

Confined by Conservatism: power and patriarchy in the novels of Charlotte Brontë

by

JESSICA BARBARA WHITE

submitted in accordance with the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Master of English Literature

in the subject

ENGLISH

at the

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AFRICA

SUPERVISOR: PROF J MURRAY

NOVEMBER 2013

# Table of contents

	Page
Plagiarism declaration	iii
Summary and key terms	iv
INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER 1 <i>Jane Eyre</i> : a new model of womanhood	13
CHAPTER 2 <i>Shirley</i> : ideology and stereotype	39
CHAPTER 3 <i>Villette</i> : power and prejudice	64
CHAPTER 4 <i>The Professor</i> : gender and sexuality	92
CONCLUSION	120
BIBLIOGRAPHY	130

## Plagiarism declaration

1. I know that plagiarism is wrong. Plagiarism is using another's work and to pretend that it is one's own.
2. I have used the Harvard System of Referencing as the convention for citation and referencing. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works of other people has been attributed and cited and referenced.
3. This dissertation is my own work.
4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.
5. I acknowledge that copying someone else's assignment or essay, or part of it, is wrong, and declare that this is my own work

SIGNATURE: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

## Summary

Title of thesis:

CONFINED BY CONSERVATISM: POWER AND PATRIARCHY IN THE NOVELS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Summary:

This dissertation explores the ambiguous nature of the social criticism in Charlotte Brontë's novels — *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, *Villette* and *The Professor* — particularly pertaining to patriarchal ideology and its associated power relations. I shall explore how, through her novels, Brontë sought to redefine subjectivity and the feminine ideal, and in so doing, reconfigure patriarchy's gender norms and its ideologies which were oppressive to women. However, Brontë's varying contestation of and acquiescence to female Victorian stereotypes, along with her equivocal representation of ideology, identity, gender, and the self, undermine her efforts to create a new model of womanhood and female empowerment. Nonetheless, through Brontë's intimate depiction of her characters' struggles between their desires and patriarchal prescripts, she offers a novel, more indirect and significant challenge to the patriarchal status quo. In this way, Brontë's social criticism is confined by her conservatism.

## Introduction

Terry Eagleton states that Charlotte Brontë's novels contain a "radical sexual demand — an angry, wounded, implacable desire for full personal acceptance and recognition" (1988: xix). It is this irrepressible desire which comes through so strongly in her work, and is arguably the reason her novels have entered the Victorian literary canon and still remain popular today.<sup>1</sup> Brontë's novels are explorations of patriarchy<sup>2</sup> and offer insights into issues of power relations, ideology, identity and gender that were visionary for her time and which remain pertinent today (Moglen, 1978). The great emotional and philosophical force behind Brontë's fiction lies in its struggles with the contradictions of the Victorian age (1837 - 1901),<sup>3</sup> operating at all times within the confines of Victorian ideology. It is these contradictions in Brontë's presentation of patriarchy, gender,<sup>4</sup> the feminine ideal and their associated ideologies which will form the focus of my dissertation. I shall explore how, through her novels, Brontë sought to redefine subjectivity (Shuttleworth, 1996) and the feminine ideal, and in so doing, reconfigure patriarchy's gender norms and its ideologies which were oppressive to women. In addition, I shall examine Brontë's ambiguous representations of stereotypes, identity and ideology, and her efforts to establish a discourse of female empowerment. I shall also consider Brontë's fraught depiction and subversion of established power relations, and the associated power and dynamics of the "masculine" gaze.

Janis Caldwell speaks of Brontë's "intensely personal, perilously autobiographical,<sup>5</sup> violently passionate style" (2003: 483), thus succinctly summarising the key qualities which distinguish her

---

<sup>1</sup> Over 150 years after Brontë's death and Gaskell's biography — which to no small degree helped to establish the myth of Brontë as a tragic heroine (Showalter, 1977), akin to those of her novels — Brontë's works are still widely prescribed at places of learning and are being translated into popular films (for example, see Fukunaga's rendition of *Jane Eyre*, 2011). Brontë's works remain popular fodder for literary criticism, and critics continue to offer fresh insights into the likely inner life and motivations of Brontë and her characters. Gilbert and Gubar (1984), Moglen (1978) and Maynard (1987) are just a few of the better-known critics. *Jane Eyre* has even been described as "the most famous Victorian heroine" (Vejvoda, 2003: 243).

<sup>2</sup> Patriarchy as referred to in this dissertation denotes the Victorian patriarchal policies and principles which pertain to white, middle-class women such as Brontë and the heroines she depicts in her novels.

<sup>3</sup> The Victorian era saw many important technological, scientific and economic changes and developments take place, which had far-reaching implications for society (Barber, 2006). Many people viewed these changes with great ambivalence. The modern, industrial world these changes brought about was more mobile, changeable and uncertain than the previous social order where one's values, beliefs and social station were largely fixed and unchanging (Barber, 2006). The Victorian era's many ambiguities and contradictions centre around people's shifting responses and attitudes towards this period of flux.

<sup>4</sup> Gender, as I refer to it in this dissertation — and as Brontë represents it in her novels — refers to a social construction that is imposed on the sexed body. In other words, gender is the customary social ritual of organising people into the two different and diverse categories of men and women, and further, of arranging unequal power relations based on this difference (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004).

<sup>5</sup> Hook, too, describes Brontë's work as "imaginative autobiography" (1974: 9). This is a theme that recurs throughout this dissertation and which is summed up in the conclusion.

novels from those of many of her contemporaries. Victorian female authors were considered to be women first and foremost, and any deviation from the feminine ideal of charity, chastity and suffering in silence was fiercely condemned; thus the “personal” and “passionate” nature of her writing broke gender taboos. It was the strength of Brontë’s passion which concerned her contemporaries, who labelled her “unladylike” as they had no other terms with which to conceive of and label the subversiveness of her writing (Gordon, 1994: 334). Victorian literary critique was highly gendered (Flint, 2002), and if an author’s sex was unknown, critics were not deterred from offering gendered criticisms nonetheless.<sup>6</sup> So Brontë states, in the preface to the 1851 edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, that she and her sisters:

Did not like to declare ourselves women, because — without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called “feminine”— we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise (Brontë, 2013 [1850]: ix).

An understanding of patriarchy is thus vital to an understanding of the gender norms and ideology (Walby, 1989) of the Victorian era. Patriarchal authority rested on the founding notion that women and children, and the working and poor classes, were inferior to middle-class men, requiring leadership and discipline (Ingham, 1996). Sylvia Walby defines patriarchy as “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women” (1989: 214).<sup>7</sup> Further, she distinguishes between public and “private” brands of patriarchy (Walby, 1989: 228). The former she defines as the subordination of women in public life (rather than women’s exclusion from the public sphere), and the latter as the arrogation of women’s labour within the household, as well as the relative prohibition of women from various social arenas (Walby, 1989). The intensification of private patriarchy reached an apex within the middle-class in the 1850s, at which time there was an amplification of repressive ideologies concerning women (Walby, 1989). It was around this time that Brontë began to write and publish her novels, which could be viewed as a reaction against her own experiences of patriarchy.

---

<sup>6</sup> For instance, Lewes, suspecting the author of *Jane Eyre* to be a woman, complained that *Shirley* was “masculine... in the sense of vigour,” and that “that vigour often amounts to coarseness... certainly the very antipode to ‘lady like’” (Lewes, 1974 [1850]: 163).

<sup>7</sup> Walby uses the term “social structure” in her definition of patriarchy so as to reject notions of biological determinism, as well as the idea that every man enjoyed a dominant position and every woman a subordinate one (1989: 214).

Through stressing the intelligence, morality, and inherent power of her heroines, Brontë challenged essentialist,<sup>8</sup> patriarchal views of women. Thus in each novel we find a typically feminine character seeking to redefine herself, weighed down by patriarchal society, but envisioning a way to rise above the oppression of society at the time (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).<sup>9</sup> Brontë's novels stress the high cost of and barriers to independence (Crosby, 1984) for middle-class women.<sup>10</sup> In her novels, Brontë rejects the feminine goal of tranquillity as the motivating force in her heroines. This is a very noteworthy parting from the conventional values of popular literature and those of society (Hunt, 1983). Rather, Brontë is preoccupied with the goal of "getting on" in life (Rylance, 2002: 148). In the case of Victorian women, this meant either earning one's way or getting married. "Getting on" forms the principle motivating force for her heroes and heroines; indeed, it is the site at which private and public, personality and ideology, clash (Rylance, 2002). The primary struggle for Brontë's heroes and heroines is to reconcile their strong moral and religious principles — informed by patriarchal society, which underwrites women's oppression — with their deep desire for agency and self-determination. The latter was deemed ideologically incongruent with the former in Victorian society. Thus Brontë's heroes and heroines are shown to question society's ideologies and the roles prescribed to women.

Like her heroines — and indeed like many mid-Victorian, middle-class women, whose words are not enshrined in print — Brontë felt deeply divided within herself (Foster, 1985). This, as

---

<sup>8</sup> Stone (2004) defines essentialism as the belief that certain traits and properties are indispensable to women, and that one needs to have these in order to be considered such. Victorian society largely subscribed to the concept of collective identity, which stresses the similarities of people deemed to belong to a particular social group, and Victorian literature treated such characteristics as "natural" (Cerulo, 1997: 386). Brontë — taking the stance of the social constructionists who would emerge after her time — challenged such essentialist dichotomies of gender and its supposed inborn nature. It should be noted that an outright rejection of essentialism is problematic, as this denies women a common ground and common concerns around which to identify and rally. Thus Riley (1988) advocates that women reject being classified as an essential class with common traits, while recognising and rallying around the fact that society treats them as such. Brontë adopts just such a scheme of "strategic essentialism": through her depiction of the originality and uniqueness of her heroines, she discredits an essentialist view of women. Further, through highlighting the plight of women in patriarchal society, she gives voice to their common concerns.

<sup>9</sup> That even Crimsworth's tale in *The Professor* fits this mould highlights the fluidity of identity and gender which characterise Brontë's novels. Crimsworth, a distinctly feminine character, feels ostracised from society for failing to conform to society's model of masculinity — as evident from his school tales. In seeking a living abroad, so, too, Crimsworth seeks a means of redefining himself and rising above the oppression he has always felt.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted again that patriarchal ideology was uneven in that it differed in its doctrine and application for women of different classes and races (Walby, 1989). By way of example, while patriarchal ideology upheld that a woman's place was the home, this was reinforced to a far greater extent for middle-class women than working women (Walby, 1989). For this reason, my exploration of patriarchy shall be limited to its doctrine and effects on the lives of the white, middle-class characters Brontë was primarily concerned with.

Brontë's desires often conflicted with societal expectations and the norms governing Victorian society. We see this in Brontë's letter to Ellen Nussey, where she instructs her:

Don't deceive yourself by imagining I have a bit of real goodness in me.... if you knew my thoughts... and the fiery imagination that... makes me feel society, as it is, wretchedly insipid, you would pity and I dare say despise me (1996 [1836]: 144). I don't pride myself on these peculiarities. I strive to conceal and suppress... but they burst out sometimes, and then those that see the explosion despise me (1996 [1836]: 153).

Here, Brontë reveals herself to be as dissatisfied and divided a character as her own literary creations. For this reason, ambiguity and ambivalence form key features of Brontë's novels (Foster, 1985). Sally Shuttleworth describes Brontë's work best when she says that it is "distinguished... not by the clarity with which she articulates an achieved position, but rather by the intensity with which she wrestles with contradictions" (1996: 246).

Part of the reason for Brontë's inner and literary ambiguity was the fact that she was a "feminist" living in an age prior to the term and its evolution. Brontë herself would likely have been unfamiliar with such a concept. I use the term "feminist" here loosely to refer to a woman who recognised gender biases in society and created awareness regarding the issue through the decades since its inception, its criticism evolving in the process. Feminism is a vast field which has undergone various so-called waves and movements through the decades since its inception as its criticism has evolved. The first wave of feminism (late 1800s) sought to subsume gender differences and assert equality between the sexes through the suffrage movement (Woodhead, 2001). The second wave, which reached an apex between 1960 and 1980, propagated an essentialist doctrine of gender and championed women's liberation (Woodhead, 2001) through the clarion call that "the personal is political" (De Lauretis, 1990: 116). The third wave, which climaxed in the 1990s, sought to turn the tide on second-wave essentialism, highlighting the complexity of gender, identity and sexuality (Woodhead, 2001). That Brontë's novels reflect social issues that resonate with the concerns of the various waves of feminism illustrates just how ahead of her time she was. This is evident in her depiction of identity as dis-identification (her conception of self being based on a character's divergence from the social ideal) as well as in her portrayal of the displacement of her characters as being both outward and public, and inward and private, illustrating how the personal is indeed political (De Lauretis, 1990).<sup>11</sup> We see this in Jane's flight from Lowood, Thornfield, and Marsh End

---

<sup>11</sup> The feminist movement has co-opted the traditional metaphor of the "body politic" (wherein the state was likened to a human body) and inverted it to refer to the "the politics of the body", depicting the human body as a "politically inscribed entity" (Bordo, 2003). Since the second wave, feminism has consistently insisted on the importance of exploring one's personal life. This "personal" approach to feminism also serves as one of

in turn, as well as in Lucy's displacement to Villette, where the heroines' inner dislocation is reflected in their changing geographical circumstances.

The phrase "the personal is political" insists that subjectivity — how we conceive of ourselves — is related to society's legislative and economic bodies at large and is the site where hegemony and resistance meet (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). The binary divide between private and public — so prominent in Victorian society — is challenged through emphasising how ideology and its power structures are replicated or resisted in an individual's every thought and deed (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). Brontë's novels offer us an intimate portrait of this process, depicting how individuals struggle to reconcile themselves to society's norms and ideals. Teresa De Lauretis (1990) argues that, if the personal is considered to be political as far as politics' effects are translated into personal experience, this very approach is itself bound within a paradox. The paradox lies in the fact that such study and criticism are excluded from conventional discourse and yet confined within it, denied independence (De Lauretis, 1990). We see evidence of this — and Brontë's awareness of this paradox — in Shirley's attempts to create a feminine discourse of power which Caroline misinterprets given the staid, ideologically-laden formulae and symbols she employs (I will explore this further in the chapter on *Shirley*). Like Shirley, Brontë battles to depict a society and relationships that transcend the confines of patriarchal discourse, try as she might to construct a counter, female-empowering, "feminist" ideology in her novels. There again, raising awareness is key to scrutinising society and instigating social change (De Lauretis, 1990) and Brontë's novel depiction of her heroines' most intimate desires and struggles achieves this.

Brontë's "feminism" is not one which can envisage fundamental change in society (Moglen, 1978: 134) and she is not a controversial figure who sought to abolish patriarchal ideology (Gordon, 1994). Rather, Brontë transfers the challenge against patriarchal principles from legislative arenas to the more elusive, complex and relatively unexplored field of "private feeling" (Gordon, 1994: 163). Thus Brontë tackles the epicentre of woman's enslavement: the heart and mind (Gordon, 1994).<sup>12</sup> Through redefining and satirising women's sense of self and her private and public experiences,

---

the primary similarities between third-wave and second-wave feminism, as well as between third-wave and post-feminisms, speaking to the significance of this theoretical development (Braithwaite, 2002).

<sup>12</sup> Brontë broaches the topic of women's complicity in their oppression in various ways. In *Jane Eyre*, we are presented with a lonely world, and in place of female solidarity we find oppressed women policing each other (Showalter, 1977). Brontë addresses the topic directly in *Shirley* when the narrator, speaking of Caroline's heartache at Robert's coolness towards her, speaks of the "shame and anguish" and the "inward remorse for self-treachery" (2008 [1849]: 90) women experience when they confess love first and violate patriarchal norms. "The thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret" (90) is nothing more than a woman punishing herself for daring to violate social custom. In this way, Brontë gives voice to women's private experience of patriarchal oppression and highlights the pervasiveness of ideological constraints.

Brontë highlights the ideological foundations of identity and gender norms, and illustrates how these are assumed within the self.<sup>13</sup> Her great literary strength is her ability to portray the way in which society's practises and ideologies become internalised and "inscribed within the self" (Shuttleworth, 1996: 244). Through exploring her heroines' mind and emotions (the Reason and Feeling she wrote about with such aching passion),<sup>14</sup> Brontë explores how women's subjectivity is shaped by society's ideologies. This is the undefined mistreatment examined in Brontë's novels: "denial of feeling" (Gordon, 1994: 154). It is likely that we see evidence of Brontë's passion and conviction in Jane's words: "you think I have no feelings, and that I can do without one bit of love or kindness; but I cannot live so" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 32). Driven by her experiences of the public and private oppression women felt under patriarchy, Brontë is arguably deliberately ambivalent, refusing to deny or suppress her needs and desires in all their complexity (Foster, 1985), as seemingly expressed through her heroines' inner conflicts. In this light, such ambivalences enhance rather than dilute and undermine her criticism of Victorian society and its ideologies, as some might argue.

Brontë's critique of Victorian ideology is complex and sophisticated. Ideologies are not merely immaterial ideas. Rather, they have substance and are given expression and significance by social practises and institutions (Dobrovic, 2006). Victorian laws can be said to have encouraged the attitudes and endorsed the norms of society (Dobrovic, 2006), so affecting social relations that they constituted both social interaction and individuals' subjectivity (Poovey, 1998). Brontë understood the coercive effects of ideology on subjectivity, despite the fact that critical theory thereon was yet to be established. Further, Brontë recognised the power of language in determining subjectivity,<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>13</sup> Armstrong argues that "domestic fiction" such as Brontë's novels situate subjectivity in an individual's desire, and make the well-being of the individual and society dependent upon the individual's self-control and repression (1987: 164). In spite of Brontë's attempts to expose how individuals become inscribed with patriarchal ideological constructs and gender norms through social coercion, she nonetheless retains this patriarchal prescript of self-repression.

<sup>14</sup> Reason and Feeling — loosely representing mind and emotion, society and self — could almost be considered characters in their own right and this could well be Brontë's intention, given the capitalisation of these terms in *Villette*. Indeed, it is in *Villette* that we see the loaded use of these terms most clearly, and feel Lucy's pain when she cries "Reason is vindictive", "if I have obeyed her it has chiefly been with the obedience of fear, not of love" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 229). From Crimsworth's admission that "a man is master of himself to a certain point, but not beyond it" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 225), and Jane's unease that "the vehemence of emotion... was claiming mastery" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 255) over her self-control, to Lucy's pained obedience, we see evidence of the fraught conflict between Reason and Feeling, society and self, in Brontë's works.

<sup>15</sup> In defining constructionism, Pfohl (2008) states that given the language-dependent nature of societies, our conception and description of ourselves and the world around us is shaped and coloured by our relation to each other and the material, symbolic and imaginary worlds. The stories a society creates — and, in turn, is recreated by — serves as constructionism in action (Pfohl, 2008). It could be argued that the constructed nature of gender forms the primary occupation of feminism (Leavy, Gnong and Ross, 2009). That the constructed nature of gender and identity forms the primary concern of Brontë's novels reveals her to be a true proto-feminist. Social constructs include certain ideas at the expense of others and they are both founded and destabilised by what they exclude (Leavy, Gnong and Ross, 2009). Brontë saw through the

and knew that this power was within her grasp (Armstrong, 1987). To this end, Brontë uses various themes, narrative techniques and careful choices of phrase to great effect, raising awareness of how patriarchal ideologies oppress women through her novels, and contributing greatly to the debate surrounding the “woman question”.

The “woman question” refers to the great Victorian debate concerning the character and responsibilities of women. Patriarchy’s essentialist gender construction of femininity was founded on the idea that women’s “natural” maternal instincts fitted them for the role of guardian of the home and guardian of societal morality while the masculine gender construct was deemed to be fitted for the struggles of the workplace (Ingham, 1996). Man was believed to represent rationality, leadership, and civilization while woman embodied the irrational, the passionate, and the natural world with all its vagaries (King, 2002). Men thus asserted that the faculty for thought and accomplishment was theirs alone, and they attempted to consign women to the realm of feeling (Faderman, 1981). Women assumed these values and developed the “cult of womanhood” (Faderman, 1981: 157).<sup>16</sup> The idea that different natures belong to the different sexes determined the “separate spheres”<sup>17</sup> which underwrote Victorian England’s social, economic and political systems and conventions (Poovey, 1998). The fact that women were viewed primarily as wives and mothers reveals how women as a group were only ever thought of in terms of their relationship and service to men. This ideology was dispersed via sermons, conduct books,<sup>18</sup> and literature and was so entrenched and pervasive that any deviation from the norm was seen as anomalous and problematic (Poovey, 1998). By the 1840s, the idea of women belonging in the home was firmly established (Hall, 1998) and gender ideologies enjoyed unique authority and significance (Shuttleworth, 1996). The idea of a binary distinction between men and women, masculinity and

---

constructionist nature of patriarchal ideology and destabilised it through drawing attention to the myths and perspectives which had been excluded and suppressed, so diminishing the credibility of patriarchal constructs.

<sup>16</sup> “True womanhood” was the ideal by which women were judged, and judged themselves (Welter, 1966: 152). This ideal was comprised of four primary attributes: devoutness, virtuousness, obedience and domesticity (Welter, 1966). These are the qualities which characterised patriarchal ideology’s feminine ideal.

<sup>17</sup> The term “separate spheres” is a retrograde denotation (Davidson, 1998). Together with such phrases as the “cult of domesticity” and “true womanhood”, it describes women’s experiences of disempowerment during the nineteenth-century as a result of her relative “separation” from social and institutional power (Davidson, 1998:444). Middle- and upper-class women were disconnected from their male counterparts not only in terms of their daily activities, but in spiritual interests and leisure occupations as well (Faderman, 1981). Apart from living together and raising a family, there was little common ground between the sexes (Faderman, 1981).

<sup>18</sup> Armstrong (1987) speaks of how conduct books — or women’s educational handbooks — created a female designated field of knowledge. As these texts appeared apolitical, these rules assumed the status of common sense and natural law, promoting and disseminating distilled ideology (Armstrong, 1987). By the 1850s, the reach and sway of conduct books was such that most of society knew and accepted the feminine ideal this literature promoted, and viewed it as “common sense” (63).

femininity, is reinforced by various opposing categories including: intellectual and physical, spiritual and material, cultural and natural, all of which have been coloured by gender philosophies.

Coventry Patmore's poem, "Angel in the House", written about his wife, whom he considered the perfect woman, served as a significantly influential portrait of the domestic feminine ideal (Hartnell, 1996). Patmore's "angel" exemplifies what women were expected to be: self-sacrificing, childlike and pure (Hartnell, 1996), as well as emotional, intellectually inferior, and lacking sexual passion in all but the most deviant women (Auerbach, 1982). Patmore's poem and the feminine ideal it extolled became so widely-accepted that the title became shorthand for Victorian patriarchy's ideal woman (Auerbach, 1982). Indeed, Patmore's "angel" effectively "became an a priori assumption, entrenched in Victorian domestic discourse" (Hartnell, 1996: 473). It is this essentialist position on women which Brontë criticises and it is her ambivalent criticism thereof which I shall be examining.

The figure of the "Angel in the House" belies a brutal enigma with connotations of confinement and sanctification (Auerbach, 1982). When women felt they failed to live up to the ideal, they responded by: seeing themselves as inadequate, challenging the bar set for them, or maintaining the essential values of womanhood while expanding the model and incorporating greater independence and agency (Welter, 1966). It was the latter *modus operandi* that Brontë adopted. Nancy Armstrong (1987) argues that it is impossible to distinguish the emergence of the "Angel in the House" ideal from either the popular novel or the incipient middle-class which required just such an "angel" to maintain domestic and national order while Victorian men were engaged in the workplace. That being said, novels such as Brontë's sought to destabilise such literary myths. Brontë went further by actively attempting to create her own feminine ideal, one that could only exist in a fantasy world of her creation, where the power of patriarchy could be matched by the power of women.

Judith Butler describes fantasy not as the antonym of reality, but rather what reality excludes; testing the limits of reality and, in so doing, creating "the possible in excess of the real" (2004: 29). Brontë's characters are such excesses, surpassing the ideological and literary bounds of Victorian conceptions and depictions of femininity and masculinity to such a degree that they cannot be adequately defined by gender (Cornell and Thurschwell, 1987). From the feminine Crimsworth to "Captain" Keeldar, the vast majority of Brontë's heroes and heroines defy simplistic gender classification. From her first novel, Brontë shows evidence of rejecting a strictly biological designation of femininity and masculinity, which she portrays, to a degree, as "existential"

conditions (Moglen, 1978: 104), predetermined by society's ideology. In this way, Brontë is able to characterise femininity as powerlessness, dependence, insecurity, and weakness (Moglen, 1978) while showing her heroines to be intelligent, insightful, powerful women. For instance, only Caroline and Shirley can appreciate and fully understand the plight of workers in all its complexity due to their similarly marginalised status, while men like Moore and Helstone cannot. Similarly, while Jane realises that becoming Rochester's mistress will undermine his love and respect for her, he lacks the insight and wisdom to fully appreciate the implications of his request. Thus Brontë subtly presents her heroines as superior to her male characters in their acumen, undermining patriarchal authority by portraying it as lacking.

Brontë portrays gender as a performance born out of interaction with others who share a mutual understanding of gender-based codes.<sup>19</sup> Brontë sought to discredit patriarchal ideologies through stressing the primacy and integrity of subjectivity over socially prescribed gender models. Further, she portrays her male and female characters as being held to ransom by society; viewed as incompetent and persecuted if they do not adequately perform the gender roles assigned to them (West and Zimmerman, 1987).<sup>20</sup> Thus Crimsworth is presented as less than a man through his many typically feminine traits and features, as well as through comparisons between him and his more physically imposing and powerful elder brother, who persecutes him for his perceived inferiorities, along with many of the other characters, throughout *The Professor*.

To be sure, Brontë's ideas concerning patriarchy, gender and power were ahead of her time. This is evident in how she portrays the struggle for agency as being fought not on behalf of a sexual identity, but rather against such constructs. Michel Foucault was later to take just such a position in his fight against the "disciplinary society" (Balbus, 1987: 118). This predates both Sigmund Freud and Jacques Lacan, too, who would instruct us that "men" and "women" do not exist in any theoretically pure, essentialist capacity; but rather that we are all split beings consisting of elements of both gender positions (Cornell and Thurschwell, 1987). In an attempt to reclaim women's identity and self-determination, Brontë locates her heroines' source of strength in their acceptance and appreciation of their otherness.<sup>21</sup> This sense of otherness is closely tied to the "body" in Brontë's

---

<sup>19</sup> It is through interacting with society that Shirley learns her station to be atypical, and she employs various gender-based traits depending on the company in a playful effort to reveal the incongruity of gender ideology. So she says to Helstone: "you must regard me as Captain Keeldar today. This is quite a gentleman's affair...The ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp... at their peril they speak" (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 229—230).

<sup>20</sup> This predates gender theorists such as Butler (2004), who proposed the theory of gender as performance.

<sup>21</sup> This is most evident in *Villette*, which depicts Lucy's growing self-awareness and acceptance. Her ability to adapt and develop is based upon her atypical character and social position, which enables her to define herself in opposition to an alien society (Dolin, 2008). This grants her the insight and freedom to explore her true self.

works. The “body” is not a neutral entity. Throughout Western history, the idea of the “body” as being something alien and separate from one’s true self (be it one’s mind, spirit or soul), and being a destructive force that prevents one from achieving one’s true ambitions, is recurrent (Bordo, 2003). As Victorian women are invariably linked to the “body” and men to the “mind”, the negativity associated with the “body” is transferred to women, with the effect that they are seen as forces that are destructive to the pursuit of knowledge, spiritual enlightenment, and healthy sexuality (Bordo, 2003).<sup>22</sup> This has instilled the fear of distinctiveness and otherness in women (King, 2002). Despite the fact that Jane “was a discord in Gateshead Hall [and]... was like nobody there” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 10), being “other” to her relations, she stands up to both her cousin and her aunt in their unjust treatment of her. Lucy, too, admits that she is “nobody’s daughter”, with “no relations”, and has “no attractive accomplishments — no beauty” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 146). Still, Lucy has the courage and sense of self to tell Ginevra that “hapless as I am, according to your showing, sixpence I would not give to purchase you, body and soul” (146). By firmly establishing her heroines as unattractive and socially retiring, Brontë makes them less marriageable and, in so doing, frees them from social and literary expectations (Andrews, 2004). Through their solitary, unconventional behaviour, and their unusual features and attire, Brontë challenges social values concerning women (Andrews, 2004).

The unconventionality of Brontë’s heroines challenges hegemonic views of the Victorian period. Fiction offers itself to readers more as a departure from history than a traditional account thereof, presenting a challenge to customary historical accounts (Newton, 1981) and defying critics who seek to glean information about the past from literary representations. Brontë’s novels support this argument, given their strong social criticism, their subversion of patriarchal ideology and gender constructs, and Brontë’s attempts to redefine the feminine ideal through her heroines. These factors confound a straightforward reading of the Victorian era in which the novels are set. The complexity and ambiguity which characterise Brontë’s works could more accurately be said to reflect both the private and the public, the hegemonic and the personal, in the Victorian era. Brontë’s depictions of her heroes’ and heroines’ struggles between their desires and patriarchal prescripts — likely informed by Brontë’s own struggles — give us great insight into the lived experience of the age.

---

<sup>22</sup> Feminists came to view the “body” as the cause of women’s subjugation with gender ideologies being rooted in perceived physical differences between sexes (Bordo, 2003). Since woman’s “body” was first compared to man’s and found lacking, theorists throughout the ages have regarded women as inferior (King, 2002). From Aristotle, who saw women as defective, and St Thomas Aquinas, who viewed them as imperfect, to modern-day societies that limit women’s agency, women’s “bodies” could be said to remain their prisons.

Nina Auerbach describes the convolution and abstruseness of the Victorian era best when she speaks of “the chaos of its apparent inconsistency and the intensity of its underlying coherence” (1982: 1). While I seek to explore the overarching characteristics and retrospectively labelled ideologies of patriarchal society in nineteenth-century England, it is important to remember that in practise, individuals and societies rarely uniformly conform to such ideologies (Hall, 1998), as their engagement therewith is complicated and multidirectional. The middle-class patriarchal ideology commonly associated with the Victorian era was constantly challenged and changing (Poovey, 1998). The process of reading an author’s work with the view of learning about the past is not an unproblematic one. It is important to bear in mind that an author’s work is highly subjective — along with each reader’s interpretation thereof — and is burdened by agenda, the framing and choice of words working to mould and shape the reader’s point of view. Further, the conditions under which any text is written are reproduced in those texts to various degrees, as reality and its representation are interrelated (Poovey, 1998). Thus causation is multidirectional, calling into question the unidirectional point of view that numerous critics and historians exercise (Poovey, 1988) and which whitewashes over the ambiguities of real life. Bearing these challenges in mind, learning of the past through literature is nonetheless beneficial as it remains a valuable source of insight into how individual characters experienced the social conditions of their age. We arguably find in Jane’s cry “grant me at least a new servitude!” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 84) and Caroline’s demand that the “men of England! Look at [their] poor girls” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 330) evidence of Brontë’s own despair at the limited, lonely existence available to her in patriarchal society, and her explicit criticism thereof.

The argument posited in my dissertation rests on two assumptions: the first, that patriarchal ideology is central to understanding the representation of the female characters’ oppression in Brontë’s texts; the second, that Brontë’s texts offer us uniquely revealing insights into how gender ideology is experienced by individuals through the perspectives of literary figures (Newton, 1981). Brontë’s characters’ oscillating subversion of and adherence to patriarchal ideology gives readers insight into the extent to which this female novelist was a defender of and challenger to the status quo (Newton, 1981). I shall explore four primary themes in my dissertation. Through *Jane Eyre* I shall examine Brontë’s treatment of female Victorian stereotypes and her attempt to create a new model of womanhood. *Shirley* will provide the departure point from which to view Brontë’s ambiguous depiction of identity, ideology and stereotype, as well as her attempt to create a counter culture of female empowerment. By way of *Villette* I shall consider Brontë’s study of and challenge to traditional power relations, and the power of the masculine gaze. Finally, I shall turn to Brontë’s

first completed novel and arguably the blueprint for her later works, *The Professor*, to explore her representation of gender, sex and sense of self.

Critics, particularly feminist critics,<sup>23</sup> often see female novelists as voicing their “sense of dualities” in clandestine ways as they felt unable to directly express their true feelings and ideas unfiltered in public (Foster, 1985: 78). Brontë is typically seen as a “paradigm” for such novelists by these critics who believe the architecture and ambiguities of her novels both form and disguise her social criticism (78). However, I shall argue that Brontë does not conceal social criticism in her novels; rather, this is voiced deliberately, explicitly and self-consciously. The so-thought clandestine elements of her fiction are in fact ambiguous aspects of her social criticism, which is at all times confined by her conservatism.

---

<sup>23</sup> Gilbert and Gubar in their analysis of Brontë’s novels, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, spearhead the critical reading of dualities in Brontë’s work as representing clandestine criticism, describing the central confrontation in *Jane Eyre* as Jane’s confrontation with her own “imprisoned hunger, rebellion and rage” (1984: 339). In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell refers to Helen Burns as being “as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë [Charlotte’s elder sister] as Charlotte’s wonderful power of reproducing character could give” (2005 [1857]). However, rather than subscribe to such a straight reading, Gilbert and Gubar view Helen as “burning with spiritual passion” as well as “anger”, until she is ultimately “carried off by her own fever” (346). This illustrates the kind of clandestine resistance many other feminist critics read into Brontë’s work.

## Chapter 1

### *Jane Eyre*: a new model of womanhood

Brontë's literary construction of "woman" was ground-breaking. She helped to redefine the model of womanhood propagated by patriarchal ideology and alter the literary tradition by ushering in a new discourse<sup>24</sup> characterised by the integrity of inner life and feeling<sup>25</sup> rather than traditional, male-defined literary symbols and conventions (Armstrong, 1987),<sup>26</sup> which tended to undermine female agency, even honour. In breaking with literary conventions, and presenting a complex heroine of thought and feeling, Brontë saw herself as writing truth. As she states: "unless I have the courage to use the language of Truth in preference to the jargon of Conventionality, I ought to be silent" (2000 [1848]: 118). Jane herself asks forgiveness of the "romantic reader" for "telling the plain truth" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 110).

*Jane Eyre* is the story of the eponymous character's psychological development and maturation, and her struggle to define herself under patriarchy's ideological constraints. Cynthia Carlton-Ford goes as far as to argue that in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë establishes a new genre, one she terms "the feminist fairy-tale", which chronicles women's unique predicament of how to enjoy intimacy while retaining independence in relations with men (1988: 375). It is through the interiority of her characters that Brontë explores Victorian stereotypes of femininity, gender, and power while highlighting the oppression middle-class women experienced under patriarchy. Through exploring Jane's inner struggles, Brontë exposes the depth and complexity of female subjectivity, and the way in which it can become suppressed and engendered by patriarchal ideology (Shuttleworth, 1996). In so doing, she rejects the "Angel in the House" ideal as a constructed fantasy and attempts to create a new model of womanhood. Popular fiction in general assumed the role of reworking the "Angel in the House" stereotype so as to humanise and individualise her (Armstrong, 1987). However, self-sacrifice and self-control remained the essential qualities which most authors would not have their heroines violate (Armstrong, 1987). Brontë offers us heroines who can think, feel and act, and whose needs and desires can find expression — perhaps even fulfilment. While Brontë depicts

---

<sup>24</sup> Bellis (1987) argues that *Jane Eyre* offers illustrations of a verbal feminine discourse. While this is typically relegated to the margins of the male-dominated literary profession, in *Jane Eyre* this discourse is granted a central and ever increasing role (Bellis, 1987). However, as Jane's many asides to the reader demonstrate, she remains mindful of the traditional role of a writer (Bellis, 1987), as well as her role as a woman. For this reason, her text remains constrained in its structure and diction, which in turn work to constrain its passion.

<sup>25</sup> Brontë and her sisters have been credited with making passion part of the literary tradition (Chase, 1947).

<sup>26</sup> During the course of the novel, Brontë subverts many traditional literary metaphors and symbols so as to redefine them. We see this with Brontë's use of fire in the novel; while typically a symbol of danger, Brontë evokes its positive connotations of warmth and feeling to a greater degree than its destructive force (Maynard, 1987). Likewise, while the symbol of the moon is traditionally one of stasis and restraint, Brontë uses it to great effect as a vibrant symbol of feminine intuition, imagination and desire (Maynard, 1987).

female desire with a novel intimacy, immediacy and power, she ultimately refuses to allow her heroines to give in to their desires. Rochester illustrates this when he pronounces of Jane: “judgment shall still have the last word in every argument, and the casting vote in every decision” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 202). Then again, Brontë’s work can still be considered avant-garde and proto-feminist in how she resolved that it was “morally desirable” to depict her heroines on the same terms as those of traditional literary heroes: on the merits of their inner self (Moglen, 1978).

Brontë’s novels offer a psychological depiction of her heroines’ attempts to carve their own path in life, counter to that which society had laid out for them. Brontë breaks with ideological and literary norms by illustrating how one’s subjectivity is constrained by society and its discriminatory ideologies, and how one is constantly evolving through one’s desires, effectively broadening and redefining the female psyche (Armstrong, 1987).<sup>27</sup> This expanded female psyche, and its accompanying fierce discourse of feeling, illustrates how female self-definition can be based on socially-prescribed “inexpressivity” (Shuttleworth, 1996: 197). Here, attempts to acknowledge and voice intimate thoughts and emotions end in self-loathing for failure to conform inwardly to patriarchy’s female ideal. So Jane chastises herself for indulging her feelings for Rochester: “a greater fool... had never breathed the breath of life... your folly sickens me... could not even self-interest make you wiser?” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 160).

Brontë gives a legitimate voice to female passion, which patriarchal society sought to curb, through exploring her heroine’s inner life of private feeling and desire. We see this is how Jane is able to stand up to Rochester, speak openly with him, as she feels free “from painful restraint” (147), and argue convincingly with him when in disagreement with him. In this way, through likening female passion and desire to that of men, she endowed her heroes and heroines with “absolute identity” on a new “ontological plane” (Armstrong, 1987: 197). However, internal psychological struggle and external social struggle are intimately linked in Brontë’s novels (Shuttleworth, 1996). Thus, while Jane is presented to us as atypical, the challenges she faces in the novel are emblematic of those faced by many woman in Victorian society. Brontë recognises that identities are formed

---

<sup>27</sup> The Cartesian tradition adheres to the idea of a “constituting subject” and stresses the agency of individuals to form their own identity; while the non-Cartesian position upholds the theory of a “constituted subject”, one which is the “product of social forces” (Leavy, Gnong and Ross, 2009: 262). Feminist scholars have critiqued the Cartesian subject for being inherently masculine in conceptualisation, and the non-Cartesian subject for divorcing the “mind” and “body” (Leavy, Gnong and Ross, 2009). Subsequent scholarship has sought to construct a subject that retains the agency of the Cartesian model and which integrates the “mind” and “body” (Leavy, Gnong and Ross, 2009). Brontë’s portrayal of a latent subjectivity existing prior to a socialised identity (Armstrong, 1987) reveals her to be in alignment with these latter scholars through her attempts to reveal the artificiality of social coercion on female identity, whilst highlighting the inherent power and integrity of the female spirit.

through contraposition, necessitating the repression of ambiguities so as to produce the illusion of a stable, socially-accepted identity (Scott, 1986). However, Brontë goes further by stressing that the repressed elements and desires remain and form an ever-present threat to the coherence and stability of self (Scott, 1986). This is clearly evident in Jane's discordant nature.<sup>28</sup> Most notably in Brontë's novels, psychological struggle appears as self-repression, accompanied by the threat of madness (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).<sup>29</sup> This is evident in Jane's symbolic ties with Bertha, whose confinement is a symptom and cause of her instability. In this way, Brontë suggests the undesirability and fundamental unsustainability of patriarchal ideology's constructions of gendered identity.

### **The "myth of woman"**

Victorian patriarchal and gender ideologies were pervasive. The domestic ideal of woman became more powerful as it was enshrined in fiction, "for the fiction of domesticity exists as a fact in its own right", exerting power over readers as they absorb social norms (Armstrong, 1987: 251). In contemporary culture, with its multiplicity and variety of voices, it is difficult to appreciate the central role that faith and fiction played in Victorian society, and the great influence they exercised over society at large, and women in particular (Auerbach, 1982). However, underlying the patriarchal view of women's folly, we find evidence of the myth of their power and limitless transformative potential (Auerbach, 1982). While patriarchal ideology decreed that the woman worthy of respect was an "angel" of selflessness as daughter, wife, and mother, Auerbach (1982) argues that what she terms the "myth of woman" was self-creating and self-interested: a source of great power offering a new dispensation.<sup>30</sup>

We find this "myth of woman" in *Jane Eyre*. Jane decries the intolerable standards and models set for women and the limited agency available to them, demanding autonomy and power: "women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from

---

<sup>28</sup> Jane's internal divisions are less apparent as her consciousness is externalised. I will explore this in greater detail in "The hysterical text" section below.

<sup>29</sup> Unconventionality was used as a key form of oppression by Victorian patriarchal society, shaming women into conforming to the desired mould. Deviation from the norm was linked to mental instability, and the threat of being viewed as mentally unsound helped to keep women in line (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

<sup>30</sup> Victorian women ruled both country and home while ironically being excluded from public institutions (Auerbach, 1982). Queen Victoria's reign and the middle-class woman's rule of her home placed women in positions of great power, despite the patriarchal oppression they were subjected to. It is this latent power of both ruler and oppressed that Auerbach (1982) refers to as the "myth of woman", and which she argues lay at the imaginative centre of society. That such a "myth of woman" lurks in the shadows of Victorian writing hints at the endurance and wide acceptance of this myth (Auerbach, 1982).

too rigid a constraint” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 110). Thus Jane is an example of this literary, mythic woman: independent, powerful and egocentric.<sup>31</sup> In such speeches, Brontë explicitly challenges patriarchal ideologies, attacking the philosophy of “separate spheres” as unfounded, revealing society’s inherent biases.

*Jane Eyre* is characterised by zealous, scarcely suppressed sedition, directed towards patriarchal ideologies, which Victorian readers recognised (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). These traits earned the novel censure from a society in conflict with itself, whose culture was constantly under construction. Elizabeth Rigby, in her review of the novel, states that “the tone of the mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has also written *Jane Eyre*” (1974 [1848]: 109–110). In this cultural conflict, the doctrine of Christianity was often used to cloak gender and class-based issues. Rather than taking offence at *Jane Eyre*’s sexual allusions, and the possible moral threat this posed, critics attacked it as “anti-Christian” for its challenge to society’s norms. Jane’s passionate, angry cries of injustice and her refusal to conform to the life dictated to her by society offended readers more than Rochester’s sexual vitality, and they viewed the former as a greater threat to the social order (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Thus we see the great power and threat represented by the “myth of woman” to the patriarchal status quo. However, whilst challenging patriarchal ideologies concerning middle-class women, Jane nonetheless strives to live up to their associated values and norms, desperate for social acceptance: “I know I should think well of myself, but that is not enough: if others don’t love me, I would rather die” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 67). Here we see how, like Brontë herself, Jane’s radicalism is confined by her conservatism.<sup>32</sup>

### **Female stereotypes and tropes**

*Jane Eyre* is preoccupied with exploring Victorian female stereotypes, and creating a new model of womanhood. Galen V. Bodenhausen and C. Neil Macrae (1998) describe stereotypes as descriptive notions related to affiliation in a particular grouping. While not defining said groupings, these descriptive notions are typically considered to be characteristic of members of such groups (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998).<sup>33</sup> Brontë employs stereotypes in most of her minor characters

---

<sup>31</sup> “Egocentric” here does not denote selfishness. Given patriarchy’s admonishment of women who act in their own interest, I use this term to indicate efforts to legitimise and validate women’s needs.

