The Caged Bildungsroman:
Feminist Avian Narratives in Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* and
Thomas Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

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Splitting the Lark:
An Introduction to Bird Animalities in British Literature

When thirteen-year-old Aurora first comes to England in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s epic poem *Aurora Leigh* (1856), she calls her English aunt’s existence a “caged-bird life,” explaining that her relation was “born in a cage / Accounting that to leap from perch to perch / Was act and joy enough for any bird.” In comparison to her carefree Italian childhood, Aurora finds herself, a newly-orphaned “wild bird scarcely fledged,” suddenly trapped in the “cage” of English womanhood.¹ She no longer possesses the intellectual freedom she had in Florence with her parents; now, there’s no world for her beyond the domestic. It is no accident that Barrett Browning adopts a “caged bird” metaphor to describe her narrator’s shift to English society.

*Aurora Leigh* inverts autobiographical events from Barrett Browning’s life to create a feminist “novel in verse,” undermining the classical genre of the epic to celebrate historically-suppressed women writers. And, an invalid who could not leave her father’s London home until she eloped at the age of forty, Barrett Browning described herself as a “caged bird” poet. In a letter to R. H. Horne in 1843, Barrett Browning provides a brief autobiography of her life as a writer:

And then as to stories, my story amounts to the knife-grinder’s, with nothing at all for a catastrophe. A bird in a cage would have as good a story. Most of my events, and nearly all my intense pleasures, have passed in my *thoughts*. I wrote verses—as I dare say many have done who never wrote any poems—very early; at eight years old and earlier. But, what is less common, the early fancy turned into a will, and remained with me, and from that day to this, poetry has been a distinct object with me—an object to read, think, and live for. ²


Almost a century later, Virginia Woolf echoed Barrett Browning’s construction as a “caged bird storyteller” in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) to describe the woman writer’s experience working within English poetics:

One goes into the room—but the resources of the English language would be much put to the stretch, and whole flights of words would need to wing their way illegitimately into existence before a woman could say what happens when she goes into a room… One has only to go into any room in any street for the whole of that extremely complex force of femininity to fly in one’s face. How should it be otherwise? For women have sat indoors all these millions of years, so that by this time the very walls are permeated by their creative force.³

Woolf and Barrett Browning both accept and use an ornithological metaphor that associates women with birds in order to subvert it. They argue that the “bird in a cage” *does* have a good story to tell, that “femininity” is “complex,” forceful, and ready to “fly” out of its room and onto the page. But their subversion only takes place because the “bird in a cage” metaphor exists as a means to suppress female voices. Woolf even uses the “flying bird” metaphor to explain how her language was not built for her; as a “bird in a cage,” she is an “illegitimate” contributor to the English literary tradition. She is supposed to be the object, not the subject. She is meant to be gazed at, rather than the one who gazes. She is in a cage because male writers put her there to flutter, not fly. She is a bird because they made her that way.

I have long been interested in how women writers transform feminized or sexualized natural images, such as flowers or the moon, to craft a feminist poetics of their own. Specifically, this thesis examines bird imagery, which, when used metaphorically, often connotes women (or, when describing specific bird species, is highly gendered), in two Victorian novels as critiques of the hierarchal structures that oppress and “cage” women. More broadly, my study examines the

way that women exist in a language that was not built with their freedom in mind. Poststructural
feminist Hélène Cixous tackles this question in her seminal piece, “The Laugh of the
Medusa” (1976). She argues that women must reclaim their bodies, and therefore, their
figurative language, in order to write themselves into fiction, because “male writing,” exhibited
by writers of all genders, subconsciously excludes them:

I maintain unequivocally that there is such a thing as marked writing; that, until now, far
more extensively and repressively than is ever suspected or admitted, writing has been
run by a libidinal and cultural-hence political, typically masculine-economy; that this is a
locus where the repression of women has been perpetuated, over and over, more or less
consciously, and in a manner that’s frightening since it’s often hidden or adorned with
the mystifying charms of fiction; that this locus has grossly exaggerated all the signs of
sexual opposition (and not sexual difference), where woman has never her turn to speak.5

Cixous understands that figurative language carries the weight of all figurative language that
comes before it. In a patriarchal world, Cixous proclaims, “woman” is never far from
“mother” (a “source of goods” for men to Cixous) because language is built for male power and
pleasure.6 In the Western literary tradition, male writers construct aesthetics and imagery
associated with women for patriarchal purposes: to suppress, to sexualize, to overpower, to make
wife and therefore, an extended part of the male self. The flower could be crushed by the boot.
Eve’s apple shows her weakness and her feminine fallibility. Aphrodite and Athena sprung from
their ruler/father Zeus. The cow is bred, branded, and objectified for its milk. Virginal Mary is

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4 Cixous writes within the concept of binary genders, which I would argue erases trans and gender-
nonconforming people and is hence invalid, problematic, and outdated. I do believe her arguments about
feminine writing, when universalized to consider all people who do not identify as cisgender and male,
are valuable, which is why I include her.


6 Ibid, 881.
inherently holy, sexual Mary must be saved by Christ. People of color, women, gender non-conforming people, and all who are “other” in historical, socioeconomic, political, literary English consideration exist within the perimeters of an inherently oppressive language. Words cannot fully escape their patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic, racist, ableist, and classist pasts, and writers are forced to struggle with them in order to move past the metaphors that came before their own metaphors. Even when they successfully reshape an image, they cannot erase the history of language that made that image oppressive in the first place.

My study looks at two nineteenth-century novelists—one female and one male—who, I argue, understand the realities of these poetics and write anyway. I could have picked any number of historically-oppressive images, but I choose birds because I have found their linguistic, scientific, and imperialistic histories to be as significant as their literary history in Victorian British novels. Nevertheless, I must clarify that my work does not fall under the umbrella of animal studies. On the contrary, my thesis contributes to animality studies, an emerging form of literary scholarship that looks at nonhuman animals from a cultural perspective in literature, art, and history. Unlike animal studies, animality studies does not evoke animal rights and welfare as its purpose for scholarship. Michael Lundblad, who coined the term animality studies in 2009, eloquently explains that, “Animality studies might thus be seen as speciesist, but animal studies, conversely, runs the risk of ahistorical, universalist prescriptions about how to treat or interact with nonhuman animals.”

Therefore, animality studies can examine human interpretations of animals to understand human interpretations of the self and the other. Animality studies connects well with feminist and ecofeminist studies, as it does in my

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thesis, because animals are historically linked with women and people of color in a way that oppresses and marginalizes them. In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway explicitly details this connection:

The discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal—all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright constitution—is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism. Woven into that tie in all the categories is “woman’s” putative self-defining responsibility to ‘the species’ as this singular and typological female is reduced to her reproductive function. Fecund, she lies outside the bright territory of man even as she is his conduit. The labeling of African American men in the United States as an ‘endangered species’ makes palpable the ongoing animalization that fuels liberal and conservative radicalization alike. *Species* reeks of race and sex; and where and when species meet, that heritage must be untied...

Through my animality studies, I hope to examine the cultural invention of “birds” rather than birds themselves. My thesis will look at the ways novelists who I argue are, to some degree, feminist, “untie” *animals* from the figurative language associated with them to show how they influence the lives of the *people* who are deemed “Others” in patriarchal structures.

In order to look at the subversion of this concept, though, I must first briefly establish how “birds” come to be omnipresently connoted with women in Victorian England. The fourth definition of “bird” in the Oxford English Dictionary remarks that “bird” initially meant “a maiden, a girl” because, in Middle English, “burd” looked and sounded similar to “bryde,” or bride. The Middle English Dictionary confirms this confusion, noting that “bryd” and “burd” are “partial synonyms” with “brīde ‘young woman, bride.’” According to the Oxford English Dictionary, as early as the fourteenth century, “writers understand it as a figurative sense.”

Though “bird” did not actually mean “woman” in English until the fourteenth century, Western

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cultures have long been domesticating birds while simultaneously dehumanizing women. Art historian Richard H. Randall Jr. explains that bird cages were an ancient invention:

The history of bird cages can be traced to the ancient world, and already in the eighth century B.C. an iron bird cage in a Greek house is mentioned by Pollux (x, 160). Many Greek vases depict the tall wicker cages that were characteristic in the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., and the Romans had a variety of rectangular, domical, and basket-shaped forms. On an early Christian sarcophagus from the Vatican cemetery a domed bird cage is shown with the bird sitting on top of it, signifying that the soul of the person had been liberated from its earthly prison.9

As birds became novelties that could be caged and maintained in homes, images of domestic birds versus images of wild birds came to represent the dichotomies of earthly and heavenly, freedom and imprisonment, empowered and tame. Women were regularly the owners and caretakers of these “cagebirds,” a notion that Roman poets Catullus and Ovid take up in their famous poems about their lovers. “Catullus 2,” or “Passer, deliciae meae puellae,” depicts Catullus’ lover Lesbia playing with her pet sparrow, which makes Catullus jealous:

Sparrow, the special delight of my girl,
whom often she teases and holds on her lap
and pokes with the tip of her finger, provoking
counterattacks with your mordant beak,
whenever my luminous love desires
something or other, innocuous fun,
a bit of escape, I suppose, from her pain,
a moment of peace from her turbulent passion,
I wish I could play like she does with you
and lighten the cares of my sorrowful soul.
It thrills me as much as the nimble girl
in the story was thrilled by the gilded apple
that finally uncinched her virginal gown.10


In Catullus’ poem, his lover delights in her sparrow when she cannot delight in him, and Catullus, envious of the bird, feigns powerlessness and passivity. He wishes that he could find “peace” from his “passion” for Lesbia by playing with himself in an erotic sense just as Lesbia “teases” and “pokes” the animal in her lap. Lesbia is not a bird, but “Catullus 2” shows how early writers sexualize and fetishize women alongside their caged pet birds. Though Catullus might not try to overpower Lesbia, he, like many male poets, equates her with an animal that could be oppressed and ensnared.

Other early works of literature likened femininity to ecology more generally. In many Greek myths, the gods transform women into flora or fauna to protect them before or after they experience sexual violence. Zeus turns his mistress Io into a heifer to hide her from his jealous wife Hera; Peneus, the river god, turns his daughter Daphne into a tree to keep her from being raped by Apollo. In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, the gods turn Prome, the wife of Terseus, and her sister Philomela into birds (Prome a swallow, Philomela a nightingale) after Terseus rapes Philomela, cuts out her tongue, and attempts to kill both women. Morphed into animals, these mythological women might be liberated from the dangers of mankind, but they are made into pure voice. Consequently, they are trapped, immobilized, and dehumanized by their “metamorphosis.” Greek and Roman myths also depict hyper-sexualized and violent monsters as half-female, half-animal. Ovid’s version of Medusa, the snake-haired woman who turns men to stone, is transformed into a gorgon as punishment for her sexuality. When Aeneas and his men land on the island Strophades in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, they are attacked by harpies, “Bird-bodied, girl-faced things…abominable their droppings, their hands are talons, their faces haggard with
hunger insatiable.” On heroes’s quests, valiant men like Odysseus and Oedipus have to overcome tricky, alluring, and feminized creatures like sirens and sphinxes. Though they appear to be beautiful women, underneath the pretty faces of these half female, half animal creatures lies something much more sinister. These “hungry” she-beasts, though arousing, threaten patriarchal societies and must therefore be slew, destroyed, or conquered.

These images of women and animals festered in Western literature for nearly a thousand years, and, when globalization was on the rise in the late medieval period, early French and English authors returned to these classical mythologies when constructing their own literatures. George D. Economou argues that French author Jean de Meun’s *Roman de la Rose* establishes “a simile” through the image of a bird where “the nature of the bird being made directly analogous to the nature of woman.” Geoffrey Chaucer, who conducted an English translation of *Roman de la Rose* and had to be conscious of the partials synonyms “burd” and “bryde,” appropriates this metaphor in many of his original works. In the *Squire’s Tale* and the *Manciple’s Tale*, Chaucer places anthropomorphized birds as pets within the high class spaces of a royal court and the god Apollo’s fictionalized home. Lesley Kordecki explains that in both tales, the presence of a talking bird in the upper class households changes the presence of the women—Canace and Phoebus’s wife—in these spaces as well: “the text not only anthropomorphizes the animal…but also morphs the human, at least partially, into a bird.” Kordecki argues that appearances of

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actual birds in Chaucer’s works complicate otherness in those same works: “the nonhuman creatures of Chaucer’s poems...are linked with the nonmale, forming a similar marginalization of the two groups that provokes analysis.” Further, Chaucer appropriates the metaphor of the “bird in a cage” alone to describe a woman trapped in domesticity. In the Miller’s Tale, Chaucer’s narrator describes the relationship between John, a carpenter, and his wife, Alisoun:

This carpenter hadde wedded newe a wyf,
Which that he lovede moore than his lyf;
Of eightseteene yeer she was of age.
Jalous he was, and heeld hire narwe in cage,
For she was wylde and yong, and he was old
And demed hymself been lik a cokewold.

Though there is no physical bird in the Miller’s Tale, Alisoun, who is called “byrd” multiple times by her lovers, embodies a metaphor that equates femininity and birdlikeness with imprisonment and dehumanization. By equating marriage and the domestic space as a “cage,” Chaucer draws a subtle parallel between the domestication of birds and household domesticity.

Chaucer and his successors embraced the etymological confusion between “burd” and “bryde” in Middle English, continuing a literary practice that compared women to birds. It is likely that William Shakespeare most significantly developed the connotations that Chaucer first translated into the English language. From the romance scenes of Romeo and Juliet to the references to Ovid’s Philomela in Cymbeline and Titus Andronicus, Shakespeare fills many of his tragedies with avian images to describe romantic encounters and sexual violence. One

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14 Ibid, 6.

particularly famous allusion to the “bird in the cage” comes from the final act of *King Lear*,

when a captured Lear begs his daughter Cordelia to refrain from confronting her sisters:

…Come, let’s away to prison:
We two alone will sing like birds i’ the cage:
When thou dost ask me blessing, I’ll kneel down,
And ask of thee forgiveness: so we’ll live,
And pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh
At gilded butterflies, and hear poor rogues
Talk of court news; and we’ll talk with them too,
Who loses and who wins; who’s in, who’s out;
And take upon’s the mystery of things,
As if we were God’s spies: and we’ll wear out,
In a wall’d prison, packs and sects of great ones,
That ebb and flow by the moon.\(^\text{16}\)

Lear imagines prison as a domestic space where he and Cordelia, unaffected by the pulse of social and political change, can “talk” of frivolous things and “sing” like two birds in a cage. To the incestuous and emasculated Lear, Cordelia can transform imprisonment into paradise by being the perfect daughter and wife, because the “bird” in the cage can be carefree even when trapped. Avian epithets in Shakespeare’s comedies also subtly complicate questions of gender. In *Twelfth Night*, Sir Toby Belch compares Maria to birds to describe her delicate petiteness (“Look where the youngest wren of nine comes,”) and he makes fun of Malvolio by calling him “bawcock,” “chuck,” and “biddy.”\(^\text{17}\) These terms of endearment, which mean bird, chicken, and hen respectively, emasculate Malvolio and point to the feminine weaknesses that arise in him following Toby and Maria’s cruel prank. In a play that examines binary gender roles, Toby’s epithets demonstrate how women and chickens, both used in patriarchal societies for their reproductive organs, are treated more similarly than woman and men in early modern England.


By the time England reached the Victorian period, writers far and wide—from the authors of the Restoration Period to the Romantic poets—had, whether consciously or unconsciously, carried on the tradition of using birds in their figurative language to ascribe gender and dehumanize women. But, as a middle class rooted in imperialism, industrialization, and the home developed in the early nineteenth-century, people’s thoughts about animals in general changed to become more similar to the way they thought about domesticated birds. Harriet Ritvo notes that, following the scientific realizations of the Enlightenment, the British began to see animals as “the objects of human manipulation” rather than the other way around: “advances in such fields as stockbreeding, veterinary science, and weapons technology made actual animals easier to manage…once nature ceased to be a constant antagonist, it could be viewed with affection and even, as the scales tipped to the human side, with nostalgia.”18 Because they could be dominated, many animals became critical objects of sentimentalism and exoticism in Victorian culture. Observational science books like Thomas Bewick’s History of Quadrupeds (1790) and History of British Birds (1797) were staples of the Victorian country house, providing lively and nostalgic illustrations that made nature accessible to the everyday reader. The London Zoological Society, founded in 1826, assisted in importing animals from imperialized countries in the British Empire. Citizens could experience the thrill of seeing caged giraffes and lions—and could feel a nationalistic pride in knowing Britain’s worldwide power. At home, upper and middle class families enjoyed a similar power with their pampered pets, especially when they bred and showed their dogs as examples of their wealth and prestige. The Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic art movements created endless watercolors, sketches, prints, and portraits of animals, flowers, and children that, when placed in parlors and bedrooms, reproduced the domestic sentimentality of

the time. And, alongside the image of the domesticated animal was the portrait of perfect middle class wife. From paintings to poetry, Victorians portrayed women with dogs, cats, birds, and other pets as the nostalgic “others,” less than men but beloved by them. The bird, with its homebound “cage,” was often the perfect animal metaphor for the woman stuck in the house because, as Elaine Shefer describes, “birds symbolized the position of their female owners, who fed and played with them—refined, docile, confined to the home.” Artists and photographers like Walter Deverell and David Octavius Hill embrace these parallels in works like A Pet (1853) and (The Bird Cage) Two Sisters (1845), where women stand dainty next to their caged animal twins. John Ruskin, the most famous art critic of the era, produced visual, literary, and critical works “rampant” with avian metaphors, often used to describe middle class women and girls. The bird in the cage was a politicized image, used to encourage women that, in the home, they were kept safe and innocent, allowed to best be the beautiful and selfless wives and mothers they were destined to be.

Ironically, though Victorian culture insisted that a woman’s place was in the home, female writers conquered the medium of the great Victorian novel. Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, and George Eliot penned many of the remarkable and memorable works of their time—and they often used their novels to combat the idea that women were satisfied as what Coventry Patmore named the “Angel in the House.” The treatment of animals in these novels often mirrors the treatment of women, which allowed female novelists to make covert feminist critiques by evoking Darwinism and advocating for animal rights. One excellent example occurs


20 See Figure 1 for Deverell’s and Hill’s work.

21 Ibid, 21.
in George Eliot’s *Daniel Deronda*, when Grandcourt, Gwendolen Harleth’s aggressive suitor, interacts with the “beautiful liver-coloured water spaniel,” Fetch, his loyal pet. Eliot interjects her narrational observations when Grandcourt deliberately plays with a different dog as Fetch watches forlornly:

I fear that Fetch was jealous, and wounded that her master gave her no word or look; at last it seemed that she could bear this neglect no longer, and she gently put her large silky paw on her master’s leg. Grandcourt looked at her with unchanged face for half a minute, and then took the trouble to lay down his cigar while he lifted the unimpassioned Fluff close to his chin and gave it caressing pats, all the while gravely watching Fetch, who, poor thing, whimpered interruptedly, as if trying to repress that sign of discontent, and at last rested her head beside the appealing paw, looking up with piteous beseeching…But when the amusing anguish burst forth in a howling bark, Grandcourt pushed Fetch down without speaking…

“Turn out that brute, will you?” said Grandcourt to Lush, without raising his voice or looking at him—as if he counted on attention to the smallest sign. By petting the more beautiful Maltese Fluff while staring at his pleading spaniel, Grandcourt cruelly teases Fetch, who desires his love. The dog desperately tries to win over her master’s affections with a gentle touch and pleading eyes. When these techniques fail, she beings to “howl,” which leads Grandcourt to physically “push” her, call her a “brute,” and force his companion Lush to take her away. Grandcourt’s abuse of Fetch directly foreshadows his abuse of Gwendolen, whom he emotionally manipulates throughout their relationship. More significantly, Eliot uses the two dogs to demonstrate Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, which insists, as Gillian Beer argues, “in contrast to all other species (where the female most commonly holds the power of selection), among humankind the male dominates choice.”

A woman’s beauty, therefore, determines her ability to reproduce, a concept that erases her ability to chose. Rather

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than making a conscious choice to become a governess and work for herself, Gwendolen lets Grandcourt “choose her” for her beauty and natural fitness. She becomes an animal when she loses the very thing that makes her human: her free will.  

