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## "Delicate and Aerial": The Vanishing Body in *Jane Eyre*

Rachel Mann

Rachel MANN is a doctoral candidate in English literature at the University of California, Santa Barbara. She is currently completing a dissertation on embodied communication, or the language of movement, in nineteenth-century British narrative and dance.

University of California, Santa Barbara.

I argue that *Jane Eyre* shows how the desirability of the disappearing body, a primary trope in Romantic ballet, is also encoded into contemporaneous Victorian fiction. Jane's desire for disappearance—she attempts to erase her body, or vanish through self-starvation—resonates with the sensual rhetoric of vanishing sylphides and fairies that drives Romantic ballet narratives. The Romantic ballet's combination of ethereal characters and eroticized dancers is reworked into the Victorian femininity depicted within Brontë's novel: Jane inscribes a specific kind of eroticism on her frame in what can be seen as almost a reversal of the idealized Romantic ballet body. Paradoxically, as she removes her flesh in order to not be seen, Jane makes her vanishing body more visible, attractive, and desirable to Rochester: this complex figuration of starvation and idealization, I contend, internalizes Romantic ballet within *Jane Eyre*.

corps, ballet romantique, érotisme, féminité

The image of the Romantic ballerina's graceful and ethereal body floating across opera house stages formed an integral part of nineteenth-century femininity. As her body flickered onto and vanished from the stage, tantalizing the ballet's male hero, she presented audiences with an unrealistic yet desirable figure. Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* is particularly useful for discussing how the desirability of this disappearing body, as figured in Romantic ballet, is encoded into contemporaneous Victorian fiction: the Romantic ballet's combination of ethereal characters and eroticized dancers is reworked into the Victorian femininity depicted within Brontë's novel.<sup>1</sup>

Although *Jane Eyre* does not focus on literal dance performance, Jane's desire for disappearance - she attempts to erase her body, or vanish through self-starvation - resonates with the eroticized rhetoric of vanishing sylphides and fairies that drives Romantic ballet narratives.<sup>2</sup> Various ethereal creatures populated Romantic ballet stages, yet the female dancers who played them had to be lushly embodied in order for a contemporaneous audience to read them properly. While Romantic ballet audiences (figured as male) desired the liminal creations held between the substantial bodies of the Romantic ballerinas themselves and the aerial figures they portrayed, Rochester prefers to read Jane's vanishing body, seeing in it the ideal Romantic sylph. He desires a literally ethereal body, rather than a figuratively ethereal character or an embodied ballerina, and sees Jane as a magical creature, the embodiment of a character played by a dancer rather than a dancer herself.

Paradoxically, by attempting to remove her flesh in order to not be seen, Jane inscribes a specific kind of eroticism on her frame in what can be seen as almost a reversal of the idealized Romantic ballet body. While Jane and Rochester are both realistic about Jane's small body and almost miniature stature, their opinions about her beauty and attractiveness differ wildly. While he wants desperately to read her body, Jane believes that she is ugly and does not wish to be read by anyone: she wants to avoid drawing attention to a body that displeases

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<sup>1</sup> The Romantic ballet period extends approximately from 1830 to 1850.

<sup>2</sup> While many of Brontë's female characters perform this self-erasure, *Jane Eyre*'s alteration of her body means she is read more consistently as a balletic character (by Rochester) than any other Brontë heroine.

her.<sup>3</sup> Yet the less sensual smallness of her body corresponds in some ways to the Victorian feminine ideal, as I will discuss, and is attractive to men such as Rochester. Since the attraction of a Romantic ballet figure was the contrast between the ethereal characters on stage and the fleshier bodies enacting those characters,<sup>4</sup> Rochester's preference for a slender lover indicates a conflation of the spiritual and sensual. Contemporaneous ballet dancers were more embodied, and did not correspond to this version of the Victorian ideal figure, as Jane does;<sup>5</sup> Brontë's descriptions of Jane's unconventional body as holding potential for desire complicate notions of the ideal Victorian woman (often seen as fertile but not sexually desiring). The difference between ballet dancers and Jane reiterates the contrast between the separation of character and body, and the unity of both. By starving her body in hopes of being ignored, Jane unwittingly transforms herself into a balletic sylph, paradoxically creating what Rochester will read as a sexualized, desirable body.

## “The Effect of A Real Spirit”: Disappearing Through Starvation

Jane's wish to disappear coalesces in her repeated refusal to eat; her starvation means she does not want her body to be read, although she often wishes to be heard.<sup>6</sup> Brontë is constantly reiterating food (and the lack of it) in *Jane Eyre*, and the food is almost always met with a refusal, or an omission from the text of any consumption, on Jane's part. Several critics contend that lack of appetite is imbricated in the list of qualities that, along with innocence and abstemiousness, made up the middle-class Victorian “beau ideal,” or ideal woman.<sup>7</sup> While the critical discussion of slender bodies in Brontë's texts is increasing (more of an investigation has been made into disease in her novels),<sup>8</sup> two prominent critics offer different ways of ascertaining just how visible Brontë's self-erasing bodies, as I discuss them, are. Helena Michie contends that the Victorian heroine's (slender) body is absent, and that the physical features described merely point the reader to what is not there: “The bodily parts that

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<sup>3</sup> She constantly reinforces this ugliness to herself: “I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer [...] I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure; I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked” (*Jane Eyre*, 98).