<sup>32</sup> Brontë acknowledges her own power as a novelist by dramatising the development of a heroine who gains the ability and authority to author her own story. In this way, she serves as an embodiment of this “myth of woman” herself.

<sup>33</sup> Stereotypes both directly and indirectly influence individuals’ judgements and behaviours. This occurs directly through the activation of stereotypical views, and indirectly when stereotypical notions impact on the

and uses them as counterpoints to her heroes and heroines, who serve as Brontë's attempts to reengineer social identifiers. In this way, Brontë critiques social stereotypes and undermines the ideological foundations of patriarchy. This is apparent when Jane says to Rochester: "I'm not an angel... I will be myself... you must neither expect nor exact anything celestial of me — for you will not get it, any more than I shall get it of you" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 263). Jane's latter assertion that she "had rather be a thing than an angel" (265) highlights once again Brontë's efforts to deconstruct the "Angel in the House" ideal.

Bertha Mason, Blanche Ingram, Miss Temple, and Helen Burns all serve as Victorian character types which Jane must confront and overcome (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984) in order to create an integrated self, independent of society's prescripts.<sup>34</sup> Blanche Ingram is Brontë's most explicit example of the stereotypical, self-serving beauty who manipulates the marriage market and her suitors to her ends. Bertha Mason, the insane, creole wife, is the incarnation of patriarchal ideologies concerning women and the flesh, embodying carnal, irredeemable female sexuality (Showalter, 1977). Miss Temple, as her name indicates, acts as the motherly "Angel in the House" at Lowood, serving as surrogate mother for Jane (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Helen Burns represents the similarly unattainable ideal of self-renunciation as she is indifferent to the material world in her complete focus on the next (Showalter, 1977). Through these characters, Brontë systematically explores and critiques female stereotypes, proving their inadequacy in light of the depth and complexity of the female psyche, exhibited in Jane. Thus Brontë undermines patriarchy's ideological precepts through employing traditional moral codes and literary conventions.

Helen Burns and Miss Temple serve as orthodox examples of Victorian "angels". It is through them that Jane learns what it means to conform to society's expectations (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). The two offer different but similarly unattainable ideals: the former representing self-sacrificing spirituality and self-renunciation, the latter feminine repression (Gilbert, 1977). From both, Jane learns what it means to compromise. This is clear in her plea "grant me at least a new servitude" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 84) if nothing more can be had from life. Ultimately, Jane rejects

---

choice and reading of the accessible information (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998). It is the latter that has a greater effect on individuals' perception and actions (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998). Research suggests that if individuals do not consider their social identity to be under threat, and if they are encouraged to consider contradictory information, they may well not engage in social stereotyping (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998). Through encouraging her readers to identify with an authentic heroine, Brontë attempts to create just such an environment for her readers, encouraging them to see beyond the stereotypes surrounding women to the people beneath through depicting in Jane a woman who does not conform to stereotypes of divine purity and inferiority to the male characters around her.

<sup>34</sup> Likewise, the Rivers sisters, Diana and Mary, represent the female archetypes of huntress and virgin mother respectively (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). It is significant that they are two women as opposed to one, suggesting that the unified self that encompasses both is out of Brontë's reach (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

both models for herself, stating with confidence: “I was no Helen Burns” (63). Brontë sought to criticise the selflessness demanded of middle-class Victorian women through Miss Temple and Helen Burns, as well as through what this costs Jane. The power Jane so desperately craves is the power of self-determination (Flint, 2002). This is why even Miss Temple elicits Jane’s rebellion, for she, too, would have her conform to society’s norms and models for women. Jane’s feelings towards Miss Temple are fraught as admiration and thankfulness tussle with opposition to her prescriptions that Jane conforms to society’s expectations (Rylance, 2002). Helen’s subservience to patriarchal and religious authority similarly earns Jane’s ire. Helen’s philosophy on life is summed up when she says to Jane, “the Bible bids us return good for evil... it will be your duty to bear it... it is your fate” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 52). While Helen is able to think of “something beyond her punishment” (47), Jane states that she “should resist” (52), refusing to deny what she sees as her right as a human being and child of God to be treated with equality.

Feminist critics such as Joan Anderson (2004) typically read in the characters of Miss Temple and Helen Burns repressed rage and rebellion on Brontë’s part. This is arguably because they appear too “good” to be true. Helen is seen to be “burning” with anger and spiritual passion, her tendency to leave her things in disgraceful disarray read as a form of rebellion (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 346). However, if one views minor figures like Helen Burns and Miss Temple as stereotypes rather than fully-developed characters in their own right, their adherence to the unattainable standards of the feminine ideal is necessary rather than implausible. Jane, the only fully-developed female character in the novel, needs idealised models like Helen<sup>35</sup> and Miss Temple in order to measure herself against and reject them. Thus Brontë critiques the patriarchal ideological constructs they represent.

In this way, Jane’s self-development is depicted in relation to other characters, who serve as foils for her. Brontë’s defining literary trait is the way in which she separates her heroines’ psyches into the reductive, socially prescribed “mind” and “body”, establishing these as characters or character-types in their own right (Showalter, 1977). We see this with Helen and Bertha, who represent Jane’s “spirit” and “body” respectively (Showalter, 1977), and who appear in the novel in response to Jane’s need to explore these parts of herself. Rochester and St John serve the same purpose. As Jane’s primary inner conflict — along with that of all Brontë’s heroines — is between reason and feeling, she is confronted with choices between the two throughout the novel. In order to achieve an integrated self, Brontë’s heroines must reject society’s models of feeling and flesh in

---

<sup>35</sup> As previously quoted, Gaskell states that “Helen Burns is as exact a transcript of Maria Brontë as Charlotte’s wonderful power of reproducing character could give” (1857 [2005]), describing her as “delicate, unusually clever and thoughtful for her age, gentle and untidy” (78): all traits of Helen. That Brontë wished to honour her sister through this character undermines the argument that Helen is a figure of repressed rage.

their extremes and find a way to marry the two (Showalter, 1977). Thus, once she has proven to herself that she has power over her emotions by leaving Rochester, Jane must then confront her reason through the character of St John, who offers her a loveless life of intellectual and spiritual fulfilment. This cyclical conflict between “mind” and “body”, reason and feeling, in their assorted manifestations, through various characters and trials, is essential for Jane’s maturation and psychological development.

### **The hysterical text<sup>36</sup>**

*Jane Eyre* is remarkable for the way in which Brontë’s depiction of Jane’s world colours her psychological descriptions of other characters (Maynard, 1987). In this way, she creates a kind of coherent, psychological realism that extends throughout every aspect of the novel, furnishing the work with a remarkable sense of unity: a more true-to-spirit brand of realism. John Maynard (1987) views the novel’s plot as framework of fantasy as opposed to a coherent depiction of a society governed by natural, religious and social laws. He argues that the truth of Jane’s account is to be found not in the tales she relates, but in what these reveal about her character, as well as, significantly, in Jane’s need to defend and validate her personal history (Maynard, 1987). Typically, Brontë’s novels are so concerned with the psychological reality of her characters that she is not afraid to abandon realism in its conventional sense within the plot in order to uphold it on a greater scale (Hunt, 1983). This is evident in how Jane’s consciousness is projected onto her environment to such a degree that people and events appear to develop in response to her need to test her value system (Moglen, 1978). The symbolic nature of the people and places in the novel (Moglen, 1978) upholds this view of the novel as a hysterical text. After Rochester proposes, for instance, Jane enquires “what had befallen the night?... and what ailed the chestnut tree? It writhed and groaned” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 258). The coming storm personifies the conflict raging within her over her betrothal, while the soon-to-be fractured chestnut tree represents her union with Rochester. Furthermore, Jane goes through a new phase of personal development with each new establishment she resides in; confronting the figures of patriarchy in each place and gaining strength from the

---

<sup>36</sup> Pervasive, complex and ill-defined, hysteria was broadly viewed as a divergence from typical behaviour and emotional excess during the Victorian era (Mangham, 2003). The origins of the term “hysteria” tie it to female sexuality and indeed it was viewed as a distinctly feminine disorder. Texts can be classified as hysterical by virtue of the nature of their tone, subject matter and intent (Mangham, 2003). Partly an ideological construct, hysteria is linked to the political and economic aspirations of the era (Mangham, 2003). This is seen in how hysteria’s primary sufferers — namely middle- and upper-class women — were omitted from public life and restricted to the home. Through its incorporation into contemporary literature, hysteria can serve to justify calls for women’s emancipation (Mangham, 2003).

match.<sup>37</sup> In this way, the cyclical, repetitive structure of the novel supports this reading (Moglen, 1978). The scene of enclosure and escape, which sees young Jane locked in the red room,<sup>38</sup> can be considered emblematic of her story as a whole; given the significance of the incident by its position at the novel's opening and her remembrance of it at key moments thereafter (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

The novel is indeed hysterical in that the text symbolically enacts those elements which would be out of place in psychological realism. Brontë, by necessity, circumvents conventions of psychological realism and contemporary literature where there existed no precedent for a tale expressing women's anger and empowerment. When Brontë employs female self-assertion, resulting depictions of dependence and frustration cause the text to fragment hysterically (Poovey, 1988). This is evident in the red room scene, where Jane's frustration and anger at her powerlessness sees her witness "a light [gleam] on the wall" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 11–12). This, she believes to be "a herald of some coming vision from another world", and results in her experiencing "a species of fit" (11–12). That Jane overhears the servants say that someone saw "something [pass] her, all dressed in white, and [vanish]" and "a light in the churchyard just over [her uncle's] grave" (14), adds credence to her tale. In this way, readers' suspicions of Jane's mental instability are undermined at the expense of realism in the text. Similarly, Jane's divided nature is made less obvious as her conflicting traits are externalised (Auerbach, 1985). This is clear in how nature reflects Jane's emotions and how certain characters serve as externalisations of herself. Thus we find the fractured chestnut tree, and characters such as Bertha (representing Jane's fiery, rebellious side) and Helen Burns (representing her self-sacrificing, self-depreciating side).

Bertha<sup>39</sup> serves as another key element of the hysterical nature of the text, emerging whenever Jane comes close to relinquishing control (Shuttleworth, 1996). She becomes a manifestation of Jane's suppressed frustration and rage (Maynard, 1987). Even Bertha's most terrifying acts can be considered physical displays of Jane's latent desires. For instance, Jane's deep concerns over her impending nuptials and resulting loss of autonomy could be said to lead Bertha to

---

<sup>37</sup>Jane's lonely sojourn on the moors and her movement through various homes exemplify the rootlessness of women in patriarchal society (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

<sup>38</sup>The incident in the red room — with its window-seat retreat, its male-conducted interrogation and female exposure, and resulting loss of consciousness — is relived at Thornfield (Bellis, 1987). However, significantly, at Thornfield it results in an assertion of feminine power through Jane (Bellis, 1987).

<sup>39</sup>*Wilde Sargasso Sea*, Rhys' empathetic retelling of *Jane Eyre* from Bertha's perspective, highlights the developments made in the treatment of female literary characters (Showalter, 1977). Downtrodden and deceived, Rhys explores Bertha's Creole heritage, giving voice to the unspoken, racial elements which underlie Brontë's tale by depicting her as the ostracised, native "other" (Showalter, 1977). Originally named Antoinette before Rochester renames her, Bertha is Rhys's illustration of how one's identity can be determined by imperialist society (Spivak, 1985).

tear Jane's veil in two and render the wedding null and void (Gilbert, 1977). Similarly, while Jane appears untroubled by Rochester's sexual confessions, Bertha's arson attack on him in his bed suggests otherwise (Gilbert, 1977). Likewise, Jane's repressed anger at Rochester's gypsy trick could be said to provoke Bertha to attack Mason while Jane's desire to end Rochester's mastery — symbolised in her inferior position in Thornfield — sees Bertha destroy the mansion (Gilbert, 1977). Rochester's suffering extends to him losing the hand and eye which Jane referred to previously, maiming him in such a way as to render him dependent on her later (Gilbert, 1977). While Bertha appears to function as Jane's antithesis, she in fact serves as an embodiment of her baser inclinations, another model she must reject in order to achieve a fully integrated self. Various parallels exist between the two, such as the prisons of the attic and the red room and the like terms with which they are mentioned (Shuttleworth, 1996). We see this in Rochester's references to Bertha as a "fiend" and "madwoman" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 304), which echo the Reeds' servant's reference to Jane as a "mad cat" (6), and Mrs Reed's own thoughts on whether Jane "were child or fiend" (23). Furthermore, it is noteworthy that Jane baulks at Rochester's criticism of Bertha, preferring to sympathise with her and to think of her as an ill-fated woman (Shuttleworth, 1996). Such sympathy suggests the inherent similarities between the two; not only in their person, but also as women under patriarchal control. Principally, it is fire<sup>40</sup> that ties Bertha and Jane: the fire of Jane's inner passion and rage, and the fire that Bertha employs to execute Jane's deepest, darkest desires. Indeed, Bertha "is Jane's truest and darkest double" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 360).<sup>41</sup> The identification is best illustrated when Jane looks in the mirror and finds Bertha there (Maynard, 1987).

In another way, Bertha is less Jane's self-reinforcing counterpart than her subverter, undermining her efforts to create a unified self (Shuttleworth, 1996). Bertha highlights the feeble foundations of Jane's assertion that she is self-controlled (Shuttleworth, 1996) through her externalisation of Jane's inner, unrepressed desires. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar go as far as to argue that Jane's encounter with Bertha forms the novel's primary confrontation: a struggle with her

---

<sup>40</sup> Carlton-Ford argues that "as element, symbol, and metaphor", fire holds a central place in the novel. This is most apparent as a symbol of the hearth, home and intimacy Jane longs for, on the one hand, and, on the other, as a symbol of the immolation and self-sacrifice that traditionally accompanies this, and which she dreads (1988: 386). Fire also serves as a key to character, as characters are presented on a spectrum that ranges from heated and impassioned to cold and rational (Carlton-Ford, 1988).

<sup>41</sup> Bertha can be viewed, too, as a double for Rochester. They look alike, being of similar complexion, shape and strength (Roy, 1989). Further, Bertha is a pyromaniac and Rochester is consistently associated with images of fire while both share similar vices of sexual permissiveness (Roy, 1989). As Rochester's mate, Bertha represents a latent part of himself and his unsuccessful confinement of her symbolises his unresolved struggle with his anger and lust (Gordon, 1994: 157). Bertha's death heralds Rochester's resolution of his inner turmoil and his achievement of a sound and integrated self.

own “hunger, rebellion and rage” (1984: 339).<sup>42</sup> In this light, Bertha’s death in her own fire signals Jane’s development and the resolution of her anger against patriarchal society and her powerlessness. It could be argued that Jane no longer needs Bertha to enact her revenge against society.

There again, one could view Jane as representative of the empowering “myth of woman”, and Bertha as representative of the baser elements of human nature, personifying all men’s fears concerning female sexuality and power.<sup>43</sup> Certainly, depicting a woman as a sexual creature who suffers eruptions of insanity is to adhere to Victorian patriarchal ideology (Shuttleworth, 1996). In support of this reading, Brontë cites the reasons for Bertha’s insanity from Victorian psychiatry, stating that it was passed down from her mother, and — in accordance with contemporary psychiatric discourse — she suggests that Bertha’s attacks occur in response to acts of nature, such as the red moon (Shuttleworth, 1996). Brontë appears to classify Bertha’s actions as stemming from a brand of “moral madness”, a popular diagnosis at the time, whereby the natural tenor of one’s emotions, morals, and impulses were distorted without one’s intellect or reason being significantly altered (Showalter, 1977: 120). That a voracious sexual appetite was a common symptom of moral madness furthers this assumption (Showalter, 1977). Brontë’s inferred subscription to such a theory reveals her adherence to certain patriarchal ideologies and beliefs. That being said, Brontë appears to make plain — through Rochester’s tale of their marriage — that much of Bertha’s debasement can be attributed to her confinement. Brontë’s ability to see through the myths surrounding patriarchal ideologies and perceive its implications is thus clear here too.

### **Jane Eyre: the figure and the fiction**

Brontë’s fraught relationship with the patriarchal ideologies of her time is evident in the ambiguities and double entendres which exemplify Jane Eyre’s character and her tale. Jane Eyre is a complex figure. While outwardly Jane appears docile and disciplined, the reader, who is privileged

---

<sup>42</sup> Spivak (1985), in turn, argues that Bertha is the embodiment of imperialism in the novel and that her function within the text is to sufficiently blur the borderline between animal and human. This is evident when Jane says of Bertha that “it snatched and growled like some strange wild animal” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 296). Thus Jane robs Bertha of her sanity and her humanity. Spivak (1985) claims that Bertha plays this role so as to undermine the privileges granted her by the temper and letter of the law in the eyes of the reader. Spivak (1985) locates this within the larger imperialist project, which played a formative role in the cultural depiction of England to itself, and which is particularly significant in literature.

<sup>43</sup> Female sexual desire was an issue that touched the core of society (Faderman, 1981) and was deemed a hazardous force to be restrained (Showalter, 1977). Many critics — most notably Maynard (1987) and Shuttleworth (1996) — argue that Brontë’s novels are characterised by sexual desire. Chase goes as far as to say they are “driven by an undercurrent of sexual power that dominates her characters thoughts and actions” (1947: 490).

to her thoughts, knows her to be deeply conflicted. The reader recognises that while Jane presents a socially acceptable face to society, her emotions and strong sense of injustice rage against the conformity and subservience demanded of her. As both a child and a young adult, Jane challenges social and ethical bounds, and tests the limits and forms of power and identity open to women (Moglen, 1978). Ultimately, however, a more mature Jane appears to uphold patriarchal precepts by the close of her narrative. It could be argued that her frustrations stem from not being able to enjoy a more favourable social position in the existing system, rather than originating from dissatisfaction with the status quo itself. I will return to this issue in the conclusion.

Young Jane's confrontation with Mrs Reed is an astonishing act of self-assertion and it is unthinkable for a child in Victorian society — or for a Cinderella-figure in contemporary literature (Gilbert, 1977). An older Jane describes how "a passion of resentment fomented now within [her]" and her "soul began to expand, to exult, with the strangest sense of freedom, of triumph, [she] ever felt" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 32). Further, it is significant that in Jane's confrontation with Mrs Reed she reminds her that she, too, is bound by patriarchal restrictions (Gilbert, 1977): "what would Uncle Reed say to you if he were alive?" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 23). Thus Jane, a child and social inferior, equates herself with her aunt, a woman and social superior. Such an action as this from one so young holds a great, latent challenge to the social strata and power structure of society. The reason Jane gives for the outburst — that "some-thing spoke out of [her]" (23) — is even more alarming than the audacity of the child (Gilbert, 1977). In suggesting that she had little or no control over herself, Jane threatens the power dynamics of a society which relies upon women suppressing their needs and desires so as to conform. That Jane experiences "a sensation as if [she] had been poisoned" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 33) after the event illustrates the toll such revolt exacts on the rebel. Even as an adult, Jane confesses: "I never in my life have known any medium... between absolute submission and determined revolt. I have always faithfully observed the one, up to the very moment of bursting" (407). Thus Jane's lack of control over her barely repressed anger at injustice remains unresolved in early adulthood, threatening to burst forth at a moment of lapsed self-control. This latent threat to the social order is clearly apparent.

As evident from the quotation above, Jane is deeply divided within herself. Plain, principled and self-controlled, she attempts to fulfil patriarchal ideals for middle-class women to a degree, all the while longing for greater autonomy and agency. It is through her speech alone that Jane is empowered, as she has no social status, money, or physical attractions and charms to empower her or endear her to others (Armstrong, 1987). As such, it is the text as outcome, not as instrument — Jane's story itself — which is at stake in the novel (Poovey, 1988). Each time Rochester attempts to

commandeer Jane's tale, Bertha enacts Jane's revenge. We see this when Rochester disguises himself as a gypsy and tells Jane how *she* feels,<sup>44</sup> as well as after Mason is injured when Rochester instructs Jane to be silent and imagine herself to be him as a young boy (Poovey, 1988).<sup>45</sup> St John, too, earns Jane's censure as he attempts to construct an ending for her tale, which she rejects.<sup>46</sup>

In terms of syntax, Jane's prose offers swells of energy and emotion, bound within social conventions. Thus the novel imitates linguistically Jane's challenge of social norms whilst remaining contained within a conventional social — and literary — framework (Shuttleworth, 1996). We see this energy and vibrant desire when Jane asserts that "there is something in that... because it does not sound too sweet... all I want is to serve elsewhere. Can I not have so much of my own will? I want this because it is of no use wanting anything better" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 85). Here, Jane's strong desire for agency and action is bound with social conventions whereby women were expected to accept their lot. We see, too, how composed oratory of self-control and development is juxtaposed with its dreaded other: abandoned emotion and energy. Thus Brontë suggests that the powers of conventionality and rebelliousness are in essence the same (Shuttleworth, 1996).

#### **Patriarchy and religion: father versus God the Father**

While female conduct in the novel is explored in terms of submission and insubordination, male conduct serves as a study in patriarchal power (Rylance, 2002). Brontë systematically criticises the various patriarchs Jane encounters, most notably John Reed, Brocklehurst, Rochester, and St John (Roy, 1989). Brontë is principally concerned with the issue of middle-class women's dependence, and her ambiguous representation of this speaks of her own inner conflict between rebellion and conservatism. This is never clearer than in her fraught representation of religion, which vacillates between condemnation of hypocritical religious figures and deference to God the Father. This fraught depiction is most clear in Brontë's portrayal of Brocklehurst and St John. It is noteworthy that these two characters are also both the novel's staunchest patriarchs and its most overtly religious characters. In this way, Brontë draws attention to the institutional nature of

---

<sup>44</sup> Rochester says to Jane: "you are cold, because you are alone... You are sick; because the best of feelings... keeps far away from you" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 198), dictating her emotions to her.

<sup>45</sup> Rochester tell Jane she must "suppose [she was] no longer a girl... but a wild boy", and to "imagine [herself] in a remote foreign land" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 219), usurping her tale, identity and subjectivity.

<sup>46</sup> St John would have "Jane, come with [him] to India... as [his] helpmeet and fellow- labourer" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 409), refusing her the happily-ever-after ending she desires.

patriarchal authority through religion, and portrays Christianity as a tool of social control (Roy, 1989), to a degree.<sup>47</sup>

Brontë is at pains to illustrate the dividing line between true religion and the religious establishment, with its close ties to the Victorian patriarchal power structure (Arnold, 1968). Through the character of St John in particular, Brontë equates the religious establishment with patriarchal authority. This is evident when St John tells Jane: “God and nature intended you for a missionary’s wife... I claim you — not for my pleasure, but for my Sovereign’s service” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 409). Thus St John claims command of Jane in the name of God, denying her the self-autonomy she has felt since youth is her God-given right. That Jane feels she “could not resist him” (406) speaks of the great temptation that patriarchal authority holds over her. Similarly, Brocklehurst’s efforts to control the Lowood pupils through religion are condemned by Brontë. This is apparent when he punishes a young girl for the natural curl of her hair, querying why she “conform[s] to the world so openly... as to wear her hair one mass of curls?... are we to conform to nature?” (61). Brontë reveals the baselessness of patriarchal norms and values concerning women by having Brocklehurst treat a girl’s natural, God-given beauty as something offensive and immoral. In this way, Brontë suggests such patriarchal precepts are illogical and — in opposition to patriarchy’s assertions — against God and “nature”.

Despite Brontë’s opposition to the patriarchal religious establishment, in Jane’s words, “one idea... still [throbs]” throughout the novel, and that is “a remembrance of God” (299). It has also been argued that Jane’s many references to God throughout her tale serve as surreptitious commendations of religion and, by extension, patriarchy (Roy, 1989). However, that Jane often calls on God’s strength — “be not far from me, for... there is none to help” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 300) — to help her meet and endure the many challenges she faces as a result of her powerlessness within society undermines this argument. As does the fact that Jane’s assertions of moral and spiritual autonomy and integrity facilitate her criticisms of women’s oppression in patriarchal society (Lamonaca, 2002). Indeed, her spiritual convictions are depicted as being the very reason and power behind her resistance to Rochester and St John’s unfavourable propositions (Lamonaca, 2002).

Jane’s autonomy is tested once she leaves Thornfield and she is forced to rely on her own initiative and strength to survive. She finds a form of feminine authority figure and anchor — one

---

<sup>47</sup> That the doctrine of Christianity was used to support patriarchal ideology is clear from Rigby’s review of *Jane Eyre*. She accuses the novel of displaying “a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God’s word or in God’s providence”, and of a “pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civil society in fact has at the present day to contend with” (1974 [1848]: 109).

she has searched for all her life — in nature (Moglen, 1978): “the heath... was dry, and yet warm... the sky... was pure... the dew fell, but with propitious softness... Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was; and I... clung to her with filial fondness... I was her child” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 327). However, her love for and affinity with nature does not supersede her reverence for God: “we know that God is everywhere, but certainly we feel his presence most when his works are on the grandest scale spread before us” (328). In this establishment of a feminine deity in nature and her subsequent subordination to the patriarchal heavenly Father, we see once more how Brontë’s attempts to construct a new model of womanhood are ultimately undermined by her conservatism.

### **Bending women’s bonds**

So, too, we see how in attempting to redefine female selfhood, Brontë typically employs traditional frameworks (Foster, 1985). Because her heroines are enmeshed in conventional roles and restrictions, she is able to question these in light of the heroines’ needs and desires, and thus critique them. We see this in Jane’s cry — “I desired liberty... ‘grant me at least a new servitude!’” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 84) — when she leaves Lowood. That her life until this point has been spent in such physically and mentally limited spaces illustrates the few options open to middle-class women in her position. Jane rises against those who would restrict her to domesticity, forcing her to repress her abilities (Flint, 2002): “I was weary of an existence all passive” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 115); “I longed for... more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind” (110).

Part of the effectiveness of Brontë’s work rests in her exploration of traditional romantic frameworks and stereotypes, which she employs in order to express her doubts regarding patriarchal ideologies concerning women (Foster, 1985). Through her heroines’ questioning of their roles and position within heterosexual relationships, Brontë highlights and condemns the power imbalances therein (Foster, 1985). These, in turn, serve as examples of the imbalances in society as a whole. Jane speaks of being “called to the paradise of union” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 258), referring to marriage, despite her obvious awareness of the restrictions it imposes on women. This is evident in her uneasiness regarding Rochester’s changed attitude and actions towards her upon their engagement. Despite the fairy-tale qualities of her story, Jane is under no delusions as to the utopian nature of marriage. We see this in her assertion that upon their marriage Rochester “will turn cool” and that his “love will effervesce in six months, or less” (263). All she claims to hope for is that she should not “as a friend and companion... become quite distasteful to [her] dear master”

(263). Jane resists Rochester's efforts to romanticise their union and to etherealise her, so transforming her into a model wife through buying her expensive clothes and jewellery (Moglen, 1978). As Jane says, "the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with... degradation" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 271).

A significant source of Brontë's heroines' sedition rests in their resistance to traditional roles in heterosexual relationships. While society figures motherhood as the distinctive characteristic of women, Brontë barely mentions it, if at all (Poovey, 1988). The issue of selfless dedication to their partners is moot. Rather, their focus is on personal fulfilment within relationships,<sup>48</sup> rendering them rebels of Victorian society and its principles (Foster, 1985); embodiments of the self-serving, empowering "myth of woman". Even when Jane becomes a mother, her child receives no more than a passing mention, superseded as he is by marital passion for Rochester. This is clear in Jane's mention that "the boy had inherited [Rochester's] own eyes... large, brilliant, and black" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 461); Rochester's eyes consistently signifying sexual passion (Poovey, 1988). Jane's recurring child dreams speak of her fear of marriage and maternity. That these dreams are more akin to nightmares illustrates the deep dread she feels towards the loss of self and the indentured service that comes with matrimony and motherhood (Moglen, 1978). In retelling the dream, Jane speaks of how she "was burdened with the charge of a little child... while [Rochester]... withdrew farther" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 284). This reveals her fears of being hampered with the task of raising children largely on her own. That in another dream the "child clung round [her] neck... and almost strangled" (286) Jane speaks of the degree to which she fears she will have to sacrifice herself in motherhood. Further, Rochester's absence in her dreams speaks of the loneliness she fears in marriage should his affections wane, which she believes to be likely.

### **Rochester: insurrection and integrity**

From the very first meeting between Rochester and Jane, the fraught nature of their relationship in all its irony, contradiction, and its struggle for determination, is evident.<sup>49</sup> Rochester,

---

<sup>48</sup> This much is clear in the case of Lucy and Shirley too. Shirley, during Louis's proposal, challenges him to "live for [her] if [he] dare[s]", and demands that he "be good to [her]", and "be [her] companion through life" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 522—523). Thus Shirley sets the terms of their marriage to her satisfaction. Boone (1992) has convincingly argued that Lucy's happiness and wellbeing — as well as the satisfaction of her desires — are best served by her. So it is Lucy, alone, without M. Paul, who is best poised to find fulfilment.

<sup>49</sup> Oliphant argues that *Jane Eyre's* "furious love-making was but a wild declaration of the 'Rights of Woman' in a new aspect" (1976 [1855]: 312). She refers to "the old-fashioned deference and respect — the old-fashioned wooing" as "proofs of the inferior position of woman, to whom the man condescended" (1976 [1855]: 312). She goes on to argue that "the lover who struggled with her, as he would have with another man... was the only one who truly recognised her claims of equality" (1976 [1855]: 312). In this way, she credits *Jane Eyre* with introducing a new literary tradition and social criticism.

who from first glance appears the very embodiment of masculine energy, falls off his horse and requires Jane's assistance — suggesting that male power is not without its limitations. Rochester's references to Jane's powers of "bewitch[ing]" (122) his horse further expresses his recognition of Jane's agency, independence and mystery. However, Rochester's response — "necessity compels me to make you useful" (115) — highlights his condescending view of the young woman before him. Helpless and requiring her assistance, it is still Rochester that is compelling Jane, rather than Jane who is the active, independent agent offering her assistance (Gilbert, 1977).

Rochester needs Jane, and he gradually comes to realise it. This is clear not only from the way in which he needs her to rescue him on a number of occasions — such as when she saves him from his burning bed — but also from the way he comes to rely on her strength and advice (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). That Rochester allows Jane to save him repeatedly reveals his recognition of their equality. Jane's strong sense of independence serves as an attraction to Rochester. This is apparent in how he softens his behaviour when he senses that she finds it overbearing (Maynard, 1987). It is this same equality — this recognition of their soul's counterpoint in the "other" — that ultimately renders Rochester's gypsy costume ineffective on Jane. She sees through such external trappings, just as he sees through the image of the plain governess to the passionate soul within (Gilbert, 1977). It is significant that the first real connection Rochester and Jane make occurs when he disguises himself as a female gypsy so as to speak candidly with her (Dobrovic, 2006). By adopting the costume and its attenuated gender and social positions, Rochester is able to experience middle-class, female marginality for the first time, opening himself up to empathising with Jane. This, in turn, inaugurates a deeper empathy and reversal of roles on a larger scale (Bellis, 1987). This sets their relationship on a new course as the pair is able to achieve a degree of intimacy they could never have otherwise achieved.<sup>50</sup>

This familiarity and parity is born out of empathy for the other. While Rochester is the embodiment of patriarchal vitality (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), he has also suffered the adverse effects of patriarchy as a result of being born a second son. Duped into making an inappropriate<sup>51</sup> match with Bertha by his father and elder brother — and suffering much as a result — Rochester rebels against authority, scorning society's approval and establishing his own moral code (Moglen, 1978). As one who has suffered, Rochester is able to understand Jane, and appreciate why she

---

<sup>50</sup> Rochester's need to role-play in order to achieve this illustrates Brontë's awareness of "gender constructivity" (Dobrovic, 2006: 17).

<sup>51</sup> Rochester admits that he married Bertha for her money and her flesh; his sexual desire for her blinding him to the ulterior, mercenary motives his father and brother had in promoting the match (Vejvoda, 2003): "for the sake of making [Rochester's] fortune" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 128).

“fear[s] in the presence of a man... to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 139). Rochester is a remarkable character and not only for the fact that he views Jane through a different lens to the patriarchal point of view he has towards Adele and Blanche Ingram. Rochester is remarkable because, in so doing, he breaks from the conventional power role of master.

As their relationship develops, Jane and Rochester are increasingly freed from society's posturing and empty rituals and the self-repression expected of polite interaction between people of different sexes. Rochester states that he “find[s] it impossible to be conventional” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 139) with Jane. In turn, “the ease of his manner [frees Jane] from painful restraint” (147), enabling her to express herself freely. Carla Kaplan (1996) argues that to speak freely and be understood is the “paradise of union” that Jane longs for (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 258). However, this is one that Jane ultimately does not realise. This is because for Jane and Rochester to communicate as true equals, they need to occupy another world, and have “passed through the grave” before they can stand “at God's feet, equal” (256). Jane's speech achieves little beyond giving her the satisfaction of speaking her mind, it does not change society's unequal power relations, which must be amended before true equality and communication can be achieved between them (Kaplan, 1996).

Rochester, like Jane, deviates from the social and literary norm by sharing her desire for greater freedom and agency, and wanting this for her as well (Dobrovic, 2006). This liberty enables the pair to discover their affinity, which awakens their sexual passion for each other (Moglen, 1978). Jane states that she “knew the pleasure of vexing and soothing him by turns... retaining every minute form of respect... [and] propriety... this suited both him and me” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 158).<sup>52</sup> Rochester, recognising their like-mindedness and attraction, desires to have a more egalitarian relationship with Jane than society permits: “I don't wish to treat you like an inferior... I only claim such superiority as must result from twenty years' difference in age and a century's advance in experience” (135). Jane, who admits that she “did not feel insensible to his condescension” (134), responds by stating: “your claim to superiority depends upon the use you have made of your time and experience” (134). This retort illustrates her inherently rebellious spirit. Despite asserting that he “won't allow that”, Rochester goes on to partly demand, partly ask of Jane

---

<sup>52</sup> That Jane feels compelled to reassure the reader that she conformed to social norms during her confrontations with Rochester illustrates how she — and Brontë — paradoxically feel the need to be seen to conform to society's rules whilst breaking them. Whether or not this stems from a desire to conform or is a strategy to ensure that Jane is not rejected by readers, and that her criticism resonates with them, this admission of Jane's is telling.

that she “still agree to receive my orders now and then... will you?” (135). This, in turn, suggests that despite his assertions, Rochester does in fact view Jane as his equal. However, his references to her as “little girl” (136), “child” (253), and “fairy” (247) reveal his continued belief in his superiority despite his protestations of equality. Rochester recognises Jane’s resistance to his influence, evident when he says, “you master me — you seem to submit... I am influenced, conquered” (263), acknowledging that she only appears to submit. Ultimately, though, he refuses to allow himself to be truly “conquered”.

That being said, that Rochester repeatedly dons costumes and disguises at all (such as during charades and the gypsy scene) suggests his awareness of the essential unsustainability of his power over her. His attempts to trick Jane — both as a gypsy and through his mock courtship of Blanche — reveal his efforts to subvert her influence over him, to reclaim the mastery over her which society decrees should be his as a man. As soon as Rochester has gotten Jane to agree to marry him, the power dynamic between them begins to change and he begins to assert himself more aggressively as her superior. This supports the view that he has been attempting to eschew their equality and assume ascendancy over her all along. As Rochester states, “it is your time now, little tyrant, but it will be mine presently: and when once I have fairly seized you... I’ll ... attach you to a chain” (273).

Jane’s statement “I was growing very lenient to my master” (188) encapsulates the convolution and ambiguity of the power dynamic of their relationship: while accepting his mastery, she recognises that she exerts great influence over him. The fact that Jane refers to Rochester as her “master”, deferring to him, illustrates her awareness of the many material inequalities between them (Moglen, 1978). This is further evident in her comment, “he seems to forget that he pays me 30 pounds per annum for receiving his orders” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 134) and is reflected by Jane’s being a governess,<sup>53</sup> and Rochester her master. Rochester feels the need to assure Jane, upon their engagement, that “every attention shall be [hers], that [he] would accord to a peer’s daughter” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 261). This demonstrates his awareness, too, of the financial and class imbalances in their relationship. Despite these, Jane is unafraid to confront Rochester and assert herself: “do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless?... I have as much soul as you, — and full as much heart!” (255). Notwithstanding the disparities between them, Jane proclaims her superiority over Rochester when she states, “I am better than you” (256) on the grounds that she would never marry for money. In this way, Brontë challenges

---

<sup>53</sup> In practise, governesses effectively fulfilled the roles of middle-class mothers; however, their relation to working-class men and women by way of the wages they earned rendered them a threat to the validity of the ideology of “separate spheres” (Poovey, 1998). A tabooed figure for gentlemen and male servants alike, governesses were seen as destabilising agents (Poovey, 1998), undermining gender and class boundaries.

Victorian society's criteria for power and superiority, subverting patriarchy's privileging of masculinity, wealth and age in favour of moral superiority and character.<sup>54</sup>

During their engagement, Jane begins to truly understand the significance and impassability of their financial and class inequalities (Moglen, 1978), and she begins to fear and resent her dependent state. This is clear when she says, "if I had but a prospect of one day bringing Mr Rochester an accessible fortune, I could better endure to be kept by him now" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 271). With the balance of power about to shift significantly in favour of Rochester with his assumption of the rights of a husband, Jane desperately attempts to gain power in the only way open to her: financially. By virtue of the fact that only a wealthy relative's death can grant Jane independence and means, Brontë highlights how unyielding women's dependence is (Poovey, 1988). As she senses her identity and independence being overcome, Jane attempts to re-establish control and reassert former boundaries with increasing insistence (Moglen, 1978), refusing to give up her position as governess (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 273) or to begin dining with Rochester (273). Jane perceptively recognises his smile to be "such as a sultan might... bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched" (271). Believing him to view her as a kept woman, and astutely recognising that he would demand favours in return, she asserts that she "will not be [his] English Celine Varens" (272). Jane sees the likeness between herself and Rochester's other women which he refuses to acknowledge: she realises that a woman who is not a wife is forever confined to a demeaning position of dependence (Poovey, 1988). Prizing her independence even more dearly, she refuses to allow him to dress her in fine clothes, recognising this to be an attempt to change her.<sup>55</sup> Jane insists that Rochester "give [her] nothing but... [his] regard", stating that if she gives him hers "in return, the debt will be quit" (272).

Having suffered the ill-effects of patriarchal rule all her life, Jane is mistrusting of Rochester as a husband, sensing that even an egalitarian love will give way under the tyranny of marriage (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Jane tells Rochester as much, stating (in a previously quoted line): "I suppose your love will effervesce in six months, or less", but that "as a friend and companion, I hope never to become quite distasteful to my dear master" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 263). In contrast to

---

<sup>54</sup> Brontë repeatedly undermines patriarchal authority through stressing the ultimate superiority of God, evident in St John's words: "I am... under human guidance, subject to the defective laws and erring control of my feeble fellow-worms: my king, my lawgiver, my captain, is the All-perfect" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 408).

<sup>55</sup> We see in Jane's characteristic muted and plain style of dress a subtle but firm desire for self-control (Andrews, 2004) and self-determination, as well as her desire to separate herself from a society (and its fashions) which has never accepted her. It is through dress that Jane presents herself as an independent, working woman, and through dress that she resists Rochester's attempts to transform her into a stereotypical lady when she refuses to let him buy her finer clothes (Andrews, 2004).

Rochester's fairy-tale illusions of taking "mademoiselle to the moon" where she "shall live with [him] there and only [him]" (269), Jane is presented as the wiser — and thus superior — one of the two. While expressing reservations about the nature and longevity of Rochester's affections in marriage, Jane is also wary of the intensity of his passion during their engagement. She sees but two possible avenues of action: complete submission or a coquettish and, at times, harsh flirtation intended to keep Rochester's advances at bay. Jane's own feelings towards Rochester are deeply ambivalent. Although drawn to the raw, masculine power and authority he exudes, she is at the same time wary of these very same qualities. And while she deeply desires to submit to Rochester and give herself wholeheartedly, despite accepting his proposal, she begins to pull away (Chase, 1947). Though she tells Rochester that she is "not, as [he] seem[s] to think, troubled by any haunting fears" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 283) of their marriage, Jane confesses, once a date for their wedding is set, that she felt "something stronger than was consistent with joy... almost fear" (261).

Once she has discovered that Rochester is already married, while tempted to live with him as his mistress because she loves him, Jane rejects such a fate, refusing to compromise her character, her identity and her self-determination, as she values her integrity and autonomy more than the pleasure of being his mistress (Poovey, 1988). Certain critics view Jane's actions in fleeing from Rochester as being cowardly; motivated by the fear of being unable to meet the challenge his love presents (Arnold, 1968). However, such critics overlook Rochester's own flawed offering of love here. While giving Jane the love she so desperately craves, his love is limited by virtue of the burden of his hidden bride and his string of mistresses (Arnold, 1968). This prevents him from offering all of himself to her (Arnold, 1968). Jane proves to be judicious in mistrusting Rochester and his motives. As becomes evident, Rochester was attempting to make up for his past sins through committing bigamy: believing that in marrying, loving and serving Jane, he would atone for the sins of his marriage to Bertha and his series of affairs (Vejvoda, 2003). This much is clear when Rochester murmurs, after proposing to Jane: "it will atone... It will expiate at God's tribunal. I know my Maker sanctions what I do. For the world's judgment - I wash my hands thereof" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 258). Rochester's planned tour of the Continent after their marriage in this light serves as more a purification ritual for him than a honeymoon (Vejvoda, 2003): "all the ground I have wandered over shall be re-trodden by you... Ten years since, I flew through Europe half mad; with disgust, hate, and rage, as my companions: now I shall revisit it healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 262—263). Here, again, Jane reveals herself to be Rochester's superior. While she has reservations about marrying Rochester, she does not leave him for these,

but to “flee temptation” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 323). Upon leaving him, she encounters St. John, who is the embodiment of duty (Chase, 1947).

### **St John and sacrifice**

This is in essence the strong temptation that St John holds for Jane: the temptation of self-renunciation, both to God in Heaven, and himself on earth. St John teaches Jane what it is to be a submissive woman under the authority of a father and husband figure in a patriarchal household. Jane goes so far as to say that “if [she] were his wife, this good man... could soon kill [her] without... receiving in his own crystal conscience the faintest stain of crime” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 419). This succinctly depicts the injustice done to middle-class women in Victorian society, and the ignorance of men to this fact, through the sanction of patriarchal ideology. St John is the kind of character who feeds off Jane’s subservience to consolidate his own masculinity (Moglen, 1978). He desires complete mastery of Jane; he wishes her to sacrifice her sexuality, her emotions, and her identity — everything most dear and vital to herself. That Jane is sorely tempted is illustrative of the great battle within her to overcome patriarchal ideology’s shackles. St John tells Jane that he wants “a wife: the sole helpmeet [he] can influence efficiently in life, and retain absolutely till death” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 413). Despite her strong desire for a life of purpose and action, the kind of life St John promises her, Jane understands that this comes at the price of her autonomy, her very self: “If I join St John, I abandon half myself... He will never love me, but he shall approve me” (411). Brontë’s strongest criticism in the novel is that such a life of meaning and accomplishment is not open to a woman without a man to lead her.