With these historical contexts and nineteenth-century attitudes in mind, I will conduct two close readings of Victorian novels where the authors correlate extensive bird imagery with their unconventional heroines. In *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891), Charlotte Brontë and Thomas Hardy take up ornithological metaphors to criticize and subvert the patriarchal connotation of the “bird in the cage.” As Brontë is an early Victorian while Hardy is a relatively late one, they appropriate this figurative language in different ways for distinct purposes. Because both writers studied what they thought was science alongside literature, I will frame my arguments in the context of popular natural history, which changed drastically in the years that separate the two novels. My first chapter will examine how Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds* influences the figurative landscape in *Jane Eyre*, in which Brontë attempts to “kill off” traditional ornithological metaphors to build a feminist definition of “birdhood” for her ideal heroine. In my second chapter, I will explore how Hardy compares the ways men prescribe meaning to Tess to the ways Tess understands actual birds by looking at Hardy’s poetic and Darwinian agendas. Through these studies, I will assess the degree to which Brontë and Hardy subvert the image of the bird in the cage in order to reclaim the Victorian heroine and undermine Hardy recreates Eliot’s scene from *Daniel Deronda* in his novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, when the dairymaids writhe “feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion” for Angel Clare “thrust on them by cruel Nature’s law….” (162). In Hardy’s version, though, there is no male villain like Grandcourt; instead, only “cruel Nature” forces the dairymaids to compete for the man. This “passion,” as Hardy notes, abstracts “the differences which distinguished them as individuals,” making them simply their sex, but, because they have “no hope” of winning Angel, Hardy is able to describe his female characters’ animal instincts without turning them (at least for a moment) into animals. I will further dissect the way Hardy intersects his feminist critique with his knowledge of Darwinism in my chapter on *Tess*.

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24 Hardy recreates Eliot’s scene from *Daniel Deronda* in his novel, *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, when the dairymaids writhe “feverishly under the oppressiveness of an emotion” for Angel Clare “thrust on them by cruel Nature’s law….” (162). In Hardy’s version, though, there is no male villain like Grandcourt; instead, only “cruel Nature” forces the dairymaids to compete for the man. This “passion,” as Hardy notes, abstracts “the differences which distinguished them as individuals,” making them simply their sex, but, because they have “no hope” of winning Angel, Hardy is able to describe his female characters’ animal instincts without turning them (at least for a moment) into animals. I will further dissect the way Hardy intersects his feminist critique with his knowledge of Darwinism in my chapter on *Tess*. 
patriarchal connotations of birds in English literature. Further, I will argue that, as poet Emily Dickinson notes, by “splitting the lark,” we find human hierarchies underneath our bird animalities.
“Stranger Birds, and Strangest Human Beings”:
*Charlotte Brontë’s Ornithological Metaphors and the Humanization of Jane Eyre*

When Mrs. Reed excludes her niece from a family gathering at the beginning of *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charlotte Brontë’s protagonist retreats to a window-seat with “[her] book—Bewick’s ‘History of British Birds’” (10). Ten-year-old Jane notes frankly that she cares little “for the letterpress” of the book, though she deigns to read the text; instead, she loves the engravings of the birds, and the tiny “vignette” images of Arctic landscapes and “dreary space[s]” included in the margins. Bewick’s sketches, rather than his writings, stimulate her imagination:

> Of these death-white realms I formed an idea of my own: shadowy, like all the half-comprehended notions that float dim through children’s brains, but strangely impressive. The words in these introductory pages connected themselves with the succeeding vignettes, and gave significance to the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray; to the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast; to the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud as a wreck just sinking… (11)

The appearance of a natural science textbook like Bewick’s *History of British Birds* in the introductory pages of *Jane Eyre* fulfills its own purpose, particularly because Brontë engages so closely with bird imagery and ornithological metaphors. From Jane’s overt declaration to Rochester, “I am no bird, and no net ensnares me” (293), to her favorite plate as a child, “whose birds of paradise, nestling in a wreath of convolvuli and rosebuds, had been wont to stir in me a most enthusiastic sense of admiration…” (25), Brontë devises a detailed figurative landscape of

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25 The Oxford English Dictionary offers a main definition for *vignette* dating back to 1751: “An ornamental or decorative design on a blank space in a book or among printed matter, esp. at the beginning or end of a chapter or other division, usually one of small size or occupying a small proportion of the space; *spec.* any embellishment, illustration, or picture uninclosed in a border, or having the edges shading off into the surrounding paper; a head-piece or tail-piece.” Two secondary definitions are also relevant, which explain *vignette* as “A photographic portrait, showing only the head or the head and shoulders, with the edges of the print shading off into the background,” and “A brief verbal description of a person, place, etc.; a short descriptive or evocative episode in a play, etc.” Brontë died before these definitions were in use, but scholars like Susan B. Taylor describe Brontë’s bird motifs in this style.
birds that has remained half-comprehended in Brontë studies. Scholars like Jane Stedman and Emily Roberson Wallace have examined Bewick’s presence in *Jane Eyre* as inspiration for Jane’s landscape paintings and the natural landscape of Thornfield. Only one author has suggested that Bewick’s book provides a landscape for the novel itself. Susan B. Taylor uses the physical layout of Bewick’s anthology to explain the omnipresent bird imagery within *Jane Eyre*:

Brontë’s ornithology itself serves as a vignette for her novel, a running illustration of her text, in much the same way that Bewick’s [visual] vignettes serve his ornithology text. It is as though Brontë inverts the textual strategies of Bewick: Bewick writes an ornithological treatise illustrated with engravings of birds and smaller tailpiece illustrations of ordinary life, whereas Brontë writes a treatise of ordinary [human] life, featuring a portrait of an ordinary governess, complemented with smaller “tailpiece” references to birds.\(^26\)

Taylor’s captivating argument, which is essential for my study, examines the parallels between Brontë’s textual landscapes and Bewick’s depictions of British birds. Still, Taylor fails to perceive exactly why Jane seems subconsciously preoccupied by the literal birds in her environment; additionally, she ignores the ornithological metaphors that Jane and other characters use to prescribe meaning to Brontë’s heroine.

Jane’s fascination with *British Birds* mirrors Brontë’s adoration for Bewick and his work. As children, Brontë and her siblings poured over their family copy of Bewick’s 1816 edition of *British Birds* an educational text covering variety of subjects. In one of her earliest letters to her friend Ellen Nussey,\(^27\) Brontë notes that Ellen had asked her “to recommend some books for [her] perusal,” and, in response, Brontë suggests that “For Natural Science read Bewick, and


Audubon, and Goldsmith.”\textsuperscript{28} The Brontë children, though, used Bewick’s work as artistic inspiration nearly as often as they did a science primer. Charlotte alone created at least four paintings copied from *British Birds*, including one of a “vignette” landscape featuring a fisherman\textsuperscript{29} and one from Bewick’s section on “the Mountain Sparrow.”\textsuperscript{30} Brontë even explored him as a topic in her juvenilia. As an adolescent, she eulogized Bewick, who died in 1828, through a poem of twenty stanzas. In “Lines on the Celebrated Bewick,” Brontë passionately describes some of Bewick’s most evocative vignettes, before coming to her conclusion that “A hundred fairer scenes these leaves reveal; / but there are tongues that injure while they praise: / I cannot speak the rapture that I feel / When on the work of such a mind I gaze.”\textsuperscript{31} By sixteen, Brontë had studied Bewick as a scientist, an artisan, and even as a sort of visual poet; and still, she already understood that she could not fully capture that same “rapture” that Bewick proved in her watercolors or verses. Her work—even with birds—had to be her own.

It would foolish to presume Bewick’s birds were Brontë’s only influence in constructing her textual avian landscape for *Jane Eyre*. As I discuss in my introduction, images and the figurative they create, such as birds and their consequential ornithological metaphors, carry the etymological, scientific, sociological, and poetic histories of all figurative previously created by

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\textsuperscript{28} Audubon, an ornithologist, was Bewick’s American contemporary and the author of *Birds of America*, which was released as a series in England between 1827 and 1838. Goldsmith could refer to either Oliver Goldsmith, a natural historian, or the Reverend J. Goldsmith, a geographer. Oliver Goldsmith is the more likely and romantic choice. He wrote *A History of the Earth, and Animated Nature* (1774), the natural history textbook that young Maggie Tulliver reads in George Eliot’s *The Mill on the Floss* (1860). Nevertheless, the Brontë family owned J. Goldsmith’s *A Grammar of General Geography* (1823), so either might be possible.

\textsuperscript{29} See Figure 2 in the image index for Bewick’s original vignette and Charlotte’s copy.


those images. Brontë knew ornithological metaphors from ancient mythology and her medieval predecessors; as anyone who has read Jane Eyre knows, she all but memorized Milton’s Paradise Lost; and, evident by the two direct allusions she makes to Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale,” she does not forget to pay tribute to the Romantic traditions that commenced only decades before her. Consequently, Brontë recognized the patriarchal hierarchies and expectations for women that ornithological metaphors perpetrated. The party scenes at Thornfield reveal Brontë’s awareness of the animalized language used to describe nineteenth-century women.

When Blanche Ingram and her female associates enter the drawing room so the male guests can smoke after dinner, Jane executes these complex metaphors: “There were but eight: yet, somehow, as they flocked in, they gave the impression of a much larger number…They dispersed about the room, reminding me, by the lightness and buoyancy of their movements, of a flock of white plumy birds” (199). Jane applies ornithological terms to describe the women’s graceful movements that, for good or ill, dehumanize her aristocratic counterparts. Jane “flocks” these women together and imagines them, in their group, as appearing less human than they are, essentially erasing their individualities. Instead of humans, they are creatures. In comparison, when the men arrive in the drawing room, Jane recounts their entrance without using any animal imagery; instead, though their “collective appearance, like that of the ladies, is very imposing,” they are simply “costumed in black; most of them…tall; some young” (202). Jane perpetrates this avian language in her following illustrations of female interactions with men: “the ladies, since the gentlemen entered, have become lively as larks…Amy Eshton…chatters like a wren…Blanche Ingram…selects herself a mate” (204). Jane subconsciously treats her female and male subjects unequally by using gendered language that reinforces the internalized hierarchies she
seems to stand against. Through Jane’s animalized portraits of the women around her, Brontë demonstrates the ways in which certain patriarchal images persist in the subconsciousness of women, even in her avatar, a character who resists these poetics.

Brontë deliberately deploys bird imagery, but, tellingly, it is not the only animal image used to dehumanize women—specifically, her protagonist—in the novel. Jane demonstrates a pattern of falling into patriarchal avian metaphors to characterize herself and others, despite the fact that she is subjected to a variety of gendered animal epithets. Besides Jane, only Rochester and St. John Rivers draw comparisons between Jane and birds. As potential partners, their additions reflect Jane’s inner discourse of ornithological figurative language. It is no surprise that Jane picks the man who uses birds to positively describe her, even if he employs the metaphor to negatively describe other woman. The truth is that Brontë loves avian metaphors, especially when they are used in the language of love. Brontë’s adoration for Bewick and birds clashes with her awareness that ornithological figurative language is a patriarchal tool that oppresses women. She uses her heroine to try to combat these conflicting realities. Brontë constructs Jane with her own intellect, sensibilities, and desires, and this construction begins with Bewick’s *British Birds*. In the opening pages of her own book, Brontë attempts to nest a different narrative than the one that would have been familiar to many contemporary readers. Though Bewick’s book is not a novel, Jane reads it subversively, which allows her to conceptualize her own story and forge a meaning that differentiates itself from the general public’s understanding of *British Birds*.

32 Jane is called “mad cat,” “rat,” and “toad,” along with the more general terms of “animal,” “creature,” and “thing” by John Reed and his mother, their servants, and Rochester.
By focusing on Bewick’s marginalia rather than his birds, Brontë defamiliarizes Bewick’s text to show her readers how to read a woman’s story. I return to the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, where Brontë first “forms” Jane as an unloved child at Gateshead:

Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast. (10)

Though Brontë positions Jane in a space that physically shuts out her relations and the harsh realities outside, she does not fully “separate” Jane from her environment. Because “there was no possibility of taking a walk that day” and Mrs. Reed excludes her from the family, Jane is trapped in between two worlds. The window seat, with its “scarlet drapery” and “clear panes of glass,” protects Jane from these environments, but it also shows her the spaces she cannot access. In this way, it functions, at least metaphorically, like a birdcage. Perched in this liminal spot, Jane defies her marginal social position by reading *British Birds* without focusing on the birds. Jane adopts her observations of nature and *British Birds* to form “an idea of [her] own” from the text.

The “winter afternoon,” though inaccessible to Jane, functions as a “pale blank” page for her imagination, allowing her to draw parallels between herself and Bewick’s vignettes. She is Bewick’s cold “rock” in a storm, the “broken boat stranded” on his coast, the daughter of his “ghastly moon” glowing above a sinking ship (11). She is not his bird. Jane understands her situation through her interpretations of Bewick’s book rather than the book itself, explaining that,

Each picture told a story; mysterious often to my undeveloped understanding and imperfect feelings, yet ever profoundly interesting: as interesting as the tales Bessie sometimes narrated on winter evenings, when she chanced to be in good humour; and when, having brought her ironing-table to the nursery hearth, she allowed us to sit about
it, and while she got up Mrs. Reed’s lace frills, and crimped her nightcap borders, fed our eager attention with passages of love and adventure taken from old fairy tales and other ballads; or (as at a later period I discovered) from the pages of Pamela, and Henry, Earl of Moreland. With Bewick on my knee, I was then happy: happy at least in my way. (11)

Just as Bessie takes up “passages” from folklore and literature, Jane construes Bewick’s tiny vignettes and avian portraits from her educational pursuits. Her understanding of herself materializes from her fragmented interpretations of nature and literature, allowing her to cull a liberated, though lonely, definition from the margins of a textbook. When she exists solely in her mind, where she can command metaphor and develop her own inner textual landscape, she is “happy” in her own way because she can be herself. Through this introduction of Jane, Brontë teaches readers how to read _Jane Eyre_. She instructs them to pay attention to the patriarchal realities that would, traditionally, trap Jane, but she also tells them that the minuscule images in her figurative landscape, like the vignettes in the margins of Bewick’s textbook, will subvert these traditional connotations. Most of all, Brontë prefaces to her readers that she is not writing a traditional _bildungsroman_. She is forming a woman’s narrative in a male literary world, and she will have to combat all the obstacles that come along with creating “an idea of her own.”

Brontë immediately presents the first of these obstacles through John Reed, who shows Jane that her patriarchal society can and will use its language to oppress her. Brontë demonstrates this reality when John interrupts Jane’s “happiness” to abuse her. John immediately launches dehumanizing metaphors against Jane, calling her a “bad animal” and a “rat” to enact his power over her. Further, he takes Bewick’s _British Birds_ from Jane’s hands, telling her “you have no business to take our books; you are a dependent…I’ll teach you to rummage my bookshelves: for they are mine” (13). As a fatherless boy in the British upper class, John does not only own
Gateshead and all the books within it; he owns the figurative language built by a patriarchal society that benefits him. John “others” Jane from the literature she has interpreted for herself, claiming that she has “no business” creating a language that allows her to be a human. Their similar names express how linguistically close Jane is to being the same as John, but her gender and class, as represented by her title and position, keep her from equality. Then, as if to further his point,

...I saw [John] lift and poise [Bewick’s] book and stand in act to hurl it, I instinctively started aside with a cry of alarm: not soon enough, however; the volume was flung, it hit me, and I fell, striking my head against the door and cutting it. The cut bled, the pain was sharp: my terror had passed its climax; other feelings succeeded. (13)

Quite literally, John manipulates ornithological language to injure and objectify Jane. By showing John weaponizing Bewick, Brontë parallels metaphorical epithets with actual violence. In John’s world, a world that he controls, Jane will always be a “bad animal” who can be physically damaged by the metaphors within a literature she loves.

Through Jane’s early intimacy with Bewick that turns brutal in a patriarchal society, Brontë establishes Jane’s textual conundrum that, as Taylor explains, she exhibits through an elusive “verbal vignette:” how can a woman devise her own meaning out of a natural metaphor caged by patriarchal language? Brontë, though, does not think this question is rhetorical. Ever determined, she sets out to construct an answer. Throughout Jane Eyre, Brontë attempts to subvert ornithological language as a means for Jane—and Brontë herself—to take control of their narratives. In this chapter, I explore how Bewick’s History of British Birds functions as a guidebook for the figurative landscape of Jane Eyre. Though I examine Jane’s hunger for love

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33 Taylor, 6.
34 On “verbal vignette,” see Footnote 25.
and affection as an subversion of traditional ornithological metaphors that compare women to birds, I also explain how her preoccupation with birds demonstrates her fear that patriarchal institutions will turn her into an animal. Brontë animalizes Rochester’s wife Bertha to “kill off” the bird metaphor so Jane can acquire her ideal domestic life—one of equality—with Rochester. In its stead, I argue that Brontë reclaims birds in her own metaphors for natural love and reshapes them to fit her own, albeit problematic, feminist ideologies.

Long before Charlotte Brontë’s birth, Bewick’s legacy had been immortalized in British literature. Soon after the release the first volume of British Birds on land birds, William Wordsworth praised Bewick in “The Two Thieves:”

Oh now that the genius of Bewick were mine
And the skill which he learn’d on the Banks of the Tyne;
Then the Muses might deal with me just as they chose
For I’d take my last leave both of verse and of prose.35

Like Brontë, Wordsworth claims he would give up his poetic talents for Bewick’s “genius,” an extraordinary declaration from a writer who believed that “[Poetry’s] materials are to be found in every subject which can interest the human mind.”36 But Wordsworth’s admiration reflects the public’s obsession with the wood-engraver-turned-naturalist. By the time Brontë first held British Birds in her hands at the age of twelve,37 its first volume, Land Birds, had been through eight editions and the second, Water Birds, was on its sixth.38 Bewick’s wood engravings were a


38 Taylor, 7.
cultural phenomenon, a staple, historian William Howitt argues, of British rural households. As Iain Bain recounts in his introduction to Bewick’s *Memoir*, Howitt writes in 1838, “I have heard those who loved the country, and loved it because they knew it, say, that the opening of Bewick was a new era in their lives.”

The “new era” that Howitt describes redefined science as a public experience. *British Birds* was really the first field guide for novice birders rather than a piece of natural history. Bewick could not even classify himself as a naturalist because he did not originate much of the text in his book. He had an author, Ralph Beilby, who complied research from acclaimed ornithologists of the time and had a falling out with Bewick before publication. R.M. Healey of *British Birds Magazine* notes that “No ornithologist will ever regard Thomas Bewick…as a naturalist of the same standing as contemporaries such as Edward Donovan, John Latham and James Bolton…But…Bewick…defined a certain English Romantic sensibility which persists to this day.” Bewick promoted the idea that anyone who could observe nature could be their own naturalist. This concept seems idealistic, especially when we realize that Bewick’s “science” was really art. Bewick’s methods in *British Birds* even facilitate the techniques of Romantics like Wordsworth. In their advertisement for *Lyrical Ballads*, Wordsworth and Coleridge explain that the “majority” of the poems in the volume “are to be considered as experiments…the middle and lower classes of society…will look round for poetry, and will be induced to enquire by what

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species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.” Just as Bewick wanted for science, the English Romantics wanted to make poetry accessible to the English people. They compared their compositions to scientific investigations, using vocabulary like “experiments,” “enquire” and “species” to illustrate the process of defining the commoner’s poetry. Though Wordsworth and Coleridge might have believed that their process was empirical like Bewick’s work, in actuality, Bewick’s process was based in poetics. Bewick’s *British Birds* translated science for a popular audience through artistic mechanisms, but in doing so, the real “science” behind the text was effectively lost for the sake of poetic liveliness and detail.