<sup>4</sup> See Deborah Jowitt, *Time and the Dancing Image*: “spectators found the paradox of a real, and probably available woman playing an incorporeal nymph a titillating one” (44). This contrast was emphasized by the revealing costumes ballerinas wore: for more on the eroticism of these costumes, see Judith Chazin-Bennahum, “Women of Faint Heart and Steel Toes.”

<sup>5</sup> This explains why Rochester did not remain with a performer, since for him the sylph as played by a substantial woman (for example, his prior mistress, opera dancer Céline Varens) is not as enthralling.

<sup>6</sup> In contrast, Deidre Lashgari argues that the two heroines in *Shirley* starve themselves so that they can be read correctly (141).

<sup>7</sup> See Patricia Branca, *Silent Sisterhood: Middle-Class Women in the Victorian Home*; Joan Brumberg, *Fasting Girls: The Emergence of Anorexia Nervosa as a Modern Disease*; Joan Burstyn, *Victorian Education and the Ideal of Womanhood*; and Deborah Gorham, *The Victorian Girl and the Feminine Ideal*. However, there was more than one ideal body type during the lengthy Victorian period. Thorstein Veblen argued in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) that one means of differentiating between classes was “the consumption of food, clothing, dwelling, and furniture by the lady and the rest of the domestic establishment” (68). In other words, the wife of a late-Victorian gentleman would be expected to consume food and goods, and to show that consumption both in her house and on her person - become plumper - as a means of displaying her husband's wealth.

<sup>8</sup> For work on Brontë's slender bodies, see, among others, Sheryl Craig, “My Inward Cravings: Anorexia Nervosa in *Jane Eyre*”; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*; Lashgari, “What Some Women Can't Swallow: Hunger as Protest in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*”; Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies*; and Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body*. For work on disease and Brontë, see Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill*; Beth Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire, and the Constraints of Culture*; and Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*.

comprise the litany which in turn constitutes the female body as it appears in the Victorian novel, are carefully selected not only for what they represent but for the absences they suggest [...] the marked and selected attributes of the Victorian female body construct an imaginary body in the space between” (97).<sup>9</sup> Contrastingly, Anna Kruguvoy Silver argues that the thin or anorexic body is always present: in Brontë’s texts, she states, “women’s lack of appetite (or inability to eat) [...] represents in large part a criticism of women’s social roles, most specifically women’s inability, because of constructions of femininity, to speak their desires. [...] [T]he fasting body is always a physical presence in the text: it is never [absent or erased]” (91-2). The connection between food, silence, and desire is mediated through the female mouth and its (lack of) speech. Here, my argument intersects between Michie’s and Silvers, as I believe the starving body is both present and absent - creating a presence by attempting to absent itself - in *Jane Eyre*.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, I argue that for Jane, the spaces in between and the “absences they suggest” would be even greater than Michie proposes, since Jane is already trying to make a space where her body is and create an absence in her presence. Jane’s catalogue of what food is offered to her and what food she refuses constructs for the reader an imaginary diet, or an absence where the ingested food should be, since that is hardly ever described. To reframe Michie, then, I suggest, there is a different imagined body held in the space between Jane and the food she does not eat; it is the imagined body - sexualized and heavy, a body like Bertha’s - she disdains and does not want. According to the model of the Victorian lady<sup>11</sup> as inculcated in Jane, sensuality and self-control were both signified through appetite; women who ate less were seen as disciplined and not sexually threatening. Seen alongside this line of argument, Rochester becomes a full participant in an anorexic gender ideology by professing desire for Jane’s childlike body over Bertha and Blanche’s fuller figures; their plumper bodies indicate more voracious sexualities.

Since the middle-class Victorian lady - a position to which Jane aspires - stays slim in order to establish an essential, purified femininity, the training Jane receives as a young Victorian girl inscribes and reinforces her dual desires for invisibility and slenderness. At Lowood, we begin to see anorexic gender ideology in full effect. The thinner Lowood students are, the more religious they seem; the school’s parsimony is read as moral ideology. As we learn from a dialogue between Brocklehurst and Miss Temple, lack of food should serve as a lesson in principle; Brocklehurst claims that a spoiled meal should serve as “spiritual edification [for] the pupils,” and that by feeding the students’ bodies, Miss Temple actually “starve[s] their immortal souls” (*Jane Eyre* 62, 63).<sup>12</sup> The only positive (female) authority Jane has yet to meet is herself silenced in this conversation; confronted by Brocklehurst’s irrationality, Miss Temple seems to turn into a statue: she “freezes, her mouth closed” (*JE* 63). It is important to note that here she is prevented from speaking through her body and through words; not only is her mouth shut, her body is immobile. If Miss Temple cannot argue with Brocklehurst about proper feminine appetites, what should an already abused child, such as Jane, make of the moral codes that have been presented to her throughout her life?