Ultimately, Jane chooses her own pleasure over St John’s approval. She views St John’s repudiation of sexual love as a denial of nature itself, a deliberate suppression and distortion of one’s will (Maynard, 1987). She is not prepared to deny the half of herself that craves love in order to grant St John’s wish — and follow society’s approved path<sup>56</sup> — to become his wife. By refusing St John, Jane overcomes her desire for external control (Moglen, 1978). As “the veil fell from [St John’s] hardness and despotism”, revealing “his imperfection” to Jane (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 413), so it falls from patriarchal authority before the reader’s eyes as well. In this way, the purported natural authority of patriarchy is shown to be illusory, erring, and human. Jane takes “courage” when she realises that she is “with an equal” in St John’s presence, one whom she “might resist” (413). St John’s authority and power serve as a symbol of patriarchy. Just as Jane “might resist” him (413), so

---

<sup>56</sup> St John would have been viewed by many readers as the more desirable husband, given the religious and social temperament of Brontë’s time, which coached women to view religion more than love as the cornerstone of marriage (Lamonaca, 2002).

Brontë suggests all women might resist the social pressures brought to bear on them. In this way, Brontë directly challenges patriarchal authority.

Where Rochester offers Jane a life of passion if she would abandon her principles, St John offers her a life of spiritual principle devoid of sexual passion. Rochester offers her fire, St John, ice: both essential elements of herself (Gilbert, 1977) — the reason and feeling that all Brontë's heroines must learn to tame. Ultimately, it is the re-born Rochester that is able to give Jane the happiest marriage, combining fire and ice, passion and submission.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë essentially offers a fairy-tale like ending where women can enjoy the kind of fruits of fortune and marriage that are not possible in the Victorian patriarchal reality. By this reading, Jane could be viewed as more a creative truth than an accurate character sketch, illustrating "woman" as she could be (Gordon, 1994). Thus Jane serves as a figure of the new model of womanhood which Brontë advocates, an embodiment of the "myth of woman". Similarly, Rochester represents "man" as he could be, rather than as he is (Gordon, 1994).<sup>57</sup> He offers Jane the kind of marriage which does not deny her her identity; the kind of relationship Brontë offers as a new model for marriage. However, for their marriage to ultimately succeed, the pair needs to be removed from society, as it is in only in the isolation of Ferndean where societal values and customs cannot break this illusion of freedom and equality.

#### **Ferndean: freedom in isolation**

Arguably, even if Jane had possessed the financial and social status afforded her by her inheritance — as well as the accompanying self-confidence and security this brings — when she first met Rochester, these would still have been no match against his "psychosexual power" (Moglen, 1978: 143). Further, it is safe to assume that Rochester, like Jane, would not have been able to overcome the ideological pitfalls and the social pressures associated with being a husband.<sup>58</sup> These are likened to Jane's depiction of the psychological restraints inscribed on women by patriarchal ideology to ensure their subservience. Such social pressures are presented as being so strong and pervasive that Rochester needs to be removed from social contact before Jane's true self is able to emerge and thrive. It is only in this "feminine" world of true sympathy and equality at Ferndean that Jane and Rochester can enjoy a happy marriage, out of society's detrimental reach (Moglen, 1978).

---

<sup>57</sup> Rather than shape her heroine to accommodate her hero, Brontë moulds Rochester to suit Jane (Dobrovic, 2006). It could be argued that Rochester, being the perfect man for Jane, can only be a feminine construct, a figment of literature. As such, Rochester can only be understood in relation to Jane and through her subjectivity and desires (Dobrovic, 2006).

<sup>58</sup> Rochester's behaviour until now allows the reader to confidently assume that were he and Jane to live "in the world", he would assume patriarchy's privileges and try to rule her as he did during their engagement.

The novel's many ambiguities are encapsulated in its close at Ferndean, itself a house of obscurity and ambiguity. The place where Rochester refused to place Bertha as he believed she was better locked in an attic, Jane attempts to depict as a sanctuary from the world (Shuttleworth, 1996) whose conventions and inhabitants have typically been hostile to her and Rochester. The physical seclusion of Ferndean, "deep buried in a wood", on an "ineligible and insalubrious site", mirrors its spiritual seclusion in "quite a desolate spot" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 439—440). This, Brontë seems to suggest, is necessary in a society where such egalitarian, heterosexual relationships as Jane and Rochester's are impossible (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Ferndean itself could be viewed as a more natural abode than any other presented in the novel. It is closer to nature, Jane's true home, than other dwellings she has lived in, and thus better suited to her. Alternately, it could be viewed as a place of stagnation and decay, with its "dank and green... decaying walls" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 440), almost becoming one with the dark forest. I believe Brontë proffers us the former reading.

Jane and Rochester's marriage is principally one of equals, not only because Rochester has suffered and experienced powerlessness, but because Jane — through confronting her own dark passions — is now her own sovereign (Showalter, 1977). However, in women's fiction, such equality is wrought through submission to joint limitation, sacrificing mutual development and progress (Showalter, 1977). Despite their spiritual equality, the injuries Rochester suffered in the fire render him Jane's physical dependent. That Jane spoke of the very injuries Rochester received before the incident suggests she wished just such a dynamic between them. It could even be argued that she brought about his maiming through the hysterical nature of the text. Rochester's blindness affords Jane many unique benefits: it protects her from his commanding gaze, depicted as threatening to her selfhood, and it gives her interpretative power over his world, placing him firmly under her guidance (Shuttleworth, 1996). In a novel where the power held in the gaze — the power of perception — is presented as crucial, Jane's power over Rochester in this regard can be considered total. When Jane states, "I am my own mistress" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 444), we should be aware that the emphasis is on "my"; the implications being that she is not Rochester's (Maynard, 1987).

Richard Chase posits that the injuries Rochester suffers are a form of "symbolic castration" (1947: 495), delivered as punishment for his former life of sedition, as well as evidence of Jane's dread of male power, which must be dampened if marriage is to be tolerable (Gilbert, 1977). However, as Jane points out, "not in one year's space, by any sorrow, could his athletic strength be quelled or his vigorous prime blighted" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 440). Rather than castrate Rochester, I would argue that the goal is to strengthen Jane in relation to him, that she may truly be his equal in monetary, social and physical terms (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). The fissure between men and

women in Brontë's novels narrows only when one or the other has been visibly subjugated or excluded (Armstrong, 1987). In this instance, it is Rochester who is dominated. On another level, Rochester himself could be considered stronger — and certainly a more developed character — as a result of his injuries, as he, like Jane, has learnt to draw strength from his own inner resources (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984) as opposed to employing the illusory power afforded him by society by virtue of his sex. Most significantly, Rochester desires Jane to have a degree of power over him. This is evident when he states “hitherto I have hated to be helped — to be led: henceforth, I feel, I shall hate it no more. I did not like to put my hand into a hireling's, but it is pleasant to feel it circled by Jane's little fingers” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 454). Indeed, Jane becomes “his right hand” (460). Significantly, too, Jane states that “there was a pleasure in my services... because he claimed these without painful shame” (460). That being said, while happy to be led by Jane, Rochester's use of the adjective “little” reiterates the fact that he still views Jane as an inferior, to a degree (Dobrovic, 2006).

### **Plain Jane**

Jane's ascendance and development as a character is a fraught process with indistinct results. While she is now a stronger, more integrated and self-assured character, she begins to display an affinity to the status quo which she has railed against up to this point. We see how Jane “meant to become [Adele's] governess once more; but... soon found this impracticable” as her “time and cares were now required by... [her] husband” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 459). By placing Adele in a boarding school, even one “conducted on a more indulgent system; and near enough to permit of [Jane] visiting her often, and bringing her home sometimes” (459), Jane is forcing Adele into the same social system and model she herself rebelled against. Further, her satisfaction with the way in which Adele is learning to become “docile” aligns her with Mrs Reed, whom she so resented (Shuttleworth, 1996). Thus Jane attempts to mould Adele into the model of womanhood she challenged previously: “a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion: docile, good-tempered, and well-principled” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 460).

Jane's attestations of contented conventionality form jarring disruptions at the end of a text whose stirring energies lie in its protestations against injustice (Shuttleworth, 1996). Jane's contentment is clear when she says: “I have now been married ten years. I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. I hold myself supremely blest” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 460). Indeed, it appears that all the energy, ambiguity and conflict of the vibrant world heretofore

described have been subdued “by a patient, practical woman” (Chase, 1947: 495). Some critics believe Jane’s contentment not to be complete, sensing a latent dissatisfaction, for instance, in her reference to St John at the closing of her tale (Flint, 2002). Jane leaves us with final words not of her happiness in marriage, but of St John’s cry: “my Master... daily... announces more distinctly... ‘I come quickly!’ and hourly I more eagerly respond, — ‘Amen; even so come, Lord Jesus’” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 462). The final message of Jane’s tale relates to personal and spiritual fulfilment and the realisation of one’s purpose in life — one of her preoccupations throughout the novel — as opposed to marital bliss (Flint, 2002). This hints at the limited nature of marital happiness, and the necessity for satisfaction beyond this sphere. This shift in focus effectively places the importance of marriage and reproduction below that of spiritual autonomy and individuality, so challenging earthly patriarchal rule with heavenly rule and, by extension, patriarchal rule with being true to one’s self. However, the inherently ambiguous nature of Brontë’s conclusion is evident again if one reads into Jane’s choice to give St John the last words in the novel, her submission to the very ideologies and institutions she had railed against so passionately (Roy, 1989). Whatever reading one favours, by the end of the novel, Jane undoubtedly appears less a revolutionary than an agent for the patriarchal status quo (Roy, 1989). Indeed, the moral fabric of *Jane Eyre* appears to reflect traditional Victorian social norms and values (Chase, 1947).<sup>59</sup>

### **Criticism curtailed**

The fundamentally ambiguous nature of Brontë’s novel results from the way in which her criticism of patriarchy is constantly undermined by her adherence to literary and social constructs. For instance, Jane’s remarkable change of fortune, which sees her transformed from a penniless orphan into an heiress and a wife, cuts short Brontë’s depiction of the social and financial challenges single women such as Jane face. As a result of her good fortune, Jane has no need to continue to critique the status quo and deplore the lot of women, as she herself becomes quite content, her new station providing her with the very privileges that eluded her before (Roy, 1989). Brontë’s conflation of social issues and fate undermines her criticism by eliminating social barriers and challenges brought about by the biases and imbalances in patriarchal society through fortuitous acts of providence. We see, for example, how when Rochester suggests that Jane “mutinied against fate” when she “claimed your rank as [his] equal” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 265), that Brontë disguises her

---

<sup>59</sup> Chase has blamed misreadings of *Jane Eyre* for much of the debate on the ambiguity of its ending, arguing that Brontë rebelled only insofar as she broke literary customs by transmuting social criticism into mythic forms (1947). He suggests that nineteenth-century literary criticism is at fault for mistaking “art for rebellion” (506).

criticism of society's class and gender imbalances through the use of fortune as the key agent as opposed to crediting Jane with finding a way to erase these social barriers for women.

Jane, who once described herself as a "revolted slave", full of "bitter vigour" (9), ultimately becomes the "Angel in the House" figure she hitherto rejected in Helen Burns and Miss Temple. Her cries of "'unjust! — unjust!" against the "insupportable oppression" (9) she felt throughout the novel are silenced. While the young Jane was unable to "answer the ceaseless inward question — *why* [she] thus suffered", "at the distance of" a number of years, a more mature Jane is able to "see it clearly now" (9—10). This early invocation of the wisdom of years hints at Jane's ultimate capitulation to patriarchal prescripts for women in her assumption of the roles of wife and mother; this, despite all the fears of marriage and motherhood she expressed previously.

The story of Jane's maturation and development, which chronicles her thwarted desires and society's injustices against middle-class women, culminates in her hearing Rochester's cry, "Jane" (427). That this call "did not seem in the room.... Nor in the garden", nor "out of the air — nor from under the earth — nor from overhead" (427), points to the fact that it was Jane herself who came into her own at this moment. The signal that she was ready for Rochester came from inside herself. This is clear in that her "heart beat fast and thick... stood still to an inexpressible feeling that thrilled it through" (427) as she heard Rochester's words; which, in turn, were elicited by her plea: "show me the path" (427). Jane confirms this when she asserts: "it was *my* time to assume ascendancy. *My* powers were in play" [emphasis added] (427). In that moment, Jane "broke from St John" (427). She is able to do so with her new found inner strength, the courage, confidence and conviction which she sought throughout the novel. She is no longer "a strange child... a little roving, solitary thing" (34), for her powers are now in ascendance. Despite this inauguration of feminine sovereignty, this materialisation of the "myth of woman", Jane's decision to use this newfound maturity and power to marry and mother in the manner she does can only be felt as a disappointment. Given the passionate and persistent social criticism Brontë has voiced through her heroine until this point, her retreat to a traditional, happily-ever-after ending appears out of sorts. While Brontë's clear attempt to create a new, empowering model of womanhood through Jane cannot be called a failure, it certainly is a disappointment. This disappointment is felt again in Brontë's following novel's eponymous heroine, Shirley.

## Chapter 2

### *Shirley*: ideology and stereotype

*Shirley* lacks the optimism and agency which distinguish *Jane Eyre*. Rather than exhibiting the energy and emotion which characterise Jane's tale, *Shirley's* narrator speaks in a clinical tone and offers a grim worldview. This is evident when he states: "if you think, from the prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken... calm your expectations, reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 5). Thus Brontë's narrator attempts to adopt a distinctly analytical approach, aspiring to offer a dispassionate analysis of patriarchal society and its ideologies. However, this is quite obviously not the result. *Shirley* is characterised by the narrator's and characters' passionate rails against injustice and fate.<sup>60</sup> Nonetheless, in these instances, Brontë encourages her readers to engage with and confront the social issues she raises. Brontë is at pains to point out that "the country is a queer state" (16) through exploring community, ideology and the individual in *Shirley*. The future appears bleak and predetermined and the possibility for positive change and development is negated by the novel's austere tone (Glen, 2002). This is heard, for instance, in the novel's closing words, which speak of how Fieldhead Hollow was once "a lonesome spot... a bonnie spot — full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 542).

Rather than focusing on character development, as in *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* offers a dissection of character stereotypes and the ideologies which propagate them, and their negative effects (Rylance, 2002). Ultimately, *Shirley* is characterised by the stasis and ineffectualness of its characters (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984)<sup>61</sup> as well as by the essential fruitlessness of its plot.<sup>62</sup> The characters Brontë offers us in *Shirley* are linked by their powerlessness. In response, they divert their attention to myths and fantasies (Moore, 2004). We see this with Shirley and Caroline, who construct mythic tales expressing their desires to resolve the social issues that distinguish the novel (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 477). Embedded mythic narratives appear in various forms throughout *Shirley*: daydreams of women and children, alcohol-induced ravings of working-class men, and creation myths in school

---

<sup>60</sup> This much is clear in the narrator's passionate plea: "men of England! Look at your poor girls... life is a desert to them... Fathers! Cannot you alter these things?" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 330).

<sup>61</sup> Robert, man of action that he is, is unable to progress in business due to circumstantial constraints while Shirley, for all her wealth and station, is frustrated in her aspirations by virtue of her sex. Further, Caroline and Shirley — like Jane before them — are unable to gain the independence and agency they speak of and long for. Consigning themselves to marriage, they appear pleased with the outcome, for all their previous yearnings.

<sup>62</sup> As with Jane and Rochester's union, the resolution of the novel's primary relationships in marriage is conventional and jarring, given the passionate criticism voiced until this point.

devoirs (Moore, 2004). Brontë reveals the repressiveness of patriarchal ideologies concerning women through her characters' manipulations of patriarchal types (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 477).<sup>63</sup>

In addition to embedded mythic narratives, Brontë appears to insert her own commentary into her characters' words. In his commentary on the novel, George Henry Lewes accused Brontë of having the "gentle, shy, not highly cultivated Caroline talk from time to time in the strain of Currer Bell herself rather than in the strain of Helstone's little niece" (1974 [1850]: 167). Critics commonly refer to what has been termed Brontë's narrator's dual voice, which alternately sanctions patriarchal ideologies concerning women and recoils from them, destabilising the narrative (Ingham, 1996). To be sure, the narrative point of view is distinctly inconsistent. While at times closely aligned to Caroline — "a third-person parallel to the private, personal focus of *Jane Eyre*" (Maynard, 1987: 151) — at others the male narrator's voice appears markedly feminine in this novel primarily concerned with women's issues. In particular instances, it is almost certainly Brontë herself who speaks (Maynard, 1987). For example, we clearly hear the echo of Brontë's voice — behind the narrator's own — when he states:

You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don't shriek... the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation... let it sting through your palm... the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 89-90).

Here, in the midst of the narrator's irony, we find Brontë's anger and bitterness at society's repressive norms and ideologies concerning women. The inverted biblical parable of the stone and the scorpion is contradicted by the very metaphors themselves (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).<sup>64</sup> Whilst many critics have censured Brontë for this "dual voice", it arguably enables her to effectively express the various arguments raging within herself.<sup>65</sup> This strategy also enables Brontë to represent, in all its complexity, the public debate regarding the oppressive practices and ideologies concerning women which was taking place at the time.

In *Shirley*, Brontë deals most directly with patriarchal ideology, and attempts to establish her own counter creed: one that is female-centred and empowering as opposed to the exclusionary and disempowering ideology imposed on middle-class, Victorian women. In this, she foreshadows Foucault's thinking on discourse, which he describes as "the thing for which and by which there is

---

<sup>63</sup> For more detail, see "Satire and stereotypes" below.

<sup>64</sup> The metaphors are incongruent as a stone cannot be digested and a person could well die from certain scorpions' bites, leaving no value in the lesson.

<sup>65</sup> While decrying repressive mores and values concerning women, at the same time, Brontë believed in feminine sacrifice and duty "with all the conviction of her time" (Gordon, 1994: 125).

struggle... the power which is to be seized" (2001 [1971]: 211). To a greater extent than *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley* is concerned with exploring the institutional nature of patriarchy by focusing on the workings of the factories and schools, the churches and charities (Armstrong, 1987). Through concentrating on the operations of such bodies, Brontë explores the ideological repression and exploitation of the powerless persons in society.

Captain Keeldar is Brontë's experiment with the connection between class, gender, power and ideology. The novel's pessimism on these themes reflects Brontë's findings (Shuttleworth, 1996). *Shirley* reveals that even women's money and status prove insufficient in overcoming patriarchal ideology, thus rendering the experiment a "study in disempowerment" (187). By tracing the complex relation between gender inequality and capitalism in patriarchal ideology (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), Brontë reveals workers and women to be the primary oppressed parties in society. Their oppression emanates from the fact that both women and workers are commodified through the marriage and labour markets respectively. Thus Brontë ties the more visible plight of the workers and their cries of injustice with the less obvious plight of women in the novel (Gordon, 1994). In this way, when the narrator states that "misery generates hate: these sufferers [the workers]... hated the manufacturers" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 27), *Shirley* encourages the reader to make the inference that women's misery at their oppression generates a similar hatred of and rebellion against the patriarchal power class. That being said, Brontë's suggestion that gender- and class-based issues are related remains timid and half-articulated (Taylor, 1979). The powerlessness and shared economic dependence on middle- and upper-class men of the two groups hold such revolutionary potential that it can only be hinted at (Taylor, 1979), ostensibly for fear of unleashing a new and untested social order. Thus the fact that Brontë's social criticism is curtailed by her conservatism is apparent here.

Victorian literature typically represents working-class women as masculine and working-class men as feminine and childlike,<sup>66</sup> thus depoliticising political issues concerning women and workers by representing these as stemming from the personal failings of the character types of each group (Armstrong, 1987). In this way patriarchal ideologies and literature concerning gender and class — however unwittingly — work to contain political resistance (Armstrong, 1987). Brontë adheres to ideological and literary conventions and practices here. We see this most clearly in the

---

<sup>66</sup> During the nineteenth-century, traditional social margins were disrupted by the establishment of the market economy and the resulting class society (Davidoff, 1979). Social relations and ideologies concerning gender were affected and different classes came to be associated with specific gender characteristics (Davidoff, 1979). The concepts of manhood and womanhood themselves are considered unique to the nineteenth-century (Davidoff, 1979). This is evident in the way that the terms have fallen out of fashion in favour of masculinity and femininity, which have distinct meanings and associations.

character of Farren whom the narrator goes as far as to directly label feminine on occasion, such as when describing how he tended the child “as tenderly as any woman” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 272). That both Caroline and Shirley “liked William”, took “delight to lend him books”, and “preferred his conversation” (273) further presents Farren’s tastes and sentiments as distinctly feminine.

### **Satire and stereotypes**

In contrast to Farren and the two heroines, the vast majority of the characters in *Shirley* display a prejudicial and unsympathetic perception of each other and society, with its complex economic, political, and social landscape. Thus Brontë highlights the pervasiveness and hazards of patriarchal ideology as well as the ill-effects of a narrow-minded, uncritical worldview (Judge, 2011), for, in Yorke’s words: “what chance was there of reason being heard in a land that was king-ridden, priest-ridden, peer-ridden” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 46). Brontë’s minor characters in particular reveal their adherence to stereotypical ideologies concerning society, politics, religion and women. This is best exemplified in Joe’s statement that “as to being a Tory, [he’d] as soon be an old woman, or a young one, which is a more flimsier article still” (276). In her retort, Shirley describes herself as a “clothier and mill-owner... besides farmer”, adding that “we manufacturers and persons of business are sometimes... a *very little* selfish and short-sighted in our views... too regardless of human suffering” (277). So she satirises the narrow-mindedness and self-centeredness of the typical man’s point of view — and of Joe’s in particular. Whilst satirising them, Brontë humanises her characters by revealing the imperfection of their perceptions (Judge, 2011). Brontë’s condemnation of her characters’ biases and bigotry extends to the narrator’s treatment of the reader, who is addressed with condescension — even ridiculed, at times — for their assumed stereotypical attitudes and expectations, bearing the brunt of Brontë’s stinging satire (Judge, 2011). This is clear in the chapter title which houses the scene between Joe, Shirley and Caroline: “Which the genteel reader is recommended to skip, low persons being here introduced” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 269). The narrator goes as far as to say to “parson hater” readers that they “need not expect [him] to go along with them every step of their dismal... unchristian road” and to “join in their... poisonous rancour” (32). This is a hostile indictment indeed, considering that the relationship between narrator and reader is typically a warm and intimate one.

Northrop Frye and Mikhail Bakhtin argue that satire de-romanticises the status quo, thus undermining it and destabilising knowledge structures (Judge, 2011). Brontë employs satire to highlight unfavourable social and literary norms regarding women so as to effect social renewal (Judge, 2011). We see evidence of this when the narrator editorialises that “a lover masculine”,

when disappointed in love, “can speak and urge explanation” but that “a lover feminine can say nothing” for “if she did the result would be... inward remorse for self-treachery” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 89-90). In advising that women “take the matter as [they] find it: ask no questions; utter no remonstrances; it is your best wisdom” (89-90), the narrator satirises society’s prescription that women endure in silence. Caroline and Shirley, in particular, satirise one of the very foundations of patriarchal culture, namely the disavowal of women’s intellectual ability (Judge, 2011). So Shirley asserts that “politics are our habitual study” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 276). Further, Brontë places the private satire of Caroline and Shirley in the traditionally masculine and public literary genre of social satire (Judge, 2011). In this way, Brontë’s intention to inspire her readers to social criticism and to set the framework for such debate through instilling a women’s point of view, however abstruse, in the minds of her readers is clear.

Shirley and Caroline in particular advocate a women’s point of view. Shirley addresses the topic of women’s marginality and social stereotypes directly when she states that “if men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed”, for even “the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women” in that “their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 296). So *Shirley* attempts to undermine the ideologies which support such stereotypes. Brontë’s analysis of the operations of and agendas behind stereotypes is perceptive. This is evident, for instance, through Helstone, who “liked to see [women] as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible; because they were then in reality what he held them to be and wished them to be — inferior” (109—100). Thus Brontë pierces through patriarchal dogma and unmasks its hidden motivations and operations. Helstone’s confession reveals how he employs stereotypes so as to view women and the world in a way which elevates him at their expense.<sup>67</sup> That even the young Martin states “I mean always to hate women” (136), highlights the unnaturalness of such prejudice and the agency required for its perpetuation. Furthermore, that his father, Mr Yorke, encourages him to “stick to it!” (136), stresses the artificiality of ideological myths. This is achieved through the necessity that they be passed on from one generation to the next. It is stereotypes such as these that Brontë is preoccupied with undermining through exploring — in all their depth and complexity — the interiority of characters

---

<sup>67</sup> Social classification is undertaken by individuals who group people into social categories in a manner that is useful to them (Van Knippenberg and Dijksterhuis, 2000). Such uses include individuals engaging in stereotyping so as to boost their self-esteem, for example (Bodenhausen and Macrae, 1998). Brontë, well before her time, displays prescient insights into the nature of prejudice.

such as Caroline and Shirley. These heroines are unlike those of the typical “poem — novel — drama”, who are “fine and divine... but often quite artificial” (296).<sup>68</sup>

Brontë’s representation of the “old maids”, Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, further serves to undermine patriarchal ideology through challenging common stereotypes of misogynist ridicule. Through these characters, Brontë highlights the honour and dignity of women independent of their relation to men (Maynard, 1987). Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, who serve as foils for Caroline in the solitary future she fears, offer two traditional and contrasting stereotypes of spinsterhood: the cantankerous witch and the selfless “angel” (Shuttleworth, 1996).<sup>69</sup> Brontë encourages sympathy for Miss Mann by highlighting how she “had passed alone through protracted scenes of suffering, exercised rigid self-denial, made large sacrifices of time, money, health for those who had repaid her only by ingratitude” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 153). Brontë’s indictment of the artificiality and harmfulness of misogynist stereotypes (Judge, 2011) can be found, for instance, in the narrator’s assertion that Miss Mann’s “main — almost her sole — fault was, that she was censorious” (153). Similarly, that “no one spoke against Miss Ainley except lively young gentlemen and inconsiderate old ones, who declared her hideous” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 156), reveals the baselessness of misogynist derision. Through the fact that “for this goodness [Miss Ainley] got but little reward in this life” (156), Brontë illustrates the hardship of women’s lot. Here, Brontë’s attempt to destabilise gender stereotypes is clear.

#### **Caroline: the dissident and the conformist**

*Shirley*, of all Brontë’s novels, addresses most directly the “woman question” (Taylor, 1979). This is apparent in Caroline’s case. Surveying her prospects of a long and lonely life, she rejects the stereotypes associated with old maids, asserting that “Miss Mann was rather to be admired for fortitude than blamed for moroseness” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 154). Further, Caroline condemns the socially approved duties and identities allotted to women as unsatisfying, highlighting the fact that the ideologies which support such myths as these benefit only the patriarchal power class and not the middle-class women who must endure them. This is evident when Caroline despairs over the

---

<sup>68</sup> Even the narrator — and through him, perhaps Brontë, too — betrays his own prejudicial views on occasion. This is evident, for instance, when the narrator states that “all men, taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies are intensely so” (142).

<sup>69</sup> In Victorian society and literature, “old maids” exuded an authority that, while unmentionable, was nonetheless potent (Auerbach, 1982). Whilst serving as figures of scorn in life and literature, spinsters were also ironically revered as sacred souls, set apart by God for a special purpose (Auerbach, 1982), and thought of as “love’s hidden saints” in a mercenary marriage market (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 136). We see just such a reverence for the lives of spinsters in *Shirley*. Brontë’s own early spinsterhood likely accounts for *Shirley*’s great empathy here.

“half a century of existence” that lies ahead of her, as she knows not how to “occupy it” (149). She goes on to question “what [she] was created for” (149)<sup>70</sup> and then goes further, stating, “that is the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve: other people solve it for them by saying, ‘Your place is to do good to others’... a very convenient doctrine to the people who hold it” (149).

Caroline vacillates between despair and anger at the lot of women. The degree to which the “woman question” draws attention and concern from the patriarchal power class is made clear through Caroline’s uncle, Helstone. When speaking seriously with him on the topic of her future financial security and proposing employment as a governess, he dismisses Caroline by instructing her to “run away and amuse yourself” (163). Caroline’s response — “with what? My doll?” (164) — hints at the frustration and anger many women felt as a result of their marginalised position in society. Viewing housework and other feminine duties prescribed by the ideology of “separate spheres” as tedious, Caroline longs to enter the masculine domain of professions, saying that she wished for one “fifty times a day” because while “successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 193). Caroline argues that women should be given agency and allowed access to financial independence and intellectual life, not only for the obvious benefits these provide, but for the human contact and purpose they give one’s life in contrast to the solitude and monotony of housework.<sup>71</sup> Caroline says of her life at the Rectory that “I do not live. I endure existence” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 315). Caroline’s lament below is characteristic of the personal, indistinct nature of Brontë’s challenge to patriarchal ideology:

I believe, in my heart, we were intended to prize life and enjoy it... Existence never was originally meant to be that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many... nobody in particular is to blame... and I cannot tell... how they are to be altered for the better; but I feel there is something wrong somewhere. I believe single women should have more to do — better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now (328).

In affirming that “each human has his own share of rights” (149) Caroline criticises the misogynist imbalances in society. In her strong sense of injustice at the societal status quo, she differs from such characters as Mrs Yorke and Hortense. It is significant that it is the younger

---

<sup>70</sup> Caroline suffers more in the manner of a Chekhovian character than a Victorian one as her inner turmoil is inspired by her belief that life is tedious and pointless (Taylor, 1979). Her sense of defeat and isolation is heightened by the fact that almost all members of her social group affirm the rightness of the life she finds unbearable (Taylor, 1979).

<sup>71</sup> Marxist scholars assert that women’s labour in the home provides “use values” and that this is essential for sustaining the efficiency of the workforce for the labour market, thus playing an integral role in the capitalist system (Higgs, 1983: 203). There is consensus that this labour is essential for an understanding of women’s subordinate position in society, which can be viewed as a consequence not of their gender, but their gender-defined work (Higgs, 1983).

characters — such as the Yorke girls and Shirley — who share Caroline’s views, thus displaying greater freedom of mind and agitating for more freedom and agency. Mrs Yorke attempts to indoctrinate her daughters, moulding them into “angels” in her house, by saying that “it becomes all children, especially girls, to be silent in the presence of their elders” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 132). Jessy challenges her by asking “why have we tongues then?” (132). Rose, too, challenges her mother’s dogma by asking “and why especially girls, mother?” (132). In such exchanges, Brontë illustrates the way in which women might challenge the oppressive doctrines and practices which impinge women’s lives.

The older generation attempts to curb the resistance of the youth and to indoctrinate them into the patriarchal discourse to which they themselves are embedded. This is evident in elder female characters such as Mrs Yorke and Mrs Pryor, who reveal themselves to be deeply entrenched in patriarchal ideology and upholders of the status quo. They are forged out of the models and roles men demand of them, and are presented by Brontë as the regrettable results of patriarchy’s impracticable ideals (Maynard, 1987). This is clear in how Mrs Yorke thinks “hard things... of any unhappy wight — especially of the female sex” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 126), which illustrates that she has adopted the misogynist ideological position of her society. That she does not hesitate to “crack a dry jest... even... at her own expense” (131) further illustrates her self-deprecation — a result of living under society’s oppressive ideologies. Mrs Pryor, too, is of just such a self-effacing mould. This is evident when she “disclaimed skill either in political or religious controversy” as she feels “such matters little adapted for female minds” (168). Jessy Yorke points out, “all my uncles and aunts seem to think their nephews better than their nieces” (133). Such a statement demonstrates how Victorian, middle-class women might be co-opted by patriarchal ideologies. The younger generation’s greater awareness of society’s discriminatory dogmas hints at a growing resistance advocated by Brontë, however ambiguously.

Caroline’s ostensible submission belies the extent to which she rejects and challenges the status quo. She goes to great lengths to meet social expectations: contributing to the charity basket (96), hosting guests in her home (93) and serving tea at Whitsuntide (247) — despite her desire not to do so (Moore, 2004). Given the strong deviation of her belief system from the feminine ideal,<sup>72</sup> Caroline’s life is marked by violent self-repression in an effort to conform. Indeed, she deeply desires to follow society’s dictates, despite being sceptical of these. Through Caroline’s self-repression and resulting anguish, Brontë suggests that Victorian ideologies concerning women have

---

<sup>72</sup> Caroline is acutely aware of her uniqueness, “feeling... how little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 95).

so perverted a value system that female suffering serves as the principle gauge of a woman's worth (Shuttleworth, 1996). Caroline suffers such ill-effects as a result of her self-repression that she confesses to Shirley that she considers herself "a fool... in some respects" and that she even "despise[s]" herself at times for her perceived failings in light of society's standards (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 194). This repression takes on a violent, physical manifestation in Caroline's hypochondria.<sup>73</sup>

The only power Caroline has is a degree of power over her own body. Unable to use her faculties in the pursuit of employment, Caroline exercises what power she does have over her body. This is not the positive power of action and agency — which is denied to her — but the negative power of passivity. She exercises this to its full extent and to the devastation of her health.<sup>74</sup> Cut off from the life of agency and purpose she seeks, Caroline's starvation signals her defeat and her acceptance of the feminine model of self-denial and submission (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984) as well as her refusal to live on these terms. Caroline's decline could be considered a kind of self-loathing or an attempt to divorce her mind and spirit from the body whose sex is devastating to her desires and ambitions (Shuttleworth, 1996).<sup>75</sup> That being said, Caroline's decline is attributed to a combination of factors including self-infliction, social oppression, and the effects of an infection. This is clear from how Caroline is said to have "felt oppressed with unwanted languor" and to have "missed all sense of appetite" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 351) and, when fever finds "there already a fever of mental excitement, and a languor of long conflict and habitual sadness", it takes hold (351).

Caroline's illness makes plain that the dependent state of women is the true source of their strife. Caroline desires the socially uncomfortable post of governess over the stifling apathy of her current existence (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). However, as Mrs Pryor attests, neither of the existing avenues open to middle-class women — namely marriage or work as a governess — ultimately

---

<sup>73</sup> Hypochondria is defined as the inclination to manifest emotional issues physically (Brumberg, 1989). The condition is indefinite and elusive, assuming many different forms, stages and degrees (Brumberg, 1989). Typically, sufferers have an overstated anxiety concerning their health and their ability to manage the pressures of their lives (Brumberg, 1989).

<sup>74</sup> Herndl (1993) argues for an understanding of literary depictions of illness that take account of the economic, social and political factors that underwrite illness, and she argues that such factors can be more significant than the actual physical symptoms and causes of ill-health in figuring the condition. While contemporary readers view female illness as a sign of accession to patriarchal values and norms, nineteenth-century women could well have seen illness as a retreat and a source of comfort — even empowerment (Herndl, 1993). Ill-health had many positive effects for women, including: rare rest, attention and affection, abstinence (which offered the additional benefit of birth control), and an opportunity to display the selflessness, bravery and piety expected of women (Herndl, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> Anorexia nervosa, which Caroline's root illness would appear to resemble, can be considered a form of protest against the female sex, as starvation delays maturity and undermines fertility, reducing women to an immature bodily state (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Indeed, Caroline does appear to revert to an immature emotional state, too, with the appearance of her mother and the child-like speech and actions she adopts.

offers relief from the solitude and monotony that wrought such devastating effects on her health (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Caroline is ultimately saved from what effectively amounts to self-destruction by the unearthing of a new identity and sense of self (Shuttleworth, 1996). This much is clear when she says to Mrs Pryor “if you are my mother, the world is all changed to me. Surely I can live — I should like to recover” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 362). The fact that Caroline mentions that she would like to recover, and that she does thereafter get well, confirms the self-inflicted nature of her condition. Further, it is significant that it is Shirley and Mrs Pryor who save Caroline and restore her to health as opposed to the typical, male literary figure of the “knight in shining armour”. They succeed in saving her with motherly and sisterly — as opposed to romantic — love (Judge, 2011). In this way, Brontë negates the need for male redemption, as women are proven capable of saving themselves.

### **Caroline and Shirley: female friendship redefined**

While acting as a “knight in shining armour” for Caroline, Shirley also serves as her foil. In this way, Caroline could be viewed as effectively saving herself from her reverie. That Caroline and Shirley are doubles is plain from the way that — in much the same way as Jane and Bertha — Shirley does what Caroline desires to do. For instance, Caroline despises the curates and Shirley dismisses them from her house (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Caroline wishes to enter the male realm of work while Shirley talks with Robert of his business interests (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Caroline prays that Robert will become financially independent and Shirley assists him with a loan (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Caroline longs for the proposal Robert first gives Shirley. Finally, Shirley’s companion is the mother Caroline desired for so long (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). As foils and counterparts of each other, it could be argued that Caroline depicts women as they are and Shirley represents women as they might be with greater independence and means (Gordon, 1994).

As readers come to know Shirley better, they learn that behind her role playing and bluster, she resembles Caroline in her deference to patriarchal norms. Ultimately, she is as constrained by her gender and as excluded from the male privileges her status and position should entitle her to as Caroline herself (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). As neither character is able to overcome the confines of their gender, Brontë illustrates the powerlessness of women by virtue of their sex and society’s exclusionary mores. Tara Moore (2004) argues that Shirley is the less rebellious heroine as she ultimately defers to patriarchal archetypes — evident in the mythic narratives she relates to Caroline — and her dissent is more lip service than anything else. That being said, she does rebel most

notably on the issue of marriage: disinheriting her male cousin in favour of his sisters,<sup>76</sup> rejecting the suitors her uncle forces upon her,<sup>77</sup> and then marrying her social inferior (Ingham, 1996).<sup>78</sup> For the most part, however, Shirley's actions remain within the confines of patriarchal prescripts. While she objects to her exclusion from the fete's war-council (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 264), it is she who restrains Caroline from going to Moore during the mill attack (Taylor, 1979). For these reasons, Moore and her counterparts view Caroline as the more rebellious heroine, arguing that she — to a greater extent than Shirley — consistently challenges and destabilises patriarchal myths. Further, Moore (2004) argues that it is Caroline who offers the more convincing theoretical alternatives to these, focusing on the ideal of an independent, female public space through Nunnwood. While in her mythic narratives Shirley ultimately lapses to patriarchal authority, Caroline consistently envisions spaces wherein women are free to transcend the existing limits of their gender (Moore, 2004). However, in the section "Shirley: mythic woman" below, I will argue that Shirley's reversion of male-defined myths and the nature of her relationship with Louis reveal her to be the more liberated heroine. Similarly, in their respective marriages, it is Caroline who arguably appears the more subservient. I will explore this further in the section entitled "Marriage: the end".

Through Caroline and Shirley's friendship, Brontë reveals how social status and competition in the marriage market divide women to a greater degree than shared trials unite them (Moglen, 1978). This is apparent in Caroline's jealousy when she bemoans how she "gave Robert up... to Shirley" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 197). She asserts that once the two are wed, she "will certainly leave them", because she could never stand the "degradation" of "lingering about, playing the hypocrite, and pretending to calm sentiments of friendship, when [her] soul will be wrung with other feelings" (219). Shirley, too, sorely resents the intrusion of Robert in their relationship, saying to Caroline that she feels "indignant" that "he keeps intruding between" them because "without him [they] should be good friends" (221). As it is, Shirley states that Robert "renders [her] to [Caroline] a mere bore and nuisance" (221). Thus Brontë illustrates how middle-class women's subservient position in society and their resulting dependence on men divides them, rendering them competitors where they should be allies in arms against their repression. As previously mentioned, it is through Shirley and Caroline's friendship that Brontë satirically attacks the very cornerstone of patriarchal ideology:

---

<sup>76</sup> Harry's "sisters will have nothing" upon him inheriting both his father and Shirley's estates (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 419) and for this reason Shirley disinherits him in favour of them. Shirley tells Harry that she does not want all her property to go to him, "though [his] father would like it" (419).

<sup>77</sup> When Mr Sympson asks Shirley, "what are your intentions... in respect of matrimony?" she responds: "to be quiet — and to do just as I please" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 460).

<sup>78</sup> That their disparate social positions is a significant, underlying issue when they first come together is evident in how Shirley forbids Louis from "ever again [naming] such sordid things as money, or poverty, or inequality" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 523).

women's supposed inferior intellect (Judge, 2011). Indeed, the friendship between Caroline and Shirley is founded on their intellectual kinship (Judge, 2011). Thus Brontë challenges the ideology of "separate spheres" (Judge, 2011). Through their friendship, Caroline and Shirley find sympathy and a brief escape from the social pressure to conform (Ingham, 1996): "the minds of the two girls being toned in harmony" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 189). As Shirley declares: "you and I will suit. I have never in my whole life been able to talk to a young lady as I have talked to you" (184).

There has been much academic debate regarding the nature and degree of affection between Shirley and Caroline. John Maynard (1987), for instance, convincingly argues that Caroline and Shirley's relationship is not offered to us as a substitute for the male-female sexual relationship. He suggests that Shirley offers Caroline a form of refuge "in pre-sexual experience" and that both characters remain convinced that men, when at their best, can offer the kind of relationship they both desire (155). On the other hand, Kate Flint (2002) argues that through their relationship, Brontë toys with the idea that same-sex relationships could prove more fulfilling for women than heterosexual marriages.<sup>79</sup> Gilbert and Gubar (1984) find support for this reading in how Caroline and Shirley's interaction is laced with sexual tension and allusion.<sup>80</sup> This is clear when, in a passionate speech to Shirley, Caroline says that "it flashes on [her] at this moment how sisters feel towards each other. Affection twined with their life... affection that no passion can ultimately outrival" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 222). Here, Caroline compares heterosexual love (what she refers to as "passion") with the promise of homosexual love (her so-termed "affection") and finds the former lacking.<sup>81</sup> Caroline, thinking of her recent heartache over Robert, goes on to state that "love hurts us so... it is so tormenting... it burns away our strength with its flame" (222). Thus she criticises heterosexual, romantic love as destructive and short-lived. She goes on to compare favourably sisterly (and ostensibly, female-orientated) love saying, "in affection is no pain and no fire, only sustenance and balm" (222). In conclusion she states: "I am supported and soothed when you — that is, only you — are near" (222), thus stressing the uniqueness and centrality of Shirley's affection in her life. The narrator, too, asserts that Caroline was "the choice of [Shirley's] affection and

---

<sup>79</sup> The appearance of "passionlessness" that women were accustomed to presenting to men for fear of being deemed sexually depraved could be abandoned when with another woman (Faderman, 1981: 159).

<sup>80</sup> Faderman describes "devotion", "affection", and "exclusive commitment" between women in a relationship as "the love that had no name" (1981: 154). Quaintly and misleadingly termed "romantic friendship" (154), until the twentieth-century, sexual attraction between "decent, healthy women" remained unacknowledged by many erudite authors and public persons (156). Such emotional and physical intimacy was not frowned upon or considered abnormal as it was common currency at the time (Faderman, 1981).

<sup>81</sup> Brontë's terminology here is rudimentary, but, as always, one must bear in mind the society she was addressing. More explicit language and diction could well have drawn unnecessary criticism and undermined the validity of her subject matter, namely, how women might find fulfilment in relationships with other women. More explicit terminology was also, arguably, unavailable in the nineteenth-century.

intellect" (251). Julia Gardner (1998) goes so far as to assert that Caroline and Shirley's desire for each other forms the novel's primary concern. It is significant that Shirley and Caroline's most suggestive conversations take place outside their homes, and the patriarchal establishment these represent. Nunnwood, with its connotations to the natural world and all-female convents, presents their interaction as natural and right (Gardner, 1998). This is evident, for instance, in how the depiction of the landscape is erotic. We find this in references to "trees that ravish the eye", "rude oak", and "untrodden glades" where Caroline says to "Miss Keeldar, I can guide you" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 179). Such suggestive imagery and language undoubtedly hint at a homosexual affection between the two. Both Caroline and Shirley conclude at the end of their time in Nunnwood: "the presence of gentlemen dispels the last charm" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 179). Further, Brontë's reference to Shirley as "Captain Keeldar" in such scenes facilitates a sexually-charged reading of their relationship. Alternately, the fact that Shirley and Caroline serve as doubles for each other may suggest that the homosexual intimacy the two enjoy is really a new independence in which women do not need the emotional and physical contribution of men to be fulfilled.

