
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Nine Articles on *Jane Eyre*: A Case Study in Critical Change, 1950–2025

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* has been read continuously since 1847, and the criticism that has accumulated around it is too large for any single article to survey. This study takes a narrower route, reading nine journal articles closely, two drawn from each of three periods (1950–1960, 1965–1975, 1980–1990) and three from a fourth (1995–2025), to show what the periodical criticism of the novel looked like at four separate moments. The sample is intended to be illustrative, not representative, and it passes over the field's landmark interventions, among them Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), Showalter (1977), Gilbert and Gubar (1979), and Spivak (1985) due to the fact that landmark texts describe a frontier while ordinary articles show where a discipline's centre of gravity actually sat. Across the four moments, the nine articles move from close attention to language and narrative technique, through the criticism of point of view, towards psychoanalytic, intertextual, and feminist reading, and finally to work that makes the feminist tradition itself the object of critique. The study offers this movement as a case rather than a map, and argues that reading a small number of articles in detail makes visible a kind of change a wider survey tends to flatten.

KEYWORDS

Jane Eyre, Literary Criticism, Gender Studies, Feminism, Victorian Literature.

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1. Introduction

Jane Eyre is a Victorian novel written by Charlotte Brontë, a renowned English novelist and poet, who was born on April 21, 1816 in the United Kingdom (Barratt, 2015). It tells the story of Jane Eyre, a young orphan who suffers during her childhood from the ill-treatment by her aunt, who as unfair punishment sends Jane to a corrupt school. Jane loses her friend Helen Burns to consumption while she is there. After becoming a teacher, she moves to Thornfield Hall to work as a governess for a rich man, Mr. Rochester. Their wedding is stopped when it emerges that he already has a wife, Bertha Mason, kept hidden in the house; Jane flees, and marries him only after Bertha's death (Brontë, 1847/2006). Since the year it was published, *Jane Eyre* has received all kinds of reviews and criticisms that deal with various aspects of the novel.

This article argues that a small, closely read sample of journal criticism can show how the reading of a single novel changed between 1950 and 2025 in ways a broader survey would smooth over. Nine articles are examined, and the sequence moves from close attention to language and narrative technique, through the criticism of point of view, towards psychoanalytic, intertextual, and feminist reading, and finally to work that takes the feminist tradition itself as its target. The claim is about these nine articles and the moments they belong to. It is offered as a case study of critical change of *Jane Eyre* scholarship as a whole, and the landmark works that shaped that scholarship are treated in Section 3 as the background against which the nine articles are read.

2. Literature Review

It is the 1950s. The world is still recovering from the horror of the Second World War. New literary schools have started to arise in the sphere of literary criticism; the current of concern here is the mid-century turn towards the text itself, of which New Criticism is the best-known form. New Criticism placed its emphasis on the text itself and set aside what surrounds it. Wimsatt and Beardsley supplied the two sharpest formulations of that position, arguing that the author's intention has no standing as a measure of a work's success (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946) and that the reader's emotional response has none either (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949). An example is M. H. Scargill's article of 1950, though Scargill belongs to this broader current, though not to New Criticism narrowly defined: he evaluates as well as analyses, and argues by comparison with poetry and drama instead of by close verbal analysis alone. He begins from the settled view of his day that the novel's intensity "is usually taken as sufficient to counteract" the objections critics raise against its plot (Scargill, 1950, p. 120). He reports that view and then asks where the intensity actually comes from. The author refers to what Ernest A. Baker wrote in *The History of the English Novel* about *Jane Eyre*: "Clumsiness and glaring improbabilities in the plot, blunders and absurdities in the picturing of a society to which Charlotte Brontë was a complete stranger . . ." (Baker, 1937, as cited in Scargill, 1950, p. 120). It is almost impossible, if ever, to see a critic nowadays perceiving *Jane Eyre* as Baker did in 1937, and the reason could be that *Jane Eyre* is, as many consider, ahead of its time; therefore, its perception changes as history goes forward. Scargill also argues that this intensity is the reason that made the readers take an interest and that "*Jane Eyre* may speak for many women, but it speaks also for all humanity, and it speaks in unmistakable terms. *Jane Eyre* is the record of an intense spiritual experience, as powerful in its way as King Lear's ordeal of purgation" (Scargill, 1950, p. 121). His own answer follows on the same page: the novel is a love story and a fight for the free expression of personality, but beyond both it records a conflict between flesh and spirit that is settled only when all passion is spent (Scargill, 1950, p. 121). The title takes that phrase from the closing line of Milton's *Samson Agonistes*, and the reading it announces, the novel as spiritual ordeal, is what separates Scargill from the consensus he opens with. However, the writer notes that we expect probability from a novelist, as opposed to a poet, unlike what Brontë did when "she used the conventional elements of the novel, the medium she understood best," to record her emotional experience, which resulted in "a new type of novel" (Scargill, 1950, p. 122). The author makes an analogy of the use of the fiction elements in *Jane Eyre* to the way a poet makes use of language and imagery to "impose belief" (Scargill, 1950, p. 122).