Jane thus begins to internalize the feminine beau ideal. Told not to speak, act out, or put forward her body in any significant way (as a sexualized being, for example), Jane responds by trying to erase her body so no one will notice her. Brocklehurst shames her into invisibility

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<sup>9</sup> Sally Shuttleworth points out that her argument radically opposes Michie’s; see Shuttleworth (83, 266).

<sup>10</sup> The more Jane talks about starving, slipping, and fasting, the clearer sense we as readers have of her small frame and delicate physique. As her starving body tries to erase itself, that same body is reinscribed into the text.

<sup>11</sup> Inherent within the idea of a proper “lady” is possession of middle or upper class status: see Michie (18). For more on class within *Jane Eyre*, see Jina Politi’s “Jane Eyre Class-ified”; for an expanded discussion of early nineteenth-century ladyhood, see Mary Poovey, *The Proper Lady and the Woman Writer*.

<sup>12</sup> Following parenthetical references to *Jane Eyre* are indicated as *JE*.

by scolding her (wrongfully) for lying in front of the other students: “‘You see she is yet young; you observe she possesses the ordinary form of childhood; God has graciously given her the shape that he has given to all of us; no signal deformity points her out as a marked character. [...] Teachers, you must watch her: keep your eyes on her movements, weigh well her words, scrutinize her actions [...] let no one speak to her’” (*JE* 66-67). Jane’s punishment is to stand still in one place, to not move, to be a statue. Her physical language is silenced; so too is her voice. No one can speak to her and the inference is that she cannot speak to anyone, or if she does speak that her voice will not be heard. From this Jane learns that she cannot defend herself through speech, and while Brocklehurst mentions that there is nothing amiss with Jane’s body - he sees “no signal deformity”- even this “ordinary body” cannot save her from punishment. He orders people in the school from all of its social strata to observe her closely; moreover, he orders the teachers to “watch her: keep [their] eyes on her movements [...] scrutinize her actions.” In other words, Jane’s body language is to be read at all times. Any movements she makes will be interpreted and, judging from this instance, are likely to be misinterpreted, since Brocklehurst is proving what a poor reader of bodies he is. This is another reason that Jane begins to erase her body and desire invisibility. If no one can see her tiny body, no one can read it incorrectly. Jane seems to be anticipating the other wrong readings in the text: the implication that she is sexually available, as Rochester briefly hopes when he proposes an erotic relationship; or that her body seems to express a willingness she does not feel, as St. John claims he sees when he proposes marriage. In contrast, a good reading seems almost to be the absence of any interpretation; Jane is happiest at the end of the novel when her body cannot be read - only felt - by Rochester.

As Jane ages, she becomes more skilled in keeping her dietary intake from the reader. While still a child, when she was denied food, it was more straightforward; in the guise of a proper lady, she sits at the table and does not bite. This directly contrasts her with the “rather snappish” (*JE* 293) Bertha, who not only bites food, but also bites her husband: when Rochester brings the marriage company into her quarters, “the lunatic sprang and grappled his throat viciously, and laid her teeth to his cheek” (*JE* 293). She continues to (not) eat like a lady at Thornfield. Even - or perhaps especially - in front of Rochester, she refuses food.<sup>13</sup> At both meals before their wedding, she absolutely cannot eat; it is as if she is trying as hard as she can to emphasize how different she is from Bertha and the other women. At this meal, Rochester inscribes the idea that food is connected to companionship:

‘Take a seat, and bear me company, Jane: please God, it is the last meal but one you will eat at Thornfield Hall for a long time.’  
I sat down near him; but told him I could not eat.  
‘Is it because you have the prospect of a journey before you, Jane? It is the thoughts of going to London that takes away your appetite?’ (*JE* 278)

We could point to this as a savvy acknowledgment by the text of sexuality and attractiveness. Coupled with the journey to London is Rochester and Jane’s first official sexual encounter, the consummation of their marriage. By not eating, Jane denies her sexuality. Sally Shuttleworth argues that Jane’s reticent speech is a successful Victorian flirtation tactic, stating that in that period the hidden self was key to feminine attractiveness: “a [Victorian] woman was deemed to be feminine (and thus truly woman) only if sexually responsive to a man; but should she disclose that responsiveness before the requisite time she would also forfeit her feminine status. Femininity was thus predicated on a condition of concealment, on a disjunction between surface control and inner sexuality” (72). Jane’s refusal to eat mirrors her proper Victorian reticence, as she attempts to conceal her femininity on yet another level. A Victorian woman must be simultaneously sexual and non-sexual,

