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NICKNAMES, FORMS OF ADDRESS, AND ALIAS
IN JANE EYRE

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In Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë exploits the potential of nicknames and addresses to reveal the nature of relationships¹ which are formed within the novel, especially the relationship between Jane Eyre and Edward Rochester. Brontë also uses Jane's adoption of the alias "Jane Elliott" to reflect the heroine's quest for an ordinary existence which, in the end, she finds too stifling.

The most prolific nicknamer in Jane Eyre by far is Rochester, whose romantic progress can fairly be charted by close attention to his choice of nicknames at every turn. The terms he uses in describing and addressing his former mistress, Celine, reveal a contempt both for the woman thus named and for himself for being the dupe of romantic yearnings. Celine is referred to as "my flame" and "mon ange";² both terms are used, of course, sarcastically, yet they reveal what Rochester probably did feel quite sincerely during his entanglement with Celine. The nicknames reinforce what he says concerning Celine's character, namely, that she adjusts her behavior to conform to his romantic idealism. Rochester's sarcastic use of "my flame" (174) and "mon ange" (174) is meant as a jibe at Celine, yet it reveals in Rochester a need

for someone who can deserve the literal application of these terms.

The nicknaming exchanged between Rochester and Blanche Ingram also reflects Rochester's disillusionment with beautiful women and further suggests that his preferment of Jane is governed partly by the fact that she is so opposite those women who have so far disappointed him in love. In the midst of Rochester's charade of courting Blanche, Miss Ingram addresses him as "Signior Eduardo" (223) to which he replies by addressing her as "Donna Bianca." As Blanche is proposing a duet, it is likely that she means to identify the two of them with characters in an Italian opera. The charm of Rochester's so quickly picking up her suggestion is undercut by the fact that his first wife, raging in her remote apartment while Blanche goes through all the paces of her elegance, is Italian. This choice of nicknames reflects in fact a connection in Rochester's mind between Bertha and Blanche which makes any love of her on his part virtually impossible. Blanche, he is quite sure, is after his money only (and there is some evidence to suggest that his point of view here is accurate). Rochester's marriage to Bertha likewise was incited by the need of money. Inherent in Rochester's identification of Blanche with Bertha is a rejection of the convention of nineteenth-century upper classes that youth, beauty, and status buy money and vice versa, a convention that for Rochester has resulted in bondage to

a mad wife whom he has never loved.

Blanche, for her part, uses names so as to tout those very qualities that make her a desirable "catch" according to the convention noted above, little knowing that in doing so she is only crystallizing Rochester's reasons for not marrying her. In addressing her mother as "Lady-mother" (222) and "Baroness Ingram, of Ingram Park " (223), she of course wants to sound the family's high titles, to aggrandize her mother and by close association herself as a person of lofty station, under the guise and protection of seeming playful. Blanche is in many senses a foil to Jane, as her self-aggrandizement shows. Jane's addresses are always straightforward and unpretentious. She refers to herself always as "Jane Eyre." It is hard to imagine the protagonist addressing herself as "Miss Eyre, formerly of Lowood," or "Janet of Thornfield manor, governess to the master's ward" (though Rochester does play around in similar ways with Jane's name).

In the contrast between Blanche's sententious exaggeration of her consideration in the world, evident in her trumpeting of the family titles, and Jane's unremitting austerity in refusing to adorn or modify her name, the reader finds a statement by the author on the virtue of names, i.e., that people use names and addresses to deceive even themselves. Blanche's improvisation on her mother's titles is an effort not only to remind Rochester of the rank she has to offer, but also to convince herself that in

these aristocratic labels lies a true superiority. Jane's refusal to know herself by any label other than "Jane Eyre" is therefore a determination to face reality squarely, a determination to know herself.

While Jane thus refuses the alteration of her name, Rochester continually improvises on it, and his names for Jane reveal simultaneously his attempts to believe that she can be manipulated into complying with his scheme of bigamy and his awareness that she is in some irreversible way beyond his grasp. Hence his nicknames fall almost entirely into two categories--those which conceive of Jane in the diminutive, as a docile, manageable unit, and those which conceive of her as an elusive, supernatural being. "My little friend" (255) suggests a wish that she will be capable of unconditional devotion, "my pet lamb" (271) that she will mindlessly follow his dictates. "Little Bungler" (342) reveals the hope that Jane is simply too feeble or incompetent to leave him on moral grounds, "little tyrant" (341) the hope that her rebellion can amount to no more than the rebellion of a Lilliputian. "Provoking puppet" (345) suggests that, if Jane occasionally irritates him, the irritation is, in itself, a pleasure and that she is not the final arbiter of her own destiny; someone else is pulling the strings. According to William Arthur, "Janet" (308) means not only little Jane but pretty Jane, and as such is the most flattering of the diminishing nicknames.³ The

above addresses are clearly a result of the psychological process of transference which is implicit in wish-fulfillment.

