

# Staging Cinderellas:

## Examining nineteenth-century ideas of the Victorian ballet-girl in *Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre*

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*This article examines nineteenth-century ideas of Victorian ballet-girls, exploring these in nineteenth-century art and literature. The artefacts presented – G. A. Turner’s aquatint, Miss Clara Webster, and Charlotte Brontë’s novel, Jane Eyre – at first suggest opposing ideas respecting Victorian ballet-girls, in the hallowed figure of real-life Clara or the condemned figure of fictional Céline. Neither artefact can directly address the real hardships Victorian ballet-girls faced, like danger of fire from gas foot-lights, societal judgment, or girls’ objectification through ballet’s fantastical iconography. Reality for working girls in Victorian England (including governess Jane, likened to Rochester’s preferred ballet-girl type) was more precarious than Brontë’s tale and Turner’s aquatint convey. I suggest that both artefacts pity the Victorian ballet-girl, challenging prejudice. Brontë also indicates the problem of ballet iconography affecting men’s interpretation of women, and through Jane, stresses the importance of women being seen, understood, and appreciated for their individual human qualities.*

**G.** A. Turner’s aquatint *Miss Clara Webster* (1845) and Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) both challenge Victorian attitudes to the ballet and working ballet-girls. The term ‘ballet-girl’ (in contrast with twentieth-century term ‘ballerina’) stipulates girlishness as a pre-condition (Céline Varens, in *Jane Eyre*, is also called ‘opera-girl’).<sup>1</sup> The iconography of Romantic ballet, with its sylphs, fairies, *et al.*, gloried in girlish purity. This dictated the representation of real-life ballet-girl Clara in *Miss Clara Webster*, and the tone of Victorian tributes she received at her death, as well as the terms that fictional Jane Eyre understands can create romantic success with Rochester. Ballet-girl Céline Varens appears a nostalgic threat for Jane, as suggested by Rochester’s language. Described by Rochester, Jane herself also seems a deified ballet-girl.

Girls’ victimisation is central to their deification in *Jane Eyre* and *Miss Clara Webster*. Turner’s purpose in creating *Miss Clara Webster* is real commemoration: Clara

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847], ed. by Michael Mason (London: Penguin Classics, 1996), p. 164.

died in the aftermath of burns at Drury Lane, her dress having caught fire during a performance on 14 December 1844.<sup>2</sup> She died days later, on 17 December 1844, aged 23.<sup>3</sup> Clara's horrific fate wasn't unusual. Nineteenth-century ballet sexualised and sanctified a costumed ballet-girl as a fantasy-object, even as girls were simultaneously denigrated because of their profession. This left the girls victim to both their audience's gaze and management negligence: managers failed to flameproof and safeguard stages. Some Victorians judged ballet-girls kindly: Albert Smith, writing in 1847, points to working ballet-girls' vital contributions to families' livelihoods, and their generosity:

Amongst no other class have we witnessed more domestic devotion, or readiness at all times to proffer mutual assistance [...] than in the Corps de Ballet.<sup>4</sup>

Since dancers were also 'underpaid', though 'overworked', many had two jobs, both as dancers and factory girls: their work ethic was indisputable.<sup>5</sup> Despite this, many 'regarded ballet-girls as little better than street-walkers'.<sup>6</sup> Ivor Guest notes one ballet-girl writing in a published lament in 1858, 'they do think so badly of us'.<sup>7</sup> The journalist Henry Mayhew, after talking to one 'street-dancer', notes the 'young ladies' appearing in 'short petticoats [...] as have been in the opera corps-de-ballet'.<sup>8</sup> Tracy C. Davis observes:

Henry Mayhew (1862) insists that ballet-girls' bad reputation is well deserved [...] but he does not explain how, if they did not accept money, they could be called prostitutes [...] he accepts the common equation of women's extramarital sex with [...] prostitution.<sup>9</sup>

Davis adds that ballet-girls alone (not their lovers or enablers) were judged, blamed for extramarital sex.<sup>10</sup> As the bias implies, marriage in Victorian England was the acceptable female vocation: Walter E. Houghton, referencing Mrs Ellis' infamous 1843 treatise, indicates a woman's chief duty was to marry and so 'careers were

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<sup>2</sup> Ivor Guest, *Victorian Ballet-Girl: The Tragic Story of Clara Webster* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957), pp. 108–11.

