

In Search of Progress: Female Academics after Jane Eyre

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Abstract

Charlotte Brontë's novel about a female educator, *Jane Eyre*, was published in 1847. This current paper asks: what progress has been enjoyed by female academics since Charlotte's day? Although women are no longer disbarred from academia, there is international evidence that women in higher education experience gender discrimination both as students and academics. This paper therefore borrows from *Jane Eyre* to define "progress" as the recognition that 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" (Brontë, 2006, pp. 129-130). It questions the extent of this progress by asking ten female academics working in four UK universities to respond to quotations from *Jane Eyre* read in conjunction with recent media stories about education and gender. Some participants claimed that women may be antagonistic towards female academics who defy notions of domesticity, while other participants appeared resistant to the idea that discrimination exists. This paper argues that, together, these beliefs normalise career stagnation as the "natural" outcome of women's alleged biological preference for non-agentic behaviour and risk isolating women who are wounded by discrimination. This study suggests that progress requires the universal rejection of culturally imposed limitations to the exercise of women's faculties.

Keywords Charlotte Brontë, feminism, women, teaching, higher education

Introduction

Charlotte Brontë's novel, *Jane Eyre*, was published in 1847 under the pseudonym Currer Bell. Victorian readers immediately speculated over Currer Bell's gender, with one critic supposing that *Jane Eyre* was a "hermaphrodite text" written by a brother and sister (Ingham, 2006, p. 27) and another assuming that it was the work

of a “sour, coarse and grumbling” man (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 337). Charlotte Brontë was eventually revealed to be the author of *Jane Eyre*, whereupon the novel was condemned as an odious expression of “rebellious feminism” (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 338). Such criticism did not, however, hamper sales of *Jane Eyre*, and indeed contemporary criticism of Charlotte’s novel was largely directed at its “heathenish doctrine of religion” rather than its feminism (Barker, 2001, p. 91). The autobiographical nature of *Jane Eyre* is widely acknowledged (see for example Gaskell, 1960), and since its publication there has been a tendency to consider *Jane Eyre* to be an exhilarating, if blasphemous, female *Bildungsroman* (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000). In keeping with this reading of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë scholars and critics have, for the most part, focussed their attention on Jane-as-Charlotte’s formative experience at school, rather than her experience as a teacher; an oversight addressed by Marianne Thormählen (2007) in her book, *The Brontës and Education*. Thormählen is frank in her assessment of the low status of the Victorian school teacher and Charlotte’s lacklustre performance in this profession, yet for Charlotte and her sisters, education was of the utmost importance: the means to obtain what Thormählen (2007, p. 214) describes as one’s integrity and “solid self-respect.”

If, as we may surmise from *The Brontës and Education*, the voice of the female educator has been mostly ignored by generations of readers of *Jane Eyre*, then this paper aims to project and amplify that voice by combining it with the voices of women working in higher education today; women who might be described as “the heirs to Jane.” In so doing, this paper asks: 170 years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, what progress has been enjoyed by female academic-educators since Charlotte’s day? The answer to this question is likely to be ambiguous, as it is indisputable that women’s position in higher education is stratospherically higher than in Charlotte’s day, when women were disbarred from academia. On the other hand, there is abundant international evidence that women experience gender discrimination in higher education both as students and academics (see for example Alison Phipps and Isabel Young’s (2014) study of “Lad Cultures” in higher education). This paper therefore borrows from *Jane Eyre* to define “progress” as the recognition that “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” (Brontë, 2006, pp. 129-130). It questions the extent of this progress by considering: gendered views on education; limitations to the exercise of female faculties, and women as teachers in higher education. It asks women working in higher education to respond to some quotations from *Jane Eyre* (labelled Excerpts 1, 2 & 3), read in conjunction

with recent media stories¹ about education and gender. Snowball sampling was used to recruit ten women employed in Education departments in four universities in the UK. In homage to Charlotte Brontë's fondness for letter writing (Barker, 2006), responses were sought via email. The sample consists of three PhD students teaching on BA and MA modules (PhD1; PhD2; PhD3); four Lecturers (L1; L2; L3; L4); two Readers (R1; R2); one Professor (Prof1). Responses were sought to three questions, discussed below.

