

Charlotte Brontë's Domestic Refusal

By

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INTRODUCTION

Jane Eyre is consummately political and ideological. Charlotte Brontë's major novel alerts its reader to issues of power and injustice, defiance and authority, labor and bureaucracy, social turbulence and the prevailing status quo.¹ Jane's first-person narrative defies easy conclusions. Chris R. Vanden Bossche succinctly sums up the problem the novel's critical discourse faces when he poses the question: "What does *Jane Eyre* do?"² Critics have confronted this question from a number of theoretical and conceptual angles.

Discussions of gender have been a natural starting point. *Jane Eyre*'s treatment of gender dynamics, marriage, and female autonomy stands apart as the most vexing and complicated aspect of the novel. Is Jane a radical feminist hero or does the text render her submissive to the domestic sphere? Does the novel privilege one woman's body over another's? Is there such a thing as an egalitarian marriage? This thesis approaches questions about the novel's investments in gendered subjectivity through the lens of "refusal," a concept that has enriched discussions of social philosophy, but has so far been missing from literary criticism of domestic fiction. I contend that refusal operates as a vital force that Brontë's Jane, as character and narrator, embodies, witnesses, and practices. My refusal-centered analysis of *Jane Eyre* communes with three separate approaches that have emerged in regards to the novel's treatment of gender dynamics: the psychoanalytic, the social, and the post-colonial.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's groundbreaking work of feminist literary criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), champions a psychoanalytic approach to *Jane Eyre* and gender. Gilbert and Gubar argue that Bertha Mason serves as Jane's psychological double.

¹ The edition of *Jane Eyre* this paper consults is the following: Brontë, Charlotte and Stevie Davies (ed.), *Jane Eyre* (London: Penguin Classics, 2006). All further citations to this text will be parenthetical.

² See: Bossche, Chris R. Vanden, "What Did *Jane Eyre* Do? Ideology, Agency, Class, and the Novel," *Narrative* 13.1 (2005): 46-66.

Imprisoned in Rochester's attic, Bertha gives voice to Jane's suppressed rage. *The Madwoman in the Attic* also argues for a distinctly female literary tradition.³ Both Gilbert and Gubar's two claims have attracted critical heat. In *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, Toril Moi claims Gilbert and Gubar simplify an issue that eludes simplification. According to Moi, "Gilbert and Gubar's account homogenizes all female creative utterances into feminist self-expression: a strategy which singularly fails to account for the ways in which women can take up a masculine subject-position."⁴ Moi maintains that the patriarchal status quo can easily indoctrinate women writers. Women writers have no natural allegiance with one another, thus challenging Gilbert and Gubar's account of a distinctly female literary tradition. Other critics dismiss *The Madwoman in the Attic's* reliance on doubles as reductionist.⁵

Jane Eyre criticism that revolves around gender and sociality evaluates Jane's place within the social worlds she inhabits. What can young Jane's abject position at Gateshead and encounter with corporal punishment at Lowood School tell us? How does it figure that Jane repudiates John Reed, Mr. Brocklehurst, and St. John Rivers, only to become one with Rochester in the novel's final pages? One enduring feminist school of thought posits that Jane, in the words of Elaine Showalter, is the "heroine of fulfillment."⁶ Jane's voice is immediately present in every social environment she visits. She thus operates as a model of female empowerment, or, as Carla Kaplan posits, "feminist resistance and liberation."⁷ Other critics, such as Nancy Armstrong and Lorri G. Nandrea, recently argue that Jane's voice is constantly imposed upon by her social

³ See: Gilbert, Sandra M., and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000). All further citations to this text will be parenthetical.

⁴ See: Moi, Toril, *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory* (London: Routledge, 2002): 51-77.

⁵ Many argue that *The Madwoman in the Attic* conveniently elides differences between groups of women.

⁶ See: Showalter, Elaine, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 112.

⁷ Kaplan, Carla, "Girl Talk: *Jane Eyre* and the Romance of Women's Narration," *Novel* 30.1 (1996): 5-31.

worlds. Jane's narrative voice is less liberated and more fragmented, less a flourish of empowerment and more a wilting under the weight of a phallogocentric society.⁸ If Gilbert and Gubar first suggested that Jane and Bertha function as doubles, other critics have assessed what their positions in the text might mean. Gayatri Spivak's influential reading of *Jane Eyre* contends that the oppressed, Caribbean-born Bertha must perish so that the European governess Jane can secure her place atop the British middle-class.⁹ Following Spivak's lead, many post-colonial critics have revisited *Jane Eyre* to assess the credence Brontë's text gives to racist or imperialist gendered ideologies. These critics have also paid attention to the feminist criticism that has sprouted up around the novel. Why do we consider Bertha Mason Jane Eyre's "dark" double?¹⁰ Critical conversation about Jane and Bertha thus makes an outward turn toward the reader. How is the reader of *Jane Eyre* complicit in the text's political priorities? This present study also makes an outward turn toward the reader, although my approach toward gendered subjectivity in *Jane Eyre* diverges from the approaches of my predecessors. In this thesis, I argue that Charlotte Brontë's novel is shaped to a large and as yet unexplored extent by *refusal*. Refusal is a concept that carries a lot of weight in the realms of politics, philosophy, and the nineteenth-century masculine literary tradition, but is casually overlooked in domestic fiction, despite its importance to the genre. Refusal in *Jane Eyre* possesses many of the same traits as refusal in politics and the nineteenth-century masculine literary tradition, but also deviates from those conceptions of

⁸ See: Armstrong, Nancy, *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719-1900* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 130-139; Nandrea, Lorri G., "Desiring Difference: Sympathy and Sensibility in *Jane Eyre*," *Novel* 37.1-2 (2003): 112-34.

⁹ See: Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," *Critical Inquiry* 12.1 (1985): 243-261.

¹⁰ See: David, Deirdre, *Rule Britannia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995); McKee, Patricia, "Racial Strategies in *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 37 (2009): 67-83; Meyer, Susan L., "Colonialism and the Figurative Strategy of *Jane Eyre*," *Victorian Studies* 33.2 (1990): 247-268; Thomas, Sue, "The Tropical Extravagance of Bertha Mason," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 27.1 (1999): 1-17.

refusal that predate the novel's 1847 publication date. In thus helping us conceive of a strand of refusal that occurred prior to the traditional theorizations of refusal, my approach will be decidedly cross-gendered. My argument for *Jane Eyre's* domestic refusal challenges the unchecked masculine custody of the term and enriches ongoing discussions of refusal that continue into today.

NOTES ON REFUSAL

What we think about when we think about refusal is often quotidian. After all, there is a way that refusal seems to gravitate toward the ordinary. We can silence the blare of an alarm clock and roll back over in bed to sleep, thereby refusing the start of the day. When a friend or colleague does something to annoy us, we can employ the dreaded “silent treatment,” thus discharging an explicit refusal to communicate verbally. A common example of refusal is when one says “no” to the offer of a baked good or treat. In this way, the person who says “no” refuses the addition of unwanted calories to his diet. The moment one refuses seems to lack distinctive features. Refusal, we often think, is standard fare. Hitting the snooze button on an alarm clock or refusing a cookie, for instance, are customary acts.

But undergirding this sense of the standardness of refusal is a deep political praxis. Indeed, the political nature of refusal seems to be built into the word itself. The word refusal has its origins in the Old French verb *refuser* meaning “reject,” “disregard,” or “avoid.”¹¹ With this in mind, it is easy to see why the idea of refusal might be understood according to arrangements of power or politics. When one rejects something, she is accepting something else. Similarly, when one disregards something, he is turning his attention elsewhere. We can thus conceive of refusal as a system of privileging. When a person or group decides to privilege one thing, they are explicitly or tacitly not privileging something else.

The system of privileging around which refusal orients itself has a long history of co-optation in the realm of politics. France, to fall back on a famous example, was launched into revolutionary state when multiple groups refused to yield to the government’s monopoly of

¹¹ *Oxford English Dictionary*. (*Oxford English Dictionary*. Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). See in particular: “refuse, v.1.”

power.¹² Gandhi, credited as the “the architect of the Indian obsession with the hunger strike,”¹³ famously believed that refusing his body of food could achieve notice and success within the political arena. Within the last fifty years or so, the politics of refusal has persisted. Refusal was certainly present in the 1960s and 70s when students on college campuses staged demonstrations and burned draft cards to protest the United States involvement in the Vietnam War.¹⁴ Later, Vietnam War veterans engaged in the practice of refusal when they engaged in a 45-day hunger strike, ingesting only water in the hopes of launching a Congressional investigation into post-war veteran treatment and the effects of Agent Orange.¹⁵

In recent years, refusal has become even more commonplace, even more of a group effort.¹⁶

From the Occupy Wall Street protests with its base in Zuccotti Park to the Israeli social justice or

¹² This is also known as the *Tennis Court Oath*. Representatives of Third Estate formed a bloc against the nobility and clergy on June 17th, 1789, and, three days later found themselves locked out of their usual Versailles meeting place. Thinking this a challenge from the king, the Third Estate convened at a nearby indoor tennis court and vowed never to disband until France had established a formal constitution. See: Doyle, William, *The Oxford History of the French Revolution* (Second Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). The Tennis Court Oath is mentioned on pages 105-106.

¹³ Mahatma Gandhi’s (1869-1948) frequent hunger strikes comprised part of what Kathryn Tidrick calls his “solitary path.” See: Tidrick, Kathryn, *Gandhi: A Political and Spiritual Life* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 247-284.

¹⁴ In *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975*, Nancy Zaroulis and Gerald Sullivan recall a draft card-burning protest on July 29th, 1965 in New York. At this protest, “four hundred people from the Committee for Nonviolent Action and the Workshop in Nonviolence marched from City Hall Park to the army recruiting building at 39 Whitehall Street.” These protesters “carried signs” and “young men dropped draft cards, their own or others’, into the flames in a small tin point.” Such an act was largely performative, as the young men eligible for enrollment in the armed forces would be sent duplicate cards. See: Sullivan, Gerald and Nancy Zaroulis, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 51-56.

¹⁵ *The New York Times*. “3 VETERANS END HUNGER STRIKE.” Nytimes.com

<http://www.nytimes.com/1981/07/11/us/3-veterans-end-hunger-strike.html> (accessed 28 May 2017).

¹⁶ According to Zeynep Tufekci, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina who studies protests in the digital age, protests with large numbers are much easier to pull off than even ten or fifteen years ago. The Women’s March in January 2017, widely considered the largest protest in American history, took only a few weeks to plan and organize. As a point of contrast, the March on Washington, in 1963, took nearly a year to plan. The quarter-million people it drew was no small feat, but pales in comparison to the millions who mobilized for the Women’s March. Size, however, does not necessarily indicate that a movement is political successful long-term. The March on Washington was able to parlay their movement into legitimate political action, because they composed a set of concrete goals (mostly pertaining to jobs and education). The jury is still out on whether the Women’s March will be successful

“Tent” protests of Tel-Aviv, the zeitgeist of the 2010s seemed to focalize around refusal, or a general opposition to practices deemed inequitable, and to political and social structures deemed out-of-whack. With the recent celebrated resistance and pronounced unwillingness to go along with the presidential administration of Donald Trump, the political practice of refusal seems more necessary than ever.¹⁷

What is most striking about most of the examples in the preceding paragraphs is the extent to which they all emerge from ideological notions or moralistic premises. Refusal, in the instance of conscientious objection, seems the *right* thing to do. Likewise, social protests emanate from a sense of justice. Yet, refusal is often accompanied by a very real risk. What happens when the protesters evacuate the park? Does the hunger strike participant override the goals of refusal when he ingests vitamins and orange juice? Even though the practice of refusal is buoyed by a sense of ethical righteousness, all too often the existing state of affairs is ready to resume operation.¹⁸

in terms of implementing certain political gains, but the track record for movements in the digital age isn't great. See: Tufekci, Zeynep, “Does a Protest’s Size Matter?” *The New York Times*. Nytimes.com https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/opinion/does-a-protests-size-matter.html?_r=0 (accessed 27 May 2017) and Jones, William P., “The Forgotten Radical History of the March on Washington,” *Dissent* 60.2 (2013): 74-79.

