

## A Governess with a Mission: Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

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**Abstract:** The article analyses Charlotte Brontë's celebrated protagonist from the perspective of Foucault's notion of *governmentality* via an investigation of the semantics of the word 'governess' and of the status of this professional woman in mid- and late-Victorian England. The aim of the approach is to demonstrate that the governess acts as an instrument of rectification in the novel, working to governmentalize a system that has been chaotic and has taken for granted woman's subordination.

**Keywords:** *governess, Charlotte Brontë, Foucault, governmentality, governmentalization, normalization, subordination, madness.*

“My dearest, don't mention governesses;  
the word makes me nervous.”  
(Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*)

Charlotte Brontë's eponymous protagonist of her most famous novel, *Jane Eyre*, spends most of her childhood and youth at Lowood, a charitable school for destitute girls, first as a pupil, then as a teacher. When Miss Temple, her favourite teacher and friend leaves the school, Jane realizes that nothing keeps her there anymore and decides to abandon teaching and find a position as a governess. Since she has no relatives to guide and support her in the adventure of going out into the wide world where to experience “a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements” [Brontë, 2001: 72], “to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils” [Ibid.] and despite the low reputation of newspaper advertising due to the practice of falsifying letters of reference and to its public nature [cf. Peterson, 1972: 7], Jane sends her announcement to the “*\_\_shire Herald*” [Brontë, 2001: 73]:

“A young lady accustomed to tuition” (had I not been a teacher two years?) “is desirous of meeting with a situation in a private family where the children are under fourteen” (I thought that as I was barely eighteen, it would not do to undertake the guidance of pupils nearer my own age). “She is qualified to teach the usual branches of a good English education, together with French, Drawing, and Music” (in those days, reader, this now

narrow catalogue of accomplishments would have been held tolerably comprehensive).”  
Address, J. E., Postoffice, Lowton, \_\_\_shire. [Brontë, 2001: 74]

Charlotte Brontë had been herself “accustomed to tuition” both as a governess and a teacher when she began writing her novel. She had been a teacher at Roe Head, Miss Wooler’s school for girls, between 1835-1838, when she was barely nineteen years old, and at Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, between 1842-1844, after being herself a student in both places. In 1839 and 1841 she had also worked for several months as a governess at Stonegappe House and Upperwood House. Such jobs were the only decent solutions accessible to educated women who could not support themselves otherwise and teaching was, as Jane labels St. John River’s humble village school, “a sanctum” [Brontë, 2001: 141] or “a very pleasant refuge in time of trouble” [Brontë, 2001: 141]. Yet, there was scarcely anything pleasant in these jobs even though for some of these women, who had been forced to leave their homes (or who had nothing of the kind), living in someone else’s house or travelling with someone else’s children, while shaping their education, might have offered them „a sense of aliveness and continuity, and ultimately creating possibilities for self-reflection and for change” [Tamboukou, 2003: 73].

*Jane Eyre* reflects Charlotte Brontë’s opinion on the status of governesses and contemporary readers perceived the narrative’s psychologically counterweighing function of curing past traumas. Elizabeth Rigby, one of her first critics, discerned in the “intensity of feeling” [in Dunn, 2001: 450] that accompanied the description “of the wrongs” [Dunn, 2001: 450] of these professional women enough evidence to ascertain that the author of the novel was or had been once one of them and concluded her review with the memorable sentence: “Never was there a better hater.” [Dunn, 2001: 450] Though she usually kept to herself, Charlotte felt the need to write a reply (“A Word to *The Quarterly*”) only to confirm the fact that her views on the occupation were unbending and her bitterness formidable:

I read all you said about governesses. My dear madam – just turn out and be a governess yourself for a couple of years: the experiment would do you good: a little irksome toil – a little unpitied suffering – two years of uncheered solitude might perhaps teach you that to be callous, harsh and unsympathizing is not to be firm, superior and magnanimous. It was a twinge of the gout which dictated that postscript. [Dunn, 2001: 457]

Far from being financially independent, some of the 19<sup>th</sup>-century educated women assumed the hazards of a transitional life in improbable conditions, away from their homes, striving to survive and sometimes supporting other members of their family with their meagre wages, too, thus transgressing the patriarchal normativity that placed women within strict boundaries of dependency and allotted them a limited space wherein to progress and subsist.