Bewick’s format for *British Birds* illustrates the literary aspects of his natural history. In both volumes, his entries typically begin with an engraving of the bird itself, followed by its English and Latin names. Bewick created these engravings from life or with the help of a taxonomy bird. He continues with a written account of the bird, including details such as its appearance, habits, mating cycles, migrations, and food intake. These recordings usually range from one to five pages in length. At the end of most entries, Bewick includes one of his vignettes, or tiny wood-engravings that Bewick calls his “tail pieces.” Taylor explains that,

…vignettes include scenes of hunting and fishing or other activities of rural village life, or socially marginal persons such as beggars and itinerant peddlers, and of shipwrecks, graveyards, and ruined castles. Often these little illustrations seem to have no obvious connection to the textual material about a given bird. They serve to fill in space between

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41 Coleridge and Wordsworth, 1.
42 Taylor, 6.
43 At seven pages, Bewick’s second longest entry across the two original volumes is the Cormorant, a bird that particularly preoccupies Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. The Gannet, Bewick’s final bird that appears in the same section as the Cormorant, receives an entry that extends onto the eighth page.
bird entries in the history, and to intrigue the reader, for sometimes the tailpieces present a moral of sort.\footnote{Taylor, 6.}

In her argument, Taylor examines the tailpieces as the underlining narrative strategy that Brontë replicates within \textit{Jane Eyre} to incorporate “Jane’s potentially explosive passions, passions noted by many scholars as symptoms of Victorian restrictions on women’s ambitions and desires.”\footnote{See Figure 3 for an example of Bewick’s typographical practices in \textit{History of British Birds}.}

But Bewick does not simply incorporate morals into his typography through his vignettes. He primarily uses poetics throughout his main text, the “ornithology” that Brontë includes in her literature as real natural science.\footnote{It is worth noting that, though both volumes have tailpieces that feature humans and animals in natural landscapes and dire situations, the subject matter in the vignette is the most considerable difference formulaically between \textit{Land Birds} and \textit{Water Birds}. In \textit{Land Birds}, most of the vignettes take place on what appears to be the English countryside. Domestic animals, country houses, farmers asleep in fields or falling off of horses, household objects, and the birds described in the entries are among Bewick’s largest inspirations. In \textit{Water Birds}, the vignettes assume a gloomier role in the textbook. Bewick includes lone rocks on the water, headstones sticking out in graveyards, and people stuck in thunderstorms. Brontë certainly imagines \textit{Water Birds} as the volume that Jane consumes in the opening pages of the novel.}

Despite the fact that he criticizes his contemporaries in natural history for this very practice, Bewick personifies birds in his descriptions of them. He frequently describes birds in gendered terms, often calling the female member of a bird “less than” the male, and will use single human perceptions to explain the characteristics of an entire “tribe” of the species.

Bewick’s swallow mythologies particularly illuminate these hypocrisies in \textit{British Birds}. In his introduction to \textit{Land Birds}, Bewick explores the assumptions different natural historians have formulated about the migrations of swallows. He focuses on one “disappearance” hypothesis:

Some have even asserted that Swallows pass the winter immersed in the waters of lakes and rivers, where they have been found in clusters, mouth to mouth, wing to wing, foot to foot…In support of this opinion, Mr. Klein very gravely asserts, on the credit of some
countrymen, that Swallows sometimes assembled in numbers, clinging to a reed till it broke, and sunk with them to the bottom...48

Bewick recognizes that his peers have the tendency to imagine romantic, humanized scenarios, such as swallows accidentally committing mass suicide or sleeping underwater for a whole season, as answers to scientific questions. He rebukes this practice, arguing that

…it requires no great depth of reasoning to refute such palpable absurdities…admitting the possibility of this curious mode of immersion, it is by no means probable that Swallows, or any other animal, in a torpid state, can exist for any length of time in an element to which they have never been accustomed, and are besides totally unprovided by Nature with organ suited to such a mode of subsistence.49

Bewick believes that human contexts can obscure empirical observations. By personifying animal activities, natural historians invalidate their arguments with “palpable absurdities” that have no place in scientific inquiry. Prefacing his book with this critique, Bewick suggests that he will refrain from using conflated humanistic metaphors to represent the birds he observes. He does the opposite. When Bewick later portrays the swift, which he incorrectly categorizes as a swallow, he depends on human metaphors and conceptions of behavior to explain its activities:

The life of the Swift seems to be divided into two extremes; the one of the most violent exertion, the other of perfect inaction; they must either shoot through the air, or remain close in their holes; they are seldom seen to alight...It is difficult to conceive how these birds, which are never seen to alight on the ground, gather these materials [for nests]; some have supposed that they catch them in the air as they are carried up by the wind; others, that they raise them by glancing along the surface of the ground; whist others

48 Ironically, Brontë owes a romantic passage between Rochester and Jane to Bewick’s rebuke. Rochester mirrors Bewick’s portrayal of the swallow myth when he begs Jane to stay at Thornfield, pleading, “A mere reed she feels in my hand!...I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?” (366). Like the swallows who cling to a reed so hard that it breaks, Rochester wants to control Jane to such a degree that he will overpower and kill her with his desires. Though this allusion may simply be coincidental, I would like to include it as an example of Bewick’s intertextual (and, perhaps in some cases, subconscious) influence on Brontë’s nature metaphors.

assert, with more probability, that they often rob the Sparrow of its little board, and frequently occupy the same hole after driving out the former possessor…\(^{50}\)

Bewick characterizes the swift’s “life” as polarized, implying that the bird’s patterns are an act of choice rather than an act of nature. Swifts, like humans with free will, “must” make a decision about their actions. Bewick bequeaths human instincts and thought processes to swifts to illustrate their activities. Further, he depends on individual observations to explain his ornithology. He only includes ideas as evidence to explain how swifts build their intricate nests. He assumes that nature only works under the eyes of man, never considering the possibility that people might not be able to see swifts gather “materials” because they are so fast or only approach the ground when humans are not around. Most importantly, he uses an explicit personification of bird interactions to detail an ornithological phenomenon. Bewick’s “probable” hypothesis insists that swifts assault and “rob” belittled sparrows of their nests. He imposes human hierarchies onto nature through metaphors, distilling occurrences in nature through figurative language disguised as empirical evidence. He jeopardizes the validity of his observations by carelessly using poetics to confirm, rather than embellish, his portraits of birds.

Bewick’s illegitimate science further complicates Taylor’s observations on Brontë’s “inversion” of his typographical practices, which “mirrors Bewick’s model of natural history as a combination of observation, personification, and intertextuality.”\(^{51}\) Brontë acknowledges Bewick, whom she saw as a recommendable author of “Natural History,” as a way to validate Jane’s feminist perceptions of birds. Her ideas typically find their scientific “proof” in Bewick’s descriptions in *British Birds*. This science, based in poetics and enhanced with moralistic


\(^{51}\) Taylor, 7.
vignettes, does not have the scientific authority that Brontë might have imagined it exhibited. Brontë builds a textual landscape inspired by Bewick to underline her thematic choices and reimagined metaphors with empirical evidence. But her inversion fails. With Bewick as her basis, Brontë actually intensifies the folkloric and etymological constructions of language that she critiques through her recycled ornithological metaphors. As she paints her portrait of a British governess and details her novel with birds in the style of Bewick, Brontë moves back and forth between furthering an oppressive metaphor and attempting to subvert it, a problematic exercise that allows her to construct her own ideal feminist narrative.

When Mrs. Reed locks Jane into the Red Room for attacking her son, Jane bitterly recounts the characters within her brief history. Among them is John Reed, who Jane portrays as a cruel, undisciplined boy: “John…twisted the necks of the pigeons, killed the little pea-chicks, set the dogs at the sheep, stripped the hothouse vines of their fruit, and broke the buds off the choicest plants in the conservatory…” (18). John’s actions towards animals and plants are child’s play versions of sexual assault and genocide. He quite literally deflowers and “strips” plants of their buds and fruit; he takes joy in massacring two different types of birds. To Jane, John resembles a patriarchal figure in miniature whose brutality towards inhuman creatures reflects his exploitation of nonmale and nonwhite humans. Jane immediately draws a parallel between John’s conduct with animals and his behavior concerning a woman, Mrs. Reed: “he called his mother ‘old girl,’ too; sometimes reviled her for her dark skin, similar to his own; bluntly disregarded her wishes; not unfrequently tore and spoiled her silk attire…” (18). Even as a child,

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52 I will hereafter refer to the specific bird descriptions from Bewick that Brontë uses in *Jane Eyre* as they appear in my argument.
John exhibits a superiority complex with his desire to overpower anything he deems “other,” including his own mother. Through Jane’s initial analogies, Brontë initiates a systematic mirroring between birds and Jane as victims of patriarchal oppression. The treatment of birds in *Jane Eyre* aligns with the treatment of women. Brontë, however, counters this parallel with Jane’s birdlike hunger for love and attention. Brontë uses ornithological language to express Jane’s movements between unsustainable relationships with men to nourishing partnerships with likeminded women to subvert the traditional connotation of women as birds.

Brontë establishes this motif when Jane interacts with a bird that comes to her window before she begins her own “migration” away from Gateshead. As she eats breakfast with the Reed sisters, Jane vaguely notices Mr. Brocklehurst’s carriage arrive, but she explains,

...my vacant attention soon found livelier attraction in the spectacle of a little hungry robin, which came and chirruped on the twigs of the leafless cherry-tree nailed against the wall near the casement. The remains of my breakfast of bread and milk stood on the table, and having crumbled a morsel of roll, I was tugging at the sash to put out the crumbs on the window-sill, when Bessie came running upstairs into the nursery. (37)

Jane’s “indifference” to human interactions, exasperated by her choice to give more attention to a robin outside her window than a carriage, demonstrates her esteem for nature and downtrodden “beings” like herself. Unlike her cousin Eliza, who feeds “poultry” (36) in order to commercially benefit from their eggs, or Georgiana, who uses pretty bird “feathers” (37) as cosmetic decorations, Jane treats her bird like a person in need rather than as a consumable good in a capitalistic society. The “hungry” robin appears in a window, a structure that repeatedly enacts Jane’s obstructed access to the world as a governess. The “little” bird asks for food and love in a space that is desolate and constrained. The “leafless cherry-tree,” which is “nailed” to the

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country house, mirrors Gateshead itself; it lacks warmth, the freedom to move, and the ability to bloom. Alone among barrenness herself, Jane tries to give her remaining pieces of “bread and milk” to a fellow lonesome creature, even ignoring Bessie’s commands to prepare for the day to do so: “I gave another tug before I answered, for I wanted the bird to be secure of its bread: the sash yielded; I scattered the crumbs, some on the stone sill, some on the cherry-tree bough, then, closing the window, I replied…” (37). Throughout this interaction, Brontë evokes the Christian ceremony of breaking bread alongside the principle of good works. Much like the biblical woman in the “Widow’s Offering,” Jane, “out of her poverty, put…” everything that was left of her food, “all she had to live on,” on the window sill for the bird.54 As she scatters the crumbs along the stone and the barren cherry-tree branch, Jane feeds her bird on the table of nineteenth-century womanhood: one where women must try to bloom while existing within the margins of society. Brontë manipulates the metaphorical concept of women as birds through a “feeding” interaction between a benefactress and a bird that foreshadows interactions between Jane and other women, the first of which occurs at Lowood School.

Jane’s passionate critique of the Reeds, which disrupts the hierarchy at Gateshead, brings on a forced “migration” that leads her to a safe, predominantly female community. Soon after Jane arrives at Lowood, Brocklehurst, the hypocritical overseer of the school who refuses to provide the children with adequate amenities, attempts to ostracize Jane from her peers by calling her a liar (79). He punishes her with mental starvation, telling the other children to refrain from speaking to her for her wrongdoings. Left alone, Jane laments her position, sinking “prostrate” on the ground and weeping: “Helen Burns was not here; nothing sustained me; left to

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54 Mark 12:41-44.
myself I abandoned myself…I had meant to be so good, and to do so much at Lowood: to make so many friends, to earn respect, and win affection. Already I had made visible progress…then I was…treated as an equal by those of my own age, and not molested by any; now, here I lay again crushed and trodden on” (81). Jane expresses her deep desires to be loved and treated with respect, both of which appear to be potential realities until a tyrannical male figure tries to rob them from her. She is left “unsustained,” hungry for validation for another human being.

Two women come to nourish Jane just as she nourished the robin. Helen Burns soon approaches Jane with “coffee and bread” (81). Helen’s entrance enunciates the power of her name. Since “the fading fires just showed her coming up the long, vacant room,” Helen’s “bright light” acts as a shining inversion of the fires of hell that Brocklehurst declares will consume Jane for her defiance of patriarchal norms. Instead of burning Jane, Helen provides her with warmth and comfort. She attempts to feed Jane, first with crumbs and then with the knowledge that no one will forsake Jane for what Brocklehurst said about her. Later, another woman arrives to sustain Jane: “some heavy clouds, swept from the sky by a rising wind, had left the moon bare; and her light, streaming in through a window near, shone full both on us and on the approaching figure, which we at once recognised as Miss Temple” (83). Through her embodiment of mythological feminist aesthetics, the Artemisian Miss Temple exhibits the possibilities of female power. Her name, which means “dwelling place,” reflects her ability to give Jane a motherly home, but it also promises empowerment within a “temple” of virginal holiness and female intellect. Unlike Brocklehurst, Miss Temple gives Jane the space to speak; to counteract his abuse, she promises Jane that she will right the narrative assigned to her. Then, Miss Temple feeds Jane “toast” and “seed cake” (86). The birdlike food of bread and seeds recalls Jane’s
crumbs left for the robin. Miss Temple and Helen welcome Jane into a female space with their sustenance of bread and intimacy. Consequently, Jane begins to learn and grow, receiving praise from her teachers and friends. Weeks later, after rounds of success in the classroom, she notes,

That night, on going to bed, I forgot to prepare in imagination the Barmecide supper of hot roast potatoes, or white bread and new milk, with which I was wont to amuse my inward cravings: I feasted instead on the spectacle of ideal drawings, which I saw in the dark; all the work of my own hands: freely pencilled houses and trees, picturesque rocks and ruins, Cuyp-like groups of cattle, sweet paintings of butterflies hovering over unblown roses, of birds picking at ripe cherries, of wren’s nests enclosing pearl-like eggs, wreathed about with young ivy sprays. (88)

Even though the harsh amenities at Lowood keep Jane physically hungry, Lowood’s women, with their affectionate and intellectual spirits, provide metaphysical food on which Jane can “feast.” The drawings she imagines creating with the artistic skills she has developed take their thematic content from Bewick’s vignettes. The final sketch that Jane dreams up, I would argue, directly copies a vignette from Bewick’s preface to *Land Birds*, which shows an empty nest wreathed in brittle ivy. Jane inverts Bewick’s dark tailpiece undertones by liberating and feminizing his subjects in her recreations. Her houses are “freely pencilled” rather than constrained by a marginal position; her butterflies fly over “unblown” flowers, which suggest intact purity; unlike the robin who appears at Gateshead’s “leafless” cherry tree, her birds eat “ripe cherries,” implying that their space allows for female growth rather than decay. Unlike Bewick’s barren and overgrown “wren’s nest,” Jane’s variant shows a fertile version filled with feminine “pearl-like” eggs. Jane’s drawings display her emerging independence and her sexual blooming as results of her all-female environment. She reimagines traditional aesthetics as feminist by following the examples of Helen and Miss Temple, who subvert the ornithological

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55 See Figure 4 in the image index for Bewick’s vignette.
connotations of Gateshead by recreating Jane’s positive interaction with a real bird against her negative interactions with animal metaphors. Through Lowood, Brontë gives her protagonist a matriarchal world to cultivate the intellectual ideals that will shape the arch of her feminist narrative.

Yet, when Jane leaves the security of Lowood, Brontë reinstates the patriarchal connotations of ornithological metaphor through Jane’s relationship with Rochester. Soon after they meet, Rochester forces Jane to discuss her past with him. At the end of their conversation, he pictures Jane as an exotic bird, stating, “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. You are still bent on going?” (162). Rochester mocks female liberation by insisting that Jane, much like an animal taken from a colonized country and displayed in an aristocratic home, is stuck in a societal cage. Simultaneously, he frets as she tries to leave him, suggesting that Jane’s presence comforts and reinforces Rochester’s ego. Harriet Ritvo explains how caged animals in country homes symbolized imperialist power in Victorian England:

Maintaining exotic animals in captivity was a compelling symbol of human power. Transporting them safely to England and figuring out how to keep them alive were triumphs of human skill and intelligence over the contrary dictates of nature; access to their native territories symbolized English power and prestige…Physical domination and confinement was only the first stage in a process that would eventually overcome the animals’ wild nature altogether. From this perspective the ultimate goal was domestication—ostensibly so that they could serve pragmatic human ends, but actually as a crowning metaphorical demonstration of human ascendency.56

As an intellectual woman angered by her oppressed position in society, Jane is an “exotic” sort of British “captive” that Rochester desires for the thrill of the chase. By possessing her, Rochester

56 Ritvo, 232-234.
can control Jane’s passions and desires. He ensnares Jane with heterosexual affection and impossible promises of an equalizing marriage.

Brontë intertextually compares the domestication of animals with the caging aspects of the domestic sphere, which Jane alarmingly warms to as she falls in love with Rochester. Around him, Jane loses sight of her feminist “wildness” in exchange for his patriarchal definition of her “birdhood.” Though Rochester plays tricks on her and abuses her feelings for him, she still “feeds” on his tiny offerings of kindness: “there was ever in Mr. Rochester (so at least I thought) such a wealth of the power of communicating happiness, that to taste but of the crumbs he scattered to stray and stranger birds like me, was to feast genially” (282). In her desperate hunger for even a “crumb” of his affection, Jane allows Rochester to dehumanize her and make her, as Mrs. Fairfax notes, into his “pet” (305). Even as she leaves him, Jane continues to fall into his ornithological metaphor, lamenting that,

Birds began singing in brake and copse: birds were faithful to their mates; birds were emblems of love. What was I? In the midst of my pain of heart and frantic effort of principle, I abhorred myself. I had no solace from self-approbation: none even from self-respect. I had injured—wounded—left my master. I was hateful in my own eyes.

(369-370)

By choosing her principles over her emotions, Jane feels that she is unnatural and unlike a bird. Her readings of Bewick tell her that many birds mate for life. The figurative landscapes she is exposed to at Thornfield teach her that her love is dependent on her domestication. According to Brontë, though, Jane acts out of her natural—and birdlike—instincts to be free. She chooses a longtime nourishment of principle over a short-term fulfillment of emotion. Nevertheless, through Jane’s self-hatred, Brontë shows how even her beloved Jane Eyre has internalized the idea that women are “lesser” than men.
Jane’s penultimate migration, much like her first, redefines ornithological metaphor through an interaction that directly mirrors Jane’s childhood moment with the bird at Gateshead. After arriving at Whitecross, Jane walks for days as a desolate women asking for help. As she wanders across the dark moors, starved and near death, Jane notices a small house where …from the lozenged panes of a very small latticed window, within a foot of the ground, made still smaller by the growth of ivy or some other creeping plant, whose leaves clustered thick over the portion of the house wall in which it was set. The aperture was so screened and narrow, that curtain or shutter had been deemed unnecessary; and when I stooped down and put aside the spray of foliage shooting over it, I could see all within… A group of more interest appeared near the hearth, sitting still amidst the rosy peace and warmth suffusing it. Two young, graceful women—ladies in every point—sat, one in a low rocking-chair, the other on a lower stool; both wore deep mourning of crape and bombazeen, which sombre garb singularly set off very fair necks and faces… (381)

Jane copies the exact movements of the “little robin” she once saw at Gateshead. Hungry and lost, she looks through a tiny “window” covered by an overgrown plant. As she holds this “foliage” like the robin grasped onto the “bough” (37), Jane sees two women sitting around a fire as they read. Fascinated by these intelligent sisters, Mary and Diana, Jane comments that she “had half-forgotten [her] own wretched position...how impossible did it appear to touch the inmates of this house with concern on [her] behalf...[she] groped out at the door” (384). When Jane enters Moor House, Brontë once again parallels the relationship between young Jane and the bird and Diana and Jane.57 Diana breaks “bread” and dips it in “milk” (388), exactly as young Jane had sat with her “bread and milk” and fed the robin “crumbs” from her plate (37). Brontë repeats the bird image, this time by fully inverting Jane’s position in another detailed interaction. Instead of the Good Samaritan, Jane is the traveler. Instead of the woman, she is the bird. Injured

57 Moors House is also referred to as Marsh’s End, but I maintain the former name in this chapter.
by male violence, disempowered by male power, forgotten by the men and maidservants of the world, Jane needs physical and mental nourishment from educated women.

