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Selling Out: The Market as Autonomy in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

One of the most illuminating instances of gifting in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* arrives when Mr. Rochester takes his young bride, the eponymous narrator of the novel, shopping. Significantly, this gifting scene is also an occasion of direct interaction with the commercial economy. And it causes Jane acute distress. As Mr. Rochester attempts to lavish expensive gowns and jewels on his bride, she remarks:

the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation. (Brontë II.38)

As a governess with a foot planted in both the gift and commercial economies, Jane recognizes Rochester's shopping spree as an effort to convert commodity objects into gift objects by relocating them from the market into the intimate domain of the marriage. She keenly grasps the potential this conversion has to reinscribe power imbalances between her and her groom, and strives to foil his plans. Her rejection of Rochester's gifts demonstrates in Jane a useful understanding of the different codes of gift and commodity exchange which she will fruitfully employ to navigate the obligations placed on her in the course of her life. As Rochester avidly shops on her behalf, Jane's "sense of annoyance" illustrates the heroine's famous aversion to dependence and illuminates the novel's obsession with autonomy writ large.

Jane makes it immediately clear that she loathes Mr. Rochester's shopping spree. Specifically, she portrays the outing as drawing into sharp relief the status imbalance between her and her master:

The hour spent in Millcote was a somewhat harassing one to me. Mr. Rochester obliged me to go to a certain silk warehouse: there I was ordered to choose half a dozen dresses. I hated the business, I begged leave to defer it: no—it should be gone through with now.

(Bronte II.37)

Jane's characterizations of Rochester as "obliging" and "ordering" and herself as "begging leave" conjure a distinct sense of domination that is only heightened in following passages. In the carriage on their way home from shopping, Jane observes that the smile Mr. Rochester directs at her is "such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (II.38). In this analogy Jane becomes "a slave" and Mr. Rochester the "sultan" who favors her, conspicuous roles which broadcast the fact that Jane detects a sense of ownership in Rochester's regard for herself. It becomes clear that the gift in this scene emerges as a stratifying device that, while it gives the appearance of solidifying the tie between bride and groom, simultaneously distances them along gender and class divides. Jane's vehement resistance to the gift—to "being dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester" (II.38)—represents her sincere attempt to shore up her autonomy against the threat of becoming a commodity herself.

The shopping scene is complicated, however, by the fact that it dramatizes both the gift and the commodity. The store-bought gift hovers on the threshold between two economies much in the way that Jane straddles gift and commercial zones in her position as governess at Thornfield: as Gilbert and Gubar have observed, the "Victorian governess...was and was not a member of the family, was and was not a servant" (Gilbert and Gubar 470). In their classic feminist analysis of *Jane Eyre*, Gilbert and Gubar identify a pattern of confinement and escape in the novel that places Jane within a succession of claustrophobic spaces—starting with

Gateshead's red room and proceeding to Lowood and beyond—which the heroine must break loose from. It seems to me that Jane's primary mode of "escape" in these instances is the commercial economy. When she has outgrown the constraints of Lowood, for instance, Jane procures her "new servitude" (Brontë I.107) by advertising in a newspaper. After fleeing penniless from Thornfield, her employment as a village schoolmistress allows her to live "free and honest" rather than a "slave" in the "fool's paradise" (II.159) of Rochester's illegitimate protection. Commerce recurs consistently as a method for Jane to carve out a measure of independence for herself within the rigidly patriarchal and classist society of Victorian England.

Perhaps the most striking example of the market enabling Jane's autonomy comes when Jane inherits a large fortune from a deceased uncle. Inheritance is, of course, the lynchpin of the Victorian economy—it allows wealthy families like the Reeds, Rochesters, and Ingrams to sustain large and profitable estates without ever working for a wage. It also typically enforces gender and class hierarchies. When John Eyre leaves twenty thousand pounds to his destitute niece, however, his bequest has the effect of weakening class and gender boundaries, elevating Jane's station in society and granting her independence beyond her lot as a woman. Arriving late in the novel, it offers a final solution to the escape pattern of Jane's life thus far: money is one of the few tools that can open all confinements. The inheritance therefor figures an invaluable gift to Jane—one that, like Rochester's silks, participates in both commercial and gifting economies.

What Jane proceeds to do with the inheritance nudges it still further into gift circulation. Her first act upon learning of her wealth is to divide it into four equal portions and distribute these among her neglected cousins at Moor-House. In so doing, Jane seeks to settle a debt she

owes the Rivers', who took her in as a beggar and saved her from starvation. Against St John's initial objections to the gift, Jane insists "I could not forego the delicious pleasure of which I have caught a glimpse—that of repaying, in part, a mighty obligation, and winning to myself life-long friends" (Brontë II.196). In true gift fashion, the freely shared inheritance serves to integrate Jane into a social unit, "winning [her] life-long friends." The inheritance also, however, detaches her from that unit. In its essence, the gift of money mimics a commercial transaction in that it impels the movement of currency with the purpose of "repaying" an "obligation." Its circulation produces similar effects to a commercial transaction: the shared inheritance disentangles Jane from the Rivers' debt and leaves the two parties cordially independent of one another. Had they been more familial, perhaps, St John would not have asked Jane to marry him. Had they been at all in each others' "obligations," Jane might not have been free to refuse St John when he did ask her. Jane's freedom, we see, lives or dies by the turns of the marketplace. Expertly toeing the line between gift and commodity economies, Jane proves she can fuse these two realms just enough to grant her the self-determination she desires but not enough to ever actually alienate her from society.

Keeping Jane's ties to the market in mind, we might return to the vile scene of the shopping spree. Rochester's attempts here to lift commodities out of the market and graft them into the gift relationship of marriage reflects what he wishes to do to Jane—namely, convert her from a "servant" to a wife, a legitimate and lasting member of the family. Yet Jane seems unprepared at this point to be severed from the source of her autonomy. Quite remarkably, she suggests on the carriage ride home that she

continue to act as Adele's governess: by that I shall earn my board and lodging, and thirty pounds a year besides. I'll furnish my own wardrobe out of that money, and you shall give me nothing but...your regard, and if I give you mine in return, that debt will be quit.

(II.39-40)

It seems that Jane's autonomy is so important to her, and so bound up in market activity, that she won't stand for jewels and silks, much less her own self, to be removed from commercial circulation for the sake of marriage. Only after she has inherited John Eyre's fortune and is empowered by this money to settle old debts (to the Rivers') and stave off new obligations (to Mr. Rochester) does she agree to marry her master and submit fully to the gift economy. As Rochester's wife, Jane performs what Lewis Hyde has called "gift labor" day in and day out, waiting on her blind and handicapped husband at Ferndean Manor. After so long a resistance to the total gift existence, Jane now finds pleasure in it: "to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes" (Brontë II.282). This dramatic reversal on our heroine's part, while it poses somewhat of an incongruous end to the book, attests the ultimate power of money to transcend gender, race, and class. Wealth, Brontë insinuates, is sometimes the only way to cut down societal constraints. With Jane numbering among the lucky few to inherit riches, the novel prompts readers to wonder what hope adheres to those less blessed. Staging its incessant conflict between market and family, gift and debt, *Jane Eyre* foment not only a feminist but an economic awakening.

Works Cited:

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