

THE POINT OF AGONY  
SEX AND POWER IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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## Abstract

This thesis reads sexual power dynamics – taking pleasure in being hurt by or hurting someone, wanting to control someone sexually or to be controlled, and enjoying power struggles and negotiations of roles – as central elements of Charlotte Brontë’s four mature novels. The argument explores the intersections of sex, play, power and agency in Brontë’s work, drawing out the intricate, shifting, and often unexpected dynamics that underlie what can seem like stark, gender-based power differentials between her characters. While there is a long critical history of examining how erotic relationships in Brontë’s novels develop through power struggles, such readings often cast these patterns of desire as either pathological, or (particularly in the case of submissive or masochistic female characters) as responses created wholly by societal strictures on female power and sexuality. Taking a reparative, sex-radical approach, this thesis rethinks literary intersections of sex and power as productive, not just problematic, and as ways of undermining and playing with, rather than just reinforcing, societal and gendered power structures.

The introduction examines the critical history of reading sex and power in Brontë’s work, situates non-normative sexual desire in Brontë’s mid-nineteenth-century context, and shows how reading reparatively can create new insights into sexual power dynamics in literature. The argument examines embodied power and the erotics of mutual infliction of pain in *Jane Eyre*, shows how material things used as sexual mediators widen the erotic scope of *Villette*, reads the negotiation of sexual roles in *Shirley* as a way of managing and transcending the pain of its novel-world, and explores the idea of fantasy as an uncontrollable, unsettling form of intimacy in *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor* and the Roe Head journal.

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## Author's declaration

I declare that all material in this thesis is original and my own work, except where otherwise identified, and that no material has previously been submitted for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

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Erika Kvistad

## Introduction

‘I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it.’

Harriet Martineau, letter to Charlotte Brontë on *Villette* (1853)

*opening questions: ‘such grossness as only could be perpetrated by a woman’<sup>1</sup>*

‘Put back your hair.’

For one moment, Shirley looked not quite certain whether she would obey the request or disregard it: a flicker of her eye beamed furtive on the professor’s face; perhaps if he had been looking at her harshly or timidly, or if one undecided line had marked his countenance, she would have rebelled, and the lesson had ended there and then; but he was only awaiting her compliance – as calm as marble, and as cool.

She threw the veil of tresses behind her ear.<sup>2</sup>

This is a passage from *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë’s second published novel. Shirley Keeldar is taking a French lesson from Louis Moore, who used to be her tutor. She is a wealthy landowner; he is employed in her house as a tutor to her cousin. When the scene begins he has summoned her to his rooms to brush up on her French. She is clearly wary at the prospect of returning to their previous roles, but at the same time willing to play along. What does it mean to decide to be your tutor’s pupil again, to take orders, show ‘a decent obeisance’ and assume a position of relative powerlessness (404), when you are no longer a

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Oliphant, ‘Modern Novelists – Great and Small’, *Blackwoods Edinburgh Magazine*, Vol. 77, May 1855, 554-568, 557.

<sup>2</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley: A Tale*, 1849, eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 404. All subsequent references are to this edition.

child, but a grown woman? What does it mean not to bring the lesson to an end when it seems to be turning into something else? What is happening in the flicker of a look where Shirley determines whether Louis's face is revealing either harshness or timidity, then decides to do as he says? This thesis is about asking these kinds of vexed, suggestive questions. It is about the moments in Brontë's work where people threaten to put chains on each other, tell someone where to sit or stand or what to do with their hair, express affection through combinations of teasing and sternness and sudden vulnerability, lock someone up to make them learn lines and then let them out and feed them cakes, fall in love with the people who mark their written work (or vice versa), punish their partners for speaking French to them with the sole effect of encouraging further French-speaking, or refer to their beloveds as 'Master' or '*petite chatte, doucerette, coquette*'.<sup>3</sup> And it is about the sharp points – like Jane Eyre's 'precious yet poignant pleasure' in looking at Rochester, 'pure gold, with a steely point of agony' – that pin the reader, too, to the text.<sup>4</sup>

Writing about *Shirley* in her work on sexuality and mentorship in Victorian literature, Patricia Menon quotes the passage above and calls it 'a reversion to the worst of [Brontë's] earlier work'.<sup>5</sup> She identifies this as a 'sensual' scene, but with a heroine who is 'sulky rather than sultry': 'This could be Zamorna with Caroline Vernon, suggesting Brontë is here reverting to a form of novelistic thumb-sucking, a return to the familiar consolations of her youth.' (112) Menon's reading conforms to a common pattern in critical responses to Brontëan power relations, in which the critic analyses a power dynamic without taking into account or considering the implications of its sexual aspects. She aptly notes that this scene is about regression, about taking on a previous set of roles, but although she has argued that aspects of Shirley and Louis's relationship are 'crudely exploited for erotic effect', she does not draw any further conclusions about the sexual dimension of this 'reversion' (110-112). But a representation of woman choosing to reenact a pupil role with a man she is profoundly attracted to means something very different from a representation

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<sup>3</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, 1853, eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 318. Translated: 'little cat, coy one, coquette'. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre: An Autobiography*, 1847, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 174. All subsequent references are to this edition.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia Menon, *Austen, Eliot, Charlotte Brontë, and the Mentor-Lover* (London: Palgrave, 2003), 112.



of a child enacting a pupil role with her teacher: it involves aspects of theatricality, decision-making, and, importantly, self-conscious adult desire. In this passage the acceptance of authority, the relinquishing of responsibility, even the sulkiness that Menon detects are not straightforward components of a pedagogical situation, but sexually charged gestures. Menon criticises both Brontë and Shirley for apparently reverting to their youth for consolation (though Brontë wrote the Angrian tales featuring the Duke of Zamorna into her twenties, and Shirley must at least have been in her teens when she was Louis's student, so 'thumb-sucking' is putting it strongly), but this misses half the story: Shirley is using a role first enacted in her youth in the context of a play of desire and power between herself and another adult. It is a scene about familiarity, but also about something new; about command and obedience, but also about choice. It is, in fact, a moment of mutual revelation. Shirley gives Louis a 'furtive' look to determine whether he can play this game with her: she sees that he can (his face is not timid, but neither is it harsh), and in response she throws back the 'veil' of her hair. She becomes aware of his desire and unveils her own.

This brief exchange – the request or command, the flicker of a gaze, the answering cool silence, the hair thrown rather than placidly put back – leads us to questions that make up the heart of this thesis. Are Shirley and Louis really flirting with each other by means of a kind of idiosyncratic dominant/submissive schoolgirl fantasy scenario? If so, should we as readers find this problematic, or should we approach it some other way? And why might this kind of flirtation, this kind of power dynamic, be an interesting and important thing to discover in Brontë's novels? The first two questions provide the premises for the thesis; the third suggests its purpose.

In answer to the first question, this thesis posits that sexual power dynamics in various forms – taking pleasure in being hurt by or hurting someone, wanting to control someone sexually or be controlled by them, enjoying reciprocal power struggles and negotiations – are central elements of Brontë's novels. This is, of course, far from the first reading to notice this. Some critics do not primarily read Brontëan sexuality in these terms: for instance, John Maynard's major study of the topic does not focus on the texts' use of eroticised power dynamics. Instead, Maynard describes what he sees as Brontë's deliberate artistic concern with 'universal processes of growth and

sexual maturation'.<sup>6</sup> This focus on growth, casting sexual life as a teleological process from lesser to greater maturity, makes it hard to explore fully the autotelic, elusive processes of sexual power play. But others have taken characters' relations within the novels to be 'transparently sadomasochistic', in Terry Eagleton's phrase describing William Crimsworth and Frances Henri's relationship in *The Professor*.<sup>7</sup> This thesis has a fraught relation to the concept of sadomasochism, for reasons to do with anachronism and its construction of a stable, definitive sexual identity; this will be discussed more fully later in the introduction. But the term 'sadomasochistic' has a useful naming function in the context in which Eagleton uses it. It makes it clear that what is going on is not just workplace bullying (though Eagleton does merge the idea of bullying with what he calls sadomasochism), and not just an 'awakening to adult sexuality' (Maynard viii), but something different: something that alchemises frustration, reproof, deprivation, condescension and defiance – the elements of Brontëan relationships – into pleasure.

The second question, of how we can approach the depiction of sexual power dynamics in literature as critics, is crucial to the way this thesis interacts with the wealth of writing on Brontë's novels that precedes it. Sandra Gilbert's 1998 essay on *Jane Eyre* takes up the thread of the influential *Madwoman in the Attic* almost twenty years later. It is shot through by a phrase used by Margaret Oliphant in her 1855 reading of *Jane Eyre*, which Gilbert says she did not know quite what to do with in her own reading in 1979: 'furious lovemaking'. 'To be frank, seventies feminism was uneasy in the presence of the erotic,' she notes. 'And as a feminist critic in the seventies, I knew that I too had to flee temptation...wasn't there an element of bad faith in this reading?'<sup>8</sup> Gilbert makes a partial contrast between her earlier political interpretation and her current interest in *Jane Eyre*'s erotics, but for Oliphant, *Jane Eyre*'s 'furious lovemaking' is itself political, even revolutionary. Specifically, she sees it as a putative force for gender equality and links it to the work of Mary Wollstonecraft, calling it 'a wild declaration of the "Rights of Woman" in a new

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<sup>6</sup> John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), ix.

<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, 1975 (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 42.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Gilbert, 'Jane Eyre and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer 1998, 351-372, 354-355.

aspect...The man who presumed to treat her with reverence was the one who insulted her pretensions, while the lover who struggled with her...was the only one who recognized her claims of equality' (Oliphant 557). Writing about the shift in her relation to *Jane Eyre* over time, Gilbert describes struggling with her own desires as a reader, and her attempt to reread the novel without 'identifying against' this readerly and erotic desire (355). Her conclusion, however, is ambivalent, representing the reader as seduced and overcome, perhaps against her own best interests: 'Finally, perhaps, that fierce gaze of darkness is what Jane and Rochester, similarly riddled by desire, assimilate into themselves. And perhaps, too, their defiant acceptance of such darkness makes the "wild nights" of their Romanticism so compelling that once again, to my own surprise, here I am, theorizing about the novel in which they star.' (370)

Gilbert's essay both lays out historical issues with feminist readings of desire and sexuality in novels – in particular, the historical tendency within some strands of feminism to see sex as an irredeemably oppressive force – and partly exemplifies it, in the author's wariness about her own response to the novel's eroticism. This thesis not only focuses on sexuality in Brontë, but on the sorts of desire and sexual expression that tend to be described as oppressive even by people who do not see sex in general that way. A 1990s feminist critic such as Judith Mitchell, who writes on women as desiring subjects and explores the erotic potential of Brontë's novels, would be likely to take issue with the idea that, for instance, heterosexual intercourse is oppressive in and of itself.<sup>9</sup> But describing Louis's desire to dominate Shirley sexually, she notes that '[m]odern feminists might well recoil in disgust from such a view, as it so clearly delineates the craving for power of the dominant over the submissive, the master over the slave.' (61) Similarly, Gilbert praises Jane's sexual self-expression while being careful to situate it as assertive as opposed to submissive: 'What (in another context) one feminist critic rather dismissively called "romantic thralldom" may have been Brontë's problem in her frustrated relationship with Heger, but her

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<sup>9</sup> As in, for instance, Andrea Dworkin's famous statement: 'Intercourse itself is immune to reform...[it] remains a means, or the means, of physiologically making a woman inferior: communicating to her cell by cell her own inferior status...until she gives up and gives in, which is called surrender in the male lexicon' (*Intercourse*, 1987 (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 174). Dworkin's ideas about sex are obviously more complex than this suggests. My point is that some critics who do not present the desire for (say) heterosexual intercourse as in need of reform in itself nonetheless present the desire for sexual expression through power dynamics as such.

fantasy of fulfilment liberated Jane into erotic as well as linguistic assertion' (356).<sup>10</sup>

In these critical passages, some crucial concepts – ‘dominant’, ‘submissive’, ‘romantic thralldom’ – seem to operate in ambiguous ways. In present-day usage, the words ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ used in noun form to describe a person (‘the dominant’, ‘the submissive’) have a fairly specific meaning: they describe roles in a power exchange dynamic that sexual partners<sup>11</sup> choose to adopt or perform with each other, based on mutual desire and negotiation. In such a dynamic the dominant’s ‘craving for power’ over the submissive is part of the definition and assumed to be what both parties want. To ‘recoil in disgust’ from this, as Mitchell suggests that a feminist reader will, only makes sense if the reader feels disgust at consensual sexual power exchanges in general. As this introduction goes on to discuss, some feminist theorists consider that such power exchanges are oppressive in and of themselves, usually because they are seen as resulting from, mimicking, and/or perpetuating oppressive societal power structures. Mitchell’s argument appears to be doing something congruent to, but slightly different from this. The other part of her description, ‘the master over the slave’, suggests that she is, instead, glossing over the element of consent. ‘Master’ and ‘slave’ are terms that some people in dominant/submissive relationships use to describe themselves, and they have become associated with dominant/submissive and sadistic/masochistic relations in general. But they are, of course, also terms describing a non-consensual relation in which roles of unequal power are not freely assumed, but forced by one person upon the other. Just after this, Mitchell describes Shirley’s submission as the reverse of acting ‘upon her own desire’, rather than as the result of it (61). She mentions ‘the erotic possibilities inherent in submission’ and is aware that ‘dominant’ and ‘submissive’ can refer to fantasy roles enacted for sexual purposes, but she also uses these concepts as if the power exchange they describe were of a piece with the nonconsensual

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<sup>10</sup> See Rachel Blau DuPlessis on H.D.: ‘this culturally mandated and seductive pattern of male-female relations...Romantic thralldom is an all-encompassing, totally defining love between unequals’ (‘Romantic Thralldom in H.D.’, *Contemporary Literature*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 1979, 178-203, 178).

<sup>11</sup> Although this thesis specifically deals with sexual power relations, not all consensual and desired sadistic/masochistic or dominant/submissive relations are sexually motivated. See Staci Newmahr, *Playing on the Edge: Sadomasochism, Risk and Intimacy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011) for more on practitioners’ own descriptions of their motivations.

inequality between an actual master and an actual slave (62). Gilbert's phrase 'romantic thralldom', borrowed from Rachel Blau DuPlessis, has a similar dual meaning: 'thralldom' suggests a real, historical oppressive relation, but also the romantic (and Romantic) notion of being enthralled by someone one desires. It evokes both real oppression, and oppression used as a way of conceptualising and performing sexual desire and pleasure.

Reading the relationship in the scene above, it clearly makes a difference whether Louis is bullying and manipulating Shirley, or whether the two are engaged in a sexual game that plays with fantasies of objectification, struggle and conquest. Chapter 3 of this thesis explores this issue, and suggests that there are elements of both in their relationship. But the fact that the question has no straightforward answer does not mean that the issue of consent in sexual power dynamics is unimportant. Brontë critics have often assumed that such dynamics in Brontë's work, whether apparently consensual or not, are always evidence of genuine oppression: that sexual dominance or sadism is by definition tyrannous, and sexual submission or masochism by definition self-destructive. Concepts of play, interaction, flexibility and choice are rarely part of these critical explorations. This misestimates the variety of ways in which sexual power dynamics can work, and moreover, leads us to miss a great deal in Brontë's novels.

*rethinking sexual power dynamics: 'enjoy without guilt the old fantasy'<sup>12</sup>*

A number of critical works on relationships and sexuality in Brontë more or less explicitly invoke a scale of values in their readings. On this scale, relations that do not focus on power dynamics represent a positive advance, often described in terms of maturity, mutuality, equality and/or feminism, on relations that do. Menon writes of *Shirley* that '[a]lmost all love in the novel is expressed in terms of hostility or in the interactions of domination and submission...In this regard, the work shows no advance over *The Professor* and little over the juvenilia. That it is not as appealing as *Jane Eyre* is tribute to the skill with which Jane's hunger for power is made more acceptable to the reader' (116).<sup>13</sup> Judith Mitchell

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<sup>12</sup> Jean Wyatt, *Reconstructing Desire: The Role of the Unconscious in Women's Reading and Writing* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1990), 40.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Ann Davis also notes the judgmental, teleological quality of Menon's analysis, seeing her reading as a result of 'the unacknowledged language of psychoanalysis' ('Useful Dangers: The Erotics of Form, Sodomasochism, Victorian Narrative', Ph.D thesis (Los Angeles:

praises *Villette* for coming ‘very close to achieving sexual equality’ in the relationship between Lucy Snowe and Paul Emanuel: ‘The message is that female desire can move beyond romantic submission to a place of greater equality, can be re-directed to encompass reality rather than romantic fantasy.’<sup>14</sup> Arguing against Robert Keefe’s conception of Lucy and Paul’s relationship as fundamentally unequal, Mitchell describes it as ‘a real achievement for Brontë’ and ‘a real advance in Charlotte Brontë’s feminism’ (70). Aside from the question of whether portraying a different kind of sexual relationship actually does represent an ‘advance’, this focus on achievement, moving beyond, and coming closer to an aim closes down interpretive possibilities. It assumes that the texts are or should be striving towards a particular goal, and that various aspects of the text’s eroticism are only interesting in the binary terms of whether they lead towards or away from it.

Other writers have assumed a similar scale of values, while showing less optimism about Brontë’s progress. Miriam Bailin does consider the dimension of pleasure in sexual power dynamics, discussing ‘pain experienced as pleasure’ in the context of the Victorian sickroom, but she concludes that ‘for Brontë, ultimately, there seems to be no available alternative to relations based on the cruel opposition between domination and submission: there are only more or less consolatory variants’.<sup>15</sup> The key word here is ‘cruel’, another instance of the slippage in terms described in the previous section: the description of the ‘opposition’ as ‘cruel’ seems to have nothing to do with how the participants feel about it, whether it is desired, and what uses it is put to. The same word appears earlier on in Dianne Sadoff’s psychoanalytic reading of Brontë, which notes that

[t]he master-servant or figurative father-daughter relationship in Brontë’s novels has been called by many critics ‘masochistic’... The cruel combination of sadism and masochism which unsettles these and other critics of Brontë’s work takes shape, as [Terry] Eagleton demonstrates, in the social structures of capitalism and, as [Helene]

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University of Southern California, 2012), 168).

<sup>14</sup> Judith Mitchell, *The Stone and the Scorpion: The Female Subject of Desire in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1994), 70.

<sup>15</sup> Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 77.

Moglen shows, in the individual personality as shaped by relationships in the family.<sup>16</sup>

Sadoff goes on to argue that the female masochism other readers have seen in Brontë's work can be reread as part of the novels' figurative enactment of the father-daughter bond, and draws on Brontë's real-life relationship with her father to make her point. In many ways this rethinking has explanatory force: familial relationships are a conspicuously missing term in Brontë, and many of the characters seem to be in search of an ideal, elective family. But the interpretation also simplifies Brontëan masochism by taking it to be a wholly fixed, gender-bound, almost fated entity, and overlooking the valences of it that do not fit the father-daughter mould.

Jean Wyatt also considers father-daughter relations, and also refigures the terms of the scale of values. Instead of opposing relationships with equal power roles to dominant/submissive relationships, her opposition is between the 'high ideals' of women's liberation, which she describes as 'ideologically correct', versus what she sees as female readers' 'passionate desire' for a strong man (40). Wyatt's analysis focuses on women's reading experiences of *Jane Eyre*, but moreover, she tends to assume that these women have all had similar childhood experiences of distant fathers, and that their readings simply retrace them: 'a reader's vicarious experience of passion for a distant, inaccessible, worldly man...can only recirculate desire through old memory traces of love for a mobile, authoritative, distant father.' (24) She notes that some female readers feel liberated or assertive when reading *Jane Eyre*, but situates these readers, too, in a father/daughter context, describing them as defying 'patriarchal injunctions to be a good girl' (25).

'In lucid and compelling rhetoric, Jane advocates in speech after speech the emancipation of women from the domestic world into a wider field of endeavor; but a conservative undertow of images pulls the reader back into confinement in that world through the attractions of the patriarchal figure that Jane loves,' Wyatt writes (11). In her reading, desire – here imagined as both Jane's and the reader's desire for Rochester as absent father figure – is a riptide, drawing female readers away from their feminist ideals and into bondage. *Jane*

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<sup>16</sup> Dianne F. Sadoff, *Monsters of Affection: Dickens, Eliot and Brontë on Fatherhood* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 132.

*Eyre* is ‘a text whose conscious ideals of female autonomy and sexual equality are sabotaged by images of symbiosis with a strong oak of a man’, so it appeals to readers who want to ‘enjoy without guilt the old fantasy of having one's patriarch all to oneself.’ (39-40) Yet the text ‘does nothing to move readers beyond that impasse, toward change’ (40). Wyatt considers the idea of union with a dominant man to be part of most women’s ‘unregenerate unconscious desire’ (chapter 3 of this thesis argues that Brontë’s works do not support this idea), but she is equally clear that this fantasy is in direct conflict with ‘conscious ideals of female autonomy and sexual equality’ (39). If women do not feel guilty about enjoying this ‘old fantasy’, they should.

More problematically, in some critical work, the assumption that Brontë’s sexual power dynamics are oppressive in themselves also means that genuine inequality and oppression can be subsumed under the rubric of sadomasochism or dominance and submission. Carl Plasa cogently discusses what he calls ‘the dangerous affront of slavery as trope’ in *The Professor*, quoting Frederick Douglass’s 1846 lecture on American slavery, which argues that using the word as a convenient metaphor ‘detract[s] from the dreadful horror’ of actual slavery.<sup>17</sup> But his own argument makes the same metaphorical move in reverse when he mentions Juanna Trista, a Spanish-Belgian student of William Crimsworth’s, who ‘went to join her father in the \_\_\_ Isles, exulting in the thought that she should there have slaves whom, as she said, she could kick and strike at will’.<sup>18</sup> Plasa describes this as a ‘celebration of her future role as colonial dominatrix’ (8). The word ‘dominatrix’ has been used to mean ‘female dominator’ in a general sense for centuries, but in current usage the primary meaning is ‘a female dominant sexual partner’. In this way, Plasa’s use of the word projects a sexual dimension onto Juanna’s violent fantasies, and moreover, describes a nonconsensual mistress/slave relationship as if there were no important differences between that and any dominant/submissive relationship. A similar process is seen in Michelle Massé’s work on female masochism and Gothic literature. Her use of the word ‘masochism’, including in

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<sup>17</sup> Frederick Douglass, *The Frederick Douglass Papers: Vol. 1: Speeches, Debates and Interviews*, ed. John W. Blassingame (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 1979), 317. Quoted in Carl Plasa, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Foreign Bodies: Slavery and Sexuality in *The Professor*’, *Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter 2000, 1-28, 9.

<sup>18</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor: A Tale*, 1857 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosenbaum, 101. All subsequent references are to this edition.



the context of *Jane Eyre*, is complicated by the fact that she also repeatedly describes the protagonist of Sade's *Justine* as a masochist because she does not fight her rapists and torturers: 'Justine, like O and all masochists who internalize the strictures that bind them, replicates her condition'.<sup>19</sup> In both critical works, fantasy tropes of consensual sexual power dynamics – punishment, slavery, rape, subjugation – are treated as though they were their non-fantasy counterparts, and vice-versa. When dealing with novels where complex, sometimes destructive, sometimes imaginatively creative power dynamics are part of the fabric of the text, a more nuanced conception of these dynamics can only help us.

*progressions: 'weird curves'*<sup>20</sup>

The argument of this thesis is in some ways a deliberate throwback: it is often in dialogue with Brontë criticism and theories of sexuality from the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, though it also forms part of a very recent shift in attitudes to sexual power relations in literature. The time around and just after the 1980s 'sex wars' – a period of conflict over the political implications of sexual practice, desire and representation within, in particular, American feminism – was a fertile time for discussing sexuality, gender and power in Brontë. After the discourse-shaping *Madwoman in the Attic*, which reads Brontë's work in terms of the struggle for female creativity to assert itself in a patriarchal context, critics such as Wyatt, Menon, Mitchell and Sadoff all asked questions about what kinds of eroticism, what kinds of desire, are possible in a world of gendered power differentials. For such writers, Brontë's eroticism is often seen as problematic in feminist terms, or as striving to create a feminist eroticism that it never or rarely achieves. Sally Shuttleworth's historicist study of Brontë in the context of Victorian psychology and Janet Gezari's study of Brontëan defensiveness both engage with sexual power relations in valuable ways, although their inflections are different from those of this thesis. Tracing the power play between Jane and Rochester, Shuttleworth describes it as a 'decisive innovation in the genre of the novel': here, power does not circulate around virginity or violation, but around knowledge, and '[e]rotic excitement is produced by evading interpretative

<sup>19</sup> Michelle Massé, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism and the Gothic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 139.

<sup>20</sup> Marianne Noble, *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 4.

penetration'.<sup>21</sup> Gezari's reading of *The Professor* has a rich sense of the 'intimacy essential to the relation of master and pupil as Brontë idealizes it', and, like Shuttleworth, she argues that the power dynamic can only be maintained by distance: 'Crimsworth only maintains his position as Frances Henri's master by...a wary dissimulation of his feelings'.<sup>22</sup>

In this sense, both Gezari and Shuttleworth are in concord with John Kucich's model of Brontëan power relations, in which desire is based on maintaining distance: '[a]t its highest pitch, Brontëan desire never seeks to achieve union between two selves – union that might promise equilibrium or rest, or a plenitude of feeling that might alleviate loss. Rather, desire always seeks to intensify isolation.'<sup>23</sup> This thesis draws on all three authors' conceptions of the importance of repression, distancing and struggle to Brontëan desire. However, it differs from them in considering that sexual power dynamics in the texts finally produce intimacy and revelation rather than distance and dissimulation. Such intimacy can rarely be described in terms of 'union', 'equilibrium' and 'rest', because the process (of struggle, overpowering, discovering, teasing) is seen as more desirable than any possible end result (of one ruling and one subjugated party).

In the last ten years or so, critical work on Charlotte Brontë has tended not to focus directly on her novels' performances of domination, submission, sadism and masochism, but to approach issues of sex, desire and power more obliquely. Janis McLarren Caldwell's 2004 work on literalisation in Brontë, which reads the 'revealing of one person to another' as 'a literalized battle between stubbornly resistant parties', touches on the idea of sadomasochism as a 'markedly Brontëan peculiarity', though it also revises it by describing it as only 'seeming sadomasochism'.<sup>24</sup> Elaine Freedgood calls her Brontë chapter in *The Ideas in Things* 'Souvenirs of Sadism', and gives a persuasive reading of Jane Eyre's use of 'experiences of abjection', like actual slavery, 'to build her own sense of subjectivity and a sense of control over it' (47). As Plasa does in his

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<sup>21</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 172.

<sup>22</sup> Janet Gezari, *Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 53.

<sup>23</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 52.

<sup>24</sup> Janis McLarren Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: From Mary Shelley to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 98-99.

reading of *The Professor*, she emphasises that Brontë's free metaphorical use of the concept of slavery takes it to be 'part of a newly constructed unchanging human condition...transhistorical, and thereby psychological and above all, individual' (49). Freedgood's tracing of *Jane Eyre*'s language of mastery and slavery to actual events compellingly shows the importance of these origins, but accepting her argument fully requires the reader not to be interested in sexual power dynamics between individuals. In her reading they can be seen only as individualistic distortions of a historical reality – as a form of delusive 'self-help', rather than, as chapter 4 of this thesis argues, ways of destabilising the idea of the self (49).

Robert Polhemus's *Lot's Daughters* interprets Brontë's work in terms of the relationship between Charlotte, her sisters and her father. In this sense, the thrust of his argument, if not its playful form, is similar to Sadoff's in *Monsters of Affection* or Wyatt's in *Reconstructing Desire*. He casts the double desire of *Jane Eyre*, which he describes as 'a violent story full of raging desire for both justice and transgression',<sup>25</sup> as a dramatisation of 'the long-existing fascination of the girl with the older man's power and experience and the older man's fascination with the young woman's fresh, erotic appeal and hopeful mind' (164). In other words, sexual power dynamics, 'erotic needs and cravings for masters to adore, talk with, hurt, suffer for, abase, nurture, and reproduce', are, in Brontë, strictly a father/daughter affair (167). Again, this description is persuasive as far as it goes, but ultimately too narrow. Moreover, Polhemus's reading of dynamics that enact fantasies of victimisation sometimes glosses over actual gender-based victimisation. He praises Emily Brontë for having transcended concepts of gender in *Wuthering Heights*, contrasting her with Charlotte, who to him appears to be saying that 'if you don't see the need to control men and check their force by resistance and education, by the sanction of law and/or by seducing them into some sort of practical, moral or erotic dependency, you cannot alter the continuing pattern of victimization' (178). But for Emily, with her fascination with death, '[w]orrying about gender inequality and sexism...is like us worrying about fair play and etiquette in Auschwitz or the Twin Towers' (179). His reading, then, does not always take into account the way the 'continuing pattern of victimization' based on gendered power

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<sup>25</sup> Robert Polhemus, *Lot's Daughters: Sex, Redemption, and Women's Quest for Authority* (Stanford University Press: Stanford, 2005), 166.

inequalities affects fantasy-based power dynamics.

Madeleine Wood's 'Enclosing Fantasies: *Jane Eyre*', written for *The Madwoman in the Attic*'s twentieth anniversary, does situate sexual desire in this context, but to the point of conceiving of desire itself as a gendered trap. Like Wyatt, Wood sees Jane's journey as going nowhere: 'she is caught within her own patterns of desire as well as by patriarchal structures'.<sup>26</sup> Wood describes Jane's experience of both sexual desire for men and desire for freedom and independence as 'the novel's process of double-think', suggesting that the two needs are incompatible (99). She captures Jane's ambivalence towards gendered power structures, noting that she wants 'not only to burn down patriarchal structures [but] to exist within them, be accepted by them, and appropriate them' (101). But her conception of reality and fantasy in the novel, as it relates to sex and power, is almost the reverse of that of this thesis. She sees Jane and Rochester as engaging in 'games of equality' (104) that are belied by Jane's sense of being 'quite mastered' by her desire for him (*Jane Eyre* 175). In her interpretation, the reader's perception of their equality is false, 'reliant on melodramatic contrivances' on the part of the text (103). Both Wood and I think of *Jane Eyre* as taking place within patriarchy, and unlike Polhemus neither of us wants to reclaim the idea.<sup>27</sup> But where Wood considers that the game between Jane and Rochester is equality – that is, that their supposed equality is a contrivance covering up the reality of oppression – in my interpretation the game is the power struggle. Indeed, the concept of game-play might be a more fruitful way of thinking about the real/unreal quality of Jane and Rochester's power struggles than the more common way of thinking about encounters in sexual power play, as 'scenes'. Like theatrical scenes, play requires willing participants that accept implicit or explicit roles and rules of engagement, but the notion of play further emphasises the possibility of effects and stakes extending beyond the space of engagement. Jane's statement (which

<sup>26</sup> Madeleine Wood, 'Enclosing Fantasies: *Jane Eyre*', in *Gilbert and Gubar's The Madwoman in the Attic After Thirty Years*, ed. Annette R. Federico (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2009), 95.