Somebody else’s house where the governess is to be found or the school where a woman is taught or where she teaches are Foucault’s ‘other spaces’, spatial categories of what he names *heterotopia* as opposed to or different from *utopia*. In

such cases, of places that actually exist but differ from habitual ones, knowledge materializes out of the living experience one gets here and of the types of relationships and responses that are entirely divergent from those established or created in customary emplacements. A governess is an obfuscation of standards because she is located within a category of heterotopia that has been created to accommodate her occasionally, a place where power grids are tampered with to such an extent as to muddle up rankings and interrogate the hegemonic space. She is located in the domestic sphere that has long been defined as a feminine space, yet she is not authenticated as part of it; she nurtures and protects children, yet she is not their mother; she is a woman (usually a young one), yet she is not placed on the marriage market since her disjunction from social life and isolation within an alternative household prevents her from being referred to as eligible. Moreover, she has been educated to be a 'lady', yet she is seldom allowed to participate in private or social events otherwise than as a contingent member of the family that has employed her. The governess's class positioning gets even more disconcerting in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when it is not only the aristocrats who hire governesses for their offspring but also the prosperous upper-middle-class who signal their newly acquired social relevance and confirm the fact that the lady of the house can now discard the responsibility of rearing her own children and place it in the hands of some other woman.

An unsurprising misfit, by reason of her ontological ambiguity, the governess is a surrogate mother who is not cherished for her motherly attributes because, in her case, maternity has been turned into a remunerated occupation. Charlotte Brontë related to Elizabeth Gaskell such an episode of her brief experience as a governess when one of the boys she had tutored had unexpectedly declared his love for her, to which his mother had exclaimed in awe: "Love the governess, my dear!" [qtd. in Brandon, 2008: 21] The scene epitomizes the employment pattern of the governess in the middle- and late-Victorian age. The incongruity of a governess's position was due mainly to the novelty of such a station, that of "a genuine professional woman." [Gorham, 2013: 28]

It is precisely the exceptionality and confusion of social and gender roles that elucidate, at least in part, both the treatment of these employees within their masters' houses and the stereotypical handling of this character in Victorian journalism and fiction. The figure of the governess was highly sentimentalized in the 19<sup>th</sup>-century press and exploited melodramatically in the fiction of the era. A segregated woman ("a solitary dependent in a great house" [Gorham, 2013: 168] as Rochester, disguised as a gypsy fortune-teller, portrays Jane), lacking the protection of male relatives and placed at the mercy of their masters, who were, more often than not, intellectually inferior to her, the governess's

[...] career might have been expressly designed for fiction. Her fall from bourgeois comfort and her long journey to its eventual restitution provided both an instant dramatic structure and a plethora of plot possibilities. How had she come to find herself in this position? How would she cope with the distress of sudden relegation to the servant

class? What were the tensions of sharing a house with employers whose equal she once had been, but now so markedly was not? [Brandon, 2008: 13-4]

In an article published in *Punch* in 1850 and entitled evocatively “The Governess-Grinders”, the author describes the fate of a governess in an overdramatic register:

We were taught from the nursery songs of our infancy to have a decent horror of those monsters whose practice it was to “grind the bones” of their fellow-creatures to “make their bread,” but the process of grinding down human beings is not unknown in these days – the scene of the operation being often the nursery itself, and the victim the nursery governess. We admire the affection of such persons as the would-be contracting party in this case, who, when they really want a very humble description of maid-of-all-work, have the audacity to insult the educated portion of the female community, by advertising for a “governess”. Let things be called by their right names; and henceforth, let the words, “WANTED A DOMESTIC DRUDGE!” be placed at the top of all similar advertisements. [in Dunn, 2001: 437-8]

