

# THE FAERY AND THE BEAST

BY ABIGAIL HEINIGER

*Charlotte Brontë's novel Jane Eyre is influenced by the classic fairy tale hopes and dreams of the traditional 'Beauty and the Beast'. Yet Charlotte's message also stands apart from the fairy-tale tradition because, through Jane Eyre, she harnesses all the power of a fairy tale to challenge the ideas that gave rise to the stereotypical ideal Victorian woman. Coventry Patmore's mid-nineteenth-century poem 'The Angel in the House' represents the type of cultural mythology that Charlotte Brontë was already challenging in the pre-Victorian era. She realizes that the best way to defeat this myth is to replace it with a new one of her own making. In the vein of 'Beauty and the Beast', Patmore's poem demands beautiful women to inspire men. Charlotte Brontë's character Blanche Ingram fulfils Patmore's demands, but it is only the fairy-like heroine Jane who has the power to rehumanize Rochester. While Blanche is surrounded by references to classical mythology, Jane is associated with fairy tales like 'The Fairies and the Hump-Back' or 'The Legend of Knockgraston'. Unlike classical myths, fairy tales are a genre that was largely preserved by women, and therefore it can empower a heroine to become a woman's ideal woman, rather than the artificial man's ideal woman.*

It is easy to recognize the classic fairy-tale hopes and dreams of the traditional 'Beauty and the Beast' in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. The triumph of the innocent heroine, Jane Eyre, lends the novel the timeless enchantment that delights each new generation. However, the message of Charlotte's reincarnation stands apart in the fairy-tale tradition.<sup>1</sup> For through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte harnesses all the power of a fairy tale, not merely to entertain, but to challenge the prejudices and constraints which were perpetuated by the cultural mythology of pre-Victorian society. Charlotte realized that the best way to defeat a myth is to replace it with a new story. Thus Charlotte Brontë creates the fairy heroine<sup>2</sup>, Jane Eyre, who defies early nineteenth-century conventions.

The 'Angel in the House' by Coventry Patmore represents the type of early nineteenth-century cultural myth that Charlotte tries to replace. Though 'The Angel in the House' was published seven years after *Jane Eyre* broke upon the literary world, the themes captured in Patmore's poem had long been a part of nineteenth-century literature.<sup>3</sup> According to Gilbert and Gubar, the ideal nineteenth-century woman is an angel who has been "killed" into passivity.<sup>4</sup> The Angel dwells inactive in a domestic heaven,<sup>5</sup> with the implicit suggestion that those who leave the domestic heaven are fallen angels. This Angel is comparable to the classical goddess Juno,<sup>6</sup> who is introduced in the opening lines of Patmore's Canto II. Like 'The Angel in the House', classical goddesses and heroines are essentially ideal women created by men. According to *Classical Myth*, men

were the only mythmakers and myth writers in ancient Greek and Roman society: 'Greek myth, like Greek literary education, was an invention of men, a fact of paramount importance in our attempts to understand it.'<sup>7</sup>

In contrast, women participated and helped to shape the oral tradition of European fairy tales. Fairy tales flourished in both the salons of aristocratic women and the shared spinning rooms of their peasant female counterparts into the nineteenth century.<sup>8</sup> Charlotte Brontë was directly a part of this woman-dominated oral tradition of fairy tales. As a child, Charlotte heard fairy tales in her beloved home on the moor from the household servant, Tabby.<sup>9</sup> Charlotte and her siblings dealt with the harshness of reality by integrating fairy tales into their lives and stories.<sup>10</sup> Since the fairy tales Charlotte was exposed to were not the products of a male-dominated genre, she was able to use fairy-tale motifs to build a strong heroine: Jane draws power from stories largely preserved by women, as opposed to those created and preserved solely by men.

Blanche Ingram, who can be seen as Jane Eyre's foil, is the ideal nineteenth-century Angel or classical goddess — an unrealistic male-created ideal. Charlotte Brontë uses Mrs Ingram to cement the association — she calls Blanche her 'angel girl'.<sup>11</sup> Like an angel or Olympian coming to earth, Blanche and the other women descend the stairs in a 'bright mist' (p. 147) of white skirts. The young women usually wear white or light-coloured clothing (p. 150). Blanche's name especially associates her with white — the colour of both angels and goddesses. Another trait the women in Blanche's party share with classical goddesses is height; goddesses are tall.<sup>12</sup> Blanche is one of the tallest women (p. 150). To make sure her readers do not miss the motif, Charlotte has Jane name Blanche 'Dian' (p. 150), referring to Diana, goddess of the hunt. Finally, Blanche claims that she wants to be the exalted, unrivaled goddess of her house (p. 158). Blanche is not promoting female power or independence; she is merely declaring that she wants to be worshipped for her temporal beauty. Blanche aspires to be a domestic and beautiful Juno. In accord with Patmore, Blanche is the sort of being who could save a beast like Rochester; her beauty would inspire her husband to be a noble mate.<sup>13</sup>