<sup>27</sup> 'Patriarchy can be a helpful term and concept, but it loses explanatory power, loses its potential to expand knowledge and understanding, if it's only used to mean *bad, bad, bad* – just an evil system by which men, for their own selfish ends, have run the world and oppressed women and children. Patriarchs have made and shaped history because life and motherhood were precarious' (Polhemus 147). But the view of patriarchy that Polhemus criticises is a straw man, and his own conception of it, which positions morality and justice as a 'refinement' to be pursued after the basic requirements of life are achieved, seems unconvincing (147).

Wood quotes) that Rochester's 'influence...took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his' can thus be read as true and deeply felt, while also involving a dimension of play in which loss of power can be experienced as pleasurable (175). Their relationship, and the novel's wider context, are laden with pre-existing power inequalities, but the sexual power dynamics between them are consciously engaged in and, like the best play, a source of pleasure.

Recent Brontë criticism, then, tends either to touch only lightly on sexual power dynamics or to maintain the assumption of earlier criticism that they are essentially destructive. The sex-radical<sup>28</sup> vein in present-day feminism, which concerns itself with issues of agency and consent, the relations between sexual practices and the culture at large, and the variety and complexity of sexual experience, offers a theoretical purchase on Brontë studies that is only beginning to be explored.

A fairly recent critical dialogue on sexual power dynamics in literature, between Marianne Noble and a reviewer of her study on female masochism in nineteenth-century sentimental writing, suggests how sex-radical theory could expand critical approaches. Noble conceives of female masochism as neither wholly liberating nor subjugating, but as a 'weird curve' or adaptive response that enabled the writers she studies to express their desires in a restrictive environment (4). She is interested in the creative possibilities of masochism, and wants to avoid both the early psychoanalytic model of female sexuality as inherently masochistic and the radical feminist view of masochism as a product of male oppression. This is a fruitful approach, and the book insightfully demonstrates how masochism might be historicised. However, her argument finally conceives of this kind of sexual desire as inevitably a product of oppression: without the negative societal strictures that created these 'weird curves', there would be no need for the adaptive response of masochism. Anna

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<sup>28</sup> 'Sex-positive' is by far the most commonly used term for the strand of feminism that argues for the valuing of sexual expression, desire and agency in its variant forms as an important part of the project of gender equality. This thesis uses 'sex-radical' to describe its approach because, while it is in disagreement with feminists and theorists who consider some sexual expressions problematic even when they are freely engaged in, implicitly positioning them as 'sex-negative' is often inaccurate. On the other hand, the idea of being neutral about sex as such almost seems more conceptually fraught, as when Elisa Glick calls for 'a new focus on the political and material effects of pro-sexuality' and presents her critique as 'not anti-sex, but rather refus[ing] to be either "for" or "against" sex and particular sexual styles' ('Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression', *Feminist Review*, No. 64, Spring 2000, 19-45, 19). By contrast, this thesis positions itself as 'for' both sex and particular sexual styles in and of themselves.

Mae Duane's review of the book, however, considers even this condemnation of masochism as such too permissive. She mentions 'the problematic reality that many women have actually *enjoyed* suffering', and notes that 'readers committed to overt and unequivocal resistance to oppression' may feel provoked by her argument.<sup>29</sup> Duane concludes her review: 'for the larger scholarly community, the uneasiness Noble's argument may cause exposes how easily critics can succumb to the temptation to exclude and condemn what displeases us, even as we imagine ourselves working towards a celebration of difference.' (258) Although this is a call for greater tolerance, it clearly describes who 'we' as critics are: uneasy, displeased, and trying to celebrate difference; not ourselves different, suffering, enjoying. Too often, even now, the critical perspective on sexual power dynamics is an outside perspective, uneasy or accepting, condemning or allowing. It is rarely a perspective of desire.

*perspectives of desire: 'how do you feel?'*<sup>30</sup>

In this thesis, I want to re-open the conversation. I want us as critics to think more broadly, more imaginatively and more excitedly about Brontëan sexuality, to see a proliferation of possibilities in Brontë's texts rather than a scale of acceptability. There are already signs that new readers are beginning to revise former assumptions and turn to different ways of approaching sexual power dynamics. Two recent doctoral theses focus wholly and explicitly on sexual power relations in Victorian literature. Claire Jarvis's 2008 work 'Making Scenes: Supersensual Masochism and Victorian Literature' focuses on 'a scenic masochism featuring a submissive male and dominant female', using this pattern to reread literary and real-life representations of Victorian marriages (including work by Emily, but not Charlotte Brontë).<sup>31</sup> In some respects, Jarvis's conception of masochism follows Gilles Deleuze's: she speaks of a 'masochistic dyad' rather than a sadist/masochist pairing (2), and sees masochism and sadism as formally distinct: 'For Deleuze and for me, the unifying symbolic aspect of masochism is its emphasis on scenic suspension: the whip that does

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<sup>29</sup> Anna Mae Duane, 'An Uneasy Union: Pain, Pleasure, and Power in American Sentimental Fiction', review of *The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* by Marianne Noble, *NOVEL: A Fiction Journal*, Vol. 33, No. 2, Spring 2000, 256-258, 257-258.

<sup>30</sup> Davis, 225.

<sup>31</sup> Claire Jarvis, 'Making Scenes: Supersensual Masochism and Victorian Literature', Ph.D thesis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 2008), 12.

not strike, the raised hand that threatens, but never connects with its target' (4). However, Jarvis criticises Deleuze's idea that there is only one agent or subject in the masochistic relationship, with the supposed female sadist being, in fact, a masochist suborned into acting out the male masochist's fantasies. Instead, she uses Richard von Krafft-Ebing's case studies and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's *Venus in Furs* to posit that the dominant woman is an active participant in these scenes, and to underscore the importance of 'sexual sympathy' to masochistic dyads: 'agreement only remains as long as each partner's desires are met' (5-6).

A fundamental disjunction between this thesis's theory of sexual power dynamics and Jarvis's is her description (following Deleuze) of relationships based on contract and negotiation as 'masochistic'. Fixed, institutionalised power dynamics are described as 'sadistic', thus casting consensual power dynamics as masochistic and non-consensual ones as sadistic. In a sense, this simply reinscribes the more common uses of the terms 'sadistic' and 'masochistic', without necessarily changing the sense of what goes on in a consensual power dynamic. However, the redefining of these terms in ways that are at odds with most practitioners' usage seems to imply a devaluing of dominant or sadistic desire. Jarvis nonetheless strongly contests this devaluing in other ways, and a similar idea is at the core of both our theses: that reading sexual power dynamics can show us 'not only how a "perverse" sexuality scopes the limits of "normative" sexuality, but also how sexuality as such impinges on questions of what constitutes subjectivity and gendered selfhood' (10). The theses, then, share the basic aim of reading sexual power dynamics in terms of the participants' desire and agency.

The critical work that chimes most interestingly with the aims of my own project is also one of the most recent: Mary Ann Davis's 2012 doctoral thesis 'Useful Dangers: The Erotics of Form, Sadomasochism, Victorian Narrative'. Davis's intervention is to consider sadomasochism – her preferred term, on the basis that 'the compounding of sadism and masochism [in this phrase] symbolizes the relational nature of these erotics, existing as two fundamentally different worldviews put into relation with one another' (11) – as a conceptual tool for thinking about Victorian narrative, focusing less on erotic identities than on erotic forms, like 'suspense, narration, contracts' (iv). Davis considers

that sex, ‘even the most “natural” and vanilla of events’, is always at once a matter of personal expression and a political engagement (17-18), and she uses this awareness to position sadomasochism as a particular kind of play: ‘rather than manifesting a desire to remain outside of social relations, sadomasochism’s play depends upon engaging with social relations’ (24). *Useful Dangers* deals with a range of Victorian novels, with the final chapter exploring *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*, and Davis’s way of thinking about Brontëan power dynamics is in accord with my own: ‘Instead of negotiating sadomasochism out of her novels, I consider how these erotics are negotiated within Brontë’s works as an ethical mode of empowerment.’ (41) Our approaches are finally complementary rather than overlapping: where Davis is interested in sadomasochism at the level of narrative form, ‘beyond its main binary players’, this thesis, while it uses narrative structure and form to make its points, is most deeply interested in the things that happen between Brontë’s characters. In a rethinking of sexual power dynamics in literature, these relationships, overdetermined and overinscribed sites for our beliefs about how desire works or should work, deserve another exploration.

*concepts of sexual power dynamics: ‘an incapacity to shape our lips around certain words’<sup>32</sup>*

That the word often used to denote the peculiar quality of Brontë’s power dynamics, *sadomasochistic*, is a word that Charlotte Brontë herself would not have known seems almost too obvious a point to make. The words ‘sadism’ and ‘masochism’ were first used in 1886 in Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathia Sexualis*, and writers like Alison Moore and Susan Derwin have shown how many of the problems inherent in these concepts were present from the start. Derwin discusses the implications of the fact that both types of experience are named after authors whose bodies of work are supposed to exemplify them, Donatien de Sade and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch: ‘To assume that the particular forms in which violence and pleasure are fused in Sacher Masoch and Sade’s novels directly translate into the understanding of human behaviour is to confuse fiction and the real’.<sup>33</sup> Although Derwin extends her

<sup>32</sup> William A. Cohen, *Sex Scandal: The Private Parts of Victorian Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 239.

<sup>33</sup> Susan Derwin, ‘Naming Pains’, *MLN*, Vol. 108, No. 3, April 1993, 472-483, 475.



point to include psychoanalysis's use of literature in general, it seems important to note that this distinction is especially central in sexual power dynamics, which themselves involve exploiting the distinction between reality and fantasy. Focusing on sadism, Moore describes how it became imagined as a continuum of pathology: 'from the moment the neologism had been invented, "sadism" encompassed the slippages between even the lightest forms of fantasmagoric sexual pleasure in the pain of others, the violent cruelty of sexual murderers and the social violence of tyrannic historical figures.'<sup>34</sup> She notes that 'once the possibility of a non-pathological active sadistic desire is invoked', for instance by theorists who practice BDSM themselves, 'the late nineteenth century's pathologized collapsing of spanking enthusiasts with sexual murderers' must be reconsidered (487).

This section does not intend to sketch out the late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century history of the concepts clustering around desires involving sexual power dynamics, although references to this history, in particular to psychoanalytic and feminist interpretations, appear throughout the thesis.<sup>35</sup> Instead, it will turn back to the period when Brontë was writing and ask what it means to portray sexual power dynamics in the mid-nineteenth century, before the concepts we have ended up using to describe it were available. This line of inquiry is, of course, formed and made possible by the later history of these concepts, not least because it reads Brontëan sexual power dynamics as having commonalities with, as well as obvious differences from, present-day formalised BDSM practices. While these dynamics differ from each other in, among other ways, the way participants conceive of and implement consent, the public/private aspect, the role of gender, the importance of and use of emotional attachment, the level of negotiation, the level of self-consciousness, and the actual acts performed, they share a sense that sexual power practices that work for their participants are possible, and that they can be autotelic, diverse, flexible and playful.

William A. Cohen's work on Victorian scandals revolving around sex

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<sup>34</sup> Alison Moore, 'The Invention of Sadism? The Limits of Neologism in the History of Sexuality', *Sexualities*, Vol. 12, No. 4, August 2009, 486-502, 487.

<sup>35</sup> Mary Ann Davis's *Useful Dangers*, Derwin, and Moore, among others, all have usefully problematising versions of this history. Nancy J. Holland gives a Deleuze-inflected account of psychoanalytic and pre-psychoanalytic viewpoints ('What Gilles Deleuze has to say to battered women', *Philosophy and Literature*, Vol. 17, No. 1, April 1993, 16-25.)

between men suggests a useful way into considering literally unnamed desires, since, as he notes, public homosexual identities, while ‘formed in large measure through the revelation, via scandal, of private sexual activities between men’, were also wholly linked to the notion of the ‘unmentionable’ (75). Instead of thinking about sexual power dynamics in Brontë’s mid-nineteenth-century novels in terms of normativity versus perversity, healthy sexuality versus pathology or even convention versus subversion, we might think in terms of what sorts of desire are thinkable, speakable, or visible in a particular context. Working in a Foucauldian vein that regards silence about sexuality as ‘a strategic form, not an absence, of representation’, Cohen notes that sexual unspeakability gives Victorian writers ‘abundant opportunities to develop an elaborate discourse – richly ambivalent, subtly coded, prolix and polyvalent – that we now recognize and designate by the very term *literary*.’ (3)

On the face of it, the main way in which the notion of the unspeakable applies to sexual power dynamics is that sexual power dynamics allow for precisely this kind of ambivalent, coded, prolix literary sex. Brontë’s novels contain only a few even oblique references to sexual intercourse as such. Rochester asks Jane to live with him as ‘Mrs. Rochester—both virtually and nominally’ in the south of France, which Jane points out would involve being his ‘mistress’ (304); Jane is reluctant to ‘endure all the forms of love (which I doubt not he would scrupulously observe)’ with St John Rivers (405); William Crimsworth worries that if he stays in the same house as the now-married Zoraïde Pelet, ‘the probability was that in three months’ time, a practical Modern French novel would be in full process of concoction under the roof of the unsuspecting Pelet’ (*Professor* 187). The four novels’ protagonists are shown to have two children between them, but conception, pregnancy and birth are all elided. If these glimpses, none of them very erotically charged, were all a reader had to go on, sex and power in Charlotte Brontë would not be much of a thesis topic. John Maynard does not, of course, restrict his own analysis to literal references to intercourse, but he writes of the hours after Frances Henri’s and William Crimsworth’s wedding: ‘[w]e then have the equivalent of a “the morning after” jump...there is of course some hint that something happened in those missing hours before book sorting and rational tea making, on which it will hardly help to speculate’ (89).

There are hints: after the “morning after” jump’ we see Frances kneeling on the floor, ‘divested of her bridal snow’ (*Professor* 246). But something also happens in the text itself. The line where William ‘distinctly instruct[s Frances] how to make a cup of tea in rational English style’ (246) might tell us more about the sex in this novel than a précis of those missing three or four hours would have. They have just got married, and he, her former teacher, is already giving her instructions, so we know that the teacher/student dynamic has carried through into their marriage. He is showing her how to make tea in the ‘rational English style’; the conflict between Frances’s French and William’s English has been part of their intimacy from the beginning (see chapter 4 for more on this), so the tea instructions relate to a kind of power play specific to them. And he tells her ‘distinctly’, suggesting at least a hint of the ‘*exigeant*’ (as Frances describes William earlier: ‘demanding’) (223).

This unpromising-looking sentence fragment, then, shows that one function of sexual power dynamics in a literary text is to spread the net of the erotic so widely that it can almost look innocuous. Jarvis alludes to this phenomenon: ‘Foucauldian criticism has found sex where it didn't appear to be represented; I am interested in extending this further, and in reading non-genital sex as central to Victorian erotics. Withholding sex, then, is a perverse way of having it’ (3). It can be, then, a way of evading prohibitions on writing sex, of speaking the unspeakable. This thesis is constantly engaged in discovering the extent of this net: for instance, chapter 2 at one point reads a man touching a woman's hand with a bundle of quills as a sexual act. Such discovery is a pleasure in itself. But to note that sexual power dynamics *can* evade prohibitions on writing sex is not to say that that is their purpose, or that sexual relations in Brontë are performed through conversations, objects, writing exercises, teaching and acts of violence simply because societal mores prevent the writing of other, ironically more normative, sorts of sexual expression. If there is one aspect of both Freud’s and Krafft-Ebing’s definitions of perversion that is central to Brontëan sexual power dynamics, it is that they are an end in themselves.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> ‘With opportunity for the natural satisfaction of the sexual instinct, every expression of it that does not correspond with the purpose of nature – i.e. propagation – must be regarded as perverse’ (Richard von Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1886), trans. Franklin Klaf (New York: Stein and Day, 1965), 52-53). ‘Perversions are sexual activities which...linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed

Describing the relation between ‘deviant sexuality’ and ‘orthodox cultural formations’, Cohen writes that ‘deviance is the cud that normative sexual ideology must constantly chew’ (21). This seems entirely right, but in the context of Brontëan sexual power dynamics’ relation to mid-Victorian-period sexual norms, the terms could also be reversed: deviant sexuality (not in all its forms, but in many of them) chews over normative sexual ideology. This brings up the obvious distinction between this project and Cohen’s: the desire he discusses is non-normative because it takes place between men, whereas the desire this thesis discusses is non-normative because it is expressed through power dynamics. In the present day, both kinds of desire can form identities, and both are categories of knowledge that can be revealed, though the process and stakes of revelation can be very different. But nineteenth-century desire between men was specifically designated ‘unspeakable’, and distinguished from the domain of conventional sexual behaviour by being criminalised and pathologised – even as, as both Cohen’s work and Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet* demonstrate, it also shaped and constituted what was considered conventional. Conversely, the types of desires this thesis deals with did not, in the mid-nineteenth century, have the conceptual weight they would later gain as pathologies or identities, and their relation to various forms of conventional sexual behaviour is not always clear.

One of the useful questions raised by work like Marianne Noble’s is: in a society where disparities of power often operate within romantic relationships between women and men, how does a specific woman’s desire to be sexually submissive work? Reading Maria Brooks’s 1827 poem ‘The Obedient Love of Woman Her Highest Bliss’, Noble asks: ‘Is it anything more than a conventional, conservative nineteenth-century view of female nature – that a woman’s true desire is to submit, obey, and suffer for her man?’ (4) Here it is necessary to distinguish between specific ideological views and lived experience; this thesis itself suggests that both literary and real-life sexual power dynamics could be gendered in a variety of ways. However, I take Noble’s point that it is hard for female submissive desires to be either directly subversive or conformist, to be fully visible as distinct types of desire or to pass as more

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rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim’ (Sigmund Freud, ‘Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality’ (1905), in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), 62).

conventionally expressed female sexuality. Alison Moore writes on the issue of what she calls 'hypernormative perversions' in a late-Victorian and early twentieth-century context.<sup>37</sup> She connects all gender configurations of sadomasochism to fin-de-siècle discourses of degeneracy, but notes that while masochistic men and sadistic women, who reversed normative gender roles, were seen in terms of 'sickly decline', masochistic women and sadistic men were seen as 'perversions of excess...a return of the barbaric evolutionary past' (140). In this way, female masochism and male sadism were the paranoid doubles of sexual normativity: 'If sadism was natural to men and masochism to women but all violence barbaric, then how was anyone to know whether or not his or her sexuality had stepped over the line into the excessive?...For everyone else who thought they might be normal, the need for self-surveillance was clear.' (157)

While the discourses Moore describes are from the latter part of the century, the half-visibility of these kinds of desires also operates in Brontë's novels. Characters often follow gender norms, behaving in dominant or submissive ways because they are required to by their gender or role. In *Shirley*, Caroline Helstone's self-castigating passivity after Robert Moore rejects a tentative romantic advance is one instance of this: 'a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery.' (*Shirley* 89) But expressions of desire generally either skew, exaggerate, or completely depart from convention. As discussed in chapter 3, Shirley's submissiveness is perceived as shocking: 'She glories in it! She conceals nothing! No shame, no fear', exclaims her uncle (465). For Shirley, normative sexual behaviour would involve marrying Sir Philip Nunnely, who would 'never command' her – entering into a putatively more equal relationship in terms of power, but also obeying the 'dictatorship' of her uncle, who claims a literally patriarchal power over her by insisting that she is part of his family (464). And both Shirley and Frances Henri in *The Professor* have very similar lines describing their aversion to tyranny. Shirley says to her uncle, who wishes a 'real tyrant' on her, that '[a] tyrant would not hold me for a day, not for an hour. I would rebel – break from him – defy him' (461). Frances's statement, '[a]gainst slavery all right thinkers revolt', is provoked by William asking her

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<sup>37</sup> Alison Moore, 'Rethinking Gendered Perversion and Degeneration in Visions of Sadism and Masochism, 1886-1930', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 2009, 138-157, 138.

repeatedly what she would do if she was forced to marry and stay with a 'profligate, a prodigal, a drunkard or a tyrant' (255). He seems, here, both to be assuring himself that Frances's submission proves that he is a 'good, just and faithful husband', and describing a fantasy of degradation in order to waken her rebellious 'spirit', thus defending the validity of their sexual dynamic and obliquely performing it at the same time (255). But both women's responses explicitly reject the idea that sexual submissiveness and a desire for abuse are the same thing. Considering the political valences of the concepts of tyranny and slavery, they also seem to be rejecting what Moore's 'The Invention of Sadism' describes as the conceptual conflation between sexual dominance and political tyranny. This suggests that this conflation might predate the late nineteenth century, where Moore situates it.

All this might sound a little sanitising, or like an attempt to show that Brontë's apparently submissive characters are not *really* submissive. In fact, it seems important to note how strongly Brontë links female submissiveness with agency and decision. John Kucich reads Frances Henri as sexually invested in both dominance and submission. But he seems to draw this conclusion from the fact that Frances is not submissive to everyone: 'At the end of *The Professor*, William Crimsworth clearly dominates Frances. And yet in relation to Hunsden, Frances reverses this power structure, becoming strangely aggressive and intimidating...Although Brontë cannot as yet follow out the implications of the logic here, she does suggest that Frances is capable of a direct, if transient, dominance of Crimsworth as well.' (97) But Frances's teasing of Hunsden seems rather to suggest that her submission is specific and chosen, not general and involuntary. It even works as a sexual scene in itself, albeit a manipulative one: by being, uncharacteristically, totally obedient to William and volubly clashing with Hunsden, she reinforces the value of her submission to William at Hunsden's expense.

In a historical moment where sexual desires expressed through power dynamics are not reified as pathology, such desires sometimes almost conform to and sometimes radically diverge from normative sexual ideology. In this historical context, such desires might not be thought of as potentially closeted, in Sedgwick's sense of 'a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence...that accrues particularity by fits and starts, in relation to the discourse

that surrounds and differentially constitutes it'.<sup>38</sup> Rather, they could be seen as veiled: obvious at times, blurred into near-invisibility at others. This veiled desire provokes the question Noble asks about the presence or absence of masochistic desire in Brooks's poem: 'Is it anything more?' (4)

One major aspect of the relation between sexual power dynamics and sexual norms that has so far gone unmentioned in this introduction is the question of where such desires come from: in particular, whether and to what degree they are societally conditioned or the result of pathology. Theories on sexual power dynamics often have this etiological thrust, and either attempt to determine, or assume that they already know, why people become dominant or submissive. Jessica Benjamin's psychoanalytic account of what she calls 'the problem of domination' attempts 'to understand how domination is anchored in the hearts of the dominated'.<sup>39</sup> She argues that structures of domination and submission begin in early childhood, when children try to identify with their fathers in their search for independence, but only male children are confirmed in this identification. Female children, then, develop a desire to submit, while male children develop a desire to control. 'The anchoring of this structure so deep in the psyche is what gives domination its appearance of inevitability, makes it seem that a relationship in which both participants are subjects – both empowered and mutually respectful – is impossible,' writes Benjamin (8). Michelle Massé's account of the origins of female masochism also argues that feminists 'cannot afford not to' use psychoanalysis: 'Resistance (that dread term) to psychoanalysis by some feminists and non-feminists is a way of asserting individuality and integrity of identity: "no one and nothing 'made' me" (in any of the verb's multiple senses)' (6). However, she focuses on a cultural process of formation rather than one taking place in childhood: 'Women are taught masochism through fiction and culture' (3). Masochism becomes, as in Noble's theory, a survival strategy, but where Noble sees this as a creative possibility, Massé does not: masochism 'marks the compromised ground of a large and disturbing group: those who...direct their energies toward "passing" within the system that oppresses them' (43). Both accounts explain masochism in terms of the female psyche or women's position in society, although in the

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<sup>38</sup> Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>39</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love: Psychoanalysis, Feminism and the Problem of Domination* (London: Virago, 1990), 5.

nineteenth century, one of the periods covered by Massé's work, men with sexual interests in receiving pain and women with sexual interests in administering it were clear presences in writing on sex.<sup>40</sup>

In both these arguments, particular sets of sexual interests are assumed not to be opportunities for pleasure, but problems to be overcome. The search for origins thus becomes part of a search for, in Benjamin's words, 'an authentic end to domination' (4). This thesis has its own origin story for submissive or dominant desires, which is really a multiplicity of stories, and which seems to correspond with Brontë's treatment of the subject. It considers that, as Sedgwick notes in a list of often unconsidered ways in which people differ from each other sexually, that '[f]or some people, the preference for a certain sexual object, act, role, zone, or scenario is so immemorial or durable that it can only be described as innate; for others, it appears to come late or to feel aleatory or discretionary' (25). For others yet, presumably, this preference can be created by, or experienced as created by, cultural pressures, childhood experiences or pathology. In this reading, Benjamin's and Massé's accounts may accurately describe the experiences of some people without being universally applicable. But at this point, rather than defending one account against another, I would

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<sup>40</sup> A few instances of this: *Venus School Mistress* is a compendium of short texts about flagellation first published around 1810 and reissued and expanded by several anonymous authors through the century. Its 1898 introduction mentions men who 'like to receive a fustigation, more or less severe, from the hand of a fine woman' as well as those who prefer to administer pain and those who prefer to watch, and sees the desire to receive pain as particularly characteristic of powerful men: 'there are innumerable old generals, admirals, colonels and captains, as well as bishops, judges, barristers, lords, commoners and physicians, who periodically go to be whipped' (*Venus School Mistress*, 1898 (London: Olympia Press, 2009), 4-5). The late-Victorian pornographic magazine *The Pearl* shows both men and women giving and receiving pain. It also sees 'lovers of the rod' as part of a continuum, rather than placing them at opposite poles of experience depending on whether they give or receive pain (*The Pearl: A Journal of Facetiae and Voluptuous Reading*, No. 2, August 1879, The Jack Horntip Collection, web, 16 October 2012). For instance, in a single installment of 'Miss Coote's Confession, or the Voluptuous Experiences of an Old Maid', Rosa Coote assumes all three of the roles described in *Venus School Mistress*: she whips her servant Jane, takes pleasure in seeing another servant, Jemima, whipped, and is whipped herself. While contemporary pornography can obviously not be taken as representative of sexual discourse, let alone sexual behaviour, even this small sample of material suggests that nineteenth-century sexual masochism can in no way be gendered wholly female. It might also be noted that Richard von Krafft-Ebing catalogues a wealth of cases of male masochism and only two of female masochism, though this seems to be due to his own perception of women's sexuality. He notes that '[i]ntrinsic and extraneous restraints – modesty and custom – naturally constitute in woman insurmountable obstacles to the expression of perverse sexual instinct.' (197) Conversely, he describes 'sexual bondage' – a non-pathological state of obedience and servitude towards a loved one, driven not by a sexual attachment to obedience itself but by the fear of losing the beloved – as more common in women than in men (202). Essentialising ideas about masochism and women's sexuality can be used both to inextricably connect the two, and to assert that any connection between the two is unlikely or impossible.



like to apply concepts from Sedgwick's essay on paranoid and reparative reading to consider what it would mean to move beyond a search for origins.

At the start of this essay, Eve Sedgwick describes a conversation with Cindy Patton about the 'probably natural history' of the AIDS epidemic. Patton tells Sedgwick that she is not really interested in knowing whether the HIV virus has been deliberately spread: 'what would we know then that we don't already know?' Sedgwick reflects that 'for someone to have an unmystified, angry view of large and genuinely systemic oppressions does not intrinsically or necessarily enjoin that person to any specific train of epistemological or narrative consequences'.<sup>41</sup> This leads her to consider the differences between 'paranoid reading', which (briefly put) aims to find out and expose the truth about particular cultural forms, and 'reparative reading', which aims to draw sustenance from them. While the systemic oppressions Sedgwick describe and the ones described by Massé and Benjamin are fundamentally different, it can be helpful to think of attempts to account for why people experience masochistic or sadistic desire as paranoid readings: their aim is to find out and expose the truth. Massé, for instance, wants to reveal 'the cultural, psychoanalytic, and fictional expectation that [women] should be masochistic if they are "normal" women' (2). She sees this process as collaborative, with women as both the subjects and the objects of their own paranoia: 'we are (or may become) the enemy' (6).

Of course, my own paranoid readings – attempts at revealing and exposing what I consider inaccurate and potentially harmful depictions of sexual power dynamics – are a running theme in this introduction. Sedgwick does not disavow paranoid reading as such, but wants to understand it 'in such a way as to situate it as one kind of epistemological practice among other, alternative ones' (128). Moreover, the point of the alternative she suggests, reparative reading, is not to prove that specific paranoid readings are untrue. Rather, she suggests that it is possible to move 'from the rather fixated question Is a particular piece of knowledge true, and how can we know? to the further questions: What does knowledge *do*...How, in short, is knowledge performative, and how best does one move among its causes and effects?' (124)

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<sup>41</sup> Eve Sedgwick, 'Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You', in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 124.

In this sense, this thesis tries to move towards a reparative reading of Brontëan sexual power dynamics, along the lines of Sedgwick's description of 'the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from the objects of a culture – even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them.' (150) Rather than searching for cultural or biographical answers to why Brontëan desire is structured the way it is, my thesis aims to draw sustenance and meaning from this desire. Sedgwick mentions a moment in Marcel Proust's *Time Regained* where the narrator feels "jostling each other within me a whole host of truths concerning human passions and character and conduct", [and] recognizes them as truths insofar as "the perception of [them] caused me joy". She notes that 'from any point of view it is circular, or something, to suppose that one's pleasure at knowing something could be taken as evidence of the truth of the knowledge.' (138) This thesis is interested in exploiting that purposely fuzzy 'or something'. I have attempted throughout to avoid replacing the idea of sexual power dynamics as invariably destructive with the similarly totalizing idea of sexual power dynamics as an unquestionable good. But the perception of these threads of desire in Brontë has caused me joy, and I have taken that to have some kind of truth value – not least because one of the things the thesis aims to show is that such experiences can have to do with joy at all.

*unveiling: "I want to tell you something," I said, "I want to tell you all"*<sup>42</sup>

This thesis is made up of four chapters, each centering around one book (with the exception of 'Fantasy', which is about *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor* and the *Roe Head Journal*) and one word: 'Bodies', 'Things', 'Pain' and 'Fantasy'. Taken together, the nouns sound like components of a scene of power play – participants, props, sensation, scenario – but they are also four of many possible lenses through which to consider the intersections of sexuality and power in these novels.