Jane finds this affection and spirit through upgraded versions of her Lowood mothers, the Rivers sisters. Diana is the Roman virginal goddess of Miss Temple’s “dwelling place.” Mary, named for the Holy Virgin, is mother of Helen’s “light of the world.” Literature, language, and history empower these ideal Victorian women as they sit around the hearth in a kindly sisterhood. Although St. John carries Jane into Moor House, his cold charity heavily contrasts the compassion Jane receives from his sisters, as noted by St. John himself: “my sisters, you see, have a pleasure in keeping and cherishing a half-frozen bird some wintry wind might have driven through their casement…I feel more inclination to put you in the way of keeping yourself” (400). St. John, like Rochester and John Reed, tries to belittle Diana and Mary’s affection by referring to Jane as a “bird” they have taken in from the cold. In actuality, the sisters’ love and intellectual power allow Jane to reflourish. By drawing, learning, and conversing with the sisters, Jane notes, their “natures dovetailed: mutual affection—of the strongest kind—was the result” (430). Brontë uses birdlike language (“dovetailed”) in a positive way to describe how her female characters tie themselves together to form a sisterhood. Unlike St. John, who cannot enjoy the “humanities and amenities of life” (453), Jane explains that she loves Diana and Mary for their “animal spirits” (403). Liberated once more in a female environment, Jane remakes the concept of the “animal” in a feminist light, showing that the everyday pieces of female “life,” which men might rebuke for their domesticity, can be what makes Jane the most human.
Even as Jane fashions a feminist connotation for “birdhood” with her female companions, she still fears what she determines in the Red Room as “the rushing of wings,” an imaginary “thing” that “oppresses” and “suffocates” her (21). Jane’s bird phantom subjugates her as much as any real monster would. Awakened by the “cage” of the Red Room, Jane’s imagination reveals her fear that, no matter how many books she reads or how much education she receives, she will not be able to escape the figurative prison that is the dehumanizing language she must use. Brontë corporealizes Jane’s subconscious fear from childhood through natural “signs” in her adulthood, which, as she hints in Jane’s dreams that foreshadow future events, “may be but the sympathies of Nature with man” (254). When Jane is with Rochester, Brontë uses bird motifs as marginal, Bewick-inspired “vignettes” that invert Jane’s childhood experience in the Red Room. Here, Jane is simultaneously allured and haunted by real birds that literalize the metaphors she has learned from her literary and scientific studies. Brontë creates a link between British birds and Rochester’s “wives” where physical depictions of birds in the novel enact Jane and Bertha’s repressed feelings. These sketches, though, vary in levels of actuality. Jane implicitly compares herself to Bewick’s cormorants and sparrows in spoken and artistic self-portraits. Meanwhile, Brontë explicitly manifests Bertha through Thornfield’s crows and nightingales, which act as warning signs of Rochester’s deceit for Jane. In Brontë’s bird vignettes, Jane remains a bird in metaphor while Bertha becomes zoomorphic. Particularly in her manifestation of the nightingale, a mythological bird that connotes the story of the raped Philomela, Brontë underlies Jane and Rochester’s romance with the violent realities of male abuse towards women. Through Bertha, a
woman who looks and acts like an animal, Jane can witness, rather than embody, what she has always feared: the physical consequences of patriarchal language.

Brontë embeds her first bird vignette into Thornfield’s topography by using a species famous for its modes of habitation. On arriving at Thornfield, Jane first notes its rookery,

…whose cawing tenants were now on the wing. They flew over the lawn and grounds to alight in a great meadow, from which these were separated by a sunk fence, and where an array of mighty old thorn trees, strong, knotty, and broad as oaks, at once explained the etymology of the mansion’s designation. (118)

Like Bewick, Jane paints a picture of Thornfield through its birds, only finding the “etymology” of the manor’s name through their movements about the land. The rooks initially demonstrate liberty to Jane, as they are able to fly around Thornfield without restriction. Jane listens “with delight to the cawing of the rooks” (118) until she is interrupted by another human, who immediately disturbs Jane’s natural observations. Mrs. Fairfax tours Jane around Thornfield, ending with its roof. Here, Jane is “on a level with the crow colony, and could see into their nests” (125). According to Bewick, rook colonies often convened in “large and populous” British towns “during the breeding time” to “live together in large societies, and build their nests on trees close to each other.” But Bewick also discusses the violence of crow societies: “these rookeries…are often the scenes of bitter contests, the newcomers being frequently driven away by the old inhabitants, their half-built nests torn in pieces…” Brontë builds the rookery at Thornfield right next to Bertha’s attic room to connect the rooks and Rochester’s first wife. Her reading on Bewick’s rooks informs Jane’s departure from Thornfield, as she is “driven away” by

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58 Taylor explains that Brontë uses “crows and rooks interchangeably” because Bewick places both birds in the *British Birds* section on “birds of the pie kind.”

Bertha’s existence. Jane later notes that when she remembers the day when Rochester attempts to marry her, she recalls in “the picture of the grey old house of God rising calm before me, of a rook wheeling round the steeple” (332). In Jane’s portrait of the past, the rook, Taylor argues, acts as “Bertha’s symbolic representation” at the ceremony. Jane can only “half-build,” or, perhaps, “half-paint,” a relationship with Rochester because the rook-like Bertha inhabits Thornfield’s nest.

Taylor goes on to explain how Jane’s verbal pictures of Bertha resemble Bewick’s descriptions of rooks: “In appearance, Bertha’s dark hair and complexion are closer to that of a rook…Bertha also shares some behavioral traits of rooks…rooks do not welcome at all.”

Taylor, however, overlooks the most important detail in Bewick’s rook observations:

The base of the bill, nostrils, and even round the eyes are covered with a rough scabrous skin, in which it differs from all the rest, occasioned, it is said, by thrusting its bill into the earth in search of worms; but as the same appearance has been observed in such as have been brought up tame and unaccustomed to that mode of subsistence, we are inclined to consider it as an original peculiarity.

Not only does Bertha, who, as Jane describes, has a “fearful blackened inflation” in her countenance (327), look like a rook, but she also presents the same “original peculiarity” as the species. Bertha easily could have been a “tame” woman, “unaccustomed” to madness and, as Rochester implies, sexual promiscuity. Instead, Bertha portrays the madwoman rather than the proper wife, leading readers to “consider” what makes Bertha mad in the first place.

Brontë hides her answer to this question in the rookery, a place also adjacent to where Jane comes to mull over her patriarchal frustrations. When she grows restless at Thornfield, Jane

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60 Taylor, 8.

61 Bewick, History of British Birds, Volume I, 71.
climbs “the three staircases, raised the trap-door of the attic, and having reached the leads, looked out afar over sequestered field and hill.” As Jane notes earlier, she is on “level” with the rookery, seeing as they see. She wishes for “power of vision which might overpass” the limit of Thornfield’s skyline. Nonetheless, she cannot move beyond even the limit of the roof.

Disappointed, Jane returns to the third story corridor, where, next to Bertha’s room, she walks “backwards and forwards” and allows “[her] mind’s eye to dwell on whatever bright visions rose before it” (129). Jane’s two positions at Thornfield mirror the location where Brontë first introduces her protagonist reading Bewick’s *British Birds*. Like the window seat at Gateshead, the roof and Bertha’s room operate as metaphorical birdcages; the former because, unlike the rooks, Jane cannot escape her grounding, and the latter because it traps a madwoman from the outside world. But, just as she did when she was a child, Jane finds inner freedom in a trapped place. She may be a bird in a cage, but she is already flying in her mind’s eye, thinking that,

Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (130)

In their famous feminist criticism, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar note that “Thornfield’s attic…becomes a complex focal point where Jane’s own rationality (what she has learned from Miss Temple) and her irrationality (her ‘hunger, rebellion and rage’) intersect…the ‘bad animal’ who was first locked up in the red-room is, we sense, still lurking somewhere, behind a dark door, waiting for a chance to get free.”

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argument, though insightful, is ironic. Jane is not the real “bad animal” of Thornfield. She walks between two doors that hide the true “bad animals:” the rooks, who are traditionally seen as “ill-omens,” and the wife who has gone mad. Brontë underscores Jane’s patriarchal frustrations with the reality that Bertha mirrors and mimics her avian neighbors. Bertha’s laughter often interrupts Jane’s passionate musings: “alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole’s laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me…” (130). Like the cawing of the rooks (118), Bertha “thrills” Jane because she almost seems to be in agreement with Jane’s feminist philosophy. Actually, Brontë argues, Bertha represents exactly what happens to a woman imprisoned in domesticity and robbed of her independence. She acts like the animal that Rochester, who sees her as a “thing” flying in “black and scarlet visage” at his “dove” Jane, assigns to her (357).

As Bertha physically mirrors the rook, Jane imagines herself as the rook’s etymological foil. When Rochester first returns to Thornfield, he examines three “water-colours” from Jane’s portfolio, one of which features a seabird, the cormorant: “The first represented clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea: all the distance was in eclipse; so, too, was the foreground; or rather, the nearest billows, for there was…a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam…” (147). Like many of Jane’s drawings in the novel, Brontë likely found inspiration for this image from a Bewick vignette that depicts a cormorant on a rock in the sea. Taylor effectively argues, and I agree, that “this painting is Jane’s self-portrait

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64 Brontë even copied this particular vignette in her childhood sketches, which furthers the possibility that she had this image in mind. See Figure 5 for Bewick’s vignette and Brontë’s copy.
as a cormorant,” directly contrasting with Bertha’s rook identity. *Cormorant*, Taylor explains, finds its meaning in “Old French, *corp-marin*, or ‘crow of the sea’/‘sea-raven,’ making it “a maritime double to Bertha’s land-locked crows.”  

Compared to its twin, Jane’s bird has more topographical agency and more typographical importance. Cormorants are international birds that can fly to different countries while rooks are domestic. Bewick’s *Water Birds*, where the cormorant appears, is almost certainly the volume that child Jane reads; the rook appears in the lesser *Land Birds*. Unlike Bertha, who shares physical characteristics with the rook, Taylor asserts that Jane does not visually resemble the cormorant. Instead, Jane’s repressed self identifies with the cormorant and historical conceptions of the bird’s personality:

…Jane has painted her alter ego. The cormorant’s nature is even more significant for understanding Jane’s self portrait, in that from Chaucer to the present, the cormorant has been seen as a symbol of gluttony and voracious greed…Brontë would have certainly been aware of the ravenous appetites ascribed to cormorants…Bewick’s text describes this practice as does Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Bewick’s textual description of the cormorant seems both to question and to reinscribe the personification of this species as greedy and rapacious…It is remarkable the qualities attributed to the cormorant’s disposition in [Bewick’s] description: tyrannical, greedy, wary, and finally, Satanic.  

Taylor observes that Bewick’s natural science and Milton’s poetics doubly-exposed Brontë to the cormorant’s “ravenous appetites,” an attribute she channels through Jane’s all-consuming hunger for love and affection. Jane, like the cormorant, is desperately hungry. More significant, though, is Bewick’s and Milton’s preoccupations with the cormorant’s “rapacious” identity, which Brontë replicates in Jane’s fleeting but memorable painting. In the first edition of *Water Birds*, the cormorant, Bewick’s antepenultimate entry, is also one of his longest across both volumes because it dives so deep into the historical connotations of the bird. In *Paradise Lost*,

65 Taylor, 8.

66 Ibid, 9.
Satan embodies the cormorant to sit “on the tree of life…devising death” for the living. In its alluring and complex connotation, the cormorant carries intense literary significance, making it the ultimate bird for Brontë’s ultimate heroine.

Still, Jane’s allegorical painting expresses how she has internalized an animal identity that patriarchal society prescribed to her. In her portrait, she contributes a disturbing dead woman to Bewick’s original sketch, as the cormorant’s “beak held a gold bracelet set with gems, that I had touched with as brilliant tints as my palette could yield…Sinking below the bird and mast, a drowned corpse glanced through the green water; a fair arm was the only limb clearly visible, whence the bracelet had been washed or torn” (147). Taylor interprets the dichotomy between the cormorant and the “drowned corpse” in Jane’s painting as an artistic representation of the conflict between Jane’s “passionate, cormorous nature” and her rational “fair side.” Though Taylor’s analysis is convincing, I would argue that the cormorant also demonstrates Jane’s internalized understanding of patriarchal language. If she gives herself over to an oppressive domesticity by accepting a bejeweled position from a domineering lover, Jane believes an inner animal will overtake her humanity. Because she notes that the “bracelet” could have been “washed” or “torn,” Brontë disassociates the cormorant from direct blame for the woman’s death. Instead, the environment contributes to its removal. The bracelet, as Taylor notes, foreshadows the pearl necklace that Jane “deliberately leaves behind when she flees after the failed wedding ceremony” and the bracelet that Rochester tries to give to her during their engagement (299). To Jane, both objects symbolize “an appropriation of riches that would kill a

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68 Taylor, 9.
part of herself.”⁶⁹ Similarly, Bewick recalls the ways fishermen have “tamed” and “rendered”
cormorants “subservient to the purposes of man” by fettering them: “a ring placed round the
neck hinders the bird from swallowing; its natural appetite joins with the will of its master, and it
instantly dives at the word of command; when unable to gorge down the fish it has taken, it
returns to the keeper, who secures it to himself.”⁷⁰ Jane’s painting certainly demonstrates her
worries that her passionate “animality” will overtake her reasonable “womanliness.” It also
shows that Jane comprehends the way patriarchal structures could lead her to unwillingly
relinquish her independence. As “unsustained” as her appetite is, she ultimately understands that,
if she were to accept Rochester’s proposition to make her his mistress, she would be starved like
the cormorant, hungry for a love she could never truly possess (365).

Though her rook and cormorant vignettes complicate her portraits of Rochester’s wives,
Brontë finds her tiniest and most important vignette in the nightingale, a bird that already
connotes partriachal oppression. The nightingale signifies Bertha’s presence in Thornfield
garden, acting as Jane’s most important physical and metaphorical “warning sign” that Rochester
is dishonest and dangerous when he proposes marriage to her. In this scene, Jane wanders the
grounds and comes across Thornfield’s “sheltered” orchard. She notes its “Eden-like”
appearance: “it was full of trees, it bloomed with flowers: a very high wall shut it out from the
court, on one side; on the other, a beech avenue screened it from the lawn. At the bottom was a
sunk fence; its sole separation from the lonely fields; a winding walk, bordered with laurels and

⁶⁹ Ibid, 10.

terminating in a giant horse-chestnut” (286-287). Philip C. Rule argues that Brontë constructs Eden in Thornfield’s orchard, placing a man and woman in the enclosed garden of “paradise,” with “a singled-out tree” to recreate the Biblical scene. But Brontë indicates that something is off about the orchard: it is isolated and broken, with a sunken “fence” separating it from the “lonely” fields. In Brontë’s true reconstruction of Eden, Jane does not function as Eve. Rather, like Milton’s Cormorant, she sits on the “tree of life,” and, though she does not realize it, foresees Thornfield’s death in the natural landscape, set in motion by Rochester’s attempt to “pick” Jane as his forbidden fruit.

Rochester cannot control the garden, which attempts, in minuscule details, to instinctively warn Jane of the tumultuous future. When he enters the orchard, Jane notes that,

My step is strayed—not by sound, not by sight, but...by a warning fragrance. Sweet briar and southern-wood, jasmine, pink, and rose have long been yielding their evening sacrifice of incense; this new scent is neither of shrub nor flower; it is—I know it well—it is of Mr. Rochester’s cigar. I look round and I listen. I see trees laden with ripening fruit. I hear a nightingale warbling in a wood half a mile off; no moving form is visible, no coming step audible; but that perfume increases; I must flee. (287)

Brontë describes vivid images of the garden only after Jane smells the “warning fragrance” of Rochester’s cigar. As Jane transitions into present tense, Brontë places pinkish flowers of “sweet briar,” “jasmine,” and “rose,” along with the “ripening fruit,” in the garden. Her erotic portrait of the garden echoes Keats’s descriptions of the forest in “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819):

I cannot see what flowers are at my feet,  
Nor what soft incense hangs upon the boughs,  
But, in embalmed darkness, guess each sweet  
Wherewith the seasonable month endows  
The grass, the thicket, and the fruit-tree wild;  
White hawthorn, and the pastoral eglantine;  

Fast fading violets cover'd up in leaves;
And mid-May's eldest child,
The coming musk-rose, full of dewy wine,
The murmurous haunt of flies on summer eves.\(^\text{72}\)

Jane recalls Keats’s language, but, unlike his narrator, she is not “musing” or basking in these scents. The “soft” incense does not simply “hang” on the “boughs” of the tree for a man to enjoy. In the context of Rochester’s approach, Brontë’s flowers and fruit “yield” their “sacrifices” of incense, suggesting that they are forced by nature to bloom for human pleasure. Rochester’s cigar, a phallic image, further disrupts the garden, and, it is at this exact moment that a nightingale, like the one in Keats’s poem, starts to sing “half a mile off.” At the sound of this bird, Jane becomes frightened. Brontë represents Jane’s heightened instincts as she looks “round and…listen[s],” mirroring her exact physicality and her abrupt language when Mrs. Reed locks child Jane in the Red Room:

Shaking my hair from my eyes, I lifted my head and tried to look boldly round the dark room; at this moment a light gleamed on the wall… prepared as my mind was for horror, shaken as my nerves were by agitation, I thought the swift darting beam was a herald of some coming vision from another world. My heart beat thick, my head grew hot; a sound filled my ears, which I deemed the rushing of wings; something seemed near me; I was oppressed, suffocated: endurance broke down; I rushed to the door and shook the lock in desperate effort. (21)

In the Red Room and Thornfield’s orchard, the presence of an unwelcome male figure in a erotically-colored, enclosed space triggers Jane’s instincts. Though the smell of the pipe or the light on the wall should not cause her to panic, Jane nonetheless feels her body respond to these instances because, as she understands them in figurative language, these images terrify her.

Finally, the “sounds” of birds, from “the rushing of wings” and later “a nightingale warbling,”

prompt Jane’s response to “flee” the spaces. Her experience with the bird metaphor reaches its
climax as her literal landscape enacts the figurative realities of her language. Jane subconsciously
understands that she is in danger of entrapment from male oppression.

Through Thornfield’s garden, Brontë rewrites “Ode to a Nightingale” from the
perspective of a woman in danger of sexual violence. Unlike Keats, Brontë, who had read Ovid’s
Metamorphosis, directly evokes the myth of the girl-turned-nightingale, Philomela.73 Raped by
Terseus, avenged by her sister, and turned into an animal, the mythological Philomela sings a
birdsong tainted by sexual assault and dehumanization. In Brontë’s novel, the song of the
nightingale echoes the sounds of a woman. Though she listens to birds throughout the novel, Jane
also hears a woman, whom she assumes to be Grace Poole, laughing a “distinct, formal,
mirthless” chuckle. Like the bird noises from the Red Rom and the orchard, Bertha’s laugh
frightens Jane when she first registers it (126). Always heard and never seen, Bertha acts as
Brontë expected nightingales to from British Birds. Bewick claims that nightingales “might be
induced to haunt places where they are not at present seen;” they are “solitary” birds that hide “in
bushes” and sing “generally at night.”74 Bertha’s rebellions happen generally at night and, in
distinct ways, resemble Jane’s experience in Thornfield’s orchard. When Bertha first attacks
Rochester, Jane hears her “demonic laugh” (173), causing her to awaken and smell smoke
coming from Rochester’s room (174), much like the scent of his pipe in the orchard. Again,
before Bertha injures Richard Mason, Jane first sees light from the moon, an echo to the gleam
on the wall in the red-room. Then, she hears a “savage,” “sharp,” “shrilly sound” and directly

73 Roberson Wallace, 254.
74 Bewick, History of British Birds, Volume I, 201
associates it with the “shriek” of the “widest-winged condor on the Andes” (238). Later contemplating the woman who cried, Jane explicitly grants Bertha a bird identity: “What creature was it, that, masked in an ordinary woman’s face and shape, uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey?” (243). A creature, a demon, and a bird of prey, Bertha has lost both her femininity and her humanity, rendered a vicious animal to Jane, Rochester, and even her brother, who calls her a “tigress” after she attacks him (245).

Brontë constructs Bertha as Philomela’s Victorian inverse. Instead of a nightingale with a woman’s spirit, Bertha’s “woman’s face” hides a violent and inhuman nature. Further, the opposite of Ovid’s Philomela, who, as Rose Whitlock eloquently puts it, “transforms into a bird but… [her] essential characteristics remain the same,” Bertha’s inner animal shows itself through her human features.75 Her “discoloured…savage face” with rolling “red eyes” demonstrates the animalistic and demonic spirit beneath her human body (327). She is a living manifestation of Jane’s cormorant self-portrait, where a “carrion-seeking bird of prey” comes to submerge a person’s humanity. Like Philomela, though, Bertha’s cries warn of sexual exploitation, violence, and the dangers of Rochester’s advances. Bewick’s description of the nightingale’s capacity in captivity clarifies Bertha’s experience:

Nightingales, though timorous and shy, are easily caught; snares of all forts are laid for them, and generally succeed. Young ones are sometimes brought up from the nest, and fed with great care till they are able to sing. It is with great difficulty that old birds are induced to sing after being taken; for a considerable time they refuse to eat, but by great attention to their treatment, and avoiding every thing that might agitate them, they at length resume their song, and continue it during the greatest part of the year.76

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By replacing Bewick’s “nightingale” with “woman” or “slave,” a social critique of patriarchal hierarchies emerges, a feat Brontë certainly undertakes. As topics of concern, Brontë uses Bertha and Jane to evoke themes of female starvation, the triangular slave trade, and the “entrapment” of oppressed groups. Susan Meyer notes that Brontë’s characterization of Bertha, who is from the West Indies, looks “blackened” (327), and revolts with fire like the Jamaican slaves who rebelled in 1831, allows her to use “the emotional force of the idea of slavery and explosive race relations in the wake of British emancipation [of slavery] to represent the tensions of the gender hierarchy in England.”

