Engagement is an in-between time: after the promise and before the fulfillment. It is taken for granted as a period of static expectation, an overlooked intermediary phase that inevitably impels two individuals towards union. This unification is the natural outcome of Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre*, the convergence towards which its narrative energies intrinsically tend. Why, then, is the engagement of Jane and Rochester, the novel’s central characters, a source of tension and distance rather than harmony and concord? Before Rochester’s proposal, Jane freely declares: “[I]t is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!” and Rochester assents (292). After

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Jane’s acceptance, he declares himself to have been mastered by her while intending to elevate her to the social status of a noblewoman. Yet, by doing so, he would master her. Wedlock not only signifies a binding tie and loss of autonomy but also represents a social institution inseparable from accompanying constructions of gender and class. Even though Jane and Rochester’s engagement appears to equalize their comparative social disparity, it actually upsets their original connection of relative equality and alters it into one of implied bondage because of the attendant transition from a relationship apart from society to one with societal expectations and definitions.

On the eve of their engagement, Jane and Rochester regard each other as equals because their relationship is conducted in social isolation. Brontë draws clear parallels between the garden in the proposal scene and the Garden of Eden. She explicitly describes the garden as “Eden-like” (286), but also includes more subtle imagery. Rochester tells Jane: “[I]t is as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string situated in the corresponding quarter of your little frame” (291). This echoes the Biblical story in which Eve is created from Adam’s left rib, forming a bond of kinship and likeness. The allusions to Eden are significant not only because of the hidden temptation that occurs that night in the form of Rochester’s proposal, but also because of the nature of the Garden of Eden: it is pre-social. Only

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two humans exist, and they behave as equals. Only after Eve eats from the Apple does God decree that Adam shall rule over her as they leave the Garden and enter the world of men. Inside the garden, Jane and Rochester are alone. Rochester calls Jane “my equal...and my likeness...my own flesh” (295), phrasing that draws parallels back to Eve being created out of Adam’s rib and to the original Biblical story of creation, in which God creates all creatures in his image, both male and female. Jane declares: “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh: it is... as if...we stood at God’s feet, equal – as we are!” (292). Jane’s declaration puts her and Rochester’s relationship in the context of souls standing in front of God, entirely separate from the world of men. Only in this framework of societal isolation are Jane and Rochester equals; a social arena would label Rochester as superior and Jane inferior on the basis of both class and gender.

Paralleling the course of Adam and Eve, only after Jane accepts Rochester’s marriage proposal does their relationship become one of inequality. The marriage proposal represents the Apple; in yielding to it Jane not only unknowingly agrees to bigamy but also introduces a societal institution into a relationship that has defied societal definition from its inception. Rochester asks Jane at the near-beginning of their interactions in the novel: “[W]ill you consent to dispense with a great many conventional forms and phrases?” (158). She does, and they

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accordingly converse without adherence to many social customs. By a similar principle, Jane and Rochester primarily interact alone. Even when Rochester encourages Jane to be present when he has house-guests, he and Jane do not mingle in front of company. The image that Brontë’s allusions to the Garden of Eden create encapsulates the transition away from a cord of kinship-like connection between equals free of worldly trappings and towards the bonds of matrimony as a societal institution. As Jane and Rochester leave the isolation of the garden and enter society, man and woman become master and dependent.

Accordingly, Jane and Rochester’s engagement alters the image of the simple connecting cord into one of veiled but binding entwinement. On the morning after the proposal in the garden, Rochester declares: “Jane, you please me, and you master me...while I am twining the soft, silken skein round my finger, it sends a thrill up my arm to my heart. I am influenced – conquered” (301). This sentence is intricately and deceptively woven. Amongst all the smooth, tender protestations of having been mastered by Jane, a reader—or Jane—may easily overlook the basic occupation that Rochester ascribes to himself: twining Jane around his finger. The alliterative metaphor of Jane as “soft, silken skein” emphasizes the way Rochester portrays her as delicate, supple, and malleable. Even the “s” sound is soft, and the “s” letter is twisted. Though Jane’s resistance might “thrill” Rochester, it does not alter his well-meaning but inexorable intent to master her. The cord that had been an embodiment of
their likeness and connection has morphed into an entanglement that binds Jane to Rochester’s will.

As Rochester plans for the wedding, his words alter the thread of connection still further and rigidify it into a chain; his language suggests a relationship of inequality at the intersection of two seeming societal opposites, nobility and slavery. Rochester intimates: “I will myself put the diamond chain round your neck...nature, at least, has stamped her patent of nobility on this brow, Jane; and I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-like fingers with rings” (299). The idea of nature stamping a patent of nobility is innately contradictory: the natural world has nothing to do with exclusive copyrights or aristocratic rank. This phrase underlines the conflict between the Eden-like garden of the proposal and the societal world of the engagement. Taken as a whole, Rochester’s words paint an image of slavery: a heavy chain around the neck, an insignia branded into the skin, a set of handcuffs binding the wrists. Many of the verbs Rochester uses, too, connote a burden and harsh treatment: “stamped...clasp...load.” The alliteration of “fine wrists...fairy-like fingers” evokes the fairy-tale feeling usually associated with magically transforming a plainly-dressed heroine of modest means into a beautiful, sparkling princess. It therefore underscores the near-grotesque contrast between a “fairy tale,” which is what Jane says her marriage with Rochester sounds like (298), and what Rochester’s words actually imply:
subjugation. He is trying to socially elevate her to the status of a noblewoman, but in doing so, he enslaves her.

