

Souvenirs of Sadism: Mahogany Furniture, Deforestation, and Slavery in *Jane Eyre*

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“The form of wood, for instance, is altered, by making a table out of it. Yet, for all that, the table continues to be that common, everyday thing, wood. But, so soon as it steps forth as a commodity, it is changed into something transcendent. It not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, relation to all other commodities, it stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than “table-turning” ever was.”

– KARL MARX, *Capital*, vol. 1

“Thinking guides and sustains every gesture of the hand. . . . We chose the cabinetmaker’s craft as our example, assuming it would not occur to anybody that this choice indicated any expectation that the state of our planet could in the foreseeable future, or indeed ever, be changed back into a rustic idyll. The cabinetmaker’s craft was proposed as an example of our thinking because the common usage of the word “craft” is restricted to human activities of that sort. However—it was specifically noted that what maintains and sustains even this handicraft is not the mere manipulation of tools, but the relatedness to wood. But where in the manipulations of the industrial worker is there any relatedness to such things as the shapes slumbering within wood?”

–MARTIN HEIDEGGER, “WHAT IS CALLED THINKING”

“From today’s perspective, the subject of timber may seem a bit obscure, but to generations past it was exceedingly mundane. No contemporary resource can match timber’s preeminent ranking in the pre-industrial world. Timber was not only the steel, aluminum, plastic and fiberglass of past ages, but oil, coal, and gas as well. . . . From the cradle to the coffin, the largest percentage of all past material culture has been wooden.”

–Mills and Boon, *Fruitless Trees: Portuguese Conservation and Brazil’s Colonial Timber*

I. Furniture

Jane Eyre has been widely discussed as a text of empire; it has less often been commented on as a work about interior decoration. Yet this is a novel that is flush with the details of furniture and drapery; in particular, Charlotte Brontë seems to have been something of an aficionado of wood, and we would do well to note whose furniture is made of what. At Gateshead, the residence of the despicable Reed family, there is massive mahogany furniture. At Lowood School, the teacher's room is furnished in mahogany—undoubtedly in a plainer style and probably in a cheaper variety than that of Gateshead—but the students' dining room has long “deal tables.” Deal—planks of pine or fir—was the lowliest Victorian wood.

Indeed, mahogany and deal are two of the great class markers in Victorian fiction: mahogany, which is always being polished or burnished, represents tasteful opulence or nouveau riche groping for the trappings of bourgeois arrival; deal, which we usually find being scrubbed, can't approximate the luster of the much more expensive wood, but if it's clean it connotes honesty and employment in some form of hard work that doesn't pay well. A third kind of wood gets special mention in *Jane Eyre*: Thornfield has walnut-paneled walls, and the Rivers siblings have several pieces of walnut furniture. The “age of walnut” in English furniture history runs from 1660–1720, so that possession of walnut furniture in a novel in which empire has spawned much new richness indicates the relatively long duration of a family's gentility and lineage. The Rivers are cash poor now, but their walnut dresser suggests they've got good blood (as does Jane, their first cousin, as it miraculously turns out in this most improbably plotted of realist novels).

Jane redecorates two residences in the last third of the novel: Moor House, the home of the Rivers siblings, where she is taken in by chance (no one knows yet that they are cousins) after she leaves Thornfield upon learning that Rochester is already married, and Ferndean, to which Rochester decamps when Thornfield conveniently burns to the ground, taking Bertha Mason with it. Jane avoids refurnishing Moor House too extensively; she allows this rural cottage to retain its own history and culture in the fact of its

plain, but old and elegant, furnishings. She most aggressively tackles a few rooms that are only minimally furnished. Turning them, oddly enough, into replicas of the infamous red room at Gateshead, she fills them with the “old mahogany” furniture and crimson drapery that contributed to her terror during her imprisonment in the room where her kindly uncle died, taking all of her immediate prospects of happiness with him. She thus creates for herself a souvenir of the sadism she endured at the hands of her cousins and her Aunt Reed at Gateshead; she makes it her own. Jane also buys souvenirs of what might be described as another form of sadism: the deforestation, colonization, and implementation of plantation slavery in the two critical sources of wealth in the novel, Madeira and the Caribbean. “Old” mahogany is probably, in the early decades of the nineteenth century, furniture made in the age of mahogany, 1720–60, when this wood, and furniture made from it, was still being imported in large quantities from those islands.¹

When Jane returns to the environs of Thornfield at the end of the novel (after the famous Gothic eruption in which she “hears” Rochester calling her name), an innkeeper tells her about the fire that has burned down the house: “Thornfield Hall is quite a ruin,” he says, “it was burnt down just about harvest time. A dreadful calamity! Such an immense quantity of valuable property destroyed. Hardly any of the furniture could be saved.”² It is worth remarking that furniture is of paramount importance; it takes about five more pages for the innkeeper to mention Bertha Mason’s suicide during the fire. And at the end of the novel, the first thing we learn about Ferndean is that it “has been uninhabited and unfurnished” (455). We can only speculate about Jane’s designs on this new residence—no specific plans or purchases are mentioned—but the most important point for now is to notice the benefit of unfurnished space in this novel. Like the fictitious but still convincing “blank” spaces on the map of empire, the idea of empty space invites the exercise of habitation as a demonstration of power.³ The disposition of things in space is also a way of externalizing an internal arrangement of objects and of enacting, however unconsciously, a strict control over them.