Gendered Views on Education

Jane Eyre begins with ten-year-old Jane facing the prospect of being sent away to school. Her highly gendered understanding of girls' education is gleaned from a servant, Bessie:

EXCERPT 1

...if Bessie's accounts of school discipline (gathered from the young ladies of a family where she had lived before coming to Gateshead) were somewhat appalling, her details of certain accomplishments attained by these same young ladies were, I thought, equally attractive. She boasted of beautiful paintings of landscapes and flowers by them executed; of songs they could sing and pieces they could play, of purses they could net, of French books they could translate; till my spirit was moved to emulation, as I listened. (Brontë, 2006, p. 30)

At boarding school, Jane forms a close friendship with Helen, a terminally ill teenager, and their kindly teacher, Miss Temple, who initiates her into what the Victorians considered to be a more masculine form of education:

[Helen and Miss Temple] conversed of things I had never heard of; of nations and times past; of countries far away; of secrets of nature discovered or guessed at: they spoke of books: how many they had read! What stores of knowledge they possessed! Then they seemed so familiar

¹ 'Gender gap in UK degree subjects doubles in eight years, UCAS study finds' *The Guardian* (2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/jan/05/gender-gap-uk-degree-subjects-doubles-eight-years-ucas-study> 'Girls in STEM: These figures show why we need more women in science, tech, engineering and maths' *IBTimes* (2016) <http://www.ibtimes.co.uk/girls-stem-these-figures-show-why-we-need-more-women-science-tech-engineering-maths-1540590> 'I can't get a permanent lecturing job – is it because I'm of childbearing age?' *The Guardian* (2017) <https://www.theguardian.com/higher-education-network/2017/jul/06/i-cant-get-a-permanent-lecturing-job-is-it-because-im-of-childbearing-age>

with French names and French authors: but my amazement reached its climax when Miss Temple asked Helen if she sometimes snatched a moment to recall the Latin her father had taught her, and, taking a book from a shelf, bade her read and construe a page of Virgil; and Helen obeyed, my organ of veneration expanding at every sounding line. (Brontë, 2006, p. 87)

Charlotte acknowledged to her editor that the character of Helen was based on her own sister Maria (Barker, 2001, p. 135), and it is widely supposed that all of the Brontë sisters received instruction in Latin from their father, in defiance of the convention that only boys should study the Classics (Thormhålen, 2007). What is certain is that Charlotte depicts Jane's transition from a naïve admirer of feminine accomplishments to the fiery orator of the manifesto that defines *Jane Eyre* as a feminist work (see EXCERPT 2). With this transition comes contempt for women willing to accept the socially determined parameters of their knowledge. Consider, for example, Jane's description of a wealthy lady, Blanche Ingram:

She was very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor....She was not good; she was not original: she used to repeat sounding phrases from books: she never offered, or had, an opinion of her own. (Brontë, 2006, pp. 215-216)

Similar disdain is evident in Germaine Greer's (1970) analysis of female undergraduates in her own feminist manifesto, *The Female Eunuch*, written more than a century after *Jane Eyre*:

Their energy is all expended on conforming with disciplinary and other requirements, not in gratifying their own curiosity about the subject that they are studying, and so most of it is misdirected into meaningless assiduity. This phenomenon is still very common among female students, who are forming a large proportion of the arts intake at universities, and dominating the teaching profession as a result. The process is clearly one of diminishing returns: the servile induce servility to teach the servile, in a realm where the unknown ought to be continually assailed with all the human faculties; education cannot be, and has never been, a matter of obedience. (Greer, 1970, p. 58)

We may agree that female students who merely "repeat sounding phrases from books" (Brontë, 2006, p. 216) or devote themselves to "meaningless assiduity" (Greer, 1970, p. 58) are poor scholars. However, the call-to-arms for women to defy gendered expectations of their education is rendered problematic by an education

system that sees behaving “quietly and responsibly” in the classroom as inherently female (Wardman, 2017).

In *Living Dolls: The Return of Sexism*, Natasha Walter (2010, p. 11) is critical of what she describes as the current fashion for biological determinism, arguing that the avalanche of scientific studies that purport to demonstrate, for example, that girls are “biologically predisposed to prefer pink” has proved detrimental to girls’ education. Educators, she argues, are being encouraged to “downgrade the influence of socialisation in favour of biological differences” (Walter, 2010, p. 153) on the basis of dubious evidence; a supposition lent weight by Sigrid Schmitz’s (2010) examination of current brain research. According to Schmitz (2010, p. 61), many research groups adopt the “laterality hypothesis,” which assumes that “female brains use both hemispheres more prominently to solve cognitive tasks” (Schmitz, 2010, p. 61), while male brains respond to task specificity “to make stronger use of either one or the other hemisphere” (Schmitz, 2010, p. 61). Schmitz (2010, p. 63) identifies a “publication bias” that is distorting debate on gender by marginalising brain imaging studies that do *not* confirm the laterality hypothesis. The effect of this “new determinism,” says Walter (2010, pp. 152-198), is most apparent in the widespread assumption that males are natural mathematicians while women are natural empathisers.