As Bewick personifies the domesticated nightingale, Brontë animalizes the domesticated person. She exploits Bertha’s ambiguous racial identity and Jamaican history to further separate Jane from madness and animalization. To Brontë, Jane’s English whiteness inherently preserves her humanity; she could never submit to her inner animal in the way her dark sister does because she is Jane Eyre, an intelligent white woman with a feminist spirit.

But like an “old” nightingale taken from nature and placed in a cage, Bertha exists both outside of England and inside its gender and racial hierarchies. Without explicitly carrying the identity of a black woman, Bertha encompasses the histories of the slave in the colonies and the woman at home, allowing Brontë to create her animal woman without actually animalizing the English lady. Instead, though she only verbally depicts Rochester’s side of the story, Brontë hints at the true horror of Bertha’s experience through Jane. Jane interprets Rochester’s story and implicitly finds Bertha’s tale when she pities the plights of the “poor girls” wronged by Rochester (359). These women all differ from Jane in ethnicity, allowing Jane to sympathize with

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them while maintaining her superiority and her position of relative power. Further, as Bertha’s mirror, Jane nearly experiences sexual (349) and physical violence at Rochester’s hands (366). Like Catherine Linton in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, who, after the onslaught of sexual awakening and marriage, wishes desperately to be a “girl again; half-savage, and hardy, and free” with her racially-ambiguous twin Heathcliff, Bertha represents threefold the animal, the slave, and the woman, fettered, violated, and maddened by British patriarchal structures at home and abroad.

Through the avian allusions in Thornfield’s orchard, Brontë displays Jane’s internal fears that forced domestication will result in the loss of her humanity; nevertheless, she foreshadows Jane’s return to Rochester at the end of the novel. Alongside her cries of liberation that rebel against the image of the woman as bird, Jane reinstates her dreams of domestic bliss with Rochester. When he asks her to “be still,” comparing her to a “wild, frantic bird,” Jane replies resolutely, “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” (293). At the same time, though, Jane recycles birdlike language to describe her desires, asking Rochester, “Do you think I am an automaton?—a machine without feelings? and can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup?” (292). Once again, Jane compares her desire for affection to a “hunger” for crumbs. Moreover, she actually does not “exert” her ability to leave him. After Rochester affirms that he loves her, Jane immediately promises that she will stay, “ensnaring” herself into a “net,” just like the captured cormorant she previously dreaded becoming. Despite her fears of entrapment and madness, Jane desperately wishes to be birdlike,

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fed with domestic joys, and loved. A life without passion scares her just as much as a life in a cage. Jane’s worry of becoming “machine-like” appears possible through a potential union with St. John Rivers, a man Jane describes as a “statue” (396). Though “I am no bird” is Jane’s most passionate declaration of her selfhood, she later tells Rochester that she is also not an “angel” (300). Further, when St. John proposes to her at Moors Head, a space that lacks real birds entirely, Jane proclaims that she cannot answer his missionary “summons” because she is “no apostle,—[she] could not behold the herald,—[she] could not receive his call” (464).

Through Jane’s self-denials, Brontë argues that the nominal roles society assigns to women inherently dehumanize them. A woman is either too earthly or unearthly, Satanic or heavenly, promiscuous or chaste, an animal or an angel. She is only ever one of two extremes. A woman cannot be the only thing that Jane ever “conscientiously believe[s]” she is: a human being (504).

Brontë creates the ultimate human in Jane Eyre, a woman who is always the voice of reason in a room, the person who balances out all the polar opposites of the novel. She neither degrades herself to hell nor elevates herself to heaven. She enacts her own domestication, building a marriage that can exist outside of British patriarchal hierarchies. In the “warnings” of the proposal scene, Brontë also foreshadows Bertha’s future demise and Jane’s equalizing union with Rochester through the orchard’s natural details. Here, Rochester points out a “West-Indian insect” (288) to Jane, and, when it flies away, Rochester refers to the Mother Goose rhyme, “Ladybird, ladybird fly away home / Your house is on fire, your children are gone” (289). Only when the West-Indian animal woman vanishes, when the house of Thornfield is “on fire,” when the residents of Thornfield who mislead Jane are “gone” can Jane take on the role of the

Oddly, Brontë does not include any birds in the landscape around Moors House. They only return in the text when Jane returns to Thornfield.
“Ladybird.”\textsuperscript{80} Then, she can return to her true home with Rochester, where they assume their romantic identities of “eagle” and “sparrow” (507), equally birdlike and domesticated.

In opposition to Bertha, the animal woman that dies because she is not the bird that everyone has identified her to be, Jane’s ladybird identity, acquired through her independence and inheritance, keeps her from domination.\textsuperscript{81} A lady before she is a bird, Jane preserves her humanity without abandoning her mate and natural “likeness.” But Jane only achieves her ideal situation through Bertha’s animalization and death. This historical erasure comes at a price. After Rochester first proposes to Jane, the nightingale continues to sing: “the nightingale’s song was then the only voice of the hour: in listening to it, I wept” (293). The nightingale symbolizes that Rochester’s bride still posthumously “stands between” Jane and Rochester’s relationship and society (294). When Jane returns to Thornfield, she notes that, though the manor was gone, the rookery remains (488). Jane anthropomorphizes these birds directly, stating that “the crows sailing overhead perhaps watched me…They must have considered I was very careful and timid at first, and that gradually I grew very bold and reckless…‘What affectation of diffidence was this at first?’ they might have demanded; ‘what stupid regardlessness now?’” (489). Even though Bertha has physically left Thornfield, her spiritual presence remains within the nested rooks, who haunt the desolate manor in her place.

\textsuperscript{80}“Ladybird” is actually another term for ladybug, but I would argue that Brontë creates a play-on-words with this allusion, rather than distinguishing between birds and insects.

\textsuperscript{81}Bertha dies by jumping from the roof of Thornfield right next to the rookery, as if, like her bird neighbors, she can escape her imprisonment by flying (493). But because she is not actually a bird, she cannot fly. Though equally frightening, Brontë seems to say, metaphor is not reality, even if it greatly impacts the way people see themselves.
As Bewick tells of rooks that are exiled from their rookeries, Rochester and Jane must rebuild their marriage “anew in some more undisturbed situation.” They settle in the isolated forest of Ferndean, where their only neighbors are the birds in the trees. Gilbert and Gubar explain that, in her ending, “Brontë seems to be saying [that true minds] must withdraw into a remote forest, a wilderness even, in order to circumvent the strictures of a hierarchal society.”

True minds alone, Brontë also seems to be saying, can only try to defy personal histories. Through Bertha’s animalization, Brontë secures Jane’s humanization. In Bertha’s inhumanness, Jane receives the “desolate place” of her own, a space she has desired since she was a child reading Bewick. Outside of society and its patriarchal language, Jane can construct her own figurative. Married to a blind man, she controls the way Rochester can understand the world: “he saw nature—he saw books through me” (519). She is the sole agent of language in their marriage, the feminist seer and interpreter. But there is no guarantee that, even in the deepest forest, the bird phantom will refrain from settling, attacking, or singing again. Jane’s son, with Rochester’s “large, brilliant, and black” eyes, will, by the patriarchal rules of primogeniture, inherit his father’s lands and carry his parents’ legacy back to British society. Through him, Brontë implicitly leaves open a future of reform, where gender and racial equality abounds, or a haunting return to patriarchal metaphor, where humans are unnaturally caged once more.

To a certain degree, Brontë deconstructs the image of the woman as a bird. In her feminist *bildungsroman*, she creates the ultimate horror for her patriarchal society, a fear that a

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83 Gilbert and Gubar, 369.
dying Mrs. Reed remembers feeling when child Jane first accused her of abuse: “I could not
forget my own sensations when you thus started up and poured out the venom of your mind: I
felt fear as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and
cursed me in a man’s voice” (275). Mrs. Reed cannot acknowledge that her metaphor is simply a
metaphor. She demonstrates the fear of the other, the need to dominate and cage the thing that is
not like herself. For British imperialism, nothing is more terrifying than the slave revolt. For the
English country manor, nothing is scarier than the insubordinate, the little orphan child, the
unwanted girl, who stands up and affirms that she is not, in reality, the animal that her superiors
make of her. “Bad animal” Brontë paradoxically conforms to the bird metaphor to subvert it. She
challenges the figurative language from within Jane, critiquing the patriarchal consciousness
behind its oppressive nature. Still, she reclaims the bird as Jane’s ultimate metaphor for equal
love and female nourishment. She makes a real woman an animal to show the utmost power of
language, but she also lets her narrator escape the metaphor’s cage. Or, at least, she tries to free
her rebellious Jane.

The lasting irony of Jane Eyre is that, in the end, Jane really is a bird. She feeds on
Rochester’s “crumbs;” she migrates from place to place; she builds a nest. As fearless and
enraged as she is, Jane wants to be domesticated, a desire that inherently subordinates her. Like
her love of Bewick, Jane’s desires for birdlikeness comes from Brontë’s immense and, quite
frankly, disturbing love for M. Heger. A French tutor during Brontë’s years at a boarding school
in Brussels, Heger was married and could not reciprocate her devotion. Nonetheless, Brontë
wrote him dozens of letters following their affair, many of which feature the patriarchal bird
metaphors that Jane uses to describe her love for Rochester. In January 1845, she writes to
Heger, “Monsieur, the poor do not need a great deal to live on—they ask only the crumbs of bread which fall from the rich man’s table—but if they are refused these crumbs—they die of hunger…I cling to the preservation of this little interest—I cling to it as I would cling on to life.”94 Nine months later, she sent another, stating, “Your last letter has sustained me—has nourished me for six months…”95 In Brontë’s Bewick-like desolate landscape, she crafts a new bird metaphor, but it is not really feminist. It is not equal. It makes her Jane into Rochester’s little bird-wife; it makes Brontë—a passionate, intelligent woman—dependent on the metaphorical sustenance of a man.

Brontë’s last bird vignettes in Jane Eyre reveal her problematic cravings. At Ferndean, Jane and Rochester embrace bird animalities: he, an eagle, she, a sparrow. The exchange where they construct these metaphors sums up the entirety of Brontë’s “Master/Servant” feminism:

“Oh, you are indeed there, my skylark! Come to me. You are not gone: not vanished? I heard one of your kind an hour ago, singing high over the wood: but its song had no music for me, any more than the rising sun had rays. 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.”

The water stood in my eyes to hear this avowal of his dependence; just as if a royal eagle, chained to a perch, should be forced to entreat a sparrow to become its purveyor. But I would not be lachrymose: I dashed off the salt drops, and busied myself with preparing breakfast. (506)

Rochester creates a direct allusion to Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820), but Jane resists this epithet because, like Bertha’s nightingale, the skylark connotes a complicated, patriarchal meaning of its own. For Shelley, the skylark, like the nightingale, is an “unseen” bird that sings “sweetest songs” of “saddest thought.” The skylark, though, embodies holiness; it is

84 Brontë, Letters, 58.
85 Ibid, 68.
“Like a star of Heaven, / In the broad day-light.” Holiness, too, is a patriarchal cage in Shelley, who romantically imagines the skylark as a caged woman:

Like a high-born maiden  
In a palace-tower,  
Soothing her love-laden  
Soul in secret hour  
With music sweet as love, which overflows her bower…

Intelligent Jane does not like the idea of being a skylark, locked in a “tower” and forced to sing for her “love-laden soul.” Instead, she picks her own bird out of Bewick’s natural history, one that lacks the figurative histories of the nightingale or skylark, to be the caretaker and partner to Rochester’s “chained” eagle.

Jane does not simply choose the sparrow though; she has been a sparrow all along. Whether consciously or unconsciously, Brontë formed her as one. Hazel-haired, green-eyed, unbeautiful, and common, Jane looks just like Bewick’s “hazel,” “plain” “dull,” and “familiar” female house sparrow. Most of all, as Bewick notes, “the Sparrow is said to be a crafty bird, easily distinguishing the snares laid to entrap it…they often mix with other birds, and not infrequently partake with the pigeons or the poultry, in spite of every precaution to prevent them.” Jane’s whole narrative finds its origins in Bewick’s *British Birds*, the book where she first “forms an idea” that is not in fact her “own” (11). At the end of her subversion, Brontë simply regurgitates the structure she meant to undermine in the first place. Her “sparrow” Jane, a

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87 Ibid, 203.


heroine who could fully reclaim birdhood as a feminist womanhood, becomes instead the
“purveyor” of Rochester’s eagle, an historically-masculine bird of prey that extends “his
dominion over the birds, as the Lion over the quadrupeds.”

Many scholars have said that *Jane Eyre* feels more radical in its middle rather than at its
ending. My notes on the bird landscape in Brontë’s novel lead to a similar conclusion.
Nevertheless, Brontë still develops an original ornithological metaphor that empowers, rather
than domesticates, women through an independent domesticity. Jane’s sisters—Miss Temple and
Helen, Diana and Mary—save her by embracing her animality, rather than ensnaring her like an
animal. They spare her Bertha’s fate and show her how to manipulate an image without
destroying it. Likewise, Brontë’s natural aesthetics, which reimagine a patriarchal metaphor in a
feminist light, show future women writers how to reshape a language that inherently oppresses
them. Her legacy was clear not four years after she died. In 1859, Emily Dickinson replicated
Brontë’s teenage eulogy for Bewick with her own poem remembering Charlotte. In a variant of
these lines, Dickinson imagines that Brontë’s “little cage,” or grave, holds a tiny bird:

This Bird — observing others
When frosts too sharp became
Retire to other latitudes —
Quietly did the same —

But differed in returning —
Since Yorkshire hills are green —
Yet not in all the nests I meet —
Can Nightingale be seen —

90 Ibid, 3.

91 Emily Dickinson, “All overgrown by cunning moss,” *Poems: Packet II, Fascicle 7*, includes 20 poems,
written in ink, ca. 1859, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, http://
www.edickinson.org/editions/2/image_sets/74779.
Brontë might conform to Bewick, the novel, marriage, and figurative language, but she “differs” in her return to these patriarchal traditions. As Dickinson astutely observes, by hiding a nightingale in her “nest,” Brontë finds the woman singing beneath the metaphors.
“A Solitary Cracked-Voice Reed-Sparrow in a Sad, Machine-Made Tone”:

*Thomas Hardy’s Birdsong Dilemmas in Tess of the d’Urbervilles*

The fate of Thomas Hardy’s eponymous heroine in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* (1891) is all but sealed at the Trantridge poultry-farm, where sixteen-year-old Tess meets the “community of fowls to which [she] had been appointed as supervisor, purveyor, nurse, surgeon, and friend.”

Their home, she finds, is an old cottage with the “aspect of a ruined tower” and an odd history:

> The lower rooms were entirely given over to the birds, who walked about them with a proprietary air, as though the place had been built by themselves, and not by certain dusty copyholders who now lay east and west in the churchyard. The descendants of these bygone owners felt it almost as a slight to their family when the house which had so much of their affection, had cost so much of their forefathers’ money, and had been in their possession for several generations before the d’Urbervilles came and built here…

> The rooms wherein dozens of infants had wailed at their nursing now resounded with the tapping of nascent chicks. Distracted hens in coops occupied spots where formerly stood chairs supporting sedate agriculturists. The chimney-corner and once-blazing hearth was now filled with inverted beehives, in which the hens laid their eggs; while out of doors the plots that each succeeding householder had carefully shaped with his spade were torn by the cocks in wildest fashion. (64)

Readers familiar with Hardy know that this passage is difficult to discern at best. I might easily see these chickens as evidence of industrialization’s negative effects on human tradition and the lives of English farmers. The Stoke-d’Urbervilles, who steal Tess’s ancestral name to hide their new money, have allowed their animals to inhabit a “copyholders” house with no regard for the human history that took place there. But this reading would ignore Hardy’s interest in evolutionary theory, which, as Hardy once wrote “revealed that all organic creatures are of one family, [and] shifted the centre of altruism from humanity to the whole conscious world collectively.”

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92 I hereafter refer to *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* using the shortened *Tess.*

agriculturists” replaced with “distracted hens,” Hardy might imply that, as humans are just further evolved descendants of the same original “family,” one living form of that family, the chickens, has simply overtaken the space of an extinct line, the copyholders. Yet this reading is questionable as well, since the chickens have been manipulated by the human force of the Stoke-d’Urbervilles. Perhaps what is most readable in this passage is its circularity, as it exemplifies the competing arguments about humans and nature that Hardy explores, twists, and changes his mind about in Tess.

For nearly a century, scholars have tried to make sense of Hardy’s arguments about nature, Darwin’s theory of evolution, and Hardy’s “pure woman” in Tess. More often than not, these scholars, like Hardy, have gone around in circles. His shifting perspectives have provoked D.E. Musselwhite to argue that Hardy uses Tess to “dissolve the boundary of the human and non-human, the animal and the vegetable…so as to constitute an almost Spinozist composite nature,” and Elisha Cohn to contend that, in Tess, “humans control nature physically but also conceptually: an ethical perspective renders the nonhuman exclusively a product of human culture.” Musselwhite’s and Cohn’s opposing conclusions both stand and fall at different moments in the novel. If Darwin’s “Nature,” as Hardy regularly alerts us, knows no “social law” (98), why do birds, the horse Prince, and even the land at Flintcomb-Ash fall victim to human mistreatment? If Tess’s femininity makes her a “portion of the field” (100), why does


Hardy give her more agency—to kill suffering pheasants or murder Alec d’Urberville, for instance—than the silent animals around her? Or does he?

I open my chapter on *Tess* with these questions because it is impossible to discuss bird imagery in Hardy’s work without acknowledging the opposing ideas about evolutionary science and social hierarchy that exist in his novel. But I would argue that it is equally impossible to acknowledge Hardy’s inconsistent natural world without considering how it impacts the submerged feminist tragedy in *Tess*. Hardy links his ideas about nature and his feminist ideals through a critique of patriarchal language. As complicated and uncomplicated as Hardy thought nature and women were, he also understood that his ideas about both subjects were constructed through language, which itself is constructed by humans. This language “others” nonhuman natural creatures, but, more significantly, this language objectifies the nonmale human creatures that use it to communicate. Ellen Rooney argues that Hardy’s ultimate agenda in *Tess* is to unflinchingly depict “the inexorable forces that produce [Tess] as the seductive object of the discourses of man,” so much so that Hardy omits any and all chances for Tess to tell the reader what happened to her in the forest with Alec d’Urberville.\(^{96}\) Rooney notes how Hardy uses figurative language to make Tess “appear” as if she is nonhuman because she is nonmale:

> The metaphors assimilating Tess to the natural world suggest the physical problem—which is ultimately a sexual problem—she faces throughout the novel. Losing her margin, seeming and therefore apparently becoming a creature less than human, Tess inhabits a foreign body. The ‘problem’ of Tess’s body is the most powerful figure by which Hardy distances her from ordinary (masculine) humanity and thus marks her peculiar lack of subjectivity as feminine.\(^ {97}\)


\(^{97}\) Ibid, 476.
Rooney focuses on the specific metaphors that compare Tess to the natural world, but Hardy’s awareness of the ways patriarchal structures influence a woman’s narrative extend far past his comparisons between Tess and the natural world. The textual landscape of Tess itself constantly notifies the reader that language is a tool for men to objectify and disempower women. Soon after Tess gives birth to the child she names Sorrow, Hardy describes the morning light on a field near her home:

The sun, on account of the mist, had a curious sentient, personal look, demanding the masculine pronoun for its adequate expression…The luminary was a golden-haired, beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature, gazing down in the vigour and intentness of youth upon an earth that was brimming with interest for him. His light, a little later, broke through chinks of cottage shutters, throwing stripes like red-hot pokers upon cupboards, chests of drawers, and other furniture within; and awakening harvesters who were not already astir. (99)

The “luminary” sun appears as if it were “personal,” “God-like,” youthful, and human, which, according to a patriarchal figurative language, equates it with maleness. Its “light” penetrates the domestic space in almost a sexual sense, entering through “chinks” and throwing “red-hot” beams on the homes of Marlott. Hardy’s sarcastic rhetoric shows how traditional poetics transform natural figments of power into images of maleness, despite the fact that they have no such consciousness. Hardy reiterates this sense not a page later when he differentiates field men from field women: “A field-man is a personality afield; a field-woman is a portion of the field; she had somehow lost her own margin, imbibed the essence of her surrounding, and assimilated herself with it” (100). Like the sun, a field-man, Hardy explains, is “personal” because he translates human hierarchies onto the field, which allows him to “other” himself from a conquered and cultivated nature. A field-woman, though, “loses” her marginal space in human
language by “assimilating” herself with nature, where she becomes a part of a whole that is incomprehensible to manmade systems.