<sup>3</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 114.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Smith, *The Natural History of the Ballet Girl* [1847] (London: Dance Books Ltd., 1996), pp. 91–92.

<sup>5</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 26, p. 5.

<sup>6</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, Volume III (London: Griffin, Bohn, and Company: Stationers' Hall Court, 1861), p. 144.

<sup>9</sup> Tracy C. Davis, 'Actresses and Prostitutes in Victorian London', *Theatre Research International*, 13.3, (1988), 221–234, p. 223.

<sup>10</sup> Davis, p. 231.

dangerous'.<sup>11</sup> (Kathryn Hughes suggests this would be true even for governesses like Jane Eyre.)<sup>12</sup> Marriage to ballet-girls was socially frowned upon, however, whilst stages' gas footlights (used for illuminating girls' legs, igniting spectators' desires) caused tragic, incalculable fatalities.<sup>13</sup>

Stage footlights lit up ballet-girls' figures, their looks commoditised for audience gratification. This took precedence over safeguarding. Guest lists many near misses and fatalities: he calls it an accepted 'holocaust of ballet-girls'.<sup>14</sup> However, the stagehand Daniel Coyle (who had tried to save Clara Webster) remarked: 'A piece of wire-work before the opening, the accident could not have occurred.'<sup>15</sup> Mindy Aloff explains many nineteenth-century dancers were burnt in cities across the world, including 'Marseilles, Hamburg, New York, Liverpool, Trieste, Rio de Janeiro, Naples'.<sup>16</sup> Respecting managers' lack of care or regulation, Alison Matthews David writes:

The visual imperatives of staging and managers' desire to arouse erotic desire in their audience outweighed the practical necessities [...] exposing the legs of the dancer both to the eyes of the spectator and what Théophile Gautier described as the 'licking tongues' of the gas footlamp [*sic*] [...] 'especially to illuminate the legs,' [...] the open weave of the honeycomb-like hexagonal tulle they wore in multiple layers of skirts killed Clara Webster.<sup>17</sup>

Dancers' costume material consisted of airy, ethereal, but highly flammable 'machine-woven gauze, tulle, and tarlatane [*sic*]', after 'Marie Taglioni's performance of *La Sylphide* in 1832 cemented the aesthetic'.<sup>18</sup> In Paris, director Louis Véron had elevated Taglioni to 'star ballerina'.<sup>19</sup> Jennifer Homans outlines the enduring, widespread appeal of Taglioni's role: Victorian 'paper dolls' and 'lithographic prints' popularised the look.<sup>20</sup> It resulted in dancers' refusal to flameproof dresses, because the technique yellowed and stiffened fabric.<sup>21</sup> David's article includes horrific photographs of French dancer Emma Livry's dress from the Musée-Bibliothèque de

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<sup>11</sup> Walter E. Houghton, *The Victorian Frame of Mind: 1830-1870* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957), p. 351, p. 348, p. 349.

<sup>12</sup> Kathryn Hughes, *The Victorian Governess* (London: The Hambledon Press, 1993), p. 31.

<sup>13</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 120, p. 2-9.

<sup>14</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 1, p. 3, pp. 5-6.

<sup>15</sup> Guest, p. 108, p. 112.

<sup>16</sup> Mindy Aloff, *Dance Anecdotes: Stories from the Worlds of Ballet, Broadway, the Ballroom, and Modern Dance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 155.

<sup>17</sup> Alison Matthews David, 'Blazing Ballet Girls and Flannelette Shrouds: Fabric, Fire, and Fear in the Long Nineteenth Century', *Textile: Cloth and Culture*, 14.2, (2016) 244-267, p. 253.

<sup>18</sup> David, p. 245, p. 248.

<sup>19</sup> Ivor Guest, *The Paris Opéra Ballet* (Alton: Dance Books Ltd., 2006), p. 45

<sup>20</sup> Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of Ballet* (London: Granta Books, 2010), p. 163.

