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"Free to love and be loved:"

Gifts, Commerce, and the Pursuit of Autonomy in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*

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Abstract

This paper draws on the anthropological literature on gift economies to reconsider the way Charlotte Brontë imagines the possibilities for women's commercial mobility in Victorian England. Specifically, it examines the overlap of gift and commercial economies in *Jane Eyre*, first exploring Jane's reliance on commerce to safeguard her independence as a woman and an orphan, and then investigating the way Jane's spiritual sojourn on the moor prepares her to act as a vessel of the gift. Reviewing pivotal economic scenes in the text—such as the bridal shopping spree that makes Jane "burn with annoyance," and Jane's distribution of her inheritance among the cousins she feels indebted to—I demonstrate Jane's talent for navigating the conflicting demands of gifts and commodities. This skill ultimately enables Jane to capitulate to the total gift existence, in which, the novel implies, she need no longer preserve her hard-won autonomy because she and her husband are fused emotionally into one. My reading of *Jane Eyre's* gift and commercial economies helps explain Jane's otherwise puzzling conversion at the end of the book from an impassioned, rebellious actor in the commercial marketplace into a docile wife inhabiting the secluded gift realm of marriage. Money, the novel uncynically affirms, is one of the few tools able to transcend social constraint and facilitate female autonomy.

Keywords: Jane Eyre, Autonomy, Commerce, the Gift

In their classic feminist reading of *Jane Eyre*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan 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—from which the heroine must break free. In this paper, I argue that Jane's primary mode of "escape" throughout the novel is the commercial economy. When she has outgrown the constraints of Lowood, for instance, Jane procures her "new servitude" (Brontë I.107) by placing an advertisement—making use, that is, of the language of commerce. Later, after fleeing penniless from Thornfield, it is her employment as a village schoolmistress in Morton that allows Jane to live "free and honest" rather than a "slave" in the "fool's paradise" of Rochester's illegitimate protection (II.159). 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.

I draw my understanding of commercial economies from Lewis Hyde's seminal work of cultural criticism, *The Gift*, in which Hyde draws on wide-ranging anthropological literature to explore the distinctions between gifts and commerce. Hyde explains that "the gift must always move" and "must always be used up, consumed," while the commodity marks the inflexible boundaries of property and is invested for personal gain rather than used up in its transfer (Hyde 4, 10). In addition, Hyde writes, "it is the cardinal difference between gift and commodity exchange that a gift establishes a feeling-bond between two people, while the sale of a commodity leaves no necessary connection" (72). The state of being unconnected, of course, is the condition of being alone, but it is also the condition of being free. Where gifts abolish boundaries in their passage from one party to another, commodities preserve boundaries when

they change hands, or erect boundaries where there may have been none: crucially, they perpetuate the anonymity and independence of their participants (Hyde 78). Brontë's *Jane Eyre* dramatizes the concerns of autonomy that gifts and commodities raise. Jane's story is, at its core, a story of commercial independence at the cost, oftentimes, of connection. As an orphan, Jane exemplifies the condition of unconnectedness, and the emotional climax of the novel arrives when she chooses to preserve her solitude—and dignity—in the face of a longed-for alliance: the illegitimate marriage to Mr. Rochester. This choice brings Jane to the moor, where she wanders alone in a spiritual episode that intensifies her alienation from society but ultimately prepares her to serve as a channel for the gift, which she receives in the form of her uncle's fortune and passes on to her cousins. This gift secures Jane lasting autonomy and allows her to finally enter the gift economy of marriage in the seclusion of Ferndean Manor, completing at last her removal from the public sphere of commerce and immersing Jane instead in the feeling-filled realm of private life, domesticity, and family.

From early in the novel, Jane shows herself uniquely able to recognize the demands of gifts and commerce. She deplores Master John's childish masquerade of property ownership, telling her cousin, when he claims that "[the bookshelves] *are* mine; all the house belongs to me," that he is just "like the Roman emperors!" (Brontë I.6). She also sees through the false charity of Mrs. Reed, and eventually rejects her aunt's poisonous gifts and the oppressive ties they foster. "'I am not your dear;'" she informs her aunt in her famous impassioned scene of reckoning, giving the lie to the emotional connection that, in word if not in reality, ought to bind the orphan to her guardian. "'Send me to school soon, Mrs. Reed, for I hate to live here'" (I.42). For a child, Jane is already at the novel's start remarkably attentive to the ways that charity goes hand in hand with dependence, and gifts with obligations, within a capitalist society.