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<sup>13</sup> However, St. John can convince her to eat: he tells her, “You are very hungry,” and she responds, “I am, sir” (*JE* 345). Without this patriarchal permission, which is also a command, Jane would continue to starve herself in order to stay within the guidelines she perceives for appropriate feminine behavior.

womanly and childlike;<sup>14</sup> Jane exercises this physical self-denial through starvation either to ignore the looming event of her wedding or perhaps to remind Rochester of her childlike status (which, unfortunately for Jane's attempts at self-abnegation, he finds attractive anyway).

Drawing on her internalized vision of ideal femininity, instead of presenting herself as a sexualized object, Jane tries to become the ideal Victorian woman in a different way:<sup>15</sup> she transforms her desire for nourishment into sustaining others. By feeding others, Jane can act out all her fantasies of being a mother/nurturer, and take on a persona that was not available to her, mothering others the way she was not mothered. The connection between motherhood and food is emphasized so much throughout the text that even Rochester takes on maternal qualities when he feeds and comforts Jane after their aborted wedding ceremony (*JE* 278-9).<sup>16</sup> Strikingly, Jane takes on this maternal/nurturing role without entering into any of the contracts that would preface a Victorian woman's typical entrance into family life. As a governess, she mothers Adèle while retaining a virgin's status and her own childlike figure. She is able to further extend her role as a nurturer to her surrogate family, the Riverses, when she feeds them a celebratory meal, telling St. John there will be "a beating of eggs, sorting of currants, grating of spices, compounding of Christmas cakes, chopping up of materials for mince-pies, and solemnizing of other culinary rites" (*JE* 390). In many ways, this is Jane's moment of fulfillment as a Victorian lady. As a proper lady at Moor House, she plays hostess, is in command of a servant, and makes a "beau ideal of a welcome" (390) and a home; this care of others does not involve her erotic or hungry body. Yet of this generous sufficiency of delicacies, Jane plans not to eat any: she is making it for the Riverses, not herself.<sup>17</sup> This moment of sensual indulgence also partially problematizes the novel's treatment of anorexia: it is difficult to reconcile the "sumptuous" vision of well-fed pleasure with Jane's determination to avoid nourishment.<sup>18</sup> In caring for others, Jane's body is still hidden; in feeding others, she can continue to vanish.

## The Desire for Abstraction: How Disappearance Affects Reading the Body

From Mrs. Reed Jane learns that silence and stillness, qualities of the ideal woman that can both be interpreted as submission,<sup>19</sup> are the markers of acceptable mannerisms, even though she rejects them: her response to Mrs. Reed is "Unjust!" (*JE* 18). Yet changing the dimensions of the body or altering its shape becomes another means of altering its physical dialogue.<sup>20</sup> By

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<sup>14</sup> The substantial body of the Romantic ballerina signified her sexual availability, in contrast to the purported chastity of a slender Victorian lady (see Brumberg, 182, and Gorham, 4-7).

<sup>15</sup> Yet she still troubled contemporaneous readers: see Gilbert and Gubar, 338.

<sup>16</sup> As Jane mourns the loss of their relationship, she does not move, eat, or speak: silencing her body through both the absence of movement and the absence of flesh. When she comes to him at last, he nourishes her (*JE* 298-9), and the coupling of companionship with the bearing of food restores Jane mentally and physically.

<sup>17</sup> Food gives Jane pleasure only when other people consume it. There are just a few exceptions to this rule in the text, such as the typhus rage at Lowood, when Jane actually enjoys her food (*JE* 77).

<sup>18</sup> Indeed, while she seems not to eat, somehow, in her happiness at Thornfield Jane allows her body to become more solid: "I ceased to pine after kindred [...] I gathered flesh and strength" (*JE* 146). This illusory feeling of family enables Jane to inhabit her body more fully: as she "gather[s] flesh," she creates familial attachments; in turn, the increasing feeling of kinship encourages her to solidify. But Rochester's acknowledgment of his previous marriage "frees" Jane from this illusion of kindred, and as she flees Thornfield, she sheds this excess flesh.

<sup>19</sup> For a less traditional interpretation of female speech, silence, and submission, see Patricia Howell Michaelson, *Speaking Volumes: Women, Reading, and Speech in the Age of Austen* (6).

