“HARMLESS PLEASURE”: GENDER, SUSPENSE, AND JANE EYRE

By Caroline Levine

“[I]t is time the obscurity . . . was done away,” writes Charlotte Brontë in 1850. “The little mystery, which formerly yielded some harmless pleasure, has lost its interest. Circumstances have changed” (“Biographical Notice” 134). The “little mystery” she coyly invokes here was not so trivial in the eyes of the literary world. From the moment that Jane Eyre appeared, reviewers speculated wildly about the identity of the authors of Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. “[T]he whole reading-world of London was in a ferment to discover the unknown author,” writes Elizabeth Gaskell (271). When the identities of the three sisters emerged, it was something of a shock to most of the London literati to discover that the writers of these “coarse” and “repulsive” novels were young, sheltered Yorkshire women, daughters of a curate, who had seen little of the world.1 Although the secret had been slowly coming out, bit by bit, it was in 1850 that Charlotte Brontë put the speculations to rest with her “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” written for a new edition of Wuthering Heights.

This version of the story is familiar to most Brontë enthusiasts. And much has been made of the Brontës’ shyness, their passionate desire for privacy, for isolation from the world.2 But surely we should stop and wonder at Charlotte’s own version of the story, which puts only a mild stress on the impulse to retreat from the public eye. Indeed, Charlotte decides to uncover her little mystery, so she says, because it is no longer any fun: it has ceased to offer her the “harmless pleasure” it had yielded before. Pleasure — surely an intriguing, playful motive for the keeping of a pseudonym.3 Why, then, does Charlotte Brontë confess to having taken pleasure in concealing her identity from the world?

I will propose an answer to this question through a reading of two mysteries: the public mystery of Currr Bell’s identity, and the suspenseful narrative of Jane Eyre. In both contexts, Brontë uses the stratagems of suspenseful equivocation to overturn widely held convictions about femininity. Suspenseful uncertainty emerges, both within the novel and without, as a powerfully subversive political tool, and Brontë’s “pleasure” in her games of delay and equivocation suggests that suspense is not such a rigidly conservative narrative mode as twentieth-century critics have asserted.

“Averse to personal publicity,” Charlotte writes in her 1850 notice, “we veiled our names under those of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated
by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine” (135). Ever scrupulous, Charlotte absolves the sisters of the charge of lying by insisting that they were only “veiling” their names. Each was donning a veil, that most maidenly and modest of garments for virtuous women outside in the world.4 Careful not to indulge in positive falsehoods, while not in fact giving anything away, the sisters chose names that were cryptic, indeterminate, ambiguous. Yet, it is worth pointing out that to veil is not to conceal entirely: it is to screen, to obscure. Typically, the veil acknowledges the fact that there is something behind it, something to be screened. It is true that the sisters discreetly refrained from claiming to be men in any “positive” way, but at the same time, their decision to take three unusual names of uncertain gender was surely an invitation to speculation. They were not lying, but rather veiling — both concealing the facts and accentuating that concealment. In this context, the Brontë pseudonyms represent a complex negotiation of the relationship between fact and fiction, between truth-telling and outright lies: they kept intact their first initials and sibling relations, they veiled names, and they provoked suspicions — and doubts — about their gender.

In the same short essay, Charlotte tells us about her first reading of Emily’s poetry, which was so unlike conventional women’s writing that Charlotte registers her shock: “I looked it over and more than surprise seized me — a deep conviction that these were not common effusions, nor at all like the poetry women generally write. I thought them condensed and terse, vigorous and genuine” (135). Emily’s voice is, unlike that of most women, intense and vigorous, but it is also marked as very much her own — as “genuine.” Her work is, on the one hand, un feminine, and, on the other hand, genuine. By yoking together Emily’s authenticity and her deviation from feminine writing, Charlotte implies that it may actually be more truthful to call Emily by an un feminine name. Though “Ellis” is not “positively masculine,” it is certainly not feminine. Emily’s un feminine public identity, therefore, fits her poetry better than the fact of her female body. The pseudonym is true to the writing, if not to the person of the writer.

After this subtle, if casuistic, justification of her honesty, Charlotte contradicts herself, offering a more conventional explanation for the taking of un feminine pseudonyms. “[W]e did not like to declare ourselves women,” she writes, “because — without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’ — we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice” (134).5 Performing a sudden about-face, Charlotte wants us to see the sisters as innocent of the unconventional gendering of their own writing. They knew nothing, it would seem, about the relations between their own work and “what is called ‘feminine’.” How strange, since only a few lines before, we have heard Charlotte state her “deep conviction” that Emily’s poetry had never struck her as “at all like the poetry women generally write.”