A rival hypothesis, identified by Schmitz (2010), is that male and female bodies are formed in their materiality through our experiences and our perception of our bodies, and that in turn our bodies influence our cognition and behaviour. Differences between sexes need not exist as a natural category in order to be “real,” as the plasticity of our brains means that socialisation is likely to cultivate behaviours that appear to confirm the theory of binary biological sexes (Schmitz, 2010). In *The Paula Principle*, Tom Schuller (2017) notes that while the number of women in higher education is continuing to rise internationally, a gender divide may be observed with regard to the subjects women chose to study: “Men,” he says, “still go into the sciences and maths in much more significant numbers” (Schuller, 2017, p. 25). Women, meanwhile, are strongly represented in traditionally feminine programmes of study, such as primary education and nursing (*The Guardian*, 2016). These findings, of course, may be cited as evidence to confirm both biological determinism and socio-cultural constructivism, depending on one’s preference. However, for anyone sceptical of the theory of biological determinism, the discovery that the proportion of female computer graduates in OECD countries actually *fell* between 2000 and 2009 makes uncomfortable reading (Schuller, 2017, pp. 25-26). A significant finding to add to this is that, regardless of the basis of our choice of degree programme, female graduates face significant barriers to equality in the workplace that include harassment and violence, as noted by the OECD (2017) report *The Pursuit of Gender Equality: An Uphill Battle*.

Question #1 asked of academic research participants

Q.1. To what extent have you observed students holding gendered views on education? Thinking about your own education and career, to what extent have you found yourself, like Jane, “moved to emulate” skills/activities that are held to be feminine?

In response to the first part of Q.1, no one disputed the existence of gendered views in or about education. Some participants provided examples of “masculine” attitudes in the classroom, such as the belief that cleaning the floor is “women’s work” (Prof1) and the desire of some male undergraduates to “act up in sessions” (PhD1). Others provided examples of gendered expectations of education, such as the “implicit assumption that the few men on the course will go on to bigger and better things and the women are more likely to keep on with the day to day education jobs” (L4). One participant says, “On the face of it students verbally advocate a gender neutral approach, but if I think about those who are on the courses, the majority conform to stereotypical gender roles” (L3). The predominance of female undergraduates in Education Studies was noted, and one participant expressed the belief that this gender imbalance “creates complicated social dynamics within the classroom” (L1):

It’s likely that in such gendered spaces, too much emphasis is placed on the privileged minority, e.g., constant questions around what male students or male colleagues would think about certain things to balance out the otherwise dominant female view. From my perspective, this silences or homogenises women as feminine. They become the silenced majority, even in the places where female power could be perhaps practised more easily as there are so many of us. (L1)

Responses to the second part of Q.1 were more mixed. Most participants described their own education as gendered, but felt that gender had *not* hampered their academic progress. Some participants refuted the idea that some academic subjects are “feminine,” and saw their decision to study “feminine” subjects as an expression of their humanity, rather than their gender. For example, one participant says, “I was good at math and economics, but I wanted to change the world and work with those on the margins—the idea of studying economics at university didn’t draw me—I couldn’t see the connection between interest and skill in the subject area and “changing the world” (L3). The idea that women might demonstrate empowerment by undertaking “masculine” study was identified as oppressive by one participant who says, “I have strangely had to fight both myself and my family to do a more “feminine” job in education, as it was felt (including by me) that I was letting the side down and should be pushing more boundaries” (L4). The desire to resist the

gendering of academic study is perhaps most evident in the statement made by a graduate of literature and education who is now pursuing a career in philosophy: “I do not think of these pursuits as inherently feminine. Nor did I perceive teaching to be an overly feminine pursuit when I entered the profession” (PhD3). One participant provided a unique yet troubling account of what might be described as a dangerous collusion between cultural constructions of gender and teaching practice in higher education:

In the institution in which I work, the vast majority of undergraduates in the teacher education programme are female, as indeed are most of the faculty. It always strikes me during admission interviews how often young women refer to “loving children” as the single most important attribute for entry to the teaching profession. I cannot draw upon an evidence base to support this claim, but I doubt very much whether the few male entrants to the course would make a similar statement. I think the course is very feminised, and that the evident tendency to nurture an overwhelmingly female cohort has become even more pronounced in an era where “student satisfaction” has come to dominate discourse about the purposes of education. (R1)

The claim that female trainee teachers holding gendered views on the profession are being nurtured to meet the needs of student satisfaction surveys is troubling, as it suggests that structures within higher education may be unconsciously promoting biological determinism and cementing the process of “diminishing returns” critiqued by Greer (1970, p. 58).

