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The Birth of a New "Angel": From *Mansfield Park* to *Jane Eyre*

Eri Mabuchi

Introduction

The ideal image of a woman in the Victorian period was a "perfect lady" and "angel in the house." To borrow the definition of Julia Prewitt Brown, a "perfect lady" means a woman who "was completely leisured, ornamental, and dependent, with no function except inspiring admiration and bearing children" (Brown 72). An "angel in the house" signifies a tender and perfect housewife, dedicating herself to her family.

Although the image of an "angel in the house" is generally associated with the Victorian period since the term itself derives from *The Angel in the House* (1854-63) written by Coventry Patmore, the similar image of ideal women can be found in eighteenth-century conduct books which assert the importance of female virtues, obedience to a husband, and good household management. According to Nancy Armstrong, the tendency of laying emphasis on the female virtues already occurred in the last two decades of the seventeenth century among the numerous aspiring social groups, as a countermeasure against daughters of old families (Armstrong 19). Those social groups valued "femaleness" above family name, high status, and fortune all of which they despised as material and superficial qualities and as a means of displaying aristocratic power (ibid. 20). And they educated their daughters to possess not a "physically attractive surface" but "psychological depth" (ibid.), so that they could be "a subject" rather than "an object" (ibid. 77).

As Armstrong also discusses, the significance of the internal qualities and femaleness increased in eighteenth-century conduct books. Furthermore, the notion of "angel in the house" might have created on the basis of the idea of women derived from the conduct books, since the ideal image of women advocated by Sarah Stickney Ellis in her improving books published in the 1830s and '40s and by John Ruskin in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) are similar to that of the aspiring groups' in the late seventeenth century and that of Erasmus Darwin's presented in his well-known conduct book written in 1797, in respect of the emphasis on women's internal qualities and good household management.

The image of ideal women recommended in all these instructions is that of women who are obedient and modest but not reconciled to absolute dependency, and who possess not only womanly softness and gentleness but internal strength and activity of mind as well. These qualities can be found both in Fanny Price, the heroine of *Mansfield Park* (1814)¹ who is generally thought to be the most delicate, passive, and dependent heroine of Jane Austen and in Jane Eyre, the aggressive heroine of *Jane Eyre* (1847)² whom Elizabeth Rigby criticized as "personification of unregenerate and undisciplined spirit."³ Since both Fanny and Jane become tender wives at the end of each story, they appear to be angels in the house. In my opinion, however, they are not just an angel whom Darwin, Ellis and Ruskin advised them to be. In this paper, I would like to clarify Fanny's concealed newness which can be associated with Jane's innovative elements. In addition, I would like to demonstrate how and why Fanny and Jane can be considered as new angels, by focusing on the new characteristics which Fanny and Jane possess besides the qualities requisite for an angel in the house, and which actually differentiate them from a mere angelic housewife.

I Modification of the Criterion for Ideal Women

The most significant newness of Fanny and Jane is that they possess less physical and material advantages but more inner superiority than other women in each novel, and this tendency is more conspicuous in *Jane Eyre* than in *Mansfield Park*. Fanny has few advantages both in her social status and marriage portion since she was born a daughter of a Marine Lieutenant without education, fortune, and connections, and lives in Mansfield as a foster child differentiated from her cousins. In addition to these disadvantages, she is "puny" (*MP* 9) and does not possess enough beauty and attainments to attract other people. As for Jane, the deficiency becomes more severe. While Fanny has a supporter, her uncle Sir Thomas Bertram of Mansfield Park, and somehow holds a little prestige as his niece, Jane possesses neither family connections nor money because of orphanhood, and she has to provide for herself. Just like Fanny, Jane is feeble as she acknowledges her "physical inferiority" (*JE* 7) to her cousins. Her body size is so small that Mr. Lloyd (an apothecary), Mr. Brocklehurst, Diana Rivers, and Mary Rivers all mistake her age. Furthermore, she is "plain" (*JE* 415) as she and others admit. For example, Bessie (a nursemaid) says to grown-up Jane, "you were no beauty as a child." (*JE* 91) Edward Rochester says that she is "not pretty" (*JE* 132) and St. John Rivers also says that she is "not at all handsome." (*JE* 339) Physical appearance is actually Jane's complex as she expresses her sense of inferiority in the following passage:

...I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit. I sometimes regretted that I was not handsomer: I sometimes wished to have rosy cheeks, a straight nose, and small cherry mouth; I desired to be tall, stately, and finely developed in figure;

I felt it a misfortune that I was so little, so pale, and had features so irregular and so marked. (*JE* 98)

Since Jane knows the power of beauty from her childhood, she analyzes that "beauty, pink cheeks and golden curls" of her cousin Georgiana Reed seem to "give delight to all who [look] at her" (*JE* 15), and she cannot help but have such an inferiority complex. Even though there is a certain difference in degree of deficiency, both Fanny and Jane lack not only respectable social connections and fortune but also physical beauty—prerequisite for disadvantaged girls—by which unfortunate heroines such as Cinderella or even Evelina in Fanny Burney's *Evelina* (1778) conventionally obtain happiness.

