

Not Sorry Works

Hot and Bothered: On Eyre

He Wanted to Train Me (Chapters 34-35)

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[Intro music fades in]

Vanessa Zoltan [00:00:02] We are now in the “St. John is an absolute monster” chapters. Jane, now an heiress, moves back to Moore House and gets the whole house ready with Hannah for Christmas. Diana and Mary come home and the three women are so happy to be together and free from a life of teaching. St. John starts to ruin the fun immediately. He's disgruntled with Jane's interest in domestic work and says he'll give her a short while to live this way. Jane notices that St. John, quote: “he lived only to aspire—after what was good and great, certainly; but still he would never rest, nor approve of others resting round him.”

Eventually, St. John decides that Jane's time of happiness, her time of reading and studying with Mary and Diana, is up and he asks her to start studying Hindustani with him and put down the German she's been enjoying working on. He says that he needs someone to study with him so that he can practice Hindustani before he leaves on his mission to India in three month's time. But it turns out that St. John has another motivation behind this request: he wants Jane to come with him to serve as a missionary in India, and wants her to come as his wife. Jane immediately hates the idea. Here is Professor Miriam Burstein.

Miriam Burstein [00:01:37] Well, part of the complication about St. John Rivers is that his basic goal in life, to be a missionary, is something that Charlotte Brontë wholeheartedly supports. All her correspondence is very pro-missionary work. But St. John Rivers himself—he's represented as problematic. Because in some ways, he is like Brocklehurst and Rochester, in the sense that he assumes that his will is of utmost importance.

When he proposes to Jane— his quite horrible proposal to Jane - is very explicitly “it is not you, it's the missionary that is getting married, not the man.” Right? And for Jane, this is just as appalling as Mr. Rochester's proposal that she go off to Europe with him and become his mistress. Because Jane talks about realizing, well, St. John Rivers would “go through all the forms of love with me,” she says.

I sometimes tell my students that people say “No one talks about sex in Victorian fiction.” Hello? That is what Jane is talking about. That is what she is so horrified by—that he very clearly does not desire her. He will go through literally the forms of love, everything that marriage demands, without the desire and without the passion, right? And that's as much an exploitation of Jane as Mr. Rochester trying to take her off to Europe and where they would live as husband and wife without really being married.

[Background music fades in]

Vanessa [00:03:07] St. John's power over Jane is so overwhelming that even though Jane recognizes it, she cannot entirely resist it. He overwhelms her. She wants to do as he says and to please him. Jane has no problem with the idea of St. John's mission and can even imagine herself going too. But she eventually gets up the strength to say that she cannot go as his

wife. "I am ready to go to India, if I may go free," she says. St. John argues with her and argues with her. She stays firm. He says that he will give her more time to think about it and tells her, quote: "Do not forget that if you reject it [this marriage proposal], it is not me you deny, but God."

And then I die from anger and frustration and this podcast is over. I'm sorry, but 'bye forever.

In chapter 35, St. John proposes again. And then he proposes *again*. St. John is trying his evangelism while he's still on English soil, trying to convert Jane into his wife and into a woman who will always do his bidding. In between proposals one and two, St. John is cruel to Jane. He behaves as if nothing is wrong, but is cold to her and gaslights her when she tries to address the tension. Between proposals two and three, Jane and Diana have a conversation. Diana tells Jane that the idea of Jane going with St. John is, quote, "Insupportable—unnatural—out of the question!" Jane is worried that it would be a suicide mission, and Diana says that it will definitely, literally kill Jane.

In the last proposal, St. John really goes for the throat. He is trying every pious angle to try to convince Jane that she absolutely *has* to marry him until he finally says: "it is what I want. It is just what I want." Jane tells him that, quote: "were I but convinced that it is God's will I should marry you, I could vow to marry you here and now" which St. John, bless his maniacal little heart, takes as a yes. But as he hugs her, celebrating, Jane hears something: the well-remembered voice of Fairfax Rochester screaming: "Jane, Jane, Jane." Here is Katia Bowers, who we spoke to about the Gothic a few episodes ago, on Jane's hearing Rochester's voice on the wind.