Jane's economic savvy, however, may be best observed in her adulthood, when she becomes engaged to her employer. One of the most illuminating instances of gifting in the novel arrives when Mr. Rochester takes his young bride shopping. Significantly, this is a scene both of gifting and of a direct engagement with the commercial economy: Rochester makes purchases on Jane's behalf, and in his mind this activity fortifies the bond between them. To Jane, however, the scene elicits great distress. As Mr. Rochester attempts to lavish expensive gowns and jewels on her, 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 importing them from the market into the intimate domain of marriage. 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" (470). Alert to the various constraints of these economies, Jane keenly grasps that Rochester's intended conversion has the potential to reinscribe power imbalances between her and her groom.

Jane's account of the shopping spree suggests that it draws into sharp relief the status differential 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. (Brontë II.37)

Jane's characterizations of Rochester as "obliging" and "ordering" and herself as fruitlessly "begging leave" conjure a distinct sense of domination in this scene. In the service of purportedly gratifying his bride, Rochester subjects her to a coercive magnanimity that attributes all the power in the relationship to himself and leaves very little for Jane to do but blush with "annoyance and degradation."

Rochester's domineering generosity is only accentuated in following passages. In the carriage on their ride 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, metaphors which suggest that Jane detects a sense of ownership in Rochester's regard for herself. It becomes clear that the gift in this scene is coercive because Rochester is treating Jane not as an equal with whom his gifts forge a "feeling-bond" (Hyde 72), but as an item of property herself: according to one old definition, Lewis Hyde explains, property is a "right of action" in something—to use, to enjoy, to destroy, or, in this case, to pamper (122). "There is no property without an actor, then, and in this sense property is an expression of the human will in things (and in other people)," Hyde explains (122). The gifts Rochester attempts to foist on Jane in Millcote represent Rochester's confidence in his right of action in Jane, and function as a stratifying apparatus which, while they give the appearance of solidifying the tie between bride and groom, simultaneously distance them along gender and class divides. Jane's aversion to her groom's silks and jewels—to "being dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester" (Brontë II.38)—represents her earnest attempt to shore up her autonomy against the threat of becoming a commodity herself.

Jane's ultimate rejection of objecthood comes when she resolves to flee Thornfield after discovering the existence of Bertha Mason, Rochester's living wife. Rochester's proposal to spirit Jane away to Europe in the wake of this discovery extends to Jane a promise of connection and belonging, but Jane famously chooses desolation and itinerancy in its stead, living for a short time "outcast, vagrant, and disowned by the wide world" (Brontë II.129). Jane even describes herself as a "mendicant," a term which the OED has defined in broad use as "a holy man or woman who begs for food" (Brontë II.129; "Mendicant," n1). In his analysis of gift cycles, Lewis Hyde calls the mendicant "the bearer of the empty place" (30). As such,

> the religious mendicant has an active duty beyond his supplication. He is the vehicle of that fluidity which is abundance. The wealth of the group touches his bowl at all sides… The gift gathers there, and the mendicant gives it away again when he meets someone who is empty (30).

In this passage, Hyde makes clear the mendicant's role in spreading the gift, facilitating its movement through a culture. The "gift moves towards the empty place" (Hyde 29), and Jane is that empty place when she turns up, cold and hungry, on the Rivers' doorstep. To her comes the gift of care when the Rivers feed and shelter her for a month, and when St. John finds her work. Her "bowl" is filled by their generosity, and must then empty once again on another's need.

Jane's opportunity to pay the gift forward comes when she inherits twenty thousand pounds from John Eyre. The money reaches her as an artifact of the commercial culture: inheritance is, of course, a means of transmitting assets, but one by which an individual can get rich without fully entering the marketplace. In Victorian England, it was the institution of inheritance that allowed wealthy families like the Reeds, Rochesters, and Ingrams to sustain large and profitable estates without ever working for a wage. Therefor money in the form of

inheritance might be seen to behave like the gift, and this is precisely how Jane uses it. Subjecting capital—the raw material of the commercial economy—to the logic of the gift, Jane delivers on her responsibility as a mendicant when she diverts the flow of her uncle's wealth in the direction of her neglected cousins at Moor-House. Her first act upon learning of her wealth is to divide it into four equal portions and distribute three of these to St. John, Diana, and Mary. In this gesture, Jane deftly fulfills her spiritual calling as the gift's vessel and passes the abundance that has filled her begging bowl on to a new "empty place."

In her act of generosity, however, Jane also seeks to settle the debt she owes the Rivers' in a more transactional manner than Hyde's theory of mendicancy allows. Against St. John's initial objections to her 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). This declaration suggests that the freely shared inheritance, in true gift fashion, promises to integrate Jane into a social unit, forging bonds of attachment in its passage and "winning [Jane] life-long friends." But Jane's remark also insinuates that the inheritance disarticulates her from the Rivers' social unit--and that Jane finds this prospect appealing. In its essence, Jane's gift of money to her cousins mimics a commercial transaction in that it impels the movement of currency with the purpose of "repaying" an "obligation." Such a gift produces similar effects to those of 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 other's "obligations," Jane might not have been at liberty to refuse St. John when he did ask her. Jane's sexual freedom, we see, as well as her economic independence, lives or dies by the turns of the marketplace.

