

Magical Lamps and Middle-Class Morals:
The Oriental Tale in the Victorian Novel of 1847 and 1848

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“...the sultan was aroused in the dead of the night, and the sharpened axe that was to sever the rope from the great iron ring was put into his hand, and he struck with it, and the rope parted and rushed away, and the ceiling fell. So, in my case; all the work, near and afar, that tended to the end, had been accomplished; and in an instant the blow was struck, and the roof of my stronghold dropped upon me.”

– Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*¹

By 1860 when *Great Expectations* appeared, Victorian readers would have easily recognized Charles Dickens’s apt reference to this “Eastern story” at the end of Chapter XIX, Volume II. An explanatory note informs modern readers that Dickens appropriates the story from James Ridley’s *Tales of the Genii* (1764), one of his favorite childhood books, which recounts the tale of a vizier who builds an elaborate trap to deceive his sultan’s enemies.² Dickens employs this fitting Oriental tale to compare the “heavy slab” that falls on the sultan’s foes to the severe “blow” to Pip’s spirit and marriage prospects upon discovering Estella’s relationship with his social rival, Bentley Drummle. By the mid-1800s, Charles Dickens was only one among many influential authors, including William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte and Emily Brontë, and Elizabeth Gaskell, for example, who repeatedly referenced Oriental tales in their novels. Eastern allusions in English fiction had become so customary by this time that authors catered to a Victorian reading public “steeped in Scheherazade’s lore,” as Cornelia Cook writes (197), and counted on readers’ familiarity with such tales to depict specific images and themes in their own novels. But why was this particular period in Victorian literature so rich in Eastern references, and what did the tales, as intertexts to such canonical novels, offer to novelistic representations of Victorian social relations at this time?

Many scholars have studied allusions to Oriental tales in Victorian fiction as authors’ means of capitalizing on a particular group of popular literary conventions that story collections and frame tales, including Ridley’s *Tales of the Genii* and Antoine Galland’s *Arabian Nights*’

¹ Charles Dickens, *Great Expectations*, ed. Charlotte Mitchell (New York: Penguin, 1996), p. 312. I will abbreviate subsequent references to the novel as *GE*.

² See *GE*, Notes to Volume II, Chapter XIX, p. 501.

Entertainments,³ offered. Oriental tales provided authors with motifs of “Alnaschar-dreams” and “castles-in-the-air,” painting fantasies of “false hopes and worldly ambition” (Cook 197);⁴ magical lamps and rings like Aladdin’s;⁵ an enchanting femininity in multicolored silks and exotic harems; and narrative attractions of endless repetition and circular time (Cook 207; Gerhardt 1-2).⁶ Authors aimed to satisfy a Victorian audience for whom such tales provided “a symbol of ideal happiness, something desired but never attained” (Ali 55), and that evoked imaginative “wonders amid the dreary life of common streets” (Gissing 30).

Aside from such images of enchanted pleasure, Eastern stories also could accentuate complex social issues, particularly those related to sexual domination and submission. For example, Galland’s Sultan, Schahriar, serves as the ultimate exemplar of “man’s inhumanity to women” (Caracciolo 25), as he plans to kill every woman in his kingdom because of one woman’s transgressions. Similarly, narrative techniques of Galland’s *Nights* particularly enable women to use the power of storytelling to gain authority over men like Schahriar, who dictate their social realities (Workman 3-4).⁷ In this way, Victorian authors referenced the Oriental tale to draw on character types of ruthless social ambition, both to underscore forms of domestic injustice and to envision modes of triumph over it. Taking this position, I will argue that William Makepeace Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë, and Emily Brontë appropriate particular Oriental tales intertexts to

³ All references to the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments* are taken from the Oxford World’s Classics Edition, ed. Robert Mack (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), based on Antoine Galland’s translation. I will abbreviate subsequent citations to this edition as *ANE*.

⁴ This motif comes from Galland’s tale “The Story of the Barber’s Fifth Brother,” within a larger story entitled “The Story of the Little Hunchback.” The Barber’s fifth brother, a merchant named Alnaschar, daydreams that he marries a rich, albeit submissive, wife. In pretending to kick the wife in his dreams, he ironically kicks his merchandise in reality and ruins his shop (*ANE* 291-98).

⁵ See Galland’s “The Story of Aladdin; or, the Wonderful Lamp” (*ANE* 651-726).

⁶ Cook notes that Victorian authors paid “an almost unconscious homage to the skill and influence of...obscure Arab story-tellers” (198). Mia Gerhardt similarly relates the “transferable” nature of Arabic storytelling to the popularity of the tales among European authors and readers (1-2).

⁷ Galland’s ultimate storyteller, Scheherazade, tells tales to Schahriar to “return him to the world of civilization and humanity” after he vows to kill one woman in his kingdom every night (Zipes 55). Nancy Workman argues that Victorians appropriated Scheherazade’s storytelling abilities for their own characters who, through narrative, gain the ability “to save lives, to gratify wishes, to extend, perhaps infinitely, a storyteller’s existence” (4).

comment on Victorian social relations and morals.⁸ More complicated than mere allusions to certain Oriental tales, Eastern stories allow readers of *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights* to recognize the novels' characters in and through Oriental intertexts, and the Oriental tale thus enriches the resonance of gendered power dynamics within narrative depictions of domestic life.

While Thackeray associates characters with Oriental tales in an essentially ironic manner, commenting on a Victorian heroism that differs from such coldhearted social exploits found in Oriental tales, the Brontë sisters suggest that an astute reading of an Oriental character can provide insight into the predicaments of women in a patriarchal culture. Nevertheless, all three authors employ Oriental tales that are already implicated in a longstanding literary tradition, mediated by characters who are also readers of these tales, further mediated by the Victorian reader who views characters reading the tales, and even additionally mediated by the author recycling such ideas from diverse works and influences of the period. This multiple mediation creates levels of textual complication that draw on a vast literary tradition and subsume intertextual content within the novel form. By rereading and recontextualizing examples of Oriental tales and their character archetypes, both characters in these novels and their Victorian readers learn how to navigate social power dynamics in order to redefine the self in the domestic community.

By the late-1840s, various cultural, social, and literary factors influenced the reintroduction of the Oriental tale into Victorian fiction. England's revitalized cultural interest in "the East,"⁹ especially during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, was reflected in a host of major

⁸ As a point of reference, I will employ Jonathan Culler's notion of "intertextuality," which he develops in relation to the theoretical work of Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, and Harold Bloom. Culler claims that textual references within a work satisfy certain expectations and "presuppositions" that exist as "prior discourse" in a text's tradition (1391-92). He uses an example: "Once upon a time there lived a king who had a daughter," arguing that the sentence "is extremely rich in literary and pragmatic presuppositions. It relates the story to a series of other stories, identifies it with the conventions of a genre, asks us to take certain attitudes toward it" (1392).

⁹ In this context, "the East" mainly refers to countries that we would consider as part of the Middle East today, such as Egypt, Turkey, and Syria.

Victorian novels published in “those twenty months, in 1847 and 1848” (Williams 9).¹⁰ Those varied achievements are surprisingly insistent in their references to Oriental tales: *Arabian Nights* stories in Dickens’s *Dombey and Son* (1846-48) and *The Haunted Man* (1848), Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), and Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847); Lord Byron’s romantic Oriental tale *The Giaour* in Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848); Samuel Johnson’s philosophic tale *Rasselas* in *Jane Eyre* (1847), which also refers to the *Nights*. These references coincide with a shift in the dominant focus of the novel towards the representation of middle-class domestic life. Novels now captured issues of social mobility and class-consciousness, which, as James Adams writes, “encouraged a host of anxieties about identity and self-determination” during this period (7).¹¹

The quest for self-identity particularly dominated the household: despite Victorian fantasies of home as a space of comfort and tranquility, novels represent it as a sphere of tense struggle for recognition and authority, between husbands and wives, masters and servants, governesses and students. The novel’s prominent place in domestic life by the 1840s allowed authors to create a microcosm of Victorian middle-class society in fiction, as an experimental forum in which these social dynamics could be tested. Oriental tales intertexts in the novels of 1847 and 1848 gain significant meaning not only in light of England’s shifting social relations, but also due to a community of readers familiar with eighteenth-century Oriental tales that recently had been reintroduced into literary circulation. In this way, authors domesticated the Oriental tale

¹⁰ In *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (1970), Raymond Williams argues that Victorian authors, especially those of 1847 and 1848, used the novel to explore “the substance and meaning of community” (11), as the notion of a “knowable community” became difficult to define in a rapidly changing Victorian society (16).