And it is no mistake that a character like Jane—tough, practical and resilient as she is—would choose mahogany furniture.

Because mahogany, according to a handy little book called *Wood*,⁴ is termite resistant; it is not subject to dry rot; it has little tendency to warp or twist; it is hard-hearted, which is a good thing for wood, making it dense and heavy; it has a fine straight grain and it polishes up beautifully to a reddish brown hue. It also takes glue exceedingly well, an important characteristic for Victorian furniture making. The great size of mahogany logs and the strength of the wood changed furniture design in the eighteenth century: very large and yet still delicate pieces could be made; the intricate carving and fretwork, skinny legs, and wafer-thin splats, seats, and table tops that characterize much eighteenth-century mahogany furniture might be imagined as attempting to ornately reverse, in the light airy quality they produce, the literally and figuratively heavy legacy of this wood's arrival in England.

R. W. Symonds, in *English Furniture from Charles II to George II*, recounts a curious anecdote about the advent of mahogany in England; he cites *A Book of English Trades* (1823) as his source.⁵ In the late seventeenth century, one Dr. Gibbons had a brother who was a “West India captain.” This brother brought some planks of mahogany back from the Caribbean because he needed ballast on his return journey to make up for the weight of the slaves he had delivered. On his return to England, he gave the planks to his brother Dr. Gibbons, who was in the midst of building a house. Initially the builders employed by Dr. Gibbons found the wood too hard to work with, but eventually he prevailed on them to make a candle box. The beauty of the wood was so striking that he commissioned a chest of drawers, which visitors admired immensely, and from this humble start, according to Symonds, mahogany as a furniture wood began to be imported into England in large quantities.

Jane can afford to refurnish and refurbish Moor House and Ferndean because she inherits a large sum from her uncle, an agent in Madeira of a trading company owned, in another almost unbelievable coincidence of connection, by the Mason family in Jamaica. During this period, Jane's uncle, John Eyre, was probably

exporting the very popular madeira wine to the West Indies and Britain. Thornfield and Ferndean can be maintained because of the proceeds of this trading company in Madeira and because of the profits from a sugar plantation, also owned by the Mason family, in Jamaica. Curiously enough, some of the finest mahogany once came from Madeira and the Caribbean; indeed, in the Caribbean the word “madeira” meant mahogany (as well as wine) well into the nineteenth century. The world of *Jane Eyre* is decorated with the literal and figural proceeds of Atlantic trade in these two crucial locations. Both places were deforested of mahogany and planted with the cash crops that allow Jane Eyre to furnish her world with souvenirs, in the form of mahogany furniture, of the original material source of her wealth. I’m going to argue in this chapter that Jane’s purchase and placement of mahogany furniture symbolizes, naturalizes, domesticates, and internalizes the violent histories of deforestation, slavery, and the ecologically and socially devastating cultivation of cash crops in Madeira and Jamaica.

In a recent book on consumer protest in the eighteenth century, Charlotte Sussman has argued that colonial products like tea and sugar made consumers anxious because they threatened to bring home the violence that attended their production.⁶ This anxiety suggests the ways in which acts of consumption were regarded as moral choices at a moment that seems to be prior to the development of the consciousness Marx called commodity fetishism. Rather than being disavowed in the form of fetishes, the social relations of production that inhere in commodities were still all *too* present to protesting eighteenth-century consumers: an anxiety-reducing containment system for such cultural knowledge had not yet been developed. And for at least some consumers in the following century, the social relations of production also remained available to consciousness, but quite happily in many cases. The symbolic compression of violence in mahogany furniture was not a source of anxiety for a character like Jane—a poor, small, female person—but a source from which to draw consolation and a sense of power. Jane’s ability to buy this fetish means that she can avow and disavow its history, and so can we: it will hide in plain sight in the rooms of her

home and it will hide interpretively as a reality effect for the very readers of the novel who would otherwise have made this connection long ago, especially feminist and postcolonial critics who have been confined, by critical canons, to allegorical modes of reading.⁷

The ability to read fables of gender into the nineteenth-century novel, or to historicize the stories of poor governesses and creole madwomen, has revolutionized the criticism of the novel, and without it, the reading I do here would be impossible. But the intransigently allegorical mode of criticism blocks the reading of the *material* properties and relations of objects that don't give us immediate clues that will help us construct what we have come to understand as literary, rather than literal, meaning. For "the allegorist," Benjamin reminds us, "objects represent only keywords in a secret dictionary."⁸ In the secret dictionary of novel criticism—the dictionary about which initiates must prove their knowledge—objects are weak metonyms for the subjects they adorn or generic markers of the real they indicate. The method of this book, that of the collector, requires a moment of forestalling allegory and of taking things literally. My project here is to imagine, like Benjamin's collector, that "the world is present, and indeed ordered" in certain objects.⁹ That ordering is not an allegory, but a history. And it is not the history that the novel narrates, but the history that the novel secretes: the history it hides and emits, the one it conceals and produces as it calls to mind the locations of deforestation and slavery for which mahogany is a metaphor, a metonym, and a literal representation.