¹⁷ In a recent interview with the *World Policy Journal*, activist and journalist Masha Gessen insists that one of the ways to refuse corrupt political action or widespread societal degradation, in general, is to maintain a sense of outrage. Gessen explains: “The way that society fights [naturalized corruption] is by maintaining a sense of outrage. Many of the catchphrases of the resistance have gotten exactly to that point, like when people keep saying, “This is not normal.” ... Stay outraged. By protesting, by maintaining healthy public debates in the media and other public spaces, we maintain it.” See: Gessen, Masha, “‘Stay Outraged’: A Conversation with Masha Gessen.” *World Policy Journal* 34.1 (2017): 55-59.

¹⁸ Sometimes, even the aims of movements predicated upon refusal help the status quo resume its operation. Anti-Vietnam War movements, according to *Who Spoke Up?*, were characterized by a frenetic “spontaneous, unorganized repugnance that people had toward the war.” This “repugnance” does not necessarily mean protestors wanted to establish a new political ideology or suggest new directions for the country. Rather, protestors had “a lot of motives” and quickly returned to their normal “private” lives in the post-war years. The more recent Occupy movement was also accompanied by a plethora of motives, but this diversity of intention was actually heralded by Occupy organizers as a positive thing. In the 2000s, rallying around a wide array of motives suggests egalitarianism and not aimlessness. Still, adopting such a protean stance did not work in Occupy’s favor. After a period of fervor, the movement

According to Herbert Marcuse, refusal is also limited because it is both simultaneously repulsed by and attracted to its governing social world. In Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*, he considers refusal according to the "rationality of negation."¹⁹ Refusal, in Marcuse's understanding of the term, "is the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is." Refusal's aim is to take "factual existence" and negate, contest and, — eventually—recreate it. But this is an optimistic picture of refusal's powers indeed! Marcuse raises an important problem to considerations of refusal as he contends that refusal is only ever a "tribute to the antagonistic society" from which it emerges. In this way, refusal is oftentimes "an illusion."²⁰ The act of refusal is thus confining. It traps the one who refuses between two poles—one of which asserts that refusal is but a mere stepping-stone to compliance, the other of which asserts refusal has already been preordained.

How, then, are we to proceed? Two possible options emerge. The first option would be to exercise a retreat from society, to willfully disengage in toto. This, in the long-term, does not seem particularly fruitful. The next option is to conceive of refusal in nontraditional senses.

splintered and the institutions that many railed against are still working according to the same methods. For information regarding the ideological failure of the anti-Vietnam movement see: Sullivan, Gerald and Nancy Zaroulis, *Who Spoke Up?: American Protest Against the War in Vietnam 1963-1975* (New York: Doubleday, 1984), 416-420. As of this writing, there has not been a substantive look into the failures of Occupy. See the following for a summation of its many goals:

¹⁹ *Negation* has a rich history in philosophy and logic. Essentially, negation is contingent and works to nullify a given proposition or formula and, in the process, makes its opposite true. In the English language, the word "not" produces negation, as do certain prefixes like un-, a-, in-, non-, and so forth. By considering refusal according to the "rationality of negation," Marcuse means that refusal will always be allied with its opposite. But what is the clear opposite of refusal? Consent? Resignation? For more on negation, see: Avron, Arnon, "Negation: Two Points of View," *What is Negation?* Gabbay, Dov and Heinrich Wansing, eds., (Berlin: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1999), 3–22; Atlas, J. D., "Negation, Ambiguity, and Presupposition," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 1.3 (1977): 321-336; Ayer, A.J., "Negation," *Journal of Philosophy* 49.1 (1952): 797-815; Berto, Francesco, "A Modality Called Negation," *Mind* (2014): 1-33; Marcos, J., "On Negation: Pure Local Rules," *Journal of Applied Logic* 3.1 (2005): 185-219; Mares, Edwin D., *Relevant Logic: A Philosophical Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP), 2004.

²⁰See: Marcuse, Herbert, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), 63.

Instead of locating refusal in the mass protest, we can turn to examples of refusal that occur on the individual level. Further, we can look at instances of refusal that are often glossed over. I propose that a focus on literary representations of refusal will help us accomplish this goal. By making this shift in focus, refusal stands a fighting chance. Instead of aiming for a complete overhaul of the system, as it were, a focus on individual instances of refusal allows us to see how refusal operates in small-scale, and, perhaps allows us to see how these small-scale refusals can be galvanized for larger purposes and contexts.

But deciding to focus on individual literary representations of refusal is attended by its own challenges. Even when discussing the literature of refusal—a genre classification that does not scream popularity—we find ourselves imposed upon by a privileged text and a privileged literary tradition. A call to focus on individual literary representations of refusal inevitably brings us to the fictional man, who, since his birth, in December 1853, has been lauded as the poster child of refusal politics. That man is none other than Bartleby, the ennui-imbued Wall St. scribe of Herman Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener.”²¹

Melville’s “Bartleby” conceptualizes refusal against a world regimented by bureaucracy and labor. In “Bartleby,” Melville writes from the perspective of an aging lawyer who serves as a “Master of Chancery.” At the outset of the story, the lawyer has two “copyists in [his] employment and a promising lad as an office-boy” (5). When the lawyer realizes that the work load has become too arduous for two copyists, he places an ad for “additional help” (9). One morning, the “pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn” Bartleby answers the lawyer’s ad, and is subsequently hired. At first, Bartleby takes to his job with expediency,

²¹ Melville’s “Bartleby” was first published in the November/December 1853 issue of *Putnam’s Monthly Magazine*. All references to “Bartleby” throughout this text will be taken from the following edition: Melville, Herman and Dan McCall (ed.), “Bartleby, the Scrivener” in *Melville’s Short Stories* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002): 3-34. All further references to this text will be parenthetical.

seeming to “gorge himself” on the lawyer’s documents. Bartleby’s initial enthusiasm, however, drastically plummets, and he refuses to complete any task the lawyer asks of him, instead responding to any entreaty with the phrase “I would prefer not to.” Bartleby’s insistence that he would “prefer not to” complete any office task goes on for some time, and so frustrates the lawyer that the lawyer eventually moves out of his Wall Street offices. The titular scrivener, of course, refuses to leave the vacated office. Bartleby’s refusals extend far beyond the office place; by story’s end, he refuses to eat, drink, or sleep. The story closes with Bartleby’s death by starvation in the Tombs of the law courts where he is being held prisoner.

Marxists and critics of capitalism regard “Bartleby” as a tale that exposes the alienating effects of labor. Bartleby’s work is mind-numbingly dull. He refuses life to avoid living solely for work.²² In recent years, Bartleby has stepped off the page and into the realm of politics. Participants in the Occupy protests, for instance, regarded Bartleby as a sort of folk hero. According to Russ Castronovo, the tale of Melville’s scrivener provided Occupy protestors with a “resonant analogy” for their own movement. Castronovo goes on: “[Bartleby] struck a chord with those who felt that the standard operating procedures of the millennial economy, which bestowed lavish compensation packages on poorly performing corporate officers while slashing workers’ benefits, had become not just inexcusable but unsalvageable.”²³ In *The Atlantic*, Jonathan D. Greenberg explains how Bartleby didn’t just become a figure of identification for Occupy protestors, but actually became a part of the protests themselves. Protestors emblazoned Bartleby’s phrase “I would prefer not to” on T-shirts and coffee mugs and posters. One such

²² See: Barnett, Louise K., “Bartleby as Alienated Worker,” *Studies in Short Fiction*, 11.4 (1974): 379-385; Kuebrich, David, “Melville’s Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in ‘Bartleby,’” *The New England Quarterly* 69.3 (1996): 381-405.

²³ See: Castronovo, Russ, “Occupy Bartleby,” *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 2.2 (2014): 253-272.

rendering depicted “a hamster nervously eyeing a treadmill, and above it the famous words, ‘I WOULD PREFER NOT TO’.”²⁴ As Occupy protestors would have it, Bartleby died to be memorialized on a T-shirt or poster.

Affixing Bartleby’s phrase of refusal to a T-shirt or poster board as a motto is problematic for a movement steeped in egalitarianism. Melville’s “Bartleby” isn’t egalitarian, but privileges a masculine paradigm of refusal. All the characters who populate Bartleby’s story (lawyers, writers, and police officers) are men. Further, “Bartleby” is only interested in the networks and hierarchies of labor, capitalism, and bureaucracy, and how they impact men. This preoccupation with a masculine paradigm of refusal also informs Franz Kafka’s “A Hunger Artist” (1922).²⁵ Kafka’s story revolves around a man (only referred to as “the hunger artist”) who performs great feats of fasting that sometimes reach up to forty days in length. The hunger artist travels from town to town and attracts sizable crowds, until one day he doesn’t. The world has changed and, spectators who are attracted to new forms of entertainment, are no longer interested in the spectacle of starvation. The hunger artist remains overlooked until he, like Bartleby before him, perishes of starvation. In the stories of Melville and Kafka, complete bodily abnegation is the ultimate form of martyrdom.

Kafka’s “Hunger Artist” especially operates as a grim harbinger of contemporary political discussion. At the time of this writing, political discussion still caters to the needs of men who feel despair over the putative loss of their perch in national and international pecking

²⁴ Greenberg notes how international Occupy protests adopted the figure of Bartleby. See: Greenberg, Jonathan D., “Occupy Wall Street’s Debt to Melville,” *The Atlantic*, April 30th, 2012.

²⁵ See: Kafka, Franz, *The Complete Stories* (Raleigh, North Carolina: Deckle Edge, 1996).

orders.²⁶ If Melville's *Bartleby* is a mascot for social protestors that refuse the system, Kafka's hunger artist is a mascot for men who feel the system has refused them.

Discussions about refusal in literature and in politics have been preoccupied with the masculine perspective of refusal. As a result, the masculine perspective of refusal has become naturalized and we have neglected to analyze the major ways female subjects first advanced the concept of refusal in the domestic realm. Before writers like Melville and Kafka took credit for literary representations of refusal, refusal belonged to domestic fiction. Who can forget when Fanny Price refuses Henry Crawford's "nonsense" proposal of marriage in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* by covering her eyes and intoning "no, no, no?"²⁷ Similarly, who doesn't want to stand up and cheer when Elizabeth Bennet rejects Mr. Collins's offer of marriage with a "perfectly serious" refusal?²⁸ Jane Austen is an author attuned to the stakes behind a woman's refusal. Although Austen imports complex gendered power dynamics into the instances of refusal she portrays in her fiction, refusal is not overtly political. For Austen, refusal has stronger affiliations to one's nuclear family, one's self-worth, and one's sense of morality.²⁹ The politics behind refusal are not important.

In contrast, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is wholly concerned with the politics behind refusal. *Jane Eyre*'s explicit concern with refusal's politics may result from the fact that Jane is not a prototypical Austen heroine. From the outset of the novel, Jane is abject, and each new

²⁶ Political discussions regarding the common man often adopt a national focus for what is an international trend.

²⁷ Austen, Jane and Marilyn Butler (ed.), *Mansfield Park* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 349.

²⁸ Austen, Jane and Pat Rogers (ed.), *Pride and Prejudice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 95.