¹¹ For comprehensive studies of literary development in the 1840s as related to Britain’s social and cultural concerns, see, for example, James Eli Adams, *A History of Victorian Literature* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Asa Briggs, *The Age of Improvement: 1783-1867*, 2nd ed. (Essex: Pearson, 2000). Particularly relevant discussions on class and gender relations in Victorian fiction include: Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987); Elizabeth Langland, *Nobody’s Angels: Middle-Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

along with the novel as a crucial means to reread and apply the tales' morals to Victorian social realities.

Egypt Through British Eyes: 1820-1850

England's heightened cultural attention to the East, especially between 1820 and 1850, influenced a resurgence of interest in Eastern literature, a trend onto which novelists latched by the 1840s. The romantic tradition of Eastern tale-telling was first brought to Europe by Antoine Galland's French translation of Arabic tales, *Mille et une Nuit* (1704-17), which appeared in England in the early decades of the eighteenth century and was quickly and anonymously translated into English (Mack xxv). As many scholars have noted, the *Arabian Nights* for Victorians became symbolic of the enchanted world of magic genii, flying carpets, and opulent palaces, which offered an escape from their own domestic reality.¹² While Victorian authors would have read Antoine Galland's *Nights* as children,¹³ Edward William Lane's translation of Galland's work, entitled *One Thousand and One Nights* and published serially between 1839 and 1841, not only sparked renewed interest in the tales for writers but also attracted a wide range of the Victorian reading public, due to the growing availability and affordability of periodical print (Adams 11-12).

While in the first quarter of the nineteenth century Oriental tales "were read and enjoyed mainly for their exotic and fabulous enchantments" (Ali 38), Lane's translation in 1839, copiously annotated with references describing Eastern customs and beliefs, capitalized on a growing vogue

¹² In her influential study *The Oriental Tale in England in the Eighteenth Century* (1908), Martha Pike Conant writes that by the nineteenth century, many Victorian authors, including Dickens and Thackeray, "testif[ied] to a fondness for oriental tales," which "have had a distinct value in stimulating the imagination of numerous writers and countless readers" since their arrival in England (254).

¹³ Authors would have also read a variety of English reprints of the anonymous Grub Street translation, with Medievalist Henry Weber's *Tales of the East* (1812) being among the most popular (Ali 42).

for serious Oriental scholarship during the second quarter of the century.¹⁴ The English “pseudo-Orientalism” of the eighteenth century, which emphasized “the marvelous rather than the probable” in fiction (Ali 29), led nineteenth-century scholars such as Lane to search for “accuracy and exactitude” in their studies of the East (Ali 37).¹⁵ Lane travelled to Egypt in 1825 and lived among its peoples for five years, resulting in an “exhaustive description of the country,” entitled *Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* (1836), which inspired both his translation of and extensive notes to his *Nights* three years later (Hollenbach 196).¹⁶ John Hollenbach argues that while Lane’s study was “precise” and “detailed,” he often made generalizations about the Egyptian character from a clearly “Christian and decidedly English” vantage point (196). Nevertheless, Lane offered his readers an “authoritative” account of the East, even if he constructed an Egyptian culture with “an affinity for the picturesque and for fancy” (Schacker 116), confirming depictions of such a fantastic national identity as displayed in Galland’s *Nights*.

This paradox, as evidenced in Lane’s translation, between a desire to present a culturally accurate description of the East, and an emphasis on the Oriental tale itself as a purely fantastic story, involving genii and magic lamps, also surfaced in historical and travel accounts of the Orient during the 1840s. English interest in Egypt peaked in leisurely and scholarly travel writing at this time, as the “1840s and 1850s marked a high tide for books on the romance of the Middle East” (Hollenbach 203). One such writer, William Thackeray, poked fun at such “romantic”

¹⁴ Renewed British interest in the Orient began in the early-1800s, due in large part to Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt at the turn of the nineteenth century; after this point the Orient became “an extension of the sphere of travel” for the British (Ahmed 4-5). English intellectual interest in the Orient became evident in 1823 when Henry Thomas Colebrooke founded the Royal Asiatic Society to investigate “the sciences and the arts of Asia, with the hope of facilitating ameliorations there and of advancing knowledge and improving the arts at home” (qtd. in Said 79).

¹⁵ For example, Sir John Gardner Wilkinson’s work studying Egyptian language and culture, entitled *Materia Hieroglyphica* (1828-30), helped to establish Egyptology as a science in England (Ahmed 66).

¹⁶ Lane’s offer to publish a work on Egypt came from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, founded in 1826, whose goal included “serving a ‘blow aimed at the monopoly of literature [and] the opening of the flood-gates of knowledge’” of diverse cultures (qtd. in Schacker 84). By 1839, Lane’s translation of the *Nights* “was situated squarely in the midst of the philanthropically-driven effort to bring literature to the masses” (Schacker 78).

accounts of the East in *Notes of a Journey from Cornhill to Grand Cairo* (1846), based on a tour in Egypt. Thackeray humorously remarked of the pyramids: “There they lay, rosy...majestical, mystical, familiar edifices. Several of us tried to be impressed...” (qtd. in Ahmed 62), ironically casting these “exotic” symbols of Eastern civilization as “familiar” to an English audience for whom such figures had indeed become commonplace through Oriental tales. A more serious work, *The History of Egypt from the Earliest Times till the Conquest by the Arabs, A.D. 640* by Samuel Sharpe (1846), sparked an 1848 book review in the *Edinburgh Review* arguing that before the nineteenth century, “Egypt was still regarded with desire by the merchant, and with anxiety by the statesman...now that it is once more open to peaceful enterprise, and has become a high road to ‘Ophir and to Inde,’ the history of its past fortunes acquires new interest” (“Art. II.” 33). Such “new interest” not only emerged in scholarly accounts by Egyptologists, but also in renewed focus on the East’s cultural and artistic importance as an ancient civilization by the late-1840s, one which the British imagined as much older and more glorious than their own.¹⁷

Thackeray’s romantic vision of the Egyptian pyramids in 1846 aptly captures the tension between the real and the romantic East that writers and scholars grappled with by the 1840s, which novelists were quick to exploit. The Eastern tale became an evocative locus of “romance” in novels increasingly given over to a realism skeptical of that realm. The “world of ideal happiness” that the *Arabian Nights* represented for authors such as Thackeray and Dickens (Ali 55), for example, demonstrated an ironic affiliation with the tales, as evidenced in these authors’ satirical uses of certain stories, especially Thackeray’s, which I will discuss in the following section. Such references greatly differ from the seminal intertextual links that the Brontë sisters engender to

¹⁷ For example, in 1847 Dr. Austen Layard conducted excavations in Nineveh and Nimroud, producing many “fruits,” such as “fragments of a colossal statue of a bull with a human head,” which were sent back to England for the National Collection and the British Museum (“The Nimroud Marbles” 536). In 1851, Layard published *Discoveries in the Ruins of Nineveh and Babylon* (Said 195), and such “wondrous relics of Nineveh and Assyria” were to appear at the Great Exhibition of 1851 (“The Proposed Exhibition of 1851” 279).

comment on Victorian power dynamics in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, which I will discuss in the second half of this essay.