[Background music fades out]

Katia Bowers [00:05:58] What you'll notice is that these moments of the supernatural, where the supernatural appears, including when Rochester's voice calls out to Jane later in the novel—they always happen around a moment of transition for Jane emotionally. So Jane will be acting out emotionally - and I say "acting out" because she's not behaving as you would expect, as society would expect a 19th-century woman in her position to necessarily behave, right? - but when she's acting out against the emotional constraints that her position has put her in. So when she's feeling for Rochester or when she has these feelings of anger that she has in that red room scene, the supernatural manifests itself. And it's explained, but it's explained by Jane. And you'll notice that she even tries to, like she has for her, that supernatural moment when Rochester's voice appears: that is not supernatural for Jane.

Vanessa [00:06:56] Jane tells us that her hearing Rochester's voice is not deception or witchcraft. It was a work of nature, and nature was roused and did no miracle but her best.

[theme music fades in]

So Jane answers to the voice on the wind: "I am coming! Wait for me!" and goes to her room to pray. I'm Vanessa Zoltan.

Lauren Sandler [00:07:22] And I'm Lauren Sandler.

Vanessa [00:07:24] And this is On Eyre from Hot and Bothered.

[theme music fades out]

Vanessa: Lauren, I don't know if you can tell, but St. John annoys me in these chapters.

Lauren [00:07:43] He's not your perfect man? (laughter)

Vanessa [00:07:46] There were two moments in reading that I actually screamed. I was like, "Oh, my God! Imagine saying that!"

Lauren [00:07:56] I know. Okay, but let's talk in terms of the "what I think we should know" part. Let's talk about one of the aspects that drives me craziest—not just about St. John, but about men who have a biblical notion of marriage that they attempt to enforce.

I want to talk about the doctrine of wifely submission, which anyone who has known me for, I don't know, the past 25 years, can tell you is a bit of an obsession of mine, one that I have written about a lot and interviewed about a lot. And so I'm going to try to be brief and let you know why I think that Brontë is railing against something that I too am railing against.

Backing up: St. John says Jane "come as my helpmeet," right, when he's saying "come as my bride." The word helpmeet comes from Genesis, in which God says to Adam, "It's not good that you're alone, dude, you need someone. And the thing I'm going to give you is this woman, and this woman is going to help you. And she's going to be suitable to you. She's going to meet your needs." And thus God created woman, in the form of the helpmeet. That notion then gets extended by Paul telling the Ephesians: "Wives, submit yourself to your husbands as you do the Lord," that husbands are the head of the family, have authority over their wives in the same way that Christ is the head of the church and has authority over Christians.

And so, I just feel this submission doctrine so directly in what St. John is telling us and what he is expecting Jane to do. And we see Jane struggling with this concept. So absolutely, this notion of "if I knew that that was right, that's what I would do"—or this notion of "that to me doesn't feel like freedom and I want to go and be free as myself and still do the work that you believe in." And I think that all of this material is part of what Brontë is railing against here and showing us, you know, Jane's resistance, even in this part of the book in which Jane is so broken down and attempting to submit so deeply. This is just the third rail for her.

Vanessa [00:10:25] Yeah. And it's why St. John says you have to come as my wife. He can pretend any which way that it's not why he wants it, but he says you can't come as my sister. And he can't articulate why. And it's because he would have no control over her as his sister. There's no reason that people in India would be able to find out that they are not actually brother and sister. They are cousins. This is something that you could easily, *easily* say. But he wants complete and utter control over her, and the only way for him to get that is through marriage. And the most telling part to me, and I know I mentioned this in my opening essay, but it just lit up in neon on the page to me this time is when he says, "but I want it," right?

Like he keeps trying all of these different arguments of, "I want you to come as my wife, because that is the only way that we can truly serve God;" "It is your mission to serve God;" "I

understand God's will, and let me tell you, this is what God wants for you." And Jane is just like: nope, nope, nope.

And then finally this "I want it" line. I think he is beating his head against the wall because he does not understand that this woman is just not giving him what he wants. And he thinks that they are essentially already married, that he essentially already has the power to tell her what to do and when. She is already in many ways behaving as his wife, following everything that he says that she should do. And at the end of the day, he's just like, I want it, and I get everything I want. And therefore— he literally mishears her! She says: "if I thought that this is what I was supposed to do, I would do it." And he's like, "Great. You said, yes."