Now it is 1955, yet we still have another article in which the author employs the close-reading technique. Edgar Shannon begins from the standard objection to first-person narration: the narrator stands between reader and event, and the technique keeps reminding the reader that the action was over before the telling began. Brontë reduces this handicap, without removing it, by shifting from the past tense to the present at chosen moments (Shannon, 1955, p. 141). He considers the shift from the past tense to the present tense in *Jane Eyre* to be a device to "convey either rising emotional tension or a new departure in the story" and makes a comment on her use of the present tense: "Skillfully depicting a number of characters simultaneously animated, the technique presents immediately to the reader the brilliancy of the scene as it appears to Jane and evokes the charged atmosphere that compels her self-acknowledgment of love for Rochester, with its concomitant dread of Blanche Ingram's rival charms" (Shannon, 1955, pp. 141–142). Other shifts he records include Jane's sensations as she returns to Thornfield after Mrs. Reed's death and her reflections on her first evening as schoolmistress at Morton (Shannon, 1955, p. 142). His conclusion reaches past immediacy. The two most significant shifts open chapters xi and xxviii, which begin the novel's second and third major sections, so the device also marks and foreshadows the structural divisions of the novel (Shannon, 1955, pp. 142–145).

In the second time period from 1965 until 1975, we continue to see that the focus of the articles about *Jane Eyre* still revolves around the text and specifically the narration of the plot. Earl Knies writes in 1966 against Carl Grabo, who had cited *Jane Eyre* as an illustration of a novel struggling with an inadequate method. Brontë succeeds, on Grabo's account, but the effort of the struggle shows on the page (Grabo, 1928, as cited in Knies, 1966, p. 546). Knies undertakes to defend that method on two grounds, that Brontë handles it with skill and that it achieves effects a Jamesian centre of consciousness could not (Knies, 1966, pp. 546–547). When he looks for evidence of the struggle Grabo describes, he finds little. Weaknesses exist, but they do not follow from the method, and most of the novel's strengths do (Knies, 1966, p. 547). He then takes up the objections to first-person narration catalogued by Clayton Hamilton: that the narrator's presence in every scene is hard to account for, that the narrator cannot witness events happening at the same time in different places, and that the narrator's knowledge of plot details bearing on no one but others is hard to explain (Hamilton, 1908, as cited in Knies, 1966, p. 548). None of the three applies here, he argues, because no detail of the plot lacks an immediate bearing on Jane, and the events she does not witness reach the reader by another route, because she "presents exposition dramatically—through scene rather than through summary—we are present when Rochester tells about his past, when the innkeeper tells about the burning of Thornfield—and so everything seems to be happening within Jane's consciousness even though the events took place when Jane was not actually present" (Knies, 1966, p. 548). The convention, he explains, allows a first-person narrator to present herself as "an admirable character without obvious self-glorification or pretentious humility" (Knies, 1966, p. 553). Brontë's heroines have an advantage here because they are plain and not liked by everyone they meet, and their frankness about those facts makes the reader readier to accept the good things they say about themselves (Knies, 1966, p. 553). He concedes Hamilton's objection that a first-person narrator cannot write essays on himself, and answers it on Hamilton's own terms. Such a narrator "can see himself as others see

him" when he is the kind of person who invites frank comment (Knies, 1966, p. 553). Every character in the novel contributes to Jane's characterisation, either by commenting on her directly or by prompting a reaction from her (Knies, 1966, p. 553).