What is going on here? Either the sisters had noticed that their work was un feminine and decided to take male pseudonyms as appropriate for their work, or they were innocent of the gendering of Victorian writing, subject to “vague impressions,” naive and guileless women who did not really know the ways of the world. If they knew that their work diverged from the feminine stereotype, then their pseudonyms were, in a way, truthful; if they did not know that their work was un feminine, then they could cast themselves as cloistered, innocent of the workings of the public sphere. Apparently intent on having it both ways, Charlotte defends herself and her late sisters against the charges of immodest
behavior. In her capable hands, the Brontë sisters emerge as scrupulous, demure, and — of all things — feminine.

But this decorous play of identity, you remember, has also been pleasurable. Charlotte unveils her femininity in 1850 because the “little mystery” no longer yields her enough amusement. There has been delight in the veiling, the ambiguity. Modesty, it would seem, has had its pleasures. It is not hard to guess at those delights. The veil suggests but does not tell; it teases and withholds, provoking desire. The pleasures of the veil are those of the erotic. Veiling is, as Roland Barthes would say, a “snare” (75). Teasing and withholding, veils are the stuff of suspense.

And Charlotte Brontë was no innocent when it came to the workings of suspenseful plotting, as any reader of Jane Eyre can attest. Take the end of volume I, for example. The final scene represents the romantic equivalent of a cliff-hanger. Jane has just saved Rochester from the fire, and, when he thanks her for saving his life, he has “strange energy” and “strange fire in his look” (171; ch. 15). However tempting to interpret, this “strangeness” is enticingly inconclusive. “He paused; gazed at me; words almost visible trembled on his lips — but his voice was checked” (171; ch. 15). The very fact that he “checks” his speech tantalizes the reader, hinting at too broadly that the hero has secrets he cannot tell. A few chapters later, after reproaching Jane for leaving the party too early, he suspends his words again: “‘Good-night, my — ’ He stopped, bit his lip, and abruptly left me” (205; ch. 17). Seductively, Rochester hints and halts simultaneously, and we become increasingly invested in what Jane calls his “equivocal tokens” (183; ch. 16). D. A. Miller defines such equivocation as the very model of plotted suspense: “To flirt … means to cultivate suspense in relationships: to hesitate between meaning, and not meaning, the gestures to which flirtation gives rise. In its teasing approach to meaning and its avoidance of definitive nomination, flirtation is well qualified to motivate the moment of narratability” (Narrative 21). Flirtation is the ideal vehicle for readerly desire, even for narratability itself. And flirtation is all about dodging the truth, about suggesting and withholding. It is, we might say, all about veiling.

Which brings us back to the pseudonym. Suspense, withholding, equivocation — these are the readerly pleasures of Jane Eyre, just as they are the private pleasures of Charlotte’s “little mystery.” From this starting point, we can read the novel and the pseudonym together to conclude that Charlotte Brontë was no shrinking violet, seeking the shade of privacy — despite the fact that she goes to some lengths to have us believe in her demure, all too feminine, timidity. What I want to suggest, then, is a reading of Brontë’s ambiguously gendered public identity in light of the gender games she plays in the text of Jane Eyre.

We may begin at the beginning — the title page of the first edition of Jane Eyre. This opening page reads: “JANE EYRE. An Autobiography. EDITED BY CURRER BELL.” Far from straightforwardly declaring the text’s authorship, these words might well puzzle the reader not in on the “little mystery.” At first glance, the text purports to be an autobiography. If so, then the author is a woman — to be precise, a woman hitherto unknown to the literary world, by the name of Jane Eyre. But few of the novel’s early readers were gullible enough to fall for that trick: by 1847, reading audiences were thoroughly familiar with the literary device of the fictional editor. Thus many guessed that the real author was a man. Ambiguous but certainly not feminine, as Charlotte shows she was well aware, the name “Currer” was widely presumed to be masculine, and it would
not have been unusual for a male novelist to pose as a female autobiographer in order to
tell a story with a woman protagonist. Numerous readers therefore leapt to the conclusion
that Jane Eyre was not an autobiography at all, but a novel by a man who was posing as a
woman. The People's Journal took this for granted, noting for us that “Mr. Currer Bell is
already slightly, but rather favourably known to the public, as one of the writers of a small
volume of poems” (81). But then again, “Currer” was such an unfamiliar and suspiciously
ambiguous name — “a mere nom de guerre — perhaps an anagram” (Christian Remem-
brancer 89) — that it could easily be a pseudonym for a woman trying to conceal her
identity. Perhaps a woman had taken a masculine name in order to get away with the
novel’s “coarse” writing and immoral hero. Or perhaps, as G. H. Lewes insisted, it was
true that any good fiction must “be built out of real experience,” and thus Jane Eyre’s
author must be female, like the protagonist (Fraser’s 84). If such were the case, then Jane
Eyre was written not by a man, but by a woman posing as a man posing as a woman.

