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An 1859 Caribbean Perspective on Jane Eyre

The year 1859 marked the 25th anniversary of the coming into force of the Emancipation Act and the centenary of the birth of William Wilberforce. In 1859, too, Cousin Stella; or Conflict, the first Caribbean reworking of Jane Eyre, was published by Smith, Elder, the original publisher of Jane Eyre, on the strength of a recommendation by Elizabeth Gaskell, Brontë’s biographer.¹ Its anonymous author was expatriate Jamaican writer Henrietta Camilla Jenkin (1808–85), a white Creole. The three-volume novel is a Bildungsroman, told in the third person, which traces the development of white Creole Stella Pepita Joddrell, whose history refigures aspects of Brontë’s characters Jane Eyre and Adèle Varens, and is set largely between 1828 and 1832. In Cousin Stella; or Conflict Jenkin strikingly reworks a considerable number of narrative topoi from Jane Eyre to create an analogue or parallel text, rather than shifts the balance of the story to the point of view of one of the minor characters.² Jean Rhys’s Wide Sargasso Sea (1966), which meshes together first-person voices of Antoinette (Bertha) Cosway Mason, the unnamed Edward Rochester, and Grace Poole to reconstruct a ‘plausible’ life of Bertha Mason (Letters 156), has been the most influential retelling of the latter kind.³ Rhys writes that she ‘was vexed’ by Brontë’s ‘portrait of the “paper tiger” lunatic, the all wrong Creole scenes’ (Letters 262). In a project that prefigures aspects of Wide Sargasso Sea, Jenkin engages with many of the discursive fields of Jane Eyre I have outlined in earlier chapters.

Jenkin critically engages with discourses of the tropical degeneracy of white Creole people. She also offers stringent comment on the evangelical ideals that animated the abolitionist movement in Britain, on the clash between these ideals and dominant plantocratic values in late plantation slavery culture, on despotism, and on analogies between

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women’s position and slavery. Stella Jodrell’s identification with the rebel slave is far more limited than Jane Eyre’s. Jenkin extends her engagement with discourses of degeneracy to criticize assumptions about the degenerative influence of ‘foreign’ blood and the degeneracy of female public performers. Jenkin represents and commemorates the institution of plantation slavery as a despotism that corrupts slave-holders (CS 3:42) and is anti-slavery, though offering a sympathetic portrait of ‘liberal’ plantocratic arguments which upheld, according to her, ‘the rights of humanity and justice’ for both enslaved people and planters (1:216–17). As a white Creole family romance Cousin Stella emphasizes divine and temporal retribution against slave-owners – their damnation, ruin, and dispossession. The novel, with its blinkered and stereotypical representation of African Jamaican characters, supports the character Louis Gautier’s view that while Sam Sharpe’s 1831 rebellion is a mark of political maturation among enslaved people, leaving open only ‘severest restrictions’ or immediate emancipation (3:218) as prudent courses of action, ‘the blacks of these islands are too degraded a set of beings to benefit by freedom’, a degradation ‘only partly’ attributable to enslavement and its legacies (2:97).

Jenkin’s narrative voice sums up the period in which Cousin Stella is set: ‘The old nations of Europe were vibrating under the struggle for liberty. . . . The reverberations of the emotions of Europe ran the round of the globe. Gold and blood were plentifully spent, a fierce cloud gathered, and hung heavy and threateningly over the West Indies; when it burst, would it purify, or utterly destroy?’ (3:42–3) These ‘emotions of Europe’ are agitation over abolition of slavery, the Reform Bill and Corn Laws in England, and revolutions in France and Italy. The political climax of the novel is the 1831 slave rebellion in Jamaica, Sam Sharpe’s rebellion, and its immediate aftermath, to which Brontë alludes, as I showed in Chapter 1.

Parts of the novel’s plot turn on aspects of what became known as the Disallowed Slave Act. Jamaica was a chartered colony with a local parliament. In 1823 the British government recommended various amelioration measures to the Jamaican House of Assembly, part of its shift in policy towards amelioration, which, as I outlined in Chapter 1, was held responsible by planters and the pro-slavery lobby for the Demerara rebellion and more widespread unrest among slaves. Lambert observes, ‘Although based on the proposals of the West India Committee [the pro-slavery lobby group in Britain] and part of its strategy to undercut calls for immediate emancipation, this accommodationist approach was unpopular among resident whites, and reformism was met with local