<sup>20</sup> Ivan Krielkamp argues that for Jane, holding back her voice allows her to explore different kinds of silence and possibilities of agency: see "Unuttered: Withheld Speech and Female Authorship in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*" (334).

starving and erasing her body, Jane is investigating a more physical kind of silence. In other words, the removal of her flesh can be seen as an attempt *not* to communicate through the body. But Jane, silent? some critics might ask. While her silences are evident throughout the text - at Gateshead, after her “silent tears” in the red room (*JE* 20), she “desire[s] and wait[s] [a change in situation] in silence” (*JE* 26); as an adult, she tells the reader, “I was quiet; I believed I was content” (*JE* 85) - Jane also has one of the most powerful narrative voices in literature; that is one reason the book was so successful.<sup>21</sup> Yet these moments of speech often result in dire consequences, and sometimes even while Jane is speaking she wishes for silence. In one of Jane’s most powerful moments of articulation, for example, she claims that she is not talking, or at least not talking conventionally:

‘I tell you I must go!’ I retorted, roused to something like passion. ‘Do you think I can stay to become nothing to you? Do you think I [...] can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup? [...] I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: - it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal - as we are!’ (*JE* 253)

Jane denies that she is speaking while speaking; instead, she claims that her body is being used as a conduit for spiritual communication (indeed, it seems to almost bypass language), which overpowers any more simple speech act and instead provides a revolutionary platform for two “equal” souls - from different classes - to connect with one another in ways more powerful and direct than speech ever could be. In this passage, Jane doubly denies her “mortal flesh.” She claims she will not “stay to become nothing to [him],” although she has been quite eager, in not eating, to reduce herself to nothing; she wants to be physically nothing but cannot bear to be emotionally nothing. Her speech rejects the literal interpretation of the slender body she has worked so hard to maintain, while equivocating food/nourishment to Rochester’s company, metaphorically connecting social and emotional food. In this paradigm, staying to become not/ no - thing to Rochester means that she would starve emotionally - her “morsel of bread” and “living water” would be taken away.

Yet Jane denies herself this spiritual bread and water when she runs away from Thornfield. As her body slips into silence and erases itself through starvation, she becomes so emaciated that her body no longer reveals any identifying characteristics. When the Rivers find her on their doorstep, there is no way for them to learn her identity; through starvation, she has (un)consciously made her body into a fresh interpretive space. Wasted away, Jane lands on the doorstep of her cousins, who do not know her; when she has regained her flesh, the resemblance appears. At this point in the novel, starvation has literally made her a blank slate - she does not even look like a person any more - and her body cannot be read as a means of disclosing her identity. Jane is brought into the house and then hears their voices commenting on her appearance: “‘she is worn to nothing. How very thin, and how very bloodless!’”; “‘A mere spectre!’” (*JE* 336). Their descriptions of her carry Rochester’s phrases of admiration to a more disturbing space. Instead of being attractive in her otherworldliness, Jane’s thinness makes her appear nearly dead. The terms that Rochester might have used for endearment are corrupted and made piteous. Her spectrality is not a quality to be adored, but a problem that needs to be solved; her thinness should not be encouraged but cured.

After recuperating and regaining some of her strength, Jane’s physiognomy still does not reveal any clue about her identity. Her name is revealed through a different kind of text; the familial connection between Jane and the Rivers is proved by the name written on a “blank”

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<sup>21</sup> Shuttleworth sees Jane’s verbal skill as her greatest strength: “Jane’s ‘weapon’ is that of language: [...] she aims constantly to gain control by [...] challenging his interpretative skills. Only by maintaining herself unread can she maintain the balance of power” (172). I want to examine the other weapons, such as silence, in Jane’s arsenal.

piece of paper.<sup>22</sup> While her blank, effaced body did not tell the Rivers anything, the blank text she creates while drawing reveals her entire identity. Her identity is then removed from the body of the page, just as she removed her identity from her body (in a way) through starvation.<sup>23</sup> St. John catches a glimpse of Jane's scribbled name on the page before Jane herself realizes it is there: "What he suddenly saw on this blank paper, it was impossible for me to tell [...] he looked at the edge; then shot a glance at me, inexpressibly peculiar, and quite incomprehensible: a glance that seemed to take and make note of every point in my shape, face, and dress [...] replacing the paper, I saw him dexterously tear a narrow slip from the margin" (*JE* 376). Jane's body/identity/ personhood is reduced to a "narrow slip" of paper, a slip which itself slips away from her. What Jane has written is revealed to her and the reader at the same time: "I read, traced in Indian ink, in my own handwriting, the words 'JANE EYRE' - the work doubtless of some moment of abstraction" (*JE* 381). At the last, her own body - through her hand - does reveal her identity, as her writing (which comes from the body) is read in a way that her physically emaciated self could not have been. Fittingly, she decides that she wrote her name at a "moment of abstraction," a time when she had achieved mentally a state - becoming abstract - she had longed for physically: a state Rochester was wont to admire.