Each concept could usefully apply to each of the novels: bodies, things, pain and fantasy are recurring obsessions in Brontë's work. This does not mean, however, that the concepts operate in parallel ways in each of the works, or even in different scenes and relationships in each work. Although *Shirley* and *Jane*

<sup>42</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), eds. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 490. All subsequent references are to this edition.

*Eyre* both involve starving female bodies, the desiring hunger of Jane Eyre's body does and means different things from Caroline Helstone's closed-down, dwindling body. The teacher/student fantasy at the heart of *The Professor* is transformed as much as it is reprised in *Shirley* and *Villette*. And the mix of raw feeling, silliness and pleasure in Lucy Snowe and Paul Emmanuel's conversation about Lucy's supposedly showy taste in clothing (*Villette* 331-333) is very unlike Louis Moore's excited inspection of the 'pure kid' of Shirley's glove and the 'fresh, unsullied satin' of her bag (*Shirley* 439). Both scenes show a woman's belongings being examined and judged in a sexualised way, but the power dynamics in each are idiosyncratic. The two scenes show how power and desire can interact in totally different registers even when the basic set-up is similar – in one scene through struggle and revelation; in the other through an act of voyeurism that expresses both power and helplessness. One of the aims of this thesis is to pick out these different kinds of dynamics and draw meaning from them on their own terms.

Chapter 1, 'Bodies', focuses on *Jane Eyre* and considers the ways in which Brontë's treatment of bodies and embodiment in this novel undermines any predictable relation between men and women, power and powerlessness, the gazer and the object of the gaze, inflicting violence and being hurt. At the same time, this disrupting of norms is itself anything but straightforward – the text is keenly aware of the political and social aspects of embodied power inequalities, but it also eroticises strength and weakness, violence and injury, often in unexpected ways. The chapter begins by exploring contemporary responses that saw Brontëan bodies (including Brontë's own) as provocative, focusing particularly on Matthew Arnold's description of Brontë as 'one of the most distressing barren sights one can witness' in the aftermath of his reading of *Villette*.<sup>43</sup> The idea of a 'barren sight' is ambivalent: depending on how it is read it can suggest passivity (the body is barren, and can easily be seen through and diagnosed as such), but also aggression (the sight itself is barren: it gives away nothing, starving the viewer's gaze).

This pattern, in which what appear to be positions of physical weakness become sources of power and vice-versa, is one the chapter continues to trace. It considers the way Jane's starving body appears at two points in the story: her

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<sup>43</sup> Matthew Arnold, letter to Frances Lucy Wightman, 21 Dec 1850, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, vol. 1 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996), 179.

catechismal confrontation with Brocklehurst, and the proposal scene with Rochester. Both the narrative and Jane herself use her physical starvation during her time at Lowood as a way of figuring her emotional starvation at Rochester's hands, making her body a rhetorical weapon because of, not despite, its position of weakness. The third section examines the moments in the novel where a character's gaze is out of their control or a source of vulnerability, and discusses what seeing, being the object of a desiring gaze, and being unable to see means in *Jane Eyre*. The final section reads Jane's and Rochester's relationship as constituted by mutual, often pleasurable injury, and, in this context, offers a reinterpretation of what happens to the power dynamic between Jane and Rochester when he is maimed and blinded at the end of the novel.

Chapter 2, 'Things', looks at the way material objects mediate sexual power relations in *Villette*, a novel filled with things that bristle with the emotions and desires that attach to them. Rather than, as Elaine Freedgood does in her study of objects in Victorian literature, thinking of things as souvenirs – which are always metonymic, storing and calling up memories of other things, places and times – this chapter proposes the idea of things in *Villette* as sex toys: as means of replacing, trying to replace, mediating, or making possible intimate contact with others. In this way, this chapter develops the previous chapter's argument about the radically unstable relation between gendered bodies and power, since these interactions can expand the characters' erotic and aggressive scope beyond the boundaries of their bodies. By examining person-thing-person interactions in *Villette*, more dimensions of the novel's erotic life become legible.

The chapter begins by drawing on various thing-discourses – debates on the role of dildos in lesbian sex lives, Freud's analysis of Dora, Bill Brown's thing theory – to explain how one might read things in person-thing-person interactions as sex toys, and the varied forms these interactions take in *Villette*. The second section considers the risks and pleasures of going through other people's things, and uses this to reconsider the frequent critical interpretation of *Villette* in terms of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish*, suggesting that *Villette*'s culture of surveillance is modelled more on the cavity search than the Panopticon. The chapter then explores the relation of these sex toys to

fetishism, discussing the letters John sends to Lucy and Paulina and the watchguard Lucy gives Paul in terms of mutuality and risk. The final section considers how people can take on the status of things, focusing on the vexed, passionate and often silently aggressive relationship between Lucy and Paulina. It picks up on Sharon Marcus's discussion of the role of dolls in mediating desire between nineteenth-century women, using it to explore Paulina's perceived doll-likeness and Lucy's own identification with physical objects.<sup>44</sup> Like the previous chapter, this one concludes by examining the novel's riddling, inconclusive ending, and reconsidering it in the light of the novel's erotics.

Chapter 3, 'Pain', focuses on *Shirley*. It invokes the concept of dominant and submissive sexual roles more explicitly than previous chapters, which have tended to use a model of shifting dynamics rather than defined roles, because *Shirley* presents such roles in a more explicit and fixed way than *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*. In *Shirley*, this chapter argues, the negotiation of submissive and dominant roles becomes a way of managing, controlling, and sometimes transcending the fundamental pain of a fictional world where gender relations are conceived of as profoundly unequal. Without ever really proving wrong the novel-world's consistent presentation of marriage as destructive, the four central characters use the mutual revelation of desires and fantasy structures to create potential ways of surviving together.

The chapter begins by discussing *Shirley* as a novel that overturns the gendered power structures associated with novels like *Jane Eyre*. Although *Shirley* is deeply concerned with gender inequality, the central male characters are unable to take social and financial mastery of women for granted, making *Shirley* a possible test case for a consideration of how sexual roles relate to social power. The novel is often perceived by critics as betraying its original promise – inherent in the explicit remarks on the necessity of female vocation, the unconventional, forceful, somewhat gender-queer title character, the dark perspective on marriage, and the powerfully depicted relationships between both Shirley and Caroline and Caroline and her mother – by ending with two heterosexual marriages, in at least one of which the man is clearly dominant. But instead of reading the final pairings as failures of authorial nerve or nods to

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<sup>44</sup> See Sharon Marcus, 'Dressing Up and Dressing Down the Feminine Plaything', in *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007).

convention, the chapter reads them as representations in their own right of the intersections of power and desire, and suggests that *Shirley*, rather than defying feminist approval, seems to call for the sex-radical feminist practice of accepting someone's expressed desires without judgment.

The chapter goes on to discuss how these desires appear in the text, interpreting Caroline's and Shirley's expressions of desire to suggest that, in Brontë, masochism and submissiveness are very far from essential features of being female, and that different levels of societal power or powerlessness do not correspond to desires for submissive or dominant sexual roles. The final section reads two conversations, one between Shirley and Louis and one between Caroline and Robert, as processes of revealing and negotiating compromises between the characters' needs and vulnerabilities. Together, they create fantasy scenarios that allow them to relate to each other, and to manage their different kinds of pain.

The exploration of fantasy continues in the final chapter. Where 'Pain' discusses its ameliorative possibilities, 'Fantasy' considers it as an uncontrollable, unsettling form of intimacy. Fantasy is at the heart of sexual power dynamics, which implicitly or explicitly involve creating more or less counterfactual stories, scenarios or roles, and this chapter shows how it also structures relationships in Brontë. In this way, Brontëan sexual power dynamics entail a radical closeness: as her characters share fantasies, their fantasies also share them.

The chapter begins by describing how, in the fragmentary Roe Head diaries, Brontë's fantasizing is conceived of as always already shared. It does not so much construct an ideal listener as create a space where the concepts of identity, being alone, and being with someone work differently. The chapter goes on to discuss scenes of fantasy in *Jane Eyre*, suggesting that Brontëan fantasy can be thought of, structurally, as parenthetical. Parentheses are in an unstable relationship to the rest of the text; they can neither be overlooked nor read as an ordinary part of the sentence. In the same way, Brontëan fantasies are something her characters want to close away but also to share, to disavow but also to have confirmed, and even when they are not quite part of the open discourse between characters (as parentheses are not quite part of their sentences), they seem to permeate it anyway. The chapter goes on to show how

fantasy, which is central to Jane's and Rochester's relationship, creates unexpected and proliferating linkages to other characters: they are never really alone in their dyad. In this sense, *Jane Eyre's* fantasies are structured around the novel's concealed third party, Bertha. But fantasy is also both the medium and itself the object of desire: in *Jane Eyre*, the ultimate fantasy is of inhabiting the loved one's inner life; not erasing their otherness, but entering it.

The next section takes on sexual power dynamics more directly, starting from Brontë's correspondence with Robert Southey and going on to *The Professor*, and discussing the disciplining of imagination as central to how Brontë conceives of both eroticism and her own writing process. Her work enacts meetings of fantasy and restraint that are not silencing, but erotically and creatively productive. Finally, the chapter focuses on Frances's translated poem-fantasy in *The Professor*, discussing translation, teaching and language struggles as part of the novel's eroticisation of restraint. Frances's teacher/student fantasy stems from a possibly autobiographical poem by Brontë, parts of which also appear in a different form as Rochester's song in *Jane Eyre*: here, a fantasy is shared even across text boundaries. There is a profound erotic uncanniness to Brontëan fantasy: what is most one's own is what is already shared.

This is a thesis that returns over and over to tracing and interpreting moments of unveiling, moments where people risk revealing their desires. In this sense, it is as much about dynamics of vulnerability as about dynamics of power (indeed, it suggests that these two things are much the same). Mary Ann Davis's 'Useful Dangers' offers a way of thinking about how critical writing – certainly this piece of critical writing – itself takes part in such dynamics. Her thesis is structured by the elements of a formalised present-day BDSM scene, from the introductory 'Negotiations' to the closing 'Aftercare'. As 'BDSM's forms – its objects, scenes, roles – adds incongruity to sex in order to reveal all sex as a form' (18), so the form of 'Useful Dangers', which explicitly invokes a DS dynamic between the 'guiding' narrator and the 'lashed and worn' reader, calls attention to the power dynamics that inform 'this most normative and regulated space of academia', the critical text (225). In this context, the phrase 'critical position' has to be thought of not just as a hard-won, embattled set of views, but as a shifting point in a power dynamic.

For my part, if my critical position resembles anything in the texts I have been reading, it is the moment where Jane Eyre tells Rochester to speak to her, then, before he can say anything, begins to cry: ‘I had been struggling with tears for some time: I had taken great pains to repress them, because I knew he would not like to see me weep. I considered it well to let them flow as freely and as long as they liked. If the flood annoyed him, so much the better. So I gave way and cried heartily.’ (302) Like other physical breakdowns in *Jane Eyre*, this one is a demonstration and a gesture, and not passive-aggressive so much as abject-aggressive. Brontë’s novels disrupt expected configurations of power, even as they seem to be fetishising them: Jane’s disintegration, her giving way, her ‘flood’, is also an assertion of her own desire and need. Vulnerability becomes transmuted into strength. In this sense, I found my positions, or re-found them, in my texts. Most of the things I focus on in Brontë – material objects as sexual mediators, sexual negotiations, the compelling power of bodies in pain, the subjectivity-bending process of sharing fantasies – have come from using what I have referred to as the perspective of desire as a filter and a way of seeing. The thesis is, then, an unveiling of my own; my desires emerge not only from the topic of my work but from its arguments, its values, the things it notices. In introducing this work, I hope that this vulnerability will turn out to be one of the forces behind my argument.



## Bodies: *Jane Eyre*

‘He seized a heavy candlestick, and threw it at me. I dodged it submissively but firmly.’

Bret Harte, ‘Miss Mix by Ch-l-tte Br-nte’ (1867)

*plainness: ‘distressing barren sights’*

After meeting Charlotte Brontë at a party in December 1850, Matthew Arnold described her parenthetically in a letter to his fiancée: ‘I talked to Miss Brontë (past thirty and plain, with expressive grey eyes though)’.<sup>45</sup> His tone seems level and not wholly unappreciative, with some implied disdain; as William Thackeray would do later, he emphasises the age of the then-unmarried Brontë. But two years later, in a letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, he looked back on his encounter with Brontë with none of his former equilibrium: ‘She is so entirely – what Margaret Fuller was partially – a fire without aliment – one of the most distressing barren sights one can witness’.<sup>46</sup>

No longer a detached observer and judge, Arnold is suddenly distressed by the recollection of Brontë’s appearance. His description suggests that the sight of her is in some way unnatural: the image of a fire burning without fuel is disturbing because it transgresses against a law of nature. The comparison with Fuller, an American women’s rights activist, might imply that Brontë’s views on gender equality are the basis of his distress. ‘Religion or devotion or whatever it is to be called may be impossible for such people now,’ he continues in his letter to Clough, ‘but...it was better for the world when they comforted themselves

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<sup>45</sup> Matthew Arnold, letter to Frances Lucy Wightman, 21 December 1850, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Cecil Y. Lang, vol. 1 (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 1996), 179.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew Arnold, letter to Arthur Hugh Clough, 21 March 1853, in *The Letters of Matthew Arnold*, 258.

with it' (132). But the most striking thing about this 'exaggerated, almost hysterical'<sup>47</sup> reaction to Brontë is that it is expressed as a reaction to Brontë's body, and that it reveals a connection between Arnold's perception of her body and his reading of her work.

*Villette* is the event that stands between Brontë as a plain, grey-eyed woman and Brontë as a distressing barren sight. Just before his revised description of Brontë, Arnold describes her work: 'Miss Brontë has written a hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted novel – what does Thackeray say to it. It is one of the most utterly disagreeable books I ever read – and having seen her makes it more so' (132). The sense of revulsion here is complex: having seen Brontë makes her book more disagreeable, but Arnold's perception of the book also seems to be making his memory of Brontë more hideous. Arnold conflates the writer, her characters and the novel itself, as he would again a month later in possibly the most famous line used to describe the novel: 'the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact put into her book'.<sup>48</sup> But in the letter to Clough, the result of the conflation is a frightening visual image. The evocation of aspects of Brontë's body – unattractiveness, barrenness, unnaturalness – seems intended to lend weight to his dismissal of her work by a sort of ill-defined association of ideas, but the threatening power of the image counteracts this. The phrase 'barren sight' cuts both ways: it suggests that Arnold is able to gain intimate knowledge and mastery of Brontë's body just by looking at her, diagnosing infertility as confidently as William Crimsworth in *The Professor* diagnoses 'vicious propensities' in his female pupils by examining their faces (*The Professor* 100). But conversely, 'barren sight' can be taken to suggest that it is not her body, but the *sight* of it that is barren. Rather than nourishing Arnold with confident knowledge, looking at her starves and distresses him. This is Brontë as Medusa.

This literary moment, in which one man reads Brontë's last novel and decides she is even less attractive than he had originally thought, crystallises several aspects of the strangeness of embodiment in Brontë. It provides a starting point for reading Brontëan bodies as inherently provocative,

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<sup>47</sup> Barnard, Robert and Louise Barnard, *A Brontë Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 14.

<sup>48</sup> Matthew Arnold, letter to Jane Martha Forster, 14 April 1853, in *Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848-1888*, ed. George W.E. Russell, 1895 (New York and London: Macmillan, 1968), 29.

undermining any predictable relation between men and women, power and powerlessness, the gazer and the object of the gaze, inflicting violence and being hurt. This chapter focuses on *Jane Eyre* and on the bodies of the 'littler' and 'pale' Jane Eyre (98) and the grim-looking, 'neither tall nor graceful' Edward Rochester (120), exploring how the novel's sexual power dynamics are enacted through, and affected by, the characters' embodiment.

Brontë's bodies are sites of inequality. Her novels tend to render structural power imbalances as physical issues, sometimes through violence but more often through hunger, deprivation, or a sense of being faulty, heterogeneous, unfitted. Jane Eyre connects her physical appearance to being at a social disadvantage: her portrait of herself, which 'omit[s] no harsh line' and 'smooth[es] away no displeasing irregularity', expresses not just that she is 'plain' but that she is 'disconnected' (161). This link is borne out by others: Bessie notes of the orphaned and miserable Jane that 'a beauty like Miss Georgiana would be more moving in the same condition' (26), and Lady Ingram claims to be 'a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class.' (177)

In this context, 'physiognomy' refers to a pseudoscientific discourse related to, though importantly different from, phrenology. Both discourses became popular in England in the nineteenth century, and both draw connections between a person's physical form and their mental, emotional and moral qualities. Several critics have explored the importance of these models to the way bodies create meaning in Brontë's novels.<sup>49</sup> Sally Shuttleworth notes that although Brontë refers to both models, her work is 'permeated by the language and assumptions of phrenology' in particular.<sup>50</sup> Where physiognomy reads the whole character from facial features, is 'imprinted unambiguously for all to see', and conceives of a unified soul shaping its own physical container, phrenology reads specific character traits from the shape of the skull, requires specialist interpretation, and imagines the individual as composed of conflicting

<sup>49</sup> See, among others, Nicholas Dames, 'The Clinical Novel: Phrenology and *Villette*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Spring 1996, 367-390, William A. Cohen, 'Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*', *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 57, No. 4, March 2003, 443-476, and Elizabeth A. Donaldson, 'The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness', *NWSA Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, Autumn 2002, 99-119, as well as Shuttleworth and Armstrong, below.

<sup>50</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 57.

qualities and forces (61). Shuttleworth argues that phrenology functions as ‘an explanatory structure for the experience of internal division’ in Brontë’s work (62), plays into Victorian ideologies of self-help and personal development, and acts as an element in the novels’ embodied power dynamics, allowing for scenes of intimate bodily reading and revelation. Building on Shuttleworth’s work, Mary A. Armstrong’s article on erotic reading in *Jane Eyre* emphasises this element of pleasure in phrenological readings, persuasively linking the notion of the legible body to queer as well as heterosexual erotic possibility.<sup>51</sup>

While phrenology and physiognomy are thus promising modes for considering the role of the body in sexual power dynamics, this chapter approaches the idea of the meaning-filled body from a different perspective. The chapter’s focus on ‘bodies’ is not intended to explicitly exclude the phrenological and physiognomic domains of the face and head. Rather, it emphasises the entire body as a site of lived experience – of pain, hunger, connection, desire, exclusion, and pleasure. I will argue that as well as being passively interpretable through frameworks like physiognomy and phrenology, Brontëan bodies have powerful effects on their surroundings – effects often at odds with what we might assume to be sources of bodily power. *Jane Eyre*’s body both suffers from and shapes her experience of social inequality. But at the same time, bodies in *Jane Eyre*, not least Jane’s own, are the sites where structures of power and vulnerability are overturned. Bodies are a useful starting point for an exploration of sexual power dynamics because they are the sites where the text deploys the serious effects of structural power imbalances, and where power and pleasure find unexpected forms.

The double-edged quality of Arnold’s reaction to Brontë, both dismissive and overwhelmed, draws out different ways in which *Jane Eyre*’s bodies have the potential to unsettle both us and our readings. Specifically, his reaction draws out the four central ideas explored in the four sections of this chapter: plainness, hunger, seeing, and distress. This first section begins with the reader, examining how both nineteenth-century and present-day readers confront and try to assimilate the unexpected aspects of Brontëan bodies. The following section considers the effect of embodied power inequalities on sexual power dynamics by considering the way Jane’s starving body appears at two points in

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<sup>51</sup> Mary A. Armstrong, ‘Reading A Head: *Jane Eyre*, Phrenology, and the Homoerotics of Legibility’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 2005, 107-132.

the story: her catechismal confrontation with Brocklehurst, and the scene where she and Rochester become engaged. The chapter goes on to discuss how versions of the gaze in *Jane Eyre* reflect the novel's reconfiguration of power and disempowerment. Finally, it shows how Jane's and Rochester's relationship is structured by a dynamic of mutual, pleasurable injury, and rereads the novel's ending in this context.

Helena Michie describes the function of predictability in physical descriptions of Victorian heroines by comparing it to pornography: 'In the same way that repeated exposure to pornography both encourages and delimits sexual responses, the endless repetitions of cliché define an appropriate territory for engagement with the heroine's body'.<sup>52</sup> The lack of surprise or provocation in fictional encounters with female bodies is both comforting and restrictive, 'making more possible a limited degree of enjoyment but erasing the potential for adventure' (89). Michie argues that clichéd descriptions of female bodies, specifically of female beauty, create not only a pornographic but also a murderous reader/text power dynamic. The clichéd female body, she explains in a reading of the representation of Elizabeth Lavenza's body in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, is 'a construction of conventional tropes' and thus 'dead from the beginning': Elizabeth's murder is 'merely the fulfilment of necrophiliac writing' (90-91).

Michie mentions that the bodies of Brontë's heroines resist this imprisoning but reassuring 'linguistic frame', and contemporary reviews of her novels bear out the idea that there is something unexpected and unsettling about Brontëan bodies (89). Many nineteenth-century readers who found Brontë's novels in some way disturbing located the disturbance in the body – either Brontë's, her characters', or some conflation of the two. A few early reviews of *Jane Eyre* mention the protagonist's plainness approvingly as a refreshing departure from novelistic convention, most notably an unsigned review in the *Atlas*, which describes it as one of the novel's triumphs:

A bungler would certainly...have painted the heroine in radiant colours. She would have been, in a novel of approved manufacture, a beauty of the first water. The author of *Jane Eyre* has too deep an

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<sup>52</sup> Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 89.

insight into human character – too profound a knowledge of the sources of human passion, to commit any such mistake.<sup>53</sup>

But others were of the opinion of Walter Bagehot, who five years after the publication of *Villette* wrote about the sense of being cheated when a novel turns out to have an ugly heroine: “Two-and-sixpence to know the heart which has high cheek-bones!” Was there ever such an imposition?<sup>54</sup> Elizabeth Rigby’s famously negative review of *Jane Eyre* described Brontë as having failed in her ‘chief object’ of ‘making a plain, odd woman, destitute of all the conventional features of feminine attraction, interesting in our sight’, the phrase ‘in our sight’ suggesting that Jane’s body is not just ambiguously imaginable for the reader, but objectively visible.<sup>55</sup> The *Spectator* was unable to ‘see anything loveable in Mr Rochester, nor why he should be so deeply in love with Jane Eyre’.<sup>56</sup> Twenty years later, Bret Harte’s ‘condensed version’ of *Jane Eyre*, ‘Miss Mix by Ch-l-tte Br-nte’, shows the heroine as not just plain but fascinated with her own plainness: she carries a bit of looking-glass with her at all times, and is unable to resist looking into mirrors and passing judgment on herself. Like Rochester’s rough manners, which in ‘Miss Mix’ turn into outbursts of candlestick-throwing described by the heroine as ‘radically polite’, Jane Eyre’s looks are an exceptional enough feature of the novel to provide a foothold for parody.<sup>57</sup>

In 1849, *Shirley*’s two beautiful female characters, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, received a kinder reception: ‘The women...are all divine, and *Shirley* is indeed an intellectual harem’, wrote the *Daily News*.<sup>58</sup> But with *Villette*, Brontë herself, Lucy Snowe, and, as if tainted anew by association, Jane Eyre came in for harsh criticism. At this point Brontë had abandoned her androgynous pseudonym and revealed her identity, and the *Guardian* presented her and her heroines as interchangeable and equally physically

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<sup>53</sup> Review of *Jane Eyre*, *Atlas*, 23 October 1847, quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott (London and New York: Routledge, 1974), 68.

<sup>54</sup> Walter Bagehot, ‘The Waverley Novels’, *National Review*, April 1858, in *The Works and Life of Walter Bagehot, Vol. 3: Historical and Literary Essays*, ed. Mrs. Russell Barrington (London, 1915), *The Online Library of Liberty*, web, October 16 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Elizabeth Rigby, review of *Jane Eyre*, *Quarterly Review*, Vol. 84, No. 167, December 1848, 153-185, 174.

<sup>56</sup> Review of *Jane Eyre*, *Spectator*, 6 November 1847, quoted in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, 75.

<sup>57</sup> Bret Harte, ‘Miss Mix by Ch-l-tte Br-nte’, in *Condensed Novels* (New York: Carleton, 1867), *Wikisource*, web, October 16 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Review of *Shirley*, *Daily News*, 31 October 1849, no. 1071.

undesirable: ‘Lucy Snowe herself is Jane Eyre over again; both are reflections of Currer Bell; and...we should respectfully decline (ungallant critics that we are) the honour of their intimate acquaintance’.<sup>59</sup> As in Arnold’s rejection of Brontë’s body, the rejection of intimacy implies, in itself, an intimate assessment. Mrs Bryan Proctor, who had met Brontë at a dinner party and who found *Villette* ‘disagreeable’, wrote in a letter to Thackeray that ‘So plain a person must see all things darkly’.<sup>60</sup> Thackeray, in turn, conflated Brontë and Lucy – ‘it amuses me to read the author’s naïve confession of being in love with 2 men at the same time; and her readiness to fall in love at any time’ – and explained the motivations of both by Brontë’s lack of so much as ‘a penny worth of good looks’.<sup>61</sup> ‘The poor little woman of genius! the fiery little eager brave tremulous homely-faced creature!’ he wrote to Lucy Baxter. ‘I can read a great deal of her life as I fancy in her book.’ (232-233) Like Arnold’s, Thackeray’s fiery image of Brontë is ambivalent, suggesting intimate physical knowledge by the very act of disavowing any interest in it. After mentioning her unfulfilled ‘burning desire’ to find a mate, he backtracks: ‘Not that I should say burning – les demoiselles ne brulent pas’ (233). What is at issue in these readings of the novels is not so much Brontë’s life as her physical being – her attractiveness or lack of it, her slight body, the ‘eager’ but undirected physical desire she is assumed to feel – and the reflections of it that readers found in the bodies of her heroines.

Early reviews of Brontë often reveal shifts in what different times and cultures value in a text, but the bodies of Brontë’s plain heroines still seem difficult to read today. Where Brontë’s early reviewers tended to find their plainness ‘totally uncongenial’ (Rigby 110), recent readers are more likely to recast this plainness in a congenial light. Karen Lawrence concludes an article by describing *Villette* as belonging to ‘a genre in which we are accustomed to seeing a different kind of beauty shine’.<sup>62</sup> This refers to one of Lucy Snowe’s few physical self-descriptions, where, dressed for a fête, she appears to herself as ‘a mere shadowy spot on a field of light...We become oblivious of these

<sup>59</sup> Review of *Villette*, *Guardian*, 23 February 1853, 128-129, 129.

<sup>60</sup> Mrs Bryan Proctor, letter to W.M. Thackeray, 8 March 1853, in *The Letters and Private Papers of W.M. Thackeray*, ed. Gordon N. Ray (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1945), vol. 3, 231.

<sup>61</sup> William Makepeace Thackeray, letter to Lucy Baxter, 11 March 1853, in *The Letters and Private Papers of W.M. Thackeray*, vol. 3, 232.

<sup>62</sup> Karen Lawrence, ‘The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 42, No. 4, March 1988, 448-466, 466.

deficiencies in the uniform routine of daily drudgery, but they will force upon us their unwelcome blank on those bright occasions when beauty should shine' (*Villette* 131). Lawrence thus implies that Lucy's perceived 'deficiencies' are simply a different, unconventional sort of beauty. Similarly, in a reading of fairy-tale themes in *Jane Eyre*, Micael M. Clarke describes both Cinderella and Jane Eyre as 'rendered unattractive by dull, shabby clothing', a comparison that assumes that Jane, like Cinderella, is not actually unattractive.<sup>63</sup> Robert M. Polhemus calls Lucy an 'ugly duckling',<sup>64</sup> another fairy-tale image suggestive of an ultimate transformation into beauty that Lucy never really experiences, and *The Madwoman in the Attic* draws on both transformation narratives in the chapter titled 'Plain Jane's Progress': 'The smallest, weakest and plainest child in the house, she embarks on her pilgrim's progress as a sullen Cinderella, an angry ugly duckling'.<sup>65</sup> Anna Krugovoy Silver writes on Charlotte Brontë's relationship to phrenology and physiognomy:

Brontë applies the fundamental basis of these pseudosciences, that character can be established by physical type, to the analysis of women's bodies, in general favoring the slim woman – what physiognomist Alexander Walker called a 'thinking beauty' – because of her supposedly reasonable, intellectual character.<sup>66</sup>

Of course, like all fictional characters in texts, Brontë's characters have no objective, definitive physical form, so these critical descriptions are not factually inaccurate. But to place Lucy Snowe, Jane Eyre or even Frances Henri in Walker's category of 'thinking beauties', to smooth over the differences between them and the hyperbolically beautiful heroines of fairy tales, or to award them the consolation prize of 'a different kind of beauty' is to attempt to fit them into what Michie calls 'an appropriate territory for engagement with the heroine's body' (89). The attention paid by nineteenth-century commentators to Brontë's

<sup>63</sup> Micael M. Clarke, 'Brontë's *Jane Eyre* and the Grimms' Cinderella', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 40, No. 4, Autumn 2000, 695-710, 697.

<sup>64</sup> Robert M. Polhemus, *Erotic Faith: Being in Love from Jane Austen to D.H. Lawrence* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990), 110.

<sup>65</sup> Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 1979 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), 342.

<sup>66</sup> Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 101.



own body, and the continual imaginative conflation of fictional bodies with her real one, highlights that the non-beautiful female body is a provocation. As both the *Atlas* review and Michie's work suggest, the beautiful female body in fiction is normative and ordinary; the non-beautiful body is out of the ordinary. It becomes, then, a potential object of mockery – as when the Guardian reviewer assumes the right to, and then pointedly declines, 'the honour of their [i.e. Lucy's, Jane's and Brontë's] intimate acquaintance', (129) – but is also seen as itself aggressive. The same kinds of power struggles and conflicts that mark these characters' bodies are already present in the reader's response to their textual presences.