Despite being situated in such a disadvantageous circumstance, Fanny and Jane are endowed with excellent interiority as if it were compensation for their diminished physical and material advantages. Fanny is depicted as a gentle, modest, thoughtful, and delicate woman with good sense, clear sight, and high principles. Similarly, Jane is described as a sensible, clear-sighted woman. Although Jane is famous for her defiant, aggressive behavior, she can be also modest and gentle. The explicit contrasts between the heroines and privileged but frivolous young females in each novel demonstrate how each story values more highly women's inner excellence—such as personality, discretion, and sensibility—than their physical and material superiority. In fact, it is the heroines' inner superiority that attracts heart of four men—Edmund Bertram, Henry Crawford, Edward Rochester, and St. John Rivers. Edmund first discovers "an affectionate heart" and "a strong desire of doing right" (*MP* 14) in the little Fanny, and later he marries her because of her excellent "mind, disposition, opinions, and habits" (*MP* 371). Likewise, noticing distinguished interiority as well as capability, active mind, and intense feeling

hidden in their calm, steady and modest demeanors, both Henry and Rochester direct their attention to seemingly insignificant heroines. Henry is attracted to Fanny's artless lively expression—"the brightness of her eye, the deep interest, the absorbed attention" (*MP* 184)—with which she eagerly listens to her brother William. Rochester says that he is "content and stimulated" by Jane's smile with "a simple yet sagacious grace" (*JE* 314). St. John explains that he chooses Jane as a wife since she is "docile, diligent, disinterested, faithful, constant, courageous," and "gentle," besides having "capacity and tact" (*JE* 403) to manage a village school.

What makes Fanny and Jane new is the shift of qualities requisite for a heroine. As Melodie Monahan mentions that "the physical appearance is the first measure of female worth" in "the prevailing ethic" (Monahan 592), external beauty has traditionally provided women with power. For example, there are many folk tales and other stories in which an orphan-like or low-status, poor heroine captivates a prince or a noble rich man with her extreme beauty and eventually gains happiness thereby. This tradition continued in eighteenth-century heroines, such as virtuous Pamela (Samuel Richardson, *Pamela*, 1740) and Evelina, whose beauty certainly contributed a lot to their eventual success. However, Austen and Brontë modify the women's qualities which men most value, and thereby try to alter the ideal image of a woman, probably aiming to avoid representing their heroines as merely being an object of male desire and to suggest how external attractiveness, such as social and sexual charm, are less significant and effective.

Although there is no evidence to prove that Austen really had any intention of changing tradition, she might at least have been conscious of it, since some of the other heroines—Catherine Morland, Elizabeth Bennet, Anne Elliot—have not superlative

but the secondary or rather ordinary beauty. Rachel M. Brownstein also refers to this point: "With ordinary-looking Catherine Morland and mouselike Fanny Price and faded Anne Elliot," Jane Austen "did raise . . . sharp questions about romance's habit of identifying perfect beauty with virtue." (Brownstein 165) As for Brontë, she deliberately re-created a plain heroine in order to express her objection to literary convention. The following quotation from the obituary of Brontë written by Harriet Martineau in 1855 proves Brontë's resolution to make a new, an unattractive heroine in her novel:

She [Brontë] once told her sisters that they were wrong—even morally wrong—in making their heroines beautiful, as a matter of course. They replied that it was impossible to make a heroine interesting on any other terms. Her answer was, "I will prove to you that you are wrong. I will show you a heroine as small and as plain as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours." (Gaskell 247)

Since it was almost taken for granted, as her sisters' response suggests, that a literary heroine was beautiful in those days, Brontë's attempt to eliminate the beauty from the essential requirements for a heroine might be considered as a dramatic change in the way a novelistic heroine was conceived. Elaine Showalter says, "[t]he influence of *Jane Eyre* on Victorian heroines was felt to have been revolutionary" and "[t]he post-Jane heroine, according to the periodicals, was plain, rebellious, and passionate" (Showalter 122).