Lauren [00:12:08] I will say—and this always surprises me when I get to the point in this chapter, when St. John starts talking about hell and his concern for Jane's soul. But I do think that St. John is a true believer. It seems until that moment to me that he's just using the Bible as a source of power. But there does seem to be some pain that he feels around the idea of Jane going to hell. They have an evening reading before prayers, and what St. John chooses is, in the most threatening way possible, to read from Revelation. Right? To read from the end of the world. This is not a subtle choice. And he, as Brontë writes, or as Jane tells us, "slowly, distinctly read, 'the fearful, the unbelieving, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone.'" And then Jane says: "Henceforward, I knew what fate St. John feared for me."

I feel like that is the moment in which Jane is telling us: he's trying to save me from hell. Or at least that's what he thinks that he's doing. And yet, she says, "a calm, subdued triumph, blent with a longing earnestness, marked his enunciation." I think that what she's trying to tell us: that it is both this entitled power play, and he also, perhaps just through his own will, has come to believe it. It's hard to know what people will convince themselves of when so much glory is on the line, when so much ambition is on the line. We've certainly seen people spin narratives of convenience for far less.

And perhaps it doesn't necessarily matter what the source of belief is for St. John at this point. He's clearly whipped him up into such a fervor that Jane must come with him, that it appears that he has convinced himself that he is her only salvation from hell, that this is her only salvation from hell. Which, of course, is the most ego-driven thing I could possibly imagine. And this is part of the savior complex, right? This is the white savior complex. This is the male savior complex. This is inherent in missionary work, whether Brontë resists that or not. And it is the thing that I think Jane resists most about St. John.

Vanessa [00:14:40] It is just interesting to me, because we have to reckon with the fact that Charlotte Brontë was pro-missionary work, right? And the idea of missionary work, as we've talked about before, is the true belief that you are saving people's souls, that you are going and telling them the word of God, which will save them, right? And I mean, there is an idea of how hell that Dante talked about, that if you were just unlucky enough to be born before Christ, you were in hell. And so, of course, missionary work—the belief that this white English society has ownership on what it means to be good and civilized and saved and all of these things, right? This white supremacist notion of savages who we have to convert to our religion or they will suffer—I mean, is just this systemized form of oppression that went well past the

time of slavery. And just like with slavery, we are still living in the repercussions of it in a very real way today.

But what's so interesting to me is that Charlotte Brontë was pro that form of missionary work, and was like, "Yes, we have to go. We have to go save the souls. People are going to suffer and go to hell." But on an interpersonal level, she hated it. She thought St. John should go and speak for God in India and go say to people in India, "Look, God wants you to take these vows and to be baptized." But she does not think that St. John has access to what God wants for her.

And that is just such an interesting you know—we talked about these political and social horizons that Charlotte Brontë could not see all the way to. And this is one, right? She intuitively understands on a personal level that one man does not actually know God's will. St. John cannot know God's will for Jane, and Charlotte Brontë understood that, but she somehow was unable to understand that means that St. John cannot possibly know God's will when it comes to the people of India. Brontë holds different standards for what Jane should have to withstand and what people in India should have to withstand from St. John

Lauren [00:16:44] Or what Bertha should have to withstand from Rochester. I mean, you're right. You're absolutely right. Our pale, smart, English girl gets to be something that is so different than the other people who need to fall prey to these men.

So St. John presses her to lay down her German and pick up Hindustani, he obligates her to study as though, you know, she's like trying to take the LSATs or pass her orgo final. I mean, the intensity of this study!

Vanessa [00:17:19] It's the bar exam!

Lauren [00:17:20] I know it's so high pressure, it's so intensive, and yet she just does it. And she says, "As for me, I daily wished more to please him; but to do so, I felt daily more and more that I must disown half my nature, stifle half my faculties, wrest my tastes from their original bent, force myself to the adoption of pursuits for which I had no natural vocation. He wanted to train me to an elevation I could never reach; it racked me hourly to aspire to the standard he uplifted."

She's just completely sacrificing herself for this requirement of his, and it's breaking her down. And reading this just now, I was thinking about why it is that St. John chooses her as this prey to groom, as this figure that seems malleable. You know, we see so much of her stubbornness and her rapport with him in a way that I feel so charmed by. And yet, at the same time, he sees her as this poor orphan. He sees her as someone with no identity, no safety beyond what she can muster for herself. And that feels like such a classic pattern, right? That this controlling figure chooses someone who can be controlled in so many ways because of trauma, because of poverty, because of lack of systemic structures to rely on. And it saddens me to watch her do it.