In the fourth article written in 1968, the author states that Charlotte Brontë was able to keep a narrative distance in a way that keeps the reader undisturbed by the fact that there is a narrative distance between the narrator and the events and does not reveal that until the end of the novel (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). She notes: "throughout the novel there is, in fact, a productive tension between the judgements of thirty and the vision of ten or eighteen" (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). According to Millgate, Brontë uses devices to bring the narrative closer, such as her use of present tense; this enables the readers to see through "the eyes of the girl rather than of the woman" (Millgate, 1968, p. 315). For the present-tense passages Millgate refers the reader directly to Shannon's article (Millgate, 1968, p. 317), so the two case studies examined here stand in documented contact rather than mere chronological sequence. Millgate's larger claim rests on Jane's pictures, which she reads as a gauge of the narrative's angle and colouration at any given point (Millgate, 1968, p. 316). She traces a sequence: the Romantic portfolio Rochester examines, the contrasting portraits of the plain governess and the accomplished Blanche, the plain studies made at Morton, and finally the total cessation of Jane's painting in the last chapter, where heroine and narrator merge (Millgate, 1968, pp. 316–319). Both articles centre on narration, and the immediate context is Anglo-American criticism of point of view. Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction* had appeared in 1961 and supplied the vocabulary, including the unreliable narrator, within which questions about Jane's double perspective could be posed (Booth, 1961).

Criticisms of *Jane Eyre* from 1980 until 1990 began to expand and vary. The fifth article, for example, was written in 1987 in which the author employs Freud's psychoanalytic theory to interpret the novel's cloak and overcoat imagery. Psychoanalysis was developed by Sigmund Freud as a clinical method and was extended to literature by Freud himself, who treated the writer's work as a disguised form of the daydream (Freud, 1908/1959). Rea refers to Freud's reading of the overcoat and the cloak as symbols for a man or for the male sexual organ, and applies it to the scene in which Jane first encounters Rochester wearing a riding cloak. Taking her cue from David Cowart's account of Jane's early relationship with Rochester as a stage of emerging sexual awareness, she argues that the novel's cloak imagery bears that reading out: "the imagery and the underlying symbolism of cloaks in the novel validates the foregoing statement. The fact that the cloak covering Mr Rochester when Jane Eyre meets him is a riding cloak has further symbolical significance. Rochester is riding nocturnally" (Rea, 1987, p. 53). Rea extends the pattern well beyond that first meeting. She reads Brocklehurst's surtout alongside Jane's description of him as a black pillar, Richard Mason's surtout as a mark of concealment as much as virility, and St. John Rivers's cloak, described as white as a glacier, as an image of sexual repression (Rea, 1987, pp. 55–58). Jane's own fur muff, cloak, and bonnet enter the argument as well, and Rea closes at Ferndean, where the trees screening the house form a natural cloak Jane must pass through before she can reach Rochester (Rea, 1987, pp. 54, 59).

In the same decade, a writer drew attention to Brontë's allusion to the *Arabian Nights*. The author claims that Charlotte Brontë enjoyed the *Arabian Nights* as a child and reaffirms that *Jane Eyre* carries noticeable similarities in the characters and events from the *Arabian Nights* (Workman, 1988, p. 178). She explains that the imagery and behaviour of Rochester in *Jane Eyre* are similar to those of Sultan Shahriyar (Workman, 1988, p. 179). She builds the case from the Oriental imagery Brontë gathers around Rochester: the Turkey carpet and carvings at Thornfield, and the black horse Mesrour, whose name in the tales belongs to the executioner at the court of Haroun Alraschid. To these she adds "the tableau scene in which Rochester and Blanche impersonate biblical characters, Eliezer and Rebecca" (Workman, 1988, p. 179), which she explains "evokes not just the Bible, but the *Arabian Nights*" because Rochester's appearance fits the description of an "eastern emir" (Workman, 1988, p. 179). In addition, she remarks: "Brontë associates the heroine of her novel with Scheherazade in several textual allusions, as well as in the character traits the two women share, thus extending Scheherazade's mythical stature to Brontë's narrator" (Workman, 1988, p. 181). Workman treats the Rochester parallel as preliminary, however. Her central claim is that Brontë's association of Jane with Scheherazade is the greater achievement: Jane, like the Eastern storyteller, secures her autonomy by controlling narration, telling St. John an interrupted tale and withholding her story from Rochester (Workman, 1988, pp. 181–185). In the second half of the article she argues that the supernatural elements and Rochester's blinding, which critics had treated as flaws, are organic to this design and allowed Brontë to test the limits of realism (Workman, 1988, p. 178). Workman cites Shannon's account of the present-tense passages directly (Workman, 1988, p. 191, n. 17), so Shannon serves as a common reference point across two of the windows examined here.

