write them down in her autobiography except for what is revealed in his speech. (Of course, Brontë uses Rochester’s soliloquy to make up for the first-person narrator’s limited and subjective description of him.) As in the case of Bessie’s song, Brontë uses Rochester’s song as a way to show the other character’s feelings in the first-person narrative by Jane.

On the other hand, unlike Bessie’s song, Rochester’s song was not written for the novel but originated from a poem previously written by Brontë. The following comparison of the two poems examines how effectively Brontë uses the song to show Rochester’s character to readers; it also reveals how his character is revealed to Jane.

It is generally well known that the song is “an adaptation from Brontë’s poem beginning with ‘At first I did attention give.’” Some critics refer to gender differences among speakers, and it is possible that Rochester’s song may be the male version. The original poem is assumed to represent Charlotte’s feelings (love) for her master (teacher), M. Heger. Whether the poem is her favorite or merely appropriate for her novels, Brontë rewrites it as the heroine Frances’s poem for The Professor (1857).7

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4 See Smith 461; Brontë, Jane Eyre 476; Chitam and Winnifrith in Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems 10; Imlay 158.
5 See Smith 461; Winnifrith 10-11.
6 See Winnifrith 10-11; Imlay 158.
7 See Smith 461; Winnifrith 10; Brontë, The Professor, eds. Smith and Rosengarten, 286-87. All subsequent page references will appear parenthetically in the text. According to Smith (The Professor, 286-87) and Winnifrith (The Poems of Charlotte Brontë, 239), an earlier version of [Frances’s poem] appears in an exercise book used by Charlotte Brontë in Brussels in 1843.
Thus, the poem has at least three versions. The original poem and Rochester’s song are both about an illegal, forbidden love since the speaker’s lover (M. Heger) and Rochester are married men. However, Frances’s poem is about a single man, Crimsworth, and has a somewhat stronger element of the teacher-pupil relationship rather than a lovers’ one (the first four stanzas in the original poem, which suggest a teacher-pupil relation and overlap partially with the first two stanzas of Frances’s poem, are omitted in Rochester’s song), though the speaker “I” (Frances, a pupil) is fictionally disguised as “Jane” (203, 204). It seems that Brontë used the original poem for Rochester’s song because of a similar situation. However, a comparison of the composition of Frances’s poem with Rochester’s song shows how impressively Brontë reveals Rochester’s character to her readers.

Frances’s poem is a first-person fictional narrative; at first, the speaker expresses her feelings for her teacher (heard by Crimsworth, who corresponds to her teacher in the real world). However, in the part of the poem read by Crimsworth (beginning with “When sickness stayed awhile my course” [202]), “my Master” (203) not only appears but also speaks his own words. In contrast to this dialogic poem, Rochester’s song retains his voice throughout. In the former case, by making the speaker’s lover (master) appear and speak in the poem, Brontë shows the speaker’s (Frances’s) submissive but accepting character, whereas in the latter case, she indicates Rochester’s selfish and dogmatic character, such that Jane rebels against the last part of his song. (On the other hand, “my Master” appears and speaks, and his character is depicted through the speaker’s eyes because Frances’s poem is her original fictional narrative. Thus, “my Master” is shown not as himself, but what she imagines him to be.)

Finally, we will conclude the analysis of Rochester’s song with a comparison with the original poem. One of the major differences between the two is the ending. The

8 Using “subject matter and handwriting” as “the only guide to dating” (The Poems of Charlotte Brontë xxii), Winnifrith dates Rochester’s song to around 1843 (363). Though he dates the original poem to around 1845 (416), he argues that “the Berg manuscript [a rough draft of the original poem] precedes Jane Eyre,” judging from “the corrections Charlotte has made to the Berg poem” (Brontë Facts and Brontë Problems 10).

9 See Winnifrith 11.
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original poem describes a disappointed love: with the speaker’s rival’s appearance (“My rival’s joy with jealous frown / Declared hostility” ll. 63-64), she loses her lover (“She seemed my rainbow to have seized, / Around her form it closed” ll. 73-74). In contrast, Rochester’s song ends with his love’s accomplishment:

My love has placed her little hand
With noble faith in mine,
And vowed that wedlock’s sacred band
Our natures shall entwine.

My love has sworn, with sealing kiss,
With me to live—to die;
I have at last my nameless bliss:
As I love—loved am I! (Brontë, The Poems of Charlotte Brontë 272)

The words imply Rochester’s perspective regarding his engagement and future marriage with Jane, but she reacts with repulsion to the line “With me to live—to die,” saying, “he had talked of his future wife dying with him. What did he mean by such a pagan idea? I had no intention of dying with him—he might depend on that” (273). In the final stanza, “die” rhymes with “I,” whereas “kiss” rhymes with “bliss.” As Heather Glen notes (140), love is what brings life to a lover, so death is inconceivable to Jane. She refuses to die soon after her husband’s death as “in a suttee” (Brontë, Jane Eyre 273) and requires an apology from him: “Would I forgive him for the selfish idea, and prove my pardon by a reconciling kiss?” (273).

Unlike Frances’s poem, Rochester’s song is not dialogic. Still, as seen above, by inducing Jane’s reaction, the song makes them begin a conversation or dialogue. During this conversation, Rochester’s element of weakness, which was almost overshadowed by his strong will in the song and Jane’s strong character, which is

10 See The Poems of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Tom Winnifrith 338. All subsequent references to this work are from this edition.
shown in her feeling of equality ("[. . .] ‘we stood at God’s feet, equal—as we are’" [Brontë, Jane Eyre 253]), are revealed to readers.

From the above analysis, three functions of the poems and songs in Jane Eyre are noted: anticipation, allusion, and descriptions of other characters’ feelings in the first-person narrative. By using her original poems, Brontë tries to avoid the first-person narrator’s drawback—the limited point of view and subjective depiction of other characters—in order to represent the other characters as they are, not just as they are seen from the narrator’s point of view.

Works Cited