And then, of course, we feel Jane's yearning for belonging. We feel Jane's yearning to please, we feel Jane's incredible isolation in the circumstances that she finds herself, that she's struggling with, that she's trying to make the best of. And this is what he offers her. This is the

structure, the identity, the meaning, the purpose and the ability to feel like she's the good girl. And I think that that desire to be the good girl, to get the good grade, to be the chosen student—it's such a part of her that it feels like we can draw a line, I think, from the girl who left Gateshead to who we see in the parlor. And it scares me.

Vanessa [00:19:44] And it's just incredible how cruel he is and how, again, like how gaslight-y the cruelty is, right? Like John Reed: you could never say John Reed wasn't cruel. He would say she hit me first and lie and whatever. But objectively: he hits her, she bleeds. There isn't ambiguity. Whereas St. John kisses her goodnight and then stops kissing her goodnight; and agrees to shake her hand, but then not in the way that they have been used to shaking hands. He is managing her on such a micro level and has such an intuitive understanding, you know, in a really predatory way, of what will make her feel vulnerable. And is building her up and tearing her down and building her up and tearing her down.

And, you know, on one of our other podcast, we bless characters at the end of episodes, and I just want to bless Diana for being like, “yes, St. John a good guy, but like, get the fuck away from him. If you did what he said, you would die and you seem miserable. You are not yourself!” And I feel like that reaching out of friendship, it doesn't entirely buoy Jane - Jane responds, “Yeah well, I guess I should go talk to him” - but I do think having one person from the outside who's like, “This is not the you I know” is so important. And especially that it's someone who isn't like “St. John is a monster,” right? But it's actually someone who loves St. John and sees his goodness - I feel like is Jane's only escape hatch. I think that he would have her entirely in his palm without Diana there.

Lauren [00:21:33] Brontë sets up all of these different things that Jane has to survive, right? She has to survive Gateshead and Mrs. Reed and John. She has to survive Lowood. She has to survive Bertha in some ways. And then what Rochester does, and then her life out on the moors and then in town and then, you know - all of these different things that feel so impossible for this orphan to survive without the strength of anything else around her.

And it's so telling I think that it feels like the thing that she comes to the brink of losing herself in most fully is St. John's power over her. You know, what it means to not have that sisterhood until she gets it. That there's only so much that we can do on our own. There's only so much that we can fight on our own. To fight for our own hearts, to fight for our own inner strength—it's just too much. And, you know, especially when we are confronted by the power of people, especially, I think, men, who suggest that they know us better, who suggest that they know what is good for us, what we really need, who we should really be. The power of what it means to be made to please them and have that validation and then have that validation pulled away; the power to warm someone to you and then have them ice you out and then bring them back to you again. All of these sort of push pulls, it's such a psychological profile. And I think it's so telling that it is the thing that Brontë is telling us even Jane can't help but lose herself to this. And I agree. Like, the way out, the way to be reminded of one's own heart, is in the sort of sisterhood, is in the friendship of someone saying, “yeah, this ain't you, girl.”

Vanessa [00:23:30] And the thing I want to say is how impressive I find Jane throughout all of this. Right? He does - he picks her because she's isolated and she is groomable in the way that, you know, we know that predators still pick kids whose parents are in the middle of a

transition, who are working too hard, right? Who are vulnerable in any number of ways that have nothing to do with the strength of their character, or who they are as people. And I love that we get this inside look as to what it is like to be someone in the middle of being groomed and the force with which you still fight back. And is it so, right—there's this moment where Jane says "forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital—*this* would be unendurable." That being with St. John would kill her. She would burn inwardly, right? She would burn from the inside out.

And what I think is so amazing is, you know, we have been led to believe that Jane is this truly exceptional person. She has survived all of the things that you outlined. And yet even *she* almost falls prey to this. She happens to have Diana, and then she hears Rochester's voice, right? This *supernatural* thing plucks her from it. But I feel like this is Charlotte Brontë offering us a real moment of sisterhood, of, like: Jane almost fell for this. This is something that we can all fall for. We can all fall for a predator who's trying to manipulate us. And it is supernatural works and sisterhood that keeps Jane from it. But that's it. It's just sheer luck.

Lauren [00:25:16] I also think that even beyond the specifics of grooming and predators, what you just read just made me feel so much like: this is what we tell all girls to be. We tell *all* girls to keep their fire low. We tell *all* girls to be good and pipe down and please people. This is such a big part of social conditioning. And to have met Jane at that moment of her life in which she was resisting all the way, and then to see how we make a girl stop resisting. There's something about that that also feels like it's even bigger than the circumstances that Brontë is laying out for us here.