“Castles in the Air”: The *Arabian Nights* in *Vanity Fair*

Not until 1839, when Lane’s translation of Galland’s *Nights* appeared in the periodical press, did Charles Dickens begin alluding to the *Arabian Nights* in his novels.¹⁸ The *Nights* not only provided Dickens a nostalgic reminder of childhood, but the stories also offered him a means to “preserve the integrity of his heroes and heroines” (Ali 56). By aligning characters with Oriental prototypes, Dickens attempts to justify the actions of his “heroes,” ironically positing that Victorian valor entails more than callous social ambition. For example, in *Dombey and Son*, published serially between 1846 and 1848, Dickens aptly casts Mr. Dombey as a “Sultan” figure, akin to Galland’s Schahriar (*DS* 194).¹⁹ Like Schahriar’s inhumane desire to dominate all the women in his kingdom, Dombey’s “majestic coldness and indifference” leads him to treat women, such as his daughter Florence and his second wife Edith, as servile figures whom he constantly debases (*DS* 645).²⁰ Not until the end of the novel, when Dombey has “fallen, never to be raised up any more” and becomes a “wasted likeness of himself” (*DS* 904, 909), does he gain a semblance of compassion, reconnecting with Florence and her children after Edith leaves him. Like Schahriar, who is duped by Scheherazade’s story-telling abilities that save her and all women from his destruction, Dombey returns to a humane world through influential female figures. By aligning him with such an Eastern prototype, Dickens reconfigures masculine domination, as it

¹⁸ As Peter Caracciolo writes, “there were indications that Dickens was rapidly rediscovering the *Nights* at the very time when...he was experimenting with new ways of reaching the public” (22).

¹⁹ Charles Dickens, *Dombey and Son*, ed. Andrew Sanders (London: Penguin, 2002). I will abbreviate subsequent references to the novel as *DS*.

²⁰ Dombey often refers to Florence as an “object,” as Dickens writes, “his feeling about the child had been negative from her birth” (*DS* 42). He frequently treats Edith as a slave-like figure, insisting that she “understand that [his] will is law” (*DS* 645), and that her duty is “proper submission to [him]...[he] will have submission first!” (*DS* 647).

involves, for Dombey, finding a role in the domestic community that accords with Victorian moral codes.

Like Dickens, Thackeray also employed references to Oriental tales ironically, both to defend his protagonist's honor and to illuminate portraits of modern English domesticity.²¹

Thackeray avidly read the *Nights* as a boy and, in 1863, he described his personal fondness for fantastic stories such as the Oriental tale:

If the gods would give me the desire of my heart, I should be able to write a story which boys would relish for the next few dozen centuries. I meet people now who don't care for...the *Arabian Nights*; I am sorry for them, unless they in their time have found *their* romancer – their charming Scheherazade. (qtd. in Caracciolo 20-21)²²

As Peter Caracciolo notes, Thackeray was reintroduced to his “charming Scheherazade” through Lane’s translation of the *Nights* in the early-1840s (21). Thackeray’s “desire” to write such a story “which boys would relish for the next few dozen centuries” takes shape in *Vanity Fair*, in which he employs the Oriental tale in a project like Dickens’s: to mock characters whose ambitious desires ultimately remain unattainable fantasies in reality. For example, by connecting William Dobbin, the novel’s closest thing to a protagonist in “A Novel without a Hero,” with Galland’s Sinbad the Sailor from the *Arabian Nights*, Thackeray links Dobbin’s domestic struggles to traditional narratives of formative journeys at sea, reaching as far back as Homer’s *Odyssey*. We first meet Dobbin as he “was lying under a tree in the playground, spelling over a favourite copy of the *Arabian Nights*” (*VF* 49),²³ when reality pulled him out of his imagination:

²¹ Michael Flynn notes that not only did Dickens and Thackeray read each other’s works, but they also had a well-known literary rivalry. Thackeray desired to “write against” Dickens, especially in *Vanity Fair*, which appeared in monthly parts at the same time as *Dombey and Son* (174).

²² From Thackeray’s essay “De Juventute,” from *Roundabout Papers* printed in *Cornhill Magazine* (Caracciolo 68).

²³ I will abbreviate subsequent citations to Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* as *VF*.

William Dobbin had for once forgotten the world, and was away with Sinbad the Sailor in the Valley of Diamonds...when shrill cries, as of a little fellow weeping, woke up his pleasant reverie....the Roc had whisked away Sinbad the Sailor out of the Valley of Diamonds out of sight, far into the clouds; and there was everyday life before honest William[.] (*VF* 51)

Positing Dobbin as a reader of Sinbad's story, Thackeray reconfigures honor in the domestic community: he presses his readers to compare Dobbin's unexciting, albeit gainful, heroism to Sinbad's gallant yet immoral adventures and ploys, to define appropriate means of asserting the self in Victorian society.

Dobbin's connection to Sinbad, however, is ultimately a nostalgic and satirical one: it both reveals Thackeray's own childhood memories of reading the *Nights* as a schoolboy, dreaming of relief from a "loathed classical education" (qtd. in Ormond 178),²⁴ and mocks Dobbin's inability to actualize fantastic adventures such as Sinbad's. Thackeray's reference to "The Story of Sinbad the Sailor," a tale which Galland added to the original Arabic collection (Mack xiv), has a special resonance for Dobbin, as the son of a grocer who is socially inferior to his schoolmates, but who goes on to worldly success but romantic frustration. Sinbad, a tradesman whose seven voyages brought him great wealth,²⁵ relates his adventures to a hard-working porter, Hinbad, who believes that anyone living in a luxurious palace such as Sinbad's must be happy. In an attempt to prove Hinbad wrong, Sinbad remarks to the porter, "I did not attain this happy condition, without enduring more trouble of body and mind, for several years, than can well be imagined" (*ANE* 142). Just as Sinbad shares the story of his own "trouble of body and mind" through his voyages,

²⁴ Leonée Ormond further describes Thackeray's use of the *Nights* via Dobbin's character mainly as the author's own means of "recall[ing] a joyful period before much later unhappiness" and of "evoking a world of impossible daring and extremes of wealth and happiness," which, for Thackeray, "were part of [the *Nights*] delight" (179-80).

²⁵ Thackeray tells us that Dobbin also rises socially when his father becomes a rich Alderman (*VF* 57).

so does Thackeray present Dobbin's quest for Amelia as a test of his character's endurance. Sinbad fails to recognize the danger of past voyages when embarking on each new one, and similarly, Dobbin continually misreads Amelia as the epitome of his romantic desire, until the novel's end when he finally realizes her flaws, but nevertheless marries her.

Thackeray specifically references Sinbad's second voyage in the "Valley of Diamonds" as an example of how *unlike* Sinbad Dobbin becomes as the novel progresses. After having already been saved from a misadventure at sea on his first voyage, Sinbad "grew weary of a quiet life" and pursued a second journey (*ANE* 147), again encountering trouble when mistakenly abandoned on an island. He escapes the island by being carried away by a bird that drops him in the Valley of Diamonds, which contains a deadly serpent species. Significantly, Sinbad flees the dangerous valley by listening to the "stratagems made use of by some merchants," which before his troubles, he "always looked upon...to be a fable" (*ANE* 149). Like Sinbad, who must closely observe the local merchants to achieve his escape, Dobbin also must study the characters in *Vanity Fair*, especially the artful Becky Sharp, in order to win Amelia's heart. However, "honest William" typically misreads these cues (*VF* 51), as he remains a "gentleman...whose aims are generous, whose truth is constant, and not only constant in its kind but elevated in its degree" (*VF* 728), to the extent that he almost loses Amelia to Becky by the end of the novel. The generous gentleman is, ironically, in danger of being overwhelmed by the world around him, instead of exploiting his surroundings for his own social and personal gain, like Sinbad.