²⁹ Fanny's rejection of Henry Crawford stems from an intuition that his moral character is flawed. Elizabeth refuses Mr. Collins because she doesn't consider him a proper match. She later refuses Darcy due to a perceived familial slight.

episode thrusts her into a more precarious position than the one that came before. Politics and power dynamics can't help but overtly shape Jane's experience in the world. In Charlotte Brontë's formulation, refusal shares a common syntax with the masculine paradigms Melville and Kafka advanced. Refusal is a felt experience of the body and concerns itself with how female subjects ought to occupy space in the social world. Charlotte Brontë's model of refusal diverges from Melville and Kafka's conceptions by introducing a different semantics of refusal. Refusal, in the domestic spaces of *Jane Eyre*, is a more active phenomenon than the refusal that characterizes the public spaces of Melville's "Bartleby" and Kafka's "Hunger Artist." Refusal isn't something that just happens. Instead, refusal is an active process with which the female subjects of *Jane Eyre* engage.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë poses the following fundamental question about refusal and the female body: how can female subjects wield refusal to exert bodily autonomy? This question does not necessarily have a complete answer. Instead, it points us to moments where refusal collides with Jane's experience of her body. In this paper, I argue that *Jane Eyre* proposes three unique portraits of female refusal. Each portrait occupies a different space within the social landscape of the novel. The first portrait, "Refusal as a bodily mode" takes place at Gateshead. The second portrait, "Refusal as social disruption" occurs at Lowood School. The third and final portrait "Refusal as the expression of doubt" occurs at Moor House and Ferndean. Although each portrait introduces different aspects of Brontëan refusal, they all share one common element: a concern with the female body.

REFUSAL AS A BODILY MODE

Starting in *Jane Eyre*'s Gateshead episodes, Charlotte Brontë draws out two aspects of refusal we see on full display in the works of Melville and Kafka, her male successors. First,

Brontë maintains that refusal is materially anchored in the body. Above all, Brontë's heroine, Jane, refuses the oppressive conditions administered by her Aunt and cousins Reed by comporting her body in an unexpected or unanticipated manner. As a young female subject living in a social world that seeks to script and construct behavior, Jane Eyre quickly learns that her body serves as her only method of retaliation. Second, Jane's adoption of various refusal tactics hinges around her outsider-status. Like Melville's *Bartleby* and Kafka's hunger artist, there is a sense that Brontë's Jane Eyre must become proficient in refusal to persist in a world that renders her estranged. The social world Brontë depicts in miniature at Gateshead seeks to reject, deny, and cast Jane aside. Enacting refusal becomes not just a choice, but a dire necessity.

Brontë's transfiguration of refusal from the realm of unfettered choice to the pressing space of utter necessity sets her novel apart from the fiction of her male literary descendants. Though *Bartleby* is lauded as the golden boy of refusal-politics, he only ever acts of his own volition. *Bartleby* does not *need* to forgo the obligations of his job and, eventually, life itself. We can similarly look upon the death of Kafka's hunger artist as purposeless. Aside from the hunger artist's desire to push the boundaries of bodily abnegation, this is a death devoid of rationale. Jane Eyre, however, can't help but refuse. Brontë elevates the inexorable nature of Jane's refusal to a dizzying pitch at Gateshead. In this way, Brontë also rejects the romanticized masculine ethos of refusal. This is not to say that the nineteenth-century masculine literary tradition of refusal is not refusal, purely conceived. Far from it! Instead, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* helps illuminate that the claims of alienation and forays into bodily abnegation, which transfix readers of *Bartleby* and *A Hunger Artist*, are dispensable when conceived in a male-dominated social economy. And, as the episodes at Gateshead first begin to show us, the choice-based nature of

male refusal is conspicuously absent from the domestic sphere.³⁰ Significantly, in the domestic sphere of *Jane Eyre*, we are thrust into a realm where refusal isn't a choice, but perhaps the only choice.

One might be tempted to read my classification of refusal "as a bodily mode" as an indication that there are multiple ways refusal expresses itself on the female body, multiple means by which refusal's objectives are brought to fruition. Although the notion of refusal as a bodily mode implies a certain kind of capaciousness, Jane expresses refusal on and through her body in a way that is understandably limited. On the one hand, Jane's refusal of certain Gatesheadian power dynamics is conscripted by the basic bodily differences that mark her as different from the Reeds. On the other hand, due to both her imposed outsider status and young age, Jane's participation in bodily refusal focalizes around instinct, impulse, and natural reflex. Although an expression of bodily refusal rooted in instinct might not seem sophisticated, Jane is presented with a paucity of options. Her means of response are few and far between. Second, refusal is foundational to Jane's trajectory of education. Especially in the novel's earlier chapters, we must accept that Jane will come to learn the ways of the world and her place within it. And as Jane makes her way through the world, she will also learn how best to harness the efficacy of refusal.³¹ Although *Jane Eyre* is not an epistolary novel, many critics have commented on its adaptation of several epistolary novel techniques.³² We are held rapt by Jane's moments of direct

³⁰ This isn't to suggest that refusal enacted in the domestic realm by a female subject isn't also a choice. I am instead attempting to point to how refusal for female subjects often presents itself as necessary, whereas for male subjects refusal lacks an equivalent sense of essential-ness.

³¹ That refusal does possess a certain efficacy will be an implicit claim of these pages. Efficacy does not always have to mean a complete upheaval of the system. Instead, efficacy can be a feeling of success. The third section of this paper's focus on *Jane Eyre*, "Refusal as the Expression of Doubt," will provide us with much to ponder regarding refusal's overall value.

³² In this way, *Jane Eyre* is most often aligned with Samuel Richardson's *Pamela*. Elizabeth Rigby famously writes in the *Quarterly Review* (1848): "For Jane Eyre is merely another Pamela, who, by the force of her character and the strength of her principles, is carried victoriously through great trials and

address and by the self-consciousness with which she fashions her narrative. These two stylistic measures possess consequential import during the opening moments of the novel, which detail Jane's travails at Gateshead. The vantage point that Jane imparts unto us, as readers, is the vantage point of an outsider, an orphan exiled even under the roof of her nearest relations. Jane puts it bluntly, as she remarks that her Aunt Reed conceived of her as "an uncongenial alien permanently intruded upon" the Reed's "own family group" (20). In many ways, such an affixed projection concedes that Jane is the prime figure of refusal. Refusal itself seems built into Aunt Reed's classification of Jane as an "uncongenial alien." Simply put, Jane is incompatible with the Reeds, and because of this, her very presence represents a permanent intrusion, a perpetual rupture in the domestic fabric of Gateshead. As an outsider looking in at the tight-knit Reed children and their mother, —a blood relation, but not a member of the immediate family group— refusal, then, first appears in the text as a matter of essential difference.

The notion of difference at Gateshead has two immediate interests in the body, the first of which relates to the body's physicality, the second of which relates to bodily comportment. Physically, Jane's difference from the Reed children manifests completely by way of her body's diminutive stature. As Jane herself records, she is "humbled by the consciousness" of her "physical inferiority to Eliza, John, and Georgiana Reed" (9). Jane's smallness, coupled with her feelings of debasement and lowliness due to that smallness, gesture toward the position she occupies within Gateshead. Even though, on one level, Jane represents a permanent rupture in the organization of Gateshead, on another level, her physical inferiority renders her powerless.

temptations from the man she loves." See: Rigby, Elizabeth, "Vanity Fair—and Jane Eyre," *Quarterly Review* 84:167 (December 1848): 153-185. Also consult: Han, John Sung, "A Lumber-Room of Her Own: Attics in *Pamela* and *Jane Eyre*," *Style: A Quarterly Journal of Aesthetics, Poetics, Stylistics, and Literary Criticism* 48.4 (2014): 529-542; Gettelman, Debra "'Making Out' *Jane Eyre*" *ELH* 74.3 (2007): 557-581.

Moreover, Brontë's text also challenges the idea that one's physical stature is wholly the product of biological inheritance. Brontë strikes a contrast between the diminutive Jane and the "large and stout" John Reed, who is equipped with "heavy limbs and large extremities" (12). Lest we think John's body is the product of nature, Jane is quick to point out that John's largeness is due to the fact that he "habitually" overeats and has a penchant for "cakes and sweetmeats" (12). In other words, John's stoutness represents indulgence.³³ Jane's smallness; suppression.

We can thus already begin to see how the organization of Gateshead hovers around issues related to the body that are both natural and arbitrary. That which is natural and that which is arbitrary is often opaque; the natural and arbitrary frequently collide and come together. Gateshead's social hierarchy works overtime to ensure that this collision is so. Brontë orders the space of Gateshead around this idea that the natural and the arbitrary commix. Jane must isolate herself in the window seat of the breakfast room because she does not have the requisite "sociable and child-like disposition," the particular "attractive and sprightly manner" (9) that Aunt Reed demands. Undergirding Jane's isolation is an implicit claim that Jane has already refused to comport her body according to the Gateshead ideal which is premised on lively and genial children. Yet one of Aunt Reed's entreaties challenges this latent reading. Aunt Reed informs Jane that she must take on a "lighter, franker" and "more *natural*" (my emphasis) temperament if she is to have any hope of "joining the group" of John, Eliza, and Georgianna Reed as they encircle their mother in the drawing room. Aunt Reed's order makes visible the

³³ John is the inverse of *Bartleby* and the hunger artist. He consumes too much and his body takes up too much space. Male corporeal size and stature, as depicted in the nineteenth-century literary tradition, exists on a wide spectrum. The body sizes of John Reed, *Bartleby*, and the hunger artist are all similar in the very fact that these men get to choose how big or small their bodies appear. No such choice seems available to Jane.

politics of Gateshead. The emphasis on acting natural is particularly telling. The word “natural” implies senses of the organic and the pure. In another sense, a call to the natural means a reinvestment in the biological and the physical. If Jane does listen to her aunt’s diktat, then, her adoption of anything natural will only lead to a more pronounced divide between her and her cousins. Jane is, after all, the descendent of a different familial line than the Reed cousins.³⁴ What is natural for her is not natural for them. In a way, Aunt Reed overplays her hand. Were she sincere about Jane comporting herself to any sort of paradigm, Aunt Reed would have done well to invite Jane to model her behavior according to the examples set by her own children. But no such example exists!³⁵ What is most important is that a certain hierarchy is upheld. The “uncongenial alien” temporarily disposed of and excluded.

In exclusion, Jane finds solace in the pages of Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds*. As she inhabits the space of the breakfast room’s window seat, “shrined in double retirement” after “having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close” (10), Jane pores over the pages of Bewick’s *History*. Jane indicates that she is “happy,” or happy in her own way (11) as she imagines the vast spaces of Norway, Siberia, and the Arctic Zone that Bewick lays out in his volume. Jane’s moment of reading in the window seat offers a powerful moment of recognition. Who hasn’t turned to a familiar book and experienced the pleasure of daily life in suspension?³⁶ Furthermore, Jane’s act of reading presents a moment in which a fantasy of complete bodily autonomy collides with a fantasy of rich visual transport. Jane’s happiness comes about her body is kept private,

³⁴ Jane to Uncle Reed (now deceased) via her mother (also deceased).

³⁵ Jane later characterizes John, Eliza, and Georgiana as selfish, spoiled, and vindictive children (18).

³⁶ Writing about Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*, Adela Pinch contends that reading possesses a kind of incantatory and transportive power, especially when that reader is encumbered by domestic travails. The risk to reading, however, is that one is always on the verge of interruption, thus breaking the “spell.” We especially see this with Jane here, as she awaits imminent interruption and assault. See: Pinch, Adela, “Lost in a Book: Jane Austen’s *Persuasion*,” *Studies in Romanticism* 32.1 (1993): 97-117.

behind a red curtain in a “hiding place” (11). So hidden, Jane can imagine she is precisely not *there*. Instead of languishing at Gateshead, she explores the vast spaces of the Arctic. At its most fundamental level, by reading Bewick’s *History*, Jane imagines an alternative present completely divorced from the harsh reality of her current situation. As she loses herself in the pages of her book, so too does she loosen the social conscription enacted upon her body.

The fantasy activated by reading Bewick’s *History* ultimately proves fleeting. John Reed soon barges in to the breakfast room searching for his cousin. As quasi-master of the house, John is emboldened by the feeling that he should have complete purview of the domestic sphere. This feeling of domestic oversight often dovetails with a feeling of female corporeal ownership. The overlap between John’s feeling of domestic oversight and his desire to locate female bodies boldly pronounces itself in John’s first extended speech in the text. Brontë records how, upon entering the breakfast room, and mistakenly thinking it empty, John asks, “Where the dickens is she?” He then calls for the aid of his sisters: “Lizzy? Georgy! Joan is not here: tell mamma she is run out into the rain- bad animal!” Notably, Brontë has John debase Jane to the status of a “bad animal.” Most significant is how John’s characterization of Jane as a “bad animal” is not aided in any way by the qualifying language of metaphor or simile that might serve to temper the effects of John’s debasement or suggest that Jane is not in fact a “bad animal” but merely momentarily conjured as such. Instead, the way that John’s classification of Jane as a “bad animal” directly abuts the en-dash suggests that, in Brontë’s formulation, Jane has genuinely been reduced to animal-status. In Brontë’s figuration of Gateshead, Jane thus can be read as all form, all body, an animal whose types of responses can be dichotomously classified as either good or “bad.”