Jane's desire for abstraction reminds us of the contrast between the desexualized slender body and the voluptuous "woman" figure, and complicates the idea of the feminine beau ideal in the text. It also asks us to consider whether this idea of the feminine beau ideal was fully in view during the start of the Victorian period - and if Brontë is fully participating in, anticipating, or deviating from this trend by giving Jane the desire to be incredibly thin. There is a contradiction between the idea of Jane starving herself so that no one will read her and the idea that she is starving herself as an ingrained means of enacting the feminine beau ideal. Since the typical Victorian beauty is often described as thin yet potentially reproductive, fertile without erotic desire,<sup>24</sup> there is potential here to support both claims. If we think about the book as on the crest of one period and the wave of another - as *Wuthering Heights* is often described as both a Romantic and a Victorian text - we can read Jane as trying to establish a Victorian female identity while clinging to a Romantic identity. She presents the assurance that she is doing the right thing and desires to be loved, while constantly reiterating the hope that no one will notice her. By trying to erase her feminized body, Jane has the best of both worlds. No one will see her, but if they did, no one could accuse her of not being feminine, in the way that (she imagines) they might call her unattractive.

Even so, Jane rejects the specific ideas of feminine attractiveness held by Rochester. In a notable dialogue between them, he tells her, "You are a beauty, in my eyes; and a beauty just after the desire of my heart, - delicate and aerial" (*JE* 258). In this passage we see the different ways Rochester and Jane view her body. He calls her "a beauty, in [his] eyes [...]" a beauty just after the desire of [his] own heart" (*JE* 258). He is not claiming that Jane is beautiful outright, or that others would see her as beautiful. His opinion does not help us form an opinion about Jane's aesthetic person. Instead she is beautiful to him; he sees beauty in her; she is exactly the kind of beauty his heart desires. His description of her as "delicate and aerial" calls to

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<sup>22</sup> Karen Lawrence argues that Lucy reveals herself through the blanks in her story in "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*." For a connection between women and blank paper in the works of Balzac, see Peter Brooks, *Body Work: Objects of Desire in Modern Narrative* (84); for an exploration of the blank page and its connections to the woman writer, see Gubar, "'The Blank Page' and the Issues of Female Creativity."

<sup>23</sup> Effacement, blankness, and excision extend to the text itself. In her edition of the text, Margaret Smith points out that there is a significant omission in volume two, chapter four: the removal of Jane's statement, "I am nothing" (xxxvi). This preserved piece of excised text acts much as Jane's name, removed from a piece of paper and reread separately, acted to reveal her to St. John - here Jane's iteration of her nothingness becomes nothing itself when it is removed from the text.

<sup>24</sup> See Shuttleworth: "The Victorian ideal of female beauty focused strongly on the procreative organs: a well developed bust and hips, set off by a narrow waist" (83).



mind the popular term used to describe Romantic ballerinas - the “spirits of the age.” Here Rochester reads Jane’s body in a deliberate fashion not unlike the deliberate way in which she presents herself as a text: he wants to see her as beautiful, and so he does; she refuses to see herself as beautiful, and so cannot. Indeed, Jane’s response to these evanescent compliments is to describe herself as “Puny and insignificant, you mean. You are dreaming, sir - or you are sneering [...]” (*JE* 259). Tellingly, Jane accuses Rochester of “dreaming,” and in the ballets a character like Rochester could have seen, sylphs do appear to their male human partners in dreams.<sup>25</sup> While Jane frames his words as insults, she cannot help couching them in the same terms he uses - the image of dreams or dreaming - that she will return to when describing her wedding dress. When looking at that dress, she tells the reader, “I shut the closet, to conceal the strange, wraith-like apparel it contained [...] ‘I will leave you by yourself, white dream,’ I said” (*JE* 275). She projects any potential beauty onto a garment she does not believe she is fit to wear.

In this maneuver, Jane is more successfully embodying the Victorian beau ideal than she may realize. Since physical appetite connotes sexual desire, denial of the first implies the absence of both; by attempting to erase and thus desexualize her body through starvation, Jane actually stays in the liminal space between potential and actual desire, pointing to her sexuality by denying it. Paradoxically, it is Jane’s small, childlike, and hidden body that arouses Rochester’s desire(s). For him, she is incredibly attractive; she is a feminine “white dream” (*JE* 275). In his embodied state, Rochester resists the flesh of the other - Bertha - and expresses desire for the spirit. His attraction to Jane allows him to reconcile erotic desire with his distaste for a fleshly lover. The fact that Jane’s physical well being at Thornfield is so temporary, and that it is removed so quickly after it appears, suggests that Rochester prefers his ghostly lover to an earthbound wife. Indeed, his apparent desire for the sylph-like Jane is magnified in his dialogue with Adèle, when he tells her that he wishes to live with Jane on the moon. In this fantasy, as Adèle points out, Rochester seems almost to encourage Jane’s starvation or self-abnegation. His delight in her insubstantiality is emphasized by the imaginary food he will “feed” her - “I shall gather manna for her morning and night” (*JE* 268) - and his desire to have Jane all to himself in an enchanted, far-off place further echoes the male desire articulated in Romantic ballets; he seems almost to wish to capture or enclose Jane and bind her to him.<sup>26</sup>