*hunger: 'the alabaster cave and silver vale where we might live'*

A paragraph into *Jane Eyre*, we are presented with the heroine's body in a state that will become familiar – tormented, problematic and generally inadequate: 'I never liked long walks, especially on chilly afternoons: dreadful to me was the coming home in the raw twilight, with nipped fingers and toes...humbled by the consciousness of my physical inferiority to Eliza, John and Georgiana Reed.' (7) That Jane is not pretty is pointed out over and over in these early scenes: 'If she were a nice, pretty child one might compassionate her forlornness,' says Abbot, 'but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that.' (26) That she is not strong is mostly implied, but no less important. John Reed orders her to 'go and stand by the door, out of the way of the mirror and the windows' so he can throw a book at her without damaging the property that 'belongs to [him], or will do in a few years', and she obeys (11). His extraordinary physical power over her seems to have less to do with her actual lack of status and inability to fight back than with their mutual perception of her as both weaker than and fundamentally different from him, a 'heterogeneous thing' (15). But the result of this perception of total difference is that Jane becomes physically attuned to John: 'Every nerve I had feared him, and every morsel of flesh on my bones shrank when he came near.' (10) This is a distorted presaging of later descriptions of Jane's love for Rochester: although the affect is very different, the sense of being utterly physically aware of another person is the same. As she watches Rochester with his guests, she notes that 'I have something in my brain and

heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him' (175). At the end of the novel, this mental assimilation develops into an experience of bodily oneness in which she is 'ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh' (450).<sup>67</sup>

In the first of these moments, Jane uses bodily, biological terms that also have strong non-biological metonymical associations. 'Brain' suggests the mind, 'heart' suggests the capacity for love, 'blood' suggests kinship, while 'nerves', as Athena Vrettos notes in the context of *Villette*, occupies an uncertain space between the physical and the mental.<sup>68</sup> Jane represents her own body as a way of asserting her sense of being 'akin to' Rochester in spite of their class and wealth differences (175): her physical form, which Lady Ingram shortly afterwards describes as revealing 'all the faults of her class', is imagined not as a barrier to her intimacy with Rochester, but as its justification (177). The physical awareness that earlier on signifies a state of oppression now signifies a likeness to the person she loves, and, by inference, a right to feel the way she does about him. But Jane also wavers between strengthening and weakening the force of her assertion, between seeing the two of them as irrefutably physically linked – 'I understand the language of his countenance and movements', 'while I breathe and think, I must love him' – and deciding that this physical link is only metaphorical after all: 'when I say I am of his kind...I mean only that I have certain tastes and feelings in common with him' (175).

Here, then, an early textual moment of fear and pain (Jane's physical fear of John) is linked with a later moment of ambivalent self-assertion (Jane's sense of her similarity to Rochester) through the medium of Jane's

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<sup>67</sup> A note of discord in the otherwise balanced terms ('all my confidence is bestowed on him; all his confidence is devoted to me' (451)) of Jane's description of her married bliss, this is a reference to Adam's physical definition of Eve, which shows how the concept of physical unity can be, paradoxically, othering: 'This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man' (Genesis 2:23, The Bible, Authorised King James Version, introduction and notes by Robert Carroll and Stephen Prickett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). All further references to the Bible are to this edition, and will be given as in-text citations). However, it also recalls the unity of humanity and God as represented by marriage in Ephesians 5:30: 'For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones'.

<sup>68</sup> Vrettos writes on Lucy Snowe and *Daniel Deronda's* Gwendolen Harleth as 'nervous heroines': 'Both heroines are...set apart by the quality of their nerves; their maladies occur in the uncharted spaces between physical reality and psychological interpretations of that reality' (*Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 61).

body. Later in the novel we find a similar bodily link between two textual moments, but with what seems like more direct awareness on Jane's part. The idea of a bodily history of experiences of fear, desire, hunger and pain connects two apparently very different moments in the novel: Jane's first confrontation with Mr. Brocklehurst, the proprietor of Lowood School; and Jane (all but) telling Rochester that she loves him. These are moments in which people with wildly different levels of societal power negotiate with each other about matters of the body, and the latter scene is troubled by echoes of the former, both on the level of the novel's structure and arguably in Jane's own consciousness.

The way the novel, and Jane herself, make use of Jane's bodily history complicates the text's representation of sexual power dynamics. In the introduction, I noted that the power dynamics between Jane and Rochester could be thought of as game-play, which requires willing participants who accept implicit or explicit roles and rules of engagement, but which can also have real-life stakes. What is missing from this account is a conception of the players' situation outside of the game. Game-players can obviously have different levels of access to power outside of the game, but they are assumed to start on an equal playing field within the context of the game. But in games as ill-defined as those between Rochester and Jane – which not only have real-life stakes,<sup>69</sup> but reenact the very kinds of power imbalances that apply outside the game – this presumed equality becomes more fraught. In an early essay, Judith Butler connects the idea of consent as a complex skill to the fact that our desires and responses are coloured by our histories: desires are 'complexes of things, fears, hopes, memories, anticipations. They arise from our concrete situation and are colored by the ambiguity of our experience.' Because we can never start on an equal footing, 'consent is not a simple act, but a project, a skill we have constantly to learn'.<sup>70</sup> While I disagree with Butler's conclusion that we therefore need to change these desires in order to

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<sup>69</sup> 'Real-life stakes' here describes a situation where the outcome of a basically playful power dynamic is likely to affect the balance of power more permanently. Jane and Rochester's argument about buying clothes for Jane is an instance of this: it works as sexual play (more on this in chapter 4), but it is also a discussion of, or struggle over, what kind of marriage they are going to have.

<sup>70</sup> Judith Butler, 'Lesbian S&M: The Politics of Dis-illusion', in Robin Ruth Linden, Darlene R. Pagano, Diana E. H. Russell, and Susan Leigh Star (eds.), *Against Sado-masochism; A Radical Feminist Analysis* (East Palo Alto, CA: Frog in the Well Press, 1982), 172-173.

make them 'truly our own', her point about the interplay between histories, desires and consent is valuable in this context (173). This section, then, aims to explore how bodily histories of pain, hunger and need affect sexual power dynamics. The sexual power dynamics between Jane and Rochester hold echoes of Jane's history of physical oppression, but Jane also uses this history to gain bodily power and authority in her relation to Rochester.

Nancy Armstrong, in her reading of *Jane Eyre* as an essentially anti-historical, anti-political novel, describes the scene where Brocklehurst catechizes the young Jane as 'a displacement of class conflict onto sexual relations'.<sup>71</sup> But as Cora Kaplan notes, opposing the two 'implies that women and gender are somehow not implicated in class relations but stand outside them'.<sup>72</sup> The catechism scene is a powerfully embodied class- and gender-based power struggle that is implicated in the sexual relations of the later part of the novel. In response to Brocklehurst's catechism Jane says that in order to avoid hell she must 'keep in good health, and not die', setting the keynote of the scene: this is a conversation about bodies and who controls them (32). As Brocklehurst reminds Jane, the context they are speaking in is one where children 'die daily'; more specifically, Brocklehurst is soon going to be in a position to control her life or death in a direct, physical way (32). The full extent of his power is unknown to Jane as well as to the reader at this point, so many of the scene's painful ironies operate on a kind of time-delay. A few chapters later, he defends his policy of half-starving the Lowood students: 'Oh, madam, when you put bread and cheese, instead of burnt porridge into these children's mouths, you may indeed feed their vile bodies, but you little think how you starve their immortal souls!' (63) His question, 'How can you keep in good health?', thus becomes a threat in a way that Brocklehurst himself perhaps does not entirely realise or control (32).

The power inequalities in this scene are starkly drawn, and made corporeal by the emphasis on Jane's smallness and Brocklehurst's looming, weird shape: 'the straight, narrow, sable-clad shape standing erect on the rug: the grim face at the top was like a carved mask, placed above the shaft by way of capital' (31). Laura E. Donaldson reads this physical description of

<sup>71</sup> Nancy Armstrong, *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 199.

<sup>72</sup> Cora Kaplan, *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 27.

Brocklehurst as ‘explicitly phallic...the black pillar standing erect (tumid penile shaft), whose grim face (glans) ejaculates the words (sperm) which engender legitimate meaning’.<sup>73</sup> But the contrast is even more marked than that. Brocklehurst initially does not appear human at all, but like a piece of architecture placed incongruously on the breakfast-room rug: ‘I looked up at – a black pillar!’ Only after a few more lines is he identified as ‘*He*, for it was a man’. He is physically completely foreign to Jane, ‘stony’ rather than flesh and nerves (31). (Later in the novel we find stone again: ‘Mr St John...was easy enough to examine. Had he been a statue instead of a man, he could not have been easier’ (344). This second stone figure is similarly dismissive of hunger, but unlike Brocklehurst, he applies his asceticism to himself, too.) The power imbalance, however, is muddied by the issue of how much control the two parties have over their discourse. Brocklehurst’s self-delusion is such that he is capable of being open about and proud of his hypocrisy, as when he quotes his daughter’s reaction to the deprived Lowood girls: ‘they looked at my dress and mama’s, as if they had never seen a silk gown before’ (34). Because of this, it is hard to tell on precisely what level he thinks he is controlling or failing to control Jane. What looks unambiguously cruel might be attributable to a lack of insight, and vice-versa. Even Jane’s own machinations, her perception of her own success or failure in manipulating Brocklehurst, remain opaque.

One of Brocklehurst’s anecdotes is telling in this regard: ‘I have a little boy, younger than you, who knows six Psalms by heart; and when you ask him which he would rather have, a gingerbread-nut to eat, or a verse of a Psalm to learn, he says: “Oh! The verse of a Psalm! Angels sing Psalms,” says he, “I wish to be a little angel here below;” he then gets two nuts in recompense for his infant piety’ (33). For the reader, and quite possibly for Jane, the bitter joke is that the boy is in a situation where being a ‘little angel’, renouncing the gingerbread-nut in favour of a Psalm, leads to him getting both credit for ‘infant piety’ and more nuts than he would have by choosing the nut in the first place. The supposed opposition between metaphorical food and literal food is false. Whether or not the boy has worked this out and is now simply playing the system, he is in a position to make his initial choice

<sup>73</sup> Laura E. Donaldson, ‘The Miranda Complex: Colonialism and the Question of Feminist Reading’, *Diacritics*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Autumn 1988, 65-77, 72-73.

because, like his sister in her silk gown, he is already in a position of privilege; he is able to risk the nut because he does not really need it. Setting this boy up as a moral model for Jane, who is soon to be one of the starving inmates of Lowood, seems like an instance of what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describes as ‘not just the contemptuous demonstration that powerful people don’t have to be acute or right, but even more, the contemptuous demonstration...of how obtuseness itself arms the powerful against their enemies.’<sup>74</sup>

The drastic imbalance of power between Brocklehurst and Jane, the strangely physical nature of his power over her, and the still-rippling shocks of Jane’s encounters with John and the red room mean that all their communication is excessive, overdetermined. Their own figures of speech get away from them, becoming less metaphorical and more literal. Brocklehurst follows the gingerbread-nut story by telling Jane that ‘you have a wicked heart, and you must pray to God to change it...to take away your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.’ (33) Jane is ‘about to propound a question, touching the manner in which that operation of changing my heart was to be performed’ (33). While Jane presumably does not really think that she is going to have her heart removed and replaced with a new one, she is also not quite being sarcastic. She has been deprived of control over her own body often enough to experience a sort of plausibility in the idea of having her heart forcibly and physically changed. As in the later scene with Rochester, for which this encounter provides a sort of dark blueprint, some of the most unsettling concepts in this scene entail uses of language that cannot quite be fixed as either literal or metaphorical.

This is particularly apparent in one of the most knowing of the novel’s fairy-tale allusions, in this child’s-eye view of Brocklehurst: ‘What a face he had, now that it was almost on a level with mine! what a great nose! and what a mouth! and what large prominent teeth!’ (32) Here, one might think, comes the inevitable, disquieting sexual dimension of this kind of power struggle. Type 333 in the Aarne-Thompson-Uther classification of folk-tales,<sup>75</sup> the

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<sup>74</sup> Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 7.

<sup>75</sup> The Aarne-Thompson-Uther system is a recent revision and expansion of the Aarne-Thompson system for classifying folk-tales by motifs. Tales of ATU type 333 are collected at *Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts*, ed. and trans. D.L. Ashliman, web, 16 October 2012.

Little Red Riding Hood stories, are on one level seduction narratives – explicitly so in the case of the version by Charles Perrault. In it the girl remains, at the end, unrescued in the wolf’s stomach, and the moral is that any man might prove to be a wolf:

Moral: Children, especially attractive, well bred young ladies, should never talk to strangers, for if they should do so, they may well provide dinner for a wolf. I say ‘wolf’, but there are various kinds of wolves. There are also those who are charming, quiet, polite, unassuming, complacent, and sweet, who pursue young women at home and in the streets. And unfortunately, it is these gentle wolves who are the most dangerous ones of all.<sup>76</sup>

But in the case of Brocklehurst and Jane, this warning is startlingly beside the point: their situation is closer to the story itself than to the gloss Perrault gives in the moral. Jane is not an attractive, well-bred young lady; Brocklehurst is not charming, quiet, or polite. He does not want to seduce her, he wants, almost but not quite literally, to eat her: to feed off her school fees while she starves. To speak of this scene as having a sexual dimension, then, is only partly accurate; the text gives us no reason to think of Brocklehurst as literally sexually predatory. Rather, the fairy-tale allusion brings together the various ways in which men can have power over women’s bodies.

Years later, in the grounds of Thornfield, Jane’s body is again agonisingly outside her control, this time because Rochester is tormenting her by telling her that she has to leave him: ‘I sobbed convulsively; for I could repress what I endured no longer: I was obliged to yield; and I was shaken from head to foot with acute distress.’ (252) She tells Rochester she wishes she had never been born (252), a return of her determination when trapped in the red room to ‘achieve escape from insupportable oppression’ by ‘never eating or drinking more, and letting [herself] die’ (15). But this desire to escape pain and powerlessness by physically disappearing transmutes into

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<sup>76</sup> Charles Perrault, ‘Little Red Riding Hood’, trans. D. L. Ashliman. *Folklore and Mythology Electronic Texts*.

something else. The slightness and insignificance of her body, 'poor, obscure, plain and little', becomes part of her rhetoric of self-assertion (253). Jane has every reason to believe that in order to attach himself to 'the shape of Miss Ingram, a noble and beautiful woman' (253), Rochester is about to dispose of her in Bitternutt Lodge in Ireland. The name, recalling the imagined gingerbread-nuts, seems like another reverberation from Jane's encounter with Brocklehurst, though its sheer implausibility also suggests that Rochester does not really intend to send her away. But her response to these particular bitter nuts evokes both bodily and emotional hunger, pointing out that Rochester is acting as though she has no desires or needs: 'Do you think I am an automaton? – a machine without feelings? And can bear to have my morsel of bread snatched from my lips, and my drop of living water dashed from my cup?' (253). The phrase 'living water' refers to John 4:1-42, and as in Jane's reference, the water in this story is both metaphorical and literal. In it, Jesus asks a Samaritan woman at a well for water, and, when she refuses, tells her that '[e]veryone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty' (John 4:13-14). The 'living water' both represents faith and actually quenches physical thirst. In the same way, Jane's use of the words 'bread' and 'water' gains a literal dimension from its connotations to her own bodily history: it evokes the 'semi-starvation' (76) and 'brackish, fetid water' of Lowood (83), where she literally had bread snatched from her lips.

Rochester is aware of this history: when Jane tells him, early on, that she has been at Lowood for eight years he is impressed, saying she 'must be tenacious of life' (121). But he then quickly incorporates the information into what will become a recurring fantasy of Jane as something other than human: 'No wonder you have rather the look of another world.' (121) This line could be taken to suggest that her otherworldliness has kept her alive, but also, conversely, that her ordeal at Lowood has made her otherworldly. Considering Rochester's fascination with the idea of Jane as elf, changeling or woman-bird hybrid, the latter implies that either having been starved, or her ability to survive without food, is part of her appeal. Rochester associates himself with Brocklehurst by obliquely presenting the two of them as rivals: there is a tinge of sexual jealousy in the statement that 'you girls probably



worshipped him, as a convent full of religieuses would worship their director.’ (123) Rather than directly addressing Rochester’s fantasies by asking whether he thinks she is a bird, an elf or a fairy (though she does later tell him that ‘I am no bird’), Jane asks if he thinks she is an ‘automaton? – a machine with no feelings?’ (253) Rochester has, of course, never called Jane an automaton. But the word does evoke the descriptions of Jane’s first day at Lowood, which emphasises the pupils’ controlled and directed filing from place to place, sometimes breaking into ‘tumult’ before being ‘resolved into order’ and uniformity: ‘Ranged on benches down the sides of the room, the eighty girls sat motionless and erect’ (46). Like machines, the pupils are, at this point in the book, expected to function without food. The word ‘automaton’ both seems to stem from and evokes Jane’s bodily history. It links Rochester’s fantasies of her non-humanity with his apparent belief that she has no feelings that need to be taken into account, and can thus be asked to remain as an employee when he marries Blanche (though the reader is aware that he does not really intend to do this). And it links both with Jane’s early experiences of dehumanisation.

Jane’s mistreatment at Lowood is class-based, as is made clear in the broadly satirical moment where Brocklehurst’s tirade on the Lowood girls’ ‘braided hair and costly apparel’ is interrupted by the entrance of his splendidly dressed wife and daughters (64). Linda Schlossberg writes on the class basis of the starvation at Lowood in terms of Malthusian population control, making a persuasive case that Lowood reflects ‘mid-nineteenth-century social anxieties regarding the relationship between the overproduction of unwanted children and the threat of mass starvation on a national scale.’<sup>77</sup> Schlossberg sees the gendered dimension of food and hunger in *Jane Eyre* as primarily a matter of Jane’s personal ‘intriguing concerns with food’ (489). However, the starvation imposed on her and her schoolmates is clearly gendered, in that it both focuses on and tries to erase the obviously female aspects of the girls’ bodies. During Jane’s first years at the school, the institution operates on the basis of a forcible mortification of the flesh, which treats female bodies as inherently ‘vile’ and both neglects and obsesses over them (63). ‘We are not to conform to nature’, says Brocklehurst

<sup>77</sup> Linda Schlossberg, “‘The Low, Vague Hum of Numbers’: The Malthusian Economies of *Jane Eyre*”, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 29, No. 2, 2001, 489-506, 489.

of one of the students' curly red hair, 'I wish these girls to be the children of Grace: and why that abundance?' (64) Abundance – of curls, food or flesh – is incompatible with Grace.

It is hard to disagree with Anna Krugovoy Silver's point that in Brontë's work 'the fasting body is always a physical presence in the text' (82), though her argument that both Brontë and Jane have internalised Brocklehurst's judgment to the point of expressing 'anorexic logic' is less convincing (20). All of Brontë's protagonists are thin, but although she seems to associate thin bodies with self-control and self-possession, they also connote being powerless, unwanted and outcast. In Brontë's work these are qualities that can foster self-possession, but only up to a point, as we see when Jane, close to death from starvation after fleeing Thornfield, has to beg for food. In Jane's speech to Rochester, her hunger is not, as in Silver's description of Shirley Keeldar, a silencing, 'allowing her body to grow as extenuated as her voice' (96), nor does it express 'the assumption that women should maintain control over their appetites both for food and sexuality' (101). Rather than attempt to control or suppress her appetites, Jane seems to be trying to make them harder to ignore. In the course of a few sentences, her position changes from one of surrender to her own body – 'I was obliged to yield; and I was shaken from head to foot with acute distress' – to one of power, as she identifies with her desire rather than splitting herself off from and fighting against it. 'The vehemence of emotion...was claiming mastery,' she says, 'and asserting a right to predominate: to live, rise, and reign at last; yes, – and to speak.' (252) Jane says she is talking to Rochester on a level beyond 'mortal flesh' (253). But in an inversion of the process of, for instance, religious mortification that creates an obsession with the body by denying its needs, she does this by making a spectacle of her actual, human 'plain and little' body (253).

But to relate two kinds of power imbalances is not to conflate them. Brontë is very clear in her delineations of abuses of power, as we see when Jane lists 'the head and front' of Brocklehurst's offenses: 'he cut off our hair, and, for economy's sake, bought us bad needles and thread, with which we could hardly sew...He starved us when he had the sole supervision of the provision department, before the committee was appointed; and he bored us

with long lectures once a week' (123). This, as Rochester says, is 'very cool'. Jane's coolness allows Rochester to take it at face value, to ignore or pretend to ignore the implications of what she is telling him, but it also makes those implications more powerful. The mention of bad needles, boring lectures and committee appointments in the same breath as having one's hair cut off and being starved works to make Jane's representation of her suffering convincing by anchoring it in concrete, prosaic reality. With this in mind, the critical view that Rochester starves Jane, and certain critical readings of Jane as self-starving, have to be revised.<sup>78</sup> Both approaches fail to take into account Brontë's precision in handling literal and metaphorical hunger, physical and emotional suffering.

Kathleen Williams Renk conceives of Jane as a 'female hunger artist', someone who 'exhibits the motivations of the medieval starving saints...who often rebel against injustice while paradoxically displaying temporary female spiritual power by attracting attention through spectacle.' (3) Jane does make a spectacle of her body in order to gain power. But Renk's idea of Jane as a hunger artist, someone who chooses not to eat for a higher purpose, sometimes relies on using a metaphorical sense of eating, food refusal, and hunger to read passages where Brontë is not using this metaphorical framework. She mentions Jane's 'hunger for justice' (7) during her time at Lowood and her refusal 'to eat the "doctrine of endurance" that Helen has force-fed her' (7). Yet in spite of the intense focus on food in the Lowood chapters, Jane's desire for justice is imagined as violence rather than as hunger (and her ideas about how the 'cruel and unjust' should be dealt with are more concerned with pragmatic problem-solving than with justice): 'When we are struck at without a reason, we should strike back again very hard...so hard as to teach the person who struck us never to do it again.' (57) Moreover, force-feeding seems like a mischaracterisation of the moral discussions between Helen and Jane. While Jane disagrees with Helen's remark that 'you think too much of the love of human beings' (69), she

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<sup>78</sup> See Rachel Mann, "Delicate and Aerial": The Vanishing Body in *Jane Eyre*, *Cycnos*, Vol. 25, 2008, web, 16 October 2012, n.p.; Kathleen Williams Renk, 'Jane Eyre as Hunger Artist', *Women's Writing*, Vol. 15, No. 1, May 2008, 1-12, Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "Portrait of a Governess, Disconnected, Poor, and Plain": Staging the Spectral Self in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Brontë Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 2, July 2009, 127-137, and Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word*.

imagines Helen's goodness as sustenance, and takes an almost sensuous pleasure in it. She describes Helen's speech as 'the swelling spring of pure, full, fervid eloquence' (73), and her company as 'a taste of far higher things' (78). As Renk points out, Jane does refuse to eat at times: she rejects a pastry tart after being locked in the red-room (though this seems to be part of a general anhedonia, as she is similarly unable to enjoy the painted plate it comes on, or her much-loved copy of *Gulliver's Travels*) (20), and is unable to eat the night before her wedding (278). But her hunger is more usually a result of being denied the food she openly wants and needs. If Jane is a hunger artist, it is not because of her skill at starving herself, but because of her ability to create power from the starvation that has been imposed on her.

A similar point about distinguishing between metaphorical and literal food and hunger – or, as Margaret Homans puts it, recognising the necessary instability of these terms, 'the relatively figurative [and] the relatively literal' – can be made about some critical readings of Rochester's moon fantasy.<sup>79</sup> After he and Jane become engaged, Rochester tells Adèle that 'I am to take mademoiselle to the moon, and there I shall seek a cave in one of the white valleys among the volcano-tops, and mademoiselle shall live with me there, and only me' (266). Adèle tells him that Jane will have nothing to eat on the moon, and he responds: 'I shall gather manna for her morning and night: the plains and hill-sides in the moon are bleached with manna' (266). He is similarly inventive in answering Adèle's questions about how Jane will stay warm and where she will get clothes from: fire-breathing lunar craters and dresses made of clouds, respectively. Renk considers that Rochester is suggesting that 'he has a god- or priestlike power not only to transport Jane beyond the earthly realm', and 'also believes that he has the power to feed her the food of the chosen people, the miraculous manna that prevents the Jews from perishing in the desert' (8). Other critics, possibly following Adèle's concern for Jane's well-being, read this scene as indicative that Rochester not only wants to starve, but actually is starving, Jane. Laurence Talairach-Vielmas says that Rochester 'is constantly shown to starve' Jane, citing the moon fantasy as evidence (58). Rachel Mann writes that 'in this fantasy, as Adèle points out, Rochester seems almost to encourage Jane's starvation or

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<sup>79</sup> Margaret Homans, *Bearing the Word: Language and Female Experience in Nineteenth-Century Women's Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 26.

self-abnegation. His delight in her insubstantiality is emphasized by the imaginary food he will ‘feed’ her.’ (par. 17) Helena Michie cites the passage in *The Flesh Made Word*, noting that ‘in his eyes, Jane does not need physical sustenance’ (24).

The element of whimsy in this story does need to be taken into account. But it can nonetheless be read as playing with the distinctions between literality and fantasy, not least because in spite of its fantastic setting, it so clearly depicts a fulfillment of Rochester’s real emotional needs. The idea that he and Jane will ‘leave earth, and make our own heaven yonder’ when they marry understandably appeals to him, because he is preparing to marry her while trying to keep concealed the woman who is already his wife: it is an absurd solution, but an oddly concrete one (267). The manna he imagines feeding Jane operates in the same way: it does not represent something imaginary, insubstantial or non-existent, but something fantastical yet solid. In Exodus, manna is described as ‘a small round thing, [as] small as the hoar frost on the ground’ (Exd. 16:14), ‘like coriander seed, white; and the taste of it...like wafers [made] with honey’ (Exd. 16:31). When left uneaten for too long ‘it bred worms, and stank’ (Exd. 16:20). It is mysterious but tangible: a steady supply would keep you alive for forty years in the desert.

To imagine feeding someone manna is not to imagine starving them, then, but it does begin to suggest why Jane wants to disrupt this line of fantasy. The moon fantasy is about Rochester’s desire to go to a place – the ‘alabaster cave and silver vale’ – where the trauma Jane tries to remind him of no longer exists (267). It is not a fantasy of starving Jane, but of erasing both their histories. In this fantasy, Jane’s past of deprivation and humiliation disappears, because she is really a powerful fairy. His first marriage disappears, because he and Jane will be alone on the moon; ‘mademoiselle shall live with me there, and only me’ (266). Bertha disappears, and is replaced by a magical wife whose ‘errand was to make me happy’, and whose wedding-ring gives her power of flight rather than imprisoning her (267). It is a fantasy of amelioration, but, as Jane seems to recognise, attempting to erase someone’s past pain by imagining it out of existence can be a damaging act in itself. Rochester’s images of birds and gossamer-covered fairies are a way of trying to reimagine Jane’s bodily history, situating it outside the realm of human experience. Jane’s

representation of her body as wholly human can thus be seen as an attempt to demonstrate how her bodily history, and the societal power structures that created it, cannot be written out of her relationship with Rochester.

*seeing: 'a sharp look-out'*

In the proposal scene, Jane draws attention to her body as part of a strategy of power. This section will consider what it means to look and be looked at in *Jane Eyre*. It argues that the power dynamics of erotic gazing in this book are essentially fluid, and a potential source of both power and powerlessness. There is a long critical tradition of considering the gaze as a source of gendered control, associating it with the power to constitute the gazer as subject and the gazed-upon as object.<sup>80</sup> But in this novel the gaze is also a site of intense, overwhelming sensation. When she was beginning to write *Jane Eyre* Brontë watched her father go through cataract surgery, and the novel reflects an awareness of the eye's vulnerability as well as its potential for detached control.<sup>81</sup> In Jane's words, the gaze functions as a 'point of agony': it penetrates and is itself penetrated, both pleasurably and painfully (174). Looking and being looked at, then, is part of the novel's deeply fluid conception of embodied power.

Peter J. Bellis writes that 'in *Jane Eyre*, sexual and social power is visual power. The struggle between Jane and Rochester is embodied in a conflict between two different modes of vision: a penetrating male gaze that fixes and defines the woman as its object, and a marginal female perception that would conceal or withhold itself from the male'.<sup>82</sup> He cites Luce Irigaray's critique of the Lacanian conception of the gaze, in which 'woman' has a place only as

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<sup>80</sup> Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', which aims to use a Lacanian conception of the gaze 'as a political weapon', is perhaps the cornerstone of this discourse (*Screen*, Vol. 16, No. 3, Autumn 1975, 6-18, 6). Later critics have both complicated her concept of the 'male gaze' and explored other axes of power imbalances that can be inscribed in the gaze, like the 'colonial gaze' (Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, (New York: Routledge, 1992)) and the 'gay gaze' (Steven Drukman, 'Gay-Gazing at The Lisbon Traviata, or: How Are Things in Tosca, Norma?', *Theatre Topics*, Vol. 5, No. 1, March 1995, 23-34)).

<sup>81</sup> Janet Gezari makes a connection between Brontë's experience of her father's eye surgery and 'the prominence of the eye' in *Jane Eyre* (*Charlotte Brontë and Defensive Conduct: The Author and the Body at Risk* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), 28), but she also links vision with power more strongly than I do, reading Rochester's blindness as 'a necessary concomitant of the novel's relentlessness in establishing Jane's point of view as not merely dominant but exclusive' (60).

<sup>82</sup> Peter J. Bellis: 'In the Window-Seat: Vision and Power in *Jane Eyre*', *ELH*, Vol. 54, No. 3, Autumn, 1987, 639-652, 639.

object: 'the predominance of the visual...is particularly foreign to female eroticism...Woman takes more pleasure from touching than from looking' (quoted 639). But contrary to Irigaray's point, *Jane Eyre* shows scopophilia not only as potentially part of female eroticism, but as wholly compatible with an ecstatic state in which powerlessness and suffering shades into pleasure. During the party at Thornfield, Jane realises that in spite of her best efforts, she still desires Rochester. She makes several precise verbal sketches of the female guests' appearance, concentrating particularly on Blanche Ingram and the question of whether her body 'were such as I should fancy likely to suit Mr. Rochester's taste' (172). The narrative then switches into the present tense for a few paragraphs as the men enter the room, jarring the reader into awareness of Jane's intense focus and interest. Jane herself is 'in the shade – if any shade there be in this brilliantly-lit apartment; the window-curtain half hides me.' (173) As Rochester enters, Jane struggles not only with her feelings but, literally, with her own eyes. She is unable not to look:

I am not looking at the arch, and yet I see him enter...I wish...to see only the silver beads and silk threads that lie in my lap; whereas, I distinctly behold his figure...my eyes were drawn involuntarily to his face: I could not keep their lids under control: they would rise, and the irids would fix on him. I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking, – a precious, yet poignant pleasure; pure gold, with a steely point of agony: a pleasure like what the thirst-perishing man might feel who knows the well to which he has crept is poisoned, yet stoops and drinks divine draughts nevertheless. (174)

The result of this loss of bodily control is not that Jane becomes a visual spectacle. Rather, it is a painful, uncontrollable, but intensely pleasurable looking. This gaze is not 'penetrating'; instead, looking at Rochester, Jane is herself penetrated by a 'steely point of agony'. The visual is anything but foreign to Jane's eroticism (we are reminded that she is a visual artist, and that when separated from Rochester, she draws him). Rochester, in turn, has power over

Jane without her being the object of his gaze: 'He made me love him without looking at me' (175).