Jane’s status at Gateshead as a pure bodily form is further underscored by how she interacts with John Reed, and how her corporeal responses operate to assuage or fight back against his

demands. The gulf between Jane's physical slightness and John Reed's grotesque physical excess is one of the means by which John enacts violence against Jane. John's brutality is relentless and Jane ably describes the unbending quality of his aggression when she explains to the reader that "he bullied and punished [me]; not two or three times in the week, nor once a twice in a day, but continually." (12) In this way, violence and corporeal assault become naturalized at Gateshead. They can no longer be considered isolated incidents plotted according to traditional temporal markers of weeks, days, and hours, but instead occur "continually," an essential aspect of life at Gateshead. For her part, Jane incorporates John's aggression into the very make-up of her body. "Every nerve" of Jane's fears her cousin and "every morsel of flesh" on her "bones" shrinks when he comes near her. The physical violence that John propagates against Jane knows no bounds and is never answerable to any kind of sophisticated response. Jane admits that she can never "appeal" John's "menaces" and "infections." Furthermore, the Gateshead servants never wish to "offend" and opt to overlook John's aggression, whereas Mrs. Read is "blind and deaf on the subject" (12). The traditional means which one might employ to refuse or reject inhumane treatment—verbal appeal and outside intervention, for instance—are wholly ineffective.

In this absence of other modes of response or opposition, Brontë illustrates how Jane can only refuse the tortuous treatment of her cousin by becoming that with which she is frequently aligned—an animal. Jane's adoption of animal sensibility is most visibly on display at the conclusion to the first chapter of the novel. John Reed has grabbed hold of Jane's copy of Bewick's *History of British Birds* and hurls it against her body. In response, Jane "instinctively" attempts to dodge the blow and issues a "cry of alarm," but she is too late. The book John threw fulfills its goal of harming Jane, causing her to fall over and hit her "head against the door." Jane

observes: “The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feeling succeeded.” What occurs next is a heightened physical scuffle during which two bodies entangle as each attempts to assert or maintain dominance over the other:

He ran headlong at me: I felt him grasp my hair and my shoulder: he had closed with a desperate thing. I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer. I felt a drop or two of blood from my head trickle down his neck, and was sensible of somewhat pungent suffering: these sensations for a short time predominated over fear, and I received him in a frantic sort. I don't very know well what I did with my hands, but he called me ‘Rat! Rat! And bellowed out loud... We were parted: I heard the words—‘ Dear! Dear! What a fury to fly at Master John!’ ‘Did every anybody see such a picture of passion!’ Then Mrs. Reed subjoined: ‘Take her away to the red-room, and lock her in there.’ Four hands were immediately laid upon me, and I was borne upstairs (14).

It would be easy to read this passage as a straightforward indictment of male violence. Jane is thrust into a precarious position as John Reed runs at her “headlong” and seizes her “hair” and her “shoulder.” The desperation with which he clamors after Jane is appropriately matched by his designation as a “tyrant” or “murderer” Here, as before, Brontë does not insert the formal tools of metaphor or simile into Jane’s description of the event. John Reed really is a tyrant. John Reed really has the potential to become a murderer. The murderous tendencies with which John Reed engages especially pronounce themselves in the next detail of the scuffle when “a drop or two of blood” from Jane’s head dribbles “down [John’s] neck.” Lest we doubted before, Brontë makes it apparent that what is at stake is not mere child’s play, but rather a very adult form of physical brutality and the infliction of bodily abuse. Jane is in harm’s way. The possibility of her

being seriously injured—or worse—is very real. But the passage is also striking for the turn it makes from a standard imposition of violence to the enactment of rebellion against that violence. “Sensible of a pungent suffering,” Jane opts to refuse via the body, and thus receives John “in a frantic sort.” Jane’s corporeal resistance to John’s encroachment is decidedly ambiguous; we don’t quite know what it is she does with her body. Whatever the case, Jane does fight back in a way that leads to John calling her “Rat! Rat! Rat!” and screaming perhaps in pain. Jane’s method of response—her bodily retaliation—is largely successful. Her body is “parted” from John’s and his from hers. In the face of extreme violence, Jane’s bodily refusal, her unwillingness to consent to or simply endure the conditions of mistreatment, holds a tremendous efficacy. At this moment, Brontë contends that bodily refusal has both the power to disrupt abuse and the power to bring about its cessation.

Brontëan refusal first appears as a phenomenon given voice by and through the body. The bodily expression of refusal is nothing new. *Bartleby*, Kafka’s hunger artist, and mass political protests all suffice as examples where the body primarily expresses refusal.³⁷ But how the body conveys refusal is unique to *Jane Eyre*. Specifically, when Jane fights back against John, there is a sense that the body overrides standard cognition. As Jane receives her cousin in a “frantic sort,” she knows not what her body is doing. It is almost as if when pushed to the precipice of intense bodily anguish, Jane’s body finally says “enough!” Jane’s body acts of its own volition before her mind has the chance to fully catch up.

This type of refusal where the body precedes the mind is entirely distinct from the types of refusal that are perhaps more familiar to us. *Bartleby*, for instance, makes up his mind to refuse and, after his mind is made up, his body follows suit. Kafka depicts a similar occurrence

³⁷ In the case of political protests, disparate individual bodies converge to function as a singular body.

in *A Hunger Artist*. The hunger artist decides he will refuse food and, after making this decision, his body goes without. We can also see how the prototypical type of refusal, where the mind comes before the body, is galvanized by political protests and social movements. The Israeli social justice protests of 2011, to cite one example, emerged after Israeli citizens noticed certain economic disparities felt by younger generations in comparison to the older generations that came before them. As such, hundreds of thousands encamped in the center of Tel Aviv and rallied around a chant that declared “the people demand social justice!”³⁸ According to these three examples, then, refusal is predicated on deliberate choice. Consciousness, or a call to consciousness, is refusal’s agent.³⁹

In the text of *Jane Eyre*, refusal is grounded on the body and bodily response operates as refusal’s agent. Furthermore, as the body refuses, consciousness is forced to take a back seat. Jane underscores the primacy of her bodily response to John’s abuse over her perception most notably by admitting a general lack of knowledge. Again, she does not know how she wields her body to refuse John. She only hears him refer to her as a “rat” and scream “out loud.” Consciousness only reenters the picture at the moment of opprobrium. Mrs. Reed’s voice distinctly emerges to relay Jane’s punishment. Jane is “borne upstairs” to the red-room by “four hands.” Consciousness thus also resurges when one loses complete control of her body.

³⁸ The organizers of the Israeli social justice protests would probably balk at my classification of their movement as “political,” as they staunchly insisted the protests were *apolitical*. Still, it is my contention that social movements by their very nature are undergirded by a certain kind of politics. For more on the Israeli social justice protests see: Rosenhek, Zeev, and Michael Shalev, “The Political Economy of Israel’s ‘Social Justice’ Protests: A Class and Generational Analysis,” *Contemporary Social Science* 9.1 (2014): 31-48; Gordon, Uri, “Israel’s ‘Tent Protests’: The Chilling Effect of Nationalism,” *Social Movement Studies* 11.3-4 (2012): 349-355.

³⁹ Refusal’s call to consciousness is perhaps why *Bartleby* captivates so many philosophers and critics. By refusing, *Bartleby* elevates himself to a higher level of consciousness. He escapes the system.

Loss of bodily control only comes about due to the addition of more bodies. Even though Jane fights back and effectively wins in a fight against her cousin John, her body is easily carried upstairs to the red-room when “four hands” arrive on the scene. Because John’s body is so easily overpowered by Jane’s, more bodies must be brought out to combat the disorder that Jane’s refusal has wrought. This body differential replicates itself in instances of refusal that appear in society writ large. In states experiencing swells of dissent, for example, excessive numbers of police and military officers are employed to mitigate the public displays of discord.⁴⁰ Force is one of the primary ways by which discord is stamped out. We can see how the passive and ambiguous nature of Jane’s language mimics the widespread politics of force. “Four hands” take Jane away. We do not yet know that those hands belong to Bessie and Miss Abbott.⁴¹ In this way, we are lifted from the domestic sphere and inserted into the political sphere. Or, better yet, the domestic sphere and political sphere are not discrete realms, but rather intermingle.

Jane Eyre’s five-part progression, featuring stops at Gateshead, Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, and finally Ferndean, carries with it the promise of female education. The novel is premised on the tacit sense that, by the final page, our heroine will have become acquainted with the world and attune to her place within it. Traditional markers of female education during the Victorian-era include a thorough knowledge of social norms and mores, familiarity with household tasks, and a deep learning of scripture. *Jane Eyre* does not reinvent the wheel when it comes to the aims of education, but there is a way that Charlotte Brontë expands the reach of education to include refusal. That is, in *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s ability to refuse becomes just as

⁴⁰ This is also why I suspect, in protests or uprisings, implements like batons or tear gas are employed. The intent is to bring the body under control or push it toward its limit. For a discussion of police tactics see: Wiatrowski, Michael D., and Jack A. Goldstone, “The Ballot and the Badge: Democratic Policing,” *Journal of Democracy* 21.2 (2010): 79-92.

⁴¹We find this out at the start of the next chapter.

important to her education as, say, an awareness of social norms and mores.⁴² We first observe the centrality of refusal to Jane's education at Gateshead. As Bessie and Miss Abbott carry Jane off to the red-room, Jane's body does not suddenly become inert. Instead, Jane indicates that she "resisted all the way." Overt bodily resistance, Jane further admits, is a "new thing" for her (15). That Jane continues to refuse bodily imposition even as Bessie and Miss Abbott restrain her reveals two fundamental features of refusal as a bodily mode. First, refusal as expressed through the body defines itself by its organic and inexorable nature. That is, there is the sense that once the body is engaged in refusal or otherwise impeded upon, it must respond by lashing out. Second, once the body learns refusal, its inclination will always be to refuse. The body's predisposition toward refusal broadcasts itself when Bessie and Miss Abbott attempt to force Jane to sit in a stool. Jane relates that, when thrust into the stool, her "impulse was to rise from it like a spring" (15). Here, the idea of a "spring," serves as a fitting symbolic representation of bodily refusal. According to classical theories of physics, as a device, a spring is known for storing potential energy. In addition, tension and elasticity characterize springs. As a result, when imposed upon, springs react proportionately in turn. By aligning her body's response with a "spring," then, Jane only further underscores the naturally reactive quality of bodily refusal itself. Like a spring, the body will always react in a way that is directly proportionate to the pressure exerted upon it.