Limitations to the exercise of women’s faculties

The passage in *Jane Eyre* most highly celebrated by feminist critics occurs when Jane is employed as a governess in Thornfield Hall and delivers what Adrienne Rich (1995, p.97) describes as Charlotte Brontë’s “feminist manifesto.” Jane is aware that she has an enviable position teaching a pleasant child in a luxurious setting, but she yearns for something more:

EXCERPT 2

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. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex. (Brontë, 2006, pp. 129-130)

Jane's frustration over the constraints placed on women is shared by Simone de Beauvoir in her 1949 treatise, *The Second Sex*. According to de Beauvoir (1993, p. 716), a man's desire for power does not run "counter to his destiny as a male," while a woman's socially determined destiny precludes power. A woman, it seems, may desire power but only a man may exercise power without breaching the culturally imposed parameters of his gender. Writing some decades after de Beauvoir, Bronwyn Davies (1991) argues that feminine agency is not easily acquired, as our language embeds dualisms that negate the experience of those on the "wrong" side of the divide between concepts (for example, male/female; mad/sane or to use the motif favoured by Charlotte in *Jane Eyre*, fire/ice). In her critique of the gendering of school leadership, Cryss Brunner (2005, p. 127) identifies a binary "power-with" versus "power-over," and argues that the power-over model of command implies that "one person has more of something than others do" (ibid), whether this be charisma, knowledge or social status, while the power-with model of command views power as something collective that is shared by all social agents. Consistent with de Beauvoir's earlier analysis, Brunner's (2005) study reveals that school leaders associate the power-over model of governance with being male, while the power-with model is strongly associated with being female.

In her analysis of the gendered discourses of leadership, Marian Court (2005, p. 4) claims that women are hailed as sympathetic and nurturing, and that our maternal qualities are alleged to constitute a "female ethos" that orients us towards effective team working. Indeed, the term "servant leadership" (Duff, 2013, p. 204) has been coined to describe the more altruistic approach to management allegedly favoured by women. In their meta-analysis of international research on the gendering of leadership attributes, Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari (2011) found that, across the world, there is a "mismatch" between "the predominantly communal qualities (e.g., nice, compassionate)" (Koenig, Eagly, Mitchell & Ristikari, 2011, p. 616) that people associate with women and "the predominantly agentic qualities (e.g., assertive, competitive)" (Koenig et al, 2011, p. 616) that they believe are required for success as a leader. So, while women today are considered to be "the nicer, kinder sex" (Koenig et al, 2011, p. 617), men are still considered to be *natural* leaders. Most troubling, perhaps, is Koenig et al's (2011, p. 617) assertion that women seem not only less natural in most leadership roles, but "often seem inappropriate or presumptuous when they display the agentic behaviour often required by these roles." For women today, being an executive "confounds and contradicts traditional notions of femininity" (Reay & Ball, 2000, p. 147) and

women are thus obliged to “act male” in order to be seen as authentic leaders. This course of action is, however, problematic, as the idea of “gender bending,” or adopting the leadership strategy of the opposite gender, is often greeted with hostility. We might note that the female school leaders in Bruner’s study who adopted a power-over model of governance were described by their colleagues as “bitches” (Bruner, 2005, p. 132).

Question #2 asked of academic research participants

Q.2. In your teaching, have you encountered female students who identify limitations to the exercise of their faculties arising from their gender? Thinking about your own education and career in academia, to what extent have you experienced restraint arising from your gender?

In response to the first part of Q.2, four participants said “no.” One identified what might be described as “domestic limitations” to the exercise of her students’ faculties, saying “many of the female students are studying alongside working and taking on caring roles (for children/partners/parents)” (L3). Another states “Some of the young women I teach have expressed the desire to teach for a few years before leaving the profession. They consider teaching as a profession that can be combined with family life, which they see as a priority” (R1). One participant recalls a “bright white British girl who was dating a minor-league footballer. She decided that university wasn’t for her as she wanted to be free to follow her boyfriend’s career choices” (PhD2). In response to the second part of Q.2, six participants identified domestic issues similar to those of their students. For example, “The biggest limitation for women in academia, in my opinion, occurs over the decision to start a family, and then to maintain the future well-being of that family at the expense of their career” (PhD3); “I struggle to go to conferences or take on external examiner roles that would mean an overnight stay, because someone needs to be at home for the kids” (L3). Views on career and motherhood were not homogenous: one participant said that she delayed the start of her career until her children started school and asks, “Is that restraint arising from my gender? I don’t see it that way. Instead, I see it as a joy to be able to take so much time with my children” (Prof1). Another participant says “My career in academia started in mid-life,” and recalls that as an undergraduate she held gendered career expectations: “I did not imagine or dream of becoming an academic while an undergraduate at university, perhaps because you had to be either “brilliant” or a career-ambitious woman who would most likely not have children, or better still, a male” (R2).