Which is, of course, the oddly circuitous truth. On the title page of Jane Eyre, a
woman, Charlotte Brontë, pretends to be a man, Currer Bell, who, in turn, pretends to be
a woman, Jane Eyre. Given this entanglement of possibilities, it is not surprising that
reviewers started to speculate wildly about the gender of the author. Presumably, the only
fact that the enticingly indeterminate title page made clear to readers was that something
peculiar was going on. Indeed, the conspicuous periphrasis of this opener was again a
perfect case of “veiling” — hinting and halting, suggesting and withholding, drawing
readerly attention directly to the mystery of the author’s gender.

Yet why bother to craft such an elaborate enigma for the title page? As we have seen,
Brontë will later tell us that the mystery offered her “some harmless pleasure.” But then,
what kind of pleasure was it? What was the pleasurable point of her intricate gender
game?

The novel itself suggests a possible answer. After all, Rochester plays his own gender
game with Jane when he dresses up as an old gypsy woman and claims to be able to tell
her fortune. It is my contention that the author’s cross-dressing begins to look pointedly
self-conscious in light of her hero’s clear motives for veiling his identity. Pretending to
divine Jane’s prospects, Rochester returns again and again to the topic of love and
marriage. “Have you no present interest in any of the company who occupy the sofas and
chairs before you?” he asks, in disguise. “Is there not one face you study? Not one figure
whose movements you follow with, at least, curiosity?” (225; ch. 19). If Rochester’s furtive
plan is enigmatic during the interview, his reasons for dressing up as an old woman are no
mystery once he reveals his identity. Jane immediately accuses him: “I believe you have
been trying to draw me out — or in; you have been talking nonsense in order to make me
talk nonsense” (228; ch. 19). Or, as Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it: “The manipulative
character of Rochester’s power to move Jane to involuntary speech is underlined in his
attempt to trick her into self-revelation by disguising himself” (102). Quite simply, Roch-
ester takes on the trappings of femininity in order to prompt Jane to divulge her secrets.
The gender performance he plays is intended to beguile his audience into betraying her
innermost feelings.

If the revelation of another’s secrets is the point of playing gender games, then
Charlotte Brontë might well have had her own audience in mind when she practiced her
obscurely gendered pseudonymity. Like Rochester, that is, she might have assumed a
disguise in order to extract confessions from her readership.
And extract them she did. The reviewers, when confronted with the ambiguous pseudonym “Currer Bell,” were successfully tricked into self-revelation. That is, some asserted that the text had been written by a man, others affirmed that it must be the work of a woman. And in the course of their fervent speculations about the identity of the author of *Jane Eyre*, they disclosed their firm convictions — or, to be more accurate, their prejudices — about the capabilities and limitations of women writers. To take one example, Elizabeth Rigby, in her famously scathing review, affirms that the novel could not have been written by a respectable woman:

No woman — a lady friend, whom we are always happy to consult, assures us — makes mistakes in her own métier — no woman trusses game and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of doing so in the same breath. Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane’s ladies assume — Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible, “in a morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!” No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on “a frock.” They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too. This evidence seems incontrovertible. Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex. (175–76)

Presenting “incontrovertible evidence,” the detective-reviewer rests her case. And, she adds cannily, if the evidence is a plant, a red herring to lead readers astray, then the author must be a fallen woman, one not permitted, “for some sufficient reason,” to share the society of her own sex. Rigby herself is careful not to expose her own femininity — speaking as if she were a man citing the authority of a “lady friend” — while she painstakingly locates specific details within the text which demonstrate irrefutably that the author is unfamiliar with the world of respectable women. No woman could have written such a text if other women habitually received her into their company.