II The Birth of a New Angel

As I briefly mentioned in the introduction, Armstrong shows in her *Desire and Domestic Fiction* that the similar shift of qualities requisite for women occurred in the late seventeenth

century. According to Armstrong, a new curriculum was developed for "the daughters of numerous aspiring social groups" in order to make them more "desirable to men of superior rank" than "women who had only their own rank and fortune to recommend them" (Armstrong 19) and who were educated to be "what a prosperous man desires" (ibid. 59). The curriculum "aimed at producing a woman whose value resided chiefly in her *femaleness* rather than in traditional signs of status, a woman who possessed psychological depth rather than a physical attractive surface, one who, in other words, excelled in the qualities that differentiated her from the male" (ibid. 20; emphasis added). Whereas an ideal woman for the leisure-class and the later upper-middle-class was traditionally a so-called "perfect lady" who is represented as a dependent, ornamental woman without no function except inspiring admiration and bearing children, the middle-class created another type of an ideal and educated woman to be gentle, modest but also capable, performing domestic duties by thoroughly exercising their femaleness.

For instance, Erasmus Darwin says in *A Plan for the Conduct of Female Education in Boarding Schools* (1797) that "[t]he female character should possess mild and retiring virtues rather than the bold and dazzling ones," and "temper and disposition should appear to be pliant rather than robust" (Darwin 10). Although he values "serene strength of mind... prepared to counteract or to bear the necessary evils of life" (ibid. 55), he warns that "great apparent strength of character... is liable to alarm" (ibid. 10) both sexes. He also refers to the importance of femininity (such as softness, gentleness, and tenderness), obedience, and household duties:

And there are situations in a married state; which may call forth all the energies of the mind in the care, education or

provision, for a family Hence if to softness of manners, complacency of countenance, gentle unhurried motion, with a voice clear and yet tender, the charms which enchant all hearts! can be superadded internal strength and activity of mind, capable to transact the business or combat the evils of life; with a due sense of moral and religious obligation; all is obtain'd, which education can supply; the female character becomes compleat, excites our love, and commands our admiration. (ibid. 11)

The desirable image of a middle-class domestic woman reflected in Darwin's conduct book has great affinities with that of Sarah Stickney Ellis' presented in a series of her improving books written in the 1830s and '40s. In *The Women of England: Their Social Duties, and Domestic Habits* (1838), she affirms that "[t]he sphere of woman's happiest and most beneficial influence is a domestic one" (Ellis (a) 496), and mentions those who are "apparently feeble and insignificant" but "can accomplish great and glorious purposes" with their "moral power" when they are "called into action by pressing and peculiar circumstances" are "striking and noble instances of women" (ibid. 500). She also emphasizes the importance of a clear sense of right and wrong which is necessary to aid the proper judgment of their husbands, brothers, or sons in some intricate affairs (ibid.). Likewise, John Ruskin thinks that women "must be enduringly, incorruptibly good," and be wise "not for self-development, but for self-renunciation," and be wise so as to be always at their husbands' side (Ruskin 99-100).

The contrast between Fanny and the leisure-class women — Lady Bertram, Miss Bertrams, Mary Crawford — in *Mansfield Park* embodies the very contrast between upper-class ladies with material value and sensual attractiveness and rising middle-class

women with femininity, "moral value," and "constant vigilance and tireless concern for the well-being of others" (Armstrong 20). Lady Bertram is a typical example of an ornamental woman, since all she does is sit, knit, or nap on a sofa and she never performs domestic duties such as the care of the children. Her selfish daughters are another sort of ornamental woman instructed to be distinguished for elegance and accomplishments (*MP* 364). Mary is also represented as a fashionable, shallow woman sticking to appearance and worldly values and opinions, as her conversation with Edmund and Fanny (*MP* 76), cold-hearted ambition, and the views on her brothers' elopement (*MP* 346) suggest. By contrast, Fanny is described as a woman possessing "good nature," "sweetness of temper," modesty, and physical delicacy, all of which are the qualities required for the ideal domestic woman. She obediently works a lot for others. She seldom asserts her opinion unless it is imperatively needed, and if she does it "by everything in the power of her modest gentle nature" (*MP* 268), "she only hazard[s] a hint" (*MP* 92) or speaks a few words in momentary agitated tone. Therefore Fanny, who ultimately becomes Edmund's wife, can be regarded as a role model of an orthodox, ideal woman. Q. D. Leavis, for example, considers her as an "over-delicate, timidly feminine type of heroine who had been evolved by the women novelists of the last third of the eighteenth century and is marked by their almost superstitious respect for authority" (Leavis 236).