Some participants, however, did *not* appear to conceptualise gender restraints as purely domestic: using language highly redolent of *Jane Eyre*, one participant condemns the gendered discourses of power in academia:

I have experienced the expectation to be calm as a woman, to swallow my anger. If I am assertive this is noticed, where it is just “normal manly behaviour” for male colleagues. Some important issues to me are often side-lined as little unimportant issues, or women’s issues. E.g., timing of meetings, childcare etc. The rolling of eyes at a “feminist rant” is equally dismissive when trying to challenge assumptions or ways of working. (L4)

Another participant says “I have experienced and witnessed male colleagues deliberately holding back female colleagues, undermining them, taking undeserved praise and sharing none, as well as being downright rude” (PhD2). Such behaviour seems to go unchallenged: in the words of one participant, “the opinions of male colleagues seem to be regarded as more valid than those of female colleagues. I think institutionalised gender discrimination is rife in academia. Any attempts to air this view, as I have done, have been received with antagonism and downright hostility” (R1). This participant says she has been dismissed as a “presumptive woman” by both male *and* female colleagues, and quotes from *Jane Eyre* to articulate this phenomenon: “I have experienced hostility from female colleagues who pride themselves on being teachers and who are particularly hostile towards those who “seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex” (R1). A similar view is expressed by another participant:

There is also gendered behaviour which involves making oneself look good in front of others. Women do not naturally demonstrate this communication or behaviour, and when they do, tend to be perceived by both male and female colleagues as “pushy” or “ambitious.” Would that be said of a man? (R2).

An additional point to observe is that, 170 years after Charlotte Brontë found it expedient to conceal her gender behind the pseudonym Currer Bell, one participant implies that “acting male” is still helpful when trying to get one’s voice heard:

I have started to feel highly grateful to my name—as it’s very uncommon and gender neutral, I feel that my written work perhaps receives stronger credit thanks to it. In other words, it’s not automatically associated with a female academic or writer. So in a way it’s ironic that I exploit my name to enter a space which is otherwise quite masculine. (L1)

Women as teachers in higher education

As we have seen, *Jane Eyre* conveys the message that one’s learning should not be “a matter of obedience” (Greer, 1970, p. 58), but the inverse appears to be true with

regard to teaching. The Brontë sisters' collective agony over the "servitude" they endured as teachers is well documented (Thormählen, 2007), and indeed their desire to escape the teaching profession prompted the publication of their novels, including *Jane Eyre* (Barker, 2001). It is perhaps not surprising, then, that this fantasy of escape is played out in *Jane Eyre*. Jane is working as a teacher in a girls' school when she inherits a vast fortune, and she immediately decides to quit her job. The local vicar, her cousin St. John Rivers, questions her judgement in this matter:

EXCERPT 3

St. John Rivers: "Would not a life spent devoted to the task of regenerating your race be well spent?"

Jane Eyre: "Yes...but I could not go on forever so. I want to enjoy my own faculties as well as to cultivate those of other people. I must enjoy them now; don't recall my mind or body to the school; I am out of it and disposed for full holiday." (Brontë, 2006, p. 450)

As a village schoolmistress, there is little scope for Jane to enjoy her "own faculties" while she "regenerates" her race through her commitment to her pupils, and while the fictional Jane accepts this constraint with good grace, a letter sent by Charlotte to her brother Branwell in 1843 reveals how Charlotte chafed under this same bond. Describing her pupils she states:

I don't hate them—hatred would be too warm a feeling—they have no sensations themselves and they excite none—but one wearys [sic] from day to day of caring nothing, fearing nothing, liking nothing, hating nothing—being nothing, doing nothing. (Charlotte Brontë, 1843 in Barker, 2006, p. 118)