On the other side, the *Christian Remembrancer* affirmed:

[W]e, for our part, cannot doubt that the book is written by a female, and, as certain provincialisms indicate, one from the North of England. Who, indeed, but a woman could have ventured, with the smallest prospect of success, to fill three octavo volumes with the history of a woman’s heart? ... Mr. Rochester, the hero of the story, is clearly the vision of a woman’s fancy, as the heroine is the image of a woman’s heart. (89)

Reliant on the realist assumption that a convincing text about the internal life of a woman must be the labor of a woman writer, this anonymous reviewer sees a feminine psychology at work in the representations of both hero and heroine. Taking these two examples together, Elizabeth Rigby claims that a woman could not have written the novel, while the *Christian Remembrancer* claims that it could not be the work of a man. Thus Currer Bell seems to have publicly achieved his — and her — emancipation from the confining trappings of both genders.
Most engaging of all is the conclusion reached by Edwin Percy Whipple, who reviewed "The Novels of the Season" for the *North American Review*. He decided that *Jane Eyre* was the collaborative work of three siblings, two brothers and a sister:

From the masculine tone of *Jane Eyre*, it might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress. These peculiarities refer not only to elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutiae of the sick-chamber, but to various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex... There are numerous examples of these in *Jane Eyre*. The leading characteristic of the novel, however, and the secret of its charm, is the clear, distinct, decisive style of its representation of character, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind. In the earlier chapters, there is little, perhaps, to break the impression that we are reading the autobiography of a powerful and peculiar female intellect; but when the admirable Mr. Rochester appears, and the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate give their torpedo-shocks to the nervous system, — and especially when we are favored with more than one scene given to the exhibition of mere animal appetite, and to courtship after the manner of kangaroos and the heroes of Dryden's plays, — we are gallant enough to detect the hand of a gentleman in the composition. There are also scenes of passion, so hot, emphatic, and condensed in expression, and so sternly masculine in feeling, that we are almost sure that we observe the mind of the author of *Wuthering Heights* at work in the text. (356-57)

Whipple presumes that a woman must have had a hand in the writing, given details of dress, the sick-chamber, and certain feminine "refinements of feeling," but then clarity, decisiveness, profanity, brutality, heat, passion, animal appetite, and slang — these are clear hallmarks of masculine writing. In fact, these markers of the male intellect are so conspicuous that the novel must have been written, at least in part, by that indisputably masculine mind, the author of *Wuthering Heights*.

So much for speculation. When Charlotte revealed the Brontës' identity in 1850, she effectively discredited a whole array of assumptions about women's writing. Women, she proved, could write with the clarity and passion of men; they could represent fearful brutality and sensuality; and, *pace* Elizabeth Rigby, respectable women could write about highly irregular relationships without sacrificing their virtue. By veiling her own gender, Charlotte had successfully provoked the world to speculate, and in speculating, to venture strong opinions about masculine and feminine writing. Then, in unveiling herself as a decent Yorkshire woman, she proved a great many of these convictions simply and emphatically wrong. Such is the plot, then, of her "little mystery."

Consider, for another example, the review in the *Era*, which Charlotte later turned on its head:

Bulwer, James, D'Israeli, and all the serious novel writers of the day lose in comparison with Currer Bell, for we must presume the work to be his. It is no woman's writing. Although ladies have written histories, travels, and warlike novels, to say nothing of books upon the different arts and sciences, no woman could have penned "The Autobiography of Jane Eyre." It is all that one of the other sex might invent, and much more... The tale is one of the heart, and the working out of a moral through the natural affections; it is the victory of mind over matter; the mastery of reason over feeling, without unnatural sacrifices. The writer dives deep into
human life, and possesses the gift of being able to write as he thinks and feels. There is a vigour in all he says, a power which fixes the reader's attention, and a charm about his "style" and "diction" which fascinates while it edifies. (9)

After setting the new writer in the context of "serious" male novelists, this reviewer makes absolutely clear what for him constitute the incontrovertible attributes of masculine writing. Mind triumphs over body, reason conquers feelings, and the affections bring us to moral maturity. In the prose, we find vigor, power, and charm. Women are not capable of such intellectual, rational, powerful, and moral work — which means that no woman could have written the novel.