By the mid-1990s the feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* was established enough to be questioned from inside it. Carla Kaplan begins by noting the novel's privileged place in the feminist canon, where it has been read as a revolutionary manifesto of the subject and Jane as a heroine of fulfilment (Kaplan, 1996, pp. 5–6). Against that consensus she separates two things the novel does. Its politics of voice, Jane's capacity to speak up and talk back, is realised. Its erotics of talk, Jane's longing for a listener who can meet her as an equal, is not (Kaplan, 1996, p. 6). Her evidence is the ending. Reunited with Rochester, Jane still withholds her story from him and tells it only to the reader (Kaplan, 1996, p. 16), and the fullest description of satisfying exchange in the novel is the one Jane gives of her cousins Diana and Mary Rivers (Kaplan, 1996, p. 18). Kaplan concludes that Brontë holds back from the resolution feminist criticism has wanted to find in the book, and that the desires the novel leaves unfulfilled deserve as much attention as the ones it celebrates (Kaplan, 1996, p. 27).

By the turn of the twenty-first century, feminist reading of *Jane Eyre* had passed out of specialist criticism and into general literary scholarship. Aşkın Haluk Yıldırım's 2012 survey of the Woman Question is representative: he argues that Victorian Britain was a society dominated by men and women were treated unfairly and posits that "Victorian gender ideology justified itself claiming that women were destined to be mothers and wives and no more" (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 46). He holds that *Jane Eyre* is an important work due to the fact that it resists this ideology as its protagonist, "Jane's quest for equality symbolizes her struggle to overcome the restraints of the period" (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 48). The author goes on to discuss male cruelty of Jane's cousin, John Reed and her confrontation with him after he attacks her (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 48). This confrontation results in Jane's punishment which the author uses to confirm his claim that "a woman is expected to be subservient in Victorian society" (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 48). He also contends that Jane seeks change when she tries to work yet she can only work as a governess and reaffirms the restrictions put on women during that era and that the reason women were allowed because "Working as a governess was one of the few acceptable jobs for a woman in Victorian England since it was not much different from the work performed by a housewife" (Yıldırım, 2012, p. 49).

A decade later the questioning had moved from the feminist reading of the novel to the discipline that produced it. Olivia Loksing Moy's 2020 essay, published in the "Undisciplining Victorian Studies" issue of *Victorian Studies*, reads Patricia Park's *Re Jane* (2015), a Korean American reimagining of the novel, and treats it as a critique of Brontë studies more than a tribute to Brontë. Park transposes the novel's structure onto a biracial Korean American narrator in post-9/11 New York, where the walk-in freezer of her uncle's grocery store serves as her red room (Moy, 2020, p. 411), and the madwoman in the attic becomes Professor Beth Mazer, a specialist in Victorian literature and gender studies whose attic office holds her feminist books and her marking (Moy, 2020, p. 414). Moy argues that the novel makes the critical tradition itself the object of satire, "exposing Victorian studies as frozen in a moment yoked to the heyday of gynocriticism" (Moy, 2020, p. 410). She names her method reading in the aftermath, after Christina Sharpe's reading in the wake, and defines it as a willingness to confront a racist past together with its effects on the present (Moy, 2020, p. 410). The attic in Park's novel is no longer the space Gilbert and Gubar made emblematic of women's writing. *Jane Re* uses it to betray Beth instead of joining her (Moy, 2020, pp. 417–418). Moy's conclusion asks the field to take multicultural rewritings seriously, "not as celebratory afterlives but as complicating aftermaths" (Moy, 2020, p. 418).