This painful, intimate moment recalls a very different scene at Lowood, where Brocklehurst's gaze, at first masterful and self-possessed, becomes a vulnerable point through which he is injured: 'Mr Brocklehurst, standing on the hearth with his hands behind his back, majestically surveyed the whole school. Suddenly his eye gave a blink, as if it had met something that either dazzled or shocked its pupil...extending his cane he pointed to the awful object, his hand shaking as he did so' (63). Janet Gezari points out that this is an accurate representation of the workings of the eye: 'the pupils constrict when the eye is either dazzled by light or exposed to an unpleasant stimulus.' (64) In this case, the unpleasant stimulus is the curly red hair of Julia Severn, which he sees as monstrous: 'what – *what* is that girl with curled hair?' (63) Momentarily incapacitated by what he has seen, he then retaliates by ordering all the girls' hair to be cut off. Gezari mentions the submerged pun on pupil as component of the eye and pupil as student; to expand on it, one might say that in punishing the pupils, he is punishing his own vulnerable eyes.

Jane's involuntarily moving irids and Brocklehurst's shocked pupils can help us interpret Rochester's blinding at the end of the novel. These moments earlier in the novel make it difficult to interpret the blinding in terms of castration or definitive disempowerment, or to claim that, as Joyce Zonana writes of Rochester, 'it is no accident that Rochester is blinded in the conflagration caused by Bertha's rebellion. Stripped of his despotic privilege to see, he can no longer function as a sultan'.<sup>83</sup> Comparing *Jane Eyre* to Rudyard Kipling's *The Light That Failed*, David Bolt criticises 'feminist commendations of *Jane Eyre*' for participating in 'patriarchal attitudes toward visual impairment'.<sup>84</sup> The article rightly tries to sever the perceived link between 'vision and the masculine role', between sightedness and the phallus (277). But it also assumes that the novel uncritically links sight and power, meaning that the sighted Jane is invested with both "the dominant role" and a "symbolic erection" in relation to Rochester (21). In this way, it misreads the unstable relation between power, sight, and the gendered body in *Jane Eyre*.

<sup>83</sup> Joyce Zonana, 'The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*', *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Spring, 1993, 592-617, 612.

<sup>84</sup> David Bolt, 'The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Ocularcentrism and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*'. *Textual Practice*, Vol. 22, No. 2, 2008, 269-289, 269.



Bolt cites the psychoanalyst Karl Abraham, a contemporary of Freud, as saying that ‘in the unconscious...the “fixed stare” is “often equivalent to an erection”’ (278), and applies it to one of the book’s final scenes, where Jane, unseen, looks at the blind Rochester. This scene of painful gazing mirrors the one at the party. Again Rochester does not look at Jane, but it is because he cannot see her, rather than because he is occupied with keeping another woman under ‘ceaseless surveillance’ (*Jane Eyre* 186). Bolt describes Jane as basking in her power over Rochester, and her ‘fixed gaze’ as ‘her unconscious erection’ (278). But in *Jane Eyre* looking is a very difficult pleasure, as Jane herself points out: ‘rapture was kept well in check by pain...A soft hope blent with my sorrow’ (431). Bolt draws ‘a conceptual link with Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon, the central idea of which is that control can be effected by the very notion of an unseen seer’ (276), but in both this scene and the party scene, the power dynamic that Bentham generally posits between seer and seen does not quite seem to fit. If the image of the Panopticon were to apply, the guard would have to be gazing longingly at an unaware, unseeing prisoner.

Bellis’s assessment that ‘Brontë’s novel does not, finally, escape from masculine structures of power; it struggles instead to reverse and redefine them, to appropriate the gaze and the written word for the novelist and her heroine’ (640), seems accurate. But I would read the text’s ‘[struggle]...to reverse and redefine’ these power structures not as a failure to escape them wholly, but as an active choice. *Jane Eyre* is fascinated with unstable power dynamics. Rather than simply trying to dismantle them, Brontë’s way of dealing with them involves making the uses of power multivalent, available in different ways to female as well as male characters, and available as sources of play as well as of control. Bolt’s criticism of *Jane Eyre*’s ‘ocularcentric and thus essentially patriarchal’ power structures thus oversimplifies these structures (279). Power in *Jane Eyre* is not random or contingent; Brontë is very aware of the larger gender-based power structures that govern her characters’ lives. But within the novel’s relationships, the situation is often more labile. The situation or position that in one scene is a source of power for Rochester – his being the object of Jane’s gaze, for instance – can be a source of power for Jane later.

The opening of this chapter hints at another striking way in which Brontëan bodies disrupt any presumed connection between seeing and power:

by their use of the idea of empty spaces in the body. As noted earlier, Matthew Arnold's image of Brontë's body as a 'barren sight' might make us think of the Medusa, the sight of whom turns the watcher to stone. Sigmund Freud links 'the terror of Medusa' to 'a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something', specifically 'female genitals'.<sup>85</sup> In this interpretation Medusa is a source of horror because she herself is castrated, but Barbara Creed makes a persuasive case that she is horrific because she is *castrating*: 'the Medusa is also regarded by historians of myth as a particularly nasty version of the vagina dentata'.<sup>86</sup> Arnold's description of Brontë as 'barren', suggesting an imagined vision of an empty womb, his statement that 'the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion and rage', and his description of *Villette* as 'hideous, undelightful, convulsed, constricted' all combine to suggest a vagina dentata element in his response to Brontë's body and book. The body and the book are both hungry, threatening to constrict around and consume the viewer or reader. In this sense, the sight of the Brontëan body is not sexually off-putting so much as terrifyingly sexually powerful.

A similar dynamic is at work in *Jane Eyre* itself. As, in Arnold's image, the body and the book hold a constricting, convulsing power over his penetrating gaze, so Jane's hunger, her display of an inner empty space, becomes a weird site of power. Though never mentioned outright, the stomach is central to the novel, its processes described with vivid intimacy. On her first day at Lowood, Jane is 'nearly sick from inanition, having taken so little the night before' (57), but this is followed by a scene in which the pupils try to eat burnt porridge: 'Ravenous, and now very faint, I devoured a spoonful or two of my portion without thinking of its taste; but the first edge of hunger blunted, I perceived I had got in hand a nauseous mess...I saw each girl taste her food and try to swallow it'. (58) After breakfast the refectory is 'evacuated', the word suggesting a vacuum-like emptiness. Later, as she wanders the moors, Jane experiences her hunger as penetrative: 'the vulture, hunger, thus sank beak and talons in my side' (327). The hungry characters in this novel are women and girls, meaning that the empty stomach becomes an empty female-gendered space, and, rather like Brocklehurst's penetrating and penetrated gaze, both

<sup>85</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Medusa's Head' (1922), trans. James Strachey, in *The Medusa Reader*, eds. Marjorie Garber and Nancy J. Vickers (New York: Routledge, 2003), 84.

<sup>86</sup> Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1993), 111.

vulnerable and threatening. This gives another dimension to Jane's assertion of hunger, as described in the previous section: where Arnold imagines Brontë's barren womb, Jane makes Rochester imagine her empty stomach.

Brontë does not just reverse the terms that are at work here – powerful and powerless, male and female, seeing and seen, penetrating and penetrated – but makes them all fluid and shifting. At various points in the novel the one penetrating might be male or female, the seer might be the one being penetrated or the one penetrating, and being penetrated might entail power or powerlessness. The novel's concept of what embodied sexual difference means, what the significance of the Brontëan body is, is in constant flux. The next section will discuss how this fluidity works in the sexual power dynamics between Jane and Rochester, and how it can be used to reinterpret the novel's ending.

*injury: 'a sly pen-knife under my ear'*

In the last two chapters, Jane returns to Rochester's home to look for him, and discovers a blackened, burned-out ruin where Thornfield used to be. She finds an old servant willing to tell her what happened to Rochester in the fire. His injuries are described in specific and realistic, if not grisly detail:

...he wouldn't leave the house till every one else was out before him. As he came down the great staircase at last, after Mrs. Rochester had flung herself from the battlements, there was a great crash—all fell. He was taken out from under the ruins, alive, but sadly hurt: ... one eye was knocked out, and one hand so crushed that Mr. Carter, the surgeon, had to amputate it directly. The other eye inflamed: he lost the sight of that also. He is now helpless, indeed—blind and a cripple. (429)

What are we to make of the fact that at the end of the novel, the romantic hero is badly injured and 'helpless, indeed'? The *Christian Remembrancer* reviewer was convinced that though 'the name and sex of the author is still a mystery', the novel had to be written by a woman, and Rochester, 'clearly the vision of a

woman's fancy', was cited as evidence.<sup>87</sup> Rochester is

the characteristic production of a female pen. Not an Adonis, but a Hercules in mind and body, with a frame of adamant, a brow of thunder, and a lightning eye, a look and voice of command, all-knowing and all-discerning, fierce in love and hatred, rough in manner, rude in courtship, with a shade of Byronic gloom and appetizing mystery. Add to this that when loved he is past middle age, and when wedded he is blind and fire-scarred, and you have such an Acis as no male writer would have given his Galatea, and yet what commends itself as a true embodiment of the visions of a female imagination. (400)

This reviewer, who criticises Brontë harshly for failings like being too 'serene' in her depiction of Aunt Reed's death, is nonetheless able both to relish Rochester's 'adamant' body and to think of his blinding, scarring and crushing (Acis was crushed by a boulder) as a 'true' product of a female imagination. It is even what identifies it conclusively as female.

Since then, critics have seen what happens to Rochester at the end of the novel as less immediately understandable. When Gilbert and Gubar turn to Rochester's blinding and maiming, it is with a sense of defending Brontë: 'Many critics, starting with Richard Chase, have seen Rochester's injuries as 'a symbolic castration', a punishment for his early profligacy...It had not been [Jane's] goal, however, to "quell the energy of the universe" [a quotation from Chase], but simply to make herself an equal of the world Rochester represents...Apparently mutilated, he is paradoxically stronger now than when he ruled Thornfield, for now, like Jane, he draws his powers from within himself' (369). Bellis, by contrast, reads Rochester as definitively disempowered by his blindness, and Jane as rather sinisterly reveling in it: 'She first watches him 'grope his way' into the open only to turn and go back inside, and then follows him and taunts him...She may reassure herself of her new dominance. Jane marries Rochester, of course, and their relationship is based on the fact of his blindness' (648). Gezari draws up a critical history of responses to the

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<sup>87</sup> Review of *Jane Eyre*, *Christian Remembrancer*, April 1848, 396-409, 396.

‘thorny crux’ of Rochester’s injuries (83). She suggests that feminist readings that see the injuries as ‘a kind of handicap that gives Jane a fair chance in a patriarchal world’ (84), and readings like those of Chase and D.H. Lawrence that see the injuries as a moral/sadistic rejection of sexuality on Brontë’s part, share interpretative ground. Both readings accept that Rochester has been fundamentally altered and in some sense disempowered, though they differ in the significance they attach to it.

This final section offers a different reading, in the context of the chapter’s argument that embodied power in *Jane Eyre* is in flux, and that it does not necessarily accompany physical strength, the ability to penetrate, or the ability to see. It does not offer a thematic explanation for what happens to Rochester, but a reinterpretation in the context of the embodied sexual power dynamics in Jane and Rochester’s relationship. Gezari aptly criticises John Maynard for diminishing the seriousness of Rochester’s injuries: ‘This is a reading that believes the loss of one’s hand and eyesight is a blow to arrogance “that does not touch the psyche more deeply”’ (85). I want to avoid this kind of diminishment of what happens to Rochester, as well as any conflation between these wholly undesired injuries the sexual power dynamics between Jane and Rochester. But the fact that Jane and Rochester’s relationship involves a pattern of often consensual and desired verbal and physical injury, usually described in terms of penetration, changes the context of the end of the novel in some important ways. It means that physical and sexual power in this novel is not necessarily figured as inviolable, impenetrable strength, and that while Rochester’s injuries affect him profoundly, they do not permanently alter his relation to Jane.

Implicit in the idea that Rochester’s injuries are a symbolic castration is that he is initially defined by masculine strength (‘a frame of adamant, a brow of thunder, and a lightning eye’), and then reduced to a humbled, maimed state. But just as the reader first encounters Jane’s body in a state of suffering and incapacity, Jane’s first, mysterious vision of Rochester as the rider of the mythical Gytrash is instantly undercut when he falls off his horse and sprains his ankle. Jane insists on supporting him, and her sense of pleasure afterwards stems in part from having been able to use her own strength: ‘My help had been needed and claimed; I had given it: I was pleased to have done something;

trivial, transitory though the deed was, it was yet an active thing, and I was weary of an existence all passive' (115). Later, describing his first meeting with 'the arbitress of [his] life' (312), Rochester emphasises the incongruity of being supported by Jane: 'Childish and slender creature! It seemed as if a linnet had hopped to my foot and proposed to bear me on its tiny wing' (312). But her slightness makes her determination to help him more out of the ordinary, and thus more authoritative: 'the thing would not go: it stood by me with a strange perseverance, and spoke with a sort of authority. I must be aided, and by that hand: and aided I was' (312).

Both Jane and Rochester are fascinated by the idea of his ability to protect, support and provide for her, though this fascination takes different forms. The caretaking fantasies Rochester is given to after their engagement seem to alienate and repulse Jane, who recognises that they are based on an either involuntary or willed lack of perception: 'I really became uneasy at the strain he had adopted; because I felt he was either deluding himself, or trying to delude me' (259). Although she is suspicious of this 'strain', in which he even mistakes the colour of her eyes, Jane admires his body as a manifestation of (especially mental) power: 'all energy, decision, will' (174). But the idea of Rochester's physical strength as something that either supports or constrains Jane is primarily present in the novel as an idea, not a reality. Jane, on the other hand, not only saves his life when Bertha sets his bed on fire, but also lets him lean on her when he seems about to faint (203). Her physical caretaking clearly has a dimension of servitude as well as of power, but he is aware that she is not wholly his to command: 'if I bid you do what you thought wrong, [you] would become immutable as a fixed star. Well, you too have power over me, and may injure me' (217).

Though Rochester provides Jane with food and shelter, her role at Thornfield is very different from her role as an unwanted extra child at Gateshead and as a charity pupil at Lowood. She is an employee, not an object of charity, and she tries to continue to inhabit this role even after their engagement, calling herself 'your plain Quakerish governess' (259). Rochester's repeated insistence on dressing her like 'a peer's daughter' on the morning after their engagement can be seen, then, as an uneasy exploration of the new roles he believes they have to adopt with each other (258). Now that they are going to

be married, Jane must be weighed down with rings and ‘diamond chain[s]’ to the point where she can no longer support him physically (259). As a result, his dialogue starts to recall his stilted, courteous speeches to Blanche Ingram, whom he tells, for instance, that ‘your own fine sense must inform you that one of your frowns would be a sufficient substitute for capital punishment.’ (180) When he lapses back into rudeness, Jane is relieved.

From their first meeting, where Rochester’s ‘frown’ and ‘roughness’ sets Jane at ease with him, his tendency to be impolite with her is a source of comfort, power and pleasure for Jane (114). When he sulks through their formal introduction to each other, Jane finds that ‘a decent quiescence, under the freak of manner, gave [her] the advantage’ (120). Esther Godfrey reads this passage as ‘one of many in which Jane revels in her lower-class position and finds it useful for its complex relation to gender’, but it can also be read more broadly as a recognition of the power of her in every sense relatively weak position.<sup>88</sup> Her acquiescence becomes powerful because Rochester’s overbearing rudeness contrasts with it and brings it out. His performance of dominance is both comforting and ‘piquant’ for Jane, because it allows her to be the most socially powerful person in the room just by taking up her default demeanour of prickly submission (120). After the first introductions have taken place they stare each other down in silence, Jane barely on the side of social convention and Rochester having given it up completely: ‘I sat down quite disembarassed...I felt interested to see how he would go on. He went on as a statue would: that is, he neither spoke nor moved. Mrs Fairfax seemed to think it necessary that someone should be amiable, and she began to talk.’ (120) Neither of them is being amiable, but Jane alone is able to maintain a social fiction of politeness.

A similar dynamic in a much more extreme form appears in the scene where Jane, having found out about Bertha, tells Rochester that she has decided to leave Thornfield. The two confrontations in the middle of the novel, the proposal scene and the parting scene, are reflections of each other: both present a triangulation of Jane, Rochester and another woman; both show Jane threatening to leave, and in both he tries and fails to restrain her physically. But the parting scene goes further, as he considers trying to solve the situation through force: “By God! I long to exert a fraction of Samson's strength, and

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<sup>88</sup> Esther Godfrey, ‘Jane Eyre, from Governess to Girl Bride’, *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol 45, No 4, 2005, 853-871, 859.

break the entanglement like tow!...Jane! will you hear reason?" (he stooped and approached his lips to my ear) "because, if you won't, I'll try violence." (302) This is an ambivalent threat, though the unsettling intimacy of his 'approach[ing] his lips to [her] ear' while threatening her with violence, and the fact that Jane describes him as 'about to...plunge into wild licence', suggests that he is threatening to rape her (302). But the lack of specificity might stem from his awareness that 'try[ing] violence' will inevitably be unsuccessful. He recognises this when he says, "'never was anything at once so frail and so indomitable. A mere reed she feels in my hand!" (and he shook me with the force of his hold.) "I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I uptore, if I crushed her?" (318) There is nothing he can do, physically, that will help him keep her. And although she seems convinced that he really intends to hurt her – 'in another moment, and with one impetus of frenzy more, I should be able to do nothing with him' – she is so fundamentally sure of her ability to 'control and restrain him' that she can take a sort of pleasure in the situation: 'The crisis was perilous, but not without its charm: such as the Indian, perhaps, feels when he slips over the rapid in his canoe.' (302) Underscoring her lack of fear of or even alienation from Rochester at this moment, her imagery is Rochester's own, echoing his prediction earlier on: 'you will come some day to a craggy pass of the channel, where the whole of life's stream will be broken up into whirl and tumult, foam and noise' (141).

Rochester's roughness, then, inspires pleasure and a sense of power in Jane, even when it threatens to turn into actual violence. But the scene suggests that Rochester needs her to inflict pain on him, too. 'Poignant', 'piquant' and 'pungent' are recurring words in their descriptions of each other. 'Is she original? Is she piquant?' he says of her (269), while she finds looking at him 'a precious yet poignant pleasure' (174) and describes his tendency to sarcasm and harshness as 'like keen condiments in a choice dish: their presence was pungent, but their absence would be felt as comparatively insipid' (188). All three words denote something sharply pointed, piercing or stinging as well as something that stimulates emotion – 'piquant' is an obsolete word for a hedgehog's quill.<sup>89</sup> So Jane and Rochester both conceive of their interactions as little jabs with sharp instruments. Jane believes that these jabs sustain their

<sup>89</sup> See the Oxford English Dictionary, 'piquant', meaning 1: 'A sharp, pointed object; spec. a hedgehog spine.'



relationship, as shown when she reflects to herself on the necessity on continuing to provoke him after their engagement: 'I like you more than I can say; but I'll not sink into a bathos of sentiment: and with this needle of repartee I'll keep you from the edge of the gulph too; and, moreover, maintain by its pungent aid that distance between you and myself most conducive to our real mutual advantage.' (273) Rochester also elaborates on the stabbing imagery, attributing a different weapon to Jane and goading her to use it: 'under pretence of stroking and soothing me into placidity, you stick a sly penknife under my ear!...Go on: what fault do you find with me, pray?...Criticize me' (131). When she later fails to produce her penknife, he rightly sees it as a very bad sign: 'Well, Jane; not a word of reproach? Nothing bitter – nothing poignant? Nothing to cut a feeling or sting a passion?...Tell me roundly and sharply – don't spare me.' (298)

Their dynamic of reciprocal, pleasurable injury is interrupted, and instead Jane casts her decision to leave Rochester as a necessary act of self-harm. Before she confronts Rochester, she engages in a dialogue with her 'conscience, turned tyrant' (267). She pleads with it to 'let another help [her]', but then answers herself implacably: 'No; you shall tear yourself away, none shall help you: you shall, yourself, pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your heart shall be the victim; and you, the priest, to transfix it' (267). The reference is to Matthew 5:27-30, where would-be adulterers are told to pluck out their right eye and cut off their right hand. Janet Gezari reads Brontë's use of the Bible verse as a 'blasphemous inversion', an instance of *Jane Eyre's* tendency to value 'Jane's profane experience above religious experience', because for Jane 'self-mutilation is the *consequence* of leaving Rochester, that is, or refusing adultery...Rochester's least adulterous act, the attempt to save Bertha's life, reproduces these events in him.' (86). But contrary to this interpretation, Jane's and Rochester's mutilations can be read as consonant with the Bible reference. The self-injuries in Matthew are prescribed as a way of avoiding any further sin rather than a punishment for it ('it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell' (Matt 5.29)), so it makes sense that Jane and Rochester experience mutilation when trying to avoid adultery. But Jane is also, as Gezari writes, 'deflect[ing] the current of religious feeling so that it flows through [her]

relationship with Rochester.’ (86) The split between Jane and the Biblically-inflected ‘voice within’ becomes a way for her to ‘let another help’ her, to double herself so that she can be both ‘tyrant’ and victim. She becomes a self-sufficient, closed system: both the impaler and the impaled, the one injuring and the one injured. She is not just cutting away Rochester and the ‘cord of communion’ between them, but shutting him out of the process of reciprocal injury, making it possible for her to do without him (252).

The mutilation she imagines happening to herself actually happens to Rochester: one of his eyes is put out, and one of his hands amputated. But in the context of their earlier relationship, it becomes more difficult to suggest that Rochester is destroyed or symbolically castrated by his injuries, or that Jane is either triumphant in her new power over him or no longer able to admire or desire him. (David Bolt implies the latter when he describes Jane’s ‘dismay at the absence of ‘painful shame’ in Rochester (281), but what Jane says is the opposite: that his absence of shame at being cared for makes it possible for her to experience ‘a pleasure in [her] services’ (451).) In this context, that Jane starts to mock him almost as soon as they are reunited, refusing to tell him where she has been, almost pulling his hair out while combing it and teasing him with her description of St John, is not a sign of annoyance or of callous sadism. Rather, it suggests that his injuries have not been able to affect the dynamic at the core of their relationship. ‘The sting was salutary,’ Jane remarks when she is able to make Rochester angry rather than melancholy (441), and he agrees: ‘You mocking changeling...You make me feel as I have not felt these twelve months’ (438).

By considering the novel’s conception of embodied power, and the peculiar qualities of Jane and Rochester’s shared sexual power dynamics, this ending can be reinterpreted. It appears not as a dramatic punishment, a domesticisation, or even a necessary disempowering of Rochester to allow Jane to become more powerful, but as part of the novel’s fascination with the multifariousness of embodied power and sexual pleasure. Rather than affirming that Rochester’s sexuality is inextricable from dominance, that his dominance is inextricable from his masculine identity, and that his masculine identity is inextricable from being impenetrable, the novel’s ending calls each of these links into question. Far from entering a relationship ‘based on the fact of

[Rochester's] blindness' (Bellis 648), Jane and Rochester are able to withstand 'the powerlessness of the strong man' (*Jane Eyre* 439) because his physical strength has never been his source of power.

## Things: *Villette*

‘(what do you call it, help me, fair reader)’  
Anonymous, *Venus School Mistress* (1898 edition)

*reading objects: ‘of what are these things the signs and tokens?’*

Knowing that her father is going to leave her again within two days, six-year-old Polly Home spends most of their time together at his feet, hemming a ‘scarlet-speckled’ handkerchief as a gift for him – scarlet-speckled, because she keeps pricking herself with the needle (*Villette* 19). Lucy Snowe lies on the garret floor in front of John Graham Bretton, a ‘grovelling, groping, monomaniac’, crying because she has lost the letter he sent her (246). Before Paul Emmanuel will accept the watchguard Lucy has made for him, he demands or pleads to know whether she was thinking of him the whole time she was weaving it: ‘[I]t is not necessary that I should cut out any portion – saying, this part is not mine; it was plaited under the idea and for the adornment of another?’ (346) ‘To fasten on certain details – and undoubtedly mahogany furniture is such a detail – is to risk making an incredibly goofy interpretive blunder,’ writes Elaine Freedgood. ‘There is nothing particularly confusing, alarming, or notable about the presence of wooden furniture in a Victorian novel: it doesn’t stand out, it just stands.’<sup>90</sup> The watchguard, the blood-stained handkerchief, the letter which is, to Lucy, the ‘letter of my hope, the fruition of my wish, the release from my doubt, the ransom from my terror’ (238) – these things do stand out. They are confusing, alarming and notable, for the characters that handle them as well as for the reader. They are also clearly, though not in any simple sense, objects of

<sup>90</sup> Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 51.

desire.

Freedgood's study of things in Victorian fiction uses metonymical readings to draw out 'critical cultural archives' from objects that have previously been ignored by readers or seen as simply part of a novel's scenery (1). By contrast to Freedgood's focus, this chapter will attend to the things in *Villette* that seem to bristle with the emotions and purpose that have become attached to them. It will read them not in directly metaphorical or symbolic terms, but in terms of what they mean to the characters who come into contact with them – in particular, how they create, channel and express these characters' desire. If Freedgood tends to think of objects as souvenirs – which are always metonymic, storing and calling up memories of other things, places and times – this chapter will consider objects as sex toys: as means of replacing, trying to replace, mediating, making possible, and, sometimes, disrupting intimate contact with others. By using the term 'sex toys', I hope to create an effect of defamiliarisation in the way we think about textual things and present a new, potentially fruitful way of drawing meaning from them. Exploring the way objects in *Villette* are used to hurt, to give pleasure and to gain power, this chapter will show how highly charged interactions between people and things widen the erotic and aggressive scope of the novel's characters. These person-thing-person interactions offer a rich way of considering and discovering networks of sexual power dynamics in the novel.

To describe, for instance, the 'bundle of new-cut quills' that Paul uses to bridge the distance between his and Lucy's hands as a sex toy is inevitably to use the phrase in a wide sense (417). But it does not necessarily mean being imprecise, or even metaphorical. Considering fictional things as sex toys entails charting a course between the attempt to '[take] something literally that was traditionally taken figurally, if it was "taken" at all' (Freedgood 20), and, conversely, the idea that 'novels [use things] for their symbolic exchange value as part of a symbol-system alone'.<sup>91</sup> In other words, the thing as sex toy occupies a middle ground between the thing imagined as material, and the thing imagined as metaphorical. Heather Findlay describes a somewhat similar course in her essay on the relation between dildos and fetishism in the context of lesbian sex lives, where she examines two opposing standpoints: that a dildo

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<sup>91</sup> Lennard J. Davis, *Resisting Novels: Ideology and Fiction* (New York: Methuen, 1987), 86.

necessarily represents a penis, and that the two concepts can be kept wholly separate. She cites Susie Bright's prescriptive statement that 'penises can only be compared to dildos in the sense that they take up space', and asks, 'Is it possible for a dildo to stand, as it were, only for itself?'<sup>92</sup> None of the things this chapter deals with are likely to invoke sex or sexuality as unambiguously as a dildo does, nor do they directly refer to or signify part of anyone's body (though as Findlay points out, this latter reference can be highly ambiguous in the case of dildos, too). But these things' recognisability as sex toys has the same basis, which is neither quite material or metaphorical, but based on the uses people put them to with each other.

It would be reductive to describe sex toys in general as means of relating to others. But in order to explore objects as elements in sexual power dynamics, this chapter focuses on relational uses of objects as sex toys, in which, somehow, something is being done to someone else. Although most of this chapter focuses on interactions between two people, it also examines some moments where objects as sex toys extend networks of desire and contact beyond the couple dynamic: Paul angrily giving Lucy a letter from John; Paulina plaiting together her fiancé's and her father's hair to make an 'amulet' (435); Paul demonstrating to Lucy the 'magic lattice' that he uses to examine the girls and teachers, or, in Lucy's words, 'to banquet secretly and sacrilegiously on Eve's apples' (365-366). Person-thing-person relations take many possible forms. One can apply a thing directly to another person (as when Lucy takes an 'artful pin' from her girdle to stave off Ginevra, who insists on being 'gummed to me, "keeping herself warm", as she said, on the winter evenings, and harassing my very heart with her fidgetings and pokings' (329)); one can apply oneself to someone else's thing (as when Maria Beck 'coolly peruse[s]' Lucy's belongings, turns her pockets inside out, leafs through her notebook and takes an impress of her keys (69)); one's thing can interact with someone else's thing (as when Lucy discovers Paul breathing smoke into her open desk: 'This was very shocking, of course...there, curling from his lips, was the pale blue breath of his Indian darling' (343)); one can use a thing as a substitute for someone else (as when Lucy receives a letter from John: 'it felt not flimsy, but firm, substantial, satisfying...I experienced a happy feeling'

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<sup>92</sup> Heather Findlay, 'Freud's "Fetishism" and the Lesbian Dildo Debates', *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 18, No. 3, Autumn 1992, 563-579, 564-565.

(239)); or one can apply a thing to oneself while in some sense aiming the action at someone else (as Polly can be said to do when she stabs herself repeatedly with a needle while making a gift for her father: the stabbing illustrates, draws attention to, and makes a spectacle of the pain she will experience in being apart from him).

These are all actions one might perform with the kinds of things that are more usually described as sex toys, and they have been described here simply in terms of how one person physically wields them in relation to another. But as even these brief extracts suggest, and as this chapter will go on to show, Brontë's use of these objects and the power dynamics they enable are always complex and multivalent. Even if it were possible to imagine an object that has a wholly unambiguous sexual significance, these are not that kind of object. In *Villette*, two things in particular – the jewel-case containing the watchguard Lucy makes for Paul, and the cigar smoke he exhales into her desk – have a peculiar intertextual resonance. A jewel-box and smoke are central elements in the first dream 'Dora' describes in Sigmund Freud's 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (1905), which can be read as a depiction of a power struggle structured around material objects. 'Dora', Freud's pseudonym for Ida Bauer, relates her dream: 'A house was on fire...Mother wanted to stop and save her jewel-case; but Father said: "I refuse to let myself and my two children be burnt for the sake of your jewel-case."' <sup>93</sup> Later, she remembers that 'each time after waking up [from the dream] she had smelt smoke.' (109) In Freud's reading, the jewel-case carries an ambivalent reference to Dora's vagina: 'Is not "jewel-case" a term commonly used to describe female genitals that are immaculate and intact? And is it not, on the other hand, an innocent word? Is it not, in short, admirably calculated both to betray and to conceal the sexual thoughts that lie behind the dream?' (130). Dora denies this interpretation, but responds (as Freud sees it) with a tacit and tactile reference to the childhood masturbation he wants her to confess to, by toying with the opening of her purse.