[transition music plays]

Vanessa [00:26:11] So Lauren, we get to this moment right at the end of our chapter reading for today, where St. John has decided that Jane has said yes to his proposal, even though she has objectively not said yes. She has used an if-then statement and that if, the conditionality, of her statement has not been met, and yet he is just like, "nah, never mind that you said yes." And he grabs her. She's being held in his arms and she hears the voice of Fairfax Rochester, calling her name. And her response is, "O God! what is it?" And she goes and starts talking to the wind, right? "I am coming! Wait for me! Oh, I will come! Where are you? Where are you?" And she listens, and the wind sighs.

And this is what she says, right - she says, "I broke from St. John, who had followed, and would have detained me. It was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers—"and all the *my*'s are in italics—"My powers were in play and in force. I told him to forbear question or remark; I desired him to leave me: I must and would be alone." And then the greatest line in the chapters: "He obeyed at once." I'm just, like, "yeah! go running!" I love it [Lauren laughs]. And she says a line that I disagree with. But she says, "Where there is energy to command well enough, obedience never fails." I do not find that to be true, but whatever.

And then she locks herself in her room, falls onto her knees and prays. And even that she says, "in my way—a different way to St. John's, but effective in its own fashion." And she gets near a mighty spirit, right? Like this prayer is transcendent. Her soul rushes out in gratitude at

his feet: "I rose...—took a resolve—and lay down, unscared, enlightened—but eager for the daylight."

So, you know, I feel like there's so many ways to read this. She's been put in this corner, and so she has almost conjured this into being, this reality of the voice. And we're going to find out more about the voice in the coming chapters. But there's something about her being trapped, that something essential about her is finally like: absolutely no. And it is a superhero moment. It's like the spider bit her and the cape is on and she is like, "I can do anything now," and St. John is gone. Like, we don't see him.

Lauren [00:28:45] I mean, I love it. But the part that I love, I love so much, it is, you know her Helen Reddy moment. I want to raise up my foam finger. There are fireworks. I am so all about it. And yet- and yet, the notion that there needs to be this sort of magical realism interruption of it, that it needs to be because she *actually* believes that she hears his voice, etc. The power's all in Jane. I just want Jane to own the power herself. These magical incursions like this, to me, deflate some of the power. And yes, maybe we can imagine that she is manifesting that voice in her own mind. But I just want it to be: her own ascendancy does not require Rochester's voice to bring her there.

And so there's this element that just frustrates me and falls short at the moment that I am cheering for her the loudest.

Vanessa [00:29:48] First of all, I'm very moved by her, "*my time, my powers.*"

Lauren [00:29:53] The best. It's the best!

Vanessa [00:29:54] But I just think that it's okay that we often get strength from one another. Like, that is what I believe in. I believe that human connection, be it through books or through friendship, is what separates us from despair. And she is about to create a situation in which she is going to be engulfed in flames from the inside. So the fact that this man who loved her completely and perfectly—and who she does not need, right? She doesn't need financially, she had the power to leave him. The fact that it is the idea that this man loves her that gives her that power. It's Diana who gives her the power earlier. It's Helen and Miss Temple who give her that power earlier. And it's within her, right? We see that she is capable, even when no one loves her at Gateshead to just exist on her own steam, but—

Lauren [00:30:45] [crosstalk] I'm okay with the love. It's the magic realism that frustrates me. It's the actual voice on the wind. The idea that she is willing to courageously resist a loveless marriage and instead decide that *her* prayer, *her* meaning, is for love, is for connection. That I think is extraordinary.

I just want it to not have to be so mystical, but that is where I tend to resist the gothic and resist supernatural romance. I want realism in my romance, and I think that that might just be a matter of taste. But I want her to feel his voice without the supernatural incursion. I want her to feel the power of love without it having to be something outside of herself that reminds her.

Vanessa [00:31:34] Yeah. And you took the words out of my mouth. I think it's taste, because I think earlier in my life, I felt the same way. And now I'm like, "these are the feelings that I have," right? I have such intense feelings.