But bodily refusal is duly limited. Even though the body's instinct is to reject imposition at any cost, the bodily expression of refusal only has a nominal, short-sighted efficacy. Even though Jane subverts John's abuse and counters Miss Abbott and Bessie's policing, the bodily

⁴² By underlining refusal's importance to the trajectory of Jane's education, I am challenging readings of the novel that maintain Jane's education only consists of straightforwardly adopting domestic ideology. See: Green, Laura Morgan, *Educating Women: Cultural Conflict and Victorian Literature* (Athens: Ohio University Press): 2001.

refusal upon which she relies can only take her so far. When Jane rises from the stool “like a spring,” for instance, Bessie outmaneuvers her by threatening to impose “bonds” fashioned with Miss Abbott’s garters (15). Threatened, Jane agrees to sit still in the stool. When Bessie ascertains that Jane will in fact sit still, she loosens her “hold” of her (16). Jane has pacified herself, if not completely complying with the conditions of her captivity, then at least modifying them to suit the demands of her captors. In so doing, Jane reveals the limit to bodily refusal. For Jane, and for Charlotte Brontë, bodily refusal has malleable boundaries over which one cannot trespass.⁴³ When confronted by such a boundary, the apprehended subject will often pledge to bring her body back under control, with control here connoting socially accepted or desired bodily conduct. The point at which one realizes the limit to bodily modes of refusal is key, because it enacts the switch from adamant rebuttal to complete acquiescence.⁴⁴

That Jane should acquiesce under imposed pressure will help us deal with an elephant in the text (or elephant in the red-room, as it were) that we have so far avoided. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in their influential *Madwoman in the Attic*, contend that Jane’s outburst against John Reed and subsequent “fit” in the red-room represent moments where Jane’s repressed rage flashes forth. Gilbert and Gubar most famously align Jane with her ostensible alter ego, Bertha. Both women, in Gilbert and Gubar’s conception, are all rage and passionate fury. But such a rich

⁴³ Conjoining the word “malleable” with something so putatively rigid and defined as a “boundary” might seem awkward, but still I insist on the pairing. In Charlotte Brontë’s articulation, the bodily expression of refusal does seem to have malleable boundaries. Miss Abbott’s garters might prove to be too imposing a restraint for Jane to overcome, but someone like John Reed would probably have no trouble escaping such bonds. The boundaries of bodily refusal are thus predicated on not only sheer body size, but also aspects of gender, social class, and temperament, for instance.

⁴⁴ *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary* is a recent collection of writings that assess torture as a practice. Chapter 6, in particular, examines the effectiveness of torture, and concludes that, more often than not, when a body is pushed to its limit, it will consent to anything. A similar dynamic is at play here. Jane supposes a limit and then agrees to control her body. See: Schulz, William F (editor), *The Phenomenon of Torture: Readings and Commentary* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press): 2007.

study risks overlooking the moments where Jane responds rationally to the situations in which she finds herself. When Bessie attempts to bind Jane with garters, for instance, Jane pledges to sit still. Further, we can regard the fury that Jane does display as not entirely unwarranted. Jane's retaliation against John Reed, for example, is entirely warranted. He strikes her first. She only weaponizes her body against him to end the abuse he has inflicted.

I see a clear difference between "rage" and my conception of refusal. Rage often implies violent anger and, more specifically, instances of violent anger. For many, then, Jane's retaliation against John Reed is an apt depiction of rage. By receiving John Reed in a "frantic sort," Jane is rage personified. Yet rage often also implies a sort of aimlessness. If we hear phrases like, "oh, he's in a rage," or "she's full of rage," we tend to avoid those referents at all costs. The object of a person's rage quite often does nothing to warrant aggression. Even if one does not provoke rage, one can easily end up on its receiving end. In contrast, refusal always occurs in direct response to something or someone. When one refuses, she is responding to the demands something or someone imposes. Jane's retaliation against John Reed represents refusal because she is responding to his infliction of abuse. In drawing out the distinction between rage and refusal, I am not attempting to suggest that they are too distinct to ever overlap. Instead, rage often becomes an agent of refusal. Jane's bodily refusal of John Reed, for instance, discharges rage for the specific purpose of ensuring John will no longer assault her.

Jane's time in the red-room is crucial to her development not because it provides her with the space to allow her repressed energies to flow freely, but because it provides her with the space to question how best to uplift herself from her abject position. In other words, in the red-room Jane is searching for the best way to exercise refusal. Held prisoner in a room isolated, "silent," and "seldom entered" (17), Jane grapples with a series of questions about her position at

Gateshead, wondering, “Why was I always suffering?, always browbeaten, always accused, for ever condemned? Why could I never please? Why was it useless to try and win anyone’s favour” (18)? Jane’s ontological questions are especially perplexing, because they gesture toward an existence at Gateshead that solely belongs to her. Even though John is sadistic, Georgianna “spoiled,” and Eliza is “headstrong and selfish” (18), Jane is the only one ever persecuted. The frequency with which Jane utters the adverb “always” in each of her questions implies that her abjectness at Gateshead possesses a sort-of permanence. The organization of Gateshead defies justice.

Gateshead’s dearth of justice is beyond comprehension for a girl of Jane’s age. Somewhat paradoxically, however, the inscrutability of Gateshead’s social organization reveals the incomprehensible nature of social structures themselves. Social groups and hierarchies defy productive meaning. In light of this, sometimes the only option one has is to fulfill a previously prescribed role. When Jane is released from the red-room, her conception of her body as a tool of refusal has not been eradicated. Instead, more audaciously than before, she uses her body in a way that serves to protest the Gatesheadian social order. When John tries to chastise Jane, she recalls her previous moment of retaliation and levels at his “prominent” nose “as hard a blow” as her “knuckles could inflict” (33). For this act, Jane is not punished as before. Instead, after having previously “drawn a more marked line of separation” between Jane and the Reed children, and forcing Jane to sleep, eat, and play by herself, Aunt Reed tells John simply not to go “near” his cousin (34). Reorganization of the social order is still out of reach for Jane, and we could insist that bodily refusal’s inability to reorder certain social dynamics is another one of its failings. But Mrs. Reed’s drawn “line of separation” between Jane and her children works two ways. Although Jane’s movement is limited and impeded by orders to sleep, eat, and play alone,

so too are the John, Eliza, and Georgianna's. While Jane is in the nursery room, for instance, the Reed children must stay in the drawing room (33). Notwithstanding the fact that Jane's quip "[The Reed children] are not fit to associate with me" (34) incurs Aunt Reed's ire, Jane is actually not too far off in her assessment. Now that Jane is not afraid to use her body for purposes of intense, retaliatory physical contact, none of the Reed children *are* fit⁴⁵ to associate with Jane.

I began here with the way refusal is written on the body, the way it is signaled by bodily difference and at first expressed instinctually to avert encroachment. We soon found ourselves turning toward the idea of education, for bodily refusal, once learned, has a sort of generative momentum. It invites replication and begs to be repeated. Bodily refusal's urge to replicate got us and the conditions under which replication occurs got us thinking about the limits of bodily refusal and why one might acquiesce to outside pressures. In the preceding pages, I have tried to set forth two views. First, refusal is allied with the body. Second, refusal expressed only through and by the body is not enough to reorganize the social order. The best we can hope for is a stalemate, which is precisely what we get as we end our time at Gateshead. The Reed children occupy certain spaces of the house and Jane occupies others. Reorganizing one's social communities is contingent upon operating from a position of power. We will see exactly how this works in the sections to come.

REFUSAL AS SOCIAL DISRUPTION

⁴⁵ Jane's retort that the Reed children "are not fit to associate" with her comes on the heels of Mrs. Reed's advice to steer clear of Jane. After Jane punches John Reed in the face, Mrs. Reed tells her son: "I told you not to go near her; she is not worthy of notice. I do not choose that either you or your sisters should associate with her" (34). Jane's statement that follows quite obviously means that her cousins are not proper associations. There is a way, though, given Jane's bodily inhibition in terms of striking back in the face of chastisement, that the word *fit* here evokes meanings of robustness and vigor. According to the *OED*, one of the earliest known appearances of the word "fit" referred to opponents of equal power. John, Eliza, and Georgianna can't compare to Jane in terms of bodily power. Hence, they are "unfit."

Refusal communicated through the body isn't the alpha and omega of refusal politics. Instead, as I maintained in the previous section, bodily refusal is always limited, because bodies can be contained and coerced. At some point, all bodies must consent to conditions that may be less than desirable. That the individual body must consent at some point to undesirable conditions poses two problems for a phenomenon like refusal. First, refusal's latent drive always orients toward social reorganization. Second, refusal does not aspire to complacency or stasis. Maurice Blanchot writes of refusal's aspirational quality in the following way: "... refusal is necessary. There is a reason which we no longer accept, there is an appearance of wisdom which horrifies us, there is a plea for agreement and conciliation which we will no longer heed. A break has occurred. We have been reduced to that frankness which no longer tolerates complicity."⁴⁶ Blanchot's conception of refusal as a "break" diverges from Marcuse's consideration of refusal according to the terms of negation. From Blanchot's vantage point, refusal does not mean rejecting one thing in favor of another. Instead, refusal actively *disrupts*.

Blanchot's characterization of refusal as a "break" from routine is an idea that has possessed tremendous sway in the realm of politics. Occupy was a break. So were the Israeli social justice protests. Hunger strikes, such as the 1981 Irish Hunger Strike, represent a breaking away from the everyday routine on the body. Melville's "Bartleby" still possesses an incantatory power for its devotees because of the extent to which Bartleby represents a break in the regulated and ritualized routines of Wall Street.

At Gateshead, Jane did disrupt the establish household order, but things largely remained the same. As Jane moves to Lowood School, she learns that legitimate social disruption is often a

⁴⁶ Blanchot wrote this description of refusal in *Le 14 Juillet*, a journal which functioned in part as a site of resistance against Charles de Gaulle, who had seized power in Paris in 1958. Blanchot's description of refusal appears in an essay originally entitled, "Le Refus," in *Le 14 Juillet*, no.2, October 1958.

covert practice. Additionally, using refusal to effect change within social hierarchies often requires the assistance of multiple people. In banding together with other Lowood women to fight against the rigid religious administration, Jane employs a similar framework to the mass protest, with its basic conceit of several individual bodies converging to form a more effective group body.

Charlotte Brontë depicts Lowood as a place of sameness and utter homogeneity. The outcast- and orphan-girls who populate Lowood are referred to by last name only, an action that rids them of any uniqueness or special distinction. Calls for “silence!” and “order!” are commonplace and “discipline” prevails (56), meaning regulation is strictly enforced. The Lowood routine is unremarkable. Days commence and conclude in similar fashion, and rules and rituals abound. The effect of the place ascetic. Whereas Gateshead thrives on naturalized violence, Lowood thrives on naturalized Spartan order.

Lowood’s Spartan order repeatedly pronounces itself on the bodies of its female students. Jane observes how “eighty girls sat motionless and erect” on benches. All eighty girls are outfitted in “costumes” that enforce uniformity— “brown dresses,” “woollen stockings,” “country-made shoes” (56). Lowood’s political power thus stems from its ability to put female bodies in designated areas and its ability to make those female bodies appear the same. The bounded space of Lowood refuses its young, female inhabitants any political power.

Critics often consider Lowood an institutional extension of Gateshead, because Lowood enforces subsistence and denies its young inhabitants any real power.⁴⁷ I would suggest that Jane does obtain social and political power at Lowood in two oblique ways. First, Miss Temple, the head administrator of Lowood, positions herself as an apt model of refusal for Jane. In turn, Miss

⁴⁷ See: Tracy Brian, “Stitching a Life, Telling a Story: Sewing in Jane Eyre,” *Women’s Writing* 21.4, 2014, 464-487.

Temple provides Jane with a new refusal template. Second, Lowood's hierarchies and social distinctions are more permeable than the rigid and imposed distinctions of Gateshead. Jane exploits Lowood's malleable social distinctions and eventually climbs the social ladder of this all-female community. Charlotte Brontë indicates that social mobility is possible when the politics of refusal and the atmosphere of education converge.