Dobbin's lack of artfulness greatly contrasts with Sinbad as a *metis* figure who, like Odysseus before him, uses his cunning to achieve his goals. Peter Molan describes Sinbad as a "self-justifying immoralist" (327), whose dexterity climaxes in his middle voyages, especially when, for example, he is buried in a communal tomb according to local custom and only returns home rich by killing the locals and pilfering their supplies (333). Even though Thackeray's

narrator sometimes refers to Dobbin as the “dexterous Captain” (*VF* 281), who is capable of “coax[ing], wheedl[ing], cajol[ing]” others in order to successfully pursue Amelia, his ends are ultimately well-intentioned, as he is often “not aware himself” of the methods he employs to assert his influence in the morally skewed society of *Vanity Fair* (*VF* 673). Unlike Sinbad, who is very aware of how his own unethical actions will affect others, Dobbin provides a rare example of how honestly to climb the social ladder of *Vanity Fair*. By creating an ironic connection between Dobbin and Sinbad, Thackeray uses the Oriental tale to redefine a Victorian heroism that values moral fortitude as a means of asserting the self in society.

“Rasselasian” Endurance in *Jane Eyre*

As *Vanity Fair* appeared in monthly parts, *Jane Eyre* appeared in October 1847. Brontë dedicated the second edition to Thackeray, writing in her preface: “There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society...who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital” (*JE* 2).²⁶ Brontë admired Thackeray for his “intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognized” and “regard[ed] him as the first social regenerator of the day” (*JE* 2). Brontë’s admiration of Thackeray’s “truth” and his force as a “social regenerator,” as the Dobbin example suggests, becomes evident in Brontë’s use of the Oriental tale intertext in *Jane Eyre*. While Brontë does not employ the tales in Thackeray’s predominantly ironic and humorous fashion, she does suggest that reading such tales provides Jane profound insight into a woman’s role in a male-dominated society. Jane’s patient endurance, similar to Dobbin’s, allows her to fulfill her desires without submitting to masculine ideals of a woman’s role in marriage.

²⁶ To distinguish between the Brontës’ novels, I will abbreviate subsequent citations to *Jane Eyre* as *JE* and to *Wuthering Heights* as *WH*.

Scholars have shown that the young Charlotte Brontë and her siblings were avid readers of Oriental tales, including Galland's *Arabian Nights*.²⁷ The children's encounters with such stories inspired them to reenact voyages to fictitious islands, taking on personages of "the Chief Genius Talli, the Chief Genius Branni, the Chief Genius Emmi, and the Chief Genius Anni," for example, as they pretended to explore such places as a "band of shipwrecked adventurers" (Ratchford 12). When Charlotte was twelve years old, she and her siblings began writing what has been collectively called "the juvenilia," which comprises sagas about invented kingdoms: Charlotte and Branwell's named "Angria" and Emily and Anne's "Gondal" (Ratchford 17-35; Workman 152-54; Elfenbein 128-29).²⁸ As various scholars have noted, the Brontës' juvenilia compensated for a childhood spent at their father's isolated parsonage in Haworth, a fragmented family life, and limited schooling; writing became the children's means of forging their own identities (Elfenbein 128-29; Armstrong 189). Charlotte's preoccupation with genii in her Angrian collection provided her an avenue not only to generate her own personal and literary identity distinct from that of her siblings, but also to experiment with themes of social power dynamics evident in Oriental tales. As Nancy Workman aptly notes, genii held "enormous power...over the universe which [] human characters inhabit" (157), and provided Charlotte an example of "agency not restricted by conventions of the real world" (48).

Many scholars have pointed to the effects that Charlotte's juvenilia produced on her later works, particularly *Jane Eyre*. Jennifer Gribble argues that Charlotte shares with Jane "the tremendous energy of an imagination pressing at the confines of a governess's social context and a nervously retiring personality" and the similar role that Charlotte's imagination played in "her

²⁷ For example, Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford notes that the parsonage bookshelves contained "favorites worn shabby by much reading, such as *The Arabian Nights* and titles by Bewick, Johnson, Scott, Byron, and Southey" (3-4).

²⁸ For thorough and standard accounts of the Brontës' childhood and juvenilia, see, for example, Fannie Elizabeth Ratchford, *The Brontës' Web of Childhood* (New York: Russell & Russell, Inc., 1964); Christine Alexander, *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

own dreary life” (279). Critics have pointed to *Jane Eyre*’s imaginative powers and romantic features as standing apart from the nineteenth-century realistic novel, as Brontë’s work charts an “inner life, not...man in his social relations” (Tillotson 257).²⁹ However, Brontë’s use of allusion, particularly to Oriental tales, not only demonstrates that *Jane Eyre* “shares common concerns with other famous Victorian novels” (Wheeler 43), but also enables Brontë to draw on such “well-established literary conventions” to provide keen insight into female subjectivity within “a broad network of political and social values” (Langland, *Telling Tales* 1-2).³⁰ Oriental tales intertexts in *Jane Eyre* thus especially allow Brontë to explore how the imagination offers Jane influential guidance on navigating gendered power dynamics in her own hostile society.³¹

Like both Dickens and Thackeray, Charlotte Brontë employs allusions to Eastern tales in *Jane Eyre* to provide a young protagonist with fanciful escapes from an often-unpleasant reality. However, *The History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia* (1759), Samuel Johnson’s “philosophic” Oriental tale,³² presents a particularly meaningful framework for Jane’s personal and social development throughout *Jane Eyre*. The *Rasselas* intertext provides Jane with a model of virtuous endurance, a spiritual fortitude that enables her ultimately to attain an influential role in her society.³³ As the Victorian reader views Jane reading *Rasselas*, who in turn watches Helen Burns

²⁹ On the other hand, contemporary critic G. H. Lewes argued in an 1847 review, “Reality – deep, significant reality – is the great characteristic of the book” due to its autobiographical form and the “actual suffering and experience” that Brontë displays, placing it closer to the realist fiction of the 1840s (“Recent Novels: French and English” 691).

³⁰ Although Langland studies Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849), she examines the novel in an intertextual relationship with *Vanity Fair*, exploring male and female authors’ perspectives on subjectivity within “well-established literary conventions” (1).

³¹ Andrew Elfenbein notes that despite the Brontës’ cultural isolation, they followed literary trends and important authors by reading periodicals at the parsonage, such as *Blackwood’s Magazine* and *Fraser’s Magazine* (129). One such author was Lord Byron, whose influence can be seen in the sexual dynamics of the Angria writings, such as *Caroline Vernon*, one of the last pieces of the collection. Charlotte and Branwell’s characters assume “Byronic roles of predator and prey once overt sexuality erupts,” in which “dominating men annihilate women” (Elfenbein 133).

³² Martha Pike Conant places *Rasselas* in her “Philosophic Group” of Oriental tales, claiming that “the story is broken by continual philosophizing...held together by the slender thread of narrative,” reflecting Johnson’s own philosophic views as professed in his periodicals such as the *Rambler* and the *Idler* (140-41).

³³ In Johnson’s tale, Rasselas, a successor to the Abyssinian throne, leaves the Edenic Happy Valley with his sister and her lady in waiting to pursue knowledge and happiness in the outside world. Guided by the enlightened poet

read the Oriental tale, Brontë suggests that rereading and recontextualizing can provide both author and reader with the power to manipulate a tale to one's own social advantage. Many critics have noted Brontë's references to the *Arabian Nights* in *Jane Eyre*,³⁴ and Michael Wheeler argues that books familiar to the "Reader," whom Jane repeatedly addresses, act as markers along Jane's journey throughout the novel (26). I will argue, however, that *Rasselas* does not merely "mark" Jane's journey throughout the novel, but more importantly, provides Jane a moral trajectory that she can follow to achieve her personal desires and gain authority over the strong male figures in her life.