Governesses themselves viewed their situation as a kind of social death or, as Jane Austen best defined it, a withdrawal “from all the pleasures of life, of rational intercourse, equal society, peace and hope, to penance and mortification for ever” [qtd. in Brandon, 2008: 9]. Charlotte Brontë illustrates the predicament of private educators in her novel in the circumstances of *Jane Eyre*'s cousins who are to leave the Moor House to take the positions of governesses

[...] in a large, fashionable, south-of-England city; where each held a situation in families, by whose wealthy and haughty members they were regarded only as humble dependents, and who neither knew or sought one of their inner excellences, and appreciated only their acquired accomplishments as they appreciated the skill of their cook or the taste of their waiting-woman. [Brontë, 2001: 300]

Jane later depicts Diana's and Mary's employment to St. John in terms of “slaving amongst strangers” [Brontë, 2001: 330].

Still, apart from the maudlin material provided by the situation of refined women who are constrained to live in alien houses, what was so alluring in the portrait of a governess that made it the perfect heroine of lachrymose reports in journalism and of melodrama in serialized stories about young women's maltreatment and distress? There were more than 25 thousand of them on the Mid-Victorian labour market, yet they represented but one third of the total of domestic women servants, according to Jeanne Peterson [1972: 4]. So it was certainly not their number that impressed the reading public. As for the living conditions and wages, these too were superior to those of women working on farms or in sweatshops.

Victorian interest in the governess could not have stemmed from her political importance, for she had none. [...] Moreover, the governess had no social position worthy of attention. She was at best unenvied and at worst the object of mild scorn, and all she sought was survival in genteel obscurity. [Peterson, 1972: 4]

So it must be something else in the governess's role and position that elicited the Victorian readers' responsiveness and it appears that what captivated the public or at least the authors who pitied the governesses' lot and what made the difference between them and other working women was unmistakably their intellectual and moral superiority to most of their employers. The sources of the public fascination with their anomalous position were to be found in their education.

The struggle for women's education had begun more than a century earlier and it was only in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century that girls could pursue an acceptable course of instruction that was comparable to that provided to boys. Starting with the 1840s, secondary schools for girls were opened and, one year after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, in 1848, the Queen's College London was founded with the specific aim of educating governesses, "providing lectures and grades" [French, 2009: 145] and an opportunity for these women to be taken more seriously and to "demand higher wages" [*Ibid.*]. A year later, Bedford College was founded on feminist grounds as a school for women and ruled by women. Many other reformers "worked to change social attitudes and to remove structural barriers" [Gorham, 2013: 27].

One of the major paradoxes that the reader of *Jane Eyre* has to comply with is the serenity with which the formerly rebellious Jane embraces the position of a woman who is meant to serve others. "But Servitude! That must be a matter of fact. Anyone may serve: I have served here eight years; now all I want is to serve elsewhere," [Brontë, 2001: 73] she tells herself, before leaving Lowood. Feminist readings, starting with Adrienne Rich's "The Temptations of a Motherless Woman" (1973) and culminating with Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), viewed Bertha Mason as an *alter ego* of the heroine, also as a means of releasing the protagonist's violence and of regulating her anger. The flaws in the description of the madwoman as a paradigmatic trope of woman's revolt were later exposed by post-colonial critics, such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in the essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985), who turned the tables on the highly-acclaimed feminist readings by pointing out that the status of Bertha Mason as a Creole woman had been widely ignored by the white middle-class Western intellectuals and explicated the mad-woman's rage through the marginalization of a non-European "other woman". Despite my appreciation for the impeccable line of reasoning of such approaches, I tend to agree with Shoshana Felman's viewpoint when she writes that "far from being a form of contestation, 'mental illness' is a request for help, a manifestation both of cultural impotence and of political castration" [Felman, 1997: 8].

The contradiction between Jane's unruly nature and her craving 'to serve' lingers as a hermeneutical incongruence if we pay no heed to the semantics of the word 'governess'. The decision "to serve elsewhere" is taken after Jane contemplates the progressed situation of the Lowood institution which she herself has helped to enhance:

The school, thus improved, became in time a truly useful and noble institution. I remained an inmate of its walls, after its regeneration, for eight years: six as pupil, and two as teacher; and in both capacities I bear my testimony to its value and importance.