This is why Rochester’s lavish gifts make Jane’s cheek burn “with a sense of annoyance and degradation” even though the concepts of elevation and degradation are antitheses (309). As the engagement introduces societal expectations into the relationship, the figurative cord connecting the two equals in the garden mutates into an explicit metaphor of slavery. Jane observes: “[Rochester’s] smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (310). The sultan’s enrichment of his slave is an oxymoron: the “enriched” slave still owns nothing. Any gold or gems the sultan gives her are still his; he owns her and all of her possessions. Giving gifts to a slave is a hollow mockery; it emphasizes that, in addition to the slave’s inability to own objects, she is unable to own even herself. The sultan adorns the slave so that he can display her as valuable property: an object.

Similarly, Rochester seeks to ornament Jane and superficially raise her social standing despite her protestations; ironically, by doing so he degrades her. As a middle-class woman with a vocation, Jane is a free and independent person. As a high-class wife whose accomplishments serve as a status marker for her husband, Jane would be an object. In a convergence of gender and class constructs, noblewomen are enriched slaves. They cannot support themselves while maintaining their social status and must marry men for money; even then, the women do
not truly own the money. Jane refers to a pearl necklace Rochester has given her as she departs Thornfield Hall: “I left that; it was not mine” (368). Jane does not feel she has legitimate claim to Rochester’s gifts for the same reason that the sultan’s slave cannot own the gifts she receives; they are not hers. She can retain and wear Rochester’s necklace only so long as she submits to the role of noblewoman; they are not only the symbols of her enslavement but also his means of manipulating her social persona. On the first day of her engagement to Rochester, Jane asserts internally: “[I]f I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr Rochester an accession of fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now” (310). The use of the word “kept” implies a dependent role like that of a mistress or slave. Jane pursues a fortune not for material benefit or even to raise her own social class—at least not directly—but in order to be more independent in her marriage. Jane’s description of the sultan as “in a blissful and fond moment” simultaneously acknowledges the seemingly benevolent nature of Rochester’s energies while implying that Rochester’s period of apparent submissive devotion is fleeting and momentary. Though this period in which Rochester gilds Jane and places her on an artificial pedestal may seem benign, soon an unveiled relationship of bondage will commence. Once Rochester and Jane are engaged to be married, societal expectations incrementally alter their interactions until the sequence culminates with Rochester’s attempt to enslave Jane.

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The way Rochester and Jane refer to each other clarifies this evolution of their relationship as a result of their engagement. Throughout the novel, Jane unfailingly addresses Rochester as “sir.” In the garden proposal scene, Rochester entreats: “Say, Edward...I will marry you” (295). Instead, she replies: “sir, I will marry you” (295). Even as Jane accepts his proposal, she attempts to modify the terms. Rochester wants her to call him Edward. She resists him, and calls him “sir.” His persistence induces the one occasion in the novel’s text where Jane addresses Rochester by his first name (295). Except for that one deviation, Jane insists on referring to her fiancé as “sir;” while this implies submission, it is actually her attempt to retain her autonomy. In Jane and Rochester’s previous interactions as employer and governess, Jane is a middle class woman with a respectable occupation and the freedom to leave Rochester’s employ. He treats her as his equal. While society perceives the advance from poor governess to enriched noblewoman as reducing the social inequality between Jane and Rochester, the conversion actually subverts the equal nature of their previous relationship. Rochester attempts to turn Jane into a high class ‘kept woman’ without a vocation of her own or the freedom to leave him. Her insistence on calling him “sir,” as well as her expressed intent to continue as Adele’s governess (311), represents her endeavor to preserve the equality she had enjoyed before the social institution of wedlock started to strip away her autonomy.

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Rochester’s naming of Jane is equally enlightening; on the very first morning of their engagement, he seeks to verbally subvert her identity and replace it with a socially-constructed one. The mutation begins with the change of “Jane Eyre” to “Jane Rochester,” then to “Mrs Rochester,” and finally to “Fairfax Rochester’s girl bride” (298). Rochester incrementally alters Jane’s name until “Jane Eyre” is completely gone; her identity is wholly bleached out and subsumed in that of her soon-to-be husband. As simply “Jane Eyre,” Jane’s identity is free from social definition. Conversely, in Rochester’s final identification of her, Jane is not even given a name of her own; she is merely a girl bride belonging to Fairfax Rochester and entirely socially labeled. She is no longer an independent adult woman with an autonomous identity; instead, her engagement has transformed her into an enriched slave girl.

The introduction of a societal institution into a relationship that had been socially isolated fundamentally changes that relationship. Societal expectations of class and gender siphon away Jane’s autonomy, distorting what had been clear and true, twisting and hardening the cord of connection that had been light and straight into a chain of bondage. Instead of being equals before God, Rochester and Jane become nobleman and noblewoman: owner and slave. The tension created by their engagement actually makes perfect sense; their relationship cannot stay the same when transformed. An engagement is
almost a fundamental paradox. It is meant to be a static period of transition, a suspended period of motion, a fixed period of change. It is inherently unstable: a near contradiction in terms.
Work Cited