Because of his understanding that the environment, animals, and women exist in literature only through a male vernacular, Hardy intertwines his interest in nature with his feminist argument. I cannot read one without noticing the other. As often as Hardy refers to evolutionary science, he shows how language transforms women, namely Tess, into flowers, fields, animals, and the moon to establish power over her. In terms of this study, I will not pretend that Hardy is singularly concerned with ornithology and avian imagery in *Tess*.

Countless scholars have explored the significance of animals in *Tess*, and it is obvious that Hardy means to draw comparisons between Tess and all of the nonhuman beings present physically and metaphorically in the novel.\(^98\) I argue that the most frequent metaphors in *Tess* compare women and children to birds. With the exception of the pheasant scene and the domesticated birds at Trantridge, which are quite explicit and individualized, avian appearances in *Tess* are subtle and anonymous. Many of the metaphors that compare women to birds arise through irregular descriptors. For instance, Hardy uses “nest” to depict beds made by or for Tess four times in the novel: Tess for the boy Abraham right before the horse Prince dies (37), Alec for Tess right before he rapes her (80), Tess for herself when she sleeps next to the dying pheasants (296), and Tess again for her mother and siblings after they are evicted from their home (383). “Nest,” included right before moments where animals, women, or children are victimized in the novel, makes Tess look like she were a sleeping or mothering animal rather than a sleeping or mothering woman. Hardy’s bird descriptors extend into the everyday lives of Tess and the

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\(^{98}\) Among the animals Tess is compared to are the horse Prince, the cows at Talbothays, nonspecific dogs and other wild animals, Pagan goddesses, and ghosts.
women around her. The female hands at Trantridge and the dairymaids at Talbothays walk in
“flocks” (74, 123); the threshing machine that Tess is forced to work on looks like a “revolving
wire cage” (346); the girls working at Flintcomb-Ash wear “wing-bonnets” (349). Tess does not
simply, as Hardy’s narrator notes multiple times, act metaphorically “like a bird in a
springe” (214). Everyday figurative language allows people to call female clothing, tools, and
movements “birdlike,” further equating womanhood, at least in a poetic sense, with birdhood. It
is no surprise that Angel Clare describes Tess to his parents as “actualized poetry” (182), because
everything that is objective about Tess—her body, the work clothes she has to wear, the machines
and animals with which she is forced to work—is conceived subjectively through a masculine
figurative, transforming her into something pure or seductive, holy or sinful, natural or unnatural,
without asking for her input or consent.

Hardy complicates Tess’s linguistic birdlikeness by setting up numerous interactions
between Tess and actual birds in the novel. He begins these concurrent motifs when Tess first
arrives to “try her fortune at Trantridge poultry-farm” (83) by taking care of Mrs. d’Urberville’s
chickens and finches. Hardy describes Tess bringing the birds to the blind woman to inspect:

“Ah, you are the young woman come to look after my birds?” said Mrs d’Urberville,
recognizing a new footstep. ‘I hope you will be kind to them. My bailiff tells me you are
quite the proper person. Well, where are they? Ah, this is Strut! But he is hardly so lively
to-day, is he?…And Phena too—yes, they are a little frightened—are you, dears?…”

While the old lady had been speaking Tess and the other maid, in obedience to her
gestures, had placed the fowls severally in her lap, and she had felt them over from head
to tail, examining their beaks, their combs, the manes of the cocks, their wings, and their
claws. Her touch enabled her to recognize them in a moment, and to discover if a single
feather were crippled or dragged. She handled their crops, and knew what they had
eaten, and if too little or too much; her face enacting a vivid pantomime of the criticisms
passing in her mind… (65)
Hardy immediately establishes that, just as the poultry-farm has overtaken the copyholders’ home, Mrs. d’Urberville gives more care to her individual chickens than she does her staff. She knows each bird by holding them and speaks to them as if they could understand her. Further, she calls them individually by their names, though she only ever refers to Tess and her former worker as “young woman” and “lad” (66). To Tess, Mrs. d’Urberville’s careful process with each chicken resembles “a Confirmation, in which Mrs d’Urberville was the bishop, the fowls the young people presented and herself and the maid-servant the parson and curate of the parish bringing them up” (66). Through the sacrilegious nature of Tess’s comparison, Hardy confirms that Mrs. d’Urberville grants more humanity to her birds than her workers. Her worries about the well-being of her poultry outweigh her concerns for the men and women of a lower class, whom she only ever addresses to criticize or command. Here, as before, Hardy seems to attack industrialization and the English class system, as Mrs. d’Urberville’s animals matter more to her than her fellow humans. This observation, though, ignores the fact that Tess lives alongside the chickens in the “ruined tower” of the poultry-house, making them her neighbors (64). As a wealthy Englishwoman, Mrs. d’Urberville’s compassionate conversations with the chickens, rather than with a companion animal such as a dog, are unusual, but her disregard for her lower-class workers is not, which Tess notes at the end of her first reception: “The girl’s surprise at Mrs d’Urberville’s manner was not great: for since seeing the size of the house she had expected no more” (66). Because the chickens occupy a human space, they are placed as Tess’s equals, so much so that they share a home and, in Tess’s eyes, a sort of religious experience with the girl.

Mrs. d’Urberville believes that Tess can more adequately “speak,” or, in this case, “whistle” to her birds because Tess is a “country girl” who is closer, in terms of social hierarchy
and intelligence, to the birds than Mrs. d’Urberville is herself (66). She commands that Tess “practise” whistling “every day” so she can teach the birds “airs,” or country songs for Mrs. d’Urberville to enjoy. Tess is just as surprised by this request as she is by her initial inability to perform it:

…and she was curious to test her powers in the unexpected direction asked of her, so as to ascertain her chance of retaining her post. As soon as she was alone within the walled garden she sat herself down on a coop, and seriously screwed up her mouth for the long-neglected practice. She found her former ability to have degenerated to the production of a hollow rush of wind through the lips, and no clear note at all. She remained fruitlessly blowing and blowing, wondering how she could have so grown out of the art which had come by nature… (66-67)

Though she sits down on a chicken’s “coop” in her “walled garden” and tries her best to whistle, Tess cannot produce a single “clear note” of song. Tess believes that her ability as a country girl has “degenerated,” but Hardy implies that just the opposite has happened: she has evolved. Earlier, when Hardy names Joan Durbeyfield in the first section of Tess, he first describes her musicality, explaining that that “No ditty floated into Blackmoor Vale from the outer world but Tess’s mother caught up its notation in a week” (26). Joan Durbeyfield sings and speaks in “dialect,” but Tess, who speaks “two languages: the dialect at home, more or less; ordinary English abroad and to persons of quality” (26), is linguistically and educationally divorced from traditional country girlhood:

Between the mother, with her fast-perishing lumber of superstitions, folk-lore, dialect, and orally transmitted ballads, and the daughter, with her trained National teachings and Standard knowledge under an infinitely Revised Code, there was a gap of two hundred years as ordinarily understood. When they were together, the Jacobean and the Victorian ages were juxtaposed. (29)

A girl of the late “Victorian age,” Tess reaches adolescence at a time where English womanhood, even in the lower classes, was in transition from the traditional. Hardy writes Tess right as the
concept of the “New Woman” was becoming prominent in European urban centers among the wealthy and the middle classes. Hardy shows how the New Woman ideals of independence, education, and voice influenced country girls living on the brick of modernity. Tess, who dreams of becoming a schoolteacher, communicates a “Standard knowledge” with a different vernacular than her mother, which suggests that Tess’s modern “country girl” story could be a New Woman’s story.

It never becomes that story because, early on in the novel, Hardy silences his heroine. Ann L. Ardis argues that Hardy’s novel cannot be categorized as New Woman’s fiction because there is “no place in his text for the New Woman who wants to articulate herself, to create herself, to make a place in the world for herself by speaking.”

Tess loses this integral sense of voice the moment Alec d’Urberville spots her failing to whistle to the finches:

“Ah! I understand why you are trying—those bullies! My mother wants you to carry on their musical education. How selfish of her! As if attending to these curst cocks and hens here were not enough work for any girl. I would flatly refuse, if I were you.”

“But she wants me particularly to do it, and to be ready by to-morrow morning.”

“Does she? Well then—I’ll give you a lesson or two.”

“Oh no, you won’t!” said Tess, withdrawing towards the door.”

“Nonsense; I don’t want to touch you. See—I’ll stand on this side of the wire-netting, and you can keep on the other; so you may feel quite safe. Now, look here; you screw up your lips too harshly. There ’tis—so.” (67)

Tess’s declaration that Alec d’Urberville “won’t” teach her to whistle is the last time she outwardly says no to him before he rapes her in the Chaseborough woods. Though she comes up

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with excuses to keep herself from him and even physically pushes him off of her, Tess does not vocally refuse Alec again in the first phase of the novel. Alec positions Tess for his whistling lesson on the opposite side of a “wire-netting” so she can “feel quite safe,” which places her, just like Jane at the beginning of *Jane Eyre*, in a birdcage of her own. He instructs her to once again whistle airs like her mother, a woman who grew up in a “Jacobean” culture and whose singing sounds like the language of animals, which aligns with Alec’s hopes to ensnare Tess “like a bird.” A man forces Tess to be silent in the discourse of men by teaching her to speak like the animal that the masculine figurative thinks she is. Following Alec’s lesson, it is quite easy for Tess to regain the country girl skill she had lost:

> She soon found that whistling to the bullfinches in Mrs d’Urberville’s room was no such onerous business when she had regained the art, for she had caught from her musical mother numerous airs that suited those songsters admirably. A far more satisfactory time than when she practised in the garden was this whistling by the cages each morning. Unrestrained by the young man’s presence she threw up her mouth, put her lips near the bars, and piped away in easeful grace to the attentive listeners. (68)

Though Tess is “unrestrained” momentarily by Alec’s presence, she is henceforth narratively caged, just like the birds to which she sings, in a novel that keeps everyone—even the reader—from ever being able to understand the titular subject’s subjectivity.

Through Tess’s initial encounters with real chickens and finches, Hardy sets up the underlying motif that parallels Tess’s silence with her desire to prescribe meaning to the actual birds around her. In this chapter, I will explore Tess’s understanding of real birds in Hardy’s Darwinian landscape as a mirror to male impressions of Tess throughout the novel. Just as men try to make sense of Tess in the masculine figurative, Tess tries to make sense of birds through a human lens, which ultimately disables her from seeing anything other than herself in them. I will
argue that, by uniting his understandings of Darwinism and patriarchal language in *Tess*, Hardy shows how women’s words falls on male ears like birdsong; even when a woman like Tess tells her story in human tongue, it is lost in poetic translation to the men who refuse to set her free.

At the beginning of the third phase in *Tess*, “The Ralley,” Hardy’s changed heroine leaves for Talbothays Dairy on a “bird-hatching morning in May, between two and three years after the return from Trantridge (117). “Bird-hatching,” which signals the sense of renewal and rebirth that Tess feels on her second migration from Marlott, also sets the tone for what I argue is the second series of bird impressions in Hardy’s novel. Unlike Tess’s interactions with domesticated chickens and finches in “The Maiden,” where the patriarchal d’Urbervilles metaphorically transform Tess into a speechless bird, Tess’s interplay with wild avian creatures at Talbothays demonstrates her desire to restart her story in a wild, pure part of the English countryside. Her associations with the Talbothays sparrows and songbirds mirror her blooming relationship with the aptly-named Angel Clare, who sees Tess as the perfect country maiden to be his wife. Tess’s need to understand her avian encounters through traditional language and metaphor makes her unable to experience fulfilling interactions with birds. In turn, Hardy foreshadows Angel’s refusal to love Tess as she truly is, rather than as the woman he had convinced himself she was. Through this “bird-hatching” section of the novel, Hardy, like “Nature in her fantastic trickery” (257), presents an opportunity for Tess to tell her story on what seems to be an untamed landscape but is actually just as ancient and domesticated as the place where she first tries to lay her nest. Here, Hardy subtly cracks open all that is incomprehensible about Tess’s narrative for the man who notices her only as the most beloved creature in his own terrain.
As Tess reaches the summit of the Vale of Great Dairies, she takes in “the bird’s eye perspective before her” and notes how it differs from the Blackmoor Vale in its ethereality, explaining that the “Froom waters were as clear as the pure River of Life shown to the Evangelist” (118-119). Tess’s notion that she has come to a Promise Land of her own, which she verifies through her impressions of the new landscape, almost immediately transforms her:

Either the change in the quality of the air from heavy to light, or the sense of being amid new scenes where there were no invidious eyes upon her, sent up her spirits wonderfully. Her hopes mingled with the sunshine in an ideal photosphere which surrounded her as she bounded along against the soft south wind. She heard a pleasant voice in every breeze, and in every bird’s note seemed to lurk a joy. (119)

Tess “hears” her own emotions in the birdsong, believing that the birds share her hopes and feel her pleasure. Hardy’s narrator inserts that Tess’s fresh feelings, perhaps, come merely from the fact that there are “no invidious eyes” on her, but, ironically, Tess interprets the “photosphere” as “ideal” to fit it to what her own gaze desires. Though Tess’s body might “fluctuate” with her mood, “the irresistible, universal, automatic tendency to find sweet pleasure somewhere, which pervades all life…had at length mastered Tess” (119). Tess’s natural tendencies, in a Darwinian sense, “master” her into seeing nature as a reflection of herself. She therefore incorrectly believes that, because her own “more perfect beauty accorded with her less elevated mood,” the birds also sound pure and joyous notes because they feel pure and joyous.

Nevertheless, as Hardy would have known from Darwin, “male birds of various species” use “vocal or instrumental sounds” for mating purposes. Avian beauty and musicality exist for sexual reproduction, which is the opposite of what Tess desires when she expresses what she believes are her harmonious emotions through song:

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She tried several ballads, but found them inadequate; till, recollecting the psalter that her eyes had so often wandered over of a Sunday morning before she had eaten of the tree of knowledge, she chanted: “O ye Sun and Moon … O ye Stars … ye Green Things upon the Earth … ye Fowls of the Air … Beasts and Cattle … Children of Men … bless ye the Lord, praise Him and magnify Him forever!”

She suddenly stopped and murmured: “But perhaps I don’t quite know the Lord as yet.” (119)

Tess’s song is not inadequate simply because she tries to place a “Monotheistic” notion on a “Fetichistic” setting. Her words feels only “approximate” because nature does not conform to “systematized religion” or even fully the “Pagan fantasy” that “women…retain in their souls” (120). Darwin’s theory disproves these romantic ideas, a fact that Hardy immediately implies by noting that Tess “really wished to walk uprightly while her father did nothing of the kind” (120). Though Tess has the desire to evolve, she unwittingly makes her body pleasing to the opposite sex both visually and vocally, which is exactly what men like Alec d’Urberville want her to do. By singing a common hymn to the birds, she attempts to translate her feelings into nature using human speech, but instead, she joins in a mating song, transforming her pure intentions into a unintended game of sexual prowess that eventually leads to her own extinction.

Hardy confirms this truth right as Tess arrives at Talbothays, where “the sole effect of her presence upon the placid valley so far had been to excite the mind of a solitary heron, which, after descending to the ground not far from her path, stood with neck erect, looking at her” (121). Though these eyes themselves are not “invidious,” in human metaphor they recall and foreshadow d’Urberville’s eyes, which last gaze on Tess as his prostitute in The Herons lodging house at the climax of Hardy’s novel.
Tess only “assimilates” herself with nature when she does not attempt to find her own desires in her surroundings through metaphor. When she first hears Angel Clare playing his harp in the garden at Talbothays, Tess, “like a fascinated bird,” cannot help but approach him:

She went stealthily as a cat through this profusion of growth, gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirts, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slug-slime, and rubbing off upon her naked arms sticky blights which, though snow-white on the apple-tree trunks, made madder stains on her skin...Tess was conscious of neither time nor space. The exaltation which she had described as being producible at will by gazing at a star came now without any determination of hers; she undulated upon the thin notes of the second-hand harp, and their harmonies passed like breezes through her, bringing tears into her eyes. The floating pollen seemed to be his notes made visible, and the dampness of the garden the weeping of the garden’s sensibility. Though near nightfall, the rank-smelling weed-flowers glowed as if they would not close for intentness, and the waves of colour mixed with the waves of sound. (138-139)

Tess becomes part of the rank garden physically as her body collects bits of the blooming nature around her. The “snails,” “thistle-milk,” and “slug-slime” are not typical images of feminine freshness or beauty, but, as Hardy describes, they are just as dazzling as “cultivated flowers,” all the more so because they are real, with “offensive” smells and juiciness not unlike the bodily fluids of a woman in her sexual prime. By simply walking through the garden, Tess can more accurately describe the passions in her body and her mind. Her subconscious feeling that she is without her body comes to her “without any determination,” which suggests that, by refraining from determining her experience in words, Tess more sufficiently understands the nature she has become. As she comes closer to him, Tess does not attempt to identify the song that Angel is playing. Instead, she moves with the notes, seeing them become “visible” in nature rather than trying to see nature become visible through the music. Her emotions arise with the “waves of colour” and “sound,” not apart from them; though Tess never voices her feelings, her subconscious passions are alive in the nature around her.
When Angel Clare becomes fascinated with Tess during their morning shifts at the dairy, he only understands her through a patriarchal construction of womanhood. Angel conceptualizes Tess as a “fresh and interesting specimen of womankind” who, not unlike the summer’s newest installment of “nightingales, thrushes, finches and such ephemeral creatures” that “took up their positions where only a year ago others had stood in their place,” fulfills a vision that hundreds of other women have and might have filled for Angel (144). For Angel, Tess exists only in relation to him; she is not an individual but an idea of womanhood. Similar to the birds that Tess tries to find pleasure in when she arrives at Talbothays, Angel places meaning onto Tess:

She was no longer the milkmaid, but a visionary essence of woman—a whole sex condensed into one typical form. He called her Artemis, Demeter, and other fanciful names half teasingly, which she did not like because she did not understand them.

‘Call me Tess,’ she would say askance; and he did. (146)

Angel compares Tess to virginal figures in Western culture, which Tess dislikes, not only because she does not “understand” what their names mean but also because they are not her own name. Angel prescribes stories to Tess that she does not know and therefore cannot mean, and he never asks her to say who she is. Instead, he sees her as a ideal female character from his own patriarchal literature, forming a mental picture of her solely out of his own impressions without her approval or consent, even during the “non-human hours” when Hardy intertextually assimilates Tess with her landscape:

…the summer fog was more general, and the meadows lay like a white sea, out of which the scattered trees rose like dangerous rocks. Birds would soar through it into the upper radiance, and hang on the wing sunning themselves, or alight on the wet rails

101 Tess’s insistence that Angel call her by her own name mirrors Jane’s frustration with Rochester for giving her fantastical epithets in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester, like Angel, falls into patriarchal metaphors to shape Jane as a character in his own story—his savior, his angel, his Janet, his little bird—rather than as simply Jane, a human woman.
subdividing the mead, which now shone like glass rods. Minute diamonds of moisture from the mist hung, too, upon Tess’s eyelashes, and drops upon her hair, like seed pearls. When the day grew quite strong and commonplace these dried off her; moreover, Tess then lost her strange and ethereal beauty; her teeth, lips, and eyes scintillated in the sunbeams and she was again the dazzlingly fair dairymaid only, who had to hold her own against the other women of the world. (146-147)

Just as Tess becomes part of the garden while listening to Angel’s harp, she joins the “meadows” and the “birds” as they transform into a seascape, her eyelashes covered with them in the wetness of the mist. Though this image of Tess, the birds, and the landscape together is what differentiates her from other women, Angel continues to envision her through feminine identifiers that she does not and would not use to identify herself. Angel sees Tess only as a figment in his own story, written for him in the literature he has read his whole life, while Hardy argues that Clare has every opportunity to read Tess as she truly is. Tess tells her own story through nonverbal interactions with nature, but Clare, ever egotistical in his evaluations of women, remains deaf to the cues Hardy emphasizes in his descriptions of Tess.

Still, Tess soon learns that even if she tries to tell Angel her story in his language, he will not understand her meaning. After their relationship begins to blossom, Dairyman Crick recounts the episode of Jack Dollop, a “'hore’s bird” who previously worked for him as a milker (149). Dollop, who, in Crick’s words, “courted a young woman over at Mellstock, and deceived her as he had deceived many afore,” becomes an object of amusement to the workers because, to avoid

102 During these “non-human hours,” Hardy also notes that Angel and Tess “could get quite close to the waterfowl. Herons came, with a great bold noise as of opening doors and shutters, out of the boughs of a plantation which they frequented at the side of the mead; or, if already on the spot, hardly maintained their standing in the water as the pair walked by, watching them by moving their heads round in a slow, horizontal, passionless wheel, like the turn of puppets by clockwork” (146). Once again, the appearance of the herons demonstrates the shadow of Tess’s past with Alec d’Urberville following her through every interaction she has with men.