Brontë's reference to *Rasselas* appears shortly after Jane has been sent to Lowood School by her Aunt Reed, in whose dwelling Jane's only means of escaping her dreadful reality is her foray into books. When Jane meets Helen Burns for the first time, Jane's own loneliness ("I had spoken to no one, nor did anybody seem to take notice of me" (*JE* 41)) draws her attention to the studious Helen: "I saw a girl sitting on a stone bench near; she was bent over a book, on the perusal of which she seemed intent: from where I stood I could see the title – it was 'Rasselas,' a name that struck me as strange, and consequently attractive" (*JE* 41). Jane's conflation of the "strange" with the "attractive" whets her interest in *Rasselas* as a potentially fantastic tale, whose exotic aura might encourage escape into her imagination. Upon a quick glance at the book, however, Jane notes that "the contents were less taking than the title: 'Rasselas' looked dull to my trifling taste; I saw nothing about fairies, nothing about genii; no bright variety seemed spread over the closely printed pages" (*JE* 42). Jane's penchant for fantasies involving "fairies," "genii," and "bright variety" are ill-served by Johnson's narrative, which seeks to instill "virtue...the

Imlac, the characters travel to locations in Upper and Lower Egypt where they observe many scenes, only to conclude that their desires are not attainable in a worldly existence.

³⁴ Both Ali and Workman argue that the dynamic between Jane and Rochester mimics that between Scheherazade and Schahriar. Ali states that "Jane's method of counteracting Rochester's imperiousness and sarcasm is basically the same as Scheherazade's" (59), and Workman argues that Jane, like Scheherazade, "controls her universe through language" (48).

highest proof of understanding” instead of acting as an “entertainment of minds” (*Rambler* No. 4).³⁵ Brontë also suggests that the Victorian reading public might share Jane’s tastes, and likewise be encouraged to ponder what such a philosophic tale may contribute to rereading the self in relation to one’s community.

As an intertext at this early juncture in the novel, *Rasselas* gains significance for Jane as a formative, didactic fiction through which both character and reader might manage reality. Having just escaped real world troubles by means of imaginary tales, Jane’s encounter with *Rasselas* reinforces the dangers of avoiding reality. On the first page of the novel, Jane evokes an isolation associated with the enjoyment of fantasy: “I soon possessed myself of a volume, taking care that it should be one stored with pictures....I sat cross-legged like a Turk; and, having drawn the red moreen curtain nearly close, I was shrined in double retirement” (*JE* 5). Brontë emphasizes Jane’s “double retirement” both in the physical room and in her mind, calling up Oriental images of the “Turk” and the “red moreen curtain” to imitate her fantasy. The books that Jane reads, however, allow her to recognize certain counterparts in her own life, most notably the “tyrant” and “slave-driver,” or Oriental sultan-figure, that John Reed becomes when he forbids her access to books and throws one at her in punishment (*JE* 8-9). As the John Reed episode displays, the Oriental tale provides Jane acute insight into her social dilemma, as she “felt resolved...to go all lengths” in defending herself like “any other rebel slave” against “Master Reed” (*JE* 9). Samuel Johnson evokes this same binary of imagination versus reality at the beginning of *Rasselas*, when Rasselas, confined to the Happy Valley, uses his imagination to escape his boredom.³⁶ Just at the point when Rasselas encounters many “imaginary difficulties” (Johnson 49), Imlac, the enlightened poet, enters the scene to share his real life experiences with Rasselas and to prevent him from

³⁵ See *Selected Essays of Samuel Johnson*, ed. David Womersley (London: Penguin, 2003).

³⁶ Scholars have noted that Johnson distrusted the imagination as a “means of escaping reality and avoiding action by withdrawing into the ideal world” (Rogers 213).

“indulg[ing] in the power of fiction” (Johnson 123). Jane’s encounter with *Rasselas* at a young age serves a similar purpose: as a book that does not contain “fairies” and “genii,” *Jane Eyre*, like *Rasselas*, uses language and the narrative as a powerful tool to cope with and confront reality, instead of using the imaginary entirely to avoid the real.³⁷

Jane’s association with *Rasselas*’s character also calls attention to Helen Burns as an Imlac-figure, who can instruct both Jane and the reader in practicing endurance to overcome social pressures. Many scholars have connected *Rasselas*’s influence on *Jane Eyre* closely with Helen’s character, who embodies a moral understanding that parallels Johnson’s views on eternity as professed in *Rasselas*: to be satisfied with life’s events, not to question God’s plan, and to expect to find true happiness in eternity (Workman 189).³⁸ From Jane’s vantage, Helen is an enlightened figure, who teaches Jane how to patiently endure life’s trials by controlling her heated feelings. Jane tells Helen that she seeks a more powerful experience of the world than her life at Lowood offered (“I wished the wind would howl more wildly, the gloom deepen to darkness” (*JE* 46)), much as *Rasselas*, before he meets Imlac, has an urge to experience the world more intensely, “to place himself in various conditions...to be engaged in wild adventure” (Johnson 49). Just as *Rasselas* at first does not understand Imlac’s ideas about “subordination,” which the poet explains, “supposes power on one part and subjection on the other” (Johnson 57), so Helen’s principle of “endurance” initially does not resonate with Jane. When Helen says, “It is far better to endure patiently a smart which nobody feels but yourself, than to commit a hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected to you,” Jane muses, “I could not comprehend this doctrine of endurance...I felt that Helen Burns considered things by a light invisible to my eyes”

³⁷ Jennifer Gribble claims that Charlotte would have agreed with her contemporary critics, such as G. H. Lewes, “that it is only through the imagination that ‘reality’ can be fully explored and understood” (281).

³⁸ Other critics have who have studied Helen Burns in connection with *Rasselas* have posited, for example, that her illness serves as a type of confinement, her own Happy Valley on earth, viewing her death as a sign of her final liberty “as if her body...were...the dank valley in which she has been caged” (Gilbert and Gubar 346).

(*JE* 47). Even though Jane at this young stage does not understand Helen's spirituality, Helen's fortitude becomes a principle that informs Jane's later experiences, just as Imlac's guidance teaches *Rasselas* the observations necessary to act virtuously in the world.

With her reference to *Rasselas*, Brontë posits a connection between the Oriental tale's value in guiding Jane's journey toward personal and social understanding and her own novel as a potential source of guidance for readers who might share Jane's frustration in confronting a hostile society. As Jessica Richard argues, "Brontë uses *Rasselasian* imagery to evoke the pathos of Jane's suffering" (348), and her physical and social confinement, from her time at Gateshead, to Lowood School, to Thornfield Hall, recalling *Rasselas's* confinement in the Happy Valley, allows Brontë to suggest "that women must also seek the choice of life that leads to fulfillment" (350). While Jane's pursuit of the "choice of life" certainly differs from Helen's "choice of eternity," *Rasselas* informs Jane's later experiences and provides her with a model of endurance needed to withstand difficult situations, such as Jane's encounters with Rochester and St. John Rivers, which become significant parts of her "choice of life." In the first instance, when Rochester and Jane are to marry, Jane realizes that she cannot marry a man who has a legal wife, as Bertha Mason remains to Rochester. As Rochester attempts to explain his situation to Jane, he equates a "mistress," such as his past lover Céline Varens, with "buying a slave," as "both are often by nature, and always by position, inferior" (*JE* 266). His words resonate with Jane:

I felt the truth of these words...if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me as...to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory. I did not give utterance to this conviction: it was enough to feel it. I impressed it on my heart, that it might remain there to serve me as aid in the time of trial. (*JE* 266)

Even though Jane forgives Rochester's past actions, "all the teaching that had ever been instilled" in her prevents her from accepting a position inferior to his. The "teaching" she refers to is that of "endurance," to which Helen introduces her at an early age: Jane now understands Helen's example of controlling her passions and not committing what Helen calls a "hasty action whose evil consequences will extend to all connected to you" (*JE* 47). Jane claims that she will guard these thoughts to help her "in the time of trial"; however, in refusing Rochester's marriage, Brontë suggests that Jane has already overcome one trial on the path toward a more virtuous understanding of self.