Here, then, things and sex are linked through a 'symbolic geography' (139), with one translating into the other: 'There is a great deal of symbolism of this kind in life, but as a rule we pass it by without heeding it.' (114) As the

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<sup>93</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")', 1905, in *Case Histories 1: 'Dora' and 'Little Hans'*, trans. Alix Strachey and James Strachey, ed. James Strachey and Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), 99.

above summary of person-thing-person relations shows, it is quite possible to find a directly symbolic aspect in *Villette*'s sex toys; my choice of quotations, I realise, draws out this quality. But because they tend to insist on one particular translation ('I knew *you* would say that', says Dora (105)), such readings can limit our understanding of the sexual power relations that can be performed through things. Jane Gallop discusses the quality of certainty in Freud's symbolic interpretation of objects in the Dora case, asking: 'Is this not the worst sort of vulgar, predictable "Freudian" interpretation? The predictability of Freud's line...offends Dora by denying the specificity of her signifiers...What woman wants to be opened by a skeleton key?'<sup>94</sup> She goes on to complicate the word 'vulgar' in the context of the Dora case, connecting it to the idea of 'keys': Freud points out that the vulgar reader of *Dora* will look for sexual 'keys' in the text, but also himself refers to the 'well-known symbolism' of keys, and finally refers to sexuality itself as 'the key' (Gallop 206-207). For the purposes of my argument, a more useful model for the interaction of things and sex can be found in Dora's perception of smoke in a dream. Freud reads this as 'the longing for a kiss, which, with a smoker, would necessarily smell of smoke' (110). But the role of the smoke here is more unpredictable than Freud's conclusion – 'everything fits together very satisfactorily upon this view' – suggests (110). The smell of smoke is not a metaphor for kissing a smoker but an actual hallucinated experience of what it would be like. And since Freud was a smoker, this also implicates the analyst himself, bringing in the idea of the transference that Freud later admits to not 'mastering' in Dora's case (160). The smoke is not only a symbol but a sensory experience, and it marks a point of disruption in the analysis.

The point is not, then, that the 'shocking' quality of the smell of cigars imbuing the little gifts Paul leaves for Lucy, the 'satisfying' substance of John's letter, and the coolness of Beck's perusal of Lucy's things have a specific and legible, if coded, sexual meaning. In describing the erotic function of things in *Villette*, we might, instead, turn to Bill Brown's exegesis of the possible uses of the word 'thing'. He emphasises the ambiguity inherent in the word itself, which at different times 'designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday', 'functions to overcome the loss of other words', and 'designates an amorphous

<sup>94</sup> Jane Gallop, 'Keys to Dora', in *In Dora's Case: Freud, Hysteria, Feminism*, eds. Charles Bernheimer and Claire Kahane (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 206.



characteristic or a frankly irresolvable enigma'.<sup>95</sup> In fact, Brown's gloss on the word mirrors Lucy's, who first hears the town of Villette described as 'chose', or 'thing':

Now, Miss Ginevra Fanshawe...only substituted this word 'chose' in temporary oblivion of the real name. It was a habit she had: 'chose' came in at every turn in her conversation – the convenient substitute for any missing word in any language she might chance at the time to be speaking... 'Chose,' however, I found, in this instance, stood for Villette—the great capital of the great kingdom of Labassecour. (55)

Eva Badowska notes that Brontë's manuscript once refers to Villette as 'Choseville' – a possible trace of an earlier draft, corrected in pencil by Brontë but still legible.<sup>96</sup> But where this leads Badowska to reflect on *Villette* as 'a novel whose immediate context was the Great Exhibition and the culture of things that coalesced around it' (1510), I want to focus on the way Brontë makes us read 'chose' as a word that is, above all, promiscuous, meaning at once anything and nothing.

The word has a history of directly sexual connotations in English, as in Alisoun's reference to her 'bele chose' in Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Wife of Bath's Prologue', suggesting her vagina.<sup>97</sup> The commodifying context of Alisoun's remark ('For if I wolde selle my bele chose / I koude walke as fressh as is a rose' (lines 447-448)), has resonances with Ginevra's thing-behaviour, particularly her willingness to accept gifts from the besotted John. He initially interprets this as a sign of innocence, claiming that 'she is far too disinterested to care for my gifts, and too simple-minded to know their value' (193). Then, once disenchanted with her, he sees it as a sign of a indiscriminate, sexualised receptivity: 'no grisette has a more facile faculty of acceptance. Strange! for after all, I know she is a girl of family.' (224) In another resonance with the 'Dora' case, Lucy plays the role of Freud to Ginevra's Dora. She tries to convince Ginevra not only that she really loves

<sup>95</sup> Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 28, No. 1, 2001, 1-22, 5.

<sup>96</sup> Eva Badowska, 'Choseville: Brontë's *Villette* and the Art of Bourgeois Interiority', *PMLA*, Vol. 120, No. 5, October 2005, 1509-1523, 1509.

<sup>97</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, 'The Wife of Bath's Prologue', *The Canterbury Tales*, in *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, vol. 4, ed. W. W. Skeat (Oxford: Clarendon, 1900), 332, lines 447-448.

John, but that she has put herself in romantic (and thus sexual) debt by accepting gifts from him: 'It stands to reason that by accepting his presents you give him to understand he will one day receive an equivalent, in your regard' (91). Half a century later, Freud tells Dora that 'a return-present [for the jewel-case Herr K. gave her] would have been very appropriate' (Freud 105). Both women are charged with impropriety for not acknowledging this exchange rate of sexual favours for material gifts. In his introduction to *Villette*, which is generally suspicious of the role of things and materiality in the novel, Tony Tanner is similarly hard on Ginevra, describing her as physically 'extremely substantial' but 'humanly empty' (21). He reads her use of '*chose*' as a sign of intellectual corruption, even bankruptcy:

...she lives in a kind of linguistic oblivion, totally indifferent to the real names of things and people...This total indifference to true names, to actual appearances, and to the syntax we use to construct a picture of the world in language, indicates that she is unaware of the real otherness of the given world and its inhabitants...And all this is perfectly summed up in her lazy habit of substituting the word '*chose*' for all the gaps in her undeveloped language.<sup>98</sup>

Notwithstanding that anyone capable of a description as pithy and deflating as 'Him you call the man...is bourgeois, sandy-haired, and answers to the name of John' (*Villette* 149) is clearly not indifferent to 'the syntax we use to construct a picture of the world in language', Ginevra's use of '*chose*', far from being lazy, does a great deal of work. Ginevra is the most casually multilingual character in the mostly bilingual world of *Villette*: she speaks French, German and English, and claims she can barely write in any of them, though her chatty, vivid letter to Lucy after her elopement suggests this is an exaggeration for effect (54). For her, code-switching, the use of elements of two or more languages in one utterance, involves not just a greater linguistic scope but a range of moral and identity-related possibilities. In the same way that her peripatetic background allows her to dismiss the Catholic-Protestant

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<sup>98</sup> Tony Tanner, introduction to *Villette*, 1979 (London: Penguin, 1988), 17-18.

divide that will become so dominant in the last half of the novel ('I was a Lutheran once at Bonn' (54)), her multilinguality lets her widen the bounds of social acceptability: '*au diable*; (one daren't say that in English, you know, but it sounds quite right in French)' (55). Lucy comments that Ginevra 'always had recourse to French, when about to say something specially heartless or perverse' (91).<sup>99</sup> But her use of '*chose*' does not only suggest a proliferation of possibilities, standing as it does for 'any missing word' in 'any language'; it also at once covers up and marks a loss: the 'temporary oblivion of the real name' (55). Ginevra's promiscuous '*chose*' suggests, then, a way of reading *Villette*'s things: they at once create connections filled with ambiguity, plausible deniability and slippages between signifier and signified, and mark the places where something has been lost.

*the pleasures of investigation: 'the most touching case'*

In 'Haworth, November 1904', Virginia Woolf expresses ambivalence about her motives for wanting to 'do homage' at the Brontë 'shrine'.<sup>100</sup> She asks herself whether this potentially 'sentimental journey' can be justified by the idea that, as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* suggests, 'Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed'. Once Woolf reaches the Brontë Museum, her 'painful' excitement turns to disappointment:

The museum is certainly rather a pallid and inanimate collection of objects. An effort ought to be made to keep things out of these mausoleums, but the choice often lies between them and destruction...Here are many autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents. But the most touching case – so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one's gaze – is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman.

The dead woman is Charlotte Brontë, and the things are a minute pair of shoes and a paisley-patterned muslin dress – personal relics, presumably as opposed

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<sup>99</sup> Patricia S. Yaeger discusses Ginevra as 'carelessly multilingual' in 'Honey-Mad Women: Charlotte Brontë's Bilingual Heroines', *Browning Institute Studies*, Vol. 14, March 1986, 11-35, 21.

<sup>100</sup> Virginia Woolf, 'Haworth, November 1904', 1904, *A Celebration of Women Writers*, web, 16 October 2012.

to professional ones. The strange unease in this description centres on the idea of the 'touching', and whether we should feel pity when looking at these things. And if so, for what? – the preserved things, or the dead people who once owned them? Woolf points out that the objects are 'inanimate', suggesting that they might in some way have been animate, endowed with remnants of their owner's subjectivity – and in fact they are currently only 'rather' inanimate. They are entombed in a mausoleum, but in a way that keeps them from being completely destroyed. 'The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them', writes Woolf, and their apparently unnatural survival has the effect of making her forget her justification for coming to look at them at all: 'one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that [Brontë] was a great writer.' Moreover, it seems impossible to keep hold of the sense of reverence with which the trip began. Woolf has only got as far as Keighley when Charlotte starts to become a figure of pity: 'our only occupation was to picture the slight figure of Charlotte trotting along the streets in her thin mantle, hustled into the gutter by more burly passers-by.' In the parsonage itself, faced with her 'little personal' belongings, the difficulty becomes more acute. These things are 'so touching that one feels hardly reverent in one's gaze'. It is as if Woolf, who is here at the very start of her writing career, is experiencing an undue intimacy with and an unwanted accession of power over the writer she admires. Although she is divided from Charlotte's things by the pane of glass that positions these everyday objects as museum displays, she is also, in a sense, touching her too closely.

By being placed behind glass, preserved from their 'natural fate', Brontë's dress and shoes have been invested with meaning – not by Brontë herself so much as by the people who preserved them, and the people who visit them in order to, as they believe, 'add something to our understanding of [her] books'. The process of remembrance and veneration that makes them relics paradoxically makes it more difficult to venerate the person who used to own them; it brings her too close. But these things do not just make their owner vulnerable, they also leave the apparently privileged observer with a sense of having been exposed in her desire to look at them. Woolf's discomfort suggests that there may be something potentially pathetic about attaching emotions to things. Investing feeling in a thing always holds the risk of investing wrongly or investing too much, and, not least, of making a spectacle of one's own mis-

investment.

Freud's concept of the fetish has resonances with how things work as sex toys in *Villette*, though there are also interesting differences. Like the thing as sex toy, Freud's fetish alleviates a fear of loss: 'the fetish is a substitute for the woman's (the mother's) penis that the little boy once believed in and – for reasons familiar to us – does not want to give up...if a woman had been castrated, then his own possession of a penis was in danger'.<sup>101</sup> At the same time, it physically manifests this fear: 'the horror of castration has set up a memorial to itself in the creation of this substitute.' (353) To Freud, this has particular implications for the idea of sexual privacy. 'The meaning of the fetish is not known to other people,' Freud writes, 'so the fetish is not withheld from him: it is easily accessible and he can readily obtain the sexual satisfaction attached to it. What other men have to woo and make exertions for can be had by the fetishist with no trouble at all.' (354) From the point of view of *Villette*, 'this world where everybody constantly watches everybody else',<sup>102</sup> this version of the role of things in sex is utopian. It suggests that it might be possible to gain sexual pleasure in a direct but coded way, to act out one's desires at once privately and in full view. Freud's statement implies that the fetish is readily accessible not just because it does not need to be wooed, but because other people cannot detect its meaning, and thus will not try to withhold it. In *Villette*, where detection and surveillance often has the aim of getting between people and pleasure (though, as we will see, it also creates pleasure), a thing that can give you what you want without anyone knowing about it seems ideal. But this is not how it works in practice.

The idea of *Villette* as a text 'dominated by the practice of surveillance' has received a great deal of critical attention, and the surveillance is often framed in terms of the panoptic structure that Michel Foucault, drawing on Jeremy Bentham's work, describes in *Discipline and Punish*.<sup>103</sup> Joseph Allen

<sup>101</sup> Sigmund Freud, 'Fetishism' (1927), in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), 352.

<sup>102</sup> Joseph Allen Boone, 'Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of "Heretic Narrative"', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 26, No. 1, 1992, 20-42, 20.

<sup>103</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 219. See also Mark M. Hennelly, 'The Surveillance of Désirée: Freud, Foucault and *Villette*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1998, 421-440; Nicholas Dames, 'The Clinical Novel: Phrenology and *Villette*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 29, No. 3, Spring 1996, 367-390; Margaret Shaw, 'Narrative Surveillance and Social Control in *Villette*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 1994, 813-33;

Boone reads the scene where Paul admits to spying on the inmates of Madame Beck's school as involving one of the central features of the Panopticon. In the Panopticon, the inmate must always be aware that they may be watched, without knowing whether they actually are at any given moment; Boone notes that 'making sure that those spied-upon know that the spying eye has penetrated their inmost secrets becomes a perverse way of consolidating and displaying one's superior powers.' (20) Boone draws out the gendered and sexual dimension of this spying: 'Probing spy-glasses, master keys, magic lattices, bottom doors – the sexualized tenor of M. Paul's metaphors reminds us that the circulation of power in the disciplinary world sketched by Foucault...is neither neutral nor neuter.' (22)

But when trying to imagine the erotic possibilities of what Lucy calls a 'taste for research' (69), the Panopticon, which in Foucault's depiction 'automatizes and disindividualizes power', may not be the best place to start.<sup>104</sup> In *Villette* surveillance can be a matter of gazing down unseen from a lofty perch, as in the case of Paul's spying, although even here the gazing is mediated by objects: the items Boone mentions clearly have sexual dimensions, but they are also actual spy-glasses, master keys, lattices and doors. More often, surveillance involves physically rummaging through someone's things. Where Woolf had to gaze at Brontë's things through a pane of glass, the searching of possessions in the novel is a tactile and sensuous process, although also one that can take different forms and levels of intensity. For instance, Lucy disavows her own curiosity about the note addressed to 'la robe grise', which she finds and eventually reads, by emphasising how delicately she handles it. She hardly even means to open it: 'its loose lid opened in my hand' (110), and she holds the note itself 'between my finger and thumb' (111), as if holding it gingerly displays for the reader, or whoever else might be watching her in the garden, her certainty that there is nothing to get excited about here.

Paul and Madame Beck search Lucy's desk in similarly telling ways. The desk itself seems to be a portable, lockable writing desk of the sort that contains letters and papers as well as writing materials (Charlotte's desk is one of the

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Katherine Inglis, 'Ophthalmoscopy in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, Vol. 15, No. 3, 2010, 348-369 (which, however, focuses on the embodied eye rather than the disembodied panoptic gaze); and Boone.

<sup>104</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 202.

exhibits Woolf might have seen at the Brontë Museum). Along with her trunk and work-box, it is one of the three cases that Lucy brings with her to the school; they are her private spaces within a room she shares with three children and the drunken Mrs Sweeny. By making copies of the keys, Beck quickly gains entrance to all of them. But the power dynamics of Beck's stealthy investigations are complicated by the fact that Lucy narrates each of them. Although, like the inmate of a panoptic structure, Lucy is aware that she could be investigated at any moment, in practice she is always able to gain sensory evidence of it, whether by actually seeing her investigator at work or, in Paul's case, by the smell of his cigar smoke. The 'see/being-seen dyad', far from being 'dissociat[ed]' (Foucault 202), is very much at work, and produces a complex current of desire.

Where Lucy's handling of the billet-doux is hesitant, Beck is neat and extravagantly thorough in her examination of the spaces within spaces that make up Lucy's desk: 'duly and impartially was each succeeding drawer opened in turn...not a little box but was unlidded; and beautiful was the adroitness, exemplary the care with which the search was accomplished' (118). Coming across this sight, Lucy reacts with excitement, apparently not so much because she has caught Beck in the act as because she finds aesthetic delight in Beck's movements. 'I will not deny that it was with a secret glee I watched her,' she says, playing on the scene's layers of concealment and revelation: her enjoyment is at once secret and openly admitted. 'Had I been a gentleman, I believe madame would have found favour in my eyes, she was so handy, neat, thorough in all she did...I stood, in short, fascinated', she says (118). This is presented as a counterfactual fantasy, but in fact it describes Lucy's current feelings: Beck has already 'found favour in [her] eyes'. After this Lucy's feelings, and the balance of power, shift rapidly as she becomes aware that the knowledge Beck is gaining from her things is purely negative. They show no signs that Lucy exists as a desiring or desired individual; she is 'as safe from spies in [her] heart-poverty, as the beggar from thieves in his destitution of purse.' (119) As Woolf felt acutely when looking at Brontë's little relics, Lucy's possessions place her in the uncomfortable position of being potentially touching in her 'heart-poverty'.

But Beck is insensible to this kind of touch, as Lucy will soon explain: 'to

attempt to touch her heart was the surest way to rouse her antipathy...It proved to her that she had no heart to be touched: it reminded her where she was impotent and dead.' (74) As Lucy describes her, Beck appears to have half the qualities that might describe a masochist's ideal sadist: she lacks the imaginative sympathy a sadist needs, but she has the ability to act without allowing sympathy to soften her. She can touch, but (again, in Lucy's reading) can not be touched. Where Woolf's experience of pity over Brontë's things makes her feel that 'Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life', Beck's touching of Lucy's things seems to enable her to see Lucy herself as a thing. As Sweeny's cashmere shawl made her temporarily employable in Beck's eyes, Beck's examination of Lucy's things confirm her thing-like employability. She can be used as a tool in part because she has no apparent existence outside of her usefulness.

The investigation stirs Lucy's feelings – 'soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them' – but leaves both her and her belongings apparently untouched: 'next day I was again Lucy Snowe...the closest subsequent examination could not discover change or apparent disturbance in the position of one object.' (119) Lucy's sense of being perceived as a thing by Beck first sets in during the investigation Beck undertakes on Lucy's first night in the school. Here Lucy experiences her body as an object of research: 'A small pantomime ensued, curious enough: I dare say she sat a quarter of an hour on the edge of my bed, gazing at my face. She then drew nearer, bent close over me; slightly raised my cap, and turned back the border so as to expose my hair; she looked at my hand lying on the bed-clothes.' (69) If Beck, at this early stage, is aware that Lucy is not asleep, what she learns in her lengthy gazing and handling is that Lucy will not confront her. For the sake of continuing their professional relationship, she will consent to be an object of investigation. Having tacitly accepted this through her passivity under Beck's touch, Lucy continues to think of herself as one of Beck's 'tools' (74). Later on, she assumes that the person who has wrapped her in shawls after she fell asleep on her desk is Beck, motivated by utility, rather than Paul, motivated by a more personal interest: 'She considers me a useful machine, answering well the purpose for which it was hired; so would not have me needlessly injured.' (360)

In all these scenes, however, Lucy's attempts at seeing herself through



Beck's eyes and her insistence that Beck must view her as a 'useful machine' seems at least in part like an attempt at disavowing the erotic aspect of these investigations. Throughout the investigation, Beck herself is something other than human; her face, in this 'night-aspect', is 'of stone' (70). But rather than helping the investigation, this aspect of thing-likeness has the function of strictly limiting how much can be discovered, both by the investigator and the investigated. Katherine Inglis points out that considering how much energy is devoted to surveillance in *Villette*, it is bafflingly ineffective as social control: 'Through his glass, Paul sees pupils stealing fruit, Madame Beck stalking Lucy and Zelig's secret impropriety – but no punishment follows, and no-one realizes that they have been seen... the threat of discovery alone is an ineffective deterrent and the *surveillante* a rather deluded tyrant...The result is the mere illusion of order.' (354) But it is perhaps too simple to think of Beck as deluded, unaware that her regime is inefficient. Lucy posits that perfect knowledge can be achieved very easily, with far less work than what is required to repeatedly, obsessively rifle through each tiny compartment of someone's desk:

The searcher might have turned and caught me...she and I would have had to come all at once, with a sudden clash, to a thorough knowledge of each other: down would have gone conventionalities, away swept disguises, and *I* should have looked into her eyes, and *she* into mine – we should have known that we could work together no more, and parted in this life forever. (119)

The surveillance practices of the Pensionnat Beck make more sense considered as an autotelic, self-sustaining process than as a wildly tireless fact-finding mission that never quite succeeds when it matters. Here anagnorisis never occurs, yet, paradoxically, Lucy is able (or thinks she is able) to predict what results it would have. She knows that 'thorough' interpersonal knowledge is something to be carefully avoided, because it would put an end to the investigation that purports to be trying to produce it. The thing-like quality of the participants keeps them both just unaware enough to allow the investigation to continue. In this way, it makes sense to think of Beck's investigations as working in the same way as other Brontëan dynamics of intimacy and control:

desire centers not on the putative end result (Beck knowing Lucy perfectly), but on the process (Beck going through Lucy's things over and over). Similarly, Lucy notes of Paul that '[t]his idea of "keeping down" never left [his] head; the most habitual subjugation would, in my case, have failed to relieve him of it...his occupation would have been gone had I left him nothing to "keep down."' (363). Unsuccessful control is its own reward; the surveillance needs to be inefficient in order to allow it to continue.

Later on, Lucy thinks Beck has returned to her desk on 'inspection duty', but instead finds that a different kind of search is taking place. In contrast to Beck's neat investigations, performed in the 'inspecting garb' of a 'shawl and clean cap', Paul almost physically dives into Lucy's desk: 'his olive hand held my desk open, his nose was lost to view amongst my papers.' (343) Lucy will soon find out that Paul is given to 'watching, and watching over' her, 'keeping' her 'down' – the phrases are neatly balanced, watching and watching over, keeping and keeping down, suggesting both control and caregiving (363). But his rifling through her desk seems less investigative than intimate for the sake of intimacy. Of all the person-thing-person interactions in *Villette*, this might be the one that most clearly lends itself to symbolic interpretation: in this case, in terms of procreative sex. Where Beck's searches leave Lucy's things apparently unruffled, Paul enters her desk physically and familiarly and leaves it in a kind of productive disarray, with 'treasures' in the form of books and pamphlets 'grow[ing]' in it as if organically (343).

Throughout most of the novel, Lucy excepts herself from the common destiny of courtship, marriage and children that the students and most of the teachers of the Rue Fossette take for granted. She tries not to 'gaze along the path they seemed so certain of treading.' (111) But the prospect or fantasy of this path is acted out through the desk, the books and the exploring hand, in the same way that the fantasy of a home of one's own is performed in miniature in the little schoolhouse Paul gives her. It seems to anticipate Lucy's attempt at stoicism a chapter later, when she imagines making her goal in life a gradual, solitary, linear accumulation of objects, acquiring a few school-rooms and supplying them with 'benches and desks, a black tableau, an estrade for myself; upon it a chair and table, with a sponge and some white chalks' (361). The books that proliferate in her desk without apparent effort – a 'fresh interesting new

work', a 'classic, mellow and sweet in its ripe age', a romance peeping 'laughingly' from her work-basket (343) – are a sensuous contrast to the hard-won black tableau and white chinks, belying the idea that 'afterwards' there will be 'nothing more for me in life – no true home – nothing to be dearer to me than myself' (361).

But the fact that it is acted out through things changes the character of this representation of creative, generative coupledness. Paul's 'gentle and careful' stirring-up of her desk stages this fantasy through euphemism, but it neither actually fulfils nor promises to fulfil it (344). Though Lucy finds the things left in her desk 'full welcome and refreshing', they are 'loans' and the products of 'capricious good-will', not things she can keep or rely on (343). Moreover, there is another dimension to this person-thing-person interaction that is in excess of the metaphor of procreation, clouding its clarity. 'Impossible to doubt the source whence these treasures flowed,' says Lucy. The 'condemning and traitor peculiarity' that identifies them as Paul's is italicised for emphasis: '*they smelt of cigars.*' (343)

Faintly echoing the line famously attributed to Freud, Janice Carlisle's *Common Scents* opens by asking: 'When does a cigar give off an odor?'<sup>105</sup> But the effect of the smell of Paul's cigars runs counter to Carlisle's answers (which do not address *Villette*, focusing on the 'fictional osmology' of novels from the 1860s (14)). Carlisle casts the propensity to give off smell in general as an issue of power, with odorlessness connoting 'the dominant and powerful norm': 'When it comes to smells, top dogs do not mark their territory; they know it because their inferiors are presumably powerless not to mark theirs.' (33) Specifically, '[w]hen [the smoker] is securely positioned as a member of the middle classes or the gentry...it may create a haze hard to see through...but rarely an odor difficult to bear.' (39) In the novel's first mention of cigars, this analysis holds true; the men who frighten Lucy by following her through the streets of Villette smoke, and though 'their dress implied pretensions to the rank of gentlemen...poor things! they were very plebeian in soul.' (64)

The smell of Paul's cigar has more complicated effects. It lets him show Lucy, indirectly but apparently intentionally, that the books come from him – the cigar being one of several objects (like his paletôt, bonnet-grec and glasses)

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<sup>105</sup> Janice Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.

that, in a faintly threatening and faintly absurd way, stand for him. And it corrupts the objects, making them ‘peccant’, a word that denotes both moral culpability and the capacity to spread disease. Desks in the Rue Fossette being ‘by no means inviolate repositories’, Lucy has no choice about accepting the objects, and thus has no choice about accepting the cigar smoke they carry into her own body (342). Philosopher and psychologist Alexander Bain’s study of the senses, published three years after *Villette*, emphasises that smell has material form. An object can be perceived as having a smell when it is partly ‘evaporated or volatilized’, hence the olfactory agent is a trace of the object itself.<sup>106</sup> Paul, then, is making something material, though ethereal – the trace of smoke from his cigar – pass from his body into Lucy’s. The cigar smoke expresses both assertion and vulnerability: it is a way of literally getting under Lucy’s skin, as well as of making it clear to her who the gifts are from, but he also worries that this quality will make her reject them – that is, that she will reject this trace of him.

Paul is able to evade the implications of Carlisle’s hierarchy of odorousness in part because the source of the smell is associated with him, but is not him: his body, even his clothes, are never described as smelling of smoke. The cigar, like any sex toy, is intimate with but not a part of the body; it can be taken up and set aside at will. But using it is not without risks. In spite of his professed indifference to being caught, Paul is clearly in a state of heightened awareness. The sound of Lucy breathing, possibly taking in the smoke he is exhaling, is enough to make him aware of her presence, and he has to take ‘a grim gripe of his self-possession, which half escaped him’ (334). The phrasing here underscores the sexual connotations of her discovery. ‘Gripe’ can refer to a grasp, a sudden sensation of stomach pain, or the handle of an implement, a range of meanings that can suggest an erection, the attempt to suppress it, and the tightening of a sphincter against penetration. What Lucy has just become a witness to or participant in can be interpreted as a euphemistic representation of a procreative sex act, a direct act of physical violation, or a performance of a fetishistic act of autoeroticism. Or it can be interpreted as a man placing books in a woman’s desk and then disarranging its contents, because like most of the person-object-person relations in *Villette*, this one relies on at least a degree of

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<sup>106</sup> Alexander Bain, *The Senses and the Intellect* (London: 1855), 158.

plausible deniability. Like the apocalyptic face-to-face meeting Lucy imagines between herself and Beck, this meeting between the investigator and the investigated feels like a discovery, but exactly what has been discovered is not clear.

“The unsubtle affective responses typically evoked by smells – pleased, displeased – quickly become translated into action – yes, no; do, don't,” writes Carlisle (31). But whether due to her habitual reticence or not, Lucy’s response cannot be sorted into either of these categories. There is a suggestion of irony, or at least of going through a ‘formality’, when she notes that the smell ‘was very shocking, of course: *I thought so at first*’ (343). Even ‘at first’, her shocked behaviour has a quality of performance to it; she opens the window ‘with some bustle’ to air out the desk, and as with the billet-doux, she ostentatiously holds the potentially infectious books ‘with fastidious finger and thumb’ (343). Like Paul’s familiarity with her desk, Lucy’s airing-out of his cigar smoke is something to be ‘caught’ at, a supposedly secret act that seems intended to be discovered (343). Paul’s response to this partial rejection of the books and the cigar smoke is so worried – “You find a brochure or a tome now and then; but you don’t read them, because they have passed under this?” – touching his cigar... “Do you like them, or any of them? – are they acceptable?” – that Lucy loses her fear of his metonymic objects. ‘[T]he neighbourhood of [the paletot and bonnet-grec] seemed no longer uncomfortable nor very formidable’ (347), and she is able to sit close to him without being ‘*asphyxidé*’, choked by his smoke and presence. This person-thing-person interaction shows how varied the effects of things used as sex toys can be: here, rather than creating tension and arousal, it creates a potential for almost comfortable, if temporary, closeness.

*desiring objects: ‘the fruition of my wish’*

In her work on fetishism and erotic obsession, Emily Apter quotes the French psychiatrist Georges Lanteri Laura, who claims that accounts of fetishism ‘always border on the ridiculous: “to risk so much for so little seems grotesque and pitiful; fetishistic clients give off the impression of being had, of paying too much for a paltry illusion.”’<sup>107</sup> This mix of revulsion and pity contrasts strongly

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Emily Apter, *Feminizing the Fetish: Psychoanalysis and Narrative Obsession in Turn-of-the-Century France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 30.

with Freud's description of clients with sexual fetishes. As well as conceiving of fetishistic sexual interests as allowing for sexual privacy and accessibility, Freud introduces 'Fetishism' by noting that while 'adherents' generally consider their fetishism to be something out of the ordinary, they do not see it as 'the symptom of an ailment': '[u]sually they are quite satisfied with it, or even praise the way in which it eases their erotic life' (351). In *Villette*, we find uses of things as sex toys that take on the characteristics of both descriptions: objects that give those that interact with them a sense of plenitude, pleasure, excitement and satisfaction, but that can also create the fear that one is risking and paying too much.