Charlotte Brontë wrote that this particular review, with its dismissals of feminine skill and its affirmations of masculine morality, gave her "much pleasure" (Letters 564). And surely, in this context, her pleasure begins to make sense. Like Rochester, her veiled identity prompts her audience to divulge their innermost feelings, and more skillful than her hero, Brontë's authorial strategy overwhelmingly succeeds. Her "little mystery," her suggesting and withholding, her erotic dance of identity: this veiling provokes the literary world to reveal its complacent blunders and rigid misconceptions, and it yields Brontë the opportunity, eventually, to put them all to shame. Emerging as a powerful critic of contemporary assumptions about men's and women's writing, Charlotte Brontë uses the techniques of suspenseful equivocation to make a significant political point.

At this juncture, we may return to the mysteries of Jane Eyre. It is here that we find our proof that Brontë was adept at the stratagems of suspense, and we might ask, in turn, whether her plotting in the public sphere throws light on the operations of her narrative. That is, if the veils of suspense serve a radical political purpose among the Victorian literati, might we say the same for the plotted mysteries of Jane Eyre?

Literary critics have not been inclined to see suspenseful narrative as a radical form. Powerful and manipulative, end-oriented narrative arbitrarily withholds particular morsels of knowledge, while signaling that withholding, and thus provokes readers to desire the very conclusions the narrative has prearranged. It is among the most effective tools for training readerly desire, and therefore an ideal vehicle for the orchestration of ideology. But Charlotte Brontë might prompt us to take a second look at the political potential of plot. After all, it is in the space between veiling and unveiling that we reveal ourselves. Mysteries offer us the opportunity for speculation, and in speculating, we necessarily overstep the bounds of the evidence, imposing our own preconceptions and desires on the world that we encounter. In the end, the solution to the mystery, if it is in the least unconventional, exposes narrowly conventional convictions as partial, as misguided, as insufficient. Such is Charlotte's own accomplishment when she unveils herself and publicly solves her "little mystery." But even when the ending confirms and resettles conventions, the delay before that resettling leaves them pointedly up in the air, and part of the pleasure of reading suspenseful narrative is the knowledge — even the anxiety — that the world may not, in the end, conform to our ideas of it. The very experience of suspenseful uncertainty proves that there is more than one credible ending to the narrative, more than one potentially plausible solution to the mystery. In this context, closure does not so much dictate an arbitrary conclusion, as it compels us to recognize the otherness of the world, the ever-present possibility that the facts may refuse to validate our prejudices. Suspenseful narrative, in short, teaches us that the world may controvert our expectations, disprov-
ing our cherished beliefs and convictions. If we are to become capable of setting aside our own preconceptions in order to hear the other, then we must indeed learn to suspend judgment. Viewed in this light, plot becomes one of the most subversive of literary forms.

Not surprisingly, the text of Jane Eyre offers us a usefully illustrative example. After a series of seductive checks and equivocations relating to Jane, Rochester goes to visit the beautiful Blanche Ingram. As Jane waits, suspended, for his return, she seeks to convince herself that she has been wrong about his interest in her: desiring but not knowing, she resolves to put her faith in conventional wisdom, which tells her that "a dependent and a novice" could never be loved by "a gentleman of family, and a man of the world." She preaches to herself, in the style of a lecture or sermon, speaking in general maxims: "It does no good for a woman to be flattered by her superior, who cannot possibly intend to marry her" (153; ch. 14). Men in superior positions cannot intend to marry their inferiors. This general law is an example of what Roland Barthes calls the "implicit proverbs" of the cultural code — "written in that obligative mode by which the discourse states a general will, the law of a society... a maxim, a postulate" (100). Like the insistence that respectable women cannot write with the vigor and charm of the male pen, the notion that a superior can never intend to marry a dependent is broadly axiomatic, sweeping enough to include the world of the reader as well as the world of the text. And this idea is certainly the prevailing orthodoxy, as Jane here makes clear. The maxim is also a comprehensive representation of the world, a generalized description of the "real," purporting to swallow up all particular cases.