<sup>21</sup> David, p. 254.

l'Opéra: her burnt costume (1862) speaks to the trauma of one among many, footnoted in history, hidden in the arts.<sup>22</sup>

Turner, as artist, demonstrates gentle sensitivity in his 1845 aquatint of *Miss Clara Webster*, which at once mourns, venerates, and shields its subject. Its inscription reads:

MISS CLARA WEBSTER / From a Sketch taken previous to her Death  
and in the drefs [*sic*] she wore on the evening of her melancholy and fatal  
accident. [...] Burned to death on Drury Lane stage, 1844.<sup>23</sup>



*Figure 1. G. A. Turner, Miss Clara Webster, 1845.  
Etching and aquatint coloured by  
hand, 556 × 405 mm.  
Theatre and Performance Collection,  
Victoria & Albert Museum, London.  
© Victoria & Albert Museum,  
London.*

Mary Stewart Evans observed of artists like Turner and Brandard:

It is to this little band of artists [...] that we owe our conception of [...] the pin-up girl of her generation [...] for posterity they will remain forever poised [...] or floating through the air.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> David, p. 255.

<sup>23</sup> G. A. Turner, *Miss Clara Webster* (London: © Victoria & Albert Museum, 1845).

Evans observes, too, a ‘robot[ic]’ aspect to these painted ballet-girls, in posed stillness or fixed motion.<sup>25</sup> In another commemorating piece (*Clara Webster / as Nancy, in the Ballet of / The Statute Fair*), also painted in 1845, artist John Brandard depicts Clara with roses and ribbons, with humanising warmth.<sup>26</sup> There is little that is robotic about the ease of his Clara’s posture: Brandard’s art commemorates Clara through its spiritedness.



Figure 2. John Brandard, Clara Webster | as Nancy, in the Ballet of | The Statute Fair, 1845. Lithograph coloured by hand, 428 mm × 290 mm. Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

On the other hand, Turner’s Clara is otherworldly. The ease with which Clara stands unwaveringly, unendingly on pointe suggests incontestable (not altogether human) virtuosity. Her simple dress and ethereal, sylph-like aura allude to the angelic and innocent heroines of continental ballets. Referring to *Giselle* (1841), *La Sylphide*, and other Romantic ballet plots, Carol Lee explains:

Romantics’ obsession with the fragility and decay of feminine beauty was startlingly effective when expressed in the medium of dance. The concept of the heroine as a chimerical creature, superior [...] found renewed potency.<sup>27</sup>

Most notably, Turner’s piece (like Brandard’s) preserves Clara’s beauty, and also elevates it: Karlien van den Beukel notes Gautier’s infamous written tribute to

<sup>24</sup> Mary Stewart Evans, ‘The Romantic Ballet Print’, *Country Life*, 113.2927, (1953), 484–485, p. 485.

<sup>25</sup> Evans, p. 484.

<sup>26</sup> John Brandard, *Clara Webster | as Nancy, in the Ballet of | The Statute Fair* (London: © Victoria & Albert Museum, 1845).

<sup>27</sup> Carol Lee, *Ballet in Western Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2002), p. 153.

Clara ('pure profile disfigured', 'for the best', etc.).<sup>28</sup> In Turner's piece, Clara's shoulders are bare, and her skin is perfect, and Clara's look is also celestial. Turner also guides attention from shoulders to voluminous dress: the skirt that caught alight is captioned and central to Turner's piece, taking up most space, more than Clara herself. It seems no accident that her skirt (still modestly covering her knees) overpowers, almost swamps her, yet her seraphic aspect means Turner commemorates Clara as a heavenly being, enhancing and immortalising her beauty in aesthetic tribute. She floats like a spirit, almost carried by her cloud-like tulle, and the scenery behind her is ghostly and ashen. Turner's piece is caringly rendered, but in it, Clara's beauty remains subject to, and of, our voyeuristic gaze. Her dress, in Turner's aquatint, is the focal point. It swamps her, drawing our gaze in perpetuity, but Clara's haunting gaze looks back at us, too.

Meanwhile, cashmere-clad ballet-girl Céline Varens in *Jane Eyre* seems sensuousness embodied. *Jane Eyre's* treatment of theatrics seems, on the surface, antagonistic: Jane refuses to join in charades.<sup>29</sup> She accepts Rochester's brutal portrait of Céline, deciding her pupil Adèle's frivolity is 'probably from her mother [Céline]'.<sup>30</sup> There is supposedly a stark contrast between Jane and Céline, who also tutored her daughter: as Adèle's governess, Jane readies herself to correct Céline's coaching of Adèle in the arts.<sup>31</sup> Judith Flanders observes that many Victorians considered theatre 'dangerous', and 'requirement for a patent to perform legitimate drama remained in place [in England] until the Theatre Regulations Act of 1843'.<sup>32</sup> This Act took place four years before *Jane Eyre's* publication and the only theatrics that Jane witnesses at Thornfield are tinged with rebellion that she does not feel or share.

