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Bonnets & Bimbos: Internalized misogyny in Austen and Brontë's work

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Abstract— *This paper examines how internalized misogyny manifests in the works of Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, particularly in Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and Jane Eyre. Through a feminist lens, it argues that while these novels are celebrated for their proto-feminist heroines, they simultaneously perpetuate patriarchal ideals by vilifying women who embody traditionally feminine traits. Characters such as Caroline Bingley, Lucy Steele, and Blanche Ingram are portrayed as superficial and vain for participating in the "marriage game," while male characters exhibiting similar behaviors are often redeemed or celebrated. By drawing parallels between these nineteenth-century archetypes and modern social phenomena such as the "pick-me girl" and "bimbo" tropes, this paper reveals how female rivalry and self-policing are rooted in enduring structures of patriarchal oppression. Ultimately, the study contends that recognizing these contradictions does not diminish Austen's or Brontë's feminist contributions but instead deepens our understanding of how internalized misogyny continues to shape narratives about womanhood.*

Keywords— ***Charlotte Brontë, Feminist literary criticism, Female rivalry, Internalized misogyny, Jane Austen.***

I. INTRODUCTION

It is only in recent years that the dictionary has begun to fully embrace what could be called the social media vernacular. Words like "DM" and "emoji" have somehow, and much to the chagrin of language purists, managed to creep between the pages (digital or physical) of reputable sources such as the Cambridge Dictionary. However, the richness is such that not all social media terms are just a Google search away (to google has become a verb in and of itself), like for example the label "pick-me". Basically, a girl or young woman who attempts to differentiate herself from other women and render them inferior in order to make herself more attractive to the opposite sex. This word has caused such a storm recently that I would need multiple essays to cover it, even though it is more than likely someone has already done it for me, but the sentiment behind it might be surprisingly old. Back in the late 1700s and early 1800s, we could already see examples of the "pick-me girl" in the work of renowned authors such as Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, although without the negative connotation. The protagonists of Austen's Sense and Sensibility and Pride and Prejudice might not exactly be thought of as "pick-mes" by even modern readers, but they do emulate "the new 'I'm not like the other girls' phenomenon … which describes a woman considering herself unique if she does not fit into the stereotypical perception of womanhood" (Rische, 2023, p. 6). The antagonists of said novels, Lucy Steele, and Caroline Bingley, respectively, are bashed by both the narrator and the protagonists in a fashion that is remarkably similar to how "pick-mes" might: caring for one's appearance is seen as superficial, and a dislike or disinterest in reading is considered uncultured. Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre fairs no better, as the antagonist, Blanche Ingram, is a similar archetype: a beautiful but wretched and superficial woman. Now, the term "pick-me" itself is misogynistic, but it raises important questions about internalized misogyny, which is when "[d]ue to the omnipresent nature of sexist,

misogynistic messages in patriarchal societies, women may internalize a sexist ideology automatically without consciously noticing" (Rische, 2023 p. 6). Internalized misogyny pits young women against each other as they unknowingly begin to perceive feminine interests or attributes as inferior. The characterization of these female antagonists of both Austen and Brontë's works and the protagonist's treatment of them make it so that their empowering feminist message is partly obscured by internalized misogyny, as it is their classically feminine traits, juxtaposed by the protagonist's more masculine attributes, which are considered wrong and inferior.

II. PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Pride and Prejudice is, arguably, Austen's most well-known piece of literature. It is a sarcastic review of marriage and society during her time period: marriage is treated as a game and it makes most, if not all, the players unhappy. Despite refusing to play, Elizabeth Bennett comes out the clear winner at the end, while Caroline Bingley, who is practically the MVP of the marriage game, is forgotten by the narrative. Like the "pick-me's target", Caroline cares about mainstream interests, in this case the marriage game, and is criticized for doing so by both the characters and the narrator. We, as the readers, are supposed to laugh at Miss Bingley's attempts at seduction, for example when she takes a turn about the room with Elizabeth in order to get Darcy's attention. But why does succumbing to the immense pressure women are under to marry makes her such a silly and vain character? According to scholar Ania Grant, Austen's "antagonists explicitly advertise their beauty, elegance, social connections, and feminine accomplishments, such as playing an instrument" (2020, p. 21) while the antagonists "demonstrate the superior qualities of their minds and characters: intelligence, kindness, honesty, and loyalty" (2020, p. 22). And yet, are these qualities really superior or are they simply less associated with women? Although Grant claims that "the conspicuous beauty of the antagonists is invariably trumped by other desirable traits of the protagonists (2020, p. 29)", Austen's protagonists are still considered beautiful. Elizabeth is more of a masculine character compared to Caroline, she is independent, sharp-tongued, and even has more rugged features. Darcy appreciates her dark intense eyes instead of Caroline's feminine beauty, but it is still "Elizabeth's physical attributes that first make it impossible for him to maintain indifference; when she arrives at Netherfield…his admiration of her dishevelled, physically exerted appearance after her walk evokes his physical attraction to her" (Barkley, 2014, p. 220). Therefore, is it really so superficial of Caroline to show off her looks when men are clearly interested in such things? In the now infamous taking-a-walk-about-the-room scene, we are supposed to laugh at Miss Bingley when she takes Elizabeth's arm and strolls with her around the room, as she is sassed by Darcy for being "conscious that [their] figures appear to the greatest advantage in walking" (Austen, 2001, p. 39). And yet, is it not true that, a few pages beforehand, Darcy agreed with her assessment that all women "must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing and the modern languages…[and] possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking" by saying "all this she must possess"? (Austen, 2001, 27). His suggestion to improve oneself with reading does not negate the fact that beauty and grace are indeed important to him. Darcy, however, is not belittled for caring about these things. In fact, he is even given a hero's arc: "Darcy has to learn humility by putting aside his vanity in his own exalted opinion of his wealth, upbringing and status as an aristocrat" (Medow, 1988, 37) in order to win the strong-willed Elizabeth's affections. Some scholars even give him a pass by stating that his initial rude behavior, what needed to be changed, was simply "an inadequacy in the phrasing of a man who, in his shyness, and despite his sophistication, is unable to express himself properly to the girl he grudgingly loves" (Medow, 1988, p. 37). Why does Caroline not get a similar treatment, why is her rudeness and superficiality considered a flaw when Darcy, who agrees with what she has to say, gets to evolve, and even gets the object of his pursuit at the end? Internalized misogyny means that these traits are viewed more negatively in women, while in men they tend to mask a "heart of gold", and this gives "Darcy the opportunity to become what the reader has been waiting for - a hero!" (Medow, 1988, p. 38). While she might have been poised to seem like a comedic character, Miss Bingley actually seems a bit lonely: she has no friends because all women are competition, and her brother and his best friend seem to carry her along but pay no attention to her whatsoever. Although "Austen values distinctly sexualized and non-fraternal relationships that allow a heroine an exit from the family framework that threatens to impede her happiness" (Barkley, 2014, p. 214), it seems she will not allow her antagonists to do so. Caroline is, like Elizabeth, bold in her physical conception of romance. She acknowledges that men are interested, and perhaps are only interested, in her figure and looks and is not afraid to use them. This boldness should be praised as it is in Elizabeth, but it is not, because internalized misogyny makes it so that both Austen and Elizabeth fall victim to the same thing her antagonists are so shamed for doing, which is thinking of other women as competition. The novel pokes fun at Caroline for her failed attempts

but, is she not doing everything right? If anything, her story is more reflective of a sad truth rather than a knee-slapping failure: there is no power on this earth, be it money, magic, charm or beauty, that can force a person to fall in love with you.