In Miss Temple, Charlotte Brontë brings together refusal's grounding in the body and rigid institutional decrees. Jane's early days at Lowood suggest that large social institutions overpower the needs of individual bodies. Food is rationed economically and Lowood's paltry food accommodations regularly induce Jane to the point of ravenousness (55). When Miss Temple learns of the "burnt porridge" the Lowood students were provided one day for breakfast, she mollifies the situation by remarking, "You all had this morning a breakfast which you could not eat; you must be hungry. I have ordered that a lunch of bread and cheese shall be served to all" (57). Miss Temple's order of a "bread and cheese" lunch is an overt political act. As she orders bread and cheese for her pupils, Miss Temple defies the orders of the institution that employs her. Miss Temple's decision to disrupt the rhythms of Lowood is met by the other instructors with a look of "surprise," so accustomed are they to endorsing Lowood's policies of self-denial and self-sacrifice. Miss Temple's address pits an individual against a larger structure or organization. Just as Jane abutted a familial unit to which she never comfortably belonged, so too will Miss Temple square off against organized religion in the form of Mr. Brocklehurst, who hypocritically makes privation the dominant tenet of his "evangelical, charitable establishment" (76). By ordering the lunch of bread and cheese for the famished Lowood students, then, Miss Temple exercises an explicit refusal. She refuses to abide by Brocklehurst's sanctioned practice of deliberate destitution. Miss Temple's refusal of established institutional practice represents a

major moment of social rupture. Unlike Jane at Gateshead, Miss Temple occupies a position of power and influence at Lowood. Temple's statement to the other teachers "it is to be done on my responsibility" (57) carries with it portent political efficacy. Through her order of lunch for the destitute Lowood students, Miss Temple neutralizes the effects of a corrupt system, but also presents herself as a representative of a decidedly *feminine* refusal.⁴⁸

Miss Temple stands out as a representative of feminine refusal, but even she cannot avert opposition. During one of Brocklehurst's routine inspections of Lowood, he questions Miss Temple's oversight of the school. In particular, Brocklehurst is appalled that Miss Temple allows one student to wear her hair curly. Miss Temple insists that the student in questions hair "curls naturally." Brocklehurst then sneers, "Naturally! Yes, but we are not to conform to nature. I wish these girls to be the children of Grace: and why that abundance?" (76). Brocklehurst's emphasis on not conforming to nature harkens back to Aunt Reed's decree at Gateshead when she impels Jane to adopt a more natural air. In oppressive social hierarchies, the word *natural* is a politically-charged adverb. Aunt Reed used it to make bodily distinctions clear. Here, Brocklehurst uses it to implement a sense of bodily sameness. Brocklehurst's next decree exposes his desire for bodily sameness: "I have again and again intimated that I desire the hair to be arranged closely, modestly, plainly." Even though Brocklehurst injects his sentences with an evangelical and religious vocabulary, he is most concerned with enforcing restrictions on the female body. In Brocklehurst's mind, female bodies are meant to be *arranged*, and not autonomous.

Despite Miss Temple's earlier engagement with refusal, she seems utterly submissive to Brocklehurst and his cadre. When Brocklehurst addresses Miss Temple, she gazes "straight"

⁴⁸ Temple refuses in the enclosed, quasi-domestic space of Lowood School. She does not refuse hierarchies and social structures in the masculine, public way that Bartleby does, for instance.

ahead and her face assumes the “coldness and fixity” of marble. Even her brow settles “into petrified severity” (75). However, stillness is not equivalent to submissiveness and a lack of distinguishable response is sometimes the most potent form of refusal. In one episode of “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Bartleby mortifies the aging lawyer by engaging in a passive nonresponse. The lawyer writes: “[Bartleby] did not look at me while I spoke, but kept his glance fixed upon my bust of Cicero, which as I then sat, was directly behind me, some six inches above my head... his countenance remained immovable” (19-20). Standing in a fixed position, and keeping one’s gaze steady and distant, emphasizes refusal’s confounding and mystifying powers. The lawyer in “Bartleby” and Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre* cannot read the passive subjects that stand before them. Bartleby and Miss Temple elude comprehension, and thus refuse to be controlled by their superiors.

Charlotte Brontë’s reader *can* read Miss Temple, and behind her marble face and unflinching gaze, moments of refusal rise to the fore. Miss Temple undermines Brocklehurst without him discerning the subterfuge. When Brocklehurst has his back turned, for instance, Miss Temple uses her handkerchief to conceal a sly “involuntary smile” (76). Temple’s smile embodies refusal’s socially disruptive momentum. First, it is “involuntary,” occurring without conscious effort. Second, Miss Temple’s breaks out into a smile at a moment when smiling is socially unacceptable. Even a sly, involuntary smile carries with it the momentum of refusal.

Miss Temple also subverts Brocklehurst in more daring ways that reveal the reach of her power and influence. After Brocklehurst publicly shames Jane for dropping her slate, hurls insults at her that harken back to her Gateshead days, and orders Jane stand silently on a stool for the “remainder of the day,” masculine authoritarianism has for the moment won the day. If Brocklehurst enforces authoritarianism, Miss Temple lets justice reign. As Jane walks up to her

punishment stool, Miss Temple covertly whispers: “Don’t be afraid, Jane, I saw it was an accident; you shall not be punished” (78). Miss Temple’s whisper gestures toward what I would suggest is the aim of refusal. Refusal doesn’t merely oppose, but rather strives to determine alternative visions of social experience.

Producing alternative visions of social experience demands a group effort. As we learned at Gateshead, one can’t do it alone. Margaret Mead’s quote “never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world” confirms social reorganization’s preference for collaboration. Charlotte Brontë portrays group-based social reorganization at Lowood when Jane, Miss Temple, and Jane’s schoolmate, Helen Burns, form a coalition. Following Brocklehurst’s unjust punishment of Jane, Miss Temple invites Jane and Helen into her “cheerful” apartment. In this space that is separate from the rest of the institute both in location and ambiance, Miss Temple allows Jane to speak out in her “own defense” against Brocklehurst’s accusations. Jane affirms her innocence as she speaks “moderately” in a “coherent” manner (84). In Miss Temple’s office, Jane refuses to succumb to flights of emotion or fancy. “Restrained and simplified,” Jane writes, “[my testimony] sounded more credible.” Needless to say, Miss Temple clears Jane’s name. She rewards Jane with a “kiss” and the three women enjoy tea and bread together. The scene in Miss Temple’s office gives birth to what Gayatri Spivak refers to as a dissident “counter-family” in the form of Helen, Jane, and Miss Temple. Moreover, the three women represent a social group steeped in refusal. The dominant authoritarian environment of Lowood would not approve of Miss Temple’s after-hours interaction with Jane and Helen. Miss Temple’s invitation to Jane and Helen and the justice she extends toward Jane directly challenges the prevailing Lowoodian culture of restriction and antipathy. But the three women move a few steps beyond refusal, too. Instead of just forgoing

Lowood's corruption, Miss Temple, Jane, and Helen all construct a new social space characterized by rhetoric, discernment, and affection.⁴⁹ Social disruption at last results in harmony.

REFUSAL AS THE EXPRESSION OF DOUBT

No. I won't. I can't. Refusal is a verbal act. In the genre of domestic fiction, refusal's verbal pyrotechnics flash forth. When Elizabeth Bennet refuses Mr. Darcy's first offer of marriage in *Pride and Prejudice*, she spurns him by culling from a lexicon of negation. Elizabeth avows, "... I cannot—I have never desired your good opinion, and you have bestowed it most unwillingly" (156). Elizabeth's negations ("cannot," "never," "un-" as in "unwilling" jolt Darcy; he is caught by "surprise" and becomes "pale with anger" (156). Before Elizabeth spurned him, Darcy was assured she would readily accept his offer. Now, doubt creeps in. Did Darcy really think Elizabeth would marry him?

Elizabeth's example of refusal embodies the final quality of refusal I will examine in this paper. In verbal contexts, refusal provokes uncertainty. Refusal most often calls into question the truth or reality of a state of affairs when it negates, contradicts, or denies. When refusal expresses doubt, it forces the one who has been refused to look introspectively. A refused subject questions prior assumptions about language, truth, and reality itself. If a person who refuses incites doubt, the recipient of refusal begins to dismantle assumptions about the social world.

Elizabeth's refusal of Darcy alerts us to the role negation plays in the Austenian marriage refusal, but Charlotte Brontë employs refusal to a different end in *Jane Eyre*. In *Jane Eyre*,

⁴⁹ Miss Temple's name is rife with association. Her apartment becomes a literal "temple," or place of refuge for Jane and Helen. The word *temple* is also religiously suggestive. If Melville's "Bartleby" and Kafka's "Hunger Artist" portray fasting as a sort of masculine, religious act, Miss Temple's name implies that religion adopts a restorative quality in *Jane Eyre*. In the bible, Jesus Christ famously sought refuge with his father, God, at the temple.

Brontë moves beyond the traditional negation/affirmation binary. When Jane refuses Rochester, she does not discharge the same negative terms Elizabeth Bennet did when refusing Darcy. Instead, Jane employs the language of positivism to break apart her would-be union with Rochester. In this substitution of positive language for negative language, Jane places herself outside of language's formal structure.

Jane must place herself outside of the formal structure of language, because Rochester would like nothing more than to contain and entrap her. After finding out about Bertha Mason, Jane wants to break things off with Rochester. Rochester, on the other hand, wants nothing more than to maintain his relationship with Jane, to maintain the Thornfield status quo. His apology to Jane, which in part avers "I have for the first time found what I truly love-I have found you" (363) reinforces his sense of ownership over Jane and her body. In those two sentence fragments alone, the self-referential pronoun "I" appears three times. Jane only appears once, in the second person singular. For Rochester, finding does not indicate discovery, but rather discovery and entrapment.

At Thornfield, Brontë claims that powerful men threaten and reduce female bodies. The men who populated Gateshead and Lowood posed considerable threats to female bodies as well, but Charlotte Brontë explicitly exposes the threat men pose to female subjects in her attention to Rochester and Jane's break-up. Rochester encourages Jane to make a "promise" that will normalize his feeling of ownership over her body. He coaxes Jane, entreating her to say "I will be yours, Mr. Rochester." Although Jane and Rochester cannot legally marry, Rochester hungers for corporeal control of Jane.

Jane at first staves off Rochester's advances in an expected way. She utilizes the tools of negation to reject Rochester's claim. Jane's rebuke, which insists "Mr. Rochester, I will not be

yours,” is an almost direct inversion of Rochester’s initial request. Moreover, Jane’s rebuke stands squarely in the Austenian tradition of marriage refusals. Rochester suggests a possibility, and then Jane immediately undoes it. Negation does not generate autonomy. The one who negates must operate within a prescribe template of language. Jane’s initial refusal aspires to distance herself from Rochester, but the language she wields still links her to him.

One must marshal language in unexpected ways to wrest free from language’s latent predetermination. Melville’s “Bartleby” fascinates philosophers, because Bartleby’s phrase “I would prefer not to” defies standard linguistic comprehension. Bartleby’s phrase is not negation, but it still functions to oppose or reject. Gilles Deleuze writes that Bartleby’s phrase embodies the “logic of negative preference... a negativism beyond all negation.”⁵⁰ Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to” is a blanket statement. The phrase refers not to a single task or entreaty. Bartleby transforms a straightforward negation into an open-ended and ambiguous declaration of preference. Slavoj Žižek argues that Bartleby’s verbal trick is liberating: “In his refusal of his Master’s order, Bartleby does not negate the predicate, rather he affirms a non-predicate: he does not say that he doesn’t want to do it; he says that he prefers not to do it. This is how we pass from the politics of ‘resistance’ or ‘protestation,’ which parasitizes upon what it negates, to a politics which opens up a new space outside the hegemonic position and its negation.”⁵¹ The overall success of Bartleby’s refusal, then, arises from his nonstandard use of language.

Jane adapts a page from Bartleby’s book to refuse Rochester. Negation holds no power in social spaces founded on pronounced power dynamics. As such, Jane must discharge language in a way that diverges from Elizabeth Bennet. After Jane’s initial negation (““Mr. Rochester, I will

⁵⁰ See: Deleuze, Gilles, “Bartleby; or, the Formula,” *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 71.

⁵¹ See: Žižek, Slavoj, *The Parallax View* (London: MIT Press, 2006), 381-82.

not be yours”)), Rochester becomes more and more frantic. He assails Jane with a series of questions, like ““Jane, do you mean to go one way in the world, and to let me go another?”” Thrice, Jane answers in the affirmative: “I do.” Jane’s affirmative “I do” formulations exist outside of standard structures of language. First, Rochester anticipates that Jane will relent. Second, Jane “I do” utterance decimates her relationship with Rochester. The destructive power of the “I do” utterance is only magnified by its standard use. A two-word affirmative like “I do” normally represents a moment of bondage. Jane instead weaponizes the phrase, using it as a tool to extricate herself from Rochester. Unconventional language usage affords Jane bodily autonomy.