[Brontë, 2001: 71]

Miss Temple leaves the school as she has to serve her husband now and Jane resolves to look for another kind of 'servitude'. She is able to leave because she has learned *to govern herself*, her own temper and feelings, and, once she has mastered her anger, she is apt *to govern others*. The mastery over herself is made apparent in her repeatedly described plainness ("I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain – for I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme simplicity – I was still by nature solicitous to be neat." [*Ibid.*: 83-4]), which is nothing else than a firm disciplining of body and mind and a compulsory restraint of sexuality. Charlotte Brontë detailed the process of self-discipline a governess was supposed to undergo in a letter to a friend, dated April 1845:

I know that if women wish to escape the stigma of husband-seeking, they must act and look like marble or clay-cold, expressionless, bloodless; for every appearance of feeling, of joy, sorrow, friendliness, antipathy, admiration, disgust, are alike construed by the world into the attempt to hook a husband. [qtd. in Gaskell, 1987: 277]

Jane's physical appearance is the mirror of an almost masochistic desire to look meek and unimportant in the eyes of others. The camouflage of her desiring body and penetrating mind in conjunction with the expediency of an occupation that allows her to enter somebody else's house and intermingle with its residents eventually enable her *to govern others*, too. Henceforth, she will be converted into an agent of *governmentality*, in Foucault's terminology. It is through *governmentalization* that "individuals are subjugated in the reality of a social practice through mechanisms of power that adhere to a truth" [1997: 32]. Governmentalization is characteristic to all societies in Western Europe and involves the exertion of power to form and steer choices, desires, and lifestyles of individuals, groups and classes. Beside other "arts of governing," it includes the art of pedagogy [Foucault, 1997: 27].

In her position of a mediator of governmentalization, Jane gains access into Rochester's house and her pedagogical mission does not comprise the teaching of Adèle only, but expressly the education of Rochester. Moreover, we are going to see that her assignment to tutor Rochester's illegitimate daughter proves to be but a plausible pretext for Jane to find herself in his house. In reality, she pays little attention to the little mademoiselle, whom she is not fond of, and as soon as her mission is completed (namely, the standardization of Rochester's way of life) she sends Adèle to a boarding school considering that the institution will be better equipped to polish the girl's volatile temper and tame her immoderate 'Frenchness':

I took her home with me. I meant to become her governess once more; but I soon found this impracticable; my time and cares were now required by another – my

husband needed them all. So I sought out a school conducted on a more indulgent system; and near enough to permit of my visiting her often, and bringing her home sometimes. I took care she should never want for anything that could contribute to her comfort: she soon settled in her new abode, became very happy there, and made fair progress in her studies. As she grew up, a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion: docile, good-tempered, and well-principled. [Brontë, 2001: 383]

We should however add in favour of Jane the fact that, on her return to the rectified (*i.e.* mutilated) Rochester, she finds him in a different location, the Ferndean Manor, in “quite a desolate spot” [*Ibid.*: 366], an old house with “damp walls” [256] and a totally improper architecture for the education of a girl: “The manor-house of Ferndean was a building of considerable antiquity, moderate size, and no architectural pretensions, deep buried in a wood.” [366] On the contrary, the architecture of a school is in itself an expression of orderliness. The school she eventually sends Adèle to is run by a complex set of regulations meant to “make-young-body-docile” [Massumi, 1996: 25].

Jane's educative mission, which presupposes the existence of certain “mechanisms of coercion and contents of knowledge” [Foucault, 1997: 50], turns into an implicit “investigation into the legitimacy of historical modes of knowing.” [*Ibid.*: 49] The architecture of Thornfield is telling of the outmoded cognitive system that Rochester adheres to. Jane wanders through its hallways and is perfectly aware of the excess of power that Rochester typifies and employs, also of the plight she will have to encounter before she is able to decode what has been concealed or encrypted (put in a crypt), that is, the existence of his alienated wife:

I lingered in the long passage to which this led, separating the front and back rooms of the third story: narrow, low, and dim, with only one little window at the far end, and looking, with its two rows of small black doors all shut, like a corridor in some Bluebeard's castle. [Brontë, 2001: 61]