III. SENSE AND SENSIBILITY

Jane Austen's *Sense and Sensibility* may be her first step into literature, but it is by no means timid. The biting wit and commentary sprinkled throughout this novel is reflective of what would make Pride and Prejudice so great later on. We can find most of this commentary directed towards Lucy Steele, the "antagonist" of the novel, as she comes to stand between Elinor Dashwood and Edward Ferrars's happy ending. She is meant to be a foil to Miss Dashwood, every flaw of the first is supposed to exalt the latter's virtues, but her characterization can become a bit misogynistic when viewed from a modern lens. Lucy is admitted to be a "considerable beauty" with "a smartness of air, which though it did not give actual elegance or grace, gave distinction to her person" (Austen, 2002, p. 87). This one compliment, however, is quickly offset with the assurance that she is "ignorant and illiterate…[deficient] of all mental improvement." (Austen, 2002, pp .92-93) unlike Elinor and her sister Marianne who are exceptionally well-read and "cultured". Lucy's characterization is very reminiscent of the extremely misogynistic "bimbo" trope: "a young woman [who is] considered to be attractive but not intelligent" ("Bimbo"). She is admittedly beautiful but is considered to be worthless by her sisters due to her lack of education. Her standing in the novel gets even worse when she enters into competition for Edward's affection, even though "competition is part of our evolutionary heritage" and "being able to compete for scarce resources is crucial to our survival and reproduction" (Grant 2020). It seems that "[i]n fiction and in life, we dislike those who are hell-bent on winning, and we prefer to interact with those who can cooperate "(Grant ,2020, p. 29). Lucy is torn down because she is considered a threat; she aggressively goes for what she wants instead of exhibiting "genuine kindness and loyalty to friends and family…without a specific goal of self-promotion" (Grant, 2020, p. 23) like the typical Austen heroine. But is it not true that "[by] using third person narration and mixing heroines' internal monologues with seemingly impartial comments of the narrator, Austen lets her heroines derogate their rivals with impunity" (Grant 26), making it so that they are just as aggressive players stuck in the marriage game? The misogyny becomes clear when we compare the depiction of Lucy with Austen's treatment of Willoughby, who despite being strikingly handsome, is also incredibly dastardly. Nevertheless, both Elinor and the novel give him a sort of redemption towards the conclusion, excusing his behavior due to a "too early independence and its consequent habits of idleness, dissipation and luxury" (Austen, 2002, p. 235) Elinor (and Austen herself) forgive Willoughby, but they do not forgive Lucy when she marries Edward's brother instead of him, even though she is just doing what women were required to do back then and marry for money. Had Edward not been helped by Colonel Brandon; would Elinor still marry him so gleefully? The heroines and the author question those who marry for gain, but they are not exactly marrying poor either. The difference between the novel's treatment of Lucy and the Dashwood sisters seems to be rooted in internalized misogyny. Lucy, like Marianne, can be considered "a heroine of sensibility who loves children and who is extremely affected by the scene of Lady Middleton's child's suffering" (Uttama, 2016, p. 6). Being a heroine of sensibility has a negative connotation in Austen's work, but while Marianne is allowed to grow out of it and learn her lesson, when "Lucy's marriage of convenience to Robert confirms her as a woman who uses her sense to achieve financial prosperity as opposed to an advocate of marriage for love which was seen as part of the cult of sensibility", she is admonished by both the novel and scholars who say that "[her] elopement and subsequent marriage to Robert ultimately suggests that she never loved Edward and that she is a woman of (economic) sense" (Uttama, 2016, p. 12). Why is it that when Marianne marries Coronel Brandon instead of dashing Willoughby it is considered prudent and character growth, but when Lucy married Edward's older brother, who is also a more prudent match, she is considered superficial and a social climber? The fact that Lucy is more aggressive in her pursuits should be hailed by the scholarly feminists who praise the Austenian heroine's nonconformism. Instead, she is scolded for her "unceasing attention to self-interest" (Austen, 2001, p. 266), despite the fact that she made a choice which resulted in a prosperous marriage as "[t]hey settled in town, received very liberal assistance from Mrs. Ferrars, were on the best terms imaginable with the Dashwoods … [and] nothing could exceed the harmony in which they all lived together" (Austen, 2001, p. 267). Austen undermines her own feminist message of women being able to balance both rationale and sensitivity, hence the title, by making fun of Lucy both when she demonstrates classically feminine traits, albeit dishonestly, like being interested in children and those which in a male we would find favorable like ambition or aggressiveness. Had Lucy Steele been a man, would Austen's readers and scholars still treat her with such contempt?

IV. JANE EYRE

Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre is much less humorous than its Austenian counterparts, but the critique towards the beautiful, marriage-seeking woman is still palpable. Blanche Ingram is, perhaps, the least redeemable of our three antagonists: she is not only cruel to Jane, but also to Rochester's adoptive child, Adèle (he is equally dismissive, but being a man it is somehow more permissible) and drops all intentions of marrying when she is tricked into believing her suitor isn't as rich as initially thought. Both readers and the novel itself are quick to write her off as superficial and vain, but is not marrying into wealth the only way for women to make a living? Miss Ingram is, like Caroline Bingley before her, criticized for playing the marriage game as it is supposed to be played, as women were taught to do so:

Blanche has to make sure to find a wealthy man to marry if she wants to keep her position within the aristocracy. She does therefore not have the luxury of looking for someone that she loves, like Jane does, but rather settles on Rochester because of his wealth and position in society. However, unlike Jane, Blanche is not spiritually connected to Rochester and therefore has to find another way of convincing him to marry her. To do so, she uses the only trait that benefits her as a woman in the Victorian patriarchal society, her beauty… (Sylwan, 2015, p. 12)