Like Elizabeth Bennet before her, Jane Eyre fields multiple offers of marriage. Jane’s offers of marriage all converge around issues of political and bodily power. Brontë forces her reader to question whether one can reconcile the competing demands of bodily control, political power, and the institution of marriage. When Jane’s cousin, St. John Rivers, proposes to her at Moor House, he offers her work as a missionary. The possibility of labor excites Jane and she seriously considers St. John’s offer of marriage. Eventually, Jane resolves: “Oh, it would never do!” (469) Jane dismisses St. John’s offer of marriage because it too strongly interweaves the capacities of work and love. “As his curate, his comrade, all would be right,” Jane writes, “I would cross oceans with him in that capacity; toil under Eastern suns, in Asian deserts with him in that office; admire and emulate his courage and devotion and vigour...” The social mobility work and travel affords impels Jane to briefly entertain St. John’s proposal. She would not be chained to any national boundary, but would rather “toil under Eastern suns, in Asian deserts...” Consenting to be St. John’s wife, however, would pose grave problems for Jane. She records how as his wife she would have to be “at his side always, and always restrained, and always checked- forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low” (469). The process of marrying

St. John would entail actually being his wife, a restriction that runs counter to the awesome freedom of movement afforded by the missionary work. In Jane's final consideration, she expresses doubt about the requirements of marriage. From Jane's vantage point, marriage is an institution that "always" restrains and "always" checks female bodies.

Marriage's conscription of female bodies pronounces itself when Jane refuses St. John's proposal. Jane informs St. John that she will only travel with him if she can travel as his "fellow-missionary," but not his wife. She declares: "I cannot marry you, and become a part of you." As appealing as St. John's offer of missionary-work is, Jane will not consent to becoming one with him. St. John greets Jane's condition with alarm; he denies Jane the opportunity of travel without first agreeing to marriage. "A part of me you must become," St. John maintains. The remainder of St. John and Jane's exchange encapsulates a fundamental tension between male desire for female corporeal control and a woman's desire for ownership of her own body. Again and again St. John insists Jane must become "a part" of him; again and again she refuses. Finally, St. John issues a decree "we must be married" as if his marriage to Jane is buoyed by inevitability and not by choice. In response, Jane issues a three-part refusal. First, Jane rejects St. John's "idea of love." Second, Jane rejects his troubling offer of marriage. Last, Jane rejects St. John himself.

Even though Jane scorns St. John's "idea of love," premised as it is on a fusion of work and romance, she ultimately fuses work and love by marrying Rochester at the novel's conclusion. In his blind state, Jane literally serves as Rochester's eyes. Moreover, she delineates the specific tasks she carries out for him, remarking "Never did I weary of reading to him; never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go; of doing for him what he wished to be done" (520). Critics of *Jane Eyre* have never been able to settle what exactly Jane's marriage to Rochester means. Two interpretative schools, however, tend to dominate the conversation.

Nancy Armstrong's foundational work, *Desire and Domestic Fiction*, typifies the first interpretative school's thinking. This interpretative school endorses the more radical suggestions of the novel's ending. From Armstrong's vantage point, Jane is a model of female authority at the novel's end because she is independently wealthy and because she only marries a man who is blind and maimed. According to Armstrong, Jane is "an institution in her own right" when the novel concludes.

Yet Armstrong's contention that Jane emerges as "an institution in her own right" comes under fire by other readings of *Jane Eyre* that privilege the novel's putatively conservative elements. Esther Godfrey, in a recent essay, vouches for a critical vantage point that disavows what some regard as the text's more subversive possibilities for female liberation and agency when she writes: "The plot conventions of Jane's rise to fortune and the marriage union that conclude the novel suggest conservative affirmations of class and gender identities that seemingly contradict the novel's more disruptive aspects." Micael M. Clarke writes similarly in her essay on *Jane Eyre* as she wonders how it is possible, by novel's end, for "the woman who once so stirringly declared women's desires for independence" to transform into "a Jane now apparently only living for Rochester." The implication behind Jane's alleged transformation that Jane has been reduced and rendered small by the very act of marriage. Gone are the days of Jane's shows of refusal. Instead, Jane has thoroughly resigned to the domestic life.

I would argue that *Jane Eyre*'s ambiguous ending operates as the novel's final act of refusal. When a reader makes his way through Charlotte Brontë's novel, he wants to say something about what the novel does. Does *Jane Eyre* privilege one female body over another? Does Charlotte Brontë confine Jane to a domestic life? Or does she expose tears and breaks in

the middle-class domestic ideal? These questions resist answers. *Jane Eyre*'s reader is thus stuck in an interminable debate. Charlotte Brontë's novel refuses an easy ideological conclusion.

Jane Eyre shares her ambiguous nature with Melville's "Bartleby" and Kafka's "Hunger Artist." For social movements and philosophers, Bartleby stands out as a figure of refusal, but for many others Bartleby signifies clinical depression. Kafka's "Hunger Artist," as Susan Sontag explains in her classic essay *Against Interpretation*, "has been subjected to a mass ravishment by no less than three armies of interpreters."⁵² In politically-charged works, the ultimate refusal is not staged on bodies or through verbal formulations. Instead, refusal makes a final turn toward the reader as it challenges and flouts tidy interpretation.

BERTHA'S BODY AND REFUSAL

Jane isn't the only female character in *Jane Eyre* who expresses refusal on and through her body. Bertha Mason perplexes, expands, strains, and exposes limitations to the text's concerns with bodily refusal. During Jane's two physical encounters with Bertha Mason, Charlotte Brontë's heroine regards Rochester's first wife as a frenetic bodily force that refuses standard modes of bodily behavior. Time and again Bertha's characterization deprives her of any humanity; time and again *Jane Eyre*'s cast of characters declare Bertha an aberration. Bertha is madness incarnate. Or so the novel's standard line contends.

Yet there is a way the novel implicitly aligns Bertha's modes of response with Jane's. Positioning Bertha as something of an opposite to Jane is not an unusual conceit. Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* contend that Bertha voices Jane's anger, a suppressed aspect of Jane's "rebellious feminism" (338). Other analyses of Bertha's position in *Jane Eyre* equally

⁵² According to Sontag, those "armies" are "those who read Kafka as social allegory," "those who read Kafka as psychoanalytic allegory," and "those who read Kafka as religious allegory." See: Sontag, Susan, *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Picador, 1966), 3-14.

concern themselves with Bertha's apparent oppositional relationship to Jane. Gayatri Spivak's "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism," for instance, argues that Brontë's novel introduces two poles for gendered subjectivity: the "female individualist" and the "native female" (245). Elizabeth J. Donaldson draws attention to theorizing Bertha as a disabled subject who abuts Jane's abledbodiness.⁵³ My refusal-driven approach contends that Bertha and Jane are not inherent opposites. Rather, attention to the contexts and contours of refusal reveals that what separates Jane and Bertha are the vagaries of chance. Harnessing refusal to extricate oneself from physical confinement—as Jane does with both Rochester and St. John—is a privilege not every female subject receives. Instead, *Jane Eyre* insists that female subjects are more commonly *refused* by a male-dominated society. Thus refused, causing disorder seems the only viable option.

When Brontë introduces Bertha to Jane in the middle of the night, Bertha stages two moments of refusal rooted in the legibility of the female body. First, Brontë suggests that Bertha's body refuses easy comprehension. Jane cannot effectively describe Bertha's body. She considers Bertha "a form" and a "shape" and only indicates that Bertha seems like a woman (326). To Jane, Bertha crystallizes as an embodied phantasm or "vampire" who intrudes upon her bedroom and rips her veil "in two parts" (327). But Jane's encounter with Bertha also emerges as a moment where Jane fails to properly read into the situation that unfolds before her. Wearing a "white and straight" garment, Bertha represents a vision of Jane's impending future. It is almost as if Bertha destroys Jane's veil and glares at her with "fiery eyes" to encourage Jane to refuse Rochester's hand in marriage. Unable to communicate verbally, Bertha wields her body to draw attention to the fact that Rochester is a man who

⁵³ See: Donaldson, Elizabeth J., "The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness," *NWSA Journal* 14.3 (2002): 99-119.

imprisons and isolates women. Bertha approaches Jane in a half-awake, half-asleep liminal space and pleads with Jane to see in the “dark oblong glass” the woman she might become upon marrying Rochester. However, Bertha’s appeal falls flat on a recipient who misreads the transaction.

Bertha’s propensity for bodily refusal is only amplified by her confinement in a “room without a window” (338). Bertha’s bodily refusal in a confined and claustrophobic room at Thornfield offers a stark parallel to Jane’s resistance in the red-room at Gateshead. It is thus possible to read Jane’s claim of recognition—“I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features” (338)—as less of a remembrance of Bertha’s nighttime visit and more of a sign of identification. Bertha refuses in the same way young Jane once refused at Gateshead. Like Jane, Bertha aims to disfigure a male authoritarian figure. Bertha grapples Rochester’s “throat” and bites “her teeth to his cheek” When Bertha overpowers with her “virile force,” she is even restrained in the same way that Bessie and Miss Abbot once threatened to restrain Jane, although Rochester elects to restrain his wife with “cord” and “rope” as opposed to garters.⁵⁴ The similarities between Jane’s refusal at Gateshead and Bertha’s refusal in the third-story room at Thornfield expose how women’s’ refusal involves certain consistent variables.

Yet Bertha’s bodily refusal differs from Jane’s. Whereas Jane imposed limits on how she brandished her body, no such limit exists for Bertha. Whereas Jane’s education helped refine her refusal tactics, the possibility of education has been denied to Bertha. Bertha’s confinement is so callously insensible that it has reduced Bertha to a purely reactionary bodily force. Bertha’s

⁵⁴ Chapter II: “Miss Abbot, lend me your garters; she would break mine directly” (15).

reactionary bodily status is perpetual because her imprisonment is perpetual. If Marcuse's considers refusal "the protest against that which is," Bertha renders the protest permanent.

I have argued elsewhere that refusal propels itself toward replication. Refusal empowers. For Bertha, refusal's orientation toward replication produces the blazing fire that decimates Thornfield at the novel's denouement. Here, Bertha's arson represents the apotheosis of refusal. By lighting Thornfield on fire, Bertha refuses imprisonment and wrests herself free from corporeal bondage. Jane hears the news of Thornfield's destruction second-hand. According to eyewitness testimony, Bertha stood atop Thornfield's roof "against the flames" then "yelled and gave a spring," smashing herself against the pavement (493). Channeling an elemental force provides Bertha with a way out of her body.

Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) richly aestheticizes Bertha's desire to move beyond the confines of her body. In Rhys's retelling of Thornfield's fire, Bertha receives the idea to destroy Thornfield in a dream. Bertha's dreamscape allows her to see herself as the other inhabitants of Thornfield see her. Bertha meets her dream-self with a pang of identification and revulsion, commenting, "It was then that I saw her—the ghost. The woman with the streaming hair. She was surrounded by a gilt frame but I knew her."⁵⁵ This moment of identification and revulsion compels Rhys's Bertha to light Thornfield aflame. Rhys decelerates what is a chaotic event in Brontë's original tale into an event that is placid and calm. Bertha reveals how she "dropped the candle" she "was carrying and it caught the end of the table and I saw flames shoot up" (169-170). When Bertha awakes from her dream, she resolves: "I know why I was brought here and what I have to do" (171). This statement of intent that concludes Rhys's adaptation finally figures refusal as a willed and imaginative act.

⁵⁵ See: Rhys, Jean, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, reissue 2016), 169. All further references to this text will be parenthetical.