3. Methodology

This study is a purposive case study, not a survey. Its object is not the whole of *Jane Eyre* criticism, which now runs to many thousands of items, but a small set of articles read closely enough that the critical assumptions at work in each can be described in detail, not just summarised. Nine articles were selected. The number was chosen so that each could receive sustained attention within the space of a single article, since a diachronic argument of this kind is better served by a few readings carried out in detail than by a large sample handled at the level of the abstract. The sample is illustrative and makes no claim to statistical representativeness.

Candidates were identified through JSTOR, Project MUSE, and the MLA International Bibliography using the terms "Jane Eyre" and "Brontë" limited to journal articles. Inclusion required that an item be a peer-reviewed article published in English, that it give *Jane Eyre* sustained analytical treatment, and that the full text be obtainable for close reading. Book chapters and monographs were excluded because their length makes them incommensurable with journal articles; also excluded were review essays, reference-work entries, dissertations, and conference papers. Seven of the nine take the novel as their sole subject. The other two read it alongside further texts, *Workman* with three other Victorian works and Moy with a contemporary adaptation. Both were retained because that more diffuse mode of engagement is itself part of what this study is describing.

The four windows were set at 1950–1960, 1965–1975, 1980–1990, and 1995–2025, separated by gaps of five years so that each samples a distinct moment instead of a continuous run. The first three are ten years wide; the fourth is thirty. The asymmetry is done on purpose, since the period after 1995 produced a larger and more heterogeneous body of *Jane Eyre* criticism than any preceding decade, and a ten-year slice of it would have forced a choice among several incompatible strands. Widening the final window lets the articles drawn from it register a change within feminist criticism. One consequence of these criteria concerns format. The first is a matter of format. Several of the interventions that did most to reorient criticism of the novel in this period were not journal articles. Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) gave Bertha Mason a history and a voice and reset the terms on which later critics would read her. Showalter (1977) placed Brontë at the head of a continuous tradition of British women novelists. Gilbert and Gubar (1979) made Bertha "Jane's truest and darkest double" (p. 360), the anger the heroine cannot acknowledge as her own. A novel and two books fall outside a corpus restricted to journal articles by definition. The five-year interval between the second and third windows compounds this, since it places 1979 in a gap. Neither exclusion reflects a judgement about influence. The second consequence concerns selection within the windows. Spivak (1985) satisfies every criterion set out above and was not chosen. Her essay reads Bertha against the axioms of imperialism, arguing that Bertha must destroy herself so that Jane can become "the feminist individualist heroine of British fiction" (p. 251). The omission is deliberate because this study samples representative periodical criticism, because a field's ordinary output shows where its assumptions had settled, which its exceptional work by definition does not. The design asks that the nine articles be read against these four texts, not in place of them.

Two articles were taken from each of the first three windows and three from the last. The final window carries a third because the reasoning about heterogeneity applies with more force the closer the corpus comes to the present, because a span of thirty years holding several incompatible strands cannot be registered by a pair, and the third article lets that window show a sequence rather than a contrast. Two is the minimum permitting comparison within a period as well as across periods, which the argument requires, since it depends on showing that critics working at the same moment share assumptions even when their subjects differ. For the first three windows the pair was selected for contrast, so that the two articles had to address different aspects of the novel, so that a window would display a range. Beyond that criterion, selection was constrained by availability. The resulting set is a purposive sample assembled by the author, not the output of a ranking procedure, and a different reader applying the same window scheme would very likely arrive at a different nine. Where the two articles in a window fall close together, as with the 1987 and 1988 pair, the proximity follows from availability, and no claim is made that either article represents its full decade.

Each article was read in full, and three things were recorded for each: the critical vocabulary it employs and the tradition that vocabulary belongs to; the features of the novel it treats as significant, whether style, narrative structure, psychology, or gender politics; and the scholarship it cites. The third of these established that the corpus is connected by more than chronology, as both Millgate (1968) and Workman (1988) cite Shannon (1955) directly.