Still, *Jane Eyre's* fairy lore draws from theatre and from Europe. One girl's sacrificial love is central to *Jane Eyre*: this is true of the ballets to which Rochester often alludes. These ballets draw on Germanic and Slavic lore and are French productions. Brontë read *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*.<sup>33</sup> One issue referenced sylphs, 'Gisele' [sic], and *La Sylphide*.<sup>34</sup> Rochester calls Jane a 'sylph' and components of the tale he tells Adèle (a scarf of light, a fairy offering a ring) echo *La Sylphide*.<sup>35</sup> He compares Jane to a *wili* (with her 'veil of gossamer', 'from the abode of people who are dead'), then nurtures and kills her hopes, fears her 'death-like hush', and loses her with the dawn,

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<sup>28</sup> Karlien van den Beukel, 'Arthur Symons's Night Life', in *Babylon Or New Jerusalem?: Perceptions of the City in Literature*, ed. by Valeria Tinkler-Villani (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 135–157, p. 151.

<sup>29</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* [1847], p. 207.

<sup>30</sup> Brontë, p. 165.

<sup>31</sup> Brontë, p. 117.

<sup>32</sup> Judith Flanders, *Consuming Passions: Leisure and Pleasure in Victorian Britain* (HarperPress, 2006), p. 292.

<sup>33</sup> Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Abacus, 2010), p. 173, p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> Lorgnon, 'A Word Or Two Of The Opera-Tive Classes', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 55.341, (1844), 292–298, p. 298.

<sup>35</sup> Brontë, p. 292, pp. 299–300.

just as in *Giselle*.<sup>36</sup> Jane forgives Rochester, as Giselle does Albrecht, and the spirits of Giselle and Jane save their loves from destruction ('I am coming!').<sup>37</sup> Bertha echoes *wili* Myrtha, meanwhile, longing to kill all men ('she said she'd drain my heart').<sup>38</sup> The threat of fire haunts Jane in Thornfield, as it haunted Victorian girls in theatres. Jane, too, has the 'look of another world'.<sup>39</sup> As Sarah Davies Cordova writes of *Giselle* and *La Sylphide*, *Jane Eyre* draws (psychologically) its 'male hero into a supernatural world [...] which he does not control'.<sup>40</sup> Ballet lore, then, is integral to *Jane Eyre*.

Ballet-girl Céline also haunts Jane and Rochester. Molly Engelhardt points to Jane's eagerness to hear her doppelgänger's tale, urging Rochester 'back on track'.<sup>41</sup> Céline is also 'little' and Adèle, who resembles Céline, is 'slightly built, with a pale, small-featured face', like Jane.<sup>42</sup> Rochester wants ballet-roses in Jane's hair, as Brandard's Clara Webster wore, as Adèle wore, as Céline must have worn, too.<sup>43</sup> Rochester reveals he lingered 'years' in Paris for Céline and Adèle.<sup>44</sup> He never offers Céline marriage, so it seems probable he lingers to watch (his possible daughter) Adèle grow for signs of resemblance, concluding there are none.<sup>45</sup> It still takes Céline's final romance, removal to Italy, and abandonment of Adèle to force Rochester and Adèle out of Paris, years after the split. Jane states: 'I will not be your English Céline Varens'.<sup>46</sup> She senses she mirrors the ballet-girl type preferred, but if Céline haunts Jane, she also haunts Rochester. Rochester points out 'contrast', but confuses them: Céline and Jane are both artists.<sup>47</sup> (Kathleen A. Miller explains Jane will not see Céline's artistry or inherited artistry in Adèle.)<sup>48</sup> Engelhardt points to Victorian dancers' discipline, implying Céline's (and Clara Webster's).<sup>49</sup> This echoes Jane's own work ethic. Jane also mimics Céline's coquetry:

Rochester's use of fairy language [...] speaks suspiciously of the hold that the ballet [...] has on his fantasy life. Rochester transfers his erotic memories of Céline and the ballet world onto Jane [...] [who] plays the role of the sylph, the *wili*, and the fairy with exceptional aplomb. [...]

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<sup>36</sup> Brontë, p. 300, p. 275, p. 336.