Caroline's friendship with Shirley, which initially held such promise, does not provide the release that Caroline, in particular, longs for (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). I feel that Brontë's arguably homosexual experiment is ambiguous, sporadic and inconsistent. It almost seems as if Brontë tried cutting men out of the relationship entirely but decided this was an error. The dissipation of the homo-erotic allusions in the novel illustrates how Brontë struggles to represent untraditional love and longing in Victorian literary modes (Gardner, 1998). She attempts to give voice to "experiential values" for which her society had no words other than the negative descriptions "not womanly," "masculine" and "unnatural" (Ingham, 1996: 33). Thus her struggle to establish a new ideology, whilst immersed in the literary and societal models of patriarchal ideology, is evident.

While ultimately serving as her double, Shirley is also Caroline's opposite: an outgoing, independent heiress, full of life, where Caroline is retiring, dependent and passive. Shirley knows through experience that being a woman negates one's economic position and social standing. Thus she attempts to transform herself into "'something more" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 172) than a woman: "Captain Keeldar" (Moglen, 1978). As she states: "they gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 172). Named for the son and heir her parents wanted, Shirley revels in her ambiguous role, toying with the traditionally masculine privileges it affords her. This is evident in how she plays her role to great effect, instructing Helstone that he "must regard [her] as Captain Keeldar today. This is quite a gentleman's affair. The ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp, and at their peril they speak"

(Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 229—230). That Shirley views herself both as a woman and as “something more” reveals her cognisance of the fact that she can play both gender roles simultaneously. Alternately, Shirley could be described as a “non-sexual woman” whose masculine traits suggest some liberty from a traditional feminine identity more than they imply sexual ambiguity (Maynard, 1987). Shirley’s masculine traits serve as a public persona she adopts in an attempt to access the socially-prescribed “masculine” status and power (Gardner, 1998) which is not afforded her as a woman. This is illustrated when, after Robert Moore was “gravely talking to [Shirley] of business”, she states that she felt “really... quite gentleman like”, asserting that “they ought to make [her] a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 172).<sup>82</sup> Certainly, Shirley is acutely aware of the performative nature of her gender identity (Gardner, 1998),<sup>83</sup> stating during the mock religious war that she will “borrow of imagination what reality will not give” her (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 254). Casting herself in the masculine role of knight, Shirley goes on to say that she “almost long[s] for danger; for a faith — a land — or... a lover to defend” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 255). Here, in addition to highlighting once more the performative nature of gender, Brontë suggests not only the possibility of a woman playing the role of “knight in shining armour” for a man, but playing that role for a woman as well. While Shirley enquires after and tests the boundaries of socially prescribed femininity, in terms of character, she is a true and feminine woman as per Brontë’s ideal: warm, loving, generous and courageous. “Fair and girlish; not a man-like woman at all” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 420), yet regularly displaying “masculine” traits and behaviour, Shirley calls into question the inherent connection between biological sex and the gendered identity which underpins patriarchal ideology.

Shirley’s role as Captain Keeldar serves to amuse male company, and while they indulge her, it does not earn her their respect and acceptance. As she says to Caroline: “they won’t trust me... That is always the way when it comes to the point” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 265). This ultimate lack of respect and acceptance on the part of men is clear when Helstone responds indulgently and patronisingly to Shirley (Moglen, 1978), entrusting her with the protection of his niece and even lending her a gun, but not allowing Shirley to attend to wounded workers and soldiers, and

---

<sup>82</sup> Brontë’s use of masculine pronouns in reference to Shirley — “Captain Keeldar was complimented on *his* taste; the compliment charmed *him*: it had been *his* aim to gratify and satisfy *his* priestly guests: *he* had succeeded” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 231) — highlights the artificiality of Shirley’s role in particular and gender norms in general by calling attention to such external signifiers [emphasis added].

<sup>83</sup> Butler (2004) and West and Zimmermann (1987) have written extensively on the performative nature of gender. In brief, West and Zimmermann (1987) state that gender is established through social engagement, and that we have the capacity to recognise and reproduce gender traits. These are performative acts we engage in that depict the image we want others to have of our sexual nature (West and Zimmermann, 1987). (For further analysis, see Chapter 4 on *The Professor*).

prohibiting her from assuming a place on the frontline. At this time, Shirley asks of Helstone if he wants her “as a gentleman... to supply [his] place, be master of the Rectory, and guardian of [his] niece and maids while [he is] away” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 280). Helstone’s response — “exactly, captain... you, who bear a well-tempered, mettlesome heart under your girl’s ribbon-sash” (280) — is markedly ironic. However, Shirley does earn Helstone’s grudging respect, as he states that “there are not ten thousand men in England as genuinely fearless as” she (224). Thus, while Shirley is afforded a glimpse of masculine society and the commercial domain, she remains as excluded as other middle-class women (Ingham, 1996). If anything, she becomes even more of a commodity than her poorer sister, Caroline, as she is a more valuable prize on the marriage market (Moglen, 1978). By virtue of her station, Shirley sees how powerless and excluded she is from male society, which would accept her but for her sex. In this way, she is uniquely placed to see through society’s coercive gender and class myths and the ideologies which sanction the disempowerment and misuse of women and the working class (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). We find evidence of this enlightened thought in the mythic tales and figures she creates.

### **Shirley: mythic woman**

Shirley’s unique insights into gender relations are reflected in her religious beliefs as well. Like Jane, Shirley seeks a feminine authority and spirituality, one which is not tainted by patriarchal privilege and serves as a mere extension of the patriarchal power structure. To this end, Shirley envisions divine feminine figures. Further, like Jane, Shirley finds the source of her spirituality and strength in nature (Moglen, 1978), which is yet deferential to God: “Nature is now at her evening prayers” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 269). Shirley leads Caroline in creating a female-centred counter-culture and religion. Rewriting mythology and biblical and classical texts, and drawing on contemporary poetry, Shirley attempts to create a universal, empowering feminine creed through the tales she relays to Caroline (Ingham, 1996). While the complex and ambiguous depiction of female mystique and power that she offers is inhibited by her reliance on patriarchal prescripts (Moore, 2004), I argue that this is to no great degree as she appropriates traditional, patriarchal figures and narratives and uses them to create empowering female figures.

In one such mythic narrative, Shirley parodies stereotypical images of seductive female monsters. Her tale centers on the image of an unnatural, de-sexed mermaid who actively destroys men, enacting nature’s — and women’s — revenge against patriarchal ideology and society (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Without a gender-defining anatomy, the figure of the mermaid can appropriate traits of both genders. In Shirley’s tale, the mermaid combines masculine physical strength and a

female identity. Through the mythic figure of the mermaid, Shirley gives literary form to Auerbach's (1982) "myth of woman", articulating women's repressed rage. Indeed, it is when the mermaid "feels herself powerless" that "anger crosses her front" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 207). Shirley's depiction of her as a "temptress-terror! Monstrous likeness of ourselves!" (207) reveals her intention to link this figure — and its associated power — to herself and Caroline. Brontë extends this association further, when the narrator describes Caroline "combing her hair, long as a mermaid's" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 85). Thus we see how Brontë deliberately links Caroline to this figure of feminine power and mystique.

Shirley's question to Caroline "are you not glad... when at last, and with a wild shriek, she dives?" (207), highlights the inherent power of women, awesome and terrifying to behold — even in one's self. To Caroline's response — "she is not like us: we are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters" (207) — Shirley asserts that: "some of our kind... are all three. There are men who ascribe to 'woman', in general, such attributes" (207). While Caroline rejects demeaning stereotypes of women by virtue of their reductive, biased nature, Shirley, on the other hand, embraces these derogatory, male-originated images so as to appropriate their inherent power. Moore (2004) argues that Shirley uses the tale to educate Caroline on the patriarchal values that label unsanctioned female desire as monstrous, and that her employment of derogatory stereotypes signals her acceptance of them. Conversely, I propose that Shirley is attempting to subvert such tropes, transforming these vilifying stereotypes into empowering symbols. Thus, rather than "dismiss[ing] the image with an exclamation of horror" (Moore, 2004: 480): "Temptress-terror!" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 207), I would suggest that in this cry, Shirley revels in the power of the feminine figure.

That being said, Shirley does plainly battle to balance the great desire and power intrinsic in her mythic narratives with her deference to patriarchal mores and values (Moore, 2004). Sally Shuttleworth (1996) argues that Brontë deliberately undercuts the images of infinite female depth and possibility that she attempts to propagate with assertions of their illusory nature through Caroline's interjections. In this way, while asserting the existence of female creativity and intelligence, Brontë depicts the expression and exercise of such gifts as unfeasible. Indeed, I believe that Shirley's evolving myth of female spirituality, which ultimately lapses to an earlier creed of female subservience, suggests as much. As Shirley confesses to Louis, "I am neither so strong, nor have I such pride in my strength as people think" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 429).

Moore (2004) argues that Shirley's revision of Milton's creation story illustrates her submissiveness to patriarchal ideology. She supports this reading by stressing its Biblical roots and highlighting Shirley's references to Greek mythology, both of which she suggests reveal her need to base her fantasy on patriarchal prescripts. As further proof of this, she cites the fact that Shirley chooses to focus on Eve's male progeny in favour of establishing a tradition of female heroes. Again, however, I argue that Shirley's appropriation of male-centered texts and traditions signals her desire to co-opt these rather than her acquiescence to them. In her tale, Shirley substitutes Milton's domesticated housekeeper for a Titan woman who gives birth to a Messiah-Amazon mother figure named Nature (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). In her revision, Shirley says that "Milton tried to see the first woman; but... he saw her not" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 270). She goes on to "remind" men such as Milton that "the first men of the earth were Titans and... Eve was their mother" (270). Here, Shirley supersedes patriarchy's traditional power structures, elevating women above men. By stating that "the first woman was heaven-born" (270), Shirley elevates women to the level of divinity. Further, in asserting that "vast was the heart whence gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations" (270), Shirley positions women as the physical and spiritual creators of humanity:

The first woman's breast that heaved with life onto this world yielded the darling which could contend with Omnipotence: the strength which could bear a thousand years of bondage... the unexhausted life and uncorrupted excellence, sisters to immortality, which, after millenniums of crimes, struggles, and woes, could conceive and bring forth a Messiah (270).

By positioning women as contenders with "Omnipotence", Shirley challenges the church's traditional, patriarchal power structures. Through depicting women as "unexhausted", "uncorrupted", and immortal, Shirley sanctifies this divine, feminine figure and constructs a more noble and powerful creature than man's "Angel in the House" ideal. Finally, by highlighting that women brought "forth a Messiah", Shirley stresses the centrality and agency of women in God's work on earth. While Caroline accuses Shirley of making "a hash of Scripture and mythology", saying "there is no making any sense of you" (270), Shirley is unmoved, adding that "Eve is Jehovah's daughter, as Adam was his son" (270—271). In so stating, Shirley claims equality with men in God's eyes and a right to worship as a woman and as she sees fit, without being coerced into conforming to male-defined norms and following the prescriptions of the patriarchal church. Here again, where Caroline chides Shirley on the coherence and technical points of her argument — employing the language, logic and symbols of patriarchal ideology — Shirley attempts to describe in words that which exists only in the realm of spirituality and emotion. She is attempting to establish a female-centered faith where a female figure is the all-powerful well-spring of life and knowledge.

*Shirley* offers marked attacks on religion as a bastion of patriarchal power at various points in the novel (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). While *Jane Eyre* seeks to find a space within patriarchy's faith for women, *Shirley's* namesake abandons this search in favour of establishing a niche-faith, true to God, which bypasses male-dominated structures, one which is empowering and liberating for women. Caroline, too, is unafraid to challenge male-centred religious doctrines. This is evident when, in speaking of a controversial passage of scripture, she asserts that the Apostle Paul wrote the verse "for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 278). Thus Brontë, through Caroline and Shirley, challenges religious doctrines which malign women. Further, it is telling that in her search for strength and solace in God, Caroline finds it instead in her mother's arms. That being said, despite the fact that Caroline "believed, sometimes, that God had turned his face from her", she still holds to the belief that "whoever grieves still cling fast to love and faith in God: God will never deceive, never finally desert him" (295). Through Brontë's complex and at times ambiguous criticism of religion, its institutions and its connection to patriarchy, we see evidence of her conservatism and the equivocal nature of her criticism.

Ultimately, Shirley appears to abandon her creed and, in Louis's presence, seems to revert to an earlier set of beliefs, more in line with those of patriarchal ideology. The reader feels Shirley's decline with the reappearance of Louis as a great disappointment and loss. Moore (2004) argues that Shirley's mythic narratives are here eclipsed by the male-orientated literary tradition, and that any affectations of Shirley's proto-feminism are dismissed once and for all. She supports this reading by suggesting that the employment of Louis's native language, and his recital of the *devoir*, silences Shirley's tale. Shuttleworth (1996), too, contends that Louis's ascendancy over Shirley is enacted linguistically in the reading of her "La Premiere Femme Savante". The view that Shirley's recital of this old essay to Louis signals her submission to him, and her reversion to a more socially acceptable creed, is supported by how, when taking over reading the story from Louis, Shirley takes "the word up as if from his lips: she took his very tone... she reproduced his manner, his pronunciation, his expression" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 412).

In "La Premiere Femme Savante", Shirley writes of how "something... asserted a God-given strength, for which it insisted she should find exercise" (407). This illustrates how women's strength is derived from God, as opposed to originating from within themselves, or the feminine deity symbolised by nature. "La Premiere Femme Savante" depicts the tale of the marriage between Humanity (depicted as a second Eve) and Genius (a son of God). The *devoir* is riddled with biases and contradictory desires, and ends by justifying gender inequality and reconstituting the patriarchal order (Moglen, 1978). This old French exercise of Shirley's is a re-telling of the Biblical tale of how

the Son of God comes to earth to claim his Bride, his chosen people: the story of “the bridal hour of Genius and Humanity” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 409). Here, the masculine Genius, Son of God, redeems and restores fallen Humanity, Eve. This inert, ineffective Humanity is a far cry from the powerful Titan-woman, depicted in Shirley’s latter tales (Shuttleworth, 1996), where Genius “held close his dying bride... bore her triumphant into his own home — Heaven; restored her, redeemed, to the Jehovah... [and] crowned her with the crown of Immortality” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 409). However, this *devoir* cannot be examined in isolation, and when read in conjunction with Shirley’s others, a more complex and nuanced understanding of Shirley’s enlightenment arises.

In contrast to “*La Premiere Femme Savante*”, Shirley’s other *devoirs* paint a more positive picture of the kind of relationship she has with Louis. Rebecca McLaughlin (2004) cites Shirley’s *devoir*, “*Le Cheval Dompte*” — or “*The Broken-in Horse*” — to support a subversive reading of Shirley’s marriage. The *devoir* seemingly outlines the taming of a wilful horse, and the resulting unity of the horse and rider’s desires. However, the emphasis in the story lies with the horse learning to master its own will, as opposed to being broken-in and mastered by the rider, which might have destroyed its spirit (McLaughlin, 2004). Similarly, the last *devoir* Shirley recites, “*Le Chene et le Roseau*”, speaks of how only by bending, and compromising, like the reed, can the too rigid oak refrain from breaking (McLaughlin, 2004). Thus these are not tales of mastery over another, but mastery of one’s self. This distinction is significant.

### **Shirley and Louis: freedom and fiefdom**

As is evident, the degree to which Shirley conforms to patriarchal prescripts upon Louis’s appearance, and the degree to which she merely appears to do so, is a much debated topic in Brontëan literary criticism (see, for instance, Moglen, 1978; Shuttleworth, 1996; McLaughlin, 2004). Louis describes how during Shirley’s confession, she becomes “childish,” “nervous and womanish” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 428). Thus Louis views her through a traditional, misogynist lens as the embodiment of the “Angel in the House” (Shuttleworth, 1996). As Louis states: “I could call [Shirley] nothing in my own mind save ‘stainless virgin’... the modesty of girlhood was her halo” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 436). When Shirley “submit[s]” herself “passively” (390) to Louis’s guidance and care, he says that “it was unutterably sweet” to be “near... and above her: to be conscious of a natural right and power to sustain her, as a husband should sustain his wife” (437). That Louis sees Shirley’s faults as “the steps by which [he shall] mount to ascendancy over her” (437) reveals his arguably scant appreciation of the merits and talents of the woman he claims to know and love. The absence on Brontë’s part of any criticism by way of the narrator here is puzzling given the outspoken nature

of the social commentary that has characterised the novel until now. While we are not privy to Shirley's perspective, the narration until this point includes her opinion on numerous topics in third-party fashion. However, with Louis's arrival and his assumption of the narration, Shirley all but disappears from the novel, and is effectively rendered a figure of Louis's imagining, as her surrender of her agency and centrality in the novel to Louis is depicted exclusively through Louis's eyes by way of his pen (Shuttleworth, 1996).

The veracity of Louis's pen, however, needs to be called into question (McLaughlin, 2004). Louis's narration reveals him to be a somewhat insecure man. This much is evident when he states that he is "blessed in that power to cover all inward ebullition with outward calm", hiding the "vortex... whirling" in his "heart" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 512). Here, Louis admits to experiencing considerable inner turmoil, despite appearances. It is "through this pencil" that Louis is able to "say... what [he] will... what [he] dare utter to nothing living... what [he] dare not think aloud" (436). I propose that he uses his pen to rewrite the world as he sees fit. Analysing events of the day, Louis fictionalises rather than transcribes these, constructing a more favourable version of events than typically befalls a lowly tutor in his lived experience. Louis comes close to admitting as much, stating emphatically: "I know this is the talk of a dreamer... I do dream. I will dream now and then; and if [Shirley] has inspired romance into my prosaic composition, how can I help it?" (436). In the journal entries themselves, Louis at times contradicts himself and leaves inconsistencies in his version of events (McLaughlin, 2004). For instance, in one breath Louis asserts that he is "not [Shirley's] slave — I declare it" (Brontë, 2008: [1849]: 438), while in the next he confesses that "if I must be her slave" it will not be "for nothing" (441). More subtly, the tone of Louis's editorials jars with his retelling of the sequence of events in significant ways. This is evident in Louis's journal entry regarding Shirley's dog bite. Here, he elevates his role in reassuring her and aggrandises himself in her eyes in a manner inconsistent with the synopsis of the events he relays prior to this (McLaughlin, 2004). Louis waxes lyrical about how Shirley "opened the trouble of her mind to [him] — asked [his] protection — appealed to his strength" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 436). This is notably different in tone from the content of their conversation when Shirley calmly — and under coercion — tells Louis how she "took an Italian iron from the fire, and applied the light scarlet glowing tip to [her] arm... bored it well... cauterized the little wound. Then... went upstairs" (427). Undoubtedly, Louis's journal entries offer us "a Shirley who never exists otherwise in the novel" (McLaughlin, 2004: 221). Through reading between the lines of Louis's narration, we arguably come closest to the reading that Brontë

intended.<sup>84</sup> Thus while Shirley appears to submit, as Brontë has been at pains to stress throughout the text, appearances can be deceiving.

Upon closer examination, suggestions of Shirley's independence and power continue to abound. Louis decides to "keep up the professor" (Brontë, 2008: [1849]: 422) with Shirley, a role both are accustomed to — and one which enables him to continue to exercise this form of power over her. While this reduces Shirley to the deferential role of pupil in relation to him, her capacity to adopt multiple personas and play various gender and social roles suggests her ability to transcend this subservient position as and when desired. Further, when Louis admits that he "delight[s] to find her at fault" (438), rather than being found wanting as the inactive agent here, Shirley could be viewed as deliberately transgressing so as to "give [Louis] something to do; to rectify" (438). That Louis himself recognises that he is "not master" of Shirley, "but something else" (421) illustrates his own awareness of the tenuous claim to power he has over her. To be sure, Louis's awareness of their inequality before his proposal is evident when he declares that he wishes he "were... her equal" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 512). Furthermore, it could be argued that Louis only ever desired a fleeting power over Shirley, enough to establish himself as a man in his own eyes as well as hers. This he could well have viewed as a necessity given his feminised profession and position. This is supported by Louis's assertion that he desires to "establish power over, and then to be indulgent to the capricious moods" of his wife (519). Shirley's previously quoted assertion that it is at Robert's "peril" that he "ever again name such sordid things as money, or poverty, or inequality" (523), suggests that she recognises that he will be predisposed to view himself her inferior, and for this reason she makes the declaration.

That being said, Shirley admits that she desires to be mastered, saying to her uncle she "will accept no hand which cannot hold [her] in check" (462). One of the reasons she rejects Sir Phillip is that "he would expect [her] always to rule", and, as she attests, she has "no taste whatever for the office" (462). While Shirley's fierce independence prohibits her from submitting to a tyrant whom she would "defy" and who "would not hold [her] for a day" (461), nonetheless she desires the kind of "master... in whose presence [she] shall feel obliged and disposed to be good" (462).<sup>85</sup> This kind of relationship requires agency on the woman's part to willingly submit to a man whose goodness she acknowledges and wishes to emulate. This is a far cry from the kind of coerced submissiveness

---

<sup>84</sup> This same narrative technique is employed in Crimsworth's narration in *The Professor*. My chapter on that novel explores the topic in greater depth. That Crimsworth is the only other male narrator in Brontë's works suggests the validity of this interpretation.

<sup>85</sup> McLaughlin (2004) argues that we should read Shirley's submission to Louis and her desire for a master with some scepticism. She suggests that Shirley employs a double entendre when she speaks of desiring a master, referring, instead, to her school "master", Louis, whom she had already made up her mind to marry (219).

to an unbending tyrant to whom Shirley states she would never submit. Such subservience is indeed represented as being more desirable than the alternative.

As in *Jane Eyre*, the power dynamic between Louis and Shirley remains contentious and ambiguous, evident from the affectionate way in which Louis refers to Shirley as “my pupil, my sovereign” (522). That Shirley’s questioning reply, “are we equal then, Sir?” (522), is met by an affectionate yet derogatory retort — “you are younger, frailer, feeble, more ignorant than I” (522) — illustrates again the puzzling nature of their relationship. Shirley, too, appears divided over the degree of independence and submission she desires. While describing herself as a “leopardess” who is “tameless”, in the very same breath she says to Louis that she is “glad to know [her] keeper... only his voice will [she] follow” (522). Shirley’s desire for a “companion”, a “guide” and a “master” — all of which demand different degrees of subservience — illustrates her inner struggle between her desire for freedom and submission. Rather than simply wanting a master, Shirley appears to desire a helpmate. Where Louis assists her in her personal shortcomings, Shirley likewise assists him where Louis himself is lacking, most obviously in finances and status. Shirley hands over the running of her business affairs to Louis — arguably proving herself the wiser of the two by the act — and is reported to have intimated that “Louis... would never have learned to rule, if she had not ceased to govern” (535). This, again, places the agency in Shirley’s hands as the party who handed over power as opposed to being the passive victim from whom it is usurped. From Robert and Caroline’s conversation, it is clear that Shirley never completely ceases to rule. Rather, she employs her power and status to give her husband the social respect he requires (McLaughlin, 2004). Robert says of Louis that “everyone admires his future wife; and everybody will, in time, like him” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 539). Thus we see that it is Shirley who has the community’s respect and admiration, and it is she who confers this upon Louis in turn.

Indeed, it could be argued that it is Shirley, and not Louis, who ultimately rules in their relationship. McLaughlin (2004) points out that it is Shirley who voices the marriage proposal. During the conversation which precedes this, Louis states that he is “a dependant” and that he knows his “place”, while Shirley counters that she is “a woman” who knows hers (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 517). Louis states that he is “poor” and “must be proud” (517) and thereafter he pushes Shirley to make the declaration he cannot: “you can tell me. You shall tell me” (520). This, Shirley does when she speaks the words Louis has been begging and coercing her to say: “live for me if you dare” (522). This frees Louis to claim Shirley as his own: “now... I have you: you are mine... I have chosen my wife” (523). Thereafter, Shirley voices the traditional declarations: “be good to me” (522), “be faithful to me, never leave me”, “share the burden” and “all the cares and duties of

property”, “be my companion through life; be my guide where I am ignorant; be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always” (523). In this way, it appears that it is Louis who is consenting to Shirley’s proposal and terms of marriage (McLaughlin, 2004).

While Louis refuses to acknowledge their equality, the reader feels this to be more a matter of keeping form than a rejection of the claim. Any further illusions of Shirley’s subservience are put to rest when Louis states that he feels “tantalised — sometimes tortured... unsafe: she renders me miserable... wily, tameless, peerless nature! She gnaws her chain... pining after virgin freedom... I wish there was danger she should lose me, as there is risk I shall lose her” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 527). Whether one considers Shirley’s submission true or tactical, it is undeniably necessary as a preface to marriage (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Thus Shirley’s submission could well be read as calculated, obeying the narrator’s injunction to view *Shirley’s* conclusion critically (Judge, 2011). So, rather than suggesting that female emancipation as envisaged by *Shirley* is undesirable or that Captain Keeldar was a failed experiment, Brontë insinuates that such a character is incompatible with the status quo. This distinction is significant as it places the emphasis on society and its exclusionary ideologies and practices. The message we are left with is that the kind of freedom and agency that women such as Shirley desire is natural, and that it is society’s constraints that are unnatural.

While it is Louis who must promise to care for Shirley in the terms of their engagement, during Robert’s proposal to Caroline, it is she who is made to promise to “take faithful care of [him]” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 537). This suggests that it is Caroline who ultimately suffers the more subservient marriage. Her previous affirmation that her view of an “excellent wife” is one that would correct her husband, but also one who would “study his comfort, and cherish him, and do [her] best to make him happy” (85), suggests that Caroline will devote her life to Robert’s comfort. Moore (2004) suggests that Caroline — unlike Shirley — is able to escape the confines of her role as wife by escaping to her mother’s house. In this way, she is able to benefit from female companionship and temper her husband’s influence in a way that Shirley is not (Moore, 2004). This arrangement she likens to Caroline’s desire for loving, female-centered companionship in Nunnwood (Moore, 2004). Further, Moore (2004) contends that Caroline prioritises her relationship with her mother above her marriage, citing Caroline’s declaration to Robert that she “cannot desert her [mother], even for [him]”, and that she “cannot break her heart, even for [his] sake” (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 538). Despite prioritising her relationship with her mother, I propose that Caroline’s behaviour and attitude throughout the novel suggest that she will be the dutiful and obedient wife to Robert that society prescribes.

## Marriage: the end

The radical intent evident at the opening of *Shirley* undeniably dissipates by the end, capitulating in conformity (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), however reluctantly. Marriage is consistently presented as a dubious institution, to the extent that as it forms a significant criticism of the novel. The conventionality of Brontë's ending is best described as a "cynical excess of concession to narrative conventions" (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 396). While Caroline and Shirley enjoy the traditional fate of heroines by making desirable matches, Brontë does not allow her readers to forget the tainted nature of that institution and the dubious quality of a woman's happiness as a subordinate wife (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 395).<sup>86</sup> Shirley's potential is sacrificed at the marriage altar, and Caroline's questions are silenced, her desire for action beyond the home doomed to remain unfulfilled (Moglen, 1978). While Caroline retreats into her marriage, it is a marriage to the man who has been the desire of her heart from the very start, and who saved her from the lonely life of spinsterhood she so dreaded. Shirley, on the other hand, sacrifices much in terms of agency and independence to become Louis's wife, given her desire to create a feminine spirituality and her masculine posturing. That both Caroline and Shirley are reduced to appendages of their husbands is hinted at in the diction of their marriage announcement (Glen, 2002):

There were two marriages solemnized in Briarfield Church, — Louis Gerard Moore, Esq. late of Antwerp, to Shirley, daughter of late Charles Cave Keeldar, Esq. of Fieldhead: Robert Gerard Moore, Esq. of Hollow's Mill to Caroline, niece of the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, M.A., Rector of Briarfield (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 541).

That this is the last we hear of them suggests that their fates are sealed in their adopted roles as wives. The contrast between their fate and the progressive nature of Jane's marriage to Rochester is startling (Glen, 2002) and suggests a dramatic turn to disillusionment on Brontë's part. While McLaughlin (2004) argues that Brontë successfully constructs an ending which encourages a subversive reading of a woman's power within her role as wife, chiding critics who view marriage as repressive, the tone of the narrator at the end can be described as nothing less than disenchanting.<sup>87</sup>

---

<sup>86</sup> The undesirability of marriage is further highlighted by the way in which Brontë presents life as a spinster as being not wholly undesirable. Despite Brontë's criticism of society for the prejudice and limited agency faced by Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, she affirms the integrity of single life. Hall, for instance, states that his spinster sister "Margaret is not unhappy" (Brontë, 2008 [1849]: 240). Helstone, too, advocates that "it is decidedly the wisest plan to remain single, especially for women" as "millions of marriages are unhappy... perhaps all are more or less so", for lovers "tire of each other" (86). That Brontë's two heroines then capitulate in marriage, however egalitarian, is jarring.

<sup>87</sup> As previously quoted, Fieldhead Hollow was once "a lonesome spot... a bonnie spot — full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now" (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 542). The tone of the latter, succinct sentence speaks volumes concerning the narrator's jaded point of view.

I believe it is from him that the reader must take their cue. The limited vision of Shirley's feminine spirituality, coupled with the limited development of the two heroines, suggests the extent to which they remain ideologically imprisoned in the patriarchal status quo, along with the rest of their society (Moglen, 1978).

For feminist critics, *Shirley* is Brontë's "most interesting failure" (Taylor, 1979: 84). Much of the ambivalence in Brontë's novel lies in her need to sacrifice the empowerment of her heroines in order to prove their purity (Shuttleworth, 1996) — or social acceptability — thus illustrating Brontë's ultimate adherence to reigning ideologies. This is most evident in Shirley, whose character and desire for freedom and dominion are so contradictory at times as to almost defy comprehension. Shirley stands for female liberation in the novel, and with her marriage in particular, Brontë seems to suggest, in tragi-comic fashion, the unhappy inescapability of female subordination in patriarchal society (Moglen, 1978).<sup>88</sup>

Little, if anything, is resolved in the novel as a whole. While the immediate threats to Robert's factory are relieved, the underlying social, political and economic challenges remain, even more ominous in their dormancy (Ingham, 1996). In addition, the narrator's prediction that the natural world — which has been consistently feminised during the course of the novel — will be further devastated by the hand of man in pursuit of profit (Judge, 2011) holds an ominous, implicit warning for women and society as a whole. In a fallen, intractable world such as this, Brontë suggests that private desires and ideas are ineffective against endemic patriarchal ideologies (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). In this way, Brontë's disillusionment in her quest to redefine the feminine ideal and disrupt misogynist stereotypes is made clear in *Shirley*. In *Villette*, Brontë's following novel, this disillusionment is even more pronounced and felt more acutely through her intimate depiction of women's oppression under patriarchy through the character of Lucy Snow.

---

<sup>88</sup> Shirley's view of marriage as a repressive institution for women is evident when, in speaking of marriage before Louis's reappearance, she states: "I could never be my own mistress more. A terrible thought! — it suffocates me!" (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 181). She finds in her "independence" and "solitude" a "mantle" of great comfort; whereas "if [she] married, that could not be" (181). That she feels the need to marry in spite of this highlights the intractability of women's oppression in patriarchal society.

## Chapter 3

### ***Villette*: power and prejudice**

Matthew Arnold describes *Villette* as “a hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel... one of the most utterly disagreeable books I ever read” (1974 [1853]: 201), while Lewes calls it “a work of astonishing power and passion... an influence of truth as healthful as a mountain breeze” (1974 [1853]: 210). Brontë’s last finished novel, *Villette*, typically elicits one of these two very different responses (Colby, 1960). It is the tale of a young woman’s self-development and social enlightenment but more than that, it is the tale of a woman’s suffering under patriarchal society’s ideological constraints. *Villette*’s veracity of suffering, so George Eliot comments, is the root of its “almost preternatural” power (1974 [1853]: 192). It is this, Lucy’s struggle for self-definition in a society which has already defined her, which makes the novel Brontë’s most subtle yet scathing critique of patriarchal ideology.

In terms of artistry and ethics, *Villette* is more uncompromising and activist than *Jane Eyre* (Rabinowitz, 1985). *Villette* is Lucy’s attempt at “psychological exorcism” (O’Dea, 1988: 45). Where Jane offers a representation of her life (O’Dea, 1988), Lucy half-heartedly invites her readers to be party to an assessment of hers. Where *Jane Eyre*’s ending is closed, *Villette*’s remains open-ended and ambiguous (Rabinowitz, 1985). Furthermore, where Jane appears honest and reliable, Lucy proves herself to be deceptive (Rabinowitz, 1985). Brontë employs Lucy’s deception to challenge Victorian literary conventions, thus aligning herself with Lucy in her rejection of patriarchal norms, and empowering herself and her heroine through the narration (Rabinowitz, 1985). *Villette* consequently offers Brontë’s clearest rejection of patriarchal models and values, as well as her most articulate, multifaceted depiction of a woman’s experience of patriarchal ideology.

*Villette*, like *Jane Eyre*, is offered to us as the autobiography of its narrator, Lucy Snow and, as with *Jane Eyre*, Brontë employs this format so as to establish a reader, embedded in the text, who serves as the recipient of Lucy’s tale (Peeck, 2004). Significantly, however, in this instance, Brontë links reader and narrator in a more intimate and dynamic way (Peeck, 2004). Gregory O’Dea (1988) describes *Villette* as Brontë’s experimentation with narrative voice, tension and control, calling it her most nuanced literary accomplishment as it elicits from the reader feelings of estrangement and persecution as well as sympathy for the narrator. He goes as far as to argue that it is the relationship between narrator and reader that forms *Villette*’s main point of interest. For instance, when Lucy tells her readers, “each and all”, to “take it your own way” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 157), she creates an uncomfortable self-awareness for her readers who are brought to consider other readers of the text,

their potentially different perspectives, and how this affects their own (O'Dea, 1988). Further, when aboard the boat bound for the continent, Lucy speaks of thinking she “saw the continent of Europe, like a wide dream-land”, going on to describe how “sunshine lay on it, making the long coast one line of gold”, and of how there was “spread a sky... grand with imperial promise, soft with tints of enchantment” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 56—57). She then promptly instructs the reader to “cancel the whole of that... or rather let it stand, and draw thence a moral... Day-dreams are delusions” (56—57). Lucy’s intervention in her tale to instruct her reader on how to receive it places both Lucy and the reader outside of the narrative (Peeck, 2004). Therefore Lucy’s narrative appears unfixed and subject to amendment (Peeck, 2004). In addition, such instances leave the reader with an awareness of being under Lucy’s gaze (Peeck, 2004), monitored and evaluated before they will be trusted with more of her tale. Furthermore, Lucy addresses the reader in a near-dismissive manner (Peeck, 2004): “my reader, I know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first impressions; and it is well... as I had neither time nor mood to cherish such” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 45). This is clear, again, when Lucy speaks of the shipwreck which marred her younger years: “I will permit the reader to picture me... as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather... However... I must somehow have fallen overboard, or that there must have been wreck at last” (35). While Lucy leaves her readers to think what they wish of this time of her life, this suggests a lack of faith on her part in her readers’ ability or desire to understand her true experiences (Peeck, 2004). Consequently, she renounces responsibility for her readers in these instances (Peeck, 2004). This repudiation of her readers is linked to Lucy’s denunciation of society at large, indicating her suspicion of others.

Through Lucy’s unreliability and the text’s overt self-reference,<sup>89</sup> Brontë challenges many of the traditional assumptions and conventions of literature<sup>90</sup> and, by extension, society. Furthermore, *Villette* confounds its readers’ expectations — most particularly nineteenth-century readers (Peeck, 2004)<sup>91</sup> — with its unconventional and Modernist traits.<sup>92</sup> Lucy’s narrative style, which enables her

---

<sup>89</sup> Lucy relates her tale with many explicit textual references (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991), speaking of “my book of life” wherein are “set down... characters of tint indelible” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 260), and offering her readers “an alliterative, text-hand copy” (56—57) of certain depictions.

<sup>90</sup> That *Villette*’s hero is foregone to facilitate the development of its heroine (Rabinowitz, 1985) is undeniably a dramatic departure from Victorian literary conventions.

<sup>91</sup> Nineteenth-century readers would have been shocked by a heroine who loves two men in the course of a novel (Peeck, 2004). Through their identification with Lucy, Brontë challenges such social taboos.

<sup>92</sup> Modernism (1890 — 1939) encompasses the visionary optimism of the early twentieth-century as well as the discontent of the war years (Bradbury, 1995). Examples of Modernist influences include: Lucy’s fraught consciousness, the instability of her sense of self, and the unreliability of her narration, as well as *Villette*’s self-referentiality. Certainly, as Peeck points out, making the character of Lucy comprehensible to nineteenth-

to avoid ever completely revealing her true self, grants her a qualified “freedom” which is evident in the flexibility and equivocation with which she presents herself and her tale (Boone, 1992: 41). This reticent narrative style reflects a “shifting self” that can only be known in an unconventional, “radically non-appropriative” way (41). *Villette* explores the inner conflict between society’s prescribed self-repression and the self’s need to explore and express a nearer likeness of one’s self, thus depicting the very process of female compliance under patriarchy (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). While seeming the least passionate of Brontë’s novels, this is only because it is also the least accessible — Lucy having managed to master the art of self-repression to a greater extent than Brontë’s other heroines (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). It is between the lines of Lucy’s story of self-repression, in the midst of the inner conflict that she hesitatingly and only half articulates, that the reader finds Brontë’s most illuminating, intimate and scathing critique of patriarchal society.

### **Identity: the externalisation of the inner self**

In this way, identity is figured as an elusive entity in *Villette*. The term “identity” can refer both to “social” and “personal” identities: the former denotes social categories whereby one is classified, and the latter distinctive traits that give one a sense of pride and that one considers to be constant and of public consequences (Fearon, 1999: 2). Identities in *Villette* are presented as fluid as the characters remain capricious and impenetrable (Choi, 2012). Examples of self-disguise, cross-dressing and performance appear throughout the text, illustrating the indecipherability of identity (Choi, 2012). On another level, various characters’ habitual and perplexing use of multiple names for each other reflects the same (Choi, 2012).<sup>93</sup> Beyond simply offering insights into the interiority of a young woman, *Villette* goes further by displacing identity and destabilising such concepts as “consciousness” and “interiority” upon which it depends (Crosby, 1984: 703).

Through highlighting the instability of identity, *Villette* undermines the founding ideologies of patriarchy and stresses its debilitating effects on middle-class women such as Lucy (Crosby, 1984). This is accomplished through the uniquely intimate portrait of Lucy that Brontë provides. *Villette* is a more deeply psychological portrait than Brontë’s previous novels, where identity is consistently figured as an external rather than an internal attribute. This is evident in Brontë’s emphasis on Lucy’s attire over her physiognomy (Andrews, 2004: 11),<sup>94</sup> as well as her depiction of faces as masks,

---

century readers must have been a formidable challenge for Brontë, as Lucy is indecipherable in “the patriarchal sense” (2004: 224). Boone, too, has labelled *Villette* “uncompromisingly ‘modern’” (1992: 36).

<sup>93</sup> Thus we have characters such as Graham Bretton / Isidore / Dr John, who is described by three different names by Lucy at different points — arguably as her perception of him changes (Auerbach, 1985).

<sup>94</sup> This is most plainly apparent in Madame Beck’s appraisal of Lucy at their first meeting when Lucy “divined... the wish to form from the garments a judgement respecting the wearer” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 69). Lucy’s

which might hide one's true nature or feelings.<sup>95</sup> This is apparent, too, in Lucy's various confrontations with herself in mirrors.<sup>96</sup> Through viewing herself — and perceiving herself as others see her — Lucy develops greater self-awareness and self-knowledge (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Lucy's first significant viewing of herself in a mirror is aided by Ginevra, who paints an unflattering portrait of Lucy's reflection, stating that she has “no attractive accomplishments — no beauty” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 146). The half-satirical way in which Lucy accepts this vision — even going so far as to laud Ginevra on her honesty — reveals Lucy's low self-confidence and poor self-image (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). In the second instance, when Lucy is confronted by herself in the mirror at the theatre, she is disconcerted, not recognising herself, even referring to herself in the third person (Glen, 2002): “we suddenly encountered another party approaching from the opposite direction... a handsome middle-aged lady... a gentleman... [and] a third person in a pink dress ... for... a moment, I believed them all strangers” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 209—210). That Lucy experiences a “jar of discord, a pang of regret” (209—210) when she likens herself to the Brettons — feeling herself to be so much their inferior — suggests once more her low self-regard. Finally, when she believes M. Paul to be lost to her, Lucy confronts herself in the mirror alone for the first time. There, she has the epiphany that mirrors do not reflect reality, but rather they help to create it through enabling people to impose their own interpretations on what they see. Thus Lucy realises the possibility and power of self-definition for the first time (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), signalling that she has finally come into her own. These crises in front of the mirror represent Lucy's wrestle for the power of self-definition and autonomy (Newton, 1981). Through focusing on external signifiers, Brontë highlights once again the fundamentally performative nature of identity and the central role society and its norms and ideologies play in the construction of the self.

Lucy's orphaned state offers her the possibility to define herself in the absence of the patriarchal family's influence. Indeed, with “no possibility of dependence on others”, “self-reliance

---

insistence in the play that she “keep [her] own dress; come what might” (138) bears greater significance in this light. As she goes on to demand: “it must be arranged in my own way... the things must not be forced upon me” (139). Thus clothing — another external signifier — is seen as an exemplar of the inner self, in addition to being employed as symbol of self-determination (Andrews, 2004).

<sup>95</sup> We see, for instance, Lucy describe in a moment of real connection with M. Paul how his face “changed... from a mask to a face” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 321) and in depicting her ascendancy over Madame Beck, she refers to Madame's “habitual disguise, her mask” (447).

<sup>96</sup> Narratives are habitually likened to mirrors, highlighting their so-thought accurate reflection of life: the classics refer to literature as a mirror image of nature, while Renaissance literary titles frequently feature the term “mirror” (Sweeney, 1995). However, Modernist literature purports not to resemble mirrors, but rather looking glasses (Sweeney, 1995). In this way, Modernist works stress not a representational surface, but the process of looking into one (Sweeney, 1995). So Brontë states in a letter, “we only suffer Reality to suggest - never to dictate” (2000 [1849]: 285). It is this very process of observation that Brontë seeks to make her readers aware of. Through highlighting the unreliability of the narrator, Brontë turns the spotlight on the act of narration, and in so doing, makes the reader aware of their interpretative role in her tale.

and exertion were forced upon [her]" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 36). Lucy comes to embrace these attributes of independence and action. The great secret of her parentage signals not only the hidden nature of her true identity, but the possibility of identity change by way of a lack of fixity. By extension, that Lucy has no family, "no home" (50), suggests the essential isolation of existence. This is most particularly the case for middle-class women, who are not afforded an equal place in Victorian public life. Thus transformation of the self (and, by extension, society) is latent in Lucy's undisclosed parentage.