That Rochester recognizes that elusive, unmaneuverable quality in Jane becomes apparent, however, in his less artful moments, such as when Jane douses him with water and wakes him out of a deep sleep, from which he emerges yelling "witch" and "sorceress" (184). At other points, he rails at her, pronouncing her to be a "changeling," "sprite," and "malicious elf" (345), articulating both an accusation against her elusiveness and, at the same time, his fear that she is in fact not within his power to dominate.⁴ Jane herself recognizes that these names are actually the more complimentary ones: "I decidedly preferred these fierce favors to anything more tender" (345). It is probably worth noting the contrast between Rochester's understanding of the inscrutable Jane Eyre and John Reed's. To John, Jane's life of the mind is an absence of vitality. He calls her "Madame Mope" (6). Rochester, on the other hand, attributes an excess of vitality to Jane's life of the mind. Outwardly she may be the staid governess, but in the hidden regions of her consciousness, from which her strange paintings spring, she is complex, tormented, seething with life.

Rochester's befuddlement, arising from his conflicting perceptions of Jane, becomes evident in his inability to find any name for her at all on one occasion. After an evening of

lavishing superlative addresses on Blanche, he bids Jane, "Good-night, my _____," (226) not even certain that he has begun correctly with the assumption that she in some way belongs to him, and in fact she does not.

When Jane returns to him and, the obstacle to their union out of the way, promises to marry him, Rochester's use of nicknames reveals a resolution of the two halves of his perception of her. She is now "my fairy," (559) indicating that, however ethereal she may seem, he still has a hold on her, and "my skylark" (562)--she may be a free spirit, but she is a mortal creature. It is more than likely that Brontë was familiar with Percy Shelley's "To a Skylark," in which the bird is figured as "an unbodied joy" (line 25) which is only heard, never seen, and which knows none of the experience of human sorrow. Rochester realizes that something about Jane defies analysis; as Shelley says of the skylark, "What thou are we know not." Rochester's implication that Jane has suffered no more than the skylark is a bit roseate. But his observation is accurate insofar as Jane seems to have emerged from each of her sorrows unscathed. She learns from experience, but it never has the same ravaging effect on her that it seems to have had on Rochester. Implicit in his calling her a skylark is, in fact, the suggestion that Jane's presence will be therapeutic for Rochester, just as the skylark's song is therapeutic for the human voice in Shelley's poem:

Like a poet hidden
 In the light of thought,
 Singing hymns unbidden,
 Till the world is wrought
 To sympathy with hopes and fears it
 heeded not (lines 36-40).

Both names, "my fairy" and "my skylark," indicate an autonomous character, one who is in command of her own life but who voluntarily chooses the limitation of Rochester's sphere.⁵

Rochester's nicknames for the women who have crossed his life reveal a simultaneous fear of and fascination with women. Whether or not he began by being frightened of women, his marriage to Bertha and his experience with Celine certainly confirm that fear is a logical response. His reference to Celine as "mon ange" reveals both his disappointment that she is not an angel and an idea that women should minister in that capacity to men, that they should be better than men. After all, he too is guilty of the infidelity for which he so bitterly accuses Celine. Far from being an angel, however, Bertha acts more like a harbinger from hell. Rochester then generalizes from his experience with Bertha, such that in the back of his mind he fears to find her demonic qualities in other women, even Jane, as is evident from his calling her "witch" and "sorceress." The reconciliation of his two ideas concerning Jane, as noted above, goes hand-in-hand with the allayment of his fears that women are either intangible sprites or unendurable devils, as evidenced by his referring to Jane

as "my fairy" and "my skylark."

Nicknames in Jane Eyre function not only to indicate relation but also to reflect the protagonist's initial isolation and her transition out of isolation into relation and community. In Jane Eyre, Brontë uses variations in characters' addresses to convey Jane's sense of alienation. The reader finds, to begin with, a protagonist related to but strangely unconnected to the residents of Gateshead. Although it is common for children to refer to the spouse of their uncle as "aunt," Jane unvaryingly refers to the wife of her uncle as "Mrs. Reed." The family as well as the servants reinforce this attitude of separateness, the servants by referring, themselves, to the Reed family as the "Missis" and "the Misses Reed and Master Reed" in speaking to Jane. John Reed commands her to call him Master Reed.⁶ Jane's voluntary use of "Mrs. Reed" further shows that the estrangement is mutually enforced. She comments on her isolation thus:

I was a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there; I had nothing in harmony with Mrs. Reed or her children, or her chosen vassalage. If they did not love me, in fact, as little did I love them. They were not bound to regard with affection a thing that could not sympathize with one amongst them; a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities (13-14).