<sup>37</sup> Brontë, p. 467, p. 496.

<sup>38</sup> Brontë, p. 239.

<sup>39</sup> Brontë, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Davies Cordova, 'Romantic ballet in France: 1830-1850', in *The Cambridge Companion to Ballet*, ed. by Marion Kant (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113–125, p. 122.

<sup>41</sup> Molly Engelhardt, *Dancing out of Line: Ballrooms, Ballets, and Mobility in Victorian Fiction and Culture* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2009), p. 103.

<sup>42</sup> Brontë, p. 161, p. 158, p. 116.

<sup>43</sup> Brontë, p. 291, p. 158.

<sup>44</sup> Brontë, p. 164.

<sup>45</sup> Brontë, p. 164.

<sup>46</sup> Brontë, p. 302.

<sup>47</sup> Brontë, p. 164.

<sup>48</sup> Kathleen A. Miller, "'Well that is beautiful, Miss Jane!'" *Jane Eyre* and the Creation of the Female Artist', *Brontë Studies*, 35.3, (2010), 248–266, pp. 255–56.

<sup>49</sup> Engelhardt, p. 96.

Emulating the flirtatious skills of Céline, Jane becomes increasingly proficient.<sup>50</sup>

Rochester's apparent rival for Jane's affections, St. John Rivers, is confused with Céline's chosen 'musician or singer': Rochester imagines, in Rivers, the Grecian god of music, a 'graceful Apollo'.<sup>51</sup> Jane unsettles Rochester because she echoes Céline. She materialises in Hay Lane like a ballet 'elf', putting him in mind of ballet's 'fairy tales'.<sup>52</sup>

Paris, in particular, seems a subtle but inescapable presence in both *Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre*. Clara Webster's own dancing is traceable to Paris, her father having taken lessons with Gaétan Vestris before teaching Clara.<sup>53</sup> Turner's *Miss Clara Webster* draws from Paris' stock of Romantic ballet characters and Paris is where *Giselle* and *La Sylphide* were first staged. It makes the real Clara subject to objectification: if we can liken Clara to *Giselle*, *wili*, etc., we can interpret her as such, as an impossible and incorruptible being. This happens to Jane in *Jane Eyre*. Rochester lived in Paris.<sup>54</sup> While *Jane Eyre*'s timeline is unclear, Guest suggests nineteenth-century ballet in Paris was uniquely 'fitted to convey the lost poetry that Romantic artists claimed to have rediscovered'.<sup>55</sup> Daniel Snowman identifies one 'cluster of operatic obsessives: the *dilettanti* [...] who "delighted" in opera [...] only [the] eyes revealing something of the fiery recesses of his soul'.<sup>56</sup> This sounds just like Rochester. Snowman explains 'Paris was the centre of the operatic world [...] [where] the grandest productions were mounted'; only 'men were allowed to sit in the orchestra stalls' or enter the Green Room, and salons of 'Parisian glitterati' created a 'showcase [...] [for] younger performers [...] they offered an important stepping stone towards a career'.<sup>57</sup> It is Rochester's engagement with Paris ballet that creates connection between Jane and Céline: Jane is a 'fairy' with a 'sylph's foot' (like Céline's 'little foot'), Rochester's most explicit hint that Jane herself is like a ballet-girl, inspiring recollections of ballet.<sup>58</sup> His enthusiasm for ballet disavows his own (false) dichotomy when he praises Jane or censures Céline for their different careers, and working girls in *Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre* look similar, irrespective of working environments.

Clara Webster, Céline Varens, and Jane Eyre are working Cinderellas who are romanticised for girlish vulnerability. Turner's Clara is painted as girlish to protect her as his subject, just as Rochester's Céline is dainty and so at once falls under his

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<sup>50</sup> Engelhardt, p. 103.

<sup>51</sup> Brontë, p. 164, p. 490.

<sup>52</sup> Brontë, p. 351, p. 139.

<sup>53</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 13.

<sup>54</sup> Brontë, p. 349.

<sup>55</sup> Guest, 2006, p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> Daniel Snowman, *The Gilded Stage: A Social History of Opera* (London: Atlantic Books, 2009), pp. 163-64.

<sup>57</sup> Snowman, p. 151, p. 157, p. 153.