Lucy wavers between taking intense pleasure in the letters John sends her, and being dismayed by her own relation to them. In a startling echo of *Jane Eyre*, Lucy, who has climbed up to a garret to read the first letter in private only to lose it when the mysterious nun appears, begins to think of herself as a madwoman in the attic: "My letter! my letter!" I panted and plained, almost beside myself. I groped on the floor, wringing my hands wildly' (246). Her description of seeing the nun leads John to diagnose 'a case of spectral illusion...following on and resulting from long-continued mental conflict' (249). But as we find out later, the appearance of the nun has a prosaic (if also wonderfully silly) explanation. In this chapter it acts as a red herring, displacing the spectral illusion that is the letter itself. Lucy is 'almost' but not quite 'beside' herself, flickering between identifying with the abject figure on the floor – 'Cruel, cruel doom! To have my bit of comfort preternaturally snatched from me, ere I had well tasted its virtue!' – and cruel observation: "Oh! They have taken my letter!" cried the grovelling, groping, monomaniac.' (246)

Sally Shuttleworth traces the increasing popularity of the term 'monomania' from the 1830s. She quotes James Cowles Prichard's 1835 description of monomania as a circumscribed, partial insanity, in which 'the understanding is partially disordered or under the influence of some particular illusion, referring to one subject, and involving one train of ideas', while the person in question otherwise functions perfectly well.<sup>108</sup> Shuttleworth notes that this innovation in conceptions of mental disorder contributed to the idea of the

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<sup>108</sup> James Cowle Prichard, *A Treatise on Insanity and Other Disorders Affecting the Mind* (London: 1835), 17, quoted in Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 51.

mind as divided against itself, establishing 'a more malleable and also more tenuous model of the self' (52). For Lucy, the idea of monomania seems to have to do with a sense of passionate attachment: earlier in the novel she describes the young Polly's intense need for her father as a sign of 'a one-ideal nature; betraying that monomaniac tendency I have ever thought the most unfortunate with which man or woman can be cursed' (13). Here intense attachment is seen as a curse, not a source of potential delight. These pathologising accounts of attachments to objects suggest that healthy relations to objects involve not caring about, investing in or needing them too much. This section imagines relations with objects in a different way. Looking at two particularly erotically fraught instances of sex toys, the letters John writes to Lucy and the watchguard Lucy gives to Paul, it examines what allows these things to work as sources as pleasure and connection, and what stops them from working.

The first letter John sends to Lucy holds physical traces of his body, as well as suggesting it metonymically. Lucy's name is written in a 'clean, clear, equal, decided hand', 'hand' suggesting both the body part and its mark; the seal is 'round, full, deftly dropped by untremulous fingers', 'round' and 'full' hinting at some property of John himself as well as of his seal (239). Paulina, receiving a letter of her own from John, notices the same equivalence between the writer and the material properties of the letter:

Graham's hand is like himself, Lucy, and so is his seal – all clear, firm, and rounded – no slovenly splash of wax – a full, solid, steady drop – a distinct impress: no pointed turns harshly pricking the optic nerve, but a clean, mellow, pleasant manuscript, that soothes you as you read. It is like his face – just like the chiselling of his features: do you know his autograph? (374)

These two reactions are uncannily similar. Both women treat their letters in the same way, taking them to be read in a private location, studying 'the outside of my treasure' and hesitating over opening it. The terms they both use to describe the letter's physical qualities, like 'full', 'solid', 'firm' and 'rounded', suggest the monolithic solidity associated with phallic objects, and both women imagine John in the vaguely ejaculatory act of dripping wax onto the letter. But the seal

also invites penetration. Faced with it, Paulina casts herself as a 'beleaguer', saying that 'one does not take a strong place of this kind by instant storm' (374), while Lucy casts herself as a seducer: 'I folded the untasted treasure, yet all fair and inviolate' (239). Lucy describes the letter as satisfying her most basic physical needs: food, drink, sunlight, 'the blood in my veins' (247); Paulina reads her letter like 'an animal athirst, laid down at a well and drinking; and the well proved quite full, gloriously clear' (375).

There is an obvious and painful irony in this similarity. In Paulina's case the letter not only holds traces of its writer, it also promises him: it contains a confession of love, and presages their marriage. In Lucy's case the letter is what she has instead of its writer; his pleasure in writing it is 'a gratification he might never more desire, never more seek' (244). 'Why is fixation on the phallus not called a fetish when it is attached to a man?' asks Marjorie Garber, noting that 'the concept of "normal" sexuality, that is of heterosexuality, is founded on the naturalization of the fetish.'<sup>109</sup> But here, unlike the letter that is attached to a man, Lucy imagines the letter that is not attached to a man as superseding its writer, becoming an object of desire in itself. The letter remains temporarily 'inviolate' in the sense of not being opened, but Lucy acts out a different sort of sexual analogy with it, suggesting how flexible its sexual connotations are. Instead of penetrating and opening it, she enfolds and encloses it in every container she can think of: 'I folded [it] in silver paper, committed it to the case, shut up box and drawer, reclosed, relocked the dormitory' (239). She kisses it, 'approach[ing] the seal, with a mixture of awe and shame and delight, to my lips' (239). Later, the power dynamics reverse and she finds herself anxious and powerless before the letter: 'Will it be cool? – will it be kind?' (244)

Lucy's emphasis on the letter's materiality becomes, in part, a way of disavowing her imaginary investment in it, a way of presenting her hopes as already fulfilled rather than only teased. But it is also a way for her to take pleasure from it. She loves it because it is a thing, 'a morsel of real solid joy: not a dream, not an image of the brain, not one of those shadowy chances imagination pictures, and on which humanity starves but cannot live' (239). Jessica Brent argues that '[t]he emotional value she assigns to these letters – a value that even she admits is out of proportion to their banal content – testifies

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<sup>109</sup> Marjorie Garber, 'Fetish Envy', *October*, Vol. 54, Autumn 1990, 45-56, 46.



to her desperate wish to get Graham's inaccessible image under linguistic control, to capture his essence with the written word.<sup>110</sup> The idea of John as an inaccessible image that can be admired but not touched is important. Lucy loves looking at him: when she first realises that he and Graham are the same person, she is 'observing the colour of his hair, whiskers, and complexion – the whole being of such a tone as a strong light brings out with somewhat perilous force' (98). Throughout the novel she struggles with this 'curious one-sided friendship' that is also a one-sided sensory passion, and with the awareness that the pleasure she takes in him as a physical being gives her no real rights over or access to him: 'this benignity, this cordiality, this music, belonged in no shape to me...Does the nectarine love either the bee or bird it feeds? Is the sweetbriar enamoured of the air?' (362) John's physical elusiveness makes his letter all the more valuable. In contrast to Brent, I would argue that the letter's linguistic content is subordinate to its thingness, its ability to be held and kept. John promises to write 'just any cheerful nonsense that comes into my head' (228), and it is not the content but the 'shape of a letter' that 'haunt[s]' Lucy's 'brain in its very core' (238). When Louisa Bretton writes to her Lucy reproduces the whole text (272), but not so here. There are good narrative reasons for this – not only would it be hard for any text to justify Lucy's attachment to it, but it is perhaps necessary for the reader to be unsure of how far it really does justify it. Nonetheless, this reticence also suggests that Lucy is more interested in the letter as thing than as communication; she is, in a sense, objectifying it.

With time, the sense of secure possession, fulfilment and pleasure that Lucy gains from the letters starts to fade. Tangible as the first letter is, it can be lost, as Lucy discovers when John hides it, keeps it hidden while watching her cry, and returns it only to threaten to take it back again, telling her that it is really still his. Eventually, the five letters Lucy receives 'from incessant perusal were losing all sap and significance: my gold was withering to leaves before my eyes, and I was sorrowing over the disillusion' (268). What was initially a person-thing-person interaction eventually loses its aspect of mutual involvement and becomes a person-thing interaction between Lucy and the letters. Reading the first letter, Lucy emphasises the sense it gives her of mutual desire and *me* – but to gratify *himself* (244). She adds that this is 'a gratification he might

<sup>110</sup> Jessica Brent, 'Haunting Pictures, Missing Letters: Visual Displacement and Narrative Elision in *Villette*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 37, No. 1/2, Fall 2003, 86-111, 102.

never more desire...but *that* concerned the future' (244). Lucy is thus aware that her desire for mutuality in itself makes her enjoyment temporary. As she reads, she has a profound sense of both the perfection and the momentariness of her pleasure: 'This present moment had no pain, no blot, no want; full, pure, perfect, it deeply blessed me.' (244) The letter works brilliantly as a sex toy, but because of the nature of the pleasure she takes in it, it only works for a short time.

The jealousy Paul feels over Lucy's fascination with John plays out through a series of charged person-thing-person interactions that culminate in the gift of the watchguard. Like John, Paul takes back his gift to Lucy, but where John is joking when he claims that 'you don't really care for it' (248) Paul means it. '*Je vois bien que vous vous moquez de moi et de mes effets* [I see plainly that you mock me and my things],' he says, snatching back the handkerchief she has been tossing into the air like a ball. Lucy disagrees, calling his behaviour a 'whim' and Paul himself 'a mere sprite of caprice and ubiquity', but there is some truth to it: she is playing with Paul's thing because she is thinking about and imagining enjoying John's thing, the 'treasure in the case, box, drawer upstairs' (242). Paul 'unwarrantably' hand-delivers John's letter to her (240), then rages at her class in a speech where his anger seems directed primarily at things, making Lucy a piece of classroom furniture or the classroom an extension of her: 'that conceited boudoir of a first classe, with its pretentious book-cases, its green-baized desks, its rubbish of flower-stands, its trash of framed pictures and maps, and its foreign surveillante' (240). The word 'boudoir' faintly sexualises this rant, casting the classroom as Lucy's private, intimate space.<sup>111</sup> In this way, the pretensions, trash and rubbish of the classroom link with his later, more playful scolding over what he sees as Lucy's 'flaunting, giddy colours' and over-elaborate dress; 'all your poor scattered sins of vanity, your luckless chiffon of rose-colour, your small fringe of a wreath, your scrap of ribbon, your silly bit of lace', as Lucy puts it to herself (322-324).

Both speeches are incited by sexual jealousy, suggesting that Paul associates the unbounded display of material things with uncontrolled

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<sup>111</sup> Considering the context, in which Lucy is refusing to respond to Paul's taunting, it also seems possible that a reference is intended to the derivation of the word from the French '*bouder*' – the classroom is a space in which to sulk. See the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'boudoir', etymology, from the French '*boudoir*', literally 'a place to sulk in', from '*bouder*', to pout, sulk.

sexuality. (In nineteenth-century usage, these qualities – untidiness and promiscuity – coincide in the word ‘slut’.<sup>112</sup>) At the same time, his close observation of her scarlet dress and black lace, the ‘flowers under the brim of [her] bonnet’ and the ‘bow of ribbon at [her] neck’ is clearly in itself a sensory indulgence. Lucy points out that ‘the fact was, M. Emanuel’s taste in colours decidedly leaned to the brilliant’ (332-333). Lucy’s (actually quite limited) deployment of decorative things, and Paul’s engagement or over-engagement with them, opens up a realm of erotic possibility that allows for chastisement, control, admiration, jealousy and teasing.

The watchguard, although not the focus of this scene, is its instigating object: Lucy’s statement that she is making it ‘[f]or a gentleman – one of my friends’ (331) is what sets Paul off (‘*on sait ce que c’est qu’un ami* [we all know what “friend” means]’, he says earlier (242)). Mark M. Hennelly reads the watchguard as, in part, Lucy’s attempt to make up for having broken Paul’s glasses. In his reading, the guard, and the sensuously described little case it comes in – ‘a small box I had bought for its brilliancy, made of some tropic shell of the colour called “nacarat”, and decked with a little coronal of sparkling blue stones’ (335) – might represent ‘Lucy’s atonement for her castrating *lapse* and Paul’s lack, her *labor* of love, the gift of her sexuality or *labia*, an androgynous clue through the *labyrinth* of life, or all such interwoven motifs’ (Hennelly 434). Initially, though, the most important thing about the watchguard is that Paul does not believe it is for him. His relation to this brilliant object is like Lucy’s relation to John: it is beautiful, but it is not his. When Lucy, during the ribbon and lace argument, holds up the ‘bright little chainlet of silk and gold’ that she has yet to give him, he groans – ‘I suppose over my levity.’ (333) When she does give it to him, he asks her over and over whether it is really ‘*all*’ his, or whether some of it was made ‘under the idea and for the adornment of another’ (346).

As for the object itself, a watchguard is a chain; in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester threatens to “just – figuratively speaking – attach you to a chain like this” (touching his watchguard) (270).<sup>113</sup> A watchguard prevents loss; Rochester

<sup>112</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes both meaning 1a, ‘A woman of dirty, slovenly, or untidy habits or appearance; a foul slattern’, and 2a, ‘A woman of a low or loose character; a bold or impudent girl; a hussy, jade’, in use in the mid-nineteenth century.

<sup>113</sup> As in *Villette*, this watchguard is associated with cases: ‘I want a smoke, Jane, or a pinch of snuff...unfortunately I have neither my cigar-case, nor my snuff-box’ (270). Since the reason Rochester needs a smoke to comfort him is that Jane has decided to keep out of his way and continue working until they are married, and the purpose of the watchguard is to chain her

wants to attach Jane to one 'lest my jewel I should tyne' (270). Its repeating name – watch-watch – describes the dual aspect of Paul's activities, watching and guarding, surveilling and looking after, keeping and keeping down. But the word also implies mutuality, suggesting that the watcher is also being watched. In this way, the watchguard is an extraordinary, if double-edged, gift. It at once manifests and dispels jealous fear; it is a guard against loss; it is a joke about Paul's visual proclivities; it hints at the kind of sexual captivity that Rochester imagines for Jane. Finally, it shows, through her attention to what he likes, her discovery of his middle names, engraved in the lid of the case, and the pun inherent in the word, that she is watching him as closely as he is watching her. Where John's letter is 'cheerful nonsense' on one side and 'the blood in my veins' on the other, the watchguard is given and received with equal investment, intensity and risk. Rather than producing momentary, intense pleasure, it mediates a more complex relation.

*people imagined as things: 'unobtrusive articles of furniture'*

In her work on eroticism in Victorian female friendship, Sharon Marcus describes Lucy's ambivalent relation to other women as a 'distinctly Victorian' kind of queerness: one that 'inheres in an anomalous distaste for other women's amity, not in a transgressive preference for women's love.'<sup>114</sup> She notes Lucy's reluctance to be emotionally close even to Paulina, 'a good woman who reciprocates her affection', because her good qualities in themselves create 'a sense of deficiency in Lucy that risks turning friendship into rivalry...as John's worthy beloved, the virtuous Paulina is as much Lucy's rival as the capricious Ginevra was.' (105) 'I liked her,' says Lucy of Paulina, pointing out how unusual a statement this is for her (371); earlier, and surprisingly, she says that '[i]f anyone knew me it was little Paulina Mary.' (301) But as Marcus rightly says, they are not friends. However, Marcus's characterisation of Paulina as a 'good woman' may obscure the workings of this not-friendship, because its strange mingling of liking, desire, identification, revulsion and resentment is driven by Lucy's uncertainty as to what exactly Paulina is. In this section, I will argue that other characters' desire for and, in Lucy's case, aggression towards Paulina is

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to him, Hennelly's (and indeed Freud's) link between case and vagina is one possible way of reading this object.

<sup>114</sup> Sharon Marcus, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 103.

structured by a tendency on the part of almost every character, sometimes including Paulina herself, to think of her as a doll. This perceived thing-status also has narrative implications in the way the centre of narrative focus veers away from Lucy and towards Paulina: for long stretches of the novel Lucy presents Paulina as a doll heroine, the subject of others' erotic and disciplinary desires. Finally, it has implications for Lucy's own conception of herself as a thing.

Later in *Between Women*, Marcus writes about currents of violence and desire in Victorian doll stories, in which 'dolls are to girls what, in the fashion press, girls were to women: beautifully dressed objects to admire or humiliate, simulacra of femininity that inspire fantasies of omnipotence and subjection.' (149) As parallel between adult women's fashion magazines and little girls' dolls suggests, Marcus presents the mistreatment of these simulacra of femininity as something girls learn from their mothers: 'In children's fiction, girls who subject dolls to violence usually reenact the discipline of mothers and other female caretakers' (162). Eugenia Gonzalez complicates Marcus's focus on violence against dolls in her article on surveillance and discipline in Victorian doll stories, noting that girl owners' aggression towards their dolls is almost invariably presented with a didactic purpose, to teach girls to 'protect the weak and the vulnerable'.<sup>115</sup> However, she also argues that doll stories often present power dynamics where the girl's violence is a response to her sense that the doll is surveilling her (43). The kind of reenactment Marcus describes occurs when Lucy meets Paulina for the first time in her questionably adult form, after the fire in the theatre where John saves her from being trampled by the crowd. With John instructing her in how to handle Paulina, telling her that '[s]he must be touched very tenderly', Lucy finds herself undressing the passive 'faint and sinking girl' (263). Gazing down at her charge, Lucy performs an echo of the physical examination she received at the hands of Madame Beck. Where Beck raises Lucy's cap to expose her hair (69), Lucy gets closer still, 'fold[ing] back [Paulina's] plentiful yet fine hair, so shining and soft, and so exquisitely tended' (264). Like Beck, she goes on to examine her subject's hands, which are 'veined finely like the petals of a flower' (264). Through this mirroring of the earlier

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<sup>115</sup> Eugenia Gonzalez, "I sometimes think she is a spy on all my actions": Dolls, Girls, and Disciplinary Surveillance in the Nineteenth-Century Doll Tale', *Children's Literature*, Vol. 39, 2011, 33-57.

incident, Lucy's sensory pleasure in Paulina's 'rich gift[s] of nature' makes it easier still to retrospectively read the encounter between Beck and Lucy as similarly charged.

Despite or possibly because of this enjoyment, Lucy quickly shifts into the imperious, punitive language of the doll stories (in one story quoted by Gonzalez, a girl maternally tells her doll that 'I thought I had at least taught you that it was rude to stare at strangers', adding that 'You must surely know by this time that it was because of your staring ways that you lost your eye'<sup>116</sup>). Lucy notices that Paulina's 'lip wore a curl – I doubt not inherent and unconscious, but which, if I had seen it first with the accompaniments of health and state, would have struck me as unwarranted, and proving in the little lady a quite mistaken view of life and her own consequence.' (264) The disciplining behaviour of Beck – who is no unmixed triumph as a parental figure, treating her own children with cool distance and everyone else in her charge with monitoring and bribes<sup>117</sup> – is reflected and perpetuated in Lucy's inward sharpness toward 'the little lady'. But the relation between the two moments is not necessarily causal, in the way that one doll-narrator describes when she says that her owner's violence 'was from no want of affection towards me, but simply from a desire to imitate her mother...while the mother tortured her own hair, Jane tortured mine.'<sup>118</sup> Lucy, of course, has pre-existing reasons for her attitude towards Paulina.

If Lucy's reproving manner, with its similarity to her earlier description of Polly as 'a little busy-body' (15), has not made it clear, there are other links between this so-far-unnamed character and the child Polly. Paulina later says of the adult John that '*he* is Graham, just as *I* am little Polly, or you are Lucy Snowe' (277), but Paulina's relation to her younger self is stranger than this simple equivalence suggests. Tim Dolin describes Polly as precociously simulating adult femininity, but considers that when the Bretton section of the

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<sup>116</sup> S. B. Martin, *The Morals and Emotions of a Doll* (London, 1897), 87, quoted in Eugenia Gonzalez, "I sometimes think she is a spy on all my actions": Dolls, Girls, and Disciplinary Surveillance in the Nineteenth-Century Doll Tale', 43.

<sup>117</sup> The one time Beck seems to allow Lucy to 'grow up', temporarily withdrawing her attempts at controlling her, it is by specifically avoiding a person-thing-person interaction: "To my bedside she came at twelve o'clock at night, and told me she had no present for me: "I must make fidelity advantageous to the St. Pierre," said she; "if I attempt to make it advantageous to you, there will arise misunderstanding between us – perhaps separation. One thing, however, I can do to please you – leave you alone with your liberty"" (298).

<sup>118</sup> Julia Pardoe, *Lady Arabella, or the Adventures of a Doll* (London: 1856), 51-52.

novel ends, ‘it is the end of the “very unique child” and the beginning of the commonplace womanly woman.’<sup>119</sup> This seems to miss, though, that Polly, first seen as ‘a shawled bundle’ in Warren’s arms (7) and Paulina, first seen wrapped in ‘some arrangement of drapery’ in John’s arms (262), are similar figures, and similarly, in Polly’s father’s words, not ‘quite cannie’ (280). Lucie Armitt describes Paulina/Polly’s quality of anachronism, her being out of time: ‘Polly is a particularly disturbing character, described from the start as both strange and estranged from the rest of humanity. So acute is this strangeness that, at the start of the book, the reader struggles to gain any clear sense of who or what she is, or even her age.’<sup>120</sup> But Paulina/Polly can also be read as quite the reverse of estranged from the rest of humanity; rather, she attaches herself to it tenaciously. (In one extraordinary scene, Polly lies ‘mute and motionless’ for hours at the feet of an apparently unaware John. (31)) She needs to be close to and animated by another person, as Louisa Bretton intuits when she says that ‘[i]f [Polly] were to take a fancy to anybody in the house, she would soon settle, but not till then’ (11). Lucy is more unsettled by this: ‘One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled to Graham’ (25). Lucy’s sense of her uncanniness – she says of the bereft Polly that a room with her in it ‘seemed to me not inhabited, but haunted’ (12) – seems to have to do with her incongruous and changeable levels of maturity, as well as her miniature size. Lucy’s description of Paulina as ‘a small, delicate creature, but made like a model’, although primarily an approving remark about her beauty, also casts her as a small-scale representation or image of something else (264).<sup>121</sup>

Freud’s essay on the uncanny explores the idea of living dolls, but unlike the essay by Ernst Jentsch to which it refers, which in Freud’s words argues that ‘a particularly favourable condition for awakening uncanny feelings is created when there is intellectual uncertainty whether an object is alive or not’, Freud points out that ‘children have no fear of their dolls coming to life, they may even

<sup>119</sup> Tim Dolin, introduction to *Villette* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xxiv.

<sup>120</sup> Lucie Armitt, ‘Haunted Childhood in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*’, *The Yearbook of English Studies*, Vol. 23, 2002, 217-228, 218.

<sup>121</sup> Lucy could be using the word ‘model’ to suggest a human artist’s model, but the words ‘made like’, and the emphasis on her smallness, seem to suggest that she means something closer to an inanimate, small-scale object used as a template for a larger-scale work of art. In either case, though, the sense of imitation is present.

desire it.’<sup>122</sup> Polly herself has a firm and apparently untroubled faith in her doll Candace’s ‘possession of sentient and somnolent faculties’ (30). Oddly, even Jentsch seems to consider dolls too close to us to be genuinely unsettling: ‘those cases must here be discounted in which the objects are very small or very familiar in the course of daily usage. A doll which closes and opens its eyes by itself...will cause no notable sensation of this kind’.<sup>123</sup> And yet Lucy experiences the adult Paulina as uncanny by virtue of being, precisely, very small and very familiar: weirdly like her child self, who in turn is weirdly precocious.

Possibly surprisingly to a modern-day reader, the text’s comparisons of the six-year-old Polly to a doll accentuate her maturity, both in her manner and her physical appearance, rather than diminishing it. Mentions of her doll-like size, clothes and accessories are coupled with descriptions of her ‘neat, completely-fashioned little figure’ (8), her restrained weeping (9), her ‘womanly’ attempts at sewing (15). Marcus notes that dolls in the nineteenth century often represented adult women or older girls, usually with ‘voluptuous hourglass figures’, and that dolls representing babies only became popular after about 1914 (155): in the mid-nineteenth century, comparing a little girl to a doll could imply comparing her to a simulacrum of a mature woman. Yet even when Paulina is seventeen, seen as old enough to get married, and as old as Ginevra is when she elopes with de Hamal, she continues to be perceived as a simulacrum of maturity. When she hesitantly tries to prove that she is an adult – “‘I thought,” said she, “I thought I had finished my education –” – her father immediately undercuts her: ‘That only proves how much we may be mistaken in our thoughts...Ah, my little girl, thou hast much to learn’ (286). In the next scene, John takes pleasure in discovering that in spite of speaking to him ‘in quite womanly sort’, Paulina still occasionally lisps: ‘Not one of those pretty impulses and natural breaks escaped him’ (288). When they first meet as adults John is unsure of whether she is a child or an adult, and takes the question up with Lucy rather than Paulina herself. Paulina’s statement that she is ‘a person of seventeen’ thus seeks to establish not just her adulthood, but her existence as a person (262).

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<sup>122</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The “Uncanny”’ (1919), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII: An Infantile Neurosis and Other Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Karnac, 2001), 234.

<sup>123</sup> Ernst Jentsch, ‘On the Psychology of the Uncanny’, 1906, trans. Roy Sellars, 1995, *The Boundary Language Project*, web, 16 October 2012.



Polly/Paulina is repeatedly called a 'thing', with its connotations of inanimateness, indeterminacy, monstrosity, and sheer materiality. She is described as a 'comical little thing' (according to Harriet (10)), a 'minute thing' (according to Lucy (14)), a 'little thing' (according to John (17)), a 'little thing' (according to Lucy (34)), a 'little spoiled, pampered thing' (269) and an 'affected little thing' (according to Ginevra (270)), an 'airy, fairy thing' (according to Lucy (274)), and 'the one precious thing I had' (according to Mr. Home (433)). Paulina even describes herself this way once, in an attempt to express the increasing conflict between her childlike and adult aspects. With her first love letter from John in her lap, she feels herself to be 'a thing double-existent – a child to that dear papa, but no more a child to myself.' (374) In the end, though, this conflict is resolved: the relationship between Paulina and John is made up of elements of Polly's relation to the younger John, and at the end of the novel she is able to remain with both her father and her husband.

John, Lucy and Paulina's father are thus all invested in the idea that Paulina can grow older and even go through symbolic sexual initiation while still retaining and renewing a sense of innocence. Such an initiation takes place through another thing-interaction in the chapter 'The Little Countess', which is filled with the tension between Paulina's roles as her father's 'daughterling' (280) and John's 'playmate' (281).<sup>124</sup> Paulina asks for a sip of ale from John's cup (280):

She continued to look up exactly with the countenance of a child that longs for some prohibited dainty. At last the Doctor relented, took it down, and indulged himself in the gratification of letting her taste from his hand...he prolonged it by so regulating the position of the cup that only a drop at a time could reach the rosy, sipping lips by which its brim was courted. (282)

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<sup>124</sup> As Dolin's note to the text points out, this tension is brought out further in the description of Paulina's father a 'grave and reverend signior', a quotation from a speech by Othello that continues: 'That I have ta'en away this old man's daughter / It is most true' (William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Othello, The Moor of Venice*, 1603 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1.iii.76, 78-9, quoted in explanatory note 280, *Villette*, 524). But the person who refers to Mr. Home as such is Lucy, not John. She is pointing up the drama that is starting to unfold between Paulina, John and Mr. Home, but she is also obliquely casting herself as Othello, who loves and kills Desdemona.

This use of the cup – which, being John’s christening cup, even bears his name – has the hallmarks of the thing as sex toy: it is a sexual analogue, and at the same time enables what is clearly in itself a sexual experience. But it has the added dimension of, again, presenting Paulina as a thing being played with.

The scene where John asks Paulina’s father for permission to marry her is, not unusually for such scenes in literature, strongly marked as a person-thing-person interaction with Paulina as the thing. Mr. Home ‘will not say you *robbed* me, but I am bereaved, and what I have lost, *you*, it seems, have won’ (433); John, on his part, ‘did truly regard you as the possessor of the most valuable thing the world owns for me’ (434). Paulina is spoken of as ‘it’ throughout the conversation. But in contrast to many other representations of women being married away as though they were objects, this perception of Paulina as thing does not render her powerless, but endows her with an unpredictable, physical connecting power. She forces the two men’s hands together and superintends the literally bloody struggle that follows: ‘Graham, stretch out your right hand. Papa, put out yours. Now let them touch...Papa, you grasp like a vice. You crush Graham’s hand to the bone, you hurt him!’ (434) Shortly afterwards we see Paulina creating an amulet to keep the two from quarreling, using the part of their bodies that can most readily be detached and turned into a thing:<sup>125</sup> their hair, ‘severed spoils from each manly head’, which she plaits, ties with her own hair, and ‘prison[s]’ in a locket (435).

But if their need to see Paulina as a doll structures and enables John’s desire and her father’s love, the same perception also affects Lucy’s story by seemingly knocking it out of course. *Villette* begins with three chapters focused raptly on someone other than its protagonist. From the moment Lucy finds out that ‘a little girl...would soon be my companion’ (6), the sentence falsifies itself. Paulina is never Lucy’s companion; in fact, for the rest of the novel Lucy will be struggling not to be Paulina’s companion. At the same time, however, Lucy reinforces her own displacement from the centre of the narrative by continually imagining Paulina as a doll, an object of erotic and violent desires. When Lucy first sees Paulina she describes her as ‘exceedingly tiny; but...a neat, completely-fashioned little figure...she looked a mere doll; her neck, delicate as wax, her head of silky curls, increased, I thought, the resemblance’ (8). Paulina appears

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<sup>125</sup> See Galia Opek’s analyses of hair being used to create artifacts in *Representations of Hair in Victorian Literature and Culture* (London: Ashgate, 2009).

to resist this identification by refusing to let Lucy play with her: prefiguring Lucy's undressing of the adult Paulina, Polly repeatedly tells her nurse that Lucy 'shall dress me on no account.' (10) The one scene that does seem to enact a happy moment in a maternally inflected girl/doll relationship comes at the end of the Bretton section, where Polly gets into Lucy's bed to be 'tranquillized and cherished' (34). Toni Wein notes that this, as far as we know, makes Polly the only person to share Lucy's bed<sup>126</sup> – though Beck gets fairly close to it.

With her sensuous descriptions of Polly/Paulina's doll-likeness, Lucy seems to both desire and fear becoming an adjunct to a doll story – not the central 'little thing', not even the owner (Polly links herself with her father and John, never with Lucy), but the girl companion, 'a bright lady's shadow' (298). Lucy reacts fiercely against the idea of becoming Paulina's paid companion, in spite of a considerable financial incentive, and in spite of having accepted a similar position before with Miss Marchmont. 'Rather than be a companion,' she says, 'I would have made shirts, and starved.' (298) The sewing implements Lucy is prepared to take up are objects associated with Polly/Paulina. As a child, the needle is the 'perverse weapon' with which she voluntarily stabs herself, staining the handkerchief she is hemming for her father with 'minute red dots' (15). As an adult it is a reminder of this wounding precocity, in which 'the tiny and trembling fingers that could scarce guide the needle, though tiny still, were now swift and skilful' (289), as well as a visual lure: 'Graham...followed with his eye the gilded glance of Paulina's thimble, as if it had been some bright moth on the wing, or the golden head of some darting little yellow serpent' (291). Lynn Mae Alexander describes the Victorian public's concern for and fascination with the plight of professional Victorian needlewomen, noting that being an underpaid, overworked seamstress was seen as a common prelude to prostitution.<sup>127</sup> In the introduction to *Villette*, Tim Dolin refers to this association between seamstresses and being forced into prostitution, and considers that the image of Polly sewing 'would have immediately suggested to its contemporary readers the figure of the suffering needlewoman' (xxiv). Lucy's choice of words thus suggests that rather than be Paulina's companion, she would be Paulina, adopting her key object and its connotations of suffering

<sup>126</sup> Toni Wein, 'Gothic Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*', *SEL: Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 39, No. 4, 1999, 733-746, 741.