There is no doubt that Jane already *knows it*. The reference she makes to Perrault's atrocious hero, who kills his wives and hides their bodies in a locked room of his castle, indicates her awareness of Rochester's debauchery. Besides, all those weird noises she could hear at night, the spine-chilling screams and hysterical outbursts of laughter, have by this time aroused her suspicion and caution as regards the unrestrained command of her master over every single being in the house. Likewise, she could not have ignored Rochester's steady fantasy that he verbalizes in her presence on the subject of her domestication as a caged bird:

I see at intervals the glance of a curious sort of bird through the close-set bars of a cage; a vivid, restless, resolute captive is there; were it but free, it would soar cloud-high.  
[Brontë, 2001: 118-9]

She will later use the same avian imagery (“I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.” [Brontë, 2001: 216]) to defy any attempt to enslave her. After several years, bird similes will be transferred on the impaired Rochester who is now portrayed as “a royal eagle chained to a perch” [374] or as “a caged eagle” [367]. Yet, Jane’s role is not to incarcerate and punish anyone, but to neutralize the effects of the master’s extreme power, to elucidate its sources and its casualties. She initiates a set of procedures that will instate knowledge and inhibit any further legitimation of excess. Forcing the acknowledgment of an alternative and more coherent system of knowledge on Rochester, Jane manages to make him embrace a different viewpoint, to look at his house from the outside, thus to admit of his guilt in having changed it into a prison for the deranged wife:

“Come where there is some freshness, for a few moments,” he said; “that house is a mere dungeon: don't you feel it so?” “It seems to me a splendid mansion, sir.” “The glamour of inexperience is over your eyes,” he answered; “and you see it through a charmed medium: you cannot discern that the gilding is slime and the silk draperies cobwebs; that the marble is sordid slate, and the polished woods mere refuse chips and scaly bark. Now here” (he pointed to the leafy enclosure we had entered) “all is real, sweet, and pure.” [Brontë, 2001: 183-4]

Readers still tend to identify with Rochester and place his aberrant domestic solution within a fictitious historical context in which such a horrid treatment of insanity might have been tolerable. In actual fact, as Roy Porter points out, “scandals revealing the improper confinement of the sane had already led to the Madhouses Act of 1774” [2002: 108-109] and, since then, everything that had to do with private madhouses had been “licensed annually by magistrates.” [Porter, 2002: 108-109] Most importantly, since Rochester’s wife belonged to the upper class, at least by marriage, any kind of confinement was to be authorized by a medical practitioner and a magistrate. It is surprising to find out that, as early as 1828, the English legislation established the Commissioners in Lunacy whose task was to prevent any form of abuse in relation to such patients and to impose standardization of treatment and care. As for forced incarceration, in the 1830s, England imposed ‘non-restraint’ regulations in most of the asylums [Porter, 2002: 112-3]. What is intolerable in Rochester’s handling of mental illness is the arbitrariness of decision-making and the paradoxical relegation of responsibility on the sick person while absolving himself of any guilt. He reads madness as an animalistic stasis with the mad being the image of “humanity sliding down towards animal frenzy” [Foucault, 2006: 156]. Jane pleads in favour of the disturbed wife:

“Sir,” I interrupted him, “you are inexorable for that unfortunate lady: you speak of her with hate – with vindictive antipathy. It is cruel – she cannot help being mad.”  
[Brontë, 2001: 257]



Jane gives voice to a new concept of madness and in her dissociation from Rochester's brutality we can discern "the birth of new structures, the silhouette of the great asylums of the nineteenth century" [Foucault, 2006: 386], which, for all their flaws, represented by no means an ontological advancement. Rochester's household with a mentally ill person locked up in a room upstairs and taken care of by a drunken woman-servant creates a breach in the social networking that does not allow connectivity and transmission of knowledge, the act of concealment being presented as a disruption of normalcy which needs to be restored.