In contrast, Jane asserts: 'I am not an angel . . . and I will not be one till I die: I will be myself. Mr. Rochester, you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me . . .' (p. 228). Jane emphatically refuses to assume the role of the angel in the house. She must be herself — a changeling, the elf in the house. As a changeling, she challenges and deconstructs the beautiful, passive, domestic pre-Victorian ideal. Rochester explicitly calls Jane a changeling: 'You changeling — fairy-born and human-bred!' (p. 386). A changeling is 'an ugly, stupid, or strange child superstitiously believed to have been left by fairies in place of a pretty, charming child'.<sup>14</sup> Jane has some of the physical characteristics of a changeling. She has 'silent' (p. 188), 'sylph feet' (p. 228) — she walks with the stealth of the fair folk. Changelings' hands are especially distinct. Changelings and fairies have circles on their palms rather than the creases seen on the hands of humans.<sup>15</sup> Jane's hands are elfish; her palms have no lines (p. 173) and Rochester claims that her fingers are fairy-like (p. 227).

The changeling, Jane, provokes Rochester out of his melancholy with her impishness instead of charming him with her looks. Charlotte Brontë triumphs over all conventions of female beauty by allowing her heroine to possess only a beauty that is more than skin deep. Rochester describes Jane as looking 'poor and obscure, and small and plain . . .' (p. 224). If Blanche's height associates her with goddesses, Jane's diminutive size associates her with the elves and fairies throughout the entire novel.

Since Jane's hands have no lines, Rochester cannot read her fortune (p. 173). Later, Rochester states that she will decide her own destiny (p. 223). Thus, the lack of lines on Jane's palms may not only be an elfish trait, but also an indication of her fairy-like power to decide her own fate. Jane's ability to decide her own fate is the driving force behind the novel. She embodies the opposite of the passive angelic ideal. For example, Rochester tells Jane: '... I have seen what a fire-spirit you can be when you are indignant. You glowed in the cool moonlight last night, when you mutinied against fate and claimed your rank as my equal' (p. 230).

It is because of her changeling ability to be a 'fire-spirit' (p. 230) that she is Rochester's equal and fit to be his bride. Jane cannot make Rochester more handsome or relieve him of the curse of his first marriage, but her fiery spirit can withstand and temper Rochester's snarls (p. 276). It is the 'inward power' (p. 266) which allows her to conquer his demon of pride and the curse of his bipolar personality to converse with the man hidden within him, a man, neither Blanche nor anyone else, tries to reach (p. 164). Moreover, Rochester's 'fixed desire' (p. 273) is to find someone like Jane, who will revive his soul with deep, meaningful conversation. He defines Jane as the ideal wife for himself when he states: 'You mocking changeling . . . If Saul could have had you for his David, the evil spirit would have been exorcised without the aid of the harp' (p. 386). Her association with fairies is more than physical, it is also a description of Jane's personality; because of her impish personality, Rochester finds Jane more desirable than the beautiful Blanche.

Jane challenges the idea that it takes a beauty to rehumanize a beast. Perhaps the most striking physical aspect of Jane is her plainness, simply because it is a novelty not found in Western myths and fairy tales. Fairy tales, myths, and society all demand beautiful females. Blanche sums it up well when she states: 'As if loveliness were not the special prerogative of woman — her legitimate appendage and heritage! I grant an ugly *woman* is a blot on the fair face of creation . . .' (p. 157). According to both Blanche and society, it is simply unacceptable for a woman to be less than beautiful, but Jane is. She defies the conventions of beauty by looking like an elf rather than a goddess or an angel. Jane does not inspire Rochester to nobleness with her beauty, contrary to Patmore's suggestion.