Yet Jane will not be caught or bound so easily. There are many instances wherein Rochester tries to “capture” her by reading her countenance in some way and she refuses: for example, he asks her to move forward so he can “see” her, but Jane tells the reader she “would much rather have remained somewhat in the shade” (*JE* 130). Shuttleworth argues that, in Brontë’s fiction, this reading of the other (which Shuttleworth sees as surveillance) establishes a self: “The desire of the other to read the self, brings to the subject of surveillance a reassuring sense of self-‘possession’: a sense of selfhood is actively produced through the experience of the power to withhold” (46). This is especially relevant for Jane, who wishes to remain hidden while gazing at her master; she can thus establish her self through withholding it. Rochester articulates this possessiveness when he breaks from prior descriptions of Jane’s beauty to say, “You - you strange - you almost unearthly thing! - I love you as my own flesh. You - poor and obscure, and small and plain as you are - I entreat to accept me as a husband” (*JE* 255). His desire for her is still reflected in the words “strange” and “unearthly”, but his description of her as small and plain seems a reiteration of Jane’s view of herself rather than

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<sup>25</sup> Ironically, a sensuous, lower class woman like Céline Varens would have played an ethereal figure like this. For a discussion of ballet’s class status in Victorian London, see Ivor Guest, *Victorian Ballet-Girl: The Tragic Story of Clara Webster* (26).

<sup>26</sup> In particular, it is reminiscent of the ending of *La Sylphide* (1832), in which an evil witch fools the hero into giving a magic scarf to an untouchable sylphide, whom he loves. He thinks the scarf will enable him to hold the otherworldly sylphide, but it kills her.

an accurate portrayal of how she comes across to Rochester. Oddly, her insubstantial body is as important to him as his “own flesh,” but in offering her his flesh, he asks for her spirit in return. We must ask then if by starving herself Jane also deprives Rochester—possibly both of them thrive on this deprivation and sense of control. If they share the same “flesh,” then when Jane denies herself, she also denies Rochester. At this moment in the text, Jane’s response, significantly, is to turn the tables on him by saying, “Mr. Rochester, let me look at your face: turn to the moonlight. [...] I want to read your countenance: turn!” (255). Her insistence on him physically turning to enable a proper reading is especially interesting; by acting as the observer of his face, she hopes to distract attention from her body. By nearly commanding him to allow her to look at his face, she establishes his physical body as a text: in her request is an implicit assumption that she will read his countenance correctly. Here, Jane is the one with the power as she uses her skill of reading the body to test the truth of Rochester’s words to her.

The two do share a fully embodied and eroticized physical encounter later in the novel, after Jane has discovered Rochester’s marriage and is preparing to leave Thornfield. In their heated discussion, Rochester’s reading of Jane takes on a cast of desperation—there is no communicative means at his disposal (physical or verbal) to convince Jane to his point or to successfully entreat her to stay. While they are temporarily ineffectual, Rochester’s words reminds us once more of his desire for both a spiritual and sensual lover: “If I tear, if I rend the slight prison, my outrage will only let the captive loose [...] it is you, spirit [...] that I want: not alone your brittle frame. Of yourself, you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence—you will vanish ere I inhale your fragrance” (*JE* 318, 319). He claims to desire her “spirit,” but her “brittle frame” is desirable too (indeed, it appears superior to Bertha’s body, which Rochester and Jane see as a “beast [...] some strange wild animal [...] a] clothed hyena [with...] bloated features” [*JE* 293]). He is preoccupied here with what should happen if he were to penetrate or tear her body (the little death is implied). The reasons Rochester has for desiring Jane also echo the characteristics of Romantic ballet figures. His hope that she will fly to him and “nestle against [his] heart,” his worry that she will “elude [his] grasp,” and his fear that she will “vanish” all read like descriptions of scenes from Romantic ballets;<sup>27</sup> they seem to reference the earlier scene of capture and binding. Indeed, in acting out his expression of desire and his attempts to capture what he sees as an otherworldly being almost place him in a Romantic ballet as the hero. By reading Jane this way, he can adore a “sylph” in both body and spirit. However, as long as he interprets and desires Jane as an otherworldly creature, her desirability will be predicated on her continued disordered eating. Figuratively, he would prefer to keep her as a ballet character rather than an embodied person.