Jane's recognition of companionship in marriage (more important than mere passion) emphasizes *Rasselas*'s relevance as a multilayered intertext: Jane's moral progress parallels both that which Johnson wished his travelers to achieve and that which Brontë wishes her readers to gain through the act of reading the novel. Jane's understanding of a woman's role in marriage not only reflects Imlac's early words to *Rasselas* about the danger of "subordination" (Johnson 57), but also echoes "the debate on marriage" that *Rasselas* and his sister Nekayah discuss in their observations of private and public life (Johnson 95). In his theory of marriage, *Rasselas* stresses the importance of mutuality, which, as he says to Nekayah, will ultimately lead to happiness: "Marriage is evidently the dictate of nature; men and women were made to be companions of each other...I cannot be persuaded but that marriage is one of the means of happiness" (Johnson 94). In this view, *Rasselas*, like Jane, believes that men and women "were made to be companions of each other," and that marriage, as "the dictate of nature," is merely "*one* of the means of happiness" (my emphasis), not the only means. Similarly, Jane recognizes that by leaving Rochester, she will be able to seek happiness elsewhere, in a place where she can fulfill her desires without sacrificing her values. Jane later rejects St. John Rivers because, as with Rochester, her passions and principles diverge. In deciding not to travel to India with St. John, Jane thinks:

Oh! it would never do! As his curate, his comrade, all would be right: I would cross oceans with him in that capacity; toil under Eastern suns...admire and emulate his courage and devotion...but as his wife...forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry...this would be unendurable. (*JE* 347)

While Jane respects St. John's Christianity, her personal goals and sense of virtue do not match his. Jane would be "forced" to sublimate her desires, which would be "unendurable" for her. She recognizes that she would not be a true "companion" to St. John, in *Rasselas's* words, and that their differing passions would not lead her to happiness.

In *Rasselas's* "conclusion, in which nothing is concluded" (Johnson 137), Johnson posits that the journey toward virtuous understanding itself gains more importance than any specific knowledge acquired along the route. Similarly, Jane's personal journey involves controlling her inner desires and situating her own moral values above men's wishes for her, as her means of asserting authority over them. As Jane enters on her own path toward moral and emotional happiness with Rochester, she respects St. John's Christian journey, with which Brontë ends the novel. Jessica Richard remarks that Brontë's unsettling conclusion "resists closure" much like Johnson's (351), and that ending with St. John's story, according to Heather Glen, allows "other possibilities of meaning to come into the text" (qtd. in Richard 351). I argue, however, that Jane's effective reading of the *Rasselas* intertext allows her to realize that there are many paths toward happiness, marriage being only "one of the means," as *Rasselas* says (Johnson 94); nevertheless, marriage is the means that Jane chooses as the most attractive to fulfilling her personal desires, over the more heroic vocation that St. John pursues. In *Jane Eyre*, the *Rasselas* intertext underscores Jane's struggle to reconcile imagination and reason, desire and the social barriers to its fulfillment. Through *Rasselas*, Brontë also calls her Victorian audience to reread Jane's story

through the lens of the Oriental tale, as a fictional means of navigating how to define the self in the domestic community.

Nelly Dean: The Scheherazade of *Wuthering Heights*

At the same time young Charlotte developed her kingdom of Angria, Emily Brontë, along with her sister Anne, created Gondal, “a large island in the North Pacific, a country of snow-capped mountains, moors, and wide-spreading lakes” (Ratchford 65). Although only fragments of her Gondal poetry survive, the kingdom itself sheds light on Emily’s imaginary world versus her actual experiences at Haworth. Andrew Elfenbein claims that the only real “experience” that Emily had was her writing, which in turn reflected an “imaginary life” and, therefore, “the pretended division between imaginary and real experience collapses when examining her work” (134). Unlike Charlotte and Branwell’s Angria, a kingdom in which strong male figures dominated females, mimicking complex sexual dynamics in Lord Byron’s poetry, Emily’s Gondal took the opposite stance: instead of defining a woman’s history in relation to man, Emily “demonstrated how barren female subjectivity became as a result of such [patriarchal] assumptions” (Elfenbein 134). In her Gondal writings, Emily forged her own identity against that of her siblings and, like Charlotte, tested theories of gendered power dynamics through her early fiction.

Critics have often remarked upon Emily Brontë’s peculiar identity and her lack of personal history, as aspects that come to the fore both in her Gondal poetry and in her later works. While her siblings had put their juvenilia behind them and had left home to confront the world by 1839, Emily remained home at Haworth with her father and continued writing. Unlike other contemporary female writers, Emily’s work lacked any “didactic impulse” concerning “domestic and religious topics” (Elfenbein 138). Thus, in addition to being a marginalized figure as a woman, she remained farther outside of convention by not getting married, and Andrew Elfenbein

even argues that a lack of personal information about Emily reinforces her status as a “non-person” (126). Despite her personal and social isolation, Emily’s familiarity with Byron’s work, as well as with that of her siblings and contemporaries, allowed her to remain both inside and outside of literary conventions. While Raymond Williams describes *Wuthering Heights* as “a novel without a history: a novel without precedents or descendants” (63), I will posit that Emily uses Oriental tales not only as a way to participate in conventional literary modes, but also to give agency and history to a subordinate female character like herself, particularly through the act of writing oneself into a story.

Shortly after the first edition of *Jane Eyre* was published in October 1847, Emily and Anne, under the names Ellis and Acton Bell, published their own novels – *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* – in December 1847. In her “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” to the 1850 edition of the novels, Charlotte not only revealed her sisters’ true identities, but also defended their works, especially Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*, which many reviewers called “strange” but “powerful,” in addition to much more severe criticism.³⁹ In accounting for the novel’s “strangeness” critics such as Dorothy Van Ghent have pointed to the story’s “elemental figures” and lack of “civilized habits” that were otherwise common in Victorian novels (154).⁴⁰ As one such “strange” aspect of *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë’s narrative manipulation allows the author to craft a rather fantastic story through the viewpoint of a servant, Nelly Dean, who relates the characters’ histories to Lockwood, a tenant of Heathcliff’s Thrushcross Grange. Scholars have remarked upon Nelly Dean’s story-telling abilities and concurrent power over the novel,

³⁹ The first lines of the novel’s review in the *Examiner* (8 Jan. 1848) state: “This is a strange book. It is not without evidences of considerable power: but as a whole, it is wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable; and the people who make up the drama...are savages ruder than those who lived before the days of Homer” (“*Wuthering Heights*” 21). Charlotte responded: “the immature but very real powers revealed in *Wuthering Heights* were scarcely recognized; its import and nature were misunderstood; the identity of its author was misrepresented” (*WH* 309).

⁴⁰ Susan Meyer similarly notes that “[u]nlike *Jane Eyre*, in which dangerous energies are tamed or suppressed in the novel’s ending...*Wuthering Heights* relentlessly pursues its exploration of the ‘fearful’ and ‘disturbing’ energies of social transgression” (103).

comparing her to Scheherazade in the *Arabian Nights*, weaving her tales to a male listener for personal and social benefits. While both William Thackeray and Charlotte Brontë overtly reference Oriental tales in their novels, I will argue that Emily Brontë subtly draws upon such stories to lure her readers into the multifaceted and “strange” community of *Wuthering Heights*.⁴¹ Taking a different approach from either Thackeray or Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë’s layered narration, mediated by the Oriental tale intertext, suggests the power of storytelling itself as a means for women and other marginal figures to appropriate new forms of domestic authority.