Bertha is another character that Charlotte uses to deconstruct the demand for physical beauty in women. Rochester compares Bertha's past beauty to that of Blanche: they were both 'tall, dark, and majestic' (p. 268). He claims that Bertha's beauty 'dazzled' (p. 268) him and so he thought he was in love (p. 268). However, Bertha's beautiful exterior hid a 'pigmy intellect' (p. 269) and 'giant propensities' (p. 269). These internal vices, coupled with Bertha's strong, physical health, condemned Rochester to live a solitary, bitter life (p. 270). In fact, Bertha's insanity makes both herself and Rochester bestial. She is described as a 'clothed hyena' (p. 258) and makes 'wolfish cries' (p. 271). Jane calls Rochester 'Gytrash' (p. 98) and 'brownie' (p. 385) because his attitude and appearance are similar to that of these fairy-tale beasts.

Another way Jane differs from the classical ideal is with her physical movement. Like an elf or a fairy, her power of mobility seems almost supernatural. Rochester claims that she can spring up and disappear like a shadow, and he is helpless to stop or detain her (p. 385). Jane decides she wants to leave Gateshead for boarding school (p. 21). She chooses to leave the complacency of Lowood for Thornfield (p. 74). Both of these moves demonstrate Jane's restless spirit as well as her independence.

Jane's flight from Thornfield demonstrates how she uses her physical mobility to assert her spiritual freedom. Jane's flight also places her within the Anglican fairy-tale tradition: when mortal men transgress the laws of their fairy wives, their wives leave them. For example, the fairy Meliora leaves her hero lover, Partenopex, when he defies her by trying to learn her identity.<sup>16</sup> Similarly in 'Melusine', the fairy Pessine leaves her husband when he disobeys her.<sup>17</sup> The transgressing spouses of immortals are usually sentenced to temporary banishment.<sup>18</sup> However, mortals must earn fairies' forgiveness. Fairies are both quick-tempered and unforgiving, like the fairies in the Celtic fairy tale 'The Hump Back and the Fairies'.<sup>19</sup> Rochester, the disabled 'brownie' (p. 385) reaffirms the association between the 'The Hump Back and the Fairies' and *Jane Eyre*.

Although Charlotte Brontë associates Jane with changelings, she asserts that her heroine is thoroughly human by expressing the depth of Jane's spiritual life. Unlike elves, fair folk, or even her cousin Eliza, Jane is not seeking complete independence from mankind (p. 297); neither is she leaving in a fit of wrath, like an offended fairy bride. Jane forgives Rochester from the depth of her heart before she leaves (p. 262). Moreover, she admits that she still loves Rochester: 'I *do* love you . . . more than ever: but I must not show or indulge the feeling . . .' (p. 267). Thus, Jane's separation from Rochester is outside the fairy-tale tradition of fairy brides. Instead, Jane is simply refusing to give up her self-respect (p. 279). Jane will not allow her spirit to become enslaved, even for love; she refuses to sacrifice her immortal soul to a man.

Jane's adherence to her soul or her conscience is also an un-fairy-like trait. According to Hans Christian Andersen's 'The Little Mermaid', air sprites, or fairies, do not have souls.<sup>20</sup> In contrast, Jane boldly asserts that she has one (p. 222). Jane's soul makes her equal with Rochester (p. 222), and she values it more highly than she values her love for him (p. 279). Jane maintains possession of this soul. Though she allows Rochester to become her temporary 'idol' (p. 278), she is able to 'renounce' (p. 278) her idolatry and depart. Furthermore, Jane's need to assert that she has a soul may be considered self-recognition of her fairy-like characteristics: though she seems fairy-like, she is not a fairy because she has a soul. Though having a soul makes Jane undeniably human, it is on the Marshes, a place traditionally haunted by the fair folk, that Jane comes to terms with her soul (p. 285). Jane's human, spiritual life is still intertwined with fairies.

The grace which characterizes Jane is a product of her spiritual life, and through it Jane transcends her fairy identity. Grace is not a characteristic afforded to soulless, impish fairies. In fairy tales, like the Scottish story 'The Fairies and the Hump-Back' or the Irish story 'The Legend of Knockgrafton',<sup>21</sup> fairies are quick to inflict punishment and take revenge on blundering mortals. It is Jane's grace which preserves the innocence necessary for the enchanting quality of the novel. Jane's grace is most emphatically demonstrated in her forgiveness. Jane forgives both her Aunt Reed (pp. 202, 210) and Rochester (p. 262).

Though Aunt Reed does not accept it, Jane repeatedly offers her the grace and freedom of forgiveness. This is not a typical fairy-tale motif. For example, no heroine attempts to save the wicked stepmother from the just fate of dancing to death in red-hot slippers.<sup>22</sup> However, Charlotte has Aunt Reed refuse to accept the grace Jane offers, and thus, like every wicked surrogate mother-figure in traditional fairy tales, Aunt Reed loses her position of power and dies.