In simultaneously fulfilling her role as mendicant and settling her debt to the Rivers, Jane shows that she can reconstitute money as a gift even while exploiting its market value. This move serves her remarkably well. While the institution of inheritance typically enforces gender and class hierarchies, John Eyre's bequest of twenty thousand pounds to his destitute niece has the uncharacteristic effect of weakening the constraints of class and gender, elevating Jane's station in society and granting her independence beyond her lot as a woman and an orphan. In this sense, the inheritance provides another instance in which commerce—here, literal capital—enables Jane's improbable maiden autonomy. Jane's own ingenious manipulation of the inheritance as a polysemic sign operating in both commercial and gift contexts at once enables Jane to claim independence for herself without actually alienating herself from society.

Arriving late in the novel, the inheritance also satisfies an important narratological need. Putting an end to Jane's long destitution, 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 many confinements. The inheritance-as-money gives Jane the financial independence that enables her to approach Rochester again, now more nearly his equal than she was when she first became his bride. The inheritance-as-gift, however, and what Jane does with it, cultivates in the novel the narrative conditions necessary to make plausible its incongruous close. Jane's transformation from an impassioned and restless seeker to a docile and contented wife has perplexed readers across decades, but her spiritual interlude as a mendicant, and her execution of the duties that Hyde attaches to this position, may suggest answers to this narrative crux. Hyde writes,

> the labor of gratitude is the middle term in the passage of a gift…We cannot receive the gift until we can meet it as an equal. We therefor submit ourselves to the labor of

> becoming like the gift. Giving a return gift is the final act in the labor of gratitude, and it is also, therefore, the true acceptance of the original gift. (65)

We might hear Jane refer to the labor of gratitude when she remarks, of sharing her wealth: "good fortune opens the hand as well as the heart wonderfully; and to give somewhat when we have largely received, is but to afford a vent to the unusual ebullition of the sensations" (Brontë II.199). In "truly accepting" the original gift that the Rivers gave her when she collapsed starving outside their door, Jane in effect becomes "like the gift," makes herself equal to it, and is thus consecrated as an actor in the gift economy as well as a resourceful navigator of the commercial one. In fact, after she joins the gift cycle, Jane no longer need dowse for commercial autonomy at all. She can finally turn her sights toward an ideal vision of marriage as a pure gift economy, a construct that could not be reconciled with her market pursuits until now.

To illustrate the depth of Jane's evolution here, we might return to the reviled scene of the shopping spree. Rochester's attempts in that scene 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 encountered the extremes of unconnectedness during her three-day interlude amid the heather, and learned to think and act in the spirit of the gift, can Jane agree to marry her master and submit fully to the gift economy.

The final chapters of Jane's account see her embracing the notion of the 'pure gift,' unmotivated by personal interest. Jonathan Parry has shown the fiction of the pure gift to be historically "inseparable from the ideology of the purely interested individual pursuit of utility, and to emerge in parallel to it" (Parry 453). If *Jane Eyre* tracks the development of these converse notions, the end of the novel finally situates its heroine in a fantasy of selfless devotion and care. As Rochester's wife, Jane performs what Hyde calls "gift labor" day in and day out, waiting on her blind and handicapped husband at Ferndean. Gift labors "cannot, by their nature, be undertaken in the willed, time-conscious, quantitative style of the market," Hyde explains (138). They are typically female or feminized chores concerning emotions and the soul, and in submitting to them Jane dulls some of the threat that her commercial activity posed to the patriarchal order. After so long a resistance to the total gift existence, Jane now finds pleasure in such a life: "to yield that attendance was to indulge my sweetest wishes" (Brontë II.282). This dramatic reversal on our heroine's part, while it proffers a somewhat discordant resolution to the narrative, affirms Jane's gender and permits the novel to close on the scene of a comfortably heterosexual idyll far removed from the pressures of the market and expunged of the racialized other who formerly posed an impediment to Jane and Rochester's union.

The pure gift economy of marriage becomes Jane's lasting happiness, from which, the novel implies, she needs no escape. Once united with Rochester, Jane no longer defends the autonomy of her "unblighted self" and "unenslaved feelings" in the same way (Brontë II.223). "We are ever together," she writes of herself and her husband. "To be together is for us to be at

once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company" (II.281-82). By virtue of this denouement, *Jane Eyre* paradoxically celebrates intimacy as the sacred outcome of financial independence. Brontë attests to the power of money to transcend constraints of gender and class—nodding, perhaps, to her own reliance on the anonymity of commerce to facilitate her literary career. 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* perhaps foments not so much a feminist as an explicitly economic brand of awakening.

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