Through recontextualizing Scheherazade’s storytelling role in the *Nights*, Nelly Dean realizes that narrating gives her the power not only to shape the story to her own personal advantage, but also to maintain social dominance despite her inferior role as a servant.⁴² While we do not actually see Nelly Dean reading the *Nights*, we first recognize her knowledge of such tales in her cunning advice to the young Heathcliff. In lamenting his inferior looks as a “dirty, ragged, black-haired child” (*WH* 29), Heathcliff exclaims to Nelly: “I wish I had light hair and fair skin...and had a chance of being as rich as [Edgar Linton] will be!” (*WH* 45). Nelly responds to Heathcliff’s outburst with an apt reference to a particular *Nights* tale: “You’re fit for a prince in disguise. Who knows but your father was Emperor of China, and your mother an Indian queen...And you were kidnapped by sailors and brought to England” (*WH* 45). Nelly’s words draw upon Galland’s story about a Persian Prince, Camaralzaman, and his Chinese Princess, Badoura, and the tale’s continuation (*ANE* 357-410), which relates “several generations of

⁴¹ As Peter Caracciolo argues, Brontë “not only places Nelly Dean in the role of Scheherazade to Lockwood’s Schahriar, but also deploys the narrative methods of the *Nights* with a subtlety that is rare amongst novelists of the period,” as the frame tale acts to further implicate the reader in Brontë’s story (27).

⁴² In *The Servant’s Hand* (1986), Bruce Robbins references the Brontë children’s relationship with their servant, Tabitha Ackroyd, claiming, “folk superstitions and social history were inseparable parts of what servants had to narrate” (105). Responding to Mikhail Bakhtin, who states in *The Dialogic Imagination*, “[s]ervants are the most privileged witnesses to private life” (125), Robbins writes that “in the period of the novel” in England, “[t]here was... a sudden and well-documented new anxiety on the part of masters and mistresses about the damage that servant spies and informants could do” (108).

conflicts between parents and children whose relationships verge perilously on the unnatural” (Caracciolo 26), another striking similarity to Brontë’s story. Although Heathcliff does not heed Nelly’s advice to transform his “dark” nature “into a bright prince of light or gold” (Gose 62-63), Nelly’s role as storyteller becomes significant here. By advising Heathcliff to prosper from his hardship rather than lament it, she provides him with valuable instruction for how to successfully survive in his social world, as she has survived as a woman and a servant. Moreover, her tale-within-tale (relating to Lockwood what she had told Heathcliff as a child) not only mimics Scheherazade’s power and control over her frame-within-frame narrative, but also allows Brontë to posit that carefully manipulating a story allows one to create a desired, if not yet fully realized, image of self in relation to others.

By humanizing Nelly through her relationship with young Heathcliff, Brontë employs Nelly as more than a mere narrative tool. Nelly’s story-telling technique, like Scheherazade’s, allows her not only to influence other characters, such as Heathcliff and Lockwood, but also to control the overall story for her own benefit. After a nightmare in which Lockwood sees Catherine Linton’s ghost at Wuthering Heights, he retreats to Thrushcross Grange where Nelly tells him a type of “bedtime story” of the manors’ histories. In the *Nights*, Scheherazade similarly relates her tales to the Sultan in the late-night hours, prolonging both his desire for more stories and her impending death until the next day. After the first night of Scheherazade’s tales, her sister Dinarzade pleads that Scheherazade continue the story of “The Merchant and the Genie” the following night, which arouses the sultan’s curiosity:

Lord, sister, says Dinarzade, what a wonderful story this is! The remainder of it, says Scheherazade, is more surprising; and you will be of mind, if the sultan will let me live this day, and permit me to tell it out next night. Schahriar, who had listened to Scheherazade

with pleasure, says to himself, I will stay to-morrow, for I can at any time put her to death, when she has made an end of her story. (*ANE* 18)

Scheherazade's plan to save her own life by never "mak[ing] an end of her story" consists of deferring the sultan's pleasure until the following day, with tales "more surprising" as the days pass. Like Scheherazade, Nelly often interrupts her story to defer Lockwood's pleasure. For example, in the middle of Heathcliff's story, Nelly interjects: "But Mr. Lockwood, I forget these tales cannot divert you. I'm annoyed at how I should dream of chattering on at such a rate...I could have told Heathcliff's history, all that you need to hear, in half-a-dozen words" (*WH* 48). Nelly's story-telling abilities so captivate Lockwood that, like Schahriar, he implores her to continue late into the night: "Sit still Mrs. Dean...do sit still another half hour! You've done just right to tell the story leisurely...and you must finish in the same style. I am interested in every character you have mentioned, more or less" (*WH* 48). In calling her story a "tale" meant to "divert" her listener, Nelly mimics Scheherazade's language to the sultan when she wishes to prolong his curiosity. Merely fascinated by Nelly's story, Lockwood, like Schahriar, does not realize that Nelly's story acts to advance her own interests, not his. Brontë suggests that Lockwood misreads Nelly's tale when he falls in love with Catherine and emphasizes Nelly's power to craft Catherine's story in the specific way she wishes Lockwood to perceive it.

Interestingly, Nelly's narrative voice drops out of the story when Lockwood feels confident enough to relate the tale to readers, as Brontë adds yet another layer of mediation to this fiction. In doing so, she forces both character and reader to decipher the story's complex narrative before using fiction to one's social or personal benefit. Lockwood expresses his narrative confidence to the reader: "Another week over – and I am so many days nearer health, and spring! I have now heard all my neighbor's story...I'll continue it in her own words, only a little condensed," claiming that he will not be able to "improve [Nelly's] style" (*WH* 121). Although

such an authorial move on Brontë's part may force both character and reader "into an active participation" with the story (Mathison 107), Brontë's deft ploy works as a parallel to Scheherazade's narrative voice, which Galland also removes from his tales.⁴³ Just as Scheherazade's stories themselves have succeeded in sparing her life thus far, Nelly's voice has laid the groundwork necessary to mold Lockwood's perceptions of characters to her own liking.⁴⁴ Lockwood merely repeats Nelly's version of the story and does not grasp her underlying aims in tale-telling, as Lockwood, a poor interpreter of the tale like Schahriar, allows Brontë to warn her audience to question a story's motives before trusting fiction as a primary means of navigating reality.

As a Scheherazade-figure, Nelly gains power by employing clever manipulations of plot both in the story's actual events and in her retelling to Lockwood. Although a mere servant, Nelly uses the tale as a tool to maintain her influential position among the characters in this community. Just as Scheherazade controls her stories to prolong her life in the sultan's kingdom, Nelly also manipulates characters' stories both to save herself from punishment and to frame situations in a way that she wishes them to transpire. At many points in her narrative to Lockwood, Nelly admits to her unfaithful behavior and role as interpreter of events for her own gratification.⁴⁵ When Nelly determines to tell Mr. Linton about Catherine's secret visits to young Linton, she often hides information to mitigate Mr. Linton's "alarm" and "distress" (*WH* 195). She relates to him the "whole story" of Catherine's time there, "with the exception of her conversations with her cousin,

⁴³ After the "Twenty-Seventh Night" of Scheherazade's tales, Galland inserts an "Advertisement" explaining that while he retained the "Arabian author's design" in repeating Scheherazade's voice up until this point, the European "reader of these Tales" would tire of this method (*ANE* 65). For this reason, he omitted the overarching frame narrative until the last night when the sultan exonerates Scheherazade.

⁴⁴ Bonamy Dobrée similarly emphasizes Brontë's "brilliance" through such narrative complication, as Nelly becomes the "vehicle of communication" that "really convey[s] the intuition, and not merely relate[s] events" (49).