<sup>127</sup> Lynn Mae Alexander, *Women, Work, and Representation: Needlewomen in Victorian Art and Literature* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2003), 96-101.

femininity, domesticity, pain, self-sacrifice, and sexual danger.

Tanner writes that for Lucy 'the critical issue is to what extent she can resist the drives, both internal and external, to negate her complex interior self and become the piece of unobtrusive furniture which others take her for' (20). This is a reference to Lucy's description of herself gazing at John:

He laid himself open to my observation, according to my presence in the room just that degree of notice and consequence a person of my exterior habitually expects: that is to say, about what is given to unobtrusive articles of furniture, chairs of ordinary joiner's work, and carpets of no striking pattern. Often, while waiting for Madame, he would muse, smile, watch, or listen like a man who thinks himself alone...He, I believe, never remembered that I had eyes in my head, much less a brain behind them. (98)

But seen in the context of the role of things in *Villette*, and particularly of Lucy's relationship with Paulina, what seems like wildly exaggerated self-abasement, or simply compliance with other people's views of her, may in fact be something different. Monica Feinberg writes that '[w]ith romance and marriage relegated to the Polly Home subplot, *Villette's* unattractive and acerbic heroine unhappily resigns herself to a solitary life,'<sup>128</sup> but perhaps the strangest and most painful thing about the relationship between John and Paulina is that it is imagined as if it were not a subplot. In what Lucy calls their 'infatuation of egotism' (425), she features as a mundane point of comparison (Polly tells John that he has 'a nice, strange face; far nicer, far stranger, than either his mamma or Lucy Snowe' (424)), as an obstacle ('Don't tell my mother or Lucy, they wouldn't approve,' whispers John (282)), or as a talking point ('Graham says you are the most peculiar, capricious little woman he knows; but yet you are excellent; we both think so' (425)). Rather than thinking of her as an unassuming piece of furniture, they think of her as a secondary character. This is what is at stake when Lucy tells her, pained, that 'I have my sort of life apart from yours' (425). Paulina is aware that Lucy has feelings, and she wants her to be happy, but she cannot imagine an existence for Lucy outside of her own.

<sup>128</sup> Monica L. Feinberg, 'Homesick: The Domestic Interiors of *Villette*', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 25, No. 2, Winter, 1993, 170-191, 170.

In this context, Lucy's ostentatious silence and reticence seems to be not so much in compliance with others' view of her as in defiance of them. In this novel, even chairs of ordinary joiner's work and carpets of no striking design can have a proliferation of meanings. In the novel's penultimate chapter, when Lucy's expressed fantasy of a home of her own becomes a reality, so does the implicit fantasy of being the heroine of a doll story. The house in Faubourg Clotilde is a doll house, described in terms very similar to descriptions of Paulina: 'small', 'very neat', a 'nut-shell'; the parlour is 'very tiny, but I thought, very pretty. Its delicate walls were tinged like a blush' (484-485). Lucy's reaction is uncharacteristic of her, but quite characteristic of Paulina: her exclamation, 'Pretty, pretty place!' (485) echoes Polly's 'Pretty little dog!' (20) Lucy's reenactment of Polly/Paulina's submissive behaviour – she kisses Paul's hand, and serves him chocolate in her 'pretty gold and white china service' (488) – is a model of a relationship. It is tiny in scale (Lucy implies that there is only one performance), and at once real and unreal. Paul gives her a doll-house, but it is also a school-house, and she becomes its increasingly independent and prosperous director. The three years of his absence, in which she is both doll and director, are the 'happiest years of my life.' (493)

Emily Apter notes that in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud places 'the burden of perversity on [the] rather elusive notion of "lingering"' (17). Here, he describes perversions as 'sexual activities which either (a) extend, in an anatomical sense, beyond the regions of the body that are designed for sexual union, or (b) linger over the intermediate relations to the sexual object which should normally be traversed rapidly on the path towards the final sexual aim.'<sup>129</sup> The very strictness of this definition is suggestive in that it leaves such a tiny scope for non-perverse sexuality: 'How long,' asks Apter, 'before foreplay deteriorates into perverse "lingering"?' (17) It also imagines both the perversion and the 'sexual aim' as having both a spatial and a temporal aspect, and in this way, it suggests how we might link the array of objects that mediate sexual relations in *Villette* with its famously inconclusive, ominous ending. *Villette* is irredeemably perverse, both in content and in form: it extends sexual possibility far beyond not just the appropriate regions of the body, but beyond the body

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<sup>129</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), in *On Sexuality: Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality and Other Works*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Angela Richards (London: Penguin, 1977), 62.

proper, and it refuses to give either the reader or its characters the gratification of the 'final sexual aim'. 'Here pause: pause at once,' says Lucy at the point of upheaval, struggle, and still just-possible arrival (496). Her decision to 'leave sunny imaginations hope' is most often taken to negate itself, saying all but definitively that no 'union and...happy succeeding life' takes place – very few readers express much confidence that Paul returns from sea. But it is important that the novel ends at the point of possibility, before either fulfilment or disaster. Constantly derailing itself from 'the path towards the final sexual aim', *Villette* is a novel without an orgasm – but it is also, possibly consolingly, a novel that shows how much can happen between two people without them ever quite touching.

## Pain: *Shirley*

‘The fantasy ceases to be a personal mental resource to be drawn on intermittently during the course of everyday life; now it can be elaborated with the help of another and may shift into the centre of our lives.’

Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor, *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life* (1976)

*marriage plots: ‘romances are pernicious’*

*Jane Eyre* develops into a novel of complex power dynamics, but outwardly, the power differentials between protagonist and love interest are about as stark and nuance-free as they can get: the man is twice the woman’s age, physically stronger than her, and not only possesses far more social and financial power, but also controls her livelihood. Sandra Gilbert summarises the novel’s narrative as a fairy-tale *National Inquirer* headline: ‘CINDERELLA MEETS BLUEBEARD’.<sup>130</sup> To describe Jane and Rochester in these terms, she writes, ‘is, of course, to imply that they embody ideas of the feminine and the masculine in a particularly resonant way’ (358). But this pattern of roles – the impoverished, dependent woman, the man with every apparent advantage of position, physicality, wealth and gender – is not the only one, or even the predominant one in Brontë’s work. Judith Wilt describes ‘a society pondering in the dream life of its fictions the ordering shapes of its world: top and bottom, dominant and submissive, master and slave, male and female’.<sup>131</sup> *Shirley* is, in one sense,

<sup>130</sup> Sandra Gilbert, ‘*Jane Eyre* and the Secrets of Furious Lovemaking’, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, Vol. 31, No. 3, Summer 1998, 351-372, 357.

<sup>131</sup> Judith Wilt, ‘Love/Slave’, review of *Dead Secrets: Wilkie Collins and the Female Gothic* by Tamar Heller, *In the Name of Love: Women, Masochism, and the Gothic* by Michelle Massé, *Daughters of the House: Modes of the Gothic in Victorian Fiction* by Alison Milbank, and *Subjects of Slavery, Agents of Change: Women and Power in Gothic Novels and Slave*

highly invested in these 'ordering shapes'; it presents dominant and submissive sexual roles in a more explicit and fixed way than *Jane Eyre* or *Villette*. But the novel also takes a wider and more complex view of the social, professional and financial aspects of power relations. This chapter explores *Shirley*'s negotiation of these different forms of power, and argues that its representation of sexual power dynamics complicates, rather than simply exacerbating, the novel's gendered power imbalances.

As shown in the introduction, critical conceptions of female masochism and submissiveness often depict these strands of desire as a response to cultural pressures, a means by which women try to eroticise the situation of dependence they have been placed in; both Michelle Massé and Marianne Noble make this claim, for instance. *Shirley* is explicitly concerned with women's situation of dependence in society, and with structural power inequalities between men and women. However, it also differentiates its actual representation of gendered power. Robert Moore rents Hollow's-mill at 'a somewhat high rent' from Shirley Keeldar, the owner of the Fieldhead estate (26), and when the business is close to failure, he borrows money from her to allow him to continue to work the mill on speculation. Unable to propose to Caroline Helstone because she has no money of her own, he asks Shirley to marry him in order to secure his financial future, and she turns him down in disgust. In social terms, Shirley does something comparable to what Rochester does: she marries Louis Moore, who is employed as a tutor by her family (though the fact that Louis was also at one point Shirley's tutor complicates the power dynamic). Louis himself echoes Jane's famous self-description, claiming to have 'nothing but a very plain person to offer the woman who may master my heart' (519).

*Shirley* also differentiates its representation of gendered sexual desire. Where *Jane Eyre* plays with the stereotypically Gothic power relations it draws on, and most of *Villette*'s characters are engaged in unstable networks of power and desire, *Shirley* presents something apparently simpler: a romantic relationship in which the female character is consciously submissive, and the male character consciously dominant. Shirley Keeldar accepts Louis Moore's proposal of marriage with the word 'master' (521), and what exactly she means by it is one of the questions on which the novel turns. But although two

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*Narratives* by Kari J. Winter, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 3, Spring 1994, 451-460, 452.



characters who can be interpreted as a sexually dominant man and a sexually submissive woman get married at the end of the novel, this is a double wedding, and the other woman and man have completely different kinds of desires. The fact that *Shirley* has two central female characters and two central male characters becomes central to the way the novel conceives of desire and power; by showing characters of the same gender experiencing different kinds of desire, the novel avoids construing masochism and submissiveness, for instance, as essentially female. This chapter argues that *Shirley* acts as a test case for the etiology of sexual power dynamics in Brontë. It suggests that we cannot simply conclude that experiencing oppression makes characters eroticise oppression, or that experiencing pain makes them eroticise pain. One way to find new meanings in this puzzling novel is to examine the specifics of the central characters' erotic desires. In this way, the negotiation of sexual roles in the novel's heterosexual relationships appear not as ways of affirming the imbalance of power between genders, but as a way of managing, controlling, and sometimes transcending the inherent pain of the novel's world.

In 1850 Mary Taylor, Charlotte Brontë's childhood friend, wrote to her about some extracts from *Shirley*: 'you talk about women working. And this first duty, this great necessity, you seem to think that some women may indulge in – if they give up marriage and don't make themselves too disagreeable to the other sex. You are a coward and a traitor.'<sup>132</sup> Context takes some of the sting from the condemnation; once Taylor received the full novel she noted that 'Shirley [the character] is much more interesting than Jane Eyre, who never interests you at all until she has something to suffer.'<sup>133</sup> But her expression of disappointment and concern is not an uncommon element in readings of *Shirley*. The novel's opening paragraphs are an exercise in the forcible lowering of expectations. In the same tone in which Caroline is told to break her teeth on the stone of romantic disappointment (90) we are told that we are going to be fed sparingly, that we must not expect 'passion, and stimulus, and melodrama', but 'something real, cool, and solid' (5). But *Shirley* breaks this promise, too.

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<sup>132</sup> Mary Taylor, letter to Charlotte Brontë, 25 April 1850, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Vol. 2: 1848-1851: With A Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 2000), 392.

<sup>133</sup> Mary Taylor, letter to Charlotte Brontë, 30 August 1850, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Vol. 2*, 439.

This novel, which Tim Dolin describes as ‘at once...defiant and...appeasing’,<sup>134</sup> is ‘defiant’ in its confrontation of how miserable and uncomprehending relations between genders can be, especially when they are ‘fetter[ed]’ together in marriage (*Shirley* 466). Then, apparently in an effort at appeasement, it ends with a double wedding – though, as Judith Wilt points out, the title of this final chapter, ‘The Winding-up’, has shades of both an ‘artificial’, mechanical drawing to a close and of a purposely irritating joke (2).

The rest of this section will explore this winding-up further, and argue that *Shirley*’s artificial-seeming, apparently hyper-conventional ending has implications for the novel’s conceptions of desire and sexual power dynamics. As Julia Gardner notes in her reading of queer desire in *Shirley*, ‘critics of *Shirley* have long noted that the conventional marriage plot provides an unsatisfactory conclusion for this novel’.<sup>135</sup> Gardner’s own description of the ending is telling, too: ‘Despite Shirley’s consistent positioning of herself as masculine and establishing herself as a suitor to Caroline, eventually she is paired off with a man, Louis Moore. Correspondingly, Caroline and Robert Moore are paired off.’ (416) The phrase ‘paired off’ does a great deal of work here: the passive voice implies that the people entering these relationships lack agency, and it implies that whoever does have agency<sup>136</sup> is trying to dispatch these characters, to finish their plot-lines and get rid of them. The issue of agency does tend to become clouded in representations of love and desire, insofar as these representations are often invested in the idea that we are not in control of who we end up loving or wanting. But this is not exactly what is happening in Gardner’s reading. When Shirley presents herself in a masculine way and pursues Caroline romantically, she is seen as having agency over herself (‘positioning of herself...establishing herself’); when she marries Louis it happens without her agency, and even, it is just barely implied, against her will – ‘despite’ her rebelliousness. Suzanne Keen echoes the idea that the double

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<sup>134</sup> Tim Dolin, ‘Fictional Territory and a Woman’s Place: Regional and Sexual Difference in *Shirley*’, *ELH*, Vol. 62, No. 1, 1995, 197-215, 212.

<sup>135</sup> Julia Gardner, “Neither Monsters nor Tempresses nor Terrors”: Representing Desire in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 1998, 409-420, 410.

<sup>136</sup> Generally the source of agency is assumed to be the writer, although Elliott Vanskike writes interestingly on the critical perception of *Shirley* as having ‘got away from’ Brontë by the end (‘Consistent Inconsistencies: The Transvestite Actress Madame Vestris and Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 4, March 1996, 464-488, 468).

marriage represents the loss of a battle against conventionality: ‘In *Shirley*, an emancipatory fantasy about the possibility of a woman’s agency in the economic, political and sexual realms loses the contest of outcome to a tidy but disappointing double marriage plot.’<sup>137</sup> Diana Maltz, reviewing Keen’s work, joins her in criticising the way ‘Shirley’s and Caroline’s intimacy...leads only into a generic double-marriage plot.’<sup>138</sup> Tara Moore sees a potential for queerness and female mythology at the end of *Shirley*, but only if ‘the reader looks beyond the narrator’s treatment of the concluding marriages’<sup>139</sup>. It is as if the text, which has previously been meandering along with something like *Villette*’s polymorphous perversity, has turned abruptly onto the straight and narrow and hit a dead end. By way of analogy, if *Villette* is a novel without an orgasm, *Shirley*’s double happy ending is experienced as anticlimactic – unsatisfactory, too dearly bought. Is it possible to read these marriages as something other than a defeat?

For a reader who has taken pleasure in *Shirley*’s attacks on gender inequality, its powerful title character and its complex, passionate relationships between women, the end of the novel provides considerable scope for disappointment. Caroline and Robert argue over what will happen to the wooded copse which she and Shirley once planned to explore by themselves, and with exaggerated relish and a hint of just possibly joking sexual aggression, Robert promises to turn the trees into firewood and fill ‘yonder barren Hollow’ up with ‘my mill’ (540). She kisses him ‘mutely’, and then both she and Shirley are silent for the rest of the novel. The announcement of their marriages is almost parodically clear in its visual enactment of patriarchy, with the women shrunk down to their first names, swamped in the full names, styles and geographical assignations of any number of men: ‘Louis Gérard Moore, Esq. late of Antwerp, to Shirley, daughter of the late Charles Cave Keeldar, Esq. of Fieldhead: Robert Gérard Moore, Esq. of Hollow’s mill, to Caroline, niece of the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, M.A., Rector of Briarfield’ (541). Shirley’s self-styling as ‘Shirley Keeldar, Esquire’ and her desire to be made ‘a magistrate and

<sup>137</sup> Suzanne Keen, ‘Narrative Annexes in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*’, *Journal of Narrative Technique*, Vol. 20, No. 2, Spring 1990, 107-119, 107.

<sup>138</sup> Diana Maltz, review of *Victorian Renovations of the Novel: Narrative Annexes and the Boundaries of Representation* by Suzanne Keen, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 55, No. 1, June 2000, 137-142, 139.

<sup>139</sup> Tara Moore, ‘Women and Myth Narratives in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*’, *Women’s Writing*, Vol. 11, No. 3, 2004, 477-492, 488.

a captain of yeomanry' are apparently decisively erased (172). 'This world has queer changes,' remarks Martha, the narrator's housekeeper (the narrator is suddenly, disconcertingly a character in the story). She describes Shirley and Caroline with their husbands' names, 'Mrs Louis' and 'Mrs Robert', and notes that fairies are never seen in the Hollow now (541-542). The queerest change, it seems, is the change from a queer story-world – one that allows for fairies, mermaids, female Titans and new Eves, Shirley's passionate jealousy over Caroline (she half-jokes about fighting a pistol duel with Robert over her), Caroline's sensuous passion for her lost mother – to a straight one, which allows for a list of men's names and a new mill.

But this double wedding can also be read in less conventional terms. One possible line of argument uses the double nature of these marriages to suggest that this change never actually takes place, and that Shirley and Caroline's relationship remains the predominant one in the novel. Julia Gardner argues that 'Robert and Louis are not particularly important in the novel...It is almost as if the women are marrying the same man. Indeed, given the double marriage ceremony and the flatness of the male characters, the wedding can be interpreted as an attempt to join the two women together rather than separate them according to heterosexual convention.' (417) Certainly, the uncanny interchangeability of Robert and Louis becomes a joke at one point – they switch places, and Robert asks, 'Which is the old love now, Lina?', although Caroline does immediately recognise him (347). The double marriage ceremony can be read as performing a joining of two women as well as of two heterosexual couples: when we last see the couples, the men and the women are paired up separately: 'the two Mr. Moores'; 'Mrs. Louis was the grandest...Mrs. Robert was quieter-like' (Shirley 541). But Gardner's conclusion that 'the men are included in the narrative as a concession to convention...they are of marginal importance to the women' seems to occlude a wealth of meaning, putting Louis and Robert to one side as conventional ciphers that need no reading (418).

Instead, I read the Moore brothers as both narratively and structurally central. *Shirley's* double-heroine, double-hero structure produces possibilities, unwritten alternatives that haunt the text. '[T]he young men and women...are tried out in a series of combinations that would be serious if it weren't so funny', notes Judith Wilt, before laying out a list of the possible sexual/marital

combinations of Shirley and Louis and Caroline and Robert and the different kinds of narratives that would allow for these pairings, or that these pairings would create around them.<sup>140</sup> Reading the marriages at the end of *Shirley*, it is difficult not to feel some regret at what seems like the closing-down of the potential for desire between Shirley and Caroline, although, as noted above, one could also argue that this possibility persists beyond the end of the text. But it seems necessary to consider the pairings we do end up with as more than failures of authorial nerve or nods to convention. The alternative texts suggested by the doubling of protagonists and love interests make these representations of the characters' desires more distinct, because they indicate what might have happened, but does not. They bring out the element of agency in the novel's narratives of desire, and make it less easy to consider Brontëan sexual desires as part of a pattern of damaging, gender-based societal or psychological conditioning.

To take Wilt's explication of the text's unwritten alternatives a step further: if Caroline and Robert were not part of the novel, it would be easier to read a generalised gendered pattern into Shirley's submissiveness and Louis's dominance. It might be taken to imply a gender-essentialist view of sexuality, suggesting that sexual submissiveness is natural to women and sexual dominance natural to men. Alternatively, it might suggest that Shirley presents herself as submissive because she has no other way of expressing sexual desire, or that Louis's dominance is only the sexual aspect of socially sanctioned misogyny. Conversely, it would be easier to conflate Caroline's restless pain-seeking with sexual submissiveness or masochism if it were not represented alongside Shirley's submissiveness, which, while it can cause her pain and difficulty, is also distinctly pleasure-driven. The same doubling mechanism prevents us from too easily associating male dominance with misogyny. Both Robert and Louis are casually patronising towards women at times; for instance, Robert describes his sister and female servant as 'the femininity in the cottage yonder' (23), and Louis calls Shirley 'womanish' when she reveals her fear of developing hydrophobia after being bitten by a mad dog (428). These small moments of derision contribute to the novel's sense of how widely men and women are sundered by societal power structures. 'Shirley, men and

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<sup>140</sup> Judith Wilt, 'Shirley: Reflections on Marrying Moores', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 30, No. 1, 2002, 1-17, 7-8.

women are so different', says Caroline, explaining why she feels sure that Robert feels very little for her, 'they are in such a different position...you may have a friendship for a man, while he is almost indifferent to you' (192). But the fact that these two men are shown to experience very different kinds of desire makes it necessary to at least partially disentangle Louis's desire to dominate Shirley from his general attitude towards women.

In this way, the novel articulates its conception of sexual power dynamics through its double-heroine, double-hero structure. While the final double wedding can be seen as hammering home the inescapability of heterosexual convention, its very doubleness also accentuates the less conventional elements of these pairings. It can be read not only as a double bow to convention, but as another of the novel's queer changes.

*reading others' desires: 'doing a foolish thing'*

Just before Robert first rejects Caroline, she withdraws behind a tree to study him admiringly, and the narrator reproduces her thoughts: 'He has not his peer [...] he is as handsome as he is intelligent. What a keen eye he has! What clearly cut, spirited features – thin and serious, but graceful! I do like his face – I do like his aspect – I do like him so much! Better than any of those shuffling curates, – better than anybody: bonnie Robert!' (89) This transcription of her thoughts is then very gently mocked: her phrase 'bonnie Robert' is repeated in quotation marks, and the narrator notes Robert's eagerness to disappear 'like a phantom', but 'being a tall fact, and no fiction, he was obliged to stand the greeting' (89). Caroline then discovers that Robert is not going to pursue a relationship with her, although the reader already has some sense of this: at the end of the last chapter he rebukes himself for having softened towards her, telling himself that 'the phrenzy is temporary...it will be gone to-morrow' (82). At this point, when the narrative focus switches from her delight at seeing Robert to her pain at being rejected by him, the teasing tone disappears: 'It was difficult to withdraw her hand from his, till he had bestowed something like a kind pressure' (89). In the next paragraph, which urges the silent acceptance of rejection, it is unclear whether Caroline is reminding herself that 'a lover feminine can say nothing' and ordering herself to squeeze the scorpion of unrequited love ('close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your

palm'), whether the narrator is telling Caroline this, or whether the narrator is talking directly to the reader (89-90). The statement, two pages later, that 'what has been said in the last page or two is not germane to Caroline Helstone's feelings' suggests that we have drifted from Caroline's particular situation to a more generally applicable one (91). This passage, then, attempts to bring the reader close to its depiction of romantic rejection, and to create a layer of ironic distance between the reader and Caroline's experience of being in love. Caroline's internal monologue on Robert should convince us that she loves him (if her sudden difficulty with cutting out a piece of dress fabric in the previous chapter had not done so already (72)), but it does not seem designed to convince us that he is lovable.

Early reviews of *Shirley* often describe it as less emotionally involving than *Jane Eyre*. Reading *Jane Eyre*, 'we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr Rochester about four in the morning', but *Shirley* causes no sleepless nights because it does not 'concentrate the interest on one person or one group'.<sup>141</sup> The *Edinburgh Review* wrote that '[i]t does not so rivet the reader's attention',<sup>142</sup> and added that '[t]he two heroes of the book [...] – for there are two – are not agreeable characters' (163). The reviewer in the *Literary Gazette* felt similarly: 'we do not get to love or even admire any of the leading parties in the drama'.<sup>143</sup> Someone reading *Jane Eyre* or *Villette* will not necessarily love and admire as the first-person narrator loves and admires, but the intimacy and restrictiveness of the first-person narrative mean that we are, relatively speaking, close to their desires. But *Shirley* is about desires that we are not entirely allowed to sympathise with. This is partly a function of the novel having two central female characters, neither of whom is the viewpoint character for much of the book – it may be impossible to be as immersed in Caroline's inner life as in Jane's, simply because Jane is always speaking to and interpreting for the reader. But it also stems from other authorial decisions that diminish the reader's ability to feel with Caroline and Shirley. We do not see either of them falling in love, and

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<sup>141</sup> Review of *Shirley*, *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country*, Vol. 40, No. 240, December 1849, 691-703, 692.

<sup>142</sup> G.H. Lewes, 'Shirley: a Tale', review of *Shirley*, *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 91, No. 183, January 1850, 153-173, 159.

<sup>143</sup> 'New Novel: *Shirley: a Tale*', review of *Shirley*, *The Literary Gazette*, No. 1711, 3 November 1849, 808-810, 808.

so cannot follow them in the process. Caroline already loves Robert when the novel begins. Shirley is in some sense in love with Louis before he appears in the text, though the reader is led to think otherwise – her tendency to repeatedly mention and blush over Robert Moore’s name, ‘the name by which she seemed bewitched’ (191), turns out to have to do with his brother (448). The weird and intense courtship between Louis and Shirley is not only rendered entirely from his point of view, but narrated by him – the only point in the text where one character so completely takes command of the narrative. The passages from his diary are entirely about how and why he loves and wants her, while Shirley herself says little about how and why she loves and wants him. After her engagement, she seems reluctant to ever marry him; it takes ‘a sort of tempest-shock’, not further explained, to get her to fix a day for the ceremony (534). But she also states that ‘I would die if I might not have him’ (526). *Fraser’s Magazine* noted that in reading *Shirley* ‘the reader’s mind will have to make a painful effort (a sort of squint) to see two or more distinct things at once’ (692), and Shirley’s desire is two distinct things at once: incontrovertible, and not, from an outside perspective, quite explicable.

With this in mind, the difficulty and dissatisfaction both present-day and nineteenth-century readers feel with the novel’s romance plot can be read productively, rather than as a sign of artistic failure. Two ideas are central to *Shirley*: that people want different things, and that everything, not least marriage and romantic love, is fundamentally likely to give pain. The novel persistently worries at the question of what women’s lives are for, but although the question is spurred by Caroline’s realization that she may not be ‘growing up to the ordinary destiny’ of married life, marriage itself is no solution. In her introduction to the novel Janet Gezari notes that *Shirley*’s ‘most powerful anxiet[y]’ is marriage,<sup>144</sup> and rather than trying to resolve this anxiety, the novel dwells on it and in it. The questions called up by Caroline’s self-description as ‘a poor doomed mortal, who asks, in ignorance and hopelessness, wherefore she was born, to what end she lives; whose mind for ever runs on the question, how she shall at last encounter, and by whom be sustained through death’ are not answered by marriage, only silenced by it. (197) Caroline’s alternatives to marriage – doing charitable work as an apprenticeship for becoming an old

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<sup>144</sup> Janet Gezari, introduction to *Shirley* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), xiii.



maid, or becoming a governess – involve, at best, being able to choose and control her experience of pain: work helps her to ‘stun and keep down anguish’ (158); it ‘can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture’ (193). Governessing, which is tinged with romance, excitement and independence in *Jane Eyre*, is seen as a liminal, isolated existence here (316), but Mrs Pryor advises Caroline equally strongly against getting married: ‘It is never wholly happy. Two people can never literally be as one’ (319). Shirley herself is repeatedly proposed to by men she cannot love or even respect; the one exception, Robert Moore, forfeits her respect by asking her to marry him in order to save his business from failure. Her intimacy with the man she does end up marrying begins when she makes him promise to kill her if she develops hydrophobia, with ‘such a sure dose of laudanum as shall leave no mistake’ (429). Love, desire and marriage are intermittent sources of pleasure in *Shirley*, but they are also consistently presented in terms of pain management.

Discussing marriage and the idea that men and women do not really understand and must inevitably bore each other in the end, Shirley says to Caroline, ‘[M]en are not all like your uncle: surely not – I hope not.’ (182) This is a particularly frightening prospect considering the striking image of marital horror in ‘The Curates at Tea’, where Helstone briefly considers marrying and destroying Hannah Sykes, who attracts him precisely because she confirms his worst prejudices about women: ‘It is probable she would have married him if he had asked her...and the second Mrs. Helstone, inverting the natural order of insect existence, would have fluttered through the honeymoon a bright, admired butterfly, and crawled the rest of her days a sordid, trampled worm.’ (100) Caroline says, not very comfortingly, ‘I suppose we each find an exception in the one we love, till we *are* married’ (182). We never get a chance to find out whether the novel’s critics of marriage are ‘true oracles’ (182), because the only glimpse we get of the characters after their weddings is frustratingly inconclusive. Shirley says that ‘I choose to doubt their truth’, and the novel does not prove this to be the right choice, but nor does it judge Shirley for making it (182).

One of the difficulties in reading *Shirley* is that it has a basically pessimistic world-view, and also shows characters experiencing a variety of

desires and needs that the text rarely invites readers to understand fully. Conflating these two things can lead to the assumption that characters are unhappy because they want the wrong things. But if we keep them separate, *Shirley* can be read as a novel in which people under often painful, unfair and depressing circumstances pursue their peculiar needs to an ending that, even if we do not recognise it as happy, is actively created through desire and negotiation. Carol Bock, writing about the narrative strategy of *Shirley*, notes that ‘critics have been loath to play the part they believe this text has given them...to do so would be to think of themselves as the narrator apparently does: as highly conventional, somewhat obtuse, and very likely to make inaccurate assumptions’.<sup>145</sup> But if the narrator of *Shirley* seems to expect little of readers, the text requires a great deal: it asks the reader to have faith in the characters’ own desires while often making it difficult to empathise with them directly. *Shirley*, so often frustrating for feminist readers, seems to call for the basic sex-radical feminist praxis: the willingness to accept an expression of desire without judging it. This does not require us to suspend readerly practices of questioning and interpreting; it opens up the text, allowing us to access sites of possibility and pleasure rather than closing them down prematurely.

*submission and assertion: ‘I thought you liked to do as you please’*

The chapter ‘Uncle and Niece’, in which Shirley has a sharp conversation with her uncle Sympson about why she rejected Sir Philip Nunnely’s proposal, suggests how we might consider these desires in a wider context – specifically, how or whether we should try to reconcile Shirley’s expressions of submissive desire with her assertiveness, her forcefulness and her pleasure in masculine self-presentation. Elliott Vanskike’s reading of Shirley’s courtship explores Shirley’s unstable gendering and her submissive relation to Louis in often persuasive ways, but interestingly misreads this scene. His argument is that Shirley’s desire to submit to Louis and Louis’s desire to dominate Shirley are so exaggerated and, in Shirley’s case, so inconsistent with the rest of her character that their relationship must be intended as a satire of gender relations under patriarchy. Of the scene in ‘Uncle and Niece’, Vanskike writes: ‘When Shirley is justifying her refusal of Sir Philip to