Thornfield has come under the scrutiny of imperious governmentality, which does not involve necessarily "surveillance and control," but, as Foucault describes it, a process of rectification. When truth is brought to light by Jane "as she is the one responsible for informing Mason of Rochester's pending nuptials when she writes to her Uncle John in Madeira" [Cohen, 1998: 23], a change of attitude is estimated to take place in regard to Bertha Mason. After the disclosure of Bertha's imprisonment and neglect, Jane immediately leaves Thornfield in like manner she has once left Lowood and the fact that she does not leave Rochester, but Thornfield, is clearly emphasised in the text: "I grieve to leave Thornfield: I love Thornfield – I love it..." [Brontë, 2001: 215] However, the architecture of this domestic space has been contorted so horribly by the abuse of the husband that it permits the presence of no decent inhabitant within its entrails that have convulsively and publicly thrown out their obnoxious contents: a threatening maddened wife, a drunken caretaker, an illegitimate daughter and an aspiring bigamous Lord of the House.

Jane manages to circumscribe Thornfield within institutionalized jurisdiction and to liberate the insane woman from the authoritarian control of the husband. In doing so, she escapes control herself and prevents the reiteration of abuse. From this perspective, Jane's acceptance of Rochester's proposal is a manifestation of her striving to dislocate conventional knowledge and norms, a manner of "acting in such a way that others' behaviour can have no negative [impact] on us later" [Foucault, 1997: 157]. Even though, at times, the heroine hesitates and questions her power to annul woman's established subordination ("I half lost the sense of power over him. I was about mechanically to obey him, without further remonstrance..." [Brontë, 2001: 215]), she eventually performs the role of a Foucauldian *dispositif* of governmentalization and an agent of renewal through the downright denial of long-standing notions of femininity and the liberation of the oppressed woman. By getting Bertha out of her room and herself out of a vicious liaison, Jane manages to place herself within and without the house that she deprives both of its angel and of its demon, the Victorian ideological constructs of womanhood. The ruins of the house that Jane Eyre contemplates several years after the disaster that has occurred as an inevitable consequence of Rochester's refusal to take cognizance of the change, stand for the ruin of an axiological system that has become irrelevant:

I looked with timorous joy towards a stately house: I saw a blackened ruin. No need to cower behind a gate-post, indeed! – to peep up at chamber lattices, fearing life was astir behind them! No need to listen for doors opening – to fancy steps on the pavement or the gravel-walk! The lawn, the grounds were trodden and waste: the portal yawned void. The front was, as I had once seen it in a dream, but a shell-like wall, very high and very fragile looking, perforated with paneless windows: no roof, no battlements, and no chimneys – all had crashed in. And there was the silence of death about it: the solitude of a lonesome wild. [Brontë, 2001: 361-362]

The 'happy ending' of the novel renders in slow-motion sequences the awakening of Rochester's consciousness. Jane, who has come back to complete her mission, reads to him, as she is now "the apple of his eyes", and 'translates' reality into a new dialect for him. His 'recovery' is gradual and painful but he will eventually come to see the light:

Mr. Rochester continued blind the first two years of our union: perhaps it was that circumstance that drew us so very near – that knit us so very close! for I was then his vision, as I am still his right hand. Literally, I was (what he often called me) the apple of his eye. He saw nature – he saw books through me; and never did I weary of gazing for his behalf, and of putting into words the effect of field, tree, town, river, cloud, sunbeam – of the landscape before us; of the weather round us – and impressing by sound on his ear what light could no longer stamp on his eye. Never did I weary of reading to him: never did I weary of conducting him where he wished to go: of doing for him what he wished to be done. And there was a pleasure in my services, most full, most exquisite, even though sad – because he claimed these services without painful shame or damping humiliation. [Brontë, 2001: 384]

Jane's servitude is now pleasurable. She serves a blinded man who is slowly recovering his sight under her protective care. She has changed from a bereaved girl into an independent mature woman and moved from the periphery towards the centre, yet "fully aware of the radical potentiality and instability of her new position" [Godfrey, 2005: 856]. The conjunction of the status of the governess with that of the woman writer in the 'long century' is evident and will be addressed elsewhere.

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