<sup>58</sup> Brontë, p. 300, p. 292, p. 161.

protection. Jane, too, accepts and resists Rochester's cocooning her in the same ballet iconography. Smith opens his 1847 book on London ballet-girls by referencing forest glades and fairies.<sup>59</sup> It resembles Rochester's first encounter with Jane: his meeting Jane is an authentic realisation of staging he'd experienced, e.g. like seeing a *wili* from *Giselle* emerging from the trees. Still, Smith seems conscious of spectators like Rochester taking this staging seriously so, stripping out Romantic iconography, Smith then suggests: 'Into the green-room, you will [...] find a small pale child'.<sup>60</sup> She earns 'perhaps a shilling a night', 'cheeks hollow and pale [...] limbs nipped and wasted'.<sup>61</sup> Smith also remarks:

The handsome presents made [to] some of these girls—who work so very hard at so very small a salary—might well turn their heads; as might the offers of a splendid settlement or establishment.<sup>62</sup>

Smith's descriptions are meant for girls like Clara Webster and Céline Varens, but since Smith's words also resemble Jane (who looks like a child, owning just five shillings), so Jane resembles Smith's girls from the ballet.<sup>63</sup> Jane was starved once: perhaps Céline had once been starving, too.<sup>64</sup> In all three cases, Cinderellas must be tethered, garlanded, and lauded.

To men like Rochester, working girls emulate the sylph-like elusiveness performed on stage. However, this elusiveness (in life) results from rootlessness and working poverty (until Mr Eyre's will intervenes for Jane). Engelhardt observes that nineteenth-century dancers selected partners 'according to convenience'.<sup>65</sup> Céline did this, but Jane also suggests Rochester's presence is a convenience ('your strength offers [...] so safe a prop').<sup>66</sup> In love with Michael Bruce, Clara Webster was also occasionally migratory and undiscoverable. Clara's manager Alfred Bunn (like Rochester) suggested *he* was a victim when Clara pleaded for (or simply took) occasional time off from her career demands.<sup>67</sup> Engelhardt implies Jane and Céline wish themselves empowered movers, 'moving when need or desire calls', but their rootlessness stems from poverty and *lack* of options.<sup>68</sup> The 'free', 'independent' Jane at one point considers herself sent out of Thornfield to Ireland for work, accepting she must go wherever Rochester says: 'I am sorry to send my little friend on such weary travels', Rochester teases, before proposing.<sup>69</sup> Like Clara Webster, Céline probably

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<sup>59</sup> Smith, pp. 9–10.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, pp. 15–16.

<sup>61</sup> Smith, pp. 18–19.

<sup>62</sup> Smith, p. 102.

<sup>63</sup> Brontë, p. 474, p. 252.

<sup>64</sup> Brontë, p. 141.

<sup>65</sup> Engelhardt, p. 191.

<sup>66</sup> Brontë, p. 493.

<sup>67</sup> Guest, 1957, pp. 120–21.

<sup>68</sup> Engelhardt, p. 104.

<sup>69</sup> Brontë, p. 284, p. 283.

toured for work and, as routine, faced (nightly) dangers on stage or harassment in the Green Room. According to Rochester, Céline ‘ran away’ to Italy: from what?<sup>70</sup> Céline’s poverty was implied: she was a ballet-girl. She risked fire, so took gifts from Rochester with the need to escape the theatre. Her other options seem limited: to flee to Italy with a poor musician, she’d save meagre wages and risk homelessness without a roof or career, as Jane does. She leaves her child with Mme Frédéric, who is poor: it would suggest Céline’s other choices were poor, too, or that Céline had no one else.<sup>71</sup> Céline’s abandonment of Adèle remains troubling, but Rochester never reveals who informed him of Adèle’s need, and his intervention secures Adèle her position in England. Céline being off-page means all remains unclear (i.e. how adept Céline was at staging situations herself, how loving or cold her feelings for Adèle were, who dogged or conditioned her life or Adèle’s). What *is* clear is that working poverty for passionate girls in *Jane Eyre* signifies a lack of autonomy, causing reckless decisions. Clara Webster also jeopardised work for unsanctioned time off and a weekend with Michael, risking gossip and risking her manager’s anger.<sup>72</sup> Men like Bunn and Rochester lack understanding by criticising and romanticising migratory acts made to gain a semblance of control.

*Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre*, then, are more alike than first seems: working girls are more often victims than victors of stages. Turner is very deliberate in drawing our attention to the fact: his subject, Clara Webster, was killed by tulle, fire, and managerial indifference. *Jane Eyre* suggests the connection between working ballet-girls and *all* working girls: Jane and Céline must both escape fire-prone stages. Céline runs from Paris and the theatre, maybe into deeper poverty. Jane’s stage to escape is Thornfield: Jane extinguishes one fire and escapes another, this time kindled from her bed-sheets, the inn-host tells Jane.<sup>73</sup> Rochester had discovered (in Paris) the theatre as a space to coddle and control ballet-girls, re-creating these conditions at Thornfield, which burns to the ground. His ‘evening conferences’ (urging Jane nearer the firelight) sound like the footlights framing Céline, like *La Sylphide*’s James glimpsing his sylph by firelight.<sup>74</sup> Rochester relishes theatrics and unconsciously reprises the roles of *Giselle*’s Albrecht, *La Sylphide*’s James (both bound to other women, both seeking their loves in the woods) and *La Sylphide*’s fortune-telling witch, Madge (Bertha, called ‘hag’, is also like Madge<sup>75</sup>). Jane’s relationship with Rochester parallels and escapes the metaphorical deaths of *La Sylphide*, too. (The sylph is wrapped in James’ scarf and her wings snap on contact. Sylph and James die at the loss. Having caused the circumstances, Madge triumphs.) Jane returns to Rochester when the ghosts of the ballet are (almost) expelled: the haunted Rochester mentions Jane’s ‘sisters’ from

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<sup>70</sup> Brontë, p. 164.

<sup>71</sup> Brontë, p. 118.

<sup>72</sup> Guest, 1957, pp. 119–20.

<sup>73</sup> Brontë, p. 168, p. 475.

<sup>74</sup> Brontë, p. 166, p. 149.

<sup>75</sup> Brontë, p. 339.

dreams, since the dead sylph was borne aloft by sisters.<sup>76</sup> Jane corrects him (and his narrative's framing): 'I am an independent woman'.<sup>77</sup> It has been a struggle to assert it.

In sum, *Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre* hint at the hardships that Victorian working girls faced and how ballet's iconography romanticised them as girls but vilified them if they stepped out of line. Romantic ballet costumed girls in fantasy, creating archetypes that spilled from ballet into other arts like *Miss Clara Webster* and *Jane Eyre*. *Miss Clara Webster*'s sad simplicity contrasts with flowery written obituaries<sup>78</sup> that enshrined Clara's life ('Harem's Pearl', 'butterfly', etc.).<sup>79</sup> However, Turner's Clara embodies saintliness and girliness to evoke sympathies. Turner's art does not capture the 'buoyancy' or 'elasticity' for which Clara's dancing was praised.<sup>80</sup> It does not suggest Clara as a young woman, committed to Michael Bruce. Bunn's own response to Clara's death was cold, for instance, because of his knowledge. Bunn condemned Clara's relationship ('Sad retribution!'), attending neither Clara's inquest, nor her funeral.<sup>81</sup> *Miss Clara Webster* deifies its subject, framing Clara as an innocent, beautiful prodigy, and a victim of her audience's fascinated gaze. Turner's intent seems appropriate: only with electrical stage lights did risk diminish for ballet-girls.<sup>82</sup> Meanwhile, in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester's ballet memories leak into Jane's domestic life, affecting how he interprets Jane and remembers Céline. Women must have a voice, Brontë implies, and be permitted to be no angel, to assert, 'I will be myself'.<sup>83</sup> *Jane Eyre* suggests objectification is stifling, and its protagonist must fight others' views of her, in order to be seen as she is.

## LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: G. A. Turner, *Miss Clara Webster*, 1845. Etching and aquatint coloured by hand, 556 mm × 405 mm. Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

Figure 2: John Brandard, *Clara Webster | as Nancy, in the Ballet of | The Statute Fair*, 1845. Lithograph coloured by hand, 428 mm × 290 mm. Theatre and Performance Collection, Victoria & Albert Museum, London. © Victoria & Albert Museum, London

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<sup>76</sup> Brontë, p. 482.

<sup>77</sup> Brontë, p. 483.

<sup>78</sup> Guest, 1957, pp. 115–17.

<sup>79</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 116.

<sup>80</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 96, p. 102.

<sup>81</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 121, pp. 113–14.

<sup>82</sup> Guest, 1957, p. 9.

<sup>83</sup> Brontë, p. 292.

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