I've talked about this before, but I really remember that feeling so strongly in middle school. I did not have a lot of friends in middle school, but I watched a lot of other people around me make really big compromises and give in to peer pressure in dangerous ways—in a way that I did not feel like I had to. And the reason for that is that I had a best friend since I was five years old, Kim, and we did not go to the same school. But I knew that when I got home there was someone who was going to ask me about my day and care and that Kim would listen to every bad thing that happened to me and validate me, right? And she and I had moments that felt like magical realism. Kim never missed a day of school. Not ever. She had a perfect attendance record. And there was one day that I was walking by a payphone in the eighth grade, and I don't know why, but I was like, I'm going to call Kim and leave her an answering machine message. I'm like, what did we call them? Voice message? just messages? And she picked up the phone and she was just too depressed to go to school that day. And for the first time since the first grade, her mom let her stay home. And that did—it felt supernatural to me, right? It was just a coincidence. But this is what it has felt like to me to experience those moments.

And so I don't mind the hyperbole in literature. This like "it felt like it was on the wind. It felt like nature came to take care of me." I'm not trying to convince you. I'm just trying to defend my taste, my poor taste in the gothic and the supernatural.

Lauren [00:33:14] But I mean, it's also funny how we consider it to be poor taste. I don't think that there's anything superior about resisting it. If anything, I feel like what is wrong with my like St. John-cold heart. [Laughing] Because then I hear you say that and I think like, right, that's really beautiful.

Vanessa: But no!

Lauren: But no—But no, I'm just a crotchety old person. What can I tell you?

Vanessa [00:33:36] Yeah, no, it's fine. Is it okay if I don't marry you and become a missionary with you?

Lauren [00:33:41] I know, but India would be so much fun together. (laughter)

Vanessa [00:33:46] (laughter) I want it!!

(laughter, sighs)

Vanessa [00:33:49] There is one last moment that I just feel like we have to give, like, a little shout out to, which is this line that often gets quoted from *Jane Eyre*, which is "I would always rather be happy than dignified." And it's one of the Etsy-art T-shirt lines that gets pulled from the novel. And it's a really beautiful sentiment. I love that Jane says in the novel. And it always just surprises me, not because people love it. Of course, you know, tattoo it, wear it on a t-shirt. It's a great idea. It just is the antithesis of how Jane lives through most of the book. She

throughout the book, again and again, chooses dignity over happiness, dignity in like a performative exterior way.

And I think that she says this about St. John. St. John sort of pulls away from her and Diana says, go after him and, you know, make amends. And Jane does. And she says, I would always rather be happy than dignified in situations like this. And I think that Jane says this *now*, after she has starved for three days and almost died and has been totally alone and has found a family and has money. So I think that it's a beautiful idea. And I just feel like it's important to remind ourselves how hard-won of an idea it is for Jane. It is not the Jane of Thornfield who says, "I would rather be happy than dignified." It is the Jane of Moor House.

And I like the right, like Jane changes and has moods and has specifics. And it is a tattoo of a line and yet not a line that I think is emblematic of Jane throughout the book.

Lauren [00:35:27] Right, and it's a process to get her there, right? Like it's every possible attempt to choose to be dignified instead of happy over and over and over. And it is interesting that it is this episode with St. John, which is the only time that she loses herself so much that the possibility of that dignity is a bridge too far.

You know, she's still fighting for dignity when she's starving. She's still fighting for dignity when she leaves her love. But it is this sort of sacrifice of herself, which is too much dignity to be worth it.

Vanessa [00:36:05] Well, Lauren, we are like circling the wagons on the end here. What are you looking forward to? We're doing chapters 36 and 37.

Lauren [00:36:14] I mean, this is the big stuff, right? This is the big crescendo. This is our grand finale here. It is not insignificant what will happen in the coming chapters. And I have all kinds of different feelings about it, so I can't wait to dig in with you. What are you looking forward to?

Vanessa [00:36:32] I mean, this is like the great Rochester-and-Jane reunion. She tells us at the end of the chapter, right? "I will go find you," it's not a spoiler to say that she goes and finds him. But we also find out what happened to Bertha in a way that is heartbreaking but truly illuminating. And so I'm excited to have that conversation with you about how we feel about how the book wraps up our conversation about Bertha.

Lauren [00:36:56] I intend to discuss it both in happiness and in dignity, Vanessa [Vanessa laughs]. It is our time. It is our time.

Vanessa [00:37:03] It's our time.

(laughter)

Lauren: It is our ascendancy!