Jane's response to Rochester's transgressions is even further removed from the tradition. While Jane offers her aunt forgiveness, she fervently prays that God will bless her beloved:

I had risen to my knees to pray for Mr. Rochester . . . I turned my prayer to thanksgiving: the Source of Life was also the Saviour of spirits. Mr. Rochester was safe: he was God's and by God would he be guarded. (p. 285)

Jane trusts in a God who is not only just but also a merciful saviour. Thus, Rochester's divine chastisement is tempered with mercy. Justice is not mingled with mercy in fairy tales. In fairy tales, heroes must earn mercy; the hero Partenopex must earn back the fairy Meliora's love, just as surely as Psyche earned her place at Cupid's side.<sup>23</sup>

In Mme Leprince du Beaumont's eighteenth-century 'Beauty and the Beast', the Beast is able to pay for Beauty's love by becoming a handsome prince and offering her a crown.<sup>24</sup> In Charles Perrault's late seventeenth-century version of the story, the ugly Prince Ricky of the Tuft magically grants his beautiful bride intelligence.<sup>25</sup> Unlike these fairy-tale beasts, Rochester cannot earn Jane's love at the end of the novel. He has lost much of his fortune, along with his sight and his left hand. Her love and forgiveness is the product of her grace and God's mercy. Rochester simply accepts this and gives her his love in return. In response, Jane tells him: 'I love you better now, when I can be really useful to you, than I did in your state of proud independence, when you disdained every part but that of the giver and protector' (p. 392). The state of grace in which this story ends makes it a unique addition to the fairy-tale tradition.

Since Jane leaves Rochester and he cannot earn her back, Jane maintains her power and spiritual freedom when she returns to him on her own terms. She comes to him with the statement: 'I am an independent woman now' (p. 382), and he responds 'Ah, this is practical — this is real!' (p. 382). Though they are discussing her financial situation, the deeper, implicit meaning behind their conversation is a recognition of Jane's independent spirit. Rochester describes the relationship between himself and Jane best when he states: 'Of yourself, you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will you will elude the grasp like an essence . . .' (p. 280). Thus Jane's return to him is not a regression into dependence. Jane's choice to 'nestle against [Rochester's] heart' (p. 280) does not lessen her fairy-like power — rather, it is an expression of free will.

Jane's return to Rochester reflects the diverse needs of her changeling spirit. As a human she needs purposeful relationships with people: interdependence. Still, she does not return to the confines of Victorian domesticity, but rather to run a household and raise a family with Rochester (pp. 396–97). Originally, Jane recognizes that Thornfield is the quintessentially domestic 'woman's sphere'.<sup>26</sup> It is a place of confinement that is inhabited almost entirely by women with whom Jane had to 'fetter' (p. 102) her faculties — she is 'buried with inferior minds' (p. 222). However, when Rochester returns to Thornfield, Jane finally has the chance to talk 'face to face . . . with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind' (p. 222). Thus, Jane is confident that she will not be confined to the woman's sphere when she returns to him at the manor house. Instead, she is returning to a relationship where she is an equal partner in running a household.

Rochester not only provides Jane with intellectual freedom, he is also the liberator of her spirit and emotions. In Rochester's presence, Jane feels the freedom to be impish.

During the month before their first attempt down the aisle, Jane shows Rochester the ‘divers rugged points’ (p. 240) in her character. She claims that by keeping him ‘cross and crusty’ (p. 241), she helps him avoid both depression and artificial sentimentality. One of Jane’s first silent observations when she returns to Rochester is that she feels ‘no harassing restraint’ (p. 384) in Rochester’s company. Jane claims that the first decade of their marriage is marked by this utter freedom with each other. At the heart of this freedom is their communication with each other: ‘To be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company. We talk, I believe, all day long; to talk to each other is but a more animated and an audible thinking’ (p. 397). Where the Victorian ideal placed women in bondage, this novel has a fairy-tale-like happily-ever-after ending because Jane finds freedom with Rochester. This will be a lasting freedom because it is a part of a life-long relationship.