The absence of family is mirrored on a larger scale by the absence of community in the novel. In the foreign setting of *Villette* — "a cosmopolitan city" (82)<sup>97</sup> and "land of convents and confessionals" (100) — English society is very limited and diffused. Thus individuals cannot act in concert to force their will and design for middle-class women such as Lucy upon her. In fact, society (English or otherwise) seldom, if ever, exerts any influence over her at all.<sup>98</sup> Consequently, ideology is disguised through the absence of community (Newton, 1981). As the essentialist, patriarchal ideologies and norms Brontë explores are projected onto the foreign "other" and its religion (Catholicism), they are consequently discredited and rejected for this reason (Newton, 1981). In Lucy's assertion to M. Paul "I am a Protestant: I will not bear that kind of discipline" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 484), the astute reader should understand that Lucy is in fact refusing to conform to patriarchy's doctrine, as opposed to Catholicism's. To be sure, rather than describe a growing love interest in M. Paul, Brontë depicts him as Lucy's "Christian Hero" (398), conflating religion and romance and thus masking women's social considerations with religiosity. In this way, *Villette* hides the societal roots — even the very existence — of ideology. This undermines Brontë's criticism of patriarchal ideology (Newton, 1981).

Ultimately, Lucy does not leave England out of protest against its social restrictions, but because of her rootless existence there. She states that she leaves because she has "nothing to lose" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 49), being "inured to suffering" (50), as there is nothing but despair left for her in England. Ostensibly as Brontë cannot yet bring herself to write — or perhaps even

---

<sup>97</sup> *Villette* symbolises "urban modernity" and its very title illustrates this point (Choi, 2012: 97).

<sup>98</sup> During the Victorian era, the public sphere was considered to be primarily a masculine space and the private, domestic sphere a feminine one (Choi, 2012). Thus public, urban accoutrements such as hotels, roads and theatres were considered masculine domains (Choi, 2012). That women's presence in such spaces was considered to be problematic is highlighted when Lucy enters the hotel in *Villette*, her attendance eliciting "moral anxiety" amongst the patrons over whether or not she is a "fallen woman" — the only kind of woman to frequent man's public domain (Choi, 2012: 101). Lucy's claim on London's streets when she traverses them is therefore highly transgressive as she shows scant regard for society's gender norms and values (Choi, 2012). In so doing, Lucy re-establishes the city as a "sphere for female autonomy, pleasure, and creativity" and undermines patriarchy's ideology of gendered public and private spaces (Choi, 2012: 102).

conceive of — such a blatant criticism of society as Lucy’s desire to depart in protest, the motivation for Lucy leaving cannot come from inside herself. For this reason, Brontë employs external necessities and the aurora borealis (Newton, 1981) as motivating forces. In this way, the aurora borealis serves to reassure readers that Lucy is not as audacious and “unfeminine” as to leave her home and set out on her own in protest against patriarchy: she is in the hands of Fate, her situation is beyond her control (Newton, 1981), and “circumstances... just such as most to favour... daring” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 49). Lucy’s “unutterable loathing of a desolate existence past [forbids] return” to her homeland (49). While Fate holds the power to send Lucy on her journey, Lucy herself is given the power to make her move a permanent one, based on her dissatisfaction with her life in England. In this way, Brontë makes Lucy’s rejection of England in favour of the continent palatable to the reader, while at the same time stressing the unfavourable conditions of life in England for middle-class women.

### **Female bodies and subjectivity**

When she arrives in Villette, Lucy is free to redefine herself and she begins to experiment in this respect, exploring various aspects of her character and testing these against other people’s expectations (Moglen, 1978).<sup>99</sup> The great tension in this novel, as in Brontë’s other works, lies in the heroine’s strong desire to resist patriarchal ideology and break down gender barriers, and opposing aspirations to fulfil the feminine ideal of beauty and self-sacrifice, and to enjoy the fairy-tale marriage.<sup>100</sup> As in Brontë’s previous novels, *Villette* extrapolates on the way in which patriarchal authority and its ideologies are internalised by individuals. In so doing, Brontë reveals the fundamentally artificial nature and harmfulness of such social constructions. The subjects of patriarchy’s indoctrination process are actively required to adopt patriarchy’s norms and values in order to be accepted by society (Grosz, 1987). We see in Lucy’s conflicted attitude towards society’s ideals the fraught nature of this adoption process, and how problematic it can be for individuals at odds with such values and practices. In donning the pink gown for the theatre, for instance, Lucy speaks of how the “light fabric and bright tint... scared” her, causing her a “sense of shame and fear of ridicule” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 208). Only after Graham gave her “a kind smile and satisfied nod” is Lucy’s “own eye consented... to be become reconciled” (208). That Lucy is conflicted at all highlights the agency required in conforming to societal norms, and the fact that the very same power could be used to rebel.

---

<sup>99</sup> This is evident in her assumption of various costumes and their accompanying identities.

<sup>100</sup> Lucy, speaking of Dr John, admits that she is “quite powerless to deny [herself] the delight of indulging his mood, and being pliant to his will” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 192), reflecting her desire for companionship.

Here, more than in any other of Brontë's works, the "body's" central role in the development of subjectivity is emphasised. Speaking of "the body" is misleading, as one type of "body" (for instance, the youthful, white, upper-class, female body) cannot serve as a representative for all female bodies, marginalising other variants in its dominion (Grosz, 1987).<sup>101</sup> This can only be overcome through the assertion of the integrity and sovereignty of other bodies and their subjectivities (Grosz, 1987). In *Villette*, Brontë subverts the hegemony of the feminine ideal and its "body" through highlighting the integrity and autonomy of Lucy, the anti-heroine, whose unbeautiful body and unique, independent character are not typically associated with literary heroines. This is most clear in the scene where Lucy stands before the mirror and rejects the reflection of herself in the pink gown, a symbol of the feminine ideal, its "body" and subjectivity.

Physical, social and economic relations are not simply experienced by individuals, but are "corporeally" integrated into the body (Grosz, 1987). Thus one's subjectivity, with all its desires and emotions, cannot be divorced from one's "body" (Grosz, 1987): the site where one's subjectivity and social interactions translate into one's personal experiences, one's view of the world and one's self. This is also a challenge to the Cartesian "mind" / "body" dualism. Further, as a social object, Grosz states that the "body" can be redefined and its cultural signification re-evaluated as a result of political contestation of its roles and forms (Grosz, 1987). This is what Brontë attempts to achieve through anti-heroines such as Lucy. It is clear that Brontë views the "body" as an avenue through which power is dispersed, as well as an avenue of possible resistance to this power (Grosz, 1987). We see this in Lucy's struggle to divorce herself emotionally from society's expectations and approval,<sup>102</sup> as well as through her utilisation of costumes<sup>103</sup> and other external signifiers to reject society's norms.

By extension, power cannot be considered to be purely ideological and cerebral, nor purely coercive and physical (Grosz, 1987). Rather than an intermediary between the two, the "body" should be viewed as a site "of dual power relations" where it is incised both uniquely on a private level and socially on a public level (Grosz, 1987). Brontë attempts to depict both this internal and external inscription of power on the "body". We see in Ginevra's assertion that Lucy is "nobody's daughter", "no beauty" and that she cannot "call [herself] young at twenty-three" (Brontë, 2008

---

<sup>101</sup> For this reason, I refer to the term "body" in quotation marks

<sup>102</sup> While Ginevra asserts to Lucy in a letter, "I believe you feel nothing. You haven't the same sensitiveness that a person of my constitution has" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 475), the reader, privileged to Lucy's "inner life" (448), knows this to be a falsity, a pretence to emotionlessness on Lucy's part.

<sup>103</sup> In assuming the role of a man in the play, Lucy speaks of going into "the yearned-for seasoning", and experiencing "a keen relish for dramatic expression" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 141), savouring the opportunity to transcend the limits of her sexed, socially-inscribed "body" and explore foreign parts of her nature.

[1853]: 146), evidence of society's repressive values and how these are disseminated. Ginevra's argument that "no living heart will [Lucy] ever break" (146) as a result of these social and physical "defects" is indeed assumed by Lucy, who later confesses that she believes that the "love born of beauty was not" hers, as she has "nothing in common with it" (468). In this way, Lucy's body and the social experiences it elicits have conditioned her to feel insecure and unfit for the best life has to offer. Thus the reader is made aware of the process by which Lucy's subjectivity is inscribed with patriarchy's prejudicial norms, values and power structures.

### **Power in practice**

When speaking of power, one must be careful to define what one means. Definitions of power have shifted over time. Up until the mid-1900s, power was typically thought of as aptitude and energy and used more in terms of self-advancement than dominion over others (Newton, 1981). Power as self-definition and self-command was more the common currency in the Victorian era (Newton, 1981). Where we now typically think of "power as control" (the masculine, patriarchal brand critiqued in *Villette*), Victorians commonly conceived of "power as ability" — a brand which was available to women as well as men (Newton, 1981: xv). When speaking of power as aptitude and energy, one's definition of power is broadened and one gets a more accurate sense of which forms of power were available and which were denied to middle-class, Victorian women (Newton, 1981).<sup>104</sup> The touting of women's influence in popular literature arguably worked to sustain sexual inequality in the middle-class for, in accepting the sway of influence, women relinquished the "self-advancing" power of "control and self-definition" (4). Brontë recognised the subtleties of such distinctions in power relations. Through focusing on power as ability as opposed to influence, *Villette* offers a fundamental challenge to patriarchy, albeit a furtive and ambiguous one (Newton, 1981). The omission of explicit reference to power enabled Brontë to attack the system while working within it. By granting Lucy the power of ability, for instance, Brontë attempts to undermine the "masculine" power of control through stressing female competence (Newton, 1981). In addition, the power of ability grants one the autonomy to be one's own person (Newton, 1981). Freer than most middle-class women from social and familial restraints, Lucy relishes the power and

---

<sup>104</sup> Sarah Ellis (1842) recognised that "women... must be content to be inferior to men... as their inferiority consists chiefly in their want of power, this deficiency is abundantly made up to them by their capability of exercising influence". By distinguishing between the "masculine" power denied to women and the great influence they were able to exert, Ellis offers a contemporary recognition of the ambiguous nature of the power relations between men and women. However, unlike masculine power, women's influence was ever inconspicuous and did not hold the potential for radical social change. Such is apparent in the views of an unknown author for the *Edinburgh Review* who dismisses the idea of equality between the sexes, mollifyingly stating that women's influence should "be allowed to flow in its natural channels... domestic ones" (cited in Newton, 1981: 4). We get a sense here of how constrained such influence was in social arenas.

opportunity to redefine herself and find a way of “getting on”, evident in her resolution that “when [she has] saved one thousand francs, [she] will take a tenement... [and] begin with taking day pupils, and so work [her] way upwards” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 361) — as she does. Thus, powered by none other than her own ability, exercising “self-denial and economy... and steady exertion”, she is able to achieve “an object in life” (361).

Brontë also focuses on power as achievement and uses this to counter the more obvious and accessible power of male characters (Newton, 1981). We see this in how Lucy’s “externat became a pensionnat” that “prospered” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 494). In this way, Lucy appears an increasingly powerful character. Then again, Lucy argues that “the secret of [her] success did not lie so much in [herself], in... any power of [hers], as in a new state of circumstances”; going on to state that the “spring which moved [her] energies lay far away beyond the seas” (494), in M. Paul’s person. In this way, Lucy is seen to deny the power of ability and achievement in herself, so undermining Brontë’s criticism of patriarchy through denying her own power and strength.

*Villette* reveals access to paid work — and the independence and purpose it brings — to be the ultimate cradle of power (Newton, 1981).<sup>105</sup> Lucy’s employment in the pensionnat signals a new, autonomous existence for her, granting her fresh agency and scope to exercise her talents and influence (Newton, 1981). The key role that her employment plays in sustaining Lucy emotionally is evident from the devastating effects the holidays have on her health. When “the prop of [Lucy’s] employment was withdrawn, [her spirits] went down fast”, and “when [Lucy] had full leisure to look on life as life must be looked on by such as [her], [she] found it but a hopeless desert” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 157). After engaging Lucy in the world of work and exposing her to Madame Beck’s brand of self-enhancing power, Brontë reintroduces the Brettons to Lucy. This allows her to see what life in the traditional women’s sphere as Dr John’s wife would be (Newton, 1981). Lucy’s alternating resistance to and longing for Dr John signals her mistrust of the benefits both of life as wife, as well as life alone (Newton, 1981). While marriage promises economic and emotional comfort, it also demands a sacrifice of self which Lucy distrusts above the lonely but active life of a single woman (Newton, 1981). In this way, Brontë stresses the confinement and powerlessness of women to make their own way in society.

---

<sup>105</sup> At times, however, paid work also acts as a barrier to greater power for middle-class women (Newton, 1981) by way of the diminished status the fact of their employment lends and their essential difference from women of leisure. In this way, Brontë reveals how, ultimately, the fate of women is sealed along with access to the agency, independence and power enjoyed by men in patriarchal society.

### ***Villette's revision of the "gaze"***

Power can also be considered as the capacity for reading and influencing others, or the ability to protect one's self against the same (Newton, 1981). Brontë's subtlest and strongest defiance of patriarchy's oppression is found in her characters' struggles to remain unreadable and thus unknowable (Butler, 2004). One's individuality is founded on one's aptitude for confounding the penetrative gaze of the other (Shuttleworth, 1996) for to be subjugated one must first be intelligible (Butler, 2004). This is most evident in Lucy who has retreated from society, protecting herself from hurt by isolating herself and remaining unreadable and unintelligible. Lucy takes great pride and pleasure in exercising this power, exclaiming "what contradictory attributes of character we sometimes find ascribed to us" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 301). She enjoys the fact that while "Madame Beck esteemed [her] learned and blue; Miss Fanshawe caustic, ironic, and cynical" and "Mr Home... the essence of the sedate and discreet" (301), none knew her true nature. Even "little Paulina" — whom Lucy believes "knew" her, "if anyone" did (301) — confesses to Lucy: "I wonder if anybody will ever comprehend you altogether" (425). However, this power proves a double-edged sword for Lucy. As Beth Newman (1992) points out, being the object of another's gaze can be enjoyable, even nourishing and essential to one's self. To be sure, in a patriarchal society, where women's identity and value are formed by her appearance, remaining unobserved by others is perplexing (Sweeney, 1995) — even degrading. Thus Lucy's defensive invisibility — designed to protect her from the governing gazes of society — ultimately serves as another type of imprisonment (Boone, 1992). In this way, Brontë highlights the entrenched position of women under patriarchal ideology.

Brontë employs the gaze as both a theme and narrative technique.<sup>106</sup> In this way, she suggests that perception is reality, and that the act of seeing constitutes knowledge (Shaw, 1994). A great deal of theory has been written on the "gaze". In summary, Freud postulates that the "gaze" is inherently erotic, as the observer envisions owning what he surveys (Sweeney, 1995). Jacques Lacan theorises that gazing, being gazed at by others, and gazing at oneself, all serve to shape one's identity (Sweeney, 1995). Foucault hypothesises that gazing and being gazed at denotes the balance of power in Western society (Sweeney, 1995). Feminist scholars have found the "gaze" constructive for analysing the way in which women's position in patriarchal society is formed around social interactions, depictions, discourses, and within one's subconscious (Sweeney, 1995). Brontë's work

---

<sup>106</sup> Narration and the "gaze" are inherently linked. This is evident when writers and theorists often use visual terms and imagery when referring to literature, for example: "'point of view', 'perspective', 'focus', 'frame'" (Sweeney, 1995: 147).

foreshadows similar theories of the gaze, as noted above, to similar effect, as I will discuss further in this chapter.

The “gaze” forms the representative tool of observation and governance in the novel (Boone, 1992). Joseph Boone aptly states that “if ever there were a novel filled with spying eyes, knowing gazes, and significant glances, it is *Villette*” (1992: 22). This is illustrated when M. Paul tells Lucy of “a room [he has] hired, nominally for a study — virtually for a post of observation”, wherein he can “sit and read for hours together”: his “book” is the pensionnat “garden”, “its contents... female human nature” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 363). Boone likens this “post of observation” to Foucault’s Panopticon, a primary symbol of the “disciplinary society” (1992: 21).<sup>107</sup> This disciplinary society, Foucault postulates, preserves power through ensuring its subjects serve as instruments of observation and instruction, internalising society’s regulations and policing each other (Boone, 1992). This is the very nature of the society that Brontë depicts in *Villette*. Foucault argues that the modern prison’s monitoring and governing modus operandi were adopted by a broad spectrum of nineteenth-century institutions, including schools (Boone, 1992). In *Villette*, from the moment Lucy comes to live at the pensionnat, she gets the sense that “this was a strange house, where no corner was sacred from intrusion, where not ... a thought [could be] pondered, but a spy was at hand to note and to divine” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 231). Society’s vigilance regarding conformity to social norms is effectively parodied in Brontë’s description of the pensionnat. In this way, Brontë establishes Madame’s school as a symbol of the greater society, and Madame as personifying and employing the means by which society maintains the power privileges of the status quo (Boone, 1992). Lucy’s references to Madame as “a little Bonaparte” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 143) who “ought to have ruled a nation” (74) solidify the analogy. In this establishment, one gets the sense that Madame Beck has created an institution with eyes,<sup>108</sup> one which sees all without necessitating her presence and agency. Further, the pensionnat’s inhabitants — “her staff of spies” (74) — have internalised Madame Beck’s authoritarianism and comply with her surveillance needs (Shuttleworth, 1996), thereby enhancing her power. Through this analogy, in *Villette*, Brontë comes closest to accurately portraying the constraints of patriarchal ideology on women’s mind and behaviour.

E. Ann Kaplan (1983) argues that the gaze is not essentially “masculine”, but, in order to exercise it within the context of society’s language and signs systems, and our own unconscious mind, one needs to occupy a “masculine” stance. In a society fraught with sexual inequality, it is the

---

<sup>107</sup> The Panopticon was a central watchtower — originally used in prisons — wherefrom prisoners could be constantly observed (Boone, 1992).

<sup>108</sup> “The eyes of the flowers had gained vision, and the knots in the tree- boles listened like secret ears” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 116).

active, “masculine” gaze that objectifies the passive female, projecting its own desires and preconceptions onto the “other” (Mulvey, 1973). Given the highly gendered, power-imbalanced state of Victorian society, and the sexually-charged nature of the “body” and the “gaze”, to be “read” by another was to be feminised (Shuttleworth, 1996), with femininity being associated with powerlessness. Thus, if Brontë’s heroines were to be empowered, it was essential that they not only avoid the disempowering “gaze”, but that they employ one of their own to counter it. In *Villette* Brontë attempts to create her own “gaze”, one that transcends gender stereotypes and combines both “masculine” observation and the intuition that Brontë attributes to her heroines; the only “gaze” which would transform women from objects into worthy subjects (Shaw, 1994).<sup>109</sup> As Lucy begins to come into her own and explore her identity and extend her engagement with those around her, she reveals herself to be a keen judge of character and a powerful “gazer” herself, all the more powerful because she, as narrator, is in control of her own story, and of our perception of events in turn.<sup>110</sup> Lucy reveals herself to be the ultimate “gazer” by the end of the novel, realising the passion and power in her own eyes (Boone, 1992). So M. Paul exclaims: “what fire shot into the glance! Not mere light, but flame” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 155). In this way, Brontë reassigns the “gaze” as women’s “self-empowering property” (Boone, 1992: 34). Such disruptions of the patriarchal power structures do not reflect Lucy’s arrest of the “masculine” power position. Rather, they contribute to the dismantling of patriarchy’s norms and values in the mind of the reader, which is intrinsic to *Villette*’s oblique style of narration (Boone, 1992). As “gazer” and narrator, however, Lucy proves unable to employ her power to any great effect through altering the patriarchal ideologies of her society. She remains, like all middle-class women of her time, bound by them.

### **Art: ideological armament**

In concert with the narrative theme of the “gaze”, *Villette* marks a new prominence in exhibition and performance in Brontë’s writing, offering numerous depictions of concerts, public lectures, fetes, galleries, and theatre shows (Glen, 2002). Indeed, with the Catholic confessional, even religion becomes a performance,<sup>111</sup> and a historical day of crisis for the town is celebrated and marked by pageantry (Glen, 2002). This is tied, too, to Brontë’s theme of surfaces such as mirrors

---

<sup>109</sup> Crimsworth’s defensive and aggressive surveillance, Jane’s unique and visionary observation, and Shirley’s keen perception, culminate in Lucy’s suspicious and empowered gaze (Glen, 2002).

<sup>110</sup> As discussed, Lucy’s evasiveness and dishonesty towards her readers ensure that they remain mindful of this fact.

<sup>111</sup> Boone (1992) argues that the confessional is simply another manifestation of the spirit of the Panopticon: just as M. Paul peers through the “lattice” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 363) of his watch tower, so the “mystic lattice” of “the sliding panel of the confessional” (409) serves as another, even more invasive vantage point from which one’s privacy and sovereignty are violated. It is not insignificant that Lucy, in her own words, refers to telling her tale as “writing this heretic narrative” (163).

and masks, costumes and clothing, and her complex positioning of collective and individual identity, mentioned previously.

Through Lucy's appraisal of the paintings at the museum and Vashti's performance, Brontë illustrates her understanding of the inherent, coercive power held in the spectacle of artistic representation (Shaw, 1994). Lucy suggests that the picture of Cleopatra "seemed to consider itself the queen of the collection", going on to describe how it "represented a woman" with a "wealth of muscle", an "affluence of flesh" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 199—200), which speaks of excess and superfluity. In arguing that Cleopatra "ought... to have worn decent garments" like "a gown covering her properly" (199—200), Lucy condemns the eroticisation of the female "body" by the male "gaze". When describing how "she lay half-reclined on a couch", Lucy states that the reason for this "would be difficult to say" as "she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright" as "she had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa" (199—200). In her judgement of this painting, which she pronounces as being "on the whole an enormous piece of clap-trap" (199—200), Lucy condemns the roles and stereotypes allotted to middle-class women. She critiques the passivity which men assign them, both in life and art, as well as the objectification of women by the male "gaze", which renders them inert, fleshy vessels. Through her critique, art is depicted as a social construct, ideologically laden; not an innocent source of pleasure, but a dangerous agent of repression.

This is seen again in Brontë's appraisal of the four paintings in the "La vie d'une femme" catalogue, the first of which "represented a 'Jeune Fille,' coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up — the image of a most villainous little precocious she-hypocrite" (202). Through her description and critique of the pictures, Lucy highlights their clichéd subject matter. This is evident once again in Lucy's description of the second picture, "a 'Mariee' with a long white veil, kneeling at a priedieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger, and showing the whites of her eyes in a most exasperating manner" (202). Lucy refers to the third as a "'Jeune Mere,' hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby with a face like an unwholesome full moon", and the fourth, as a "'Veuve,' holding by the hand a black little girl; and the twain studiously surveying a French monument" (202). Thus Lucy systematically critiques and condemns the most sacred elements of femininity enshrined in the "Angel in the House" ideology which the four girls represent: morality, religiosity, motherhood, and submissiveness. She labels "these four 'Ange'" as "grim and grey as burglars... cold and vapid as ghosts", exclaiming "what women to live with! Insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities!" (202). Lucy's criticism is motivated by the fact that the paintings propagate

the belief that only through strict adherence to such essentialist portraits of femininity can a woman be considered a true woman in good standing. In arguing that the four images are “as bad in their way as the indolent gipsy giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers” (202), Lucy locates the portraits within the historical context of men’s subjugation of women. Brontë’s condemnation here forms her most concise and overt critique of patriarchal stereotypes of women in life and in art.

Similarly, Vashti's performance at the theatre serves as a turning point for Lucy’s perception of women and society (Johnson, 1990). Unlike the coercive, patriarchal paintings, Vashti’s art is rebellious and self-expressive. Vashti’s performance is a daring endeavour at womanly self-depiction wherein she seizes the “gaze” by presenting a belligerent display of desire (Boone, 1992), so “disclos[ing] power like a deep, swollen, winter river, thundering in cataract” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 259). Through her performance, Vashti questions the forms and conventions of male-defined and dominated art by transcending the distinctions between art and artist, and between private and public (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). However, Brontë is again ambivalent here: Vashti exemplifies best the ambiguous, conflicted nature of Brontë’s criticism of patriarchy. In referring to Vashti as “the shadow of a royal Vashti: a queen, fair as the day once, turned pale now”, Lucy depicts her not as a vital, fiery, majestic being, but rather as a ghost of her former self, “wasted like wax in a flame” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257). While the courageousness and raw power of her performance are venerated, the performance is also figured as an act of “suicidal self-exposure” (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984: 424) for a woman. Lucy states that while she “thought it was only a woman... by-and-by [she] recognised [her] mistake”, for there was about her “something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257). Thus Brontë depicts the transcendence of gender as a monstrous thing, categorising patriarchal, gendered identities as “natural”, ordained by God, and anything other as being spurred by “evil forces” (257). Vashti’s art is revealed to be so subversive as to set the theatre alight (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), literally bringing down the physical establishment as she brings down the ideological one. Through Vashti’s act of setting the theatre on fire with the strength of her passion, Brontë encourages us to recognise the possible political implications of women’s anger at their social subjection (Dolin, 2008). Vashti embodies all the contradictions of womanhood, combining patriarchal stereotypes with the “myth of woman”: divine and demon, fallen and transcendent, powerful and self-transformative (Auerbach, 1982). Lucy’s description of Vashti as “Hate and Murder and Madness incarnate” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257) begs reference to Auerbach’s “myth of woman”: “a monster of ego”, “the source of all shaping and creative power”, who “forecasts apocalyptic new orders” (1982: 185). This is clear in Brontë’s description of her as “Wicked, perhaps... but... strong... her strength has

conquered Beauty, has overcome Grace... Fallen, insurgent, banished, she remembers the heaven where she rebelled" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 258). Here, too, in the character of Vashti, we see most clearly the uneven and abstruse nature of Brontë's criticism of patriarchal gender ideologies.

### **Lucy: embodiment of ambiguity**

Lucy, like Vashti, is the embodiment of ambiguity — more so than any other of Brontë's heroines. Lucy is more retiring and insecure than her predecessors,<sup>112</sup> she is at the same time more adventurous and courageous, more resilient and enterprising.<sup>113</sup> One gets the sense that with Lucy Brontë comes closest to rendering the depth and complexity of women's lived experiences. It is through Lucy, too, that Brontë comes closest to a definition of the most fulfilling life open to women in a patriarchal society.

Lucy's self-repression — the inner "being [she] was always lulling" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 109) — is so extreme as to bring her to divorce herself from society, to freeze others out.<sup>114</sup> So she states: "I might have had companions, and I chose solitude" (126). Life has disappointed her, so Lucy rejects social interaction because she fears rejection.<sup>115</sup> Even with those Lucy considers her closest, dearest relations, the Brettons, she ultimately remains an outsider, not an immediate member of their social group. When reunited with them, she speaks of how her "heart softened instinctively... which [she] entreated Reason betimes to check" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 178). Lucy's self-righteous attitude and sense of superiority are defences to protect her from potential hurt by others (Moglen, 1978). She maintains this illusion even to herself, in addition to the rest of society, so as to avoid breaking down, to retain control. Lucy repeatedly attests: "I, Lucy Snow, was calm" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 22). However, the excessive self-reference here suggests the effort required to effect this end. We feel her inner turmoil and desire for affection when she admits: "I wanted companionship, I wanted friendship, I wanted counsel" (185). Lucy is a highly divided character who "seem[s] to hold two lives — the life of thought and that of reality" (77). Such extreme self-repression is proven to be unsustainable through Lucy's fraught, divided self (Gordon, 1994). *Villette* does not ratify the same principle of absolute self-control that *Jane Eyre* does. Lucy's attempts at self-command are

---

<sup>112</sup> Lucy makes repeated reference to the fact that she is "solitary" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 425), even going as far as to admit that she was "going mad from solitary confinement" (273).

<sup>113</sup> Lucy alone of all Brontë's heroines comes closest to realising the future she hopes for. While Caroline's desire for employment — even as a governess — and Jane's desire for "action" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 109) and "liberty" (84) dissipate with their respective marriages, Lucy achieves her dream of administering a school.

<sup>114</sup> Brontë stated that she desired a "cold name" for her heroine — who at one point was called Lucy Frost — because she "has about her an external coldness" (2000 [1852]: 101). Ultimately, Brontë chose Snow as it "covers and conceals" (Dolin, 2008: XX), another key aspect of Lucy's character.

<sup>115</sup> Brontë situates Lucy's self-imposed alienation in the traumas of the childhood she keeps secret (Boone, 1992).

presented as unhealthy and ill-advised, amounting to a half-life (Shuttleworth, 1996). Indeed, Brontë goes as far as to equate such an existence to death. This is evident in Lucy's belief that "about the present, it was better to be stoical; about the future... to be dead" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 109). Lucy is divided by defences she has erected in response to patriarchy's inscription of its norms and values on her subjectivity. This is apparent from how she often contradicts herself, letting her guard down with readers and revealing more than she typically allows. Such unconscious contradictions only begin to dissolve by the end of the novel when Lucy learns to trust her feelings.

Reason and Feeling<sup>116</sup> again form the primary source of conflict for Brontë's heroine in *Villette*. The reader does not get the sense that Lucy is ever able to master them (Peeck, 2004). Here, they are treated more clinically and psychologically than in *Jane Eyre*. For instance, in *Villette*, Reason is directly tied to repression and patriarchy, while Feeling is more closely associated with intuition and the self, and treated with less suspicion (Moglen, 1978). However, Lucy remains a dislocated character for much of the novel, and she often turns to Reason in an effort to suppress the Feeling she has been taught by society to fear. Appealing to Reason enables her to feel justified in the self-repression endorsed by patriarchal society as well as to feel in control (Moglen, 1978) — a luxury not commonly afforded middle-class women at the time. Lucy justifies her self-repression through arguing that while such "struggles with the natural character... may seem futile and fruitless... in the end they do good" as they "make a difference in the general tenor of a life, and enable it to be better regulated... quieter on the surface" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 179). That a quiet "surface" and regulation are goals in and of themselves reveals the extent to which Lucy has been influenced by patriarchy's ideals of female submissiveness. That Lucy goes on to stipulate that "it is on the surface only the common gaze will fall" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 179), exposes the opposition her inner Feeling holds towards what societal Reason approves. The extent of Lucy's adoption of such ideological principles is clear again when she advocates that "what lies below" the surface, women should "leave... with God" (179). Lucy's adjunct — "man, your equal, weak as you, and not fit to be your judge, may be shut out thence" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 179) — discloses a latent rebellion against and criticism of patriarchy's doctrine through asserting the equality of men and women, and declaring that man is not fit to judge her.

Brontë presents Reason as the internalisation of patriarchal ideology, the "angel on the shoulder" of every woman, advising which course of action society would most approve. This is

---

<sup>116</sup> Brontë's capitalisation of these terms is evidence of the weight and importance she assigns to them, as is their personification. Talking of Reason, Lucy refers to it as "her" and depicts a kind of relationship between her, Reason and Feeling, speaking of how "Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 253).

apparent when Lucy speaks of how “Reason, would not let me look up, or smile, or hope: she could not rest unless I were altogether crushed... According to her, I was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond” (229). Lucy’s — and arguably, by extension, Brontë’s — anger at the oppression patriarchal Reason inflicts on women is clear here. In Lucy’s assertion that “Reason is vindictive”, and “if I have obeyed her it has chiefly been with the obedience of fear, not of love” (229), we see the extent to which patriarchal ideologies are inscribed on women’s subjectivity, engendering a debilitating fear of rejection that has the power to cripple women emotionally. While Brontë’s criticism here is clearly powerful in its passion, by disguising patriarchal ideology as Reason — seemingly in-born good sense, a protection against self — Brontë undermines her criticism, effectively overlooking the existence of ideology.

Lucy’s inner struggle between Reason and Feeling is clearly evident in her letters to Graham. Responding to his letter, Lucy speaks of how “to begin with, Feeling and I turned Reason out of doors... when we had done Reason would leap in, vigorous and vengeful, snatch the full sheets, read, sneer, erase, tear-up, rewrite, fold, seal, direct, and send a terse, curt missive of a page. She did right” (253—254). This letter writing<sup>117</sup> process stands as an effective symbol of Lucy’s self-repression in general, where her natural, true feelings and inclinations are “vigorously and vengefully” redirected into a socially acceptable form. That Lucy asserts that Reason “did right” illustrates her belief in this instance of the “rightness” of women’s emotional repression. This, in turn, reveals her conflicted attitude towards Reason and Feeling, or, in other words, submission to patriarchy’s principles and her own desires. Lucy sends Graham the letter dictated by Reason, but she keeps the other, ostensibly as a way to remain true to herself whilst conforming to society’s dictates and conventions. While Lucy addresses two very different letters to Dr John, Polly — the epitome of the feminine ideal — writes no less than three (Shuttleworth, 1996), “chastening and subduing the phrases” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 375) at each turn. This speaks of the extreme self-control and guardedness necessary for women wishing to please in society.

Lucy slowly reveals more of herself to readers, admitting: “I had feelings: passive as I lived... cold as I looked” (109). This illustrates how Lucy’s ostensibly calm and controlled demeanour hides a surfeit of consciously and unconsciously repressed emotions behind half-hearted role-playing (Flint, 2002). Lucy continuously shrinks from speaking honestly of herself, preferring to employ irony and

---

<sup>117</sup> Victorian society esteemed and encouraged the writing of letters (Tingley, 1996). As with all things relating to women, however, even personal correspondence was subject to a myriad rules and restrictions (Tingley, 1996). Letter-writing guidebooks determined the correct style, punctuation, formatting and penmanship, and stressed that letters should be subject to extensive revision (Tingley, 1996).

sarcasm instead.<sup>118</sup> In addition, she states that she enjoys being misunderstood (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). As a woman with little agency and affection, one who must put on a mask so as to conform to society's expectations — and who does not expect to be accepted for who she is — the power and pleasure of being misunderstood and misleading others appears to be all that is available to Lucy.<sup>119</sup> That being said, Lucy arguably tells her tale so as to avoid being misinterpreted by society, and thus controls signification in the medium of print in a way she is unable to do in life (Boone, 1992). In this way, the manner in which Lucy relates the narrative of her life is a marked departure from Victorian literary tradition (discussed above) and grants her unprecedented freedom (Boone, 1992). While desiring not to be misinterpreted, Lucy still desires to remain essentially unknown; thus she proceeds to evade and mislead those readers who would classify her according to society's prescripts, "fix[ing] her identity within the realm of the knowable" (31). Brontë ties Lucy's evasiveness to the self-repression and social masking necessary for women to fit in in society.

In addition to being evasive, Lucy's tale is highly subjective, and a biased and impassioned telling of events, while her characterisation is piecemeal, offering her readers sketches of characters in the moment, which have been further coloured by the unreliable perspective of Lucy herself (Auerbach, 1985). This is as a result of Lucy projecting her own ambivalence and divided sense of self onto others. For instance, in asking herself of Polly "how will she get through this world... How will she bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 34), we hear Lucy asking this of herself. Further, Lucy's complex and changeable opinion of her characters often results in her depicting them as divided characters themselves. This is evident in her explanation of Dr John's two personas: "the public and private" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 197). She goes on to state that in "public, he is shown oblivious of self; as modest... earnest", while "in the fireside picture, there is expressed consciousness of what he has and what he is; pleasure in homage... some vanity in receiving the same. Both portraits are correct" (197). Lucy is physically attracted to Dr John but put off by his arrogance and insensitivity, she is admiring of Madame Beck's success and power, but repulsed by her lack of morality, and she figures M. Paul alternately as a domineering Napoleon and a compassionate knight (Auerbach, 1985). In this way, Lucy's portrayal of these characters clearly vacillates with her changing perceptions and moods. Thus we see how

---

<sup>118</sup> When silencing Ginevra on the topic of Dr John, Lucy describes something that never takes place, telling how she and Mrs Bretton held Dr John "tight down in the carriage", while he was "raving between" them, and "the very coachman went wrong" for the commotion (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 236). Thus Lucy enjoys the power achieved through saying one thing but meaning another, even though she could well have made her point better through revealing the truth: that when she asked Dr John if he was "grieved" over Ginevra, he replied, "not at all" (220).

<sup>119</sup> In speaking of misleading Ginevra concerning Dr John's condition, Lucy states that "there was pleasure in thinking of the contrast between the reality and my description" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 237).

Lucy's jealousy over Ginevra's beauty and unconcerned, easy selfishness,<sup>120</sup> as well as her envy of Polly's "triple halo of... beauty... youth, and... happiness" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 452)<sup>121</sup> manifests itself as judgements against these characters (Blackall, 1976).

Deeply divided within herself, Lucy is most in control when concerned with others. This is because she is, at first, unwilling to look within herself (Flint, 2002). The reader is not made explicitly aware of Lucy's inner conflicts because she merely hints at these through her depiction of the other characters and their actions. It is through others, through reading between the lines of their stories, that the reader is gradually able to know Lucy (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), as far as this is possible. On another level, Lucy's self, and the path her life has taken, defy both social and literary stereotypes of women. Thus Lucy is almost forced to tell the stories of characters other than herself (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), as she does not have the words or the socially-approved literary model to tell her own in the manner she desires.

It is only once Lucy has come to terms with the conflicts inside herself that she can view herself and others in an unclouded light, as she does in the end (Colby, 1960). Indeed, Lucy becomes less evasive as her story progresses, acknowledging certain aspects of herself that she previously would not have acknowledged even to herself, the "fiery and rash" parts of her nature (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 301).<sup>122</sup> As she becomes a more integrated person, she becomes increasingly central to her own story as well (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Thus we find the story shifting in focus from Pauline and John, and Ginevra and de Hamal, to M. Paul and Lucy. It could also be argued that only once M. Paul displays an interest in Lucy does she feel that her own story is worth telling, as she feels her own worth is validated. It is in such ambiguities and tensions as these that the novel's power lies (Warhol, 1996).

Sexual tension, in particular, infuses the novel. Boone argues that Lucy's quest is ultimately not one for a romantic partner, but a clandestine, "autoerotic" quest to satisfy her desire (1992: 36). On the night of the fete, Lucy sees a large, round basin, one that she "knew, and beside which [she] had often stood — deep-set in the tree-shadows, brimming with cool water, clear, with a green,

---

<sup>120</sup> Lucy considers Ginevra's "fair, fragile style of beauty" and her "light, careless temperament" signs of weakness, signals of a person with an "entire incapacity to endure" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 57). Indeed, she goes as far as to call her a "flimsy person" with a "wretchless mind" (148).

<sup>121</sup>In contrasting Paulina to Ginevra, Lucy mentions the former's "refinement, delicacy, and perfect personal cultivation... a singular contrast to... Miss Ginevra" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 263). Further, Lucy refers to Paulina as "Nature's elect", one of the lucky few for whom "no excessive suffering penetrates their lot" (436). Lucy's affinity with Paulina softens her criticism of her, which comes by way of her being presented as a "flat" character, too pure and perfect: an "unearthly" (12) "angel" that lives to serve her father and husband.

<sup>122</sup> The passivity Lucy exhibits at the opening of the novel, we learn, is her social mask, and her deep passion and desire become evident along with the great self-control necessary to keep them in check.

leafy, rushy bed" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 450). The sexually-charged language and imagery employed here lend themselves to the understanding that the basin serves as a symbol of female sexual desire (Boone, 1992). It is significant that it is Lucy herself, and not a male figure, that searches for and penetrates this symbol of her desire (Boone, 1992). When Lucy says she remembers "a gap in the paling... a narrow irregular aperture", where no "man could... have made his way... but [she] thought [she] might" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 450), the evocative language and imagery Brontë employs suggest that Lucy is seeking and satisfying her own sexual fancy. This reading is further supported when Lucy says of this "irregular aperture": "I fancied I would like to try, and once within, at this hour the whole park would be mine — the moonlight, midnight park!" (450). Lucy goes on to confess: "of that coolness and verdure I thought, with the passionate thirst of unconscious fever... I still secretly and chiefly longed to come on that circular mirror of crystal, and surprise the moon glassing therein her pearly font" (454). Here, too, Brontë's placement of the moon with the circular font confirms the reading that Lucy is engaged in an "autoerotic" quest for fulfilment,<sup>123</sup> as does the fact that upon reaching the "circular mirror", she is confronted with "her own reflection, gaze to gaze" (Boone, 1992: 37). This "autoerotic" quest reflects Lucy's fresh sense of empowerment, confidence and subjectivity. Upon returning to the pensionnat, Lucy confronts the nun, who has already lost significance for her as a figure of repressed desire and life-in-death, as Lucy has finally come into her own. Thus Brontë depicts the thwarted character of female sexual and emotional passion and offers a broad assessment of the nature of sexuality, desire, love and relationships.

### **Transgressive doubling**

As is evident from Brontë's reticent depiction of Lucy's autoerotic quest, the art of representation was not as accessible for Victorian women as for men and this was further complicated by women's struggle to establish themselves as valuable, intelligible "subjects under patriarchy" (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991: 100). Thus, even when motivated by female experience, women's literary work is seldom "self-centered", as displacement of the female character is typically its distinctive feature (100). *Villette* exhibits this struggle to establish Lucy as a viable and articulate heroine, who refers to herself as "a seeming non-entity", unworthy of her readers' attention (Boone, 1992: 28). Brontë's projection of many of Lucy's traits onto her other characters reveals how her novel, too, is not a self-centered one, but an evasive depiction of female experience.

---

<sup>123</sup> Brontë typically uses the symbol of the moon to represent sexual desire, as discussed in Chapter 1 on *Jane Eyre*.

Brontë's employs the narrative device of doubling to great effect in *Villette*. In this way, she challenges patriarchal ideologies and power structures by way of depicting binaries as directly related as opposed to distinct (Warhol, 1996). To use such a device is to rebel classification and challenge social stereotypes through illustrating how no character fits exactly into social categories (Warhol, 1996). Through linking Lucy to such diverse character types as Madame Beck, Genevra, Polly, and even M. Paul, Brontë illustrates how patriarchal ideologies and their character types concerning women and gender are not, in fact, as clear-cut and consistent as they are presented. Rather, through Lucy's vacillating subjectivity, Brontë stresses that people are complex and can embody and exhibit elements of many different character types. The doubling that characterises *Villette* — both in terms of character and literary conventions — renders it an unsound, reticent, seditious text (Warhol, 1996). *Villette's* use of doubles differs significantly from traditional Victorian characterisation, as well as from Brontë's use of doubles in *Jane Eyre* (Kent, 2010). Traditionally, a "transgressive double" symbolising psychological elements of a heroine would lead the heroine to regulate her behaviour, as Bertha and Céline do in *Jane Eyre*, encouraging Jane's compliance with patriarchal norms concerning women (337). In *Villette*, however, Lucy's encounters with such "transgressive doubles" lead her further away from patriarchal norms. This is evident in how Miss Marchmont's passing encourages Lucy to leave England and the restrictive life she has experienced, as well as in how Lucy's performance in the school play and her viewing of Vashti's acting follow her encounters with the nun (Kent, 2010). In this way, Brontë is seen again to defy male-defined literary norms and conventions in such a way as to challenge patriarchal ideologies.