Although Fanny thus appears to be a typical angel in the house, she does have new aspects similar to those of Jane but different from the ideal image of women presented by Darwin, Ellis and Ruskin. First of all, she enshrines various feelings and thoughts as Jane does, though hers are so "quiet" and "deep" (*MP* 290) that they are scarcely noticed. She even feels a rage — Jane's typical passion, although Fanny's one is usually a "silent

indignation" (MP 176) concealed in her soft and gentle demeanor and manner of speaking. For example, Fanny's "feelings" are "all in revolt" (MP 278), when she feels she is completely misunderstood by Edmund, and later, she is almost "vexed into . . . anger" (MP 333) against him who seems to be too blind to the faults of Mary. There are three times in the novel when she vents her intense feelings and speaks with "an exclamation" (MP 246) or "a warmth" (MP 272) which astonishes not only the hearer (Henry, Sir Thomas, Edmund) but also Fanny herself. Even though Fanny's self-assertion does not seem to be rough and audacious, there exists a certain sign of strength and boldness in her behavior, which is not suitable for an angel. In fact, hearing her firm rejection of Henry's proposal, Sir Thomas reproaches her for being "self-willed, obstinate, selfish, and ungrateful" (MP 250). However, she does not change her resolution, despite the reproach from her foster father and the danger of losing his favor. Such strength of character can be considered as a remarkably new aspect to Fanny.

Another notable thing is that Fanny is mentally superior to any other people in the novel. While Ellis might construct and reinforce the idea of absolute superiority of men over women in both mental and physical power,⁴ it is Fanny in *Mansfield Park* who possesses the best and strongest will, belief, and judging ability as it is shown, for example, in her proper rejection of private theatre and proposal, and also as Edmund "acknowledge[s] Fanny's mental superiority" and even feels she is "only too good for him" (MP 370) in the end. Although having been regarded as an insignificant child both in her own home and in Mansfield Park, Fanny is eventually needed and trusted as a respectable adviser by her sister Susan, a wanted daughter by her foster parents (Sir Thomas and Lady Bertram), and an excellent wife by Edmund. Thus Fanny is depicted neither as a mere ornamental

woman nor as an ordinary angel in the house. Henry describes her as follows:

You have some touches of the angel in you, beyond what—
not merely beyond what one sees, because one never sees
any thing like it—but beyond what one fancies might be.
(*MP* 269)

Fanny is represented as a woman beyond an angel in *Mansfield Park*.

III A Newer Angel

Jane, like Fanny, certainly possesses the elements of an "angel in the house," though they often tend to be submerged in her innovative words and actions. Having acquired "more harmonious thoughts," "better regulated feelings," and "allegiance to duty and order" (*JE* 84) through the instruction of Miss Temple at Lowood, she becomes a disciplined, orderly, subdued, and basically obedient woman, as Rochester thinks the Lowood constraint controls her features, muffles her voice, and restricts her limbs so as not to speak freely and move too quickly (*JE* 138). Apparently feeble, "puny and insignificant" (*JE* 259), she has enough internal strength and activity of mind to combat the evils of life and guides Rochester to choose the right way, when they are faced with the danger and temptation of bigamy. In addition, she longs to have a home; she even declares that "domestic endearments and household joys" are "[t]he best things the world has" (*JE* 390). At the end of the novel, she actually becomes a devoted wife living and working in an extremely domestic sphere, Ferndean Manor, which is isolated from society. Therefore Jane meets the requirements for an angel in the house advocated by Darwin, Ellis and Ruskin.

Yet a remarkable newness which is appropriate neither for an

ornamental lady nor for an angel in the house can be found in Jane. No matter how disciplined she is, a "vivid, restless, resolute" (*JE* 138) disposition still exists under her calmness and austerity. Jane has emotion as strong and passionate as it was in the heart of ten-year-old Jane, and she does express it without hesitation. Jane offers her own opinions without reserve. Having strength of character, she does not change her resolution. While she is asserting her opinions, she is bold, stubborn and "indomitable" (*JE* 317) rather than docile or modest. Furthermore, she makes the following famous remark opposing the ideas of Ellis and Ruskin who declared that all women have to do is "devot[ing] themselves assiduously to their domestic duties" (Ellis (a) 497), and therefore they do not really need academic intelligence (Ellis (a) 503; Ruskin 102-05):

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. (*JE* 109)

This quotation suggests that neither household duties (cooking and knitting) imposed on domestic women nor daily lives of ornamental ladies (playing the piano and embroidering) will satisfy Jane. As Jane says during the engagement period that she will earn her board and lodging by continuing her work as a governess, she may never content herself with dependency on her

husband. She despises a merely ornamental woman, such as Blanche or Georgiana, who spend time on attracting prosperous men with their attainments, adornments, and sensual charm, since they seem to Jane to be nothing more than a mistress like Céline Varens in terms of being a mere male object. Therefore she feels "annoyance and degradation" (*JE* 268, 269), when Rochester tries to dress her with expensive outfits—in other words when he tries to make her an ornamental lady—after their engagement.