4. Results and Discussion

Comparison of the nine articles suggests that questions posed to *Jane Eyre* have shifted in step with broader changes in literary theory. In the first period (1950–1960) discussion centres on form. Scargill (1950) praises the novel's "intensity," treating it almost as a poetic text, while Shannon (1955) shows how Brontë's sudden moves into the present tense pull readers into each scene. Both critics stay close to the language of the novel and leave social context largely untouched.

The next window (1965–1975) retains this focus on narrative yet adds an interest in the mechanics of storytelling. Knies (1966) explores the reach of first-person narration, demonstrating that events Jane does not witness can still feel immediate. Millgate (1968) draws attention to the distance between Jane the child and Jane the adult narrator, arguing that the two voices sit together without unsettling the reader. Such work belongs to the Anglo-American criticism of point of view that followed Booth (1961). Structuralist narratology reached English readers only in the 1970s and after: Genette's account of narrative discourse appeared in French in 1972 and in English in 1980 (Genette, 1972/1980), too late to have shaped either article. Knies's article appeared in the same year as *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Rhys, 1966), which within a decade would reorient criticism of Bertha Mason. Neither article in this window registers it, a useful measure of how self-contained the criticism of point of view remained.

A turn outward marks the 1980–1990 articles. Rea (1987) imports Freud, reading the novel's cloaks and overcoats as sexual symbols and tracing how imagery can carry hidden meaning. Workman (1988) sets the novel beside the *Arabian Nights*, casting Rochester and Jane in the roles of Shahriyar and Scheherazade. Earlier critics stayed within the text; these writers connect it to psychology and to other story traditions.

The final three articles (1995–2025) show feminist criticism at three stages: Kaplan (1996) writes from inside the feminist consensus built by Showalter (1977) and Gilbert and Gubar (1979) and questions it, arguing that the novel withholds the fulfilment that consensus has claimed for it. Yıldırım (2012) writes from well outside the Anglo-American core, where feminist reading of the novel has become settled background for a survey of Victorian gender ideology. Moy (2020) turns on the consensus itself, treating the feminist criticism of the 1990s as the object of critique, and putting the critic's own position inside the reading. Together they show one body of criticism first turning reflexive, then diffusing outward, and finally becoming the thing to be criticised.

5. Conclusion

Nine articles cannot show what happened to *Jane Eyre* criticism between 1950 and 2025, and this study has not claimed that they can. What they do show is narrower and more specific. At four separate moments, critics writing about the same novel in the same format asked questions that a critic from a neighbouring window would not have recognised as questions at all. Scargill and Shannon treat the novel as an arrangement of language and tense. For Knies and Millgate it is a problem in the management of a narrating voice. Rea and Workman look under the surface for symbol and source material. Kaplan, Yıldırım, and Moy read it as a document in a continuing argument about women, and by 2020 that argument has turned to take in the critical tradition that made it. The novel did not change. What counted as a question about it did.

6. Limitations and Directions for Further Research

Several limits follow from the design. Nine articles cannot support a generalisation about a body of criticism running to many thousands of items, and a different reader applying the same window scheme would very likely assemble a different nine. Books, monographs, chapters, and the one novel that reoriented the reading of Bertha Mason fall outside a corpus restricted to journal articles, which means the field's landmark interventions are absent by construction, not by judgement. Within the windows, an eligible article of the first importance was passed over in favour of more ordinary work, for reasons the methodology sets out. And only English-language articles were examined, so criticism of the novel published in other languages

is invisible here; the pattern described is a pattern in Anglophone periodical criticism rather than in the reading of the novel worldwide.

The shape of the windows imposes more. The five-year intervals leave 1961 to 1964, 1976 to 1979, and 1991 to 1994 unexamined, and the second of those gaps contains the single most influential book written about the novel. The final window also reaches close enough to the present that the standing of the article drawn from it is not yet settled in the way the earlier ones are, since an article's place in a field is fixed by what the field subsequently does with it. Three extensions would test what this study can only suggest. Applying the same window scheme to a second canonical novel would show whether the movement described here belongs to *Jane Eyre* or to the discipline. Widening the corpus to monographs would show whether periodical criticism lags or leads the books. And examining the novel's reception in Arabic and other non-Anglophone scholarship would test whether the sequence traced here holds outside the tradition that produced it.

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