103 “'Whore’s bird,” according to the Oxford English Dictionary, refers to “properly, the child of a whore, a bastard; but usually as a mere vulgar term of abuse or reprobation.”
the wrath of the young woman’s mother, Dollop hid in the very butter churn they stand over.

Only Tess hears the sadness in the story, which sounds far too similar to her own, over the “revolving churn” of the butter. When she looks “pale” at Crick’s tale, no one asks her what is wrong; instead, Crick, calling her a maiden “with unconscious irony,” presumes that, because she is a pretty and delicate young woman, she simply feels faint from the heat. Tess reflects on this moment later that evening:

> She was wretched—O so wretched—at the perception that to her companions the dairyman’s story had been rather a humorous narration than otherwise; none of them but herself seemed to see the sorrow of it; to a certainty, not one knew how cruelly it touched the tender place in her experience. The evening sun was now ugly to her, like a great inflamed wound in the sky. Only a solitary cracked-voice reed-sparrow greeted her from the bushes by the river, in a sad, machine-made tone, resembling that of a past friend whose friendship she had outworn. (150)

In Tess’s eyes, nature no longer appears as patriarchal language typically describes it. Instead of looking like a “beaming, mild-eyed, God-like creature” (99) as Hardy’s narrator describes earlier in the novel, the sun looks like “a great inflamed wound” to Tess, similar to the “tender place” in her “experience.” No longer pleasant or joyous, Tess hears something “machine-made” in a bird’s song, much like the sound of the revolving butter churn. Her images do not coincide with traditional poetics because her story cannot be told in patriarchal society. Only the “reed-sparrow” seems to understand Tess. To her, though, the bird sounds sad, old-fashioned, and mechanical, just as Tess’s ancient story sounds to a world that has heard it so many times before that it resonates only as a joke. Destined to be a New Woman, Tess should have “outworn” this story. Instead, she is trapped in it like so many country girls, caged like the finches at Trantridge in a story that does not seem to be their own. Unable to understand what birds mean when they chirp, Tess hears the sparrow as members of her society hear her: in the background, aligned
only with the emotions they harbor in their own souls. Even her beloved Angel is so certain that he knows Tess’s story that, when he does let her speak, he does not hear her:

“But my history! I want you to know it—you must let me tell—you will not like me so well.”

“Tell it if you wish, dearest. This precious history then. Yes, I was born at so and so, Anno Domini—”

“I was born at Marlott,” she said, catching at his words as help, lightly as they were spoken. “And I grew up there. And I was in the sixth standard when I left school, and they said I had great aptness, and should make a good teacher, so it was settled that I should be one. But there was trouble in my family: father was not very industrious, and he drank a little.”

“Yes—yes. Poor child! Nothing new.” (206)

“Precious history,” “poor child,” “nothing new.” Angel has already decided that Tess’s history means what he imagines it means. He refuses to see it as tragic, does not notice the stakes she sets by telling of her intentions to become a teacher, and even makes fun of her as the dairy workers made fun of Jack Dollop’s lover. It is no wonder that Tess loses “courage” at the last minute and lets him cut her off (207). She unconsciously knows that, no matter how she tells her story, Angel will not understand it the way she does.

Angel’s arrogance forces Tess to fail in telling her story so many times that it almost feels comical. He misreads Tess’s narrative, misinterprets her emotions, misses her letter, and, in her last attempt to tell him her “faults and blunders,” dismisses her. The moment they leave the church man and wife, Tess feels that she has made a terrible mistake in marrying Angel without telling him the truth, and the world around her seems to reflect that mistake. When Tess seems “oppressed” by the sound of their coach, Angel nonchalantly mentions “the legend of the d’Urberville coach,” which supposedly appears to ancestors of a d’Urberville who committed a
“dreadful crime” in a coach (232). At Talbothays, Tess finds that she is unable to pray to God because she has idolized Angel, which she feels is “ill-omened” (233). Right before she and Angel leave, Tess identifies one more sign:

…there was a moment of silence before they had moved off. It was interrupted by the crowing of a cock. The white one with the rose comb had come and settled on the palings in front of the house, within a few yards of them, and his notes thrilled their ears through, dwindling away like echoes down a valley of rocks.

“Oh?” said Mrs Crick. “An afternoon crow!”

Two men were standing by the yard gate, holding it open.

“That’s bad,” one murmured to the other, not thinking that the words could be heard by the group at the door-wicket.

The cock crew again—straight towards Clare.

“Well!” said the dairyman.

“I don’t like to hear him!” said Tess to her husband. “Tell the man to drive on. Goodbye, goodbye!”

The cock crew again. (234)

The sound of the crowing cock distresses all the members of the lower class— the “two men,” the Cricks, and Tess—because, as Ruth Firor explains, “cockcrow at an unusual time is almost universally held ominous…a traveler in Wessex a quarter of a century ago heard an old woman exclaim against the cock who crowed after twelve o’clock noon, on the grounds that this meant that her man John was ill again.”104 This last sign, which feels real to Tess because others notice and worry about it, provides proof to her that she has done a wrong, and that the natural world around her knows it.

Some might argue that Hardy, who uses his fascination with paganism and English country folklore throughout *Tess*, meant for the cock’s crow to be a legitimate sign. Nonetheless, anyone who has read his poem, “The Darkling Thrush,” where Hardy describes a thrush on New Years Eve in 1900, knows that he is skeptical about finding human meaning in bird calls:

So little cause for carolings  
Of such ecstatic sound  
Was written on terrestrial things  
Afar or nigh around,  
That I could think there trembled through  
His happy good-night air  
Some blessed Hope, whereof he knew  
And I was unaware.  

In “The Darkling Thrush,” Hardy alludes to early nineteenth-century poems like Keats’s “Ode to a Nightingale” (1819) or Shelley’s “To a Skylark” (1820), where speakers listen to birdsongs and have intense experiences with the natural world. But Hardy’s speaker listens on the eve of a new century; Romantic poetry, which focused on idealizing nature, has long died away with the scientific realizations of the Victorian era. Unlike Shelley’s and Keats’s speakers, who interpret the songs of the skylark and nightingale, Hardy’s speaker fails to perceive why the thrush sings so joyfully when he himself is “fevourless.” Hardy’s speaker ends on a note of “unawareness” because he only understands nature when it seems to reflect his inner thoughts and emotions. Of course the thrush does not notice a “blessed hope” that the speaker cannot see. It is a thrush, chirping and singing as thrushes instinctively do. Similarly, the “crowing” cock at Talbothays in *Tess* isn’t conscious of the human conflicts occurring around it; it is only the humans who prescribe an ominous meaning to the cock’s crow. In believing in this superstition, Tess takes

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away the wrong fear from this incident. She later determines that it is safe to tell Angel about her past because Jonathan Kail, one of Crick’s workers who brings the couple their baggage, determines that the crowing cock was warning of Retty Priddle’s suicide attempt (240). When Angel shortly after tells Tess of his sexual history, Tess feels certain that her worries were misplaced because his story is “just the same” as hers (243). But, as Hardy actually reveals in the cock’s crow, a woman’s story does not sound like a man’s in patriarchal language. It sounds like the men who dominate it want it to sound.

One of the more blatantly symbolic moments in Tess happens in “The Woman Pays” when Tess, abandoned by Angel, twists the necks of “several pheasants” that had been shot and left to die in the woods of a plantation (298). Hardy’s parallel here is so obvious that it is almost laughable. Just like the birds, Tess is violated for the sake of male pleasure and continues to needlessly suffer until she too is put out of her misery. Within its context, though, the pheasant scene is much more complicated than it might initially appear. Tess comes across these birds when she travels “upland” to meet her fellow dairymaid Marian for employment. Before she meets the creatures, Hardy describes his heroine’s changed appearance:

With the shortening of the days all hope of obtaining her husband's forgiveness began to leave her; and there was something of the habitude of the wild animal in the unreflecting instinct with which she rambled on—disconnecting herself by littles from her eventful past at every step, obliterating her identity, giving no thought to accidents or contingencies which might make a quick discovery of her whereabouts by others of importance to her own happiness, if not to theirs. (295)

Tess’s transformation into a “wild animal” commences when she actively begins to “disconnect” from her past and “obliterate” her concept of self. Without hope that the human system of
matrimony will ever work in her favor, Tess divorces herself more and more from her story while she “rambles” on, becoming increasingly silent and physical as the novel reaches its climax. As she moves away from the human and towards the animal, Hardy places Tess alongside two species of birds: the pheasants, with which she deliberately interacts, and, only pages later, a pair of “strange…nameless” birds from the polar regions that Tess barely notices (307). In Tess’s juxtaposed interactions with birds, Hardy considers the question of voicelessness and power, exploring whether silence is employed naturally by animals or deliberately by humans, forces submission or allows for defiance in a patriarchal society.

Hardy first examines silence as a passive action that allows creatures to be caged. Tess’s encounter with the pheasants only occurs because she meets a face on the road to Flintcomb-Ash. This man recognizes her as Alec d’Urberville’s “friend” from Trantridge, and Tess recognizes him as the man Angel punches for calling Tess a slur. The man taunts Tess again, but,

…no answer came from Tess. There seemed only one escape for her hunted soul. She suddenly took to her heels with the speed of the wind, and, without looking behind her, ran along the road till she came to a gate which opened directly into a plantation. Into this she plunged, and did not pause till she was deep enough in its shade to be safe against any possibility of discovery. (296)

Though the man only alludes to her experience with Alec d’Urberville, Tess feels that, while her body is hunted by men, her “soul” is “hunted” by her past. Like a spooked animal, Tess reacts instinctually and runs away “with the speed of the wind,” almost as if she were in flight (309). Hardy describes Tess entering “a gate” and “plunging” into the woods of a plantation for protection. Once she determines that she is safe from the man, she builds “a sort of nest” to lie in for the night. But Tess finds that she cannot sleep:
Was there another such a wretched being as she in the world, Tess asked herself; and, thinking of her wasted life, said, “All is vanity.” She repeated the words mechanically, till she reflected that this was a most inadequate thought for modern days. Solomon had thought as far as that more than two thousand years ago; she herself, though not in the van of thinkers, had got much further. If all were only vanity, who would mind it? All was, alas, worse than vanity—indeed, punishment, exaction, death. The wife of Angel Clare put her hand to her brow, and felt its curve, and the edges of her eye-sockets perceptible under the soft skin, and thought as she did so that a time would come when that bone would be bare. “I wish it were now,” she said. (296-297)

With each physical movement, Tess becomes more like the birds she witnessed earlier in the novel. She is hunted; she cannot speak, so she flies; she enters a gate, which keeps her from men but cages her in an artificial landscape; she makes a nest for a bed because she is safe nowhere else; she says the same phrase in a “mechanical” voice, mirroring the “cracked-voice reed-sparrow” at Talbothays that sang “in a sad, machine-made tone” (150). Though Tess speaks a quote from Ecclesiastes 1, “Vanity of vanities,” says the Preacher; “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” (1.2), Hardy’s narrator notes that Tess pushes back on this centuries-old proverb and criticizes it. He explains that Tess is not in the “van of thinkers,” which emphasizes the “vanity” of these thinkers, to argue that Tess lacks not a sophisticated mind but vanity. Unlike Angel Clare or Alec d’Urberville, Tess is neither inherently conceited nor does she believe that everything is useless. Rather, she has come to understand that everything is purposeful, and that the vanity of men has led to her own unjust suffering. But, rather than voice this realization to the empty forest, Tess repeats the phrase she has been taught in the male vernacular and touches her hyper-sexualized flesh, wishing for death. She cannot speak her own thoughts because she is trapped in a world that will not hear them and a novel that deliberately omits them. Even when she is alone and physically safe from male violence, Tess is unable escape the prison of her
gendered body, which will always keep her voice suppressed and submerged like a bird in a cage.

While Tess’s wretched position partially keeps her from sleeping, she also hears “strange sounds” in the night that she has difficulty labelling. At first, she thinks she is hearing the wind, but, as the sounds are inconsistent and followed by the “fall of a heavy body upon the ground,” she decides that they must come from “wild creatures.” At dawn, she sees the truth of what she had heard: “Under the trees several pheasants lay about, their rich plumage dabbled with blood; some were dead, some feebly twitching a wing, some staring up at the sky, some pulsating quickly, some contorted, some stretched out—all of them writhing in agony” (297). Tess immediately guesses “the meaning of this,” both factually and metaphorically. She knows that the dying birds had “escaped and hidden themselves away” after they were used by a shooting party. She also knows in her soul that these “deaths” are a physical representation of the thoughts she had turned over in her head during the night. “Brought into being” artificially, these birds exist only to die for the enjoyment and pleasure of men—men whom Tess as a girl had been told were not “rough and brutal…like this all the year round…save during certain weeks of autumn or winter when…they run amuck, and made it their purpose to destroy life” (297-298). The pheasants embody Tess’s realization that, though for men all might be vanity, for the “weaker fellows in nature’s teeming family,” all is cruelty and harm as effect of that vanity (298). Tess’s and the pheasants’ passivity, which the system of language enforces, produces them as objects unworthy of human kindness. Only in death can these beings be freed from the cage that is their nonmale and nonhuman bodies.

106 Alec d’Urberville chases Tess in the summer and early autumn, so Tess knows that this saying about male violence is a lie.
When she twists the necks of her “kindred sufferers,” Tess does for the pheasants what she wishes someone would do for her: she “put[s] the still living birds out of their torture” before the “game-keepers” can come “look for them a second time.” Hardy does not grant Tess the same fate because, despite her best efforts, Alec d’Urberville does find her again. Tess partially enacts this fate when she differentiates herself from the pheasants for the first time:

“Poor darlings—to suppose myself the most miserable being on earth in the sight o’ such misery as yours!” she exclaimed, her tears running down as she killed the birds tenderly. “And not a twinge of bodily pain about me! I be not mangled, and I be not bleeding, and I have two hands to feed and clothe me.” She was ashamed of herself for her gloom of the night, based on nothing more tangible than a sense of condemnation under an arbitrary law of society which had no foundation in Nature. (298)

Tess may not currently experience bodily pain, but she is wrong in distinguishing the pheasants’ misery from her own. They were all “condemned” by a human law; they are equally voiceless; and they die under the same circumstances, as Tess is later hanged and dies from a twisted neck.

But Tess’s “two hands” that feed and clothe her also make her human. The pheasants are her “other,” not an extension of herself; she cannot decide what they do or do not feel or what they would or would not want. In killing the birds, Tess works outside the laws of nature to please her own vanity. Her human power echoes the masculine power that patronizes her, determines her meaning, and kills her for her “crimes.” By using her own hands to decide the feelings and fates of other creatures, Tess leads herself into further misery at the hands of men, who wrongfully determine what her body and soul wants.

As Tess becomes increasingly distant and non-communicative, Hardy culminates his bird interactions in Tess with a pair of creatures that actively resist comprehension. Immediately after Tess kills the pheasants, she begins to work on the harsh land of Flintcomb-Ash with Marian,
who has taken to drink. She tells Tess, “’Tis my only comfort…You see I lost him: you didn’t: and you can do without it perhaps.” Tess thinks “her loss as great as Marian’s,” but she does not say anything and instead accepts “Marian’s differentiation” (306). Tess decides against telling Marian what really happened between her and Angel, deliberately concealing her story from a woman who would perhaps understand her. For the first time, Tess embraces obscurity and resists explanation. Hardy emphasizes this sudden shift when Tess continues to conceal her emotions and opinions. She remains “severely obtuse” while Marian “shrieks with laughter” on the field, and when Marian discusses inviting Izz Huett and Retty Priddle to join them upland, “Tess had nothing to say against the proposal” (306). Hardy allegorizes Tess’s silence when he describes two migratory birds that come to the uplands with the changing weather:

After this season of congealed dampness came a spell of dry frost, when strange birds from behind the North Pole began to arrive silently on the upland of Flintcomb-Ash; gaunt spectral creatures with tragical eyes—eyes which had witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions of a magnitude such as no human being had ever conceived, in curdling temperatures that no man could endure; which had beheld the crash of icebergs and the slide of snow-hills by the shooting light of the Aurora; been half blinded by the whirl of colossal storms and terraqueous distortions; and retained the expression of feature that such scenes had engendered. (307)

Hardy made these birds so obscure that, when an avid ornithologist wrote to him in 1926 expressing “scepticism as to the ‘strange birds from behind the North Pole referred to in Tess,’” Hardy refused to give him an answer. His secretary responded to the inquiry for Hardy: “Mr Hardy…cannot remember to what birds he referred in the passage you quote from Tess or that he referred to any special ones. Strange birds do undoubtedly appear on the uplands of Dorset in

107 Hardy may be alluding to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) in his descriptions of these birds, as Captain Walton and his crew find a frozen Victor Frankenstein in pursuit of the Creature on their voyage to the North Pole. Though Frankenstein asks early in his narrative, “Who shall conceive the horrors of my secret toil as I dabbled among the unhallowed damp of the grave or tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay?” (48-49), but, unlike Hardy’s birds, he tells his story anyway.
winter time, as on other uplands, & they might be identified by watching for them through a
glass in cold weather.”¹⁰⁸ Hardy’s sarcastic reply reveals his intent of ambiguity. For the first
time in the novel, Hardy’s specific birds are without species; they are not pheasants or herons or
sparrows or finches or chickens but simply “strange” and “nameless.” Rather than define the
birds themselves, Hardy’s narrator focuses on the “horrors” that these creatures have witnessed,
overemphasizing the intensity of these scenes with dramatic adjectives like “cataclysmal,”
“curdling,” “colossal,” and “terraqueous.” Humans, though, will never hear about these
“inaccessible polar regions” because the birds will never talk of them:

These nameless birds came quite near to Tess and Marian, but of all they had seen which
humanity would never see, they brought no account. The traveller’s ambition to tell was
not theirs, and, with dumb impassivity, they dismissed experiences which they did not
value for the immediate incidents of this homely upland—the trivial movements of the
two girls in disturbing the clods with their hackers so as to uncover something or other
that these visitants relished as food. (307)

Though the “nameless” birds cannot actually speak, Hardy’s narrator acts as if their “dumb
impassivity” near the two women is a deliberate action. He jokingly notes that they have no
“traveller’s ambition” to tell their story; they dismiss their own “experiences” of the past, which
have no impact on their lives in the uplands of Flintcomb-Ash. The birds are not aware of any
narrative prescribed to them, and they do not care about the emotions or omens that humans like
Marian perceive in their arrival down south (308). Through their silence, the birds resist
subjectivity, becoming only what their actions say they are: hungry animals desiring food to
survive.

¹⁰⁸ Hardy, The Letters of Thomas Hardy: Volume Seven, 1926-1927, edited by Richard Little Purdy and
From meeting the pheasants to seeing these “gaunt spectral creatures,” Tess shifts in her approach to interacting with birds and, in turn, engaging with her past (307). When Marian mentions the birds days later, Tess does not comment on them at all, and, simultaneously, she “severely” rebukes Marian for mentioning Angel and Tess’s beauty in the same breath. Tess leaves things unsaid, both about the birds and about herself. She does not want to hear others tell her story, and, when people question her, she defaults more and more to silence. Tess’s impassivity intensifies as she fortuitously confronts figures from her history. When she realizes that her employer Farmer Groby is none other than the man she met on the way to Flintcomb-Ash, she acts differently with him than she did before:

“So you be the young woman who took my civility in such ill part? Be drowned if I didn’t think you might be as soon as I heard of your being hired! Well, you thought you had got the better of me the first time at the inn with your fancy-man, and the second time on the road, when you bolted; but now I think I’ve got the better you.” He concluded with a hard laugh.

Tess, between the Amazons and the farmer, like a bird caught in a clap-net, returned no answer, continuing to pull the straw. She could read character sufficiently well to know by this time that she had nothing to fear from her employer’s gallantry; it was rather the tyranny induced by his mortification at Clare’s treatment of him. Upon the whole she preferred that sentiment in man and felt brave enough to endure it. (310)

“Like a bird caught in a clap-net” seems to refer to Tess’s position, as she is “between the Amazons and the farmer,” but the phrase actually qualifies she “returned no answer,” the same phrase Hardy uses when Groby spooks Tess on the road. Tess’s action does not change, but her intentions behind that action do. Tess no longer gives “no answer” out of fear (296); she remains silent as an act of defiance. Her refusal to speak mirrors the indifference of the strange winter birds. It is also explicitly “like” a bird in “a clap-net” because many adult birds, particularly birds made famous in British poetry, often refuse to sing in cages. Hardy would have already known
this phenomenon from pre-Victorian naturalists like Charlotte Brontë’s beloved Thomas Bewick, who noted on nightingales that “it is with great difficulty that old birds are induced to sing after being taken.”