Jane surpasses both the ideal domestic woman—an angel in the house and an ornamental, dependent woman—a perfect lady, since she is also a mentally and even physically superior wife who is indispensable for the life of her husband. It is Jane who, like a fairy-tale prince, goes into the thick, dark and gloomy wood surrounding Ferndean in order to save and revive the blind, disabled, powerless Rochester who now must depend on someone else. In their conjugal relationship, Jane is the less vulnerable of the two and she is the one who protects, guides, and supports the partner. In addition to this interesting inversion of the conventional gender role, it is also notable that she is a financially independent woman at the end, even though she owes it to an unexpected inheritance and she ultimately becomes a faithful wife.⁵ Taking into account these innovative aspects, Jane can be differentiated from being an ordinary "angel in the house" reflected in Miss Temple and Mrs. Fairfax as well as an ornamental, "perfect lady" embodied by many of the upper-class ladies depicted in the novel. As Mrs. Oliphant related in 1855 that "*Jane Eyre* stole upon the scene, and the most alarming revolution of modern times has followed the invasion of *Jane Eyre*" (Oliphant 557), and as Ellen Moers discusses that "*Jane Eyre* is indeed the prime source, as Woolf discerned, for the language of rage and the metaphors of slavery as they permeated the literary

imagination of Victorian women" (Moers 16), Jane can be considered as a new angel in the house who challenges the prevailing type of ideal woman in that period.

Conclusion

It is worth noting that despite being depicted as the timidest and most exemplary heroine of Austen, Fanny has remarkably new elements which can be associated with those of Jane's. First of all, she lacks enough beauty to attract other people's attention. She enshrines strong will, thoughts, and feelings in her heart just as the vivacious heroines of Austen as well as Jane Eyre do. In addition, she finally becomes a "new" angel; she is not only spiritually superior to her husband but also strong, active, and capable enough to support him as well as other family members "*in propria persona*" (MP 313). These new features by which Fanny can be differentiated from both an ordinary "angel in the house" and a "perfect lady" seem to be inherited, developed, and openly re-presented in *Jane Eyre*. Even though she appears to become an ordinary housewife like Fanny in the end, she is not an angel either. She actually says to Rochester, "I am not an angel," when he calls her an "angel as [his] comforter." (JE 260) Indeed, Jane is a much newer angel in the house than Fanny, since she makes a strong self-assertion, expresses her feeling, questions the domestic sphere and household duties imposed on women, dislikes absolute dependence, excels her husband in both mental and physical quality, and consequently initiates re-creation of the image of a heroine in literary works.

Mansfield Park and *Jane Eyre* not only present a new image of a heroine but also its transition, and contain even some hints and possibilities of its future development. The newness of Fanny and Jane is inherited and further developed in their successors, Lucy Snowe in *Villette* for example, who no longer

remain or belong to the domestic sphere. Thus *Mansfield Park* and *Jane Eyre* certainly give birth to new angels—precursors of later heroines, although it is prone to be unnoticed if we are pre-possessed with the fixed image of timid and conventional Fanny and with resolving the discrepancy between Jane's revolutionary elements as an early feminist and her commonplace aspects as a devoted housewife.

Notes

- 1 Jane Austen, *Mansfield Park* (New York: Oxford UP, 2003). Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text. Hereafter, quotations from *Mansfield Park* will be cited as *MP*.
- 2 Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (New York: Oxford UP, 2000). Subsequent references to this book will be cited parenthetically in the text. Hereafter, quotations from *Jane Eyre* will be cited as *JE*.
- 3 See Miriam Farris Allott, ed., *The Critical Heritage: The Brontës* (New York: Routledge, 1995) 109.
- 4 Ellis mentions that "the first thing of importance" for women "is to be content to be inferior to men—inferior in mental power, in the same proportion that you are inferior in bodily strength." See *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities* (New York: Appleton, 1842) 8.
- 5 Armstrong also accords a high value to Jane's financial independence in comparison with other ambitious heroines desiring nothing more than economic dependency upon the man who valued them for their qualities of mind. See Armstrong, 49.

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