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> does not understand. The world mocks at it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it.
>
> (in Douglas O. Linder, 'The Trials of Oscar Wilde: an Account', n.p. [Cvii]).

Wilde's declaration is a trenchant reminder that gender not only dictates roles, but it structures relations – most powerfully the love relationship. It is telling that those lines of Victorian poetry most likely to be widely known outside academic communities today derive from Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (when in Sonnet XLII she asks 'How do I love thee?' and answers, 'Let me count the ways' (in *Longman Anthology*, p. 1112 [Aii]) and from Tennyson's *In Memoriam* (when he claims that ''Tis better to have loved and lost, / Than never to have loved at all') (*In Memoriam*, p. 58 [Ai]). Beautiful and resonant as are these lines, they can hardly do justice to the range and complexity of Victorian expressions of love. In Brontë's masterpiece novel *Villette*, the heroine Lucy Snowe angrily scorns easy love, in favour of her own, 'furnace-tried by pain, stamped by constancy, consolidated by affection's pure and durable alloy, submitted by intellect to intellect's own tests, and finally wrought up, by his own process, to his own unflawed completedness, this Love that laughed at Passion, his fast frenzies and his hot and hurried extinction' (*Villette*, p. 576 [Ai]). In Dante Gabriel Rossetti's sonnet sequence, *House of Life*, the poet describes a love relationship in which 'my soul only sees thy soul its own' ('Lovesight', in *Longman Anthology*, p. 1605 [Aii]). Victorian writers turned to love as the *sine qua non* of human experience. In their world of flux, love provided – despite and because of its infinite varieties – a source of stability and certainty, an imaginative ideal to yearn for without having to turn to the past or imagine the future.

Readings

Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (1847)

Early on in *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous heroine recalls a time when she, unjustly accused of lying and commanded to leave the room, was prompted by a passion of resentment to respond: '*Speak* I must; I had been trodden on severely, and *must* turn', she writes (p. 68 [Ai]). Brontë's emphasis conveys not simply the urgency of Jane's felt emotions, but also what is arguably the novel's dominant motif and theme – the function of voice, the need for expression, the power of utterance and their connection to the idea and ideal of autonomy. Charting her heroine's journey from a troubled childhood and adolescence through her experiences as a governess to marriage – that narrative end for so many female-centred, early English novels – Brontë's novel appropriates many traits of the *Bildungsroman*, or novel of formation, and in

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doing so situates itself within a literary trajectory that includes *David Copperfield*, *The Mill on the Floss* and many other major Victorian novels. By structuring her novel around highly charged moments of silence and speech, however, Brontë enriches and complicates that genre, most especially by foregrounding for her readers not simply the societal institutions or conventions that would silence the heroine (and sometimes, by implication, women more generally) but also the ways that she silences herself, as often in acts of self-censorship as in attempts to control others. In this way, Brontë's novel probes the very complicated relationship between psychological and social dimensions of identity.

Brontë's interest in using speech to grapple with more fundamental issues of self-control is evident early on in the novel, as when Jane records a scarcely voluntary demand made of her evil Aunt Reed and then explains, 'I say scarcely voluntary, for it seemed as if my tongue pronounced words without my will consenting to their utterance: something spoke out of me over which I had no control' (p. 60). Commanded to be silent in the opening episode of the novel, and punished when she is not, Jane uses her narrative as a form of resistance and rebellion against strictures of suppression. If in the early stages of her relationship with Rochester, Jane's refusals to speak on demand reflect her reticence and unwillingness to submit to his authority, by the time she ponders leaving Thornfield she is deeply troubled by the prospect that she will lose the opportunity for conversation: 'I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence, with what I delight in – with an original, a vigorous, an expanded mind', she tells him, (p. 281). At one of the narrative's most climactic moments, when Jane lies at death's door, she tries 'to wait His will in silence', and remembers, 'These words I not only thought, but uttered; and thrusting back all my misery into my heart, I made an effort to compel it to remain there – dumb and still' (p. 362).

In so deliberately emphasising her heroine's need both to have and to control powers of utterance, Brontë makes more resonant the implications and reliability of Jane's first-person narration. The reader of *Jane Eyre* is, as the critic Garrett Stewart has written, 'conscripted' into a relationship with the narrator that necessarily complicates interpretation of her relationship with others in her life. If the novel's most famous moment of direct address is when Jane states, 'Reader, I married him', many of her other addresses to the reader open up more complicated understanding of the reader/narrator/author relationship, as when she defensively writes, 'And reader, do you think I feared him in his blind ferocity? – if you do, you little know me' (p. 456).

Brontë's story undoubtedly reverberated for many of the readers who first encountered it in 1847 and thereafter – perhaps especially for her fellow women writers, many of whom documented their own struggles to develop their authorial voices, to go public with their ideas and opinions. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have influentially posited *Jane Eyre* as the foundational text for understanding the influence of patriarchal literary standards on