[transition music plays]

Lauren [00:37:06] So we haven't really gotten into the role of missionary work in the expansion of empire. And of course that is such a big part of these chapters and what St. John is up to here. So we thought that it would be a good idea to call someone who could tell us a thing or two. Ideally, someone who would have written a book, say, called *The Empire of Apostles*, who was a history professor at Georgetown, Ananya Chakravarti. So let's get her on the phone.

[phone ringing]

Ananya Chakravarti [00:37:58] Hi, Lauren.

Lauren [00:37:59] Hi. Thank you for joining us.

Ananya [00:38:01] It's lovely to be here with you.

Lauren [00:38:05] So, I mean, Brontë just seems like such a defender of missionary work. And I was just hoping that you could give us a little context for that. And I know that you're a lover of this book, but do these chapters just make you feel all kinda something? [laughs]

Ananya [00:38:21] Well, it's funny that you say that, because I read this first as a teenager in Calcutta, in my hometown. And of course, growing up in Calcutta, sort of reading these Victorian novels was very much part of my upbringing. So there's the colonial hangover for you right there! Especially when I read it in that context, I don't think I was really thinking about it in terms of that imperial relationship. But now with sort of the hindsight of, you know, I'm a historian and I specifically look at religion and empire—I just see so much more in the novel in terms of the richness of that.

Lauren [00:38:59] Do you think that St. John's zeal and his passion to spread Christianity feels like a form of ideological imperialism and one that Brontë supported, one that maybe we should be thinking critically about as we read this text?

Ananya [00:39:17] I mean, any time you're thinking about missionaries and empire, you have to kinda think critically. I love the way that the whole novel actually has all the different kind of tendrils of the British Empire at this time.

In fact, the figure of St. John is probably based on the real-life missionary, Henry Martin, who Brontë actually talks about. And in his memoir or his journals when he reaches Funchal in Madeira on his journey to India, he talks about us being this totally foreign place. And he's like, "You know, I feel so alienated and I'm seeing all these people in black robes." He's describing Catholic priests and nuns! And for him, it's just as alien. And in fact, the only moment that he feels familiarity in Madeira is where he sees this really devout African woman who's sort of praying and tells himself, "maybe I'll see her in heaven." And so it's a very interesting kind of moment where, you know, what is inside and what is outside for a missionary doesn't map on to necessarily our ideas of Europe versus the West in such clean ways, right? These are all places that, you know, that have very kind of very complex relationships with.

But in terms of India itself, I mean, of course! I mean, when he - Henry Martin, the same figure - when he gets to Madras finally and he sees this whole sea of as he calls Black people, and he's impressed with how elegant they are, but he sees them as essentially servile. He says basically, "oh, these are all servants ready to serve us," you know. And he's really offended when he's going up the coast from Madras. He's making his way to Calcutta. And along the coast he sees the Jagannath Temple in Puri, which is a huge temple there, and he sees it as almost an affront. How dare this heathen religion have this big monument that can be seen by foreigners on the sea. And so there's absolutely the supremacist thing. But that is almost not that surprising, if you're a scholar of that period or if you look at religion and empire.

With religious biographies, there's almost a kind of typology built in. And now when I read *Jane Eyre*, I can almost see some of that. You know, she's so steeped in religion that in writing Jane Eyre's biography, I mean, in some ways, she's drawing on this long Christian tradition of writing a religious biography, of the creation of the Christian subject, of the process of conversion. And you see it in a way that she deals with it. But what's really interesting is that for her, the interesting thing for her is not St. John. It's Jane. I think for someone like Brontë, you don't need to go abroad to be an evangelical and you certainly don't need to go abroad for the process of conversion. There's a process of conversion is as much a self-centered process as it is converting others.

Lauren [00:42:14] Ananya I'm very curious, far beyond the scope of the novel and perhaps what Brontë could have even imagined herself—if you can give us just sort of a basic primer on the cultural impact of missionary work in India.

Ananya [00:42:29] Well, I mean, there's a larger question of like, you know, Christianity in India. Christianity in India is really old, you know. So we have Persian crosses along the coast of India from the sixth to the ninth century onwards. You have every denomination you can imagine and waves of it, right? So, I mean, from the 16th century onwards, we have a Latin Catholic community that begins through Portuguese and Catholic missionaries. And then over time, obviously, with not just the English but really before them, the Dutch and even the Danish, right? There were really important Protestant missionary works.