Lucy and Paulina, while being described as polar opposites in terms of Lucy's cautious detachment and Polly's passionate attachments, are in fact intimately related. In effect, Polly represents the ultimate realisation of the self-repression with which Lucy struggles. Lucy herself recognises this affinity, commenting that "there are certain things in which we so rarely meet with our double that it seems a miracle when that chance befalls" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 278). When we first meet Polly, she is — at the tender age of seven — learning how to be the model, upper-middle-class lady and wife, greeting Dr John at the door and serving her Papa tea (Newton, 1981). She is described as "a mere doll" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 8) and "unearthly" (12), stressing the impossibility of the ideal she embodies. When we meet her as a young woman, we find her unchanged and stagnant. As her father observes, "she neither grows in wisdom nor in stature", and we "find her pretty nearly as much the child as she was ten years ago" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 280). Such stasis in physical and emotional development is unnatural, prompting her father to describe her as a "highland fairy... a strange little mortal" (280). In this way, the text suggests that the feminine ideal

that Polly represents is unnatural. It is the character of Polly that Brontë most strongly associates with the feminine ideal of subjection and etherealisation (Newton, 1981). This is clear when Lucy states that Polly was so “forgotten in [Dr John]... one would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 25). To be sure, Polly’s role is to sacrifice herself for the men she loves, the men who provide for her and sustain her sense of self. Thus patriarchy’s feminine ideal is portrayed as a barrier to adulthood, self-sufficiency and power. Through having Polly play the same role for both her father and husband, Brontë draws a parallel between the power relations between father and daughter, and those between husband and wife (Newton, 1981), illustrating how inescapable patriarchal authority is for women.

While Paulina is a fate-favoured version of Lucy, Ginevra, too, serves as a double, contender,<sup>124</sup> subject of desire<sup>125</sup> (Shuttleworth, 1996), and role model of sorts for Lucy, who envies her command of male attention (Newton, 1981). While Lucy derides Ginevra’s value system, she envies her social inclusion where she herself has only ever been an outsider. It is her conflicted feelings towards her that attracts Lucy to Ginevra. While Lucy scolds Ginevra for her faults, she also indulges her self-centredness, and she admires her refusal to conform to the image of what men — for example, Dr John — want her to be (Newton, 1981). Similarly, while we are invited to chastise Ginevra for accepting gifts from men she has no interest in, because of Lucy’s quest for economic independence, we are invited to sympathise with her active search for a rich husband (Newton, 1981) — this overt quest being something strongly tabooed in Victorian society. Ginevra, like Lucy, desires power, and she grasps the only power available to a woman in her position: the fleeting and false power of beauty.<sup>126</sup> In her relationship with Dr John, we see how temporary and illusory such power is: it is the power of the subservient (Newton, 1981). Graham himself is at all times consciousness of the aura of divinity he has placed on Ginevra. For this reason, upon her insulting his mother, he is easily able to give up the infatuation, stating that while he “was very much her slave” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 218) he is “a free man now” (250).

While Ginevra is characterised by her selfishness and her misuse of her power, Madame Beck exhibits these traits to an even greater degree as “interest [is] the master-key of [her] nature —

---

<sup>124</sup> Ginevra enjoys Dr John’s attentions for a time. In spite of her relationship with M. Paul, Lucy asserts that she “kept a place for [Dr John]” (457) in her heart.

<sup>125</sup> In the play, having “a man’s name and part” (Brontë, 2008: 138), Lucy discovers parts of herself she had never explored and expressed before. She states that Dr John’s look at Ginevra “animated” her, and she “drew out of it a history” and “threw it into [her] wooing of Ginevra” (141). Furthermore, she admits that in that moment, her “longing was to eclipse... Dr. John” (141).

<sup>126</sup> Lucy herself tentatively locates Ginevra’s source of power here when she asks, “who gave you that power?... does it lie in all your beauty?” (Brontë, 2008[1853]: 148).

the mainspring of her motives” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 74). Lucy is attracted to both Ginevra and Madame Beck by virtue of her sympathy for their self-interest, her own desires going unfulfilled. Further, Madame Beck has what Lucy so desperately craves: agency and a life of meaning. It is her position in the pensionnat which defines Madame Beck, forming her identity and lending her life purpose. While Lucy’s quest is for just such an identity and purpose, the fact that Madame Beck — who most embodies these things — is presented in such a negative light, highlighting Brontë’s ambivalence on the matter. While paying work is presented as the key to self-determination in the novel (Newton, 1981), Brontë ultimately appears to condemn this in relation to women, ostensibly for being in direct conflict with patriarchal ideology, which she seems to uphold.

Lucy herself views Madame Beck with ambivalence. While describing her as “a very great and very capable woman” and saying that she “ought to have swayed a nation” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 74), Lucy also sees her as markedly manipulative and deceptive. She states of Madame Beck that “power of a particular kind strongly limned itself in all her traits”, and further that that “power was not [Lucy’s] kind of power: neither sympathy, nor congeniality, nor submission, were the emotions it awakened” (77—78). Lucy’s distinction between different kinds of power exhibits again Brontë’s sensitivity and great awareness of the complexities and nuances on this issue. Lucy states that Madame “did not wear a woman’s aspect, but rather a man’s” (77—78), and indeed, Madame Beck is presented as distinctly unwomanly and unfeminine at times. This is evident when Lucy speaks of how “she never seemed to know the wish to take her little children upon her lap... to shower on them softly the benignant caress, the loving word” (93). Such an attack goes to the very heart of Victorian notions of femininity: a mothering nature. Thus Madame Beck is presented as alien, and while still a woman, she is presented as an incomplete one, as she has made her work, and not her family, the focus of her life. She is presented in increasingly negative terms until by the end of the novel she is depicted as a heartless, materialistic monster of a woman (Newton, 1981). This final portrait of Madame Beck suggests that Brontë ultimately could not abandon patriarchal ideology as she could not approve of a woman who placed her own interests at the centre of her life.

Vashti,<sup>127</sup> too, serves as a foil for Lucy, illustrating the alienation a life lived outside of society’s rules and restrictions holds. Vashti is the embodiment of contradiction, serving as a symbol of both independence and suppression, of successful self-expression and self-destruction, as an

---

<sup>127</sup> Vashti’s very name is seditious. According to the Bible, Queen Vashti refused to display her beauty at her husband, King Ahasuerus’, command, who thereafter decreed that “every man should bear rule in his own house” (Shuttleworth, 1996: 238). Vashti is banished as the king’s advisers believe her example will inspire similar disobedience in other wives (Johnson, 1990). Vashti’s name and the story it recalls are significant for the inherent threat she symbolises in inspiring other women to similar insurrection.

inspiration and a warning for women who would seek her life of self-determination and social exile (Johnson, 1990). It is Vashti's great power which Lucy suggests results in her self-destruction. She is described as destroying herself in her own fire, rendering herself a mere "shadow" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257). In characterising her performance as indecent self-exposure (Johnson, 1990) — not only immoral, but "evil" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257) — Lucy reveals her own deep ambivalence on the issue. Through Vashti and the contempt she evokes from the audience, Lucy reveals the social unacceptability of free expression and passionate release for women. Such censure from society enslaves women to a far more insidious and extensive degree than legal restrictions (Gordon, 1994), and necessitates the self-repression Lucy displays. Thus Brontë justifies Lucy's paranoid guardedness. It is this ambivalence between free expression and self-preservative silence that *Villette* chronicles with such integrity and passion.

Even the figure of the nun serves as a foil for Lucy because both are confined to the convent school and both lead half-lives: the nun in death and Lucy in life (Crosby, 1984). When Lucy finally confronts the nun and strips away the clothes, she finds nothing there, highlighting the essential instability of identity and, in so doing, undermining patriarchal ideology through negating the stability of the socially-approved identities available to women.

That Lucy serves as a double for so many characters — and unites them by virtue of this fact — hints at the universality of identity constraints through patriarchal ideology. Lucy is the nun, Polly, Ginevra, and Madame Beck, as her divided self is projected onto these other characters. At the same time, Lucy is not the coquette Ginevra, the "male ersatz" Madame Beck, or the self-sacrificing "angel" Polly, as she cannot be defined and confined by types such as these which society makes available for women (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). However, she cannot transcend such stereotypes either, as is apparent from how she plays out each role in turn. Thus Lucy's attempt to create her own identity, to tell her own story, on her own terms, cannot be called a failure, yet she does not ultimately succeed either. Lucy is the only complex, fully-developed female character in the novel, and for this she pays the ultimate price, compared to Ginevra and Polly's happy endings. Indeed, Brontë suggests all women in society who do not choose self-repression pay such a price.

In *Jane Eyre*, the text splinters hysterically, enacting Jane's deepest desires which cannot be contained within conventional narrative frameworks. *Villette*, too, employs a similar strategy, and can be viewed as a manifestation of Lucy's unconscious fears and desires. The symbols and language of storms and shipwrecks, which both open and close the novel, and which infuse it throughout, further support such a reading (Flint, 2002). As with Jane, Lucy's inner turmoil is projected onto the

natural world, evident when “a thunderstorm broke”, and “the tempest took hold of [Lucy] with tyranny”, whereby she was “roughly roused and obliged to live”. This reflects Lucy’s longing for “something to fetch [her] out of [her] present existence, and lead [her] upwards and onwards” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 109). This theory is supported, too, by way of Miss Marchmont’s tale foreshadowing Lucy’s own.<sup>128</sup> The figure of the nun is also a fundamental aspect of the “psychological truth” of *Villette* (Peeck, 2004: 224). Through the character of the nun, Brontë is able to render truths in ways that would be out of place in Realist form (Peeck, 2004). For example, when Lucy first encounters the nun (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 245), while she could arguably have uncovered the truth of the apparition there and then, she chooses to believe in its supernatural associations (Peeck, 2004). This gives her pause and brings her to wonder if there are “wicked things, not human... evil influences haunting the air, and poisoning it for man” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 244). This kind of perception is closer to the psychological truth of the novel. If we accept that *Villette*, like *Jane Eyre*, is a hysterical text, then Madame Walvarens, who exemplifies the stereotypical witch, is Lucy’s most sinister and surreptitious avatar, enacting Lucy’s deep, unconscious will that M. Paul disappear (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Such a reading suggests that Lucy desires independence and self-determination over romantic companionship and the life of self-sacrifice society deems the only desirable life for a woman. Further, it suggests that Lucy herself has a hand in M. Paul’s untimely end.

### **M. Paul: Lucy’s liberator and captor**

M. Paul<sup>129</sup> exhibits the characteristic blend of masculine power and feminine sensitivity which forms the cornerstone of all Brontë’s heroes (Dolin, 2008). M. Paul’s unconventional appearance<sup>130</sup> and disagreeable temper<sup>131</sup> make him the perfect match for Lucy (Newton, 1981). He

---

<sup>128</sup> In describing the love of her sweetheart, Frank, Miss Marchmont calls it “such a love as honoured, protected, and elevated” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 40). Lucy similarly describes M. Paul’s love as “faithful and thoughtful... tender and true” (494). Miss Marchmont feels that “while [she] loved, and while [she] was loved, what an existence [she] enjoyed” (39). Lucy, in turn, refers to the years M. Paul was hers — even though he was abroad — as “the three happiest years of my life” (493). Furthermore, while Miss Marchmont was to enjoy “twelve months of bliss, to undergo thirty years of sorrow” (40), Lucy strongly hints at a similar lonely fate when she says of her readers, “let them picture union and a happy succeeding life” (496), intimating the fact that M. Paul did not return, and died at sea.

<sup>129</sup> M. Paul is commonly believed to be Brontë’s tribute to her “master”, the married teacher she is believed to have had romantic feelings for (Dolin, 2008: XV). *Villette*, in turn, has been described as “the last great *devoir* that Charlotte Brontë wrote for her teacher” and “the longest love-letter in English literature” (Gordon, 1994: 271).

<sup>130</sup> M. Paul is as unattractive as Lucy herself, exhibiting a “close-shorn, black head... broad, sallow brow... thin cheeks... [and] wide and quivering nostril” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 129).

<sup>131</sup> Lucy speaks of M. Paul as being not “easy to live with”, “apt to flash danger and discomfort round him” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 348).

proves himself to be Lucy's closest double, too, as he, like Lucy, "pass[es] days laborious and loveless, nights long and lonely", and is "monkish" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 404). He is the monk to Lucy's nun, and his ferocity matches her newly discovered inner fire. M. Paul declares himself to be the counterpart of Lucy's soul: "we are alike... do you observe that your forehead is shaped like mine — that your eyes are cut like mine? Do you hear that you have some of my tones of voice? Do you know that you have many of my looks?" (367). That it is Lucy who is described as having M. Paul's attributes suggests where the balance of power rests in his mind.

M. Paul is an overstated, patriarchal stereotype, the "school-autocrat" (153), constantly attempting to curb and form Lucy into his model woman, stating that she wants "much checking, regulating and keeping down" (363). M. Paul even goes as far as to have "vaguely threatened" Lucy "with, I know not what doom, if [she] ever trespassed the limits proper to [her] sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge" (351). M. Paul's incursion into Lucy's desk,<sup>132</sup> for example, is not simply an invasion of privacy, as he gives as much as he receives, leaving her pamphlets and books to inspire and "validate" her intellectuality (Boone, 1992: 34). Indeed, it is M. Paul's admiration and encouragement of Lucy's intellectualism and ability that distinguish their relationship<sup>133</sup> from her relationship with Dr. John (Boone, 1992). M. Paul's evident pleasure in Lucy's disagreements with his views further reveals his unorthodoxy (Gordon, 1994). As Lucy reasons, was she submissive, "his occupation would have been gone" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 363), as she would leave "him nothing to 'keep down'" (363). While M. Paul assists Lucy in achieving her goals, his instructions on that score — "you shall live here and have a school; you shall employ yourself while I am away; you shall think of me sometimes; you shall mind your health and happiness for my sake" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 487) — suggest the extent to which he intends to control her future and her very self. So Lucy compares M. Paul to Bonaparte<sup>134</sup> in his love of power (349), referring to him as a "harsh little man" and a "pitiless censor" (334).

M. Paul's efforts to attain supremacy over Lucy are obvious, and for this reason, they prove less effective, contributing to Lucy's trust in him and enabling them to develop a somewhat egalitarian relationship — despite the socially sanctioned power he possesses by virtue of his sex

---

<sup>132</sup> In describing M. Paul's violation of Lucy's desk, Brontë speaks of how he "was on intimate terms with [her] desk... the fact was not dubious, nor did he wish it to be so" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 343). In going on to describe how M. Paul's "olive hand held [Lucy's] desk open, his nose... lost to view amongst [her] papers" (342), Brontë subtly stresses the eroticism of the scene.

<sup>133</sup> In this way, Lucy becomes the "penetrator" of M. Paul (Boone, 1992: 34); as she states: "his mind was indeed my library... and whenever it was opened to me, I entered bliss" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 381).

<sup>134</sup> While M. Paul, like Madame, is unflatteringly compared to Napoleon, Boone argues that M. Paul personifies "a more legitimate" form of discipline: "the worthy judge" whose serves as an "[instrument] of moral efficacy" (Boone, 1992: 24).

(Newton, 1981). Lucy goes on to state that “he was a man not always to be submitted to. Sometimes it was needful to resist” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 350). This illustrates that the strength of her own will is a match for his. Indeed, she argues that M. Paul’s very attempts to suppress her elicit her rebellion, as “his injustice stirred in [her] ambitious wishes... imparted a strong stimulus” (351). However, M. Paul himself states that he desires similar regulation from her, requesting that she “tease and try her wayward brother till she has drilled him into what she wishes” (407). Further, the fact of M. Paul’s and Lucy’s national and religious differences denies him the traditional ideological foundation for his domination of her (Newton, 1981). Through recasting Lucy and Paul’s power struggle as a spiritual battle, with Lucy’s desire for independence being classified as a Protestant trait (Newton, 1981), Brontë reveals patriarchal ideology to be an empty vessel, employed to achieve the political agenda of women’s subjection. For example, given Brontë’s traditional association of religious and patriarchal authority — most evident in *Shirley* — Lucy’s statement that M. Paul “freely left me my pure faith” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 494) could be read as the latter giving Lucy significant freedom in their relationship. However, as with Rochester and Jane’s relationship at Thornfield, the equality between Lucy and M. Paul is essentially illusory. This is seen in how Lucy refers to M. Paul as “my professor” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 353). It is only away from his presence that she is able to realise her inner strength (Moglen, 1978).

In her silent sorrow at the end of the narrative, Lucy appears only half aware of the hazards to her fragile independence and sense of self which a life with M. Paul would have brought.<sup>135</sup> Brontë, however, was under no such delusions, understanding that marriage ultimately necessitated a sacrifice of self on the part of the wife. For Lucy to retain her independence and agency, she needs to remain single (Moglen, 1978). M. Paul must die as Lucy cannot be both an independent woman and a kept wife. Brontë thus arguably suggests that the two identities are mutually exclusive (Shaw, 1994). We see Brontë’s awareness of this when Lucy states: “I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 495). It is only in M. Paul’s absence — and presumed death — that Lucy can feel that he is more her own. In his presence, she would surely have been *his* own. Throughout *Villette*, one of the few forms of power available to Lucy has been the “power of denial” and the reader senses that when Lucy stops

---

<sup>135</sup> Deceptive as Lucy is towards her readers, there are times that she even deceives herself (Peeck, 2004). It is then that astute readers are privileged with the upper hand, perceiving the truth of the situation where Lucy cannot (Peeck, 2004). Such an instance occurs when Lucy, seeing M. Paul at the fete, assumes that he is leaving for Guadeloupe without saying goodbye — despite his many assurances of his love and faithfulness (Peeck, 2004). Here, Lucy’s inability to believe herself worthy of love leads her to misapprehend a situation her perceptive readers can understand clearly (Peeck, 2004). Further, her struggle to retain her vision in the face of her blind love for M. Paul is highlighted.

rejecting M. Paul, she loses that power and control (Rabinowitz, 1985: 252) — not only over him, but over herself as well. Unlike Brontë's other novels, which all succumb to traditional endings with their culmination in marriage, *Villette* asserts, with courage and respect, the nobility and usefulness of the single life (Flint, 2002), advocating a new form of solitude enriched by meaningful work (Rabinowitz, 1985). In the end, Lucy is able to enjoy both independence and dependence, self-denial and self-advancement (Newton, 1981), albeit at different stages of her life.

Unlike Lucy, Crimsworth is denied the realisation of a stable, satisfactory sense of self, which their respective tales relate. Crimsworth's narrative, *The Professor*, written before *Villette*, can be viewed as a precursor to the latter. Both novels concentrate on the character of a school teacher and the characters' struggles to come into their own. While *Villette*, like Brontë's other novels, focuses on the development of a heroine, *The Professor* is concerned with the development of a hero, Crimsworth. Through her hero, Brontë highlights the similarities between men and women based on their inner, spiritual self rather than their sexed bodies, which patriarchal ideology discriminates against.

## Chapter 4

### *The Professor: gender and sexuality*

In Brontë's first written and last published novel we find the seeds of the leitmotifs and concerns of all her later works. That is to say, the various characters, themes and literary devices which would characterise Brontë's novels were first explored in *The Professor*. Brontë's novels are undoubtedly dominated by similar narrative strategies, as is clear in the master and pupil relationship which formed the model for the relationships of Jane and Rochester, Shirley and Louis, and Lucy and Paul. Continuity in concerns is also clear, from the inner struggle between Reason and Feeling and the highly sexual nature of the power struggles between Brontë's heroes and heroines, to the sexual nature and power-driven elements of the "gaze", as well as the homo-erotic interaction between such character as Shirley and Caroline, and Crimsworth and Hunsden. Even the ambiguous aspects of Brontë's social commentary are first seen in this text. This is evident in the fraught gender identities which characterise all her heroes and heroines and Brontë's masking of patriarchal ideology and its norms and ideals with class and national considerations. We find in Crimsworth and Frances' reverence for England, their "Promised Land" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 272), a yearning after a society of values and ideals closer to their own than Brussels offers. Thus Brontë conflates ideology and nationalism. Similarly, Hunsden's claim that Crimsworth has "proved [his] disdain of social distinction by taking up with an ouvriere" (267) in his relationship with Frances, could be read as Hunsden's criticism of Crimsworth's attempt to deny his homosexual inclinations through this relationship. Here, Brontë conflates gender and patriarchal ideology with class concerns.

While Brontë penned *The Professor* first, it is the least well-known of her works. It was published posthumously after nine publishers rejected it during her lifetime (Cohen, 2003). Brontë's numerous efforts to publish the novel are proof of the value and merit she saw in the text, which is typically considered disagreeable and disturbing (Glen, 1989). In a letter to her publisher, Brontë states that she considers sections of it "as good as [she could] write", offering "more pith, more substance, more reality... than... *Jane Eyre*" (1996 [1847]: 574). However, in light of its reception by her publishers, Brontë came to realise that "its merit... will never be owned by anybody but [herself]" (2010 [1851]: 184).

*The Professor*, like Brontë's later works, examines the life of the dispossessed female in patriarchal society — which Crimsworth figuratively represents — and ostensibly gives voice to Brontë's own anger and frustration (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Through focusing on a male

character, disenfranchised by patriarchal power structures, Brontë highlights the plight of middle-class women in Victorian society who are similarly disadvantaged. In this way, Brontë attempts to make the plight of women more accessible to men, offering up the male Crimsworth as a gateway for empathy and awareness of issues affecting women. Thus, when challenging patriarchy's prizing of external economic and social signifiers over inner wealth of character, Brontë stresses not only the inequality of the status quo, but the likeness of men and women based on their inner, spiritual self as opposed to their sexed bodies, against which society discriminates.

In *The Professor*, Brontë offers us a critique of the popular, "masculine" genre of the "self-made" man's biography (Glen, 1989: 9—10), which exemplifies and reveres society's patriarchal ideologies. Brontë's employment of this genre as the vehicle for Crimsworth's tale illustrates her desire to test and critique society's ideologies and some of its most basic assumptions (Glen, 1989) on such topics as gender, ideology and individualism. Similarly, Brontë's employment of the male narrator serves as a way of examining the rationality and restrictions of the masculine, patriarchal world view (Glen, 1989). Crimsworth's account indeed offers a remarkably unsettling and disturbing view of patriarchal society (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Here, Brontë suggests that independence is illusory, and masculinity likewise. The prolific and consistent linguistic use of the negative throughout, as well as the routine denial and rejection demonstrated by characters, all serve to illustrate the strength of starved desire (Glen, 1989) — and the violence of this repression. Brontë presents a threateningly unstable society comprised of competitive, self-interested peoples, linked by nothing but violence (Glen, 1989). Crimsworth's class at Zoraide's is representative of society as a whole, where "each individual" is in "eager pursuit of their own interest," and demonstrates "a coarse indifference to the interest and convenience of everyone else" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 126). Crimsworth's pursuit of superiority over his fellows is driven by his own competitiveness and inferiority complex. He views the characters he encounters (including his female pupils, employers and few friends) as threats to his integrity and prosperity. This much is apparent in his antipathy towards his students, his brother and Zoraide, as well as Hunsden. In this way, Brontë presents society as a whole as hostile, destructive, and a hazard to one's inner self. The "mutual disgust" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 40), "determined enmity" (41), and "persevering hostility" (42) which characterise relationships and interaction in the novel points to an "irreparable breach" (42) in society that threatens the social order. Furthermore, individuals in general are presented as bodies of contending and combative repressed impulses (Glen, 1989). All the passionate energy of the novel is either stifled in the self or consumed in violent interaction with the "other". Frances's "eccentric vigour" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 262), Crimsworth's hypochondria, and Victor's "ominous

sparks" (289) all hint at the unstable, near-irrepressible nature of desire and emotion that plague all the characters (Glen, 1989).

Crimsworth's narration and perspective is distinctly coloured by his own character, emotions and interests (Maynard, 1987) and forms a primary point of interest in the novel. As Crimsworth's narration at times offers adequate objectivity concerning his society and the events as they unfold, the reader is able to distinguish between his "turbulent inner plot" and "the more objective story" conceived by the inferred writer (73). This is apparent, for example, when Crimsworth speaks of his pleasure in witnessing the effects of his cool attitude towards Zoraide. This is a pleasure that is quite obviously too strong for one who professes indifference towards her (Maynard, 1987). Crimsworth states that when Zoraide "held out her hand to [him] — [he] did not choose to see", and that when "she... greeted [him] with a charming smile — it fell on [his] heart like light on stone" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 142). That he then goes on to "[shoot] into her eyes, from [his] own, a look, where there was no respect, no love, no tenderness, no gallantry... nothing but scorn, hardihood, irony" (142) further illustrates this point. The fissure between the tale Crimsworth desires to tell and the one that can be heard between his words allows for a fascinating, in-depth study of his character, offering insights into his consciousness that are evidently inaccessible even to himself (Maynard, 1987). It is the fracture between Crimsworth's stated feelings and actions towards Zoraide, and what the reader infers are his true feelings, which illustrates Crimsworth's inability to fully understand and express his repressed desires (Maynard, 1987). While this disjuncture in Crimsworth's narration forms the principle interest of Brontë's novel, it has created interpretive issues for readers and critics who struggle to distinguish between Crimsworth's "interpretive authority" and Brontë's "shadowy" presence, manipulating and exposing him (Shuttleworth, 1996: 124). It can be argued that *The Professor* has been described as "minor, ill-conceived, and un compelling" (Cohen, 2003: 443) for this reason. As Crimsworth remains unaware of any perspective but his own, immediate experience, he cannot offer an integrated, holistic vision of his life and the events and characters he depicts (Moglen, 1978). Brontë leaves this up to the reader to piece together. Ironically, Crimsworth is preoccupied with the power of perception, despite being unaware of many of his own prejudices and blind spots. This preoccupation is apparent when Crimsworth "contented [himself] with an inward speculation on the differences which exist in the constitution of men's minds" in considering "what inference [Edward] drew from [his] silence" and whether Edward considered "it a symptom of contumacity or an evidence of [his] being cowed by his peremptory manner" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 44—45).

## Communication confounded

Crimsworth's letter, which opens *The Professor*, sets the tone for the narrative that follows. Here, readers' expectations are arrested as the familiarity typical of first person narration is checked from the beginning (Glen, 1989) by way of Crimsworth's hostile and defensive tone. Ironically, the jarring effect of this enables readers to empathise with Crimsworth as he describes his experiences of a society where personal interaction is fraught and threatening. Further — as letter writing is an indirect form of communication — this sets the tone for interaction and communication in the novel as a whole, where characters communicate indirectly and imperfectly, failing to sympathise with and understand each other's point of view. That the letter is ultimately rendered ineffective by virtue of the fact that its intended recipient does not receive it, speaks of the futility of social engagement and the essential solitary nature of the human condition. Similarly, the "gaze" is figured as a refusal of rather than a form of interaction and communication, serving as a distressing substitute for constructive communication (Glen, 1989). Miscommunication through words and looks abounds. This is evident in such scenes as when Crimsworth, "having perused the fair page of Mrs. Crimsworth's face", releases "a deep, involuntary sigh", signalling his "disappointment" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 46). That Mrs Crimsworth perceives it "as a homage to her beauty" along with "Edward, who was clearly proud of his rich and handsome young wife" (46), illustrates the pervasiveness of miscommunication. Here, as in Brontë's later novels, characters engage in various naked staring contests, attempting to breach the defences of the other, to see through them, and in so doing, to master them: ultimate power residing with the gazer who remains unreadable (Shaw, 1994). One such contest sees Crimsworth watch Zoraide "as keenly as she watched [him]", correctly perceiving that she "was feeling after [his] real character... hoping in the end to find some chink" so as to be "mistress of [his] nature" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 118).

Crimsworth is wary of being read by others and, by extension, known and ruled by them. His rigorous self-control and evasiveness are defences against this end. He asserts that he is "guarded by three faculties: Caution, Tact, Observation" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 63). For this reason, when Crimsworth suspects Mr. Steighton of "trying to read [his] character", he feels "as secure against his scrutiny as if [he] had had on a casque with the visor down" (53). Crimsworth goes on to speak of how he showed Steighton his "countenance with the confidence that one would show an unlearned man a letter written in Greek; he might see lines, and trace characters, but he could make nothing of them" for Crimsworth's "nature was not his nature, and its signs were to him like the words of an unknown tongue" (53). Even Edward's "prowling and prying... malignity... could never baffle the lynx-eyes of these, [his] natural sentinels" (63). Thus Crimsworth presents himself as superior to

those around him by virtue of his perceptive powers, which are, in turn, presented as the “true” source of power and strong character in comparison to society’s traditional power structures and ideals.

### **Identity: the inner and outer self**

During the nineteenth-century, various identity markers — such as signs of wealth, station and religion — came to signify an exterior identity which did not necessarily have any correlation with one’s inner, spiritual self and their deepest desires (Armstrong, 1987).<sup>136</sup> Victorian society believed that even one’s physical appearance conveyed station. Hunsden addresses this in stating that Crimsworth is “such a complete Seacombe in appearance, feature, language, almost manner, [he wonders] they should disown [him]” (82). So Hunsden highlights the once-strong connection between external appearance and inner being. When Crimsworth asserts that “they are not people with whom I could ever have had any sympathy” (82), he demonstrates new thinking on a disjuncture between external and internal identity. Thus Brontë challenges traditional aristocratic, patriarchal ideals and ideologies which define one based on gender and station. Crimsworth addresses this topic again when he says of Hunsden that he “discerned that there would be contrasts between his inward and outward man” (67). As individuality began to be conceived of as being divorced from external identity markers, so a new, modern kind of power of perception — indistinguishable from such knowledge — took hold (Armstrong, 1987).<sup>137</sup> This power could be considered the true “gaze”, the ability to see beyond external traits and trappings and divine the deep motivations and desires of the “other”. We see Crimsworth employing this powerful “gaze” when, in analysing Edward’s wife, he states that he “sought her eye” as he was “desirous to read there the intelligence which [he] could not discern in her face or hear in her conversation” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 46). He goes on to assert that he “by turns... saw vivacity, vanity, coquetry, look out through its irid, but... watched in vain for a glimpse of soul” (46).

---

<sup>136</sup> Brontë’s novels are characterised by just such a model of identity. We see this in how Jane’s unremarkable exterior hides an inner fire she can barely contain at times, one that sees her rise in wealth and status and find romantic fulfilment. Similarly, Lucy’s solitary, frosty figure belies a deep desire for emotional connection and passion, as well as a strong desire and ability to succeed. Likewise, Shirley’s trappings of wealth, privilege and power are ultimately powerless to gain her respect and equality in male society by virtue of her sex.

<sup>137</sup> It is just such a “gaze” as this that Brontë champions in *Villette*, where Lucy exhibits an “unerring penetration of instinct” to “[pierce] in its hiding place the last lurking thought of” the hearts of those around her (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 336). So, too, is Jane able to see through Rochester’s various disguises to the man beneath, and to see and love the man her “master” could be before fate disfigures his body and reconfigures his character. It is this true “gaze” that enables Caroline and Lucy to see what is wrong with their society, as it enables Brontë herself — even while such a “gaze” is powerless to imagine change and affect it.

In Brontë's novels, this power of perception is typically positioned in opposition to patriarchy's dominion and is used to challenge and subvert it. This is clear from Crimsworth's struggle with his elder brother. "As an animal" Crimsworth admits that Edward "excelled" him "far" (49). However, in Crimsworth's assertion that only should Edward "prove as paramount in mind as in as in person", then Crimsworth "must be a slave" (49),<sup>138</sup> we see how he gives greater weight to mental pre-eminence and supremacy of character over external factors such as physical and social superiority. As Crimsworth goes on to state, he was not "anything inferior to" Edward (63). When Hunsden instructs Crimsworth to "carry your intellect and refinement to market, and tell me... what price is bid for them" (70), we hear Brontë critique society for its favouring of external signifiers and traditional, patriarchal power structures over inner character and the power of intellect.

### **Crimsworth: affectation and insecurity**

Crimsworth's avowal of an unchanging and defiantly "superior" (39) persona characterises his narrative (Glen, 1989).<sup>139</sup> Crimsworth is a man of discipline, one who would "never take pleasure before business" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 90) and the "self-denying economy" (55) of this practice extends throughout his character, as he denies those parts of himself that do not conform to the social ideal. Crimsworth is a rebel: both against his natural self in his effort to conform, as well as "a rebel against circumstances" (48). Thus Brontë critiques society both for its promotion of repression and denial of self, as well as for its perpetuation of social inequalities, such as the "pebbles, inequalities, briars in [Crimsworth's] path" (87) to success.

Hunsden perceptively describes Crimsworth as "lazily mutinous", full of "gentlemanlike irony" and "patrician resentment", possessing "no power" (69). The multiplicity of contradictory characteristics and emotions Crimsworth experiences illustrates his divided, fraught self. While his landlady believes Crimsworth to be the epitome of "steadiness and quietness" (55), the novel suggests that the compulsive self-control and defensiveness required to present such an impression are drastic, violent and divisive within the self (Glen, 1989). Crimsworth speaks of "three — nay four — pictures" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 86) lining the four walls of his past. These serve less as referents of particular locations and occasions than as stages of personal growth for Crimsworth, who is at once eager and anxious to reveal himself to the "other", including the reader (Starzyk, 2003). Crimsworth — like the rest of Brontë's heroes and heroines — struggles to understand and express

---

<sup>138</sup> That Crimsworth equates inferiority with slavery illustrates the highly competitive nature of society, and the powerlessness of individuals which do not fall into its patriarchal power class.

<sup>139</sup> In the opening letter, Crimsworth asserts that he "felt [himself] superior to that check *then* as [he does] *now*" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 39). Brontë's use of italics highlights the invariable haughty nature of his character.

clearly the various images and impressions of self he is comprised of, resulting in his experiencing a fragmented, unstable sense of self which undermines his projection of an integrated personality (Starzyk, 2003). Crimsworth himself is not an anomaly, rather, *The Professor* suggests, his actions and outlook represent that of society at large (Glen, 1989). As the reader questions Crimsworth's integrity in light of his divisive self, so they question the merits of society's doctrine of patriarchal individualism (Glen, 1989) and the "self-made man". In this way, Brontë's criticism of patriarchal ideologies in the novel is subtle but pervasive.

Crimsworth is deeply distrustful of society as he believes that "human nature is perverse" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 81). Thus he "[shuts] out all intruders" (47), erecting a shield of "impenetrable indifference" for he believes it "better to be misunderstood now than repulsed hereafter" (55). The characteristic "injustice" and "bad feeling" (53) exhibited by his brother, Edward, the inexorable "cold disdain" (43) of his maternal uncles, and the "cold-blooded" (39) response of Charles — his friend and the initial intended ear for his tale — engender in Crimsworth a reluctance and understandable hesitancy to open himself up to others (Starzyk, 2003). Such reserve as Crimsworth's does not appear unreasonable given the disdain with which he is habitually received by society (Starzyk, 2003). So, too, the reader is able to sympathise with Crimsworth in his distrust of others, and in so doing, draw closer to a narrator that is unreliable and reclusive.

Crimsworth's vagueness and evasiveness serve as psychological and emotional defences against society's indifference and disdain, and the threat of being perceived and known by the "other" (Starzyk, 2003).<sup>140</sup> This attitude is understandable given the reception he has received from his family and school fellows. For this reason, too, Crimsworth is reluctant to reveal those close to him. We see this with Frances, of whom he admits that he has "left... no distinct picture" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 151), as well as Hunsden, of whom he asserts that his readers must be "content with the silhouette" (57). By degrees Crimsworth begins to abandon the indifference he has practised with such fidelity, which has allowed him to know others without being fully known himself, and thus exert a form of power over them. This he does out of necessity, for the promise of being known, accepted and loved by Frances. Crimsworth's marriage to Frances is evidence of his ultimate abandonment of his indifference, which serves as a defence against, and root cause of, his once socially crippling insecurity (Starzyk, 2003).<sup>141</sup>

---

<sup>140</sup> It is not insignificant that Frances and Hunsden are treated alike and with equal reserve by Crimsworth.

<sup>141</sup> This is further suggested by the fact that Crimsworth refrains from depicting the fourth and final painting that lines his memory, for by depicting life in art, one merely generates a shadow of the real, and ultimately defers engagement with life itself (Starzyk, 2003).

Crimsworth's chronic insecurity and inferiority complex have clear social roots. This is evident when, in coming across Hunsden at Edward's party, Crimsworth speaks of how he "began moving away... because Mr. Hunsden was a manufacturer and a millowner, and [he] was only a clerk, and [his] instinct propelled [him] from [his] superior" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 57). Further to the point, he states that he "had the conviction that [Hunsden] could only regard [him] as a poor-spirited slave" and therefore he "went about to shun his presence and eschew his conversation" (58). Crimsworth's presumption is confirmed when he says to Hunsden: "I thought you and everybody else looked upon me only in the light of a poor clerk"; to which he responds, "and so we do" (59). Perceiving that their "positions are unequal", and that Hunsden "has always seen [him] to disadvantage.... [and] always will" (72), given his superior attitude, Crimsworth schools himself that Hunsden "does not like [him]" and resolves that his "self-respect defies [him] to like [Hunsden]" in turn (72). Such defensive posturing and justification for it are illustrative of Crimsworth's attitude towards others and his philosophy of social interaction.

For Crimsworth, who feels shunned by society, self-reliance is not only essential to success — as society's self-help doctrine dictates — but key to his sense of self (Glen, 1989). According to the doctrine of self-help, self-sufficiency meant not only competence in terms of one's actions in the work place, but in terms of one's conduct in the world (Glen, 1989). Similarly, independence was not only financial, but signalled autonomy of self as well (Glen, 1989). Thus when destitute, Crimsworth feels a pang of "mortification" and "a strong desire to do more, earn more, be more" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 201). Crimsworth likes to consider himself a "self-made" man, priding himself on the fact that what he has, has been hard-earned.<sup>142</sup> This is evident in how he speaks of "the burden of Tynedale's patronage" in his offer of "the living of Seacombe" (40), and how he consistently and deliberately overlooks and refuses to acknowledge the instances of help Hunsden provides. This is clear, too, when Hunsden hands Crimsworth a letter of recommendation, assuring him that "with that in your pocket you will run no risk of finding yourself in a state of absolute destitution" (84). Crimsworth's "irrelevant answer" (85) to Hunsden's enquiry after his gratitude demonstrates his feigned ignorance. Thus Crimsworth overlooks all assistance he receives to the point that he convinces himself that he effected the change alone. Crimsworth's tale of the "self-made" man is undermined by Brontë's presentation of him: not as self-fashioned, but socially constructed, and not as independent and sovereign, but as integrally related to and dependent upon others (Glen, 1989). We see this when, upon arriving in Belgium, and "tast[ing] the delight of being

---

<sup>142</sup> Brontë, in her introduction to the novel, states that she wanted Crimsworth to "work his way through life as [she] had seen real living men work theirs" and "never get a shilling he had not earned" (2003 [1857]: 37).

without a master... duty issued her stern mandate: 'Go forth and seek another service'" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 90). Thus Crimsworth's dependent state and powerlessness are reinforced.

Similar to Crimsworth's assertions of self-help, his claims of mental and moral superiority over his fellows are undermined by his own narration. This is evident when Crimsworth throws into his voice "the compassionate tone of a superior being, who... deigns at length to bestow aid" on the helpless students (95). Crimsworth's routine mention that he is "short-sighted" (78) symbolically illustrates his prejudice and narrow-mindedness, which clouds his view of himself and others. It is ironic when Crimsworth says of Hunsden that he wondered "at the perversion into which prejudice had twisted his judgement of [his] character" (69) as, unbeknownst to him, this is in fact true of himself and his view of others. Indeed, Crimsworth's portraits of others reveal more about himself than his subjects, as he projects the less appealing traits of his character onto others (Starzyk, 2003). This is most notable in the portrait he paints of his students (Starzyk, 2003). Crimsworth accuses his female pupils of having no "modesty and propriety" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 127) in their conduct, and engaging in "bold, impudent flirtation... to answer the most ordinary glance from a masculine eye" (127). He goes as far as to label them "mentally depraved" and declare them to be full of "precious impurity" (127). However, the exaggerated degree of immorality Crimsworth assigns his pupils suggests that it is he himself who is struggling with impure thoughts. While he states that they talk to him "with their eyes", saying "very audacious and coquettish things" (147), the astute reader is aware that the sensuality is in the eye of the beholder. Crimsworth's assertion that he "can truly say that in [him] they never saw any other bearing than... an austere... just guardian" (147) seems a defence against the charge of impropriety he anticipates from readers.

### **Power: of self and society**

Status as measured by parity, subordination, and dominance is the key motivating factor of Crimsworth's life. To be sure, originally titled *The Master*, *The Professor* is preoccupied with issues of power (Shuttleworth, 1996) in various manifestations, including gender inequality, social status, economics, superiority of character and dominion over others. Crimsworth views all his interactions with others in light of a power struggle, marked by hostility.<sup>143</sup> This is most notable and noteworthy in Crimsworth's relationship with his brother, Edward, who serves as the embodiment of patriarchal power. The elder brother and heir, Edward's cruel and oppressive behaviour is ultimately rewarded by patriarchal society, which in turn is ruled by similarly despotic men (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

---

<sup>143</sup> This is clear, for instance, in how he describes his interaction with Zoraide as "a regular drawn battle" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 119).

Crimsworth's first significant struggle is with Edward, concerning whom he feels "an inward satisfaction that [he] had not, in the first moment of meeting, betrayed any warmth, any enthusiasm" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 44). This satisfaction in steeling himself from emotional vulnerability is necessitated by Edward's conduct, which is one "of a master who seizes a pretext to escape the bore of conversing with an underling" (49). That even such a traditionally intimate relationship as that between brothers is figured as a battle is indicative of how lonely Crimsworth feels, and how persecuted he is by the world at large. Edward himself states that he "shall excuse [Crimsworth] nothing on the plea of being [his] brother" (51), and goes as far as to refer to Crimsworth as a "servant" (73). Crimsworth, for his part, states that he "had long ceased to regard Mr. Crimsworth as [his] brother — he was a hard, grinding master... that was all" (63). Concerning Edward "assuming towards [him] the bearing of a proud, harsh master", Crimsworth asserts that "the fault is his" (53).

Indeed, all characters are presented as actual or possible enemies and freedom is consequently figured as a rejection of and independence from society (Lane, 2002). The novel is dominated by hostility, rejection, repulsion, and resistance (Glen, 1989). Even ostensibly affable interaction is presented in a combative light (Glen, 1989). This much is apparent between the newly-wed Edward and his wife, who "chid him, half playfully, half poutingly", before "Mr Crimsworth... checked her animated scolding with a kiss" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 45). Any act of goodwill that is recorded is presented as an abnormality, even a perversity, as in the various instances when Hunsden offers his assistance to Crimsworth, who suggests this is done to serve Hunsden's own ego more than anything else (Glen, 1989). In response to Hunsden's assistance, Crimsworth states that if he "expected any reward for his championship", he should "look for it in a better world, as he was not likely to meet it here" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 81), stressing the inherent selfishness and competitiveness of society. The Victorian ideal of a man "of character" was one who was determined and unaided (Rylance, 2002: 155). Such men, striving to "get on" likely saw themselves as "violently opposed" by society (Rylance, 2002: 155).<sup>144</sup> Brontë's message is that aggressive individualism and intolerance pit individuals against each other in society (Glen, 1989). Even every-day, mundane operations and social interactions are presented as problematic in this light (Glen, 1989), as is evident in Crimsworth's experiences working for his brother. Crimsworth speaks of how he "felt [his] occupation irksome", but that he "should long have borne with the nuisance" had "the antipathy which had sprung up between [himself] and [his] employer" not "excluded [him] from every glimpse of the sunshine of life" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 62). While such an

---

<sup>144</sup> Brontë explores this very theme further through the character of Robert Moore in *Shirley* (Rylance, 2002).

individualist as Crimsworth would reject society, he is indelibly bound to it (Glen, 1989). Thus Brontë depicts the deplorable state of the status quo as intractable.

