ABSTRACT

JOANNA PACCHIOLI. Birds of the Air and Beasts of the Field: An Animal Studies Perspective on the Self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. (Under the direction of Professor Dr. Leila May.)

It may seem difficult to justify yet another look at *Jane Eyre*, a novel weighted down with over a century of fulsome literary criticism, but with the recent turn to animal studies there may be room to mine the story once more in search of the claims it makes about the rise of the self distinctively defined in terms of our relationship to animals. By considering the context of animal rights movements, scientific thought, and theological and religious beliefs, I argue that Brontë casts animals as an alternate and transmutable category of existence, thus complicating the spiritual and gender-binaries that formed the self in a time in which fixed placement—whether in class, religion, or gender roles—was tremendously authoritative in defining the self. Because of Jane’s physical appearance, disposition, behavior, gender, and class, she is relegated to the subordinate category of the ‘other,’ specifically a bestial animal. However, while these associations are meant to subjugate her, her status as animal ‘other’ provides an alternate way for her to defend and define herself, thus redeeming the connotations of being defined in animalistic terms. More importantly, Brontë heavily associates Jane with birds. In strategically employing these ornithological references, Brontë not only constructs a female self that challenges Victorian social strictures by revealing a creature free of domestic boundaries and capable to see and speak in previously limited realms but also, by invoking the contemporary sympathies and discourse surrounding animal rights through the caged bird analogy, subsequently advocates for a more equal understanding amongst human animal species and non-human animal species.