II. Forests

The geographical coordinates of *Jane Eyre*—Britain, Madeira, and Jamaica—allow the novel to revisit and remember the violence that inheres in the history and geography of British colonization, slavery, and trade. The first step in these processes, wherever they take place, is to clear land. If, as ecology and now ecocriticism have taught us, civilization and forests have been historically at odds with one another, empires and forests are particularly and chronically in conflict. Robert Pogue Harrison points out that "Rome . . . triumph[ed] over the great forest mass of the ancient

world. The forests were literally everywhere: Italy, Gaul, Spain, Britain, the ancient Mediterranean basin as a whole. The prohibitive density of these forests had once safeguarded the relative autonomy and diversity of the family- and city-states of antiquity, precisely because they offered a margin of cultural privacy. . . . The forests were obstacles—to conquest, hegemony, homogenization. . . . [T]hey enabled communities to develop indigenously, hence they served to localize the spirit of place.”¹⁰ Deforestation had already become a serious problem in England by the sixteenth century. Measures were being taken for conservation, and books were being written on what would come to be called sustainable forestry. In 1598, for example, John Manwood (a person obviously destined to do such scholarship) wrote *A Treatise of the Laws of the Forest*, a work that anticipates descriptions of contemporary ecology: “Before this nation was replenished with inhabitants, there were many great woods full of all sorts of wild beasts then known in England; and after the same came to be inhabited, the woods were, by degrees, destroyed, especially near the houses; and as the land increased in people, so the woods and coverts were daily destroyed, and by that means, the wild beasts retired to those woods which were left standing, and which were remote from their habitations.”¹¹ Acts for the preservation of woods were passed to “safeguard future timber supplies” even before Manwood’s work appeared.¹² The aptly named Manwood, in other words, is reflecting an environmental consciousness that is already well formed by the late sixteenth century.

Jane Eyre remembers the deforestation of England: Jane comes to understand, as a child reading *Gulliver’s Travels*, that there are no elves left in England, because they have all gone “to some savage country where the woods were wilder and thicker, and the population more scant” (53). The deforestation of England was initially the result of imperial aggression visited on Britain by Rome; it was extended by the need for firewood and building materials—especially for the ships of the Royal Navy, and by the aggression against the landscape produced by enclosure—a process that was reaching the culmination of its official, that is to say, parliamentary phase at the same time that *Jane Eyre* was being written and published.

The enclosure of common or unowned land seals the gate against one of the final vestiges of feudalism in England: “the commoning economy.” Commoners, the historian J. M. Neeson tells us, were the last of the English peasantry; enclosure made them into a working class.¹³ The “closing of the countryside”¹⁴ begets a new class that must figure out how to get its living within an economy that is unforgivingly modern *and* grossly underdeveloped, especially for women, especially in rural areas. When Jane leaves Thornfield on learning that Rochester is married, she arrives in the town of Whitcross, asks what the “chief trade” of the place is, and learns that some are “farm labourers; a good dealwork. . . at Mr. Oliver’s needle-factory, and at the foundry.” Mr. Oliver does not employ women, it turns out. Jane then asks, “[W]hat do the women do?” She gets the vague but nonetheless accurate answer for much of rural England at this time: “Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk mun get on as they can” (353).

In *Jane Eyre*, enclosure is imagined twice. First, at Lowood School, where the whole system is writ small: “The garden was a wide enclosure, surrounded with walls so high as to exclude every glimpse of prospect; a covered veranda ran down one side, and broad walks bordered a middle space divided into scores of little beds; these beds were assigned as gardens for the pupils to cultivate, and each bed had an owner” (80). Part of the making of the modern individual, a process to which *Jane Eyre* the novel and Jane Eyre the character made, and continue to make, a powerful contribution, is this kind of competitive individuation: one girl, one plot of land, one set of results accruing to each owner.

In this school and in its garden, Jane learns how to perform another kind of enclosure, the enclosure of the self. When she believes that Rochester and Blanche Ingram are going to be married, she forcefully reins herself in: “When I was once more alone, I reviewed the information I had got; I looked into my heart, examined its thoughts and feelings, and endeavored to bring back with a strict hand such as had been straying through imagination’s boundless and tractless waste, into the safe fold of common sense” (190). Subjectivity has no limits or boundaries: it is a wasteland, a