## “Not Vanished”

It seems, then, that Jane’s presentation of her physicality, and its neat correlation to Rochester’s desires, would result in her eventual erasure. Indeed, this is almost accomplished in her flight from Thornfield. However, the convenient occasion of Rochester’s blindness, which enables the couple to reunite as “equals” at the end of the text, also keeps Jane from vanishing through starvation.<sup>28</sup> She grants herself partial permission to stop erasing her body

<sup>27</sup> See Felicia McCarren, *Dance Pathologies: Performance, Poetics, Medicine*, for a list of these characteristics: “the tragic results of a love gone wrong; the subsequent transmutation of the woman into a white-bodied natural or supernatural being, and her removal into a fantastic realm of nature; her quintessential inaccessibility, and the solitude of the man who worships but cannot possess her, who has distanced and idealized her” (62).

<sup>28</sup> For other discussions of how Rochester’s blindness works to Jane’s advantage, see Peter J. Bellis, “In the Window-seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*” (647), and Karen Chase, *Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (90).

when she returns to the blinded Rochester as his caretaker. The following dialogue details their newfound relationship:

‘Can you see me?’  
‘No, my fairy: but I am only too thankful to hear and feel you.’  
‘When do you take supper?’  
‘I never take supper.’  
‘But you shall have some to-night. I am hungry: so are you, I dare say, only you forget.’ (JE 436)

In this passage many of the themes I have been discussing appear: Rochester’s reference to Jane again as a magical creature, the “fairy”; the stress on Jane’s (in)visibility; and the question of hunger and being fed. After spending much of the text not eating, so that her body cannot be seen, Jane finally asks if Rochester can see her; although she is wary of being read, that fear is superseded by her concern for his sight. It would be better for him to see her than to be blind. Alas, he is blind, and can only hear and/or feel. Paradoxically, his disability affords Jane the opportunity to eat as much as she wants; they are able to reconcile starvation, silence, and speech through their love and his loss of sight. A blind Rochester is the perfect partner for Jane to rehabilitate her body with: putting aside concerns of being read, or being read wrongly—as desirable in her slimness—she can eat and maintain a healthy body weight, a fact evidenced in her giving birth to two children. Since his blind eyes erase her body from his sight, she does not have to erase her body any further. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that “when [Jane and Rochester] were both physically whole they could not, in a sense, see each other because of the social disguises - master/servant, prince/Cinderella - blinding them, but now that those disguises have been shed, now that they are equals, they can (though one is blind) see and speak even beyond the medium of the flesh” (368). Both are content in this spiritual equality: Jane becomes Rochester’s eyes and as such, part of his flesh, so both of them see from her body into the world, rather than viewing her body against it. Moreover, Jane no longer has to erase herself because it would have no effect on her audience. While in this moment Jane can admit to her hunger - “I am hungry” - she does not mention eating anything herself. Instead, she makes her mark on the domestic space and then feeds Rochester, mothering him as she will later mother their children. By admitting to hunger in a situation where she was not being starved by external forces, she is making progress.

It is, however, a slow progress: in the next scene, Jane retains her habitual ambivalence to food while exploring the possibilities of feeling hungry. The morning after she returns to Rochester, she tells the reader, “I thought there was a prospect of breakfast.” Rochester greets her with, “Oh, you are indeed there, my sky-lark! Come to me. You are not gone: not vanished? [...] All the melody on earth is concentrated in my Jane’s tongue to my ear (I am glad it is not naturally a silent one): all the sunshine I can feel is in her presence” (JE 439). This is a nicely ambiguous moment. Jane prospects for breakfast, but does not clarify whether that sustenance is for herself or her lover; the novel refuses to determine whether she is, at last, truly hungry, or is merely clinging to her role as nurturer. Tellingly, this passage is very focused on Rochester; there are four proprietary pronouns (“me” and “my”) and she is described in accordance to how she relates to him. She comes to him, she does not leave him, she speaks to him; he makes her feel. Paradoxically, this both cements and refutes her desire in the text to nourish/feed, or care for others, while she wants to subsist on airy nothingness. She cares for him by emotionally providing the non-food substance that she has long desired. Metaphorically, she puts her tongue to Rochester’s ear, eating him up. Or perhaps she is prospecting for food for her lover. Rochester addresses her as a quasi-magical creature, a “sky-lark” and is relieved to find she has not “vanished,” as would also befit a magical creature, even though Jane’s body has been on the point of vanishing throughout the text by virtue of not eating. Rochester is relieved Jane’s voice “is not naturally a silent one”: an important factor, considering that she has often stayed silent in the text, or kept her body silent

and vanishing. Now her body is vanished to his sight, although it has not vanished from a physical plane; therefore, her body is silent to him because he cannot see it, so it is doubly important that he be able to hear her voice. Jane no longer needs to silence her body through starvation, or work to remain unread; she is matched with the one person - a blind lover - who cannot see her physical body, although he can feel it, no matter what it looks like. She no longer has to maintain as much of a vanishing body to act as an ideal woman, or to appear as Rochester's ballerina-like "fairy"; she cannot erase her body, since she must now be touched in order to be read.

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