⁴⁵ John Mathison also argues that Nelly "is not a mere technical device...she is a minute interpreter. She tells us what events mean, what is right or wrong, what is praiseworthy or despicable or unacceptable behavior" (106-07).

and any mention of Hareton” (*WH* 195), thus creating a pattern of deception to protect Catherine from her father. Nelly particularly hides young Linton’s defects from Mr. Linton, even after he agrees that his daughter and nephew may meet, to ensure both Catherine’s happiness and Nelly’s own pleasure in the story’s outcome. She says in her narrative to Lockwood:

Linton’s letters bore no indication of his defective character. And I, through pardonable weakness, refrained from correcting the error; asking myself what good there would be in disturbing [Mr. Linton’s] last moments with information that he had neither power nor opportunity to turn to account. (*WH* 202)

Nelly exonerates her own untruth as a “pardonable weakness,” as she admits to “asking herself what good there would be” in relating these details to Linton, thus advancing her own desire to watch these events unfold in a way that pleases her. Even in her retelling to Lockwood, Nelly recognizes her manipulative role in this story, as she crafts a domestic community in which she, as a servant, maintains power by taking it away from men such as Mr. Linton and Lockwood.

Nelly’s ultimate authority over the story’s events and over her tale to Lockwood permits her to achieve her own goals by the novel’s end. Just as Scheherazade ensures her own survival through her tale-telling abilities, Nelly not only survives her role as servant and resumes her post at Wuthering Heights by the story’s end, but she also facilitates Catherine and Hareton’s blossoming relationship by preventing Lockwood’s intrusion. Nelly says near the novel’s end: “You see, Mr. Lockwood, it was easy enough to win Mrs. Heathcliff’s heart; but now, I’m glad you did not try. The crown of all my wishes will be the union of those two; I shall envy no one on their wedding-day – there won’t be a happier woman than myself in England!” (*WH* 241).

Nelly’s admission that “it was easy enough” to make Catherine an attractive character to Lockwood implies her deliberate ploy to control these events, as the “crown of all” *her* “wishes” has come true, foremost over Cathy’s and Hareton’s. The fact that *she* will be the “happiest

woman” in England, aside from what she calls Cathy’s “lighter heart” and desire to “lov[e] and...to be esteemed” by Hareton (*WH* 241), suggests Nelly’s personal stake in altering the story for her own gratification. Although Scheherazade does not express her tale-telling motives as explicitly as Nelly does, she also manipulates the sultan to ensure her own survival: “I see, lovely Scheherazade, said [the sultan], that you can never be at a loss for these sort of stories to divert me; therefore I renounce in your favour the cruel law I had imposed on myself,” as he recognizes his “unjust resentment” of women in his kingdom (*ANE* 892). In light of Nelly’s manipulative tactics, some critics have cast her as the “villain” of *Wuthering Heights* or as the “witch” of this fairytale-like story.⁴⁶ I have suggested, however, that Brontë associates Nelly with Scheherazade in a positive and consequential way, displaying the enhanced identity and power that both character (servant) and author (female), as socially inferior members of a community, can accrue through storytelling.

Domesticating Oriental “Otherness”

As innovatively as William Thackeray, Charlotte and Emily Brontë employ the Oriental tale to reconfigure gendered power dynamics in novelistic representations of Victorian domestic life, references to the tales also provide these authors a framework for more conventional “happy-ever-after” endings that such stories prized. All three novels conclude with traditional marriage plots valued by the domestic novel, shunning more qualified endings, such as Mr. Dombey’s ultimate reentry into family life but failed marriage to Edith, or Pip’s acceptance into the adopted family of Herbert and Clara but sustained bachelorhood. Like Scheherazade’s successful marriage to Schahriar after her tales “induced him at last to forgive her” and the couple “gained...the blessings of all the people of the large empire of the Indies” (*ANE* 892), Dobbin, Jane, and Nelly

⁴⁶ James Hafley makes a strong claim that Nelly is “the villain of [*Wuthering Heights*]” and “one of the consummate villains in English literature” (199). Elliott Gose, on the other hand, argues that while “Catherine at one point views Nelly as a potential witch,” Nelly “always acts from good motives, by her standard” (64).

all achieve their own happy endings: the self acquires new authority in the domestic community which, nevertheless, honors marriage as a significant path toward such happiness.

The Oriental tale in the Victorian novel of 1847 and 1848 not only enhances the resonance of a fairytale ending, but it also reconfigures boundaries, literary, geographical, and temporal, as the novel domesticates Oriental “otherness” at home, in England. In *Vanity Fair*, *Dombey and Son*, and *Jane Eyre*, for example, authors considerably integrate the East into the domestic sphere as characters’ occupations, whether secular or religious, greatly influence the happiness of their loved ones at home. In later Victorian novels, authors cast the East as even more synonymous with an English home. In *Great Expectations*, for example, the East literally becomes Pip’s home with Herbert and Clara, as Herbert, before venturing to Clarriker’s “branch-house in the East,” would “sketch airy pictures of himself conducting Clara Barley to the land of the Arabian Nights, and of [Pip] going out to join them (with a caravan of camels, I believe), and of our all going up the Nile and seeing wonders” (*GE* 416). While Pip’s actual time in the East is not as fantastic as he imagines it, the East does, ironically, constitute his own romantic ending, substituting for a traditional marriage plot and casting the exotic as a familiar space in which to redefine the self.

Similar to the fluid geographic boundaries that the tales invited, Oriental stories allowed Victorians to participate in a temporal “reaching back” not only to eighteenth-century tales,⁴⁷ but also to ancient Eastern and Western literature. As Cornelia Cook writes, narrative repetition and circular time, as characteristic elements of Arabic storytelling, enhance the “telescoping processes of time and opening out towards past and future” (207). In 1789, Horace Walpole elucidated such historical reaching of Oriental tales when he wrote in a letter to a friend, “Read Sinbad the Sailor’s

⁴⁷ Kathleen Tillotson notes this historical “reach” in *Vanity Fair*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*, which all take place prior to the 1840s (96-97). She argues that, especially in *Wuthering Heights*, the “eighteenth-century dating gives a certain warrant, in the somewhat politer eighteen-forties, for the violent behavior and speech of the characters” and that “above all, it enriches the aesthetic distance, underlining the distancing effect of Mr. Lockwood and Nelly Dean” (97).

voyages and you will be sick of Aeneas's" (qtd. in Caracciolo 3). As Walpole's statement suggests, tales such as Sinbad's reconfigured the classic stories of Virgil and Homer and, as such, provided competition for ancient Western literature by the early-1700s.

In a forward-extending movement, Oriental tales continued to influence twentieth-century writers, such as James Joyce,⁴⁸ for the same reasons Victorian novelists found them attractive: the tales demonstrated a "cultural exoticism and domestic realism existing side by side," as Srinivas Aravamudan suggests (256). Oriental tales thus allowed both nineteenth- and twentieth-century authors to recontextualize Eastern stories as part of Western culture, involving readers in a literary tradition much more geographically and temporally complex and far-reaching than even Galland's *Arabian Nights* had established. By referencing Oriental tales through what Edward Said calls "agreed-upon codes of understanding" and not "upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (22), Victorian authors participated in reconfiguring an "amorphous" and "romantic" East by domesticating the Oriental tale in realist novels of the period, at the same time as England began to accept Oriental culture more broadly into its own spheres of social, cultural, and political reality.

⁴⁸ In *Ulysses*, Joyce juxtaposes Eastern and Western literary traditions when Leopold Bloom vocalizes variations on Sinbad the Sailor's name: "Sinbad the Sailor and Tinbad the Tailor and Jinbad the Jailer..." (Joyce 17.2319-31). Aravamudan argues that this reference suggests "the possibilities of a predictive literature within the interior domestic fiction...evok[ing] the endless machine of travel literature from *The Odyssey* onward that continues generating output even as the rules are slightly changed" to accommodate variations on this theme (260-61).

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