Title: "Oneself as Part of Another and Another as Part of Oneself: The Chiastic Logic of the Marriage Plot in Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre"

Abstract:
British women writers’ representations of marital relations have long preoccupied scholars of nineteenth-century literature and culture. Charlotte Brontë’s Jane Eyre has proved a crucial text for this line of scholarship not least because of its seemingly irreconcilable positions concerning marriage. On the one hand, it offers a heroine bold enough to define and demand the increasingly popular ideal of companionate or romantic marriage—a complementary if not also symmetrical relationship structure (S. Gilbert and S. Gubar, W. Jones, T. Schaffer). On the other hand, it reveals a heroine lonely enough to capitulate to institutionalized marriage—a decidedly asymmetrical relationship structure in both its religious and legal doctrines (M. Poovey, M. Shanley, K. Kalsem). Drawing on Boris Wiseman and Anthony Paul’s Chiasmus and Culture (2014), this paper shows how Jane Eyre deploys chiastic logic in order to reconcile these competing commitments. For Wiseman and Paul, chiasmus confers a specific relational logic, a unique way to realize the interrelationship between the part(s) and the whole. Traditionally, the one flesh doctrine (otherwise known as coverture) dictated that husbands absorbed the identity of their wives upon marriage. In other words, the husband’s civic and spiritual identity grew, while the wife’s civic and spiritual identity disappeared. The marital relationship, reconfigured through chiastic logic, becomes a way of thinking about and enacting equality within the confines of religious and legal doctrines that dictate husband and wife become one flesh in marriage. In short, chiastic love in the Jane Eyre describes a way of thinking about oneself as part of another and another as part of oneself.

Bio:
Meagan K. Simpson is a PhD candidate in English and Gender Studies Minor at the University of Notre Dame. She specializes in nineteenth-century British literature and culture with interests in narrative, epistemology, and gender. Her dissertation, “Adam and Eve in the Victorian Imagination,” argues Adam and Eve served as low-stakes and thus anxiety free tools with which nineteenth-century Britons could develop a theory of minor character. She has taught courses on argumentation, interdisciplinary approaches to gender studies, and survey courses on nineteenth-century literature and screen cultures. In the past, she has served as Gender Studies Research Workshop coordinator, managing editor for Nineteenth-Century Contexts, and co-organizer of “The Bible, Narrative, and Modernity,” a symposium on Religion and Literature here at Notre Dame. She is currently serving as President of the Interdisciplinary Nineteenth-Century Study Graduate Student Caucus.