Blanche also has a mother and sister to support, therefore the pressure to marry someone well-off becomes far more intense (à la Elinor), yet her choice of mate is criticized as superficial and she "is deemed both as too aggressive and too stagnant" (Sylwan, 2015, p. 14). This is reflective of internalized misogyny, where women's every move is viewed under a magnifying glass and picked apart and a movement towards either of the extremes is considered wrong. Even in our supposedly modern society, women are constantly having to walk the line between becoming a whore or a prude: "by portraying Blanche as both too mercenary and too stagnant, Jane successfully balances being both an emancipated woman and an ideal Victorian wife" (Sylwan, 2015, p. 18). Brontë is inadvertently sending us a misogynistic message through her characterizations because what is supposed to commend Jane to the reader over Blanche is how much more appealing the first is to a man. In her piece "CONTRADICTION IN JANE EYRE: CONVERSATIONS OF 19TH CENTURY FEMINISM", Audrey Clement states that "Jane, as a member of patriarchal society, may subconsciously criticize other women by measuring them against an unrealistic patriarchal standard" (2022, p. 53). Jane looks down upon Blanche's pursuit of Rochester, thinking to herself: "It seems to me that she might, by merely sitting quietly at his side, saying little and looking less, get nigher his heart" and "[h]ow will she manage to please him when they are married?" (Brontë, 2001, p. 159). For a woman who once claimed "I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will…" (Brontë, 2001, p. 216), Jane appears to be unwittingly vouching for patriarchal concepts such as the subservient wife who must do all she can to please her husband (never does she wonder whether someone as cold and reticent as Rochester will please Blanche), all due to internalized misogyny. We cannot forget that Jane's view of Blanche might also be tainted by her jealousy, fed by the misogynistic belief that her fellow women are competition. It is viewing "Miss Ingram as a threat to Jane's access to Rochester…[that] causes Jane to internally reject her" (Clement, 2022, p. 54). This behavior also seeps into the reader's conceptions of Blanche's character: "By pitting readers against certain women to support Jane, Brontë undermines the effective feminist advocacy of Jane Eyre from a modern perspective" (Clement, 2022, p. 55). Like with Austen's male counterparts, Rochester is also pardoned for his actions, even if they are far worse than anything Blanche ever did to Jane. He not only toys with both Jane and Blanche's emotions through disguising himself as a Romani person, but he also lies to her about Bertha, his previous wife who he has abused and locked up like an animal. How is this more redeemable than Blanche pushing Jane aside? "Jane's inability (or refusal) to hold Rochester accountable for his condescending, misogynist, or abusive actions shows how she has been trained by a patriarchal society to sympathize with Mr. Rochester over the women he is hurting" (Clement, 2022, p. 58). The biggest reason as to why Rochester's actions are more permissible than Blanche is simply because he is a man, although there might be an even more sinister force at play. "It is possible that women who have experienced abuse use internalized sexism to distance themselves from fears of harassment or abuse by deflecting blame and hostility to other women and aligning with the abuser — a form of identification with the aggressor" (Johnson 14), and not only has Jane suffered abuse at the hands of others in her past, but Rochester himself has emotionally abused her by making her believe he intended to marry Blanche and playing mind games with her. Overall, Jane and the novel's dislike of Blanche seems to come less from a place of valuing kindness and humility, but rather a subconscious set of patriarchal beliefs.

V. CONCLUSION

Austen and Brontë are, of course, still considered feminist writers, and their works did indeed open up the world of literature to include women who could think, feel, and go

on adventures which had been previously reserved for male characters only. Nevertheless, it is important for readers to notice the subconscious misogynistic beliefs they carry, for it is only through their analysis that they will be able to find them within themselves. The fact that Pride and Prejudice, Sense and Sensibility, and Jane Eyre carry internalized misogyny does not mean that they should not be hailed as great feminist pieces, it simply means that we must learn to take the good with the bad. The overly sanitized and politically correct film remakes are proof that what readers want is not an erasure of these novels' weaknesses, but rather the acknowledgement that they are weak, and that great literature can indeed be wrong. Part of the reason as to why these novels have endured through time is because they are still teaching us so much, and they can help us reflect on modern phenomena like the "pick-me". It is only through questioning and revising these texts that we will get closer to what Austen and Brontë originally intended: a better world for woman and mankind alike.

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