Although Charlotte's level of disgust over teaching is perhaps rare, the fear of "being nothing, doing nothing" is, it seems, not an unusual problem for women working in higher education today. In their analysis of the academic research gender gap, Sarah Jane Aiston and Jisun Jung (2015, p. 205) claim that, despite the increase in numbers of women entering higher education internationally, women are failing to "progress through the academic hierarchy in significant numbers and enter senior leadership positions." Aiston and Jung (2015) acknowledge the effect of the gendered discourses of power discussed previously, but speculate that female academics' career stagnation is also attributable to the fact that we publish fewer research papers and book chapters. "In the prestige economy of higher education," they claim, "research productivity is highly prized" (Aiston & Jung, 2015, p. 205). Aiston and Jung (2015) offer insight into the possible cause of this research gender

divide through their analysis of survey data on academic workload. According to Aiston and Jung (2015), female academics tend to be given a greater teaching load, and they note in particular the example of Japan, where senior academic women spend 41% more of their time on teaching compared with their male counterparts and consequently underperform in terms of research outputs. Statistics published by the Higher Education Statistics Authority (HESA, 2017) confirm that female academics in UK universities also have a higher teaching load than their male colleagues, thus inhibiting our opportunities for research and promotion (The Guardian, 2017). According to HESA (2017), in the year ending 2016 there were just 4,775 female professors working in higher education in the UK, compared with 15,195 male professors.

Theresa Marchant and Michelle Wallace (2013) speculate that women, internationally, will not reach parity in the teaching professoriate until 2033 based on current trends. For Marchant and Wallace, this slow pace of change is not accidental:

Discrimination against women in higher education takes place in complicated and subtle ways with the micropolitics of power and its effects evident on a day-to-day basis....It may well be these processes that see women confined to the casual or contract teaching-only roles, where control over resources, in this case “good jobs,” is maintained. (Marchant & Wallace, 2013, p. 67)

Exponents of biological determinism might be tempted to dismiss Marchant and Wallace’s (2013) hypothesis as paranoid, viewing instead the desire to devote one’s life “to the task of regenerating your race” through teaching (Bronte, 2006, p. 450) as part of a woman’s genetic make-up and thus her natural *choice*. However, the notion that women in academia *want* to undertake more teaching than their male colleagues is challenged by Anna Asimaki, Vasilis Zenzefilis and Gerasimos Koustourakis (2016) in their survey of women faculty members of the University of Patras, Greece. The women surveyed by Asimaki et al (2016) appear to be subjected to societal and institutional forces that shape their academic choices: firstly, the “job of teacher is presented as ideal since it maintains the social order of things in the world of the division of labour” (Asimaki, Zenzefilis & Koustourakis, 2016, p. 156); secondly academic positions “that are usually offered to, and taken on by women correspond to their feminine dispositions” (Asimaki et al, 2016, p. 157). From their findings Asimaki et al (2016, p. 151) conclude that “a traditional, linear male dominated model of administration and labour prevails in the university field, which obstructs women academics from balancing work demands with family responsibilities.” The women surveyed in the University of Patras appeared sceptical of their ability to compete with men, identifying “the quality of male

university professors' aggressiveness in contrast to the timidity of women" (Asimaki et al, 2016, p. 158) as an explanatory factor for the gender research gap. These women have, it seems, internalised the precepts of biological determinism to normalise their failure to progress to leadership positions in academia. In the words of one participant, "I'm at a low level, I can't compete for positions of power. I don't aspire to positions of power" (Asimaki et al, 2016, p. 159).

Question #3 asked of academic research participants

Q.3. To what extent do you agree with Jane that working as a teacher undermines a woman's ability to explore and enjoy her intellect/research? What differences, if any, have you observed between female and male academics with regard to teaching load and/or promotion?

Responses to the first part of Q. 3 were mixed. Some participants interpreted Jane's decision to quit teaching as pragmatic: "I would comment that economic freedom is pivotal, as Jane experienced in terms of choice and existing "out with" the slavery of the system" (L2); "I would agree with Jane to a large extent, as the notion of using one's research in teaching is often unfeasible" (PhD1). Another participant partially agreed with Jane, but did not conceptualise the curtailment of intellectual exploration as a feminine issue: "education's current culture of performativity and accountability is detrimental to any person's ability (teacher or pupil) to find intellectual fulfilment" (PhD3). Three participants commented upon the relationship between workload and gendered approaches to teaching: "I think there may be gender differences in respect of research supervision. I suspect I invest more time and emotional energy in this than some of my male colleagues at a comparable level" (R1); "I notice that I seem to shoulder more emotional labour as part of my teaching role which may be to the detriment of my research time" (L4); "Duties that involve supporting and nurturing the careers and lives of others (whether students or colleagues) tend to be picked up by women more than men" (R2). One participant agreed with Jane, but notes that the gendering of teaching also harms men:

I do feel that teaching is a highly gendered—I mean female—job in academia. It's something that is often perceived and positioned as service provision and pastoral care, so in a way it's a kind of "nursing job" and therefore fundamentally feminine. It is a huge problem and unfairness, of course. You can see that from the shame or confidence issues that male teaching fellows express—the issues of being failed as an academic. (L1)

Responses to the second part of Q.3 were extremely mixed. Three participants identified a connection between teaching load and career status: "I have found that differences in teaching load are often related to promotion rather than gender, those

at professor level are given more time for research and will do very little teaching” (PhD1); “There is no clear gender dimension to the balance of teaching and research where I work, although the professors do tend to do less teaching and most of them are men” (R1); “most senior colleagues in my department are male and as senior academics they also do less teaching” (L1). One participant identified a relationship between gender and teaching load at her university: “While I do know and work with some male colleagues who spend a lot of time teaching students and supporting colleagues, they are in the minority” (R2).

The issue of promotion was contentious. One participant says, “I have noticed more male academics/teachers getting regular promotions to research positions and female academics/teachers staying in classroom based positions” (PhD3). Three participants expressed the belief that gender discrimination undermines female academics’ progression: “I think there may be some tensions between the process of academic advancement and the reluctance of some women (me and maybe more) to do the “hard sell” required for advancement” (L3); “Where women take a more careful or more considered approach, it is seen as a lack of confidence or ability” (PhD2); “While men in my discipline have (at least in theory) equal teaching loads as women, they are very good at playing the promotion game and know which tasks will make them look good, and which to avoid or spend as little time on as possible” (R2). In contrast, the Professor in this study questioned the existence of gender discrimination: “I have not observed differences between male and female colleagues with regard to opportunities and promotion in my roles at [University X], and I don’t feel that I have been disadvantaged because I am female” (Prof1). The Professor’s career success is a cause for celebration, but her comments bring to mind Kate Ricketts and Judith Pringle’s (2014, p. 497) critique of the well-known power dynamic “where women in positions of authority surrounded by men claim that they have never found gender an issue.” We might add to this the observation that, at the time of writing this paper in 2017, the UK’s highest paid Vice Chancellor is a woman and the Prime Minister is female. Indeed, a parallel might be drawn between UK higher education and UK politics: respectively, a “queen bee” (Ricketts & Pringle, 2014, p. 497) presides over a workforce of Professors and MPs, the majority of whom are male. However, statistics indicate that in comparison with men, women in the UK are less well represented at the senior level of academia than in politics (approximately one in four, versus approximately one in three) (HESA, 2017; BBC, 2017).

Although no questions were asked about parenting, three of the participants mentioned maternal responsibilities in their response to Q.3 part two, contrasting them with their male colleagues’ paternal responsibilities: “I had to turn down a visit to a research partner in another country—I just couldn’t disappear off and leave the family for the third time in a month. I don’t see male colleagues having this problem” (PhD2); “I have far less time to spend on reading than many

male colleagues who look at me somewhat puzzled when I explain that my reading one evening was disturbed by a crying child” (L4). One participant refused to apply for jobs that would take her away from her child and says, “I have witnessed male colleagues who have been quite strategic in this regard, and who may have secured promotion by putting in time away from home, secure in the knowledge that their wives were attending to domestic matters” (R1). The participants described their domestic issues as personal rather than structural, and did not appear to endorse Asimaki et al’s (2016, p. 151) finding that university administration “obstructs women academics from balancing work demands with family responsibilities.”

Discussion

The findings from HESA (2017) tell us that women are underrepresented in senior academic posts in the UK, despite being strongly represented in higher education as both students and academics. To explain this phenomenon it is helpful to consider the economic agenda identified by Nancy Fraser (2013) in *Fortunes of Feminism*. Under this analysis, women are being inducted into neoliberal employability to serve the capitalist economy as bodies rather than as persons, with scant recognition that the gender discrimination condemned in *Jane Eyre* is being carried forward into the classroom and workplace. Consequently, female students who dominate certain higher education programmes in terms of enrolment are being conditioned by biological determinism to constitute a “silent majority” (L1) in the classroom, where they receive instruction from academics who are subjected to discourses of power that position men as “natural” leaders.