Darwin even commented on the great variation in song he noticed between different breeds of pigeons and fowls that live in captivity: “The voice differs much in certain fowls and pigeons. Some breeds are clamorous and others silent…”

Even when they do sing, caged birds often need to be taught, which is exactly why Mrs. Stoke d’Urberville hires Tess in the first place: to whistle airs to her finches. In a moment where she is urged to speak, Tess declines the opportunity, an act that allows her to defy any attempts to define her. Though Tess might be trapped in the consequences of her history, she subverts her caged position by refusing to engage in the patriarchal discourse surrounding her narrative.

As his novel draws to a close, Hardy fashions a new connotation of birdlikeness that makes a woman “like a bird” when she rejects her own subjectivity. Tess transforms into a bird when she openly acknowledges that she is the victim, not the victimizer, in her own story. When Alec d’Urberville discovers Tess again and relentlessly pursues her at Flintcomb-Ash, Tess repeatedly tries to stay silent in front of him, but she continues to fall into her old justifications for her experiences. It is only when Alec attempts to touch Tess that she reacts instinctively and slaps him violently across the face:

“Now punish me!” she said, turning up her eyes to him with the hopeless defiance of the sparrow’s gaze before its captor twists its neck. “Whip me, crush me; you need not mind those people under the rick. I shall not cry out. Once a victim, always a victim: that’s the law.” (351-352)

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Tess speaks her truth for the first and last time in the novel. She tells Alec, and the readers, that the “law” has transformed her into a victim of patriarchal structures. All along, it was she, not the “sparrow,” who sang “in a sad, machine-made tone” at Talbothays (150). It was she who wanted her neck twisted in the forest when she twisted the necks of the pheasants. But while her voice speaks her desire to die, her “gaze” shows her “hopeless defiance” of this narrative. She is “like a sparrow” when she responds in an animalistic fashion to Alec’s advances. By fighting back with her body, Tess becomes comparable to the animal male writers have depicted women as for centuries. Poetry has rendered her a creature, and so she becomes one. Tess loses her humanity so much that she commits the greatest act of physical violence against the man who subjected her to mistreatment in the first place. In a lodging house named for a bird that connotes masculine power, Hardy’s heroine destroys the power of patriarchal metaphors by truly acting like the nonhuman beings beyond mankind’s control that men imagined her to be.

When Angel chooses to love and protect Tess despite the fact that she murdered Alec d’Urberville, he ceases to interpret her meaning, allowing her to exist simply as she is. But Tess’s freedom from the narratives prescribed to her cannot last because the law itself holds her, as a woman, to a set of rules written without women in mind. By the time the officers come to collect a sleeping Tess from Stonehenge, her animalistic actions have transformed her into something physically inhuman: “her breathing now was quick and small, like that of a lesser creature than a woman” (418). In escaping the cage of her subjectivity through murder, Tess loses what made her human in the first place. She is no longer an individual woman living a life, but something
else entirely: an animal, a symbol, or, as Angel initially determines her, an actual “visionary essence of woman” (146). She has lost her ability to have her own narrative.

Hardy’s conclusion for Tess is hardly satisfactory, but it isn’t supposed to be. Tess is Hardy’s attempt to show what happens when a woman who is victimized in a patriarchal society tries to tell her story in a language that also oppresses her. Hardy’s omission of Tess’s complete version of the story presents his readers with the conclusion that, even when we think we are reading a woman’s narrative, we are missing her interpretation. Her version cannot be translated into patriarchal language for fear of being incorrectly labelled or misunderstood. As evident by the observations I have made on Hardy’s novel, Tess herself does not understand this reality. She repeatedly tries to speak, but her story goes unheard or misread until she has nothing left but her instincts—her natural, animal instincts. Her oppressive language pigeonholes her into becoming something other than human, the only thing she insists she is.

Hardy’s singular criticism of Tess is that she regularly engages in the type of patriarchal discourse that invalidates her meaning. One of the few moments where Hardy reprimands his heroine is when she interprets her surroundings during her evening walks in Marlott. As she strolls, “her whimsical fancy would intensify natural processes around her till they seemed a part of her own story. Rather they became a part of it; for the world is only a psychological phenomenon, and what they seemed they were” (97). Tess’s imagination takes up pieces of nature so they “become,” rather than “seem,” part of her story. For humans, Hardy explains, nature is but an impression of their own senses and desires. In placing meaning onto a scene, it “becomes” real to the viewer, but it also loses the essence of what it actually is when it is not, as Shakespeare would say, “apprehended and comprehended.” Nature is a part of Tess’s story as
long as she wants it to be, but she does not really understand it; she only conceives it in relation
to her own “whimsical fancies.” In Tess’s case, this differentiation proves especially problematic
because she believes her “ruined” presence ruins nature. She thinks that “midnight airs and
gusts” are “formulae of bitter reproach” against her; she supposes that a “wet day” expresses
“irremediable grief at her weakness in the mind of some vague ethical being” (97). Hardy argues
that Tess’s interpretations are far from correct:

…this encompassment of her own characterization, based on shreds of convention,
peopled by phantoms and voices antipathetic to her, was a sorry and mistaken creation of
Tess’s fancy—a cloud of moral hobgoblins by which she was terrified without reason. It
was they that were out of harmony with the actual world, not she. Walking among the
sleeping birds in the hedges, watching the skipping rabbits on a moonlit warren, or
standing under a pheasant-laden bough, she looked upon herself as a figure of Guilt
intruding into the haunts of Innocence. But all the while she was making a distinction
where there was no difference. Feeling herself in antagonism, she was quite in accord.
She had been made to break an accepted social law, but no law known to the
environment in which she fancied herself such an anomaly. (97-98)

Nature has no consciousness of Tess. Her story makes “no difference” to her environment; she is
simply existing and surviving alongside her fellow creatures. She is not impure, unnatural,
villainous, or guilty to “sleeping birds” and “pheasants” in a tree. Conventional narratives
characterize Tess with these adjectives in mind, and male “voices antipathetic to her” pen these
stories while they simultaneously oppress, delegitimize, and abuse women around them. But
nature never rhymes with their poetics. Hardy implies that patriarchal literary practices
incorrectly place nature “in accord” with conventional morality and human laws. In actuality,
Hardy insists and Darwin proves, nature does not know or care about these concepts. Though
Tess does not create these narrative practices, she perpetuates them, which Hardy believes is a
mistake. Just because women who are seen as “whores” cannot be compared to the “innocent”
and therefore feminine birds in traditional English poetics does not mean that those birds see these women as wrongdoers, or, in fact, that those birds are really innocent or feminine at all. Tess does not create the “character” that she seems to embody, but in believing this “characterization” and transposing its meaning onto the natural world around her, she perpetuates patriarchal attempts to erase her version of the story.

I would argue that Tess is most powerful in Hardy’s novel when she refuses to use these practices to interpret another woman’s story. One such moment occurs on the Sunday that Tess has promised to answer Angel’s proposal of marriage. Over breakfast, Dairyman Crick brings up the “‘hore’s bird” Jack Dollop again. Dollop has wedded a rich widow for her money, but, as Crick tells an absently-listening Angel, “then she told him that by marrying she had lost her fifty poun’ a year.” Crick’s wife blames the widow for misleading her fiancé: “Well, the silly body should have told en sooner that the ghost of her first man would trouble him” (197). In response, Crick turns to the dairymaids and asks them what they think the woman should have done.

Marian argues that, “She ought to ha’ told him just before they went to church, when he could hardly have backed out,” and Izz agrees. Retty contends, “She must have seen what he was after, and should ha’ refused him” (197). When Tess does not answer, Crick repeats his question:

“And what do you say, my dear?” asked the dairyman of Tess.

“I think she ought—to have told him the true state of things—or else refused him—I don’t know,” replied Tess, the bread-and-butter choking her. (198)

Tess first repeats what Marian, Izz, and Crick’s wife said, but then she realizes that she cannot agree with them because, like the widow, she is struggling to tell Angel about her history. She tries to concur with Retty, but Tess also finds that she cannot, because she does not want to
refuse Angel. Finally, Tess says, “I don’t know,” because she knows that she does not. She cannot know how or why this widow made the decision to marry a man without telling him her full circumstances. Tess does not know the woman’s story, and therefore, she should not judge it, because the one thing Tess does know is terrible consequences of misinterpretation:

Yes, there was the pain of it. This question of a woman telling her story—the heaviest of crosses to herself—seemed but amusement to others. It was as if people should laugh at martyrdom. (198)

When Tess refuses to participate in telling a woman’s story for her, she eludes the very discourses of man that eventually annihilate her. But Hardy follows her example when he tells Tess’s story. By withholding his heroine’s side of the narrative while refusing to pass judgement on her choices, Hardy forces his readers to listen to a birdsong that they cannot interpret. He requires them to wallow in the “unaware” and “unknown,” and, more importantly, to learn how to emphasize with the other without understanding them.
Some Thoughts on Reading a Woman’s Story:  
_A Conclusion_

I spent the last few years with a quotation rattling around in my brain. I carried it around on tote bags and pondered until it left an aching feeling in my stomach. I readily offered it up from Boston to Bath, in classrooms where it is related to the content I was learning and in ones where it definitely was not. I answered the question “Why birds?” with it, imagining a girl, not much younger than me, standing in an orchard with a fire in her heart. “I am no bird,” Jane says to Rochester, “and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.”

This thesis started over three years ago with an essay I wrote about birds and women in _Jane Eyre_. I was a first year, and I remember thinking that it was the best thing I had ever written. It was decent at most. I ended on the romantic note that “Charlotte Brontë’s feminism in _Jane Eyre_ plays on the fact that feminism cannot be achieved only by one woman alone; a community of women—bound in intellect and spirit like the Rivers sisters, the women at Lowood, and the Brontë sisters themselves— is necessary to create true equality.” Reading it now, as much as I roll my eyes at my naivety, I cannot help but mark it as the moment where I identified the question that has become the axis for my passions, the focus that has underscored nearly every literature course I have taken at Wellesley and every essay I have written as an undergraduate: if the English language and the Western literary tradition support the patriarchal idea that women are something other than human, how should we read a women’s story? That is, how do we interpret stories by or about women when they operate in a poetics that oppresses and dehumanizes them?
From Willa Cather to Lê Thị Diễm Thúy, from the town of Middlemarch to a steeplechase outside of St. Petersburg, from Jane to Tess and back again, I have probed this question, looking methodically at the figurative language that describes women and people historically othered in Western society. I wrote, yes, about birds, but also about roses, dogs, the sea, letter-writing, Christian iconography, phrenology. My well-loved books are so full of the post-its that I use to track specific imagery that I am not sure if I can read my copies again.

My question has begot even more questions, becoming more and more complicated every time I look at it. When I first read *Jane Eyre*, I found Jane powerful and believed that Charlotte Brontë was an original feminist who had figured out how to subvert patriarchal metaphors. Now, I am not so sure Brontë was writing for anyone but herself. The summer after my first year, I read *Tess of the d’Urbervilles* and was surprised to find another book that seemed to do battle with the idea that women were like birds. But the idea was everywhere, even if authors were not fighting it or noticing it at all. The birds were singing in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea*, but they were also chirping in Chaucer and Shakespeare, from Romantic poetry to Modern. The concept that women had to be either angels or animals was implied in nearly every nineteenth-century novel I read, by both men and women. I could not escape it.

Four years and thousands of pages later, I still do not have a real answer. Neither of the authors I explore in this study really conquer the image of the bird in the cage. Both Brontë and Hardy explore it, but they do not master it; despite their attempts, they do not free the woman from the birdcage. They fail to fully subvert patriarchal metaphors and form a figurative language that allows for a woman’s humanity. In her attempts to free Jane, Brontë ends up
transforming her heroine into an animal for the sake of love. She sacrifices the feminist life Jane could have led with Diana and Mary Rivers for the romance she wishes she had lived herself. Hardy shapes Tess as the ultimate victim of the narratives prescribed to women. Because men refuse to listen to her story as she tells it, Tess is forced to use her body to save herself, becoming the very animal men declare she is. But Hardy’s answer for Tess, too, suggests that silence is the best way for women to evade their own subjectivity. Though he points out the inherent hypocrisies and patriarchal ideals hidden in the English language, Hardy provides no insight into how women are supposed to speak, let alone write, their own stories in it.

The closest I have ever felt to discovering my answer was when I was studying Virginia Woolf abroad last spring. I was reading *The Waves* on a dark night in Bath, and I reached the famous scene when Rhoda, having learned of her friend Percival’s death, throws violets into the ocean. As she stands on the shore, Rhoda questions the limits of figurative language, asking herself, “‘Like’ and ‘like’ and ‘like’ — but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?”111 There it was, I remember thinking, there she is. Rhoda goes on to mock the “phrases” of Woolf’s other narrator, Bernard, who (critics often argue) represents the stereotype of the male author. She bitterly admits that she now sees the “thing” underneath the “semblance” of the thing: two rectangular shapes, one placed upon the other by the players of a “game,” to make a “perfect dwelling-place” with “very little…left outside.” One rectangle, the square, is harsh and exact; meanwhile the oblong, a rectangle with curved vertical sides, evokes slight incorrectness as defined by the rectangular form. Rhoda geometrically sees the perfect male/female binary, where the female is submissive to the male. The woman tries her best to shape

herself into him but she always fails due to her “curved” edges. Underneath the figurative, I saw, now enthralled, Rhoda finds a literal patriarchy.

I had already been tracking Rhoda, the most elusive of Woolf’s six narrators in the novel, because she repeatedly longs for an imaginary mystic space, which features, among other traditionally feminine images, a “swallow dipping her wings into dark pools.” In a novel where Bernard initiates avian imagery that oppresses Woolf’s other narrators, I felt drawn to Rhoda’s disturbing bird. I had decided that Rhoda’s otherwise feminist vision goes wrong through the swallow, which seems to symbolize Rhoda herself. Rather than triumphantly soaring in a space of its own, Rhoda’s bird nears drowning, suggesting that Rhoda’s sense of peace comes from the bird’s attempt to submerge itself in the waters of her mystic space. Even in Rhoda’s disembodied world, I had decided, she subconsciously strives to further elude the masculine figurative. She cannot cling to traditionally feminine images like her swallow because they too ensnare her in a false self, constructed by the dominant masculine voice.

Okay, I thought, if that is the case, then what will Woolf suggest a woman should do? What will Rhoda do?

Rhoda commits suicide, like Septimus Smith in Mrs. Dalloway, like Woolf would come to do herself.

I hated this answer. I hated that I could make sense of Rhoda, could understand, to some extent, why Woolf condemned Rhoda the fate she did. Woolf, more openly than any other author I studied, identifies the very conundrum I had stumbled upon. In “Professions for Women,” she admits, like me, that she has no answer:

112 Ibid, 78.
…telling the truth about my own experiences as a body, I do not think I solved. I doubt that any woman has solved it yet. The obstacles against her are still immensely powerful — and yet they are very difficult to define. Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than for a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed it will be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down to write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against. And if this is so in literature, the freest of all professions for women, how is it in the new professions which you are now for the first time entering?

Those are the questions that I should like, had I time, to ask you. And indeed, if I have laid stress upon these professional experiences of mine, it is because I believe that they are, though in different forms, yours also. Even when the path is nominally open—when there is nothing to prevent a woman from being a doctor, a lawyer, a civil servant — there are many phantoms and obstacles, as I believe, looming in her way.\textsuperscript{113}

Woolf understands that the inward woman will continue to do combat with the figurative idea of a woman even as the world becomes more open to deconstructing gender roles. Nevertheless, she does not know how this battle is won, or whether this “phantom” can or will be conquered.\textsuperscript{114} Woolf’s conclusion mirrors her open-ended resolution in \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, where she asks women “to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast.”\textsuperscript{115} Similarly, Woolf here tells professional women to choose for themselves how to beat the figurative woman, because “for the first time you are able to decide for yourselves what the answers should be.”\textsuperscript{116}


\textsuperscript{114} Maybe, as Anna Julia Cooper argues, there is no solution to this problem until there is a solution that conquers all phantoms—not just the phantoms of cisgendered women, but the phantoms of all those who are historically oppressed in Western societies.

\textsuperscript{115} Woolf, \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, 98.

\textsuperscript{116} Woolf, “Professions for Women,” 145.
Woolf’s answer for women, I believe, is to write anyway. My answer, I decide for now, somewhat reluctantly, is to read anyway.

I have learned to read carefully, to acknowledge that every image is deliberate, even if unconsciously so. When I compare something or someone to a bird, I am not doing it in a vacuum; I am either contributing to a poetic tradition or I am acknowledging that poetic tradition and trying to resist it. When an author surrounds their female characters with flower images or compares them to the moon, that author is doing the same, whether they realize it or not. My job as a feminist reader is to notice when an author employs a certain image, decide if that author is writing consciously or unconsciously of the image’s historical connotations, identify the image’s implicit or explicit meaning, and assess that meaning from what I have determined. To read a woman’s story, I have to be a self-aware reader. To read the story of someone different from me, as Hardy argues, I have to be conscious of my own biases and of the patriarchal, homophobic, transphobic, racist, ableist, and classist agendas that have historically existed in Western societies and have, therefore, influenced poetic traditions. I have to know that there is no good answer to how we are supposed to read a woman’s story, but I have to read anyway. To stop reading would contribute to the patriarchal system of silence that annihilates Tess and Rhoda before they can speak up.

Reading these stories have given me my own set of phantoms. Women, both fictional and real, haunt me. I see Tess’s tears as she breaks the necks of pheasants, caged in a narrative that she desperately tries to escape and fails. Bertha in the attic. Cathy’s ghost at the window. Rhoda throwing the violets. Sethe surprised at the idea of loving herself. Sylvia Plath and the oven. Zora
Neale Hurston’s body in an unmarked grave. Virginia Woolf under water. Countless others, vanishing before my eyes.

And yet, I have also found my idols, problematic as they are, not feminist as they may be. I see that defiant English governess who got the happy ending she wanted. Anne telling Harville about women’s feelings. Maria with the baby she always wanted. Dorothea’s white gloves. Thea Kronborg singing. Clarissa Dalloway coming down the stairs. Lily Briscoe painting. Sickly Elizabeth Barrett with her domineering father, writing love letters to a man she has never met. Recluse Emily Dickinson, devouring every piece of women’s fiction she could obtain. Maybe most of all, the woman Woolf’s narrators in *The Waves* notice as children, “the lady writing,” who, despite her brief existence in a story that does not seem to belong to her, writes anyway.117

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During the Pre-Raphaelite and Aesthetic art movements in the nineteenth-century, many artists and photographers created works that depicted women with birds and idealized the domestic sphere. Walter Deverell’s *A Pet* (1853), featured left, and David Octavius Hill’s *The Bird Cage* Two Sisters (1845), below, are just two excellent examples from the period that demonstrate this practice.


Figure 2

The Brontë children regularly recreated Bewick’s vignettes in their childhood artwork. Below is Charlotte’s copy of a Bewick vignette featuring a fisherman in a storm, and the original, from *History of British Birds, Volume II*, can be seen underneath it.


Here is an example of an entry on the Turtle Dove in Thomas Bewick’s *History of British Birds* (1797). Bewick starts each entry with a portrait of the bird, followed by its English and Latin names. He continues with a description of the bird’s physical characteristics and habits. At the end of many entries, he adds a miniature vignette that illustrates an English landscape, often featuring humans or animals. Examples of these vignettes include a picture of a tombstone jutting out of a graveyard or a man asleep in the woods. Brontë describes Jane as more intrigued by these engravings than by the text of the book itself.

Figure 4

To the right is Bewick’s vignette from his preface to *Land Birds*, which shows an empty nest wreathed with brittle ivy. I would argue that Jane reimagines this exact vignette in a drawing she creates at Lowood of “wren’s nests enclosing pearl-like eggs, wreathed about with young ivy sprays” (88).

![Figure 4](image1)


Figure 5

To the left is Bewick’s vignette from his entry on the Arctic Gull. The vignette features a cormorant on a rock in the sea. It is quite likely that Brontë used this image as inspiration for Jane’s watercoloring of a cormorant, especially since a young Brontë recreated this vignette, which can be seen below.

![Figure 5](image2)


Bibliography


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