Christopher Lane (2002) suggests that antipathy underscores all interaction in Brontë's works to the point where it is endemic to societies in her novels. Lane (2002) even goes as far as to assert that Brontë's heroes and heroines appear to be constituted by violence. However, it should be noted that this is more often the inwardly directed violence of repression than the naked, physical violence seen in *The Professor*. While Brontë's novels are marked by excessive hostility (Lane, 2002), *The Professor* itself is bound by violence (Glen, 1989).<sup>145</sup> In accusing Crimsworth of defaming him, Edward states, "I wish you were a dog! I'd set-to this minute, and never stir from the spot till I'd cut every strip of flesh from your bones with this whip" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 74). Such violent references as this are noteworthy for their unnecessary ferocity. That Edward goes on to "[flourish] his tool" so that "the end of the lash just touched [Crimsworth's] forehead" (74) reveals the ill-contained suspicion and anger harboured by individuals. That this is a condition of society at large is alluded to in the next line, where Edward speaks of how he was "insulted by the speaker opposed to [him] in the question under discussion" at "a public meeting in the Town-hall" (74). When accosted "by cant about monsters without natural affection, family despots, and such trash", Edward is further "met by a shout from the filthy mob" (74), displaying the deep dissatisfaction and barely-repressed anger in society at large.

### **Gender as power and performance**

Crimsworth's antipathy to society is a response to his circumstances. As the younger brother in a patriarchal society, never to benefit from the fortune and status of his father's estate,<sup>146</sup> Crimsworth's goal in life is superiority over others, as measured by the pre-eminence of his character, intuitive vision and social status. Brontë employs gender, too, as a sign signifying power (Moglen, 1978).<sup>147</sup> Crimsworth's powerlessness contributes greatly to his effeminacy and denies him the masculine attribute of mastery, his rightful inheritance in patriarchal society (Shuttleworth,

---

<sup>145</sup> This is most notable, too, in *Shirley*, where all social interaction is governed by violence (Lane, 2002). The fragmented structure of this novel reflects the divisions and antipathy that characterise society. Further, rather than accounting for the novel's conflicts, misanthropy exposes their illogical and insoluble nature (Lane, 2002). *Shirley* focuses on how misanthropy not only obstructs interaction, but serves as a pretext for it, as if engagement were employed to self-destructive ends (Lane, 2002).

<sup>146</sup> Edward, as the elder brother, is "possessor of the mill and business which was [their] father's" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 41), while Crimsworth has "no fortune, and no expectation of any" (40).

<sup>147</sup> Brontë does, however, illustrate through Jane, Shirley and Caroline's superior perceptiveness, for instance, that "feminine" powerlessness in society does not equate to inferiority.

1996). In his admission that he “longed for liberty” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 62), Crimsworth acknowledges his crippling sense of powerlessness and confinement.

By defying strict literary conventions that equated powerlessness with femininity and dominance with masculinity, Brontë undermines Victorian stereotypes and society’s essentialist gender ideologies (Cohen, 2003). This Brontë achieves through employing androgyny as a developmental stage (Moglen, 1978). The grey so beloved of Brontë’s heroines, for instance, serves as a meeting point between the traditionally masculine black working suit and the feminine white dress, signalling a conflation of genders in dress (Andrews, 2004) which becomes a political statement of inner rebellion.<sup>148</sup> It is often in such subtle and potentially ambiguous ways that Brontë indicates her criticism of patriarchy. The representation of gendered identities that Brontë offers in *The Professor*, as well as in her subsequent works, is not that of inherent stability and assured sexuality, but rather that of unsustainability, created and contained by stringent social coercion and violent self-repression (Shuttleworth, 1996).<sup>149</sup> This is clear in the consistency and urgency with which Crimsworth — along with all Brontë’s heroines — speaks of the necessity for stringent self-control and repression. Crimsworth’s approach to life can be summed-up in his statement: “I should have endured in silence... I should not have whispered, even inwardly, that I longed for liberty” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 62). This statement is echoed in turn by each of Brontë’s heroines.

Brontë’s treatment of gender foreshadows modern-day gender theorists. Candace West and Don Zimmermann (1987) argue that gender is an activity, a way of conducting one’s self within the context of shared, socially accepted, attitudes and models of behaviour for male and female sex categories and that one’s actions and interactions with others are viewed as either validating or undermining one’s claims of belonging to a particular sex. Brontë exhibits likeminded thinking in her treatment of gender and Crimsworth’s characterisation in *The Professor*. Butler (1988), too, refers to gender as a performance or as an undertaking on the part of each individual with social acceptance as its goal. Further, Butler (1988) argues that individuals establish social norms and gain experience through such things as language, gesticulations, and various symbolic sign systems and that gender is established through a formalized repetition of certain actions. Rather than a stable

---

<sup>148</sup> Bourdieu (1977) asserts that it is through the ostensibly immaterial minutiae of dress, deportment, demeanour and etiquette that the cultural status quo is maintained. In this way, individuals create and recreate culture and stereotypes (Bourdieu, 1977).

<sup>149</sup> The history of gender is said to be one and the same as the history of the popular novel, exerting enormous influence in establishing the norms, oppositions and stereotypes that rendered complex and ambiguous ideas concerning human identity into gendered types (Armstrong, 1987). However, Brontë’s works could be viewed as attempts to use the popular novel as a vehicle to disrupt the distribution of the misogynist norms and stereotypes other novels were propagating. Her texts can be regarded as attempts to disseminate new, empowering models and ideologies for women.

identity, Butler describes gender identities as tenuous and time-bound. Gender is a “constructed identity”, performed for the audience of society, who — along with the actors themselves — believes in the integrity of the act (Butler, 1988: 520). Constructivists such as West, Zimmerman and Butler, challenge the essentialist oppositions of gender propagated by patriarchal ideology, refuting its conception of gender as natural and right. Rather, social constructivism conceives of gender as a social act, continuously adapted and revised through conversation and social interaction (Cerulo, 1997). A century earlier, Brontë’s novels suggest just such a fluidity of gender by highlighting its performative nature.

Crimsworth reveals his awareness of the performative nature of gender when he speaks of how he “should have liked... to have the freedom and opportunity to show... that [he] was... an acting, thinking, sentient man” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 56—57). Karen Cerulo (1997) argues that treating scripted, gendered norms, values, and behaviours as natural and right encourages individuals to conform thereto and to don the socially-approved gender identity mask of their social type. Here, Crimsworth’s desire to act the part of a man appears to supersede his desire to find a suitable, heterosexual mate. This suggests that his desire to conform to the stereotypical identity model of masculinity is his primary motivating force as opposed to a natural desire to satisfy the urges and fulfill the actions that society decrees should accompany the male sex. Crimsworth goes on to state that in “justifying to [himself] and others the resolution [he] had taken to become a tradesman, [he] should have endured in silence the rust and cramp of [his] best faculties” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 62). Thus Crimsworth, having learnt the common traits of masculinity, proceeds to conform to them as far as he is able. In highlighting the performative nature of gender, Brontë undermines the integrity of masculine and feminine designations for sex categories.

By its very nature — being a conversation conducted in words and actions — the performance of gender requires an audience (West and Zimmerman, 1987). Consequently, the solitariness of Brontë’s characters can be read as both a cause and effect of their struggle to perfect these gender enactments. At the party, for instance, Crimsworth “was introduced to none of the band of young ladies” and as he “was fairly isolated”, he “could not but contemplate the shining ones from afar” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 56). His study of and evident yearning after “the shining ones” stresses the loneliness and degrading alienation of individuals who fail to personify society’s gender ideologies.

More significantly, however, is the feeling of failure and the identity crisis that accompanies one’s failure to acquire the necessary expertise of gender performance and conform to society’s

expectations (Butler, 1986). Crimsworth's bout of hypochondria illustrates his crisis concerning his masculinity, anticipated by the incongruities between his gender and sexuality, and society's norms.<sup>150</sup> That Crimsworth's insecurities concerning his masculinity and sexuality can plague him in this compelling manner and cause him physical harm, highlighting the threat that patriarchy's ideology and gender models pose to the self. Male sexuality in Victorian society was dominated by the doctrine of the need to pacify base, natural inclinations (Davidoff, 1979). Indeed, sexuality was viewed as potentially hazardous to society, threatening the rationality and self-control of the individual upon which society depends (Weber, 1968). To help tame man's natural, sexual instincts, middle-class women came to be viewed as "angels", bringing salvation and saving man from himself (Davidoff, 1979). This is the very role Crimsworth assigns Frances in the hopes that she will help him tame his natural appetites. Society viewed male sexual restraint as the epitome of self-control, a sign of true gentility in the middle-classes (Davidoff, 1979). It is just such a goal that Crimsworth aspires to. Crimsworth's hypochondriac episode also exemplifies Brontë's concerns with the conscious self and how one's mental well-being affects one physically.<sup>151</sup> This is clear when Crimsworth states that his "soul... had overstrained [his] body's comparative weakness" and he "was temporarily a prey to hypochondria" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 253).

Crimsworth's illness is precipitated by his sudden sexual awakening, as a result of his developing relationship with Frances (Maynard, 1987). The sexual desires he has so far repressed for the more attractive Zoraide and her school pupils are aroused by the homely and mild Frances, ostensibly because Crimsworth feels safe in her presence and begins to let his guard down. Hypochondria appears to Crimsworth in female form for this reason. Lawrence Starzyk (2003), too, locates Crimsworth's hypochondria in his abandonment of his carefully cultivated indifference to his budding relationship with Frances. However, he argues that in Crimsworth's hypochondriac episode, *The Professor* is less concerned with indulging sexual appetite and the loss of control than with the loss of self: the threat of making oneself vulnerable to another (Starzyk, 2003). Brontë links Crimsworth's insecurities over his identity and masculinity to the bond with his mother, which Victorians saw as a potentially emasculating influence (Moglen, 1978). This much is evident when

---

<sup>150</sup> While aware of the distinctions between gender and sexuality, I argue that Brontë presents Crimsworth as an ambiguous character in both respects. Certainly, *The Professor* is centrally concerned with Crimsworth's struggle to become a "man", which is complicated by his inferior economic and social status, his complex, homo-erotic relationship with Hunsden, and his numerous typically feminine characteristics, all of which undermine his masculinity and result in his sexuality being portrayed in an uncertain light.

<sup>151</sup> Clear parallels can be drawn here between Crimsworth's bout of hypochondria, Lucy's swoon, and Caroline's illness: each character struggles with disjunctions between their own natural inclinations and society's norms and ideals, and feel betrayed by their bodies which society employs as agents of repression. Their inner struggles and identity crises ultimately manifest physically and affect their health.

Crimsworth confesses: “my boyhood was lonely, parentless... a sorceress, finding me lost in vague mental wanderings... strong desires and slender hopes... lure[d] me to her” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 253). Here, Brontë’s treatment of Crimsworth’s case aligns her with the male medical establishment. Victorian medical opinion held that male hypochondriasis was directly linked to sexual neuroses (Shuttleworth, 1996) and Brontë reproduces this in Crimsworth’s case. This is apparent when he states that he “repulsed [hypochondria] as one would a dreaded and ghastly concubine”, and that he “was glad when the evil spirit departed” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 254). Brontë’s employment of contemporary medical opinion reveals her preoccupation with the clinical, dispassionate psychoanalysis of her characters. However, it also constrains her criticism of patriarchy by way of her employment of its gendered and prejudicial discourse.

Brontë’s disavowal of gender’s essentialism as theoretically unsound distances her from the majority of her peers. Indeed, the complex gendering of Brontë’s heroes and heroines could be considered the primary characteristic of her novels.<sup>152</sup> Brontë uses Crimsworth to highlight the arbitrariness of gender through stressing his androgynous qualities. While, on the one hand, Crimsworth conceives of himself in feminine terms,<sup>153</sup> on the other, he struggles to act and “feel” like a man. This highlights the arbitrary nature of gender as assigned by society to male and female bodies respectively, as well as the destructiveness of this act. Butler (1986) argues that by definition, gender is unnatural, and further, that the attachment of feminine gender to women’s bodies and masculine gender to men’s bodies is arbitrary. Consequently, the body can become the locus of other gender identities (Butler, 1986). As stereotypical masculinity does not come naturally to him, Crimsworth’s macho, his Byronic posturing is immediately evident as such (Moglen, 1978) and his feminine traits can be read as a more accurate reflection of his character. Crimsworth greatly desires acceptance and to be viewed by society as “normal”. However, sensing his difference, he states that he “must follow [his] own devices... till the day of [his] death; because [he] can neither comprehend, adopt, nor work out those of other people” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 83). He does not follow through with this stated aim, ultimately conforming outwardly as far as possible with his marriage, and attempting to bend his own mind to fit social designations and norms. This is

---

<sup>152</sup> Brontë exhibits an early awareness of recent-day theoretical postulations concerning gender and identity. This is evident in Lucy, who feels her inner self has a “painful union” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 165) with her body, sexed and subjected by society; as well as Shirley, who considers herself “something more” than a woman, having been given “a man’s name” and “a man’s position”, which she feels imbue her “with a touch of manhood” (2008 [1849]: 172).

<sup>153</sup> Crimsworth likens himself to a woman in stating that he “looked weary, solitary, kept down like some desolate tutor or governess” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 56).

most clear in his interaction with his son, Victor, his likeness, onto whom he projects his own insecurities.

### **Victor: like father, like son**

Crimsworth's adherence to society's gender ideology is most evident in his treatment of Victor (Flint, 2002),<sup>154</sup> whom he attempts to mould to fit society's model of masculinity. It is in these closing pages of the novel that Brontë emphasises plainly the forceful restraint required to retain a socially approved gender identity. Crimsworth's insistence that Victor "must soon go to Eton" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 288), the school he himself attended, while recalling how unhappy he himself was,<sup>155</sup> reveals his determination that his son should subscribe to society's patriarchal norms. Crimsworth believes that the social pressures of such an environment "will stir and reward [Victor] in time", bringing about a desire for "emulation" and engendering such "masculine" traits in Victor as a "thirst after knowledge" (288). This highlights the pervasiveness and power of these forces while stressing the artificiality of masculinity and its coercive nature, reflecting Crimsworth's own experience by way of his knowledge of these processes. Certainly, Crimsworth's attitude and conduct towards Victor reflects his own self-repression, and serves as an external expression of the violence of his inner self-restraint (Glen, 1989). From Crimsworth's social ostracism and self-alienation by virtue of his eccentricities, to Victor's similar disposition and experience, the cycle of antipathy and rejection seems certain to repeat itself. This is a consequence of society's reaction to deviation from its norms and ideals being denial and hostility rather than understanding and acceptance (Glen, 1989).

Crimsworth describes the "ominous sparks" in Victor's "temper" as "the leaven of the offending Adam", believing "that it should be, if not whipped out of him, at least [be] soundly disciplined" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 289). In comparing Victor's eccentricities to the original sin, Brontë highlights how pervasive and coercive patriarchal ideology and societal gender norms are, that a young boy need be curbed by violence and self-repression for him to be accepted as a man in society. Despite conceding that "to reason Victor is ever accessible" and that "by love Victor can be infallibly subjugated", Crimsworth asserts that these will not be "the weapons with which in future the world will meet [Victor's] violence... Oh, no!" (289). Crimsworth employs society's typical

---

<sup>154</sup> Victor's name is ironic as no character in the novel appears to ultimately "win" in life by achieving the fulfilment and inner peace that comes with a unified identity. That Victor, too, appears to struggle with his father's familiar fight between his inner desires and society's identity constructs highlights the fact that Brontë herself can offer no solutions to this quandary (Moglen, 1978).

<sup>155</sup> Crimsworth states that he suspects Victor's "first year or two will be utter wretchedness" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 288).

response, which is the kind of reception he himself received, ostensibly for Victor's betterment. However, when Victor's "sparks" appear "in the fierce revolt of feeling against disappointment, mischance, sudden sorrow, or supposed injustice... [Frances] folds him to her breast... then... reasons with him... then... looks at him with eyes of love" (289). Frances offers the kind of acceptance and empathy that Brontë presents as the more effective reaction — society's response appearing all the more problematic in the comparison. In Crimsworth's cry, "Oh, no!" we can hear the pain and bitterness engendered in individuals who feel alienated due to a failure to naturally and effortlessly conform to society's norms. That despite such feelings — and being a victim of the system himself — Crimsworth is bent on employing the same harmful practices suggests the impenetrability and durability of the status quo.

Hunsden's reference to Victor's "ominous sparks" as his "spirit", which he feels "should not be curbed" (289), places him in direct opposition to Crimsworth — and, by extension, society — and casts him as an agent provocateur. Hunsden is figured throughout as a threatening and dangerous character. This is evident from the beginning, in Crimsworth's visit to his home, when he remarks of Hunsden that "there was a tone of despotism in the urgency of the very reproaches by which, he aimed at goading the oppressed into rebellion against the oppressor" (69). Hunsden's presence at the close of the narrative can only be described as ubiquitous and sinister (Shuttleworth, 1996).

A symbolic reading of Crimsworth's execution of his son's beloved dog, Yorke (named for Hunsden, who gave it to Victor), suggests that the action serves as Crimsworth's attempt to purge Hunsden's influence over his son. Alternatively, it could be said to mirror the kind of severe action Crimsworth deems necessary to "discipline" his son into conformity. Victor's response to his father's killing of Yorke can be read, in turn, as a criticism of his father's intolerant, coercive approach to himself: "he might have been cured — you should have tried... you gave no time and now it is too late — he is dead" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 287). Victor's accusation that more might have been done in an effort to heal rather than harm, to restore with love rather than destroy because of intolerance, arguably serves as Brontë's condemnation of society's coercive practices.

Crimsworth's chronic fears that Frances and Hunsden will impinge on the development of his son's masculinity (Shuttleworth, 1996) are driven by the fact that Victor, like himself, displays little likeness to society's model of masculinity. This suggests the deep hurt that accompanies one's failure to conform in society, as well as the fragility of Crimsworth's own masculinity. This fragility is unmistakably present despite the fact of his marriage and his financial success — typical, external markers of traditional masculinity. Crimsworth's concern over what he depicts as an unnatural,

worrisome affinity between Hunsden and Victor mirrors his own complex and fraught relationship with the former. When Crimsworth speaks of how “Victor has a preference for Hunsden... considerably more potent... than any [he] ever entertained for that personage [him]self” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 289—290), we hear Crimsworth distancing himself from his connection to a man that was influential to him. In such ways as this, Crimsworth attempts to ignore the continued problematic nature of his own sexuality and gender identity. When he states that “Frances, too, regards it with a sort of unexpressed anxiety” and “while her son leans on Hunsden’s knee, or rests against his shoulder, she roves... like a dove guarding its young” (289—290), we see Crimsworth projecting his own deep concerns regarding their relationship onto his wife so as to further validate his concerns. Just as Hunsden serves as an unwholesome influence on Victor, undermining his development into the model man, so Hunsden influenced — and continues to sway — Crimsworth’s own efforts on this score. The viability of Crimsworth’s realisation of a socially-approved identity and sexuality plainly continues to be tested by Hunsden.

### **Hunsden: a hybrid**

Crimsworth describes Hunsden as “a talented, an original-minded man” (71—72), which suggests a respect for him. However, it is these very qualities which make him so threatening to Crimsworth. His intelligence and independence as a free-thinker make him a threat to the status quo he rejects. Hunsden refers to his family as “reformers born, radical reformers” (80), counting himself amongst them. Crimsworth sees in Hunsden “a resolution to arrogate to himself a freedom so unlimited, that it might often trench on the just liberty of his neighbours” (69), casting his rebellion in an ominous and threatening light by virtue of his incursion into the lives of others.

Indeed Hunsden knows no bounds and he is a true hybrid, blurring economic and class designations, as well as physiological and sexual characteristics. Crimsworth says of Hunsden that “[he] liked something strong, whether in man or woman; he liked whatever dared to clear conventional limits” (262). This again stresses Crimsworth’s unconventional, rebellious nature and hints at his homosexual desires.<sup>156</sup> Hunsden serves as a foil for Crimsworth, as an example of the “hybrid” he too may become. Crimsworth is indeed fascinated by and fixated with Hunsden’s sexual

---

<sup>156</sup> Freud viewed homosexuality as a natural phase of one’s development or “a fixation” with one type of sexual expression, whose inclinations are common to all (Maynard, 1987: 18). Kinsey, on the other hand, believed in a sliding scale of sexual partialities, ranging from principally homosexual to principally heterosexual (Maynard, 1987). While Brontë’s precise theories on this topic are unknown, her novels are obviously concerned with such issues. This is most apparent in *The Professor*. Through Crimsworth’s attraction to and fascination with Hunsden — and his courtship of and marriage to Frances — Brontë explores repressed desire, as well as the negative effects of such repression.

hybridism (Shuttleworth, 1996) and the affinity between the two reveals Crimsworth's own ambiguity here. Hunsden shares Crimsworth's insecurities. As Crimsworth notes, while "his general bearing intimated complete, sovereign satisfaction with himself", he showed "at times... a sudden and strong inward doubt of himself" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 61). Further, in saying of Hunsden that he "discerned that there would be contrasts between his inward and outward man; contentions, too" because he "suspected" that Hunsden's "soul had more of will and ambition than his body had of fibre and muscle" (67), Crimsworth might as well be speaking of himself. In Crimsworth's suspicion that "in these incompatibilities of the 'physique' with the 'morale,' lay the secret of [Hunsden's] fitful gloom", whose "athletic mind scowled scorn on its more fragile companion", (67) we see Crimsworth's frustration with the limits of his body and social position mirrored here. Hunsden is the counterpart to Crimsworth's soul: it is Hunsden who knows him best, who can pierce his defences, marvelling that Crimsworth should "suppose [himself]... a mystery" (68) to him. Crimsworth himself admits that Hunsden could "see right down into [his] heart" (82).

Such affinity is highlighted again during Crimsworth's visit to Hunsden's home, of which he says: "the neatness of the room suited my taste; I hate *irregular* and slovenly habits" (65) [emphasis added]. The choice of "irregular" here highlights the ambiguity of his statement, and stresses the sexual tension which characterises their interaction. The sexual tension is evident, too, when they meet at Edward's party, and Hunsden asks Crimsworth to "stay here awhile" as he has "not had a partner to-night" (58). From this, it is obvious that Hunsden has been watching Crimsworth and noting his distance from the women at the party. Despite declaring that he wants "to dance again" with the "fine girl sitting in the corner" (60), Crimsworth argues that Hunsden is "more desirous of making, than susceptible of receiving an impression" (61). This highlights once more the erotic power play between the two. Such ambiguity is clear again when Crimsworth states, "Hunsden suited me" (66). Similarly, he goes on to say of Hunsden's appearance that "as to his good looks, [he] should have liked to have a woman's opinion on that subject: it seemed to me that his face might produce the same effect on a lady that a very piquant and interesting, though scarcely pretty, female face would on a man" (67). In viewing Hunsden through a woman's eyes, considering the effects his appearance would have on the "fairer sex", Crimsworth positions himself in the feminine, hinting at his homosexual proclivities.<sup>157</sup> This becomes more obvious when he goes on to speak of Hunsden's "small, and even feminine... lineaments" (66) and of how his "expression... [wrought]

---

<sup>157</sup> While Maynard states that Hunsden appears to occupy an "almost... sexual role as a dominating male", he categorically states that this should not be misconstrued as "a homosexual relationship" (1987: 78). While Crimsworth and Hunsden may not be engaged in a physical relationship, I would argue that the nature of the interaction and feeling between the two is charged with sexual passion.

strange metamorphoses... giving him now the mien of a morose bull, and anon that of an arch and mischievous girl; more frequently, the two semblances were blent" (67). In describing his features as feminine and likening him first to a young woman, then to a male-female hybrid, Crimsworth employs his own homosexual inclinations in his depiction of Hunsden. Crimsworth goes on to articulate more explicitly his homo-erotic thoughts of Hunsden when, in thinking of "the honey of friendship" with him, he rebukes himself: "hollo... where are your thoughts tending?" (72). The presumed allusion to sexually impure thoughts of Hunsden on Crimsworth's part suggests the former's homosexual bent. His immediate self-rebuke for such actions and his assertion that he shall never find a suitable soul mate further highlight this: "leave the recollection of Hunsden... you dare to dream of congeniality, repose, union. Those three you will never meet in this world" (72).

Crimsworth's letter to his old, high-school friend, Charles — an attachment he has clearly not been able to overcome despite the distance of many miles and many years — further highlights Crimsworth's homosexual desires. This is evident in how Crimsworth issues a nervous, spontaneous refutation that he harbours romantic feelings for Charles, whose traits appear to be reflected in Hunsden (Shuttleworth, 1996). Crimsworth writes to Charles that he "certainly... never experienced anything of the Pylades and Orestes sentiment for [him]",<sup>158</sup> and that he believes that Charles was "equally free from all romantic regard to" himself (39). However, that he opens the line by stating, "what animal magnetism drew thee and me together I know not" (39), suggests the existence of a sexual attraction that he goes on to disavow in the next breath. Crimsworth goes on in a similar vein in the very next line, saying, "still... we walked and talked continually together... we understood each other", only to assert that Charles's "sardonic coldness did not move [him]" and that he "felt [himself] superior to that check *then* as... *now*" (39). Crimsworth's assertion of his unchangeable nature, and Brontë's emphasis of the terms past and present, suggest his continued homosexual desires.

Despite his emotional and sexually-charged attraction to Hunsden and Charles, Crimsworth displays a voyeuristic desire to spy on the female pupils through the "tantalizing" boards covering the window overlooking Zoraide's girls' school in the hopes of finding "some chink or crevice which [he] might enlarge, and so get a peep at the consecrated ground" (96). Here, Crimsworth displays a sexual, predatory gaze, which is further evident when he states how "pleasant" it would have been to "have watched the demoiselles" and "studied female character in a variety of phases", while he remained "sheltered from view by a modest muslin curtain" (96). Crimsworth's predatory voyeurism

---

<sup>158</sup> Orestes and Pylades were two male lovers in a popular Greek tragedy who, with a god as witness of their passion, "sailed through life together as though in one boat" (Baylis).

belies his stated rationale of studying female character, and the passion and urgency that underscore his words reveals his lack of self-awareness and understanding here (Maynard, 1987). Crimsworth's suspicion of and defensiveness towards the beauty and sensuality of the school girls in his charge suggests that it is a more powerful and threatening force over him than he acknowledges. This is clear from Crimsworth's description of the way in which Eulalie's "noble bust heaved", of how Hortense exhibited a "frolic mischief in her eye", and in how Caroline looked "sensual... the result left no uncertainty on the beholder's mind". He goes as far as to liken her to Lucrece de Borgia — a murderess who led a life of wantonness (114—115).

Crimsworth's sexuality is clearly complex in that, even after proposing to Frances, he and Hunsden still demonstrate a repressed passion for each other. This much is evident when he says to Hunsden that Frances's "sweetness made [him] careless of [Hunsden's] hot-house grapes" (257), positioning Frances and Hunsden as rivals for his affections. Further, that Crimsworth describes Frances as "more a woman to respect than to love" (259) highlights his ambiguous sexuality by suggesting that he respects her more than he loves her. To reiterate the point, upon proposing, Crimsworth reassures Frances that he will not "overpower with amorous epithets", or "worry with selfishly importunate caresses" (249), dampening expectations of verbal or physical acts of love. On Hunsden's part, when he initiates a conversation with Crimsworth on the street, he comments on how "instead of Rebecca on a camel's hump, with bracelets on her arms and a ring in her nose, Fate sends me only a counting-house clerk, in a grey tweed wrapper" (64). That he likens Crimsworth to a potential love interest, a "Rebecca", further suggests his homosexual feelings towards him. Later, when he asks Crimsworth "what business have you to be suited so well with a partner?" (267), this suggests not only his jealousy over Crimsworth's affections but also his criticism of Crimsworth for taking a wife when their interactions have always intimated that Crimsworth had no interest in one.

The palpable jealousy and antagonism characterising such conversations illustrate not only the fundamentally combative and hostile nature of social interaction, but the awkwardness involved in expressing such conventional desires. Physical expression of Hunsden and Crimsworth's feelings for each other is fraught and problematic. This is apparent when Hunsden "swayed [Crimsworth] to and fro", so Crimsworth, in turn, "grappled [Hunsden] round the waist" in a "dark" and "lonely" street, before the two had "a tug for it" and "rolled on the pavement" (267). Such violent actions are the only way in which Hunsden's jealous passion and Crimsworth's repressed desire can be made manifest. Indisputably, *The Professor* is characterised by an irregular, aggressive sexuality (Glen, 1989).

Constricted, vulnerable, uppity, strong-willed and antagonistically defensive (Moglen, 1978), Crimsworth, Hunsden and Frances serve as partial foils for each other. That these two men also serve as doubles for a woman, and visa-versa, illustrates the inherent instability of their gender identity and, by extension, the problematic nature of such gender categories in society. Brontë highlights the many similarities between Frances and Crimsworth: both are orphaned idealists, Protestants in a Catholic country, who seek success on their own terms. As Frances states: “I have no associations in this house, I am isolated; I am, too, a heretic, which deprives me of influence” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 172). Even Hunsden, who could be considered Crimsworth’s soul mate, in his jealousy, describes Frances to Crimsworth as “your counterpart... the female of your kind” (255).

### **Frances: wife, mother, dissident**

Crimsworth’s aforementioned figurative short-sightedness results in his idealising Frances during their courtship. Crimsworth reveals as much in referring to Frances as “my ideal of the shrine in which to seal my stores of love; personification of discretion and forethought, of diligence and perseverance, and self-control” (195—196). In idealising her, Crimsworth denies Frances her sexuality, confining her, in his mind, to the traditional, patriarchal model of “angel in the house”, and in dominating her, Crimsworth denies Frances her identity and independence (Moglen, 1978). Rather than out of respect or attraction for her person, Crimsworth appears to desire Frances precisely for the degree of worship and obedience he believes he will receive from her in marriage. This is apparent when he states that “such a correspondence of heart with heart; over whose expression [he] had such influence; where [he] could... infuse awe”, elicited a desire “to win and possess” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 215). Crimsworth even goes as far as to represent Frances as his inferior, stating that Frances said to him she believes he is “very good, and very superior”, and that she “should be glad to live with” him (249).

Crimsworth comes to understand that Frances is a more complex and contradictory character than he previously realised. Frances shares many pre-feminist traits exhibited by Brontë’s other heroines. This is seen, for instance, in her desire for autonomy and work after marriage (Moglen, 1978), as is articulated when Frances insists that she and Crimsworth “shall have both the same profession... and [her] efforts to get on will be as unrestrained as [his]” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 250). Going further, Frances exclaims: “think of my marrying you to be kept by you, monsieur! I could not do it” (251). She asserts that she “should get depressed and sullen” just “lingering at home, unemployed and solitary” and that Crimsworth “would soon tire of” (251) her as a result. In declaring that she should “like an active life better” (251), Brontë distances Frances from patriarchal

stereotypes of womanhood which stress women's passivity, and in stating that she "must act in some way... act with" Crimsworth (251), Brontë undermines the ideology of "separate spheres" by asserting equality between the sexes. Frances further reveals her independence and her rejection of society's patriarchal norms when, on being asked what she would have done if she had married a tyrant, she states that she "should have tried to endure the evil... for a while; and when [she] found it intolerable and incurable, [she] should have left [her] torturer" (278), for "though torture be the price of resistance, torture must be dared" as "freedom is indispensable" (279).

### **A new model of womanhood**

In the course of the novel, Crimsworth evaluates and passes judgement on various stereotypes of womanhood. Along with Crimsworth's appraisal of his female students, this is evident in his description of Mrs Crimsworth. Mrs Crimsworth is dismissed by Crimsworth as "childish" (46). Further to that, Crimsworth says that "there was more than girlish — a somewhat infantine expression in her... features" (46). He goes on to comment that Mrs Crimsworth's "lisp and expression were... a charm in Edward's eyes, and would be so to those: of most men, but they were not to [his]" (46). Crimsworth distinguishes himself from his peers here in an attempt to present himself as superior to the average man who would be swayed by a woman's beauty.

In *The Professor*, Brontë endeavours, as in her other works, to explore and re-define socially accepted norms and ideals of womanhood (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). We see this in Crimsworth's search for an intelligent and unconventionally beautiful wife, a true help-meet (Foster, 1985). So Crimsworth states: "the idea of marrying doll or a fool was always abhorrent to me... a half idiot clasped in my arms... to remember that I had made of this my equal... incapable of understanding what I said, of appreciating what I thought" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 137). Similarly, he avows that he is "no Oriental; white necks, carmine lips and cheeks, clusters of bright curls, do not suffice for [him] without that Promethean spark which will live after the roses and lilies are faded" (46). Crimsworth asserts that he requires a partner with strength of character and intellect to complement his own. Thus he affirms the merits of "intellect" over beauty (46), declaring that "Frances's mental points had been the first to interest" (252) him. However, Crimsworth comes to confess himself as much a "sensualist in [his] temperate and fastidious way" as the next man (251). He admits that he "began to suspect that it was only [his] tastes which were unique, not [his] power of discovering and appreciating the superiority of moral worth over physical charms" (251). He further confesses that he "derived a pleasure, purely material, from contemplating the clearness of [Frances's] brown eyes, the fairness of her fine skin... the proportion of her delicate form", and that he "could ill have

dispensed with” that pleasure (252). Thus Brontë stresses the pervasiveness of patriarchal norms and values, even amongst those who do not consider themselves conformists, through Crimsworth’s reverence of “physical charms” over “moral worth”.

Crimsworth goes on to prove himself a traditional patriarch in terms of the many misogynist views on women he evinces. This antipathy for women is first made distinctly clear when he refers to the woman who tends his lodgings as “that slut of a servant” (63). Later, in his position as tutor in a girls’ school, Crimsworth reveals his adherence to the patriarchal stereotyping of women as “angels” and sexual deviants. When first considering the prospect of teaching at a girls’ school, Crimsworth speaks of how he “shall gaze both on the angels and their Eden” (105). His perception on this score is underlined when he goes on to refer to “their dark nun-like robes and softly braided hair”, calling them “half-angels” (114). However, this illusion is shattered upon meeting the girls, at which time Crimsworth adopts the opposing stereotype, perceiving the young women as highly sexual beings whose wonton flirtations with him need to be controlled. He refers to Eulalie, for instance, as a “Low-Country Madonna” and to Caroline as “a hot-blooded Maroon [slave]” (114–115). His employment of such common misogynist stereotyping betrays his prejudiced, misogynist outlook. The implication is that Crimsworth employs such stereotypes partly as a result of feeling threatened by female beauty and power. In this way, Crimsworth’s adherence to patriarchal ideology forms Brontë’s criticism of such philosophies. This reading is supported by how Crimsworth goes on to speak of how women belong to a mentally inferior, servile class to men (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984): “their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 97). Through adopting such views, Crimsworth is able to elevate himself in his own mind above the women he encounters, whom he finds threatening. Further, when Crimsworth states that he was “amused with the sort of business talent [Zoraide] displayed” (109), the implications is that he is in fact overawed by her skill and acumen, and feels threatened.

### **A new model for marriage**

Along with a new model of womanhood, Brontë’s attempt to introduce a new model for marriage is similarly undermined. Through Crimsworth and Frances’s marriage, Brontë attempts to critique conventional expectations of marriage (Gordon, 1994). Further, she advocates a model which acknowledges the every-day challenges of life and the natural differences between two people, and which does not demand that women sacrifice their independence at the marriage altar. Crimsworth’s recognition of Frances’ need for independence and the kind of work that gives her life purpose goes a long way to achieving this goal. He understands that “duties she must have to fill,

and important duties; work to do — and exciting, absorbing, profitable work”, for “strong faculties stirred in her frame, and they demanded full nourishment” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 273). That Crimsworth “delighted in offering them sustenance” (273) distinguishes him from typical patriarchs and makes him an appropriate help-meet for Frances. That being said, Brontë fails to envision this new model of marriage thoroughly. While women’s work and marriage co-exist here, this is only possible because of Frances’s nightly transformations from working woman to “angel in the house” (Gordon: 1994). Frances vacillates between the roles and accompanying identities of authoritative school mistress and docile wife. That Frances leads a double-life in marriage, effectively acting as two different women at home and in the work place plainly illustrates the impossibility of the Victorian ideal. So Crimsworth states, “in the daytime [his] house and establishment were conducted by Madame the directress” (274) while “at six o’clock p.m... Frances Henri... was magically restored to [his] arms” (276). While Brontë allows Crimsworth to ostensibly rise above his effeminacy, and achieve a socially acceptable masculine identity (however unstable), by virtue of her sex, Frances is unable to escape social repression. As a woman, Frances’s powerlessness is presented as inevitable. She remains the confined wife, acting out fruitlessly on occasion when the claustrophobia becomes unbearable. Thus gender, while presented as a destructive social construct, also simultaneously serves as a symbol denoting power, which is further presented as immutable. Frances’s discomfort in these roles is clear from the way in which she acts out in the manner of a disobedient pupil at times (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984), obviously frustrated by feelings of confinement in set social roles. This is most clear after their marriage, when Crimsworth describes how Frances “would vex, tease, pique [him] sometimes... with a wild and witty wickedness that made a perfect white demon of her while it lasted” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 276).

Frances’s complexity of character — and Crimsworth’s limited understanding of her — results in the failure of their marriage to achieve the elusive ideals of egalitarianism, and mutual sympathy and profit, because characters are stuck in fixed postures (Moglen, 1978), unreadable to the other. This essential lack of compassion and understanding is nowhere more evident than on the very day of their wedding, when Crimsworth describes how Frances “was, or had been crying” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 269). When he questions Frances on the matter, she replies that “it was impossible to help it”, walking with him “like one who was eager to get some formidable piece of business over” (269). That Crimsworth presses the point no further, illustrates the fundamental want of understanding between the two. This prelude to their marriage suggests disjunctions between the image of the predominantly happy, worshipful wife Crimsworth attempts to convey and Frances’s true character and experience. Crimsworth confesses that “in one sense she was

become another woman” in that “so different was she under different circumstances, [he] seemed to possess two wives” (273—274). Crimsworth asserts that while “the faculties of [Frances’s] nature, already disclosed when [he] married her, remained fresh and fair... other faculties shot up strong, and quite altered the external character of the plant” (273—274). At other times, Crimsworth describes Frances as being as “docile as a well-trained child”, “a curious mixture of tractability and firmness” (271), drawing attention to her divided nature. Then again, Frances may well enjoy a more integrated personality than Crimsworth portrays, bearing in mind that Crimsworth’s world view and perception of people and events forms Brontë’s primary concern in the novel as she seeks to explore and illuminate issues surrounding identity, gender and ideology. It could be argued that the only way that Crimsworth can understand and relate to his wife is to conceive of her as having two separate identities and personalities: the obedient wife and mother, and the successful and assertive school mistress (Flint, 2002). As narrator, wielding supreme power, Crimsworth’s representation of his wife is all that is available to us. Frances is thus doomed to remain nothing more than “the other side” of Crimsworth’s experience, defined by him (Moglen, 1978: 97). Thus Brontë highlights the inherent powerlessness of women in fiction, who are not in control of their own identities, who have no voice or channel of their own through which they are able to speak out.

The insinuation of divisive repression and barely-repressed rebellion on Frances’s part is coloured by the undercurrent of affectionate antipathy that characterises their relationship (Glen, 1989), as it does all others in the novel. This is much is clear in how Frances loves Crimsworth “too absolutely to fear him much” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 276). As fear and repression ultimately breed resentment and rebellion, this line sets an ominous tone for their relationship. Even Crimsworth’s proposal to Frances is characterised by scarcely repressed violence (Glen, 1989). Crimsworth describes Frances as being “as stirless in her happiness as a mouse in its terror”, and he speaks of how his “arm... still detained her”, and was “gentle enough, so long as no opposition tightened it” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 249) during his proposal. Furthermore, his proposal is not a moment of unity, companionableness and mutual understanding, but one which underscores the essential separateness of each individual (Glen, 1989): “she and I were silent... Frances’s thoughts... I know not, nor did I attempt to guess them: I was occupied not in searching her countenance, nor in otherwise troubling her composure” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 249). Indeed, rather than the selflessness of Biblical love, Crimsworth displays great self-indulgence at this significant moment in his relationship, speaking of how his “heart was measuring its own contentment” (249).

The power play between Crimsworth and Frances is no less erotic for being marked by an undercurrent of violence. Crimsworth speaks of how he administered “many a punishment... for [Frances’s] wilfulness”, but that he feared “the choice of chastisement must have been injudicious” as “it seemed to encourage its renewal” (276). This suggests the pleasure Frances gained through her disobedience and punishment. For his part, Crimsworth confesses that her resistance “thrilled [him] as nothing had ever done, and made [him], in a fashion (though happily she did not know it), her subject, if not her slave” (204). Whilst such interaction suggests a mutually satisfying and erotic relationship, Frances nonetheless appears to remain childlike in Crimsworth’s estimation, even as she tests his authority. This is further evident from how Crimsworth treats her “like a child and a novice”, forcing her to “acknowledge [him] as her senior and director” (277).

Ultimately, Brontë’s attempt to create a new model for marriage falters. Frances’ subjection in marriage paves the way for Crimsworth’s achievement of the traditional Victorian model of manhood (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984). Frances lends greater credibility to Crimsworth’s presentation of himself as a typical, heterosexual man to society at large. However, she does not resolve the inherent instability of his gender identity and sexuality as she, too, is an inherently divided character. Furthermore, Crimsworth’s support for Frances’s working life does not result in real independence for her. The inherent variability of Frances’ character and her attempts to elude Crimsworth’s control illustrate the limited power of patriarchal authority and the illusory nature of its ideologies concerning women. So Crimsworth exclaims of Frances in frustration: “vain idea! no sooner had I grasped hand... than the elf was gone” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 277). Crimsworth’s reference to Frances as an elf underscores his essential lack of understanding of her nature. That he goes on to speak of having “seized a mere vexing fairy, and found a submissive and supplicating little mortal woman in [his] arms” (277) further illustrates this point.

*The Professor* offers Brontë’s strongest criticism of patriarchal, misogynist attitudes through her implicit criticism of her narrator, Crimsworth. Her subtle critique of Crimsworth’s worldview draws attention to the disjunction between his perception and reality, thus undermining the patriarchal ideologies to which he subscribes. However, the subtlety of her implied criticism and the novelty of this narrative technique<sup>159</sup> have confounded many critics and readers, so rendering this an abortive exercise. Through Crimsworth, Brontë explores the formation and practice of masculinity and the patriarchal world view, offering a damning appraisal of patriarchy’s founding precepts and the great cost exerted on the individual, as well as on society at large. *The Professor’s* psychological

---

<sup>159</sup> So, too, Brontë’s implied criticism of Louis’s narration in *Shirley* has caused consternation for readers and critics.

depiction remains desolate throughout, culminating in the ominous and ambiguous tone of its conclusion: while Crimsworth is rewarded with domestic and economic success, his lingering vigilance and guardedness remains, albeit to a less intense degree (Rylance, 2002). Thus Brontë suggests that there is no resolution or escape from patriarchal ideology's pervasive and nefarious reach. The piecemeal depictions of anxiety and aggression that characterise *The Professor's* final chapter give clear articulation to the threat and unease that characterise the novel as a whole (Glen, 1989). It is this anxiety and aggression that Brontë suggests dominate patriarchal society. Crimsworth's unshakable insecurity, evident in his persistent watchfulness and suspicion of others, is a hallmark of Brontë's subsequent heroines and a reaction to the threatening societies they dwell on the outskirts of. Such insecurity is a hallmark of the human condition, and Brontë's great skill in reflecting and exploring this theme is attested to by the longevity and broad admiration of her novels.