Gender inequity is further exacerbated under neoliberalism through the use of new public management (NPM), which seeks to enhance the efficiency of higher education by making universities resemble corporations competing with one another for research grants and research outputs (Ward, 2017). According to Schmitz (2010, p. 65), exponents of biological explanations of sex differences often justify their claims with reference to the hunter-gatherer story of our distant ancestors, in which women stayed at home gathering berries and caring for babies while men used their superior “directional and configurational skills” to track and kill prey. The legacy of this hunter-gather theory is evident in Liudvika Leisyte and Bengü Hosch-Dayican’s (2014) analysis of female academics’ career prospects in the Netherlands. Here, the social construction of business competition as “masculine” under NPM has created a “subtle gender divide” (Leisyte & Hosch-Dayican, 2014, p. 475) that sees “gatherer” women given a greater teaching load to enable “hunter” men to focus on research performativity targets. Leisyte and Hosch-Dayican (2014, p. 476) cite evidence from Sweden and the UK that shows that “women are disproportionately concentrated in teaching roles and pastoral care for students, whereas men predominantly occupy research positions.” Although previous studies have identified inequity in the allocation of teaching in the UK, this

was not something that was recognised as an issue by the majority of women in the present study. Some participants noted that professors have a lighter teaching load and that professors tend to be male, but for the most part this phenomenon was not conceptualised as gender discrimination.

Greater weight was given by participants to domestic commitments, which they felt undermined their career prospects more significantly than teaching load. This finding is poignant, as international survey data analysed by Aiston and Jung (2014) suggests that motherhood does *not* decrease female academics' research productivity, although in their study (as in this study) the participants appeared to believe the opposite. This prompted Aiston and Jung to ask:

What if academic women are explaining, or even taking individual responsibility, for their apparent “failure” to compete in the prestige economy of higher education by appealing to factors (e.g., family-related) that first, do not account fully for the gender gap in research productivity and second, are factors that the academy could, but often does not, take into account in assessing performance? (Aiston & Jung, 2014, pp. 213-214)

This “What if” appears to be a reality for some women in the UK: in response to excerpts from *Jane Eyre*, participants expressed a sense of frustration and resignation over their career prospects, yet on the whole seemed more comfortable locating their problems within the domain of service than within the domain of misogyny. In the words of one participant who identified her career prospects as limited, “I acknowledge that I am the one to carry the mental load of the family...I don't feel moved to be that way—I just don't know how to exist without being that way” (PhD2). Few of us would deny the value of an ethic of care and even less would openly condone the deliberate thwarting of the ambition of female academics who display this ethic, yet this study reveals that this is happening in at least one university in the UK. One participant says:

Verbal feedback I received on a recent (failed) application for promotion to Senior Lecturer role (despite undertaking a Subject Lead role that—on paper—should only be done by a SL) was that there was nothing wrong with what I was doing that was a barrier, rather it was how I had sold myself. (L3)

Academia appears to favour “male aggressiveness in contrast to the timidity of women” (Asimaki et al, 2016, p. 158), and women who cannot “sell” themselves as “masculine” risk career stagnation, even when (as in the above example) they are already undertaking more advanced roles in their institution.

This paper provides a snap-shot of opinions of women working in higher education in the UK, and does not consider how career breaks; part-time contracts, and the intersection of disability, race, sexuality, social class and gender impact upon female academics' career trajectories. Nevertheless, this study reveals that 170 years after the publication of *Jane Eyre*, the claim that "women feel just as men feel" (Brontë, 2006, p. 129) is still being denied. If, as one participant claims, men experience "shame or confidence issues" arising from their belief that they have "failed as an academic" (L1), then we must acknowledge that women also suffer in the same way if our careers are blocked. Instead, this study reveals that women are encouraged to "swallow their anger" (L4) in the face of gender discrimination and to identify motherhood as the greatest obstacle to career progression, rather than gendered discourses of power. A troubling finding of this study is that some female academics are antagonistic towards women who defy notions of domesticity. Of equal concern is the discovery that some female academics are resistant to the idea that discrimination exists. Together, these beliefs risk normalising career stagnation as the "natural" outcome of women's alleged biological preference for non-agentic "empathy and mediating" (L2) and risk isolating women who are wounded by discrimination.

International studies cited in this paper identify structural barriers to career progression for academics with domestic responsibilities. Such barriers need to be urgently addressed, but on its own the cultivation of "work-life balance" is unlikely to improve matters. Consider, for example, one participant's claim that at her university "The men achieve promotion or appointment to senior positions despite the fact that their accomplishments are in no way superior (and in some cases markedly inferior) to those of women occupying positions as Senior Lecturers or Readers" (R1). Another participant claims that "women, in order to be noticed and get promoted, often have to do much, much more" (R2). If, as these participants assert, the accomplishments of male and female academics are equivalent but their career progression is not, then we must look beyond domestic commitments as an explanatory factor. This study suggests that progress requires the universal rejection of culturally imposed limitations to the exercise of women's faculties; a phenomenon still not within sight so many decades after the publication of *Jane Eyre*.

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