And so throughout the 19th century, especially evangelical missionary work has become really important. And again, it's complicated, right? So on the one hand, there was undoubtedly sort of legal and political pressure to convert that was exerted by various European regimes. So in Goa, for example, where I study, you know, there were laws passed that, if you didn't convert, it would be hard to kind of hold onto your property or, over time sort of land rent, you couldn't collect it if you hadn't converted. So there were different kinds of imperial pressures to convert.

But it's also really hard not to see that, you know, within a couple of generations you had genuinely devout Indian Christian communities. So there's that dynamic. And then again, also the fact is that missionaries, especially in the 19th century—missionary education especially was an important venue for the creation of Dalit education in India in the 19th century. So education particularly was always a very missionary-heavy enterprise. I mean, the best colleges come from whether it's in Jesuit colleges in India or, you know, later on other schools, they all have religious backgrounds, but again, really, really different.

So in terms of the kind of social impact, so— you could argue that someone like me reading *Jane Eyre* or reading myself out of *Jane Eyre*, sitting in Calcutta is one of these kind of forms of imperial violence, that actually missionary education over time has kind of created. But on the other hand, like the thing that I think about is that without missionary schools, pervasive sort of caste norms around access to education might have taken a lot longer to break down. And in fact, you know, the sort of enormously important 19th century educational initiatives of Dalits—if you could trace it back to actually at some point, they went through missionary educational schools because they didn't have the kind of caste prejudice that traditional schools had about educating lower-caste people.

The way that I teach my students is that, like everything else, imperialism is a classed process. Not everybody experiences it the same. So for indigenous elites, imperialism affected that community, of which I am a descendant, in a very different way than it affected, say, caste-oppressed or other marginalized communities. And we have to be sensitive to those differences. Particularly when you're dealing with missionaries who really have a much more complex relationship to empire, because their goal ultimately is not about temporal dominion, right? It's about spiritual dominion, if anything. And that's really where you can see that they'll work together at times. But there are clearly moments where missionaries completely reject the kind of imperial imperatives that are coming from the Metropole.

Lauren [00:46:07] When you were a teenager reading this book in Calcutta and you were reading these specific chapters and reading the descriptions of how St. John was imagining India, how Jane was imagining India, did you feel unseen?

Ananya [00:46:23] You know what's really funny is because I think people really underestimate how colonial our continuing education in India is [laughs]. I was so used to reading English people's views of India that you just kind of skipped through it. You know, I'm, I, I have an absolute obsession with Agatha Christie, for example. Love her. Still my favorite way to relax is to just curl up with her. Her books are full of just the most offensive of colonial stereotypes. And it's just really—But you just have a way, when you're when you're reading in English, and you're growing up in a postcolonial place like India, of putting yourself outside of that to be able to read. And, you know, it's really, it's a way in which, for example, you know, I teach a class on women and film, and I teach my students about the male gaze of the camera. And that doesn't mean that women don't enjoy films, right? We just we've almost sort of become trained to *look* as if we were men. And so in the same way, when you're a teenage girl in Calcutta, you're *reading* as if you were English, because that is how you were initially taught to read.

And I think actually what really resonated for me was the feminism of *Jane Eyre*, that insistence on equality. So it's interesting, on the one hand, obviously there was no way I could make room for myself if I was reading in that way, as an Indian. But as a woman there was so much in my novel that that really, really resonated and felt powerful and potentially liberatory, which is, I think, exactly where Brontë's religious life was coming. I think sometimes we have a way of sort of looking at, you know, progressive, if you will, to use an anachronistic term, impulses as coming from secular sources. But especially for the periods that I look at, it's often actually religious life that leads to real conditions for radical reimaginings of society, including what it would mean to be a woman.

Lauren [00:48:45] I really appreciate that. It's especially helpful for me to hear someone who gets cranky about religious life in general. And so being reminded that these things can't be pulled apart as neatly maybe as I would like them to is really helpful.

I so appreciate that you took our call in Ananya and I really have been fascinated by the nuance that you've brought into this conversation. I really appreciate it.

Ananya [00:49:09] Thank you.

[ending credits music fades in]

Vanessa [00:49:13] You've been listening to On Eyre. We're a small show, so we need your support to run. If you can, please consider supporting us on Patreon at Patreon.com/HotAndBotheredRomPod. If you love the show, please leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or wherever you're listening to us.

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[ending credits music fades out]

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