The Chronological Setting of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*

As a very important, multifaceted English novel, *Jane Eyre* has been widely read and studied, since it was published in 1847. However, it is interesting to note that the setting of this novel — one of the basic elements of literature — is not clear. It is true that some chronological contradictions of the story have been pointed out so far, but we cannot recognise that those contradictions have been analysed in detail. The chronology of the story remains far from settled. This thesis aims to examine those contradictions and to establish the most appropriate chronology of *Jane Eyre*.

In the first chapter, we consider the chronological contradictions that Q. D. Leavis, Michael Mason and Margaret Smith noted. Q. D. Leavis mentions two problems: one is whether *Jane Eyre* is contemporary or back-dating; the other is that “the back-dating in *Jane Eyre* is not consistent” — that is, Miss Ingram’s reference to The Corsair is out of keeping with *Marmion* as “a new publication” in 1808 (Leavis 489). Michael Mason indicates that Adèle left for England by steamship not earlier than 1822 when the cross-channel steam services started. Interestingly enough, Mason infers that “the riots” in “S —” is the Chartist riots in 1839-40 in Sheffield (Mason 527n5). His inference can be an important indicator of the chronological setting in *Jane Eyre*, but the 1839-40 dating is obviously inconsistent with *Marmion* as “a new publication” in 1808 and also with the time when the story ends. If it is in 1839-40 that Jane lives in Morton, it follows that Jane gets married in 1840-41, and the end of the story is ten years later, that is, 1850-51, which means that Jane tells her “tale” three or four years after *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847. Margaret Smith interprets “S —” as Sheffield, and “the riots” as “the Luddite riots of 1812” (Smith 476n3). Yet it seems that we cannot support this inference, because the Luddites were “a social movement of British textile artisans,” not “knife-grinders and scissor merchants.” Smith’s inference also entails some chronological contradictions. The 1812 dating is earlier than the publication of *The Corsair* and the start of the cross-channel steam services.

In the second chapter, we deal with John Sutherland’s arguments about the chronological setting of *Jane Eyre*. It is a shrewd way that he indicates the nonsense of the 1808 edition of *Marmion* and the Napoleonic Wars (1792-1815) in the background of the story. Sutherland interprets “a new publication” not as the first edition but as a new edition; he suggests that the ‘new publication’ of *Marmion* is the 1834 ‘Magnum Opus’ edition. Of equal importance, Sutherland regards the setting of *Jane Eyre* as “the prelapsarian world of the stage coach.”
In the third chapter, we try to determine the chronology of *Jane Eyre*, taking into consideration the various chronological benchmarks, as well as the eight matters containing seven specific events and the ending of the story. We discover that none of the benchmarks is completely compatible with all the eight matters. We do find that the 1830 edition of *Marmion* is the least contradictory benchmark for the chronology of *Jane Eyre*.

In the conclusion, on the basis of the 1830 edition of *Marmion* as the least contradictory chronological benchmark, we can establish, not the complete but the most appropriate chronology of *Jane Eyre*, including one incompatible matter and one half-incompatible matter: “Tuesday, the first of June” and “the riots” in “S —.” In the case of the former, Swing Riots are compatible, provided that the riots are not “knife-grinders and scissor merchants” in Sheffield but “impoverished and landless agricultural labourers” in southern and eastern England. Historically we cannot help considering that “the riots” in “S — ” refers to the Sheffield riots in 1839-40, as Mason points out, but in that case, the story will end beyond the 1847 publishing year, that is, in 1850-51. This is a bold contradiction. Moreover, the locale of Morton in the “north-midland” area is also clearly incompatible with that of Thornfield in Lancashire or West Riding of Yorkshire; the site of Morton, from which “S — ” is about 20 miles away, should be transferred to the south — in the agricultural southern and eastern England, which is the site of the Swing Riots. Obviously Charlotte Brontë makes a mistake in the locale of Morton; in the same way, she makes a chronological mistake in “the riots” in “S —,” which should be revised into the Swing Riots.

In the case of the latter, “Tuesday, the first of June” should be revised into “Wednesday, the first of June.” If these revisions were to be allowed, we would be able to get a complete appropriate chronology of *Jane Eyre*.

Our chronology also brought up some contributions towards considering the social and historical context of *Jane Eyre*. Mr Rochester’s failure to clandestinely marry Jane, his bigotry and his wife’s institutionalization are issues that could be addressed in more detail. We should re-estimate the character of Rochester and his treatment of Bertha in the historical background of England between 1820 and 1830.

As far as the setting is concerned, *Jane Eyre* has one unresolved contradiction among the local relationships in respect of the place setting as well as one or two insoluble chronological ones. We made a detailed analysis of the chronological setting of *Jane Eyre*, but we could not go into thorough deliberation of the geographical setting of *Jane Eyre*, which comprises just as vague elements as does the chronological setting. In a future study, we would like to address the place setting of *Jane Eyre*.

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