Jane Eyre's ending puzzles its readers in often disconcerting ways. What does it mean that Bertha had to light herself on fire for Jane and Rochester to marry? Does the novel claim that one woman's body is more valuable than another's? Is Bertha a sacrifice? Gayatri Spivak's persuasive account of *Jane Eyre* argues that Jane's ultimate rise to the top of a British middle-class family is contingent upon the forces of European imperialism. In Spivak's view, Jane can only famously declare "Reader, I married him," (516) once the Caribbean-born Bertha has been disposed of. Recent approaches to hierarchies and class, gender, and racial distinctions challenge Spivak's reading. Bruce Robbins asserts that Spivak's analysis of *Jane Eyre* hinges on a presumption that systems of class, gender, and race work in tandem when they actually work in different ways. Robbins argues that Spivak's claim about Bertha and Jane is fundamentally flawed, concluding "upward mobility stories may not after all be built on the absolute necessity of sacrificing some Bertha Mason, some representative of Third World indigeneity."⁵⁶ Caroline Levine approaches *Jane Eyre*'s multiple hierarchies differently in her book, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*. Levine posits that *Jane Eyre* offers up "a number of unresolved hierarchies" that subvert a conclusive reading of the novel's ending.⁵⁷ Levine's overall point about hierarchies and *Jane Eyre* is that what a reader interprets says less about the text and more about him or her as a reader. The burden of responsibility for perceiving a pro-European female paradigm in *Jane Eyre* lies not with Charlotte Brontë, but with her reader.

I would like to conclude this section by offering a more compassionate portrait of Jane's relationship to Bertha. Jane and Bertha's differences are largely situational. Jane has

⁵⁶ See: Robbins, Bruce, "Soulmaking: Gayatri Spivak on Upward Mobility," *Cultural Studies* 17.1 (2003): 16-26.

⁵⁷ See: Levine, Caroline, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 110-111.

access to education, whereas Bertha does not. Jane has access to constructive female companionship; Bertha does not. Jane possess complete bodily autonomy. Bertha is chained and confined. In Bertha, *Jane Eyre*'s reader receives an image of how Jane's life might have unfolded had she succumbed to tyrants like John Reed or Brocklehurst. It is even possible to wonder if Bertha is who Jane might become once the novel ends. As Edwidge Danticat wonders: "Was there something about Mr. Rochester that eventually drove his wives insane? Would Jane end up locked in an attic too someday?"⁵⁸ Indeed, male encroachment and abuse is a shared experience for the women of *Jane Eyre*.

CODA

This thesis has proposed that female refusal rooted in the domestic sphere occurred prior to the more commonplace and widely accepted male paradigm of refusal. Although the female and male conceptions of refusal share surface similarities (namely their concern with corporeality), Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* offers us three unique portraits of refusals that are resistant to the passivity and ambivalence on display in texts like Melville's "Bartleby" and Kafka's "Hunger Artist." But where does the Brontëan strand of refusal stand today?

Refusal's characteristic spirit (as set forth by Brontë) was certainly felt on February 7th, 2017 and the weeks that followed. On the night of the seventh, United States Senator Elizabeth Warren was barred from speaking on the senate floor at the confirmation hearings for then-attorney general nominee, Jeff Sessions. Warren set out to question Sessions' fitness for the position of United States Attorney General by reading from a letter written by Coretta Scott King, in 1986, to the Senate Judiciary Committee. In the letter, Scott King voiced her staunch opposition to Sessions' federal judgeship nomination, specifically referencing instances where

⁵⁸ This quote is culled from the introduction to my edition of *Wide Sargasso Sea*.

Sessions “used the awesome powers of his office in a shabby attempt to intimidate and frighten elderly black voters.”⁵⁹ Shortly after beginning to read Scott King’s letter, Warren was silenced by her male Republican colleagues, and particularly, Senate Majority leader Mitch McConnell. McConnell then led a senate vote, at which time the Republican-held senate voted to formally silence Warren by a 49-43 vote. In issuing the majority decision forbidding Warren’s participation in what remained of the nomination hearings, McConnell explained: “She was warned. She was given an explanation. Nevertheless, she persisted.”⁶⁰ McConnell’s three, simple declarative sentences—each one propelled by its emphasis on the gendered pronoun *she*—have swiftly become sacrosanct credo for those who oppose the operations of the Trump administration. Attention has particularly been paid to the final sentence of McConnell’s statement.

Those three words “Nevertheless, she persisted” are marked by their straightforward and balanced clarity. *Adverb, pronoun, past participle*. In spite of—or perhaps because of—the sentence’s diminutive quality, it has accumulated a weight far beyond its initial import. In uttering the three words, “nevertheless, she persisted,” McConnell was attempting to employ as few words as possible to diminish a woman he conceived as an adversary. The United States senate floor is about as far away as one could get from the enclosed domestic spaces of *Jane Eyre*, but still the same gendered dynamics, the same politics come into play. Senator Warren, for all intents and purposes, is an outlier according to official and unofficial senate hierarchy. Warren’s outlier status stems from both her position as a woman and her position as a Democrat

⁵⁹ “This Is the Coretta Scott King Letter That Elizabeth Warren Was Prevented From Reading in the Senate,” TIME, <http://time.com/4663497/coretta-scott-king-letter-warren-senate-sessions/>, (February 07, 2017)

⁶⁰ Kane, Paul and Ed O’Keeffe, “Republicans vote to rebuke Elizabeth Warren, saying she impugned Sessions’s character,” The Washington Post, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/powerpost/>, (February 08, 2017)

in a largely male, largely republican legislative body.⁶¹ McConnell, on the other hand, stands above Warren as the prototypical male figure of power. As the presiding Senate Majority leader, McConnell is the chief spokesman for the Republican party. In some sense, what he says, goes.

It is not that far of a stretch to look at McConnell's words and think of their portability. Indeed, one could very easily imagine them coming out of the mouths of John Reed or Mr. Brocklehurst. "She was warned," John Reed might opine as Jane is carried away to the red-room. "She was given an explanation," Brocklehurst might explain to the students and teachers of Lowood, just after he publicly excoriates Jane. Both men would reach the same conclusion, spoken with an equal mixture of dismissiveness and pseudo-wistfulness: "Nevertheless, she persisted." A word like "persistence," signifying a commitment to a purpose or course of action despite opposition, easily brings to mind aspects of refusal. Like refusal, persistence implies perpetual progress. Even when impeded, McConnell's words suggest, Warren refused to comport herself according to the wishes of the majority.

Warren's refusal in the face of political pressure galvanized supporters. Several female commentators saw Warren's persistence, her refusal to give in, as a microcosm for the female experience. Megan Garber, writing for *The Atlantic*, explains that McConnell's phrase "nevertheless, she persisted" became an instant and "weaponized" cultural meme because scores of women "have heard the same thing, or a version of it, many times before." American culture, from Garber's vantage point, works in many ways to tell women "to be quiet," reminding them "that they would really be so much more pleasing if they would just smile a little more, or talk a

⁶¹ At the time of this writing, 52 Republicans comprise the United States Senate, compared with 46 Democrats and 2 Independents. Out of 100 Senators, only 21 women are currently serving. There are 16 female Democrat senators and 5 female Republican senators. These numbers reflect the 2017-2019 senate body. For more see: "Women in the U.S. Congress 2017," Rutgers: Eagleton Institute of Politics, <http://www.cawp.rutgers.edu/women-us-congress-2017>

little less, or work a little harder to be pliant and agreeable.”⁶² The resonances of Warren’s act, and the phrase “nevertheless, she persisted” have inspired a host of commodities and tributes.

⁶³You can find “Nevertheless, she persisted” mugs, T-shirts, and smartphone cases. A cartoonist, Tom Toro, immortalized Warren’s defiance in a drawing for the *New Yorker*. Toro depicts Warren in black-and-white against a square rose-pink background. She is looking straight at her audience with a stoic expression and her biceps are bared and flexed. On the left bicep the words “she was warned” are tattooed. On the right: “nevertheless, she persisted.”⁶⁴ Several hundred women that we know of have taken the message of Toro’s cartoon to heart, tattooing the words “nevertheless, she persisted” on their own biceps and wrists and forearms.⁶⁵ In the year 2017, refusal is still expressed on and through the female body, but this time with a twist.

In a move that mirrors educational aspect of Brontëan refusal, Chelsea Clinton published a children’s book entitled *She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World*. According to the publisher’s description, the book is intended to acquaint “tiny feminists, mini activists and little kids who are ready to take on the world to thirteen inspirational women who never took no for an answer, and who always, inevitably and without fail, persisted.”⁶⁶ Refusal, one could suggest, no longer results in immediate confinement to the red-room, but has found a place on the bookshelves of young girls.

⁶² Garber, Megan. *The Atlantic*, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2017/02/nevertheless-she-persisted-and-the-age-of-the-weaponized-meme/516012/>

⁶³ Now both strands of refusal have experienced commodification!

⁶⁴ Tom Toro, “Nevertheless, she persisted,” *The New Yorker*, February 13&20th, 2017.

⁶⁵ Rachel Leah, *Salon*, “More than 100 women get ‘Nevertheless, she persisted’ tattoos in Minneapolis,” <http://www.salon.com/2017/02/23/over-100-women-get-nevertheless-she-persisted-tattoos-in-minneapolis/>

⁶⁶ See: Clinton, Chelsea and Alexandra Boiger (illustrations). *She Persisted: 13 American Women Who Changed the World*. New York: Philomel Books, 2017.

But problems still linger around the word *refusal* and its practice. Even though Elizabeth Warren's act of refusal garnered her the respect of those who agreed with her politics, it only made her a bigger target for those who abide by on the opposite end of the political spectrum, many of whom now clamor for her downfall.⁶⁷ Moreover, if we step away from the realm of politics, everyday instances of refusal pose even graver threats to women. In her collection of essays, entitled *Men Explain Things to Me*, Rebecca Solnit details how there is a worldwide "pandemic of violence by men against women" that occurs on both intimate and foreign levels.⁶⁸ In other words, a woman's body exists in a state of permanent precariousness. So much of the violence levied against women, advances Solnit, occurs when women try to refuse or rebuff the advances of men, sexual or otherwise. Male violence against female bodies stems from an "authoritarian" impulse that decrees "I have the right to control you" (27). In this way, women across the word have the right to look at men and regard them as Jane Eyre once regarded John Reed: as murderers and tyrants.

The strict sense of control many men exhibit over women's bodies would be troubling by itself. Perhaps more troubling is that political and legal systems seem to rule in favor of male assailants as opposed to female victims. Male perpetrators of crimes against women, Solnit asserts, are excused from their wrongdoings and the epidemic of male violence is blamed on things like economic instability, mental health problems, and drugs and alcohol. In many cases, women who come forward to report instances of male assault are themselves blamed. A 2016

⁶⁷ As reported in the *Washington Post* and elsewhere, conservative groups frowned upon Senator Warren's moment of refusal and the popularity she gleaned from it. "Our goal is to make sure there is a lot of negative information flowing around Senator Warren," said Colin Reed, the executive director of a conservative group called "America Rising." It is Reed's hope that this "negative information" would bar Warren from holding public office in the future.

⁶⁸ See: Rebecca Solnit, *Men Explain Things to Me* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2014), 22. All further references to this book will be in parenthetical form.

Department of Justice investigation of the Baltimore Police Department, for instance, revealed a deep gender bias in the questioning of women who reported sexual assault. Baltimore Police Department detectives would often start their investigations by asking the women “why are you messing up that guy’s life?”⁶⁹ Such a line of questioning brings up tropes that date back to the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847. Even today, many political, legal, and social structures expect women to stay silent, to never refuse the edicts of men.

Although there is a definite politics to the female/domestic refusal endorsed by Charlotte Brontë, our current moment suggests that we still have a long way to go before female refusal and all it entails achieves legitimate political progress. Many women, of course, are no longer intimately linked to domestic spaces like Gateshead or Ferndean but a male-sanctioned status quo still works to impede female advancement. More work must be done to think through the boundaries of female refusal for our current time period. I hope, at least, to have complicated the assumed masculine narrative of refusal in my argument for the three portraits of refusal that Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* generates.

⁶⁹ The Department of Justice inquiry into the goings-on at the Baltimore Police Department resulted in a 163-page document, which was made public on August 10th, 2016. The quote referenced here can be found on page 122, under main section “E,” entitled “BPD’s Handling of Sexual Assault Investigations Raises Serious Concerns of Gender-Biased Policing.” A link to the full report is as follows: <https://www.justice.gov/crt/file/883296/download>

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