Throughout the first part of her story, Jane's inferiority of status is exaggerated by the Reeds, by the personnel of Lowood, even by Jane herself. The conception of Jane as a poor, obscure,

connectionless being is not, however, quite consistent with the facts. She is, after all, Mr. Reed's niece, and only a disregard for obligations of honor allows Mrs. Reed to foist Jane off on a charity school. The protagonist even turns out to be an heiress. The fact is that Jane herself perpetuates her image as a person of no consideration, in part by her choice of formal addresses that suggest inferiority on the part of the person who uses them. The reason is that the reputation of a creature of no consequence provides a refuge for Jane against unwanted associations. If she can reinforce in the Reeds' minds their sense that she is beneath them, she will be free to avoid them. Her strategy here is successful insofar as Mrs. Reed at least sends her off to get an education, however mediocre and beset with health hazards Lowood is.

At Thornfield, Jane's unremitting use of "Mr. Rochester" and "Sir" in addressing the owner functions somewhat differently. Initially, these choices are simply a matter of correct etiquette. As Rochester makes his friendship and preference for her evident, however, her persistence in using the same titles is a message that she does not presume that his friendliness will lead to any romantic conclusion. Later, after she has agreed to marry him, she still calls him "Sir" in response to her sense of the danger, to put it baldly, that Rochester will not make an honest woman of her. She senses herself to be at the mercy of a man with a past of many mistresses. Her insistence on the title "Sir" is perhaps

intended to recall him, at crucial points, to his responsibility as her employer not to presume on the fact that she resides in the same house with him. Even in the midst of her engagement, therefore, Jane is still in isolation. Rochester's secrecy and her own foreboding of mishap buttress rather than break down the distance reflected in her continued use of "Sir." It is not until the final pages of the novel that she refers to Rochester as "Edward."

Jane's isolation is further evident in the fact that she is the only "Eyre" to appear in the novel. This uniqueness of name functions in demonstrating not only Jane's aloneness, but also her individuality. Even when she finds relatives, they are not "Eyres," but "Rivers." She finds people who are like her and with whom she can sympathize, but she is ultimately one of a kind. Her individuality is also carefully reinforced with a last name which consists of the most homophonic sound in the language and which suggests "ere," "air," and "err." On leaving Rochester, Jane temporarily changes her last name to Elliott. She adopts this change ostensibly for the purpose of covering her tracks lest Rochester should come after her. Yet such a motive is not quite adequate to explain this decision. Rochester is not an abductor, and surely no one could hold her culpable for her part in their engagement. The explanation for the disguise resides in the qualities of the two names. "Eyre" is a fairly uncommon name and, as mentioned

earlier, yields several different meanings. "Elliott," on the other hand, is a common and much less suggestive name. Jane's unspoken wish in adopting it is to be more ordinary, to live a life full of friendship and tranquility by the fireside, as is evident by the longing with which she gazes into the Rivers' home before they take her in. These things appear to her to be the lot of the average person, so she assumes a name which she shares not with one or two other people, but with hundreds. And indeed the life of Jane Eyre as Jane Elliott takes a tremendous swing in the direction of what she considers normality. She communes with her family (though she does not yet know they are family, the effect is the same); she teaches in a situation in which there are no madwomen hidden nearby and no romantic and dangerous admirers, as at Thornfield, and no masochistic geniuses as at Lowood. She is courted (if you can call it that) by a gentleman of her own age and station in life. She achieves a solidity and stability contrary to the personality indicated by "Eyre," with its suggestions of the ethereal. Her time as Jane Elliott is cheerful, industrious, unfraught with mystery. The tone even of the novel becomes cheerful.

But Jane is forced to resume the mantle and destiny of Jane Eyre. The necessity comes in the form of an inheritance which can only be claimed by an Eyre. And, in the end, the life of Jane Elliott does not gratify the protagonist. As Jane Elliott, she

learns to be happy, but happiness does not depend on being Jane Elliott. As Jane Eyre once again, she forgoes the job, rejects the respectable and handsome St. John, and returns to the always less than respectable and now disabled Rochester, after a peculiar telepathic experience that proves she is once more her strange self.

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NOTES

¹In my article, "Nicknames in the Novels of George Eliot," Literary Onomastics Studies, XIII (1986), pp. 65-82, I consider what nicknames reveal both about the nicknamed character and the character who invents or assigns the nickname.

²All quotations from Jane Eyre are taken from the Clarendon edition, edited by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

³William Arthur, An Etymological Dictionary of Family and Christian Names, (New York: Sheldon, 1857), p. 194.

⁴In his Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), John Maynard sees the nicknames, "elf," "sprite," and "changeling" as symbolic of a sexual regression on Jane's part. Maynard, using the term "elf" to signify Jane's asexual nature prior to Rochester's awakening of her passions, writes:

Jane resolves to keep Rochester a good distance from her....But she isn't able to see what we can, the effect this process has had upon her....She is, as Rochester senses, driven back into her presexual role as elf or imp (122).

⁵In Charlotte Brontë, (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1977), p. 101, Margaret Blom comments on Rochester's use of the term "skylark" thus:

The completeness of Jane's victory appears when she, who has so often been thought of as a caged or injured bird which "quiver[s] its shattered pinions"...and "rend[s] its shattered pinions"...now becomes a "skylark."