## Conclusion

Lewes states that Brontë's novels have a singular "passion" and "power" and that she alone possesses "the passionate heart to feel, and the powerful brain to give feeling shape" (1974 [1853]: 184). Despite their at times ambivalent message, I believe that it is the passion in Brontë's words that ensures their prominence and longevity, both in the literary canon and in the popular imagination. Brontë's novels resonate with readers on a level deeper than reason, winning their acceptance of her depiction of the inner life and consciousness of her characters (Dooley, 1920) which validates their emotions and sentiments. Gilbert Chesterton (2010) describes this quality of Brontë's work best when he says of *Jane Eyre* that "for if it is not true to manners, which are constantly false, or to facts, which are almost always false, it is true to the only existing thing which is true, emotion, the irreducible minimum, the indestructible germ". He goes as far as to assert that "*Jane Eyre* is perhaps the truest book that was ever written", stating that "its essential truth to life sometimes makes one catch one's breath". Indeed, it is the raw honesty of Brontë's characters which is so remarkable. So Lewes, too, states: "reality — deep, significant reality — is that great characteristic of [*Jane Eyre*]... it is soul speaking to soul" (1974 [1847]: 84) and Margaret Sweat declares that "certain passages in *Villette* rise to a height of sublimity or reach a depth of pathos which moves the very soul" (1974 [1857]: 383).

Brontë's work offers a comprehensive expression of the private experiences of her characters (Maynard, 1987). Her relentlessly honest consideration and portrayal of the most intimate thoughts, motivations and desires of her heroines, in particular, is singular in the English literary cannon (Dooley, 1920). Certainly she depicts best the most intimate world of women, their struggles and desires, while voicing outrage at women's limited agency and scope (Taylor, 1979). Such novel and relentless honesty and intimacy concerning women's lot sets Brontë's novels apart, and contributes greatly to her criticism of the patriarchal status quo.

### Perils of autobiography

Brontë's biographers and literary critics are prone to engage in biographical readings of her novels (Taylor, 1979). I feel that this is most obviously the case with *Shirley*, during the writing of which three of Brontë's siblings passed away. Certain characterisations and changes of tone in the novel are often traced back to these deaths in critical engagements with the text. For instance, Janet Gezari (2007) believes that *Shirley* reflects Brontë's yearning after a previous era that is related to her state of mourning. Brontë herself admitted in a letter, quoted in Elizabeth Gaskell's biography, that a "great part of [*Shirley*] was written under the shadow of impending calamity; and

the last volume... was composed in the eager, restless endeavour to combat mental sufferings” (2010 [1850]: 175). Frances’s poem in *The Professor*, too, illustrates this point. Lyndall Gordon (1994) argues that Brontë’s love for Heger infuses this love song.<sup>160</sup> I believe that echoes of Brontë’s relationship with Heger can be found in all her novels. This is clear from how Jane calls Rochester “my dear master” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 263) and Shirley refers to Louis as “my master” (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 521), while Lucy calls M. Paul “my professor” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 353), and Frances refers to Crimsworth as “monsieur” (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 251). However, despite the fact that M. Paul is Brontë’s nearest likeness of Heger, in this novel, as in the rest of Brontë’s works, he remains firmly a literary hero and not a true-to-life portrait of the man. So, too, Harriet Martineau asserts, *Jane Eyre’s* Helen “is — not precisely [Brontë’s] eldest sister... but more like her than any other person. She is that sister ‘with a difference’” (1974 [1855]: 302).

Overly biographical readings remove the reader’s focus from the novels and they risk missing what Brontë is trying to say in looking at what she is not saying. In this way, too, the hazards of subsuming the heroine within the female author herself are revealed. As John Skelton states, “no explanation can ever be quite exhaustive. The experience can never entirely explain the work” (1974 [1857]: 332). While none of her novels is overtly autobiographical in that it offers an exact likeness of the trials and persons of Brontë’s life, each is undoubtedly influenced by and born out of her own experiences (Dooley, 1920). For instance, while the character of Dr John was drawn from her publisher, George Smith — as he admitted in his memoir of Brontë, adding that Brontë herself confessed as much — the process of transmuting George Smith into Dr John renders him less a portrait of the man himself than a universal type (Gordon, 1994).<sup>161</sup> For this reason, it is essential to distinguish between the surface-level plots and characters of Brontë’s novels, and the universal truths that she is attempting to depict, the latter being the locus of the autobiographical attributes of her works. As Lewes comments of *Villette*, “the naked facts and circumstances” of Brontë’s life are less noteworthy than “the actual suffering and experience” that lends this novel (1974 [1847]: 84) — as well as Brontë’s others — its astonishing force of passion and imminence.

That Brontë’s novels present a “spiritual autobiography” of her personal life (Dooley, 1920: 259) is most obvious in how her life and literature offer a clear sense of the fraught conflict between

---

<sup>160</sup> This is supported by references to “Master” and “pupil”, their fraught love, and their parting (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 243—246).

<sup>161</sup> That Brontë’s life significantly informed her art is evident in how her feelings for her publisher, Smith, brought her, during her writing of *Villette’s* second volume, to send scripts with words crossed out, and whole paragraphs and pages removed, with bits of blank paper pasted to the back to further conceal her editing (Gordon, 1994). This curious creative process, indubitably intended to gain Smith’s attention, offers an interesting insight into how Brontë’s personal life formed part of her work (Gordon, 1994).

the need to feel and subdue love (Maynard, 1987). Gaskell (2005 [1857]) states that Brontë was ever fearful of loving too well and thus tiring the objects of her affections, and that it was for this reason that Brontë sought to restrain her feelings and was ever wary of relationships. In the same vein, Brontë's novels are preoccupied with the threat posed by opening one's self up to the "other".<sup>162</sup> Similarly, her novels exhibit a reluctance — even fear — of revealing how one's true self deviates from society's ideals. Brontë's own fears in this regard are apparent in a letter she penned to Nussey: "if you knew... the fiery imagination that at times eats me up, and makes me feel society, as it is, wretchedly insipid, you would pity and I dare say despise me" (1996 [1836]: 144). In this way, the power and passion in Brontë's novels can be credited to how her own emotional struggles are reflected in her work (Dooley, 1920), reproducing the battle between her desires, and her desire to live up to society's ideals.

Literature modifies life through the act of mediation, converting one's view of reality into something altogether different from personal experience (Taylor, 1979). Through her novels, Brontë does not merely speak of her experiences but gives form to her view of life (Taylor, 1979). Brontë's novels are replete with observations on patriarchy, power, identity and gender that seemingly voice her worldview.<sup>163</sup> The novel offers a safe place, a fictional cloak, where the self can be explored (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). However, it was untrodden territory for Victorian women, who could not employ the traditional forms of self-presentation used by male writers (Parkin-Gounelas, 1991). Brontë met the challenge of depicting empowered women in fiction by creating female quest characters, along the lines of their established male counterparts and portraying their self-development, their struggles and their desire for sovereignty and power (Newton, 1981). It is this that contributes in great measure to the novelty and subversive nature of her work.

For female authors, writing required a transcendence of Victorian femininity, the latter being a vocation in and of itself, incompatible with that of writing (Showalter, 1977). Feeling demeaned by male critics' typically condescending responses to their work, and eager not to be treated with kid gloves by virtue of their sex, Victorian female authors were deeply concerned at seeming unwomanly. This is clear in Brontë's previously quoted introduction to her sisters' novels.

---

<sup>162</sup> In Brontë's fiction the "other's" attempts to read the self gives that self a heartening sense of sovereignty through exercising the power of denial (Shuttleworth, 1996: 46). It is only in remaining closed off from society that Brontë's characters are able to attain power in a world where they are otherwise powerless.

<sup>163</sup> This is most obvious in *Shirley* where the narrator's social commentary reflects a perspective that ostensibly mirrors Brontë's own, as is evident when he issues such statements as "it would not do to stop the progress of invention" (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 27), "misery generates hate" (27), "every joy that life gives must be earned ere it is secured" (83) and "all men, taken singly, are more or less selfish; and taken in bodies are intensely so" (142).

The introduction reads as peculiarly repentant and censorious of their work, seemingly as if she wanted to distance herself from the shocking and distasteful content of their novels (Gordon, 1994), and so appear more “womanly” by contrast. Here, Brontë speaks of “the immature but very real powers revealed in *Wuthering Heights* (Brontë, 2013 [1850]: xi), her criticism setting herself up as more mature and refined by contrast. Further, she says of Anne’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that “the choice of subject was an entire mistake”, presenting herself as less coarse and more cultured (Brontë, 2013 [1850]: xii). In the face of this quandary, female authors adopted numerous strategies in their life and art. For instance, a number of women authors seemed self-effacing or depreciating, even self-hating (Showalter, 1977). Through devoting themselves to their families, and evangelising patriarchy’s precepts of selflessness and obedience, they attempted to compensate for their literary endeavours (Showalter, 1977). That Brontë adopted both strategies is evident, firstly, in how she felt that taking a vacation “was a dereliction of duty” (Gaskell, 2005 [1857]) and an abandonment of her responsibilities in her father’s home, and, secondly, in how she confesses in a letter to a friend: “I have some qualities that make me very miserable... and I hate myself for days afterwards” (Brontë, 1996 [1836]: 153)).

Women’s subjugation in Victorian society forced female authors to invent new, clandestine ways to fictionalise their most intimate thoughts and experiences, resulting in texts that were emblematic and insightful, passionate and penetrating (Showalter, 1977). This is seen in Brontë’s innovative subversion of the Gothic mode in *Jane Eyre*. Here, the mad wife is confined in an attic reminiscent of the passions and sexual desires of the heroine, serving as a foil that society — through, amongst others, her family and, faith — has instructed her to imprison (Showalter, 1977). However, such novels also typically feature heroines whose ambitions of sovereignty and self-fulfilment are penalised, supplanted or otherwise undermined by marriage (Showalter, 1977). This is certainly the case with Brontë’s fiction: Jane abandons her fiery rebellion upon her marriage, Caroline and Shirley appear to be penalised with theirs, and Lucy’s hoped for contentment in romantic love is replaced by fulfilling, independent work. Similarly, while female authors in the mid-Victorian period sought to create literary heroines who had both “masculine” strength and intelligence and “feminine” compassion and proficiency, per society’s definitions (Showalter, 1977), these women — like Brontë’s heroines — were punished for this so-called unwomanliness.<sup>164</sup> In a society such as the one Brontë depicts in her novels, women are doomed to remain isolated and subjugated, as instead of female camaraderie women monitor and chastise each other for their transgressions of society’s dictates (Showalter, 1977). This is most notably the case in *Villette*,

---

<sup>164</sup> For example, see Becky Sharp in Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* and Dorothea Brooke in Eliot’s *Middlemarch*.

where even “the eyes of the flowers [have] vision” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 116). The sporadic sisterly affection and companionship that Jane finds with her Rivers cousins is unique in Brontë’s works (Showalter, 1977) and forms a minor, insignificant theme in *Jane Eyre*. The only other significant female relationships in Brontë’s novels, that of Caroline and Shirley, is laced with sexual passion and presented as something other than platonic, sisterly friendship (Gardener, 1998). Thus much of the ambivalence in Brontë’s novels is found in how she asserts the integrity and independence of her heroines whilst alternately chastising them for their refusal to conform to the patriarchal ideal she is critiquing.

In Victorian society, women were believed to be ever in danger of madness and only constant vigilance ensured that they stayed mentally sound (Shuttleworth, 1996). Thus conformity became a measure of sanity, and normality became synonymous with obedience (Shuttleworth, 1996).<sup>165</sup> Brontë’s preoccupation with mental stability is clear in how it forms a key feature in each of her novels.<sup>166</sup> This is evident in Crimsworth’s bout of hypochondria, Caroline’s illness, the endemic anxiety that characterises Lucy, and *Jane Eyre*’s employment of the figure of the deranged woman, a definitive symbol of Victorian surfeit (Shuttleworth, 1996). Brontë’s heroines’ fear of unconformity and isolation is explicable in this context. The young Jane describes herself as “a discord in Gateshead Hall” for she “was like nobody there”, “a useless thing, incapable of serving their interest” and therefore, ostensibly, “cherishing the germs of indignation” (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 10). Similarly, Caroline suffers from “a depressing feeling that she was inferior” to other women “of her age and station” (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 65), believing “how little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world” (95). Lucy, in turn, calls the Reason she associates with society’s norms and values “vindictive”, stating that she obeys it “with the obedience of fear, not of love” (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 229).

### **Literature, essentialism and ideology**

Literary works are inescapably bound by their society’s social formations and relations. They reflect and resist these in their pages in various ways, so expressing and muzzling ideological incongruities (Poovey, 1988). Social conditioning teaches women, including Brontë, to associate authority with masculinity (Moglen, 1978), for instance, and this is reflected in Brontë’s work through the typically “masculine” nature of her more empowered female characters, such as

---

<sup>165</sup> In this same way, as discussed previously, adherence to socially prescribed gender traits and activities was seen as a sign of normalcy and lucidness.

<sup>166</sup> Brontë’s early works are characterised by the threat of institutionalisation as well as instances of lunatic behaviour — notably occurring in characters that have crossed gender bounds of propriety (Shuttleworth, 1996).

Madame Beck. The Brontës in particular among Victorian authors have been credited with creating figurative expressions that transformed various ideologically-laden facts and forms into psychological tropes (Armstrong, 1987). Thus, through her literature, ideology was figured as a psychological struggle. For this reason, Charlotte Brontë's writing appears largely neutral in terms of class-based issues, for instance, when in fact she has merely transformed these issues into character traits or supplanted them with sexually-charged relations (Armstrong, 1987). This is evident from the interaction between the landed Rochester and the lowly Jane. Such statements as Jane's that upon their marriage she "shall not be [his] Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin's jacket" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 262) are the only kind of reference made between the two concerning the differences of finance and social status that divide them. The most overt reference to class takes place between the young Jane and her cousin, John, who instructs Jane, "you are a dependent, Mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen's children like us", to which Jane replies: "you are like a murderer — you are like a slave-driver" (5). The maid's injunction to Jane that she is "less than a servant, for [she does] nothing for [her] keep" (6), is the last, explicit word written on the topic. Similarly, Lucy speaks of how she "marvelled at the sagacity evinced by waiters and chambermaids" who could "everywhere tell at a glance that [she]... was an individual of no social significance and little burdened by cash" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 59). Here, too, Brontë skirts around class issues, linking this to Lucy's self-effacement. Confined and controlled in this way, class conflict is reduced to the idiosyncrasies of characters, and entrenched in middle-class discourse, as opposed to being depicted as part of the great power struggle between patriarchal hegemony and its opposing discourses (Armstrong, 1987).

In this way, Brontë was bound by the ideologies of her society. All ideology, including Victorian patriarchal ideology, is "uneven" in that it is experienced in various ways by people of various social positions by virtue of their age, class or sex (Poovey, 1988: 3). Brontë's cognisance of this is clear in *Shirley*. Caroline, for instance, feels suffocated by her lack of agency and power. While her precarious financial situation upon her uncle's death necessitates that she enters employment or gets married (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 163), she cannot pursue the man she loves or enter employment due to society's dictates (90), all of which enflames her frustration with the patriarchal status quo. Shirley, too, despite her wealth, title and masculine name, is confined in different ways by patriarchy's norms and values, which ultimately render her equally powerless while giving her a taste of and hunger for the respect and agency that would be hers as a man (172). Similarly, the young York girls' youthful energy and optimism make them even more militant and agitated against patriarchal society that favours their brothers (132—133). Thus Brontë highlights

women's shared frustrations and desires while illustrating the uniqueness of their experiences.<sup>167</sup> While women do not share each other's unique experiences and ideas of femininity, nonetheless they form part of a distinguishing social category with a distinctive and multifaceted history (Stone, 2004).<sup>168</sup> It is women's common experience of Victorian patriarchy that Brontë depicts so familiarly that enables an intense identification with her work. It is this, too, that makes her novels an important part of the pre-feminist movement.

### **Society and the self: hegemony and subjectivity**

Along with her sisters, Brontë has been credited with doing more to articulate common forms of subjectivity than other writers (Armstrong, 1987). The Brontës are recognised for their introduction of modernist concerns into the English novel (Armstrong, 1987). Thus, in a way, Brontë's novels offer our society more than they did her own in so far as they offer "psychological truths" more readily recognised and accepted in our time (Dooley, 1920: 270). For instance, Brontë's preoccupation with what Freud would later term the id is central to her notion of character (Maynard, 1987). Furthermore, Brontë's clear view of family relationships as the foundation for love and sexual relationships later in life distinctly prefigures Freud (Maynard, 1987). Indeed, Brontë's triumph is not in terms of the "externals" of plot or style, but the "inner" realm of passion and feeling (Dooley, 1920: 255). In this sense, hers is not only an intellectual power, but also a more profound and intuitive one and her preoccupation is less with the conscious than with the unconscious (Dooley, 1920). Brontë typically presents her heroes and heroines as struggling to unite their socially approved, conscious objectives and intentions with the needs of their unconscious, true selves (Maynard, 1987). To this end, Brontë employs dreams,<sup>169</sup> mythic narratives<sup>170</sup> and art to disclose latent psychological impulses and operations (Maynard, 1987). Concerning the latter, Brontë's employment of art as a symbol and metaphor for psychological imprecision and ambiguity is inspired. Hunsden remarks to Crimsworth concerning his ivory miniature of Lucia that "there cannot be a shadow without a substance" (Brontë, 2003 [1857]: 283). Thus Lucia proves that the

---

<sup>167</sup> This is again most evident in *Shirley* during Caroline and Shirley's conversations pertaining to men and marriage (Brontë, 2010 [1849]: 181—184). That being said, Shirley's comment that she has "never in [her] whole life been able to talk to a young lady as [she has] talked to [Caroline] this morning" (184) highlights how seldom this kind of intimate communication occurs.

<sup>168</sup> Such positioning of women — as sharing a lineage — means that feminist activists need not fall into the trap of being essentialist or risk limiting themselves to particular issues that only certain women are affected by, as such issues will be indirectly related to all women by virtue of their genealogy (Stone, 2004).

<sup>169</sup> Jane's dreams of being burdened with a child reflect her associated fears of being married to Rochester and all this entails (Moglen, 1978), while Lucy's "strange vision of Villette", initiated when Madame instructs that she be given a sedative, results in her "imagination [being] roused from her rest" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 450) and Lucy truly coming into her own.

<sup>170</sup> Shirley's tales of female power and passion illustrate this.

ideal exists by virtue of her imperfect reflection of it (Starzyk, 2003), and the fact that one is left wanting. Here, the divorce between an idea and its implementation, the disconnect between the real and the ideal, demonstrates both creative limitation and psychological indefiniteness which are intimately connected in Brontë's work, and consistently presented as unavoidable and unbearable (Starzyk, 2003). We see this again when Jane confesses to Rochester that she "was tormented by the contrast between [her] idea and [her] handiwork" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 126) of the drawings she presents him. Like Jane and Crimsworth, Brontë's heroes and heroines struggle to clearly understand and express the various images and impressions of self they are comprised of. This results in them each experiencing a fragmented, unstable sense of self, undermining their projection of an integrated personality (Starzyk, 2003). Similarly, Brontë employs sexual symbolism to present a more intimate depiction of character. This is seen in her depictions of rooms and buildings,<sup>171</sup> as well as the natural world,<sup>172</sup> which are employed to reveal the mental, emotional and sexual conditions of her characters (Maynard, 1987). In such ways as this, it is evident that Brontë introduced modernist elements and common forms of subjectivity to English literature.

Patriarchal hegemony<sup>173</sup> prevailed in Victorian society largely through consensus and not compulsion, supported by a kind of power that operates through language, shaping subjectivity (Armstrong, 1987). Patriarchal hegemony is disseminated when, for example, psychosexual issues are presented in literary texts in such a way as to fix the denotation of cultural material that might have stood for other, diverse political perspectives (Armstrong, 1987).<sup>174</sup> Thus, the novel's reproduction of ideology is concealed, unbeknownst to the reader (Armstrong, 1987). The eminence of domestic fiction illustrates the extent to which power in Victorian society did not depend on legislative or financial means, but rather on social hegemony (Armstrong, 1987). That being said, compared to other forms of discourse, the novel also offers a space — however small or limited — for dissention, self-exploration, and seditious communication with centres of power which

---

<sup>171</sup> *Jane Eyre's* empty, hidden and haunted rooms link the female body and sexuality (Showalter: 1977). It is in a secret room in Thornfield's uppermost hall that Bertha — symbol of excess, female power and sexuality — is contained. In turn, Thornfield can be viewed as representative of Jane herself (Gilbert and Gubar, 1984).

<sup>172</sup> The storm in *Villette*, which "took hold of [Lucy] with tyranny... [and] roughly roused [her] and obliged [her] to live" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 109) is evidence of this, as is *Jane Eyre's* depiction of the change in weather upon Rochester's ill-fated proposal, whereby the couple were suddenly "all in shadow", while the chestnut tree that symbolises their relationship "writhed and groaned" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 258).

<sup>173</sup> Victorian patriarchal hegemony is the broad acceptance and dissemination of ideas pertaining to the family, gender and sexuality, as well as modes of speech and conduct, all of which supported the patriarchal power structure, which inscribed its ideologies on individuals' subjectivity (Armstrong, 1987).

<sup>174</sup> The nature and outlook of Victorian society that is left to us is chiefly the product of those at the apex of the patriarchal power pyramid with the means and the want to perpetuate their position (Davidoff, 1979). Those peoples most removed from centres of power — for their so-thought contaminating and threatening effects on those at the centre, who took advantage of their disenfranchised status — are characteristically depicted in ways that highlight their subjection (Davidoff, 1979).

indoctrinate patriarchal ideology (Boone, 1992). We see this plainly in Brontë's novels. For instance, the principle of self-help and self-development, key to Brontë's endeavour to empower her heroines, was opposed by patriarchal ideology, which declared women's subjection in society, as well as within her own body (Shuttleworth, 1996). There again, Brontë's novels — along with those of her sisters — are unique for the way in which astonishing violence attends their attempts to give heroines greater freedom and agency (Armstrong, 1987). Brontë depicts woman's transcendence over man as an almost demonic action and power. This is most apparent in her employment of the figure of the madwoman. Brontë depicts Bertha's independence and agency as sinful, evident in how she is described in highly sexual terms, labelled a "tigress" (Brontë, 2010 [1847]: 214) and aligned with the Gothic vampire figure by virtue of her midnight attacks and the fact that "she sucked [Mason's] blood" (214). Similarly, Vashti's powerful performance is depicted not only as an act of licentious self-exposure (Johnson, 1990), but as "evil" (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 257). This, in turn, is less obvious — though no less sinister — in Brontë's depiction of her more empowered female characters (Armstrong, 1987). So we see Madame Beck, whose authority and power Lucy initially envies, is depicted in increasingly negative terms and is ultimately presented as mercenary (Brontë, 2008 [1853]: 461), spiteful and vindictive (462), as well as unwomanly (77–78), which constituted the ultimate social transgression. Madame Walravens, too, who uses her power and influence to keep M. Paul and Lucy apart, is described as "the sorceress — Malevola, the evil fairy" (389). It is this inner power and strength which contributes to Brontë's heroines' reluctance to conform in society as well as their undesirability as wives and, along with their unconventional appearance, furthers consigns them to the status of anti-heroines (Armstrong, 1987).

Brontë's novels are true accomplishments of artistry and psychological consideration over the conditions of her personal life and society (Maynard, 1987). They offer a new symbolism and interrogate the Victorian discourses of subjection, degradation and dependency, most notably for women (Taylor, 1979). Brontë's exasperation at society's restriction of women's independence is strongly voiced in her novels, which challenge and discredit these explicitly (Maynard, 1987). Brontë treats society's prescribed renunciation of self for women with both radicalism and conservatism (Lane, 2002). This is apparent in how Brontë endorses the notions of self-help, hard work and innate talent, while she is seemingly immobilised by a deep sense of impracticality — ostensibly as a result of patriarchal society's characterisation of female volatility and inability (Shuttleworth, 1996). Similarly, Brontë's deep longing for a just society is opposed to her conservatism and her belief in woman's commitment to family, evident in her devotion to her father's house (Shuttleworth, 1996). The creative energy of Brontë's novels is found in how they struggle with patriarchy's ideological

ambiguities, and in how they function within these constraints, generating new forms of consciousness and its expression (Shuttleworth, 1996). While Brontë addresses the prescriptions and restrictions placed on women, complementing the work of other pre-feminists of her day, at the same time, she speaks of women's need to conceive of and construct themselves independently of society, speaking to future generations while she was unlikely understood in her own (Gordon, 1994).

Leslie Stephen says of *Jane Eyre's* "protest against conventionality" that it "is combined with a most unflinching adherence to the proper conventions of society", to the extent that "we are left in great doubt as to where the line ought to be drawn. Where does the unlawful pressure of society upon the individual begin, and what are the demands which it may rightly make upon our respect?" (1974 [1877]: 420). Indeed, this is the question Brontë fails to answer in each of her novels. For this reason, Brontë did not overtly challenge the patriarchal ideologies and conditions of Victorian society as a revolutionary so much as she simply insisted upon the truth and validity of her own experiences and insights (Maynard, 1987). Nevertheless, Sydney Dobell's words on Brontë remain as true today as they were in her own time, that her "mission is perpetually remembered" and her efforts toward "that reconstruction of society — that redistribution of the elements of our conventional system" forever honoured (1974 [1850]: 283).

This dissertation has explored the ambiguous nature of the social criticism in Brontë's novels, particularly pertaining to patriarchal ideology and its associated power relations. I have explored how Brontë's varying contestation of and acquiescence to female Victorian stereotypes, along with her equivocal representation of ideology, identity, gender, and the self, undermine her efforts to create a new model of womanhood and female empowerment, contrary to the restrictive model advocated by patriarchal ideology. At the same time, however, I have demonstrated how, through Brontë's intimate depiction of her characters' struggles between their desires and patriarchal prescripts, she offers a novel, more indirect and significant challenge to the patriarchal status quo. In this way, too, Brontë's social criticism is confined by her conservatism.

## Bibliography

- Andrews, E. J. A. 2004. *The Physiognomy of Fashion: Faces, Dresses and the Self in the Juvenilia and Novels of Charlotte Brontë*. Dissertation, Ohio University. Available at: <http://etd.ohiolink.edu/send-pdf.cgi/Arvan%20Andrews%20Elaine%20J.pdf?ohiou1107275437>. Accessed on 6 June 2013.
- Anderson, J. Z. 2004. *Angry Angels: Repression, Containment, and Deviance*, in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Available at: <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/cbronte/anderson1.html> Accessed on 6 June 2013.
- Armstrong, N. 1987. *Desire and Domestic Fiction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Arnold, M. 1974 [1853]. Matthew Arnold, from a Letter. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 201.
- Arnold, S. 1968. In Defense of *Jane Eyre*. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 8 (4), 681-698.
- Auerbach, N. 1982. *Woman and the Demon: the Life of a Victorian Myth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Auerbach, N. 1985. *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Balbus, I. D. 1987. Michel Foucault and the Power of Feminist Discourse. In S. Benhabib and D. Cornell, eds. *Feminism as Critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 110—127.
- Barber, N. 2006. *The Victorians: English Literature in its Historical, Cultural and Social Contexts*. London: Evans Brothers Limited.
- Baylis, W.J. Lucian, The History of Orestes and Pylades from Amores (Second Century A.D.). Available at: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/lucian-orest.asp>. Accessed on 23 October 2013.
- Bellis, P. J. 1987. In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*. *ELH*, 54, (3), 639-652.
- Blackall, J. F. 1976. Point of View in *Villette*. *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 6 (1), 14-28.
- Bloom, H. 2008. *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: The Brontës*. New York: Infobase Publishing.
- Bodenhause, G. V. and C. N. Macrae. 1998. Stereotype Activation and Inhibition. In S. Robert, ed. *Advances in Social Cognition, Volume XI*, USA: Wyer, Jr, Routledge.
- Bordo, S. 2003. *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. California: University of California Press.
- Boone, J. A. 1992. Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of "Heretic Narrative". *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 26 (1), 20-42.

- Bourdieu, P. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bradbury, M. 1995. What was Post-Modernism? The Arts in and after the Cold War. *International Affairs (Royal Institute of International Affairs 1944-)*, 71 (4), 763-774.
- Braithwaite, A. 2002. The Personal, the Political, Third-wave and Postfeminisms. *Feminist Theory*, 3, 335–344.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1836]. To Ellen Nussey, 10 May 1836. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 143–144.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1836]. To Ellen Nussey, 26 September 1836. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 151–152.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1836]. To Ellen Nussey, October 1836. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 152–153.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1836]. To Ellen Nussey, October/ November 1836. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 154–155.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1837]. To Ellen Nussey, 20 February 1837. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 164–165.
- Brontë, C. 2010 [1847]. *Jane Eyre*. London: Harper Press.
- Brontë, C. 1996 [1847]. To W. S. Williams, 14 December 1847. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, Volume One*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 574–575.
- Brontë, C. 2000 [1848]. To W. S. Williams, Early September 1848. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Volume Two*. New York: Oxford University Press, 118–119.
- Brontë, C., 2010 [1849]. *Shirley*. London: Harper Press.
- Brontë, C. 2000 [1849]. To Ellen Nussey, 16 November 1849. In M. Smith, ed. *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Volume Two*. New York: Oxford University Press, 285.
- Brontë, C. 2013 [1850]. Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell, vi–xvi. In E. and A. Bell, 2013 [1851]. *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Brontë, C. 2010 [1850]. “To James Taylor, 5 September 1850”. In M. Smith, ed. *Charlotte Brontë: Selected Letters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 174–175.
- Brontë, C. 2010 [1851]. To George Smith, 5 February 1851. In M. Smith, ed. *Charlotte Brontë: Selected Letters*. New York: Oxford University Press, 184–185.

- Brontë, C. 2000 [1852]. Charlotte Brontë (1852). In H. Bloom, ed. *Bloom's Classic Critical Views: The Brontës*. New York: Infobase Publishing, 101—102.
- Brontë, C. 2008 [1853]. *Villette*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brontë, C. 2003 [1857]. *The Professor*. London: Penguin Books.
- Brumberg, J. J. 1989. Hypochondria: Woeful Imaginings by Susan Baur. *Isis*, 80 (1), 87-88.
- Butler, J. 1986. Sex and Gender in Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex*. *Yale French Studies, Simone de Beauvoir: Witness to a Century*, 72, 35-49.
- Butler, J. 1988. Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40 (4), 519-531.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*, New York: Routledge.
- Caldwell, J. 2003. Conflict and Revelation: Literalization in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (2), 483-499.
- Carlton-Ford, C. 1988. Intimacy without immolation: fire in *Jane Eyre*. *Women's Studies: An interdisciplinary journal*, 15 (4), 375-386.
- Cerulo, K. A. 1997. Identity Construction: New Issues, New Directions. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 23, 385-409.
- Chandler, M. 1993. In *Sickness and Health*. *The Women's Review of Books*, X (10-11), 3.
- Chase, R. 1947. The Brontës: A Centennial Observance (Reconsiderations VIII). *The Kenyon Review*, 9 (4), 487-506.
- Chesterton, G. K. 2010. Charlotte Brontë. Twelve Types. Available at: <http://psiqueyeros.files.wordpress.com/2010/04/chesterton-g-k-twelve-types.pdf>. Accessed on 20 October 2013.
- Choi, Y. S. 2012. *Villette* Revisited: Lucy Snowe's Urban Experience. *Brontë Studies*, 37 (2), 95–104.
- Cohen, W. 2003. Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*. *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 57 (4), 443-476.
- Colby, R. A. 1960. *Villette* and the Life of the Mind. *PMLA*, 75 (4), 410-419.
- Cornell, D. and A. Thurschwell, 1987. Feminism, Negativity, Subjectivity. In S. Benhabib and D. Cornell, eds. *Feminism as Critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 143—162.
- Crosby, C. 1984. Charlotte Brontë's Haunted Text. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 24 (4), 701-715.

- Crosby, C. 1991. *The Ends of History: Victorians and 'the Woman Question'*. New York: Routledge.
- Davidoff, L. 1979. Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick. *Feminist Studies, Women and Power: Dimensions of Women's Historical Experience*, 5 (1), 86-141.
- Davidson, C. N. 1998. No More Separate Spheres! *American Literature*, 70 (3), 443-463.
- De Lauretis, T. 1990. Eccentric Subjects: Feminist Theory and Historical Consciousness. *Feminist Studies*, 16 (1), 115-150.
- Dobell, S. 1974 [1850]. 'Curren Bell' and Wuthering Heights. *Palladium*. September 1850. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 277—283.
- Dobrovic, K. 2006. Feminine Construction of Masculinity in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. "The World As We See It": Annual Postgraduate Conference, Department of English, University of Stellenbosch, September 2006. Available at: <http://sun025.sun.ac.za/portal/page/portal/Arts/Departments/english/Documents/Kristina%20Dobrovic.pdf> Accessed on 6 June 2013.
- Dolin, T. 2008. Introduction. In M. Smith and H. Rosengarten, eds. *Villette*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dooley, L. 1920. Psychoanalysis of Charlotte Brontë, as a Type of the Woman of Genius. *The American Journal of Psychology*, 31 (3), 221-272.
- Eagleton, T. 1975. *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*. London: MacMillan.
- Eliot, G. 1974 [1853]. Letters. February and March. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 192.
- Ellis, S. S. 1842. *The Daughters of England: Their Position in Society, Character and Responsibilities*. New York: D. Appleton and Company.
- Faderman, L. 1981. *Surpassing the Love of Men: Romantic Friendship and Love between Women from the Renaissance to the Present*. London: Junction Books.
- Fearon, J. D. 1999. What is Identity (As we now use the Word)? Unpublished Masters Dissertation, Stanford University. Available at: <http://www.stanford.edu/~jfearon/papers/iden1v2.pdf> Accessed on 6 June 2013.
- Flint, K. 2002. Women Writers, Women's Issues. In H. Glen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 170—191.
- Foster, S. 1985. *Victorian Women's Fiction: Marriage, Freedom and the Individual*. Great Britain: Taylor & Francis.

- Foucault, M. 2001 [1971]. The Order of Discourse. R. Young, ed. *Untying the Text*, p. 52—64. In P. Rice and P. Waugh, eds. *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 210—222.
- Gardner, J. 1998. “Neither Monsters nor Temptresses nor Terrors”: Representing Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 26 (2), 409-420.
- Gaskell, E. 2005 [1857]. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume I*. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1827/1827-h/1827-h.htm>. Accessed on 15 October 2013.
- Gaskell, E. 2013 [1857]. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Volume II*. Available at: <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/1700/pg1700.html>. Accessed on 15 October 2013.
- Gezari, J. 2007. Introduction, vii--xxii. In C. Brontë, 2010 [1849]. *Shirley*. London: Harper Press.
- Gilbert, S. M. 1977. Plain Jane's Progress. *Signs*, 2 (4), 779-804.
- Gilbert, S. M. and S. Gubar. 1984. *The Mad Woman in the Attic: the Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. New Haven and London: London Yale University Press.
- Glen, H. 1989. Introduction, 7—31. In C. Brontë, 2003 [1857]. *The Professor*. London: Penguin Books.
- Glen, H. 2002. *Shirley* and *Villette*. In H. Glen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 122—147.
- Gordon, L. 1994. *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Grosz, E. 1987. Notes towards a Corporeal Feminism. *Australian Feminist Studies*, 2 (5), 1-16.
- Hall, C. 1998. The Early Formation of Victorian Domestic Ideology. In R. Schoemaker and M. Vincent, eds. *Gender and History in Western Europe*. London: Arnold, 181—196.
- Hartnell, E. 1996. “Nothing but Sweet and Womanly”: A Hagiography of Patmore's Angel. *Victorian Poetry*, 34 (4), 457-476.
- Herndl, D. P. 1993. *Invalid Women: Figuring Feminine Illness in American Fiction and Culture, 1840—1940*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Higgs, E. 1983. Domestic Servants and Households in Victorian England. *Social History*, 8 (2), 201-210.
- Hook, A. and J. 1974. Introduction. *Shirley*. New York: Penguin.
- Hunt, L. 1983. Charlotte Brontë and the Suffering Sisterhood. *Colby Library Quarterly*, 19 (1), 7-17.

Ingham, P. 1996. *The Language of Gender and Class: Transformation in the Victorian Novel*. London: Routledge.

Johnson, P. E. 1990. "This Heretic Narrative": The Strategy of the Split Narrative in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 30 (4), 617-631.

Judge, J. 2011. The "Bitter Herbs" of Revisionist Satire in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 7 (1). Available at: <http://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue71/judge.htm>. Accessed on 15 October 2013.

Kaplan, C. 1996. Girl Talk: *Jane Eyre* and the Romance of Women's Narration. *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 30 (1), 5-31.

Kaplan, E. A. 1983. *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera*. New York: Methuen.

King, A. The Prisoner of Gender: Foucault and the Disciplining of the Female Body. Dissertation, London Metropolitan University. Available on: <http://www.bridgew.edu/soas/jiws/mar04/king.pdf>. Accessed on 6 June 2013.

Kent, J. D. 2010. "Making the Prude" in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. *Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas*, 8 (2), 325-339.

Lamonaca, M. 2002. Jane's Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*. *Studies in the Novel*, 34 (3), 245-263.

Lane, C. 2002. Charlotte Brontë on the Pleasure of Hating. *ELH*, 69 (1), 199-222.

Leavy, P., A. Gnong, and L. S. Ross. 2009. Femininity, Masculinity, and Body Image Issues among College-Age Women: An In-Depth and Written Interview Study of the Mind-Body Dichotomy. *The Qualitative Report*, 14 (2), 261-292.

Lewes, G. H. 1974 [1847]. Unsigned Review. *Fraser's Magazine*, XXXVI. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 83—87.

Lewes, G. H. 1974 [1850]. Unsigned Review. *Edinburgh Review*, XCI. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 160—170.

Lewes, G. H. 1974 [1853]. Unsigned Review. *Leader*. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 184—186.

Lewes, G. H. 1974 [1853]. Ruth and Villette. *Westminster Review*, LIX. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 208—211.

Mangham, A. 2003. Hysterical Fictions: Mid-Nineteenth-Century Medical Constructions of Hysteria and the Fiction of Mary Elizabeth Braddon. *The Wilkie Collins Journal*, 6. Available at: <http://wilkiecollinsociety.org/hysterical-fictions-mid-nineteenth-century-medical-constructions-of-hysteria-and-the-fiction-of-mary-elizabeth-braddon>. Accessed on 13 March 2014.

- Martineau, H. 1974 [1855]. Obituary of Charlotte Brontë. *Daily News*. April, 1855. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 301—305.
- Maynard, J. 1987. *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- McLaughlin, R. A. 2004. "I Prefer a Master": Female Power in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. *Brontë Studies*, 29, 217—222.
- Moglen, H. 1978. *Charlotte Brontë: The Self Conceived*. New York: Norton.
- Moore, T. 2004. Women and Myth Narratives in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. *Women's Writing*, 11, 477—492.
- Mulvey, L. 1975. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Screen*, 16 (3), 6—18.
- Newman, B. 1992. Getting Fixed: Feminine Identity and Scopic Crisis in *The Turn of the Screw*. *Novel*, 26, 43-63.
- Newton, J. L. 1981. *Women, Power and Subversion: social strategies in British Fiction 1778—1860*, Athens: University of Georgia Press.
- O'Dea, G. S. 1988. Narrator and Reader in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. *South Atlantic Review*, 53 (1), 41-57.
- Ohmann, C. 1977. Historical Reality and "Divine Appointment" in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction. *Signs*, 2 (4), 757-778.
- Oliphant, M. 1976 [1855]. Unsigned Review. *Blackwood's Magazine*, LXXVII. May 1855. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 311—314.
- Parkin-Gounelas, R. 1991. Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and the Textuality of Selfhood. *Women's Studies Institute Forum*, 14 (1/2), 99—109.
- Peeck, M. 2004. "Are You Anybody, Miss Snowe?". *Brontë Studies*, 29, 223—227.
- Pfohl, S. 2008. The Reality of Social Constructions. In J. Holstein and J. Gubrium, eds. *Handbook of Constructionist Research*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Poovey, M. 1998. *Uneven Developments*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Rabinowitz, N. S. 1985. "Faithful Narrator" or "Partial Eulogist": First-Person Narration in Brontë's *Villette*. *The Journal of Narrative Technique*, 15 (3), 244-255.
- Ridgeway, C. L. and Correll, S. J. 2004. Unpacking the Gender System : A Theoretical Perspective on Gender Beliefs and Social Relations. *Gender & Society*, 18, 510—531.

- Rigby, E. 1974 [1848]. Unsigned Review. *Quarterly Review*, LXXXIV. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, New York: Routledge, 105—112.
- Riley, D. 1988. 'Am I that Name?' *Feminism and the Category of 'Woman' in History*. London: Macmillan.
- Roy, P. 1989. Unaccommodated Women and the Poetics of Property in *Jane Eyre*. *Studies in English Literature*, 29 (4), 713—728.
- Rylance, R. 2002. "Getting On": Ideology, Personality and the Brontë characters. In H. Glen, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 148—169.
- Scott, J. W. 1986. Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis. *The American Historical Review*, 91 (5), 1053-1075.
- Shaw, M. L. 1994. Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette*. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 34 (4), 813-833.
- Showalter, E. 1977. *A Literature of Their Own: British Women novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Shuttleworth, S. 1996. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Skelton, J. 1974 [1857]. Unsigned review. *Fraser's Magazine* LV, May 1857. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 331—342.
- Spivak, G. C. 1985. Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism. *Critical Inquiry: "Race," Writing, and Difference*, 12 (1), 243-261.
- Starzyk, L. J. 2003. Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*: The Appropriation of Images. *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 33 (2), 143-162.
- Stephen, L. 1974 [1877]. On Charlotte Bronte. *Cornhill Magazine*. December 1877. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 413—423.
- Stone, A. 2004. Essentialism and Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Philosophy. *JMP*, 1 (2), 135-153.
- Sweat, M. 1974 [1857]. Unsigned Review. *North American Review*, LXXXV. October 1857. In M. Allott, ed. *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*. New York: Routledge, 379—385.
- Sweeney, S. E. 1995. Mirror, Mirror, on the Wall: Gazing in Edith Wharton's *Looking Glass*. *Narrative*, 3 (2), 139-160.
- Taylor, H. 1979. Class and Gender in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*. *Feminist Review*, 1, 83-93.

- Tingley, S. A. 1996. "A Letter Is a Joy of Earth": Emily Dickinson's Letters and Victorian Epistolary Conventions. *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 5 (2), 202-208.
- Van Knippenberg, A. and A. Dijksterhuis. 2000. Social Categorization and Stereotyping: A Functional Perspective. *European Review of Social Psychology*, 11 (1), 105-144.
- Vejvoda, K. 2003. Idolatry in *Jane Eyre*. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31 (1), 241-261.
- Walby, S. 1989. Theorising Patriarchy. *Sociology*, 23 (2), 213—234.
- Warhol, R. R. 1996. Double Gender, Double Genre in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 36 (4), 857-875.
- Weber, M. 1968. *Economy and Society*. G. Roth and C. Wittich, eds. New York: Bedminster Press.
- Welter, B. 1966. The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820—1860. *American Quarterly*, 18 (2/1), 151-174.
- West, C. and D. Zimmerman 1987. Doing Gender. *Gender and Society*, 1 (2), 125-151.
- Woodhead, L. 2001. Chapter Four: Feminism and the Sociology of Religion: From Gender-blindness to Gender difference. In R. K. Fenn, ed. *The Blackwell Companion to Sociology of Religion*. Malden, Oxford and Carlton: Blackwell Publishing.