But Jane's experience will work to invalidate this representation, unsettling the universalizing statements of "common sense." In good realist fashion, that is, her narrative upsets conventional ways of seeing and puts forward a new and more truthful image of the real. We soon learn that a gentleman of family and man of the world can indeed intend to marry a dependent and a novice, which goes to prove that the social authorities — the general will — have got it wrong. After learning to suspend judgment, we presumably revise our understanding accordingly. But no sooner have we come to believe in this gentleman's good intentions, than we discover that Rochester does not, in fact, intend to marry Jane, at least technically speaking. And when in fact she does marry him, she is no longer a "dependent and a novice." In this double about-face, we return to our starting point, but in the process we have been forced to admit, however unwillingly, that the very open-endedness — the pleasurable uncertainty — of the plot suggests the genuine plausibility of alternative endings. By definition, suspense casts doubt on the necessity of a particular ending. By the time the narrative has finally resettled Jane's "implicit proverb," it has effectively thrown all automatic faith in the dictates of common sense into question. On the most general level, Jane's lesson invites us to nurture a skepticism about maxims and generalizing representations, to test sweeping principles against the evidence.

A quintessential bildungsroman, what Jane Eyre teaches its readers — from title page to conclusion — is a vigilant skepticism about our own assumptions. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that the heroine models this training for us, learning, little by little, to question her own preconceptions. For example, having lighted upon Grace Poole as the probable culprit for the fire in Rochester's bed, she tries to confirm her suspicions. The morning after the conflagration, Jane comes upon Grace sewing curtain rings:

There she sat, staid and taciturn-looking, as usual, in her brown stuff gown, her check apron, white handkerchief, and cap. She was intent on her work, in which her whole thoughts seemed
absorbed: on her hard forehead, and in her commonplace features, was nothing either of the paleness or desperation one would have expected to see marking the countenance of a woman who had attempted murder. . . . “I will put her to some test,” thought I: “such absolute impenetrability is past comprehension.” (175–76; ch. 16)

Jane, as we can glean from the narrative, has never actually seen a murderer, but “one” would “expect” a murderer to look desperate and pale. A murderer could not possibly look so ordinary, so “commonplace.” The exceptional, Jane suggests, must bear visible marks of its difference from the norm. But then, narrative suspense reminds us of what we know to be true: our images and expectations may well in fact conflict with “realities”; we may not know the truth. Knowing that she does not know, Jane experiments. “I will put her to some test,” Jane decides. Since she cannot “penetrate” the appearance, she must experiment on it, test it, to find out whether her suspicions do or do not fit the hidden truth.

Experimentation, like narrative, suspends the future. Experiments always hold out the possibility that the facts will show nothing, or worse, that they will prove the hypothesis wrong. The experimenter resolutely tests hypotheses rather than taking them for granted, all the while acknowledging the possibility of failure. Suspense, then, is the very substance of experimentation. And the experiment has been seen as fundamentally radical in character — resolutely anti-conventional and insurgent. As Avital Ronnell puts it: “The experimental spirit is . . . a vitality that disrupts sedimented concepts and social values” (213). Or as John Dewey has it: “The scientific attitude may almost be defined as that which is capable of enjoying the doubtful” (qtd. in Crease 39). To experiment one must be willing to suspend one’s own judgment, to acknowledge the otherness of the world, and to imagine its possible resistance to convention. In this light, plotted suspense and radical politics again converge.

Torn between conflicting solutions to the mysteries of her environment, Jane, like her author, disrupts orthodox conceptions of femininity. Wondering whether the enigma of Grace Poole involves a past sexual indiscretion, Jane considers the alternatives:

Mrs Poole’s square, flat figure, and uncomely, dry, even coarse face, recurred so distinctly to my mind’s eye, that I thought, “No; impossible! my supposition cannot be correct. Yet,” suggested the secret voice which talks to us in our hearts, “you are not beautiful either, and perhaps Mr Rochester approves you; at any rate, you have often felt as if he did.” (179; ch. 16)

If it is impossible for Rochester to have been in love with the square, dry Grace Poole, then it might be equally impossible that he loves the small, irregular Jane Eyre. Either he follows convention, in which case he cannot love either — or he is highly unusual, in which case he might well love both.

Jane quells these anxieties, for the moment, by forcing a conventional conclusion: “I compared myself with her, and found we were different. Bessie Leaven had said that I was quite a lady: and she spoke truth. . . . And now I looked much better than I did when Bessie saw me” (179; ch. 16). Jane here compares the two images and arrives at a comforting difference: she is prettier and of a higher class than Grace Poole. But, as if to make absolutely clear that all such conventions are up for grabs, it is immediately after this that the narrative introduces Blanche Ingram. If Rochester is interested in outward
marks of class and beauty, then Blanche — not Jane — must be his chosen mate. If, however, he is attracted to the hidden and the exceptional, why not Grace Poole as easily as Jane Eyre? While we wait for the answers, the narrative casts significant doubt on the relationship between conventional marks of feminine attractiveness and their unsettlingly eccentric alternatives.

Skillfully deploying the open-endedness of suspense from beginning to end, Charlotte Brontë enforces strict lessons about gender. Much as we may bluster and swagger in our convictions, there is always the chance that the solution to the mystery may prove us wrong. In a world which confines and restricts women precisely by conceiving of women’s potential as a limited, known quantity, Brontë’s suspense teaches us to doubt, to experiment, to suspend judgment. When it comes to femininity, the veil teaches us to expect surprises. Which is not such a harmless pleasure after all.

Rutgers University, Camden

NOTES

1. Responding to the “Biographical Notice,” Lewes could hardly contain his thrill at the apparent incongruity: “Curious enough is it to read Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, and remember that the writers were two retiring, solitary, consumptive girls! Books, coarse even for men, coarse in language and coarse in conception, the coarseness apparently of violent and uncultivated men — turn out to be the productions of two girls living almost alone, filling their loneliness with quiet studies, and writing these books from a sense of duty, hating the pictures they drew, yet drawing them with austere conscientiousness!” (Leader 953). After Charlotte’s death, Harriet Martineau tried to justify the disharmony, explaining that the novels reveal a committed realism, based on experience, rather than an intent to scandalize: “Such an experience as this indicates is really perplexing to English people in general; and all that we have to do with it is to bear it in mind when disposed to pass criticism on the coarseness which, to a certain degree, pervades the work of all the sisters, and the repulsiveness which makes the tales of Emily and Ann really horrible to people who have not iron nerves” (363–64).

2. For example, Winnifrith and Chitham point to Charlotte’s “shyness and depression” as the reason for her refusal to make the most of her fame (11). More searchingly, Kucich claims that Charlotte “cultivates psychic withdrawal,” but he also argues that this is not so much a sign of vulnerability as a kind of power (74 and 82).

3. Gezari appears to overlook this “pleasure” when she writes that Charlotte shows her “uneasiness” in this passage (17).

4. So compelling was the metaphor of the veil that two of the reviewers who responded to the “Biographical Notice” echoed it in the first lines of their reviews. The Examiner wrote: “In a preface to this volume the author of Jane Eyre partially lifts the veil from the history and mystery of authorship which has occupied the Quidnuncs of literature for the past two years” (288). And the opening of the Athenaeum review read: “The lifting of that veil which for a while concealed the authorship of Jane Eyre and its sister-novels excited in us no surprise” (1368).

5. Judd puts to rest the misconception that women writers took male pseudonyms in order to find publishers, and points out that a number of male writers in the period — including Shelley, Thackeray, Ruskin, and Swinburne — chose women’s names to publish their work (251).
6. This “checking,” for Barthes, is one of the prototypical delays of the hermeneutic code; narratives pique our curiosity, provoking our desire for closure, when they offer a ‘suspended answer’ (the aphasis stoppage of the disclosure)” (75).

7. As Beaty puts it, “though ‘edited by’ would not necessarily have indicated the kind of novel being presented, what it might have been expected to indicate was a work by a well-known novelist, acknowledged by name, pseudonym, or the titles of that novelist’s other works” (12). Beaty generates a rich reading of the title page by considering texts just preceding or contemporary with Jane Eyre and trying to reconstruct the experience of the 1847 reader opening the book for the first time; he looks especially closely at the idea of the “autobiography” and the fictional editor. While his work is stimulating and useful, it largely overlooks the veiling that I argue Charlotte Brontë is enjoying here.

8. Miller, for example, points to political lessons implied by the end-oriented plot of Bleak House: “insofar it arouses a desire for expeditious, conclusive solutions but only represents a single agency capable of providing them, the novel subtly identifies the reader’s demand for closure with a general social need for the police, thus continuing … [Dickens’s] apologetics for the new forces of order” (Novel 93–94). Barthes reads the stratagems of suspense as “an organized set of stoppages” on the way to orderly closure. Plotted narrative is “linked to classical metaphysics” in that it begins with an incomplete subject who is completed and fulfilled by the emergence of the truth (76).

WORKS CITED