The title page of the first edition of *Jane Eyre* claims that this novel is an autobiography. It is certainly set in a realistic and tangible time and place, unlike traditional fairy tales.<sup>27</sup> Charlotte’s heroine is concerned with staying in reality. According to Rochester, Jane treasures visions in her head, but she keeps her feet firmly on the ground (p. 276). Despite the emphasis on reality, *Jane Eyre* is firmly rooted in the fairy tale tradition of ‘Beauty and the Beast’. Charlotte provides all the characters necessary for the fairy tale: Bertha is the wicked witch who bewitches Rochester (pp. 268–69) and curses him with both marriage and her insanity. Rochester is provided with numerous Beauties, including Céline Varens and Blanche Ingram, but it is only the changeling Jane Eyre who is able to ‘rehumanize’ (p. 384) him. Rochester’s choice of Jane also demonstrates that he is maturing and learning to look for inner, lasting beauty. Jane has internalized this fairy tale — she cherishes the hope it offers and uses it to live in the real world. Thus, she has the tenacity to achieve her own happily-ever-after.

Through the fairy tale tradition incorporated into *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë creates a story that had the power to replace Victorian myths, like ‘The Angel in the House’. Charlotte harnesses the greatest power of fairy tales with *Jane Eyre*, which is to almost unconsciously instill ideas into young people’s minds.<sup>28</sup> Through *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte infects society with the idea that women can be active and intelligent. Through her changeling heroine, Charlotte subtly deconstructs the idea that women must be beautiful, passive, domestic angels. Moreover, by placing *Jane Eyre* within a local time and place setting, she is suggesting that her fairy tale could be realized by strong women in the present!

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Fairy tales: fictitious tales of fanciful creatures, usually for children. *Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary*.

<sup>2</sup> Fairy or Faery: ‘a tiny imaginary being in human form depicted as being mischievous and having magical powers.’ *Webster’s II New Riverside Dictionary*.

<sup>3</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, ‘Literature of the Nineteenth-Century’, *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, 2nd edn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1996), pp. 288–91.

<sup>4</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 290.

<sup>5</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 291.

<sup>6</sup> Coventry Patmore, ‘The Angel in the House’ (London: John W. Parker and Sons, 1860–63), p. 4. This poem uses references to classical mythology to describe the ideal Victorian woman.

<sup>7</sup> Barry Powel, *Classical Myth*, 4th edn (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2004), p. 35.

- <sup>8</sup> Jack Zipes, *Fairy tale as Myth/Myth as Fairy Tale* (Lexington, Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), pp. 18–19, 62.
- <sup>9</sup> Winifred Gérin, *Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 37.
- <sup>10</sup> Gérin, p. 32.
- <sup>11</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 2nd edn, ed. by Richard J. Dunn (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1987). All subsequent references to this work are from this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text by page number.
- <sup>12</sup> Powel, p. 228.
- <sup>13</sup> Patmore, pp. 43–44.
- <sup>14</sup> ‘Changeling’, *Random House Dictionary*.
- <sup>15</sup> Eloise McGraw, *The Moorchild* (New York: Scholastic Inc., 1996), p. 148.
- <sup>16</sup> W. A. Clouston, ‘Subaqueous Faery Halls: Forbidden Rooms: Cupid and Psyche Legends’, *Popular Tales and Fictions: their migration and transformations* (California: ASL-CLIO Inc., 2002), p. 84.
- <sup>17</sup> Clouston, pp. 84–85.
- <sup>18</sup> Clouston, p. 85.
- <sup>19</sup> W. Y. Evans-Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (London: H. Frowde, 1911), p. 92.
- <sup>20</sup> Hans Christian Anderson, ‘The Little Mermaid’, p. 56.
- <sup>21</sup> Joseph Jacobs, *More Celtic Faery Tales* (London: David Nutt, 1894), pp. 156–63.
- <sup>22</sup> Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm, ‘Snow White’, *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, Jack Zipes, translator (New York: Bantam Books, 2003), p. 188.
- <sup>23</sup> Clouston, p. 84.
- <sup>24</sup> *Perrault’s Complete Faery Tales*, trans. by A. E. Johnson and others (London: Puffin Books, 1961), p. 123.
- <sup>25</sup> Johnson, p. 44.
- <sup>26</sup> Gilbert and Gubar, p. 288.
- <sup>27</sup> Max Luthi, ‘Abstract Style’, *The European Folktale: Form and Nature* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), p. 28.
- <sup>28</sup> Jack Zipes, ‘Setting the Standards of Civilization through Faery Tales: Charles Perrault and his Associates’, *The Art of Subversion* (New York: Wildman Press, 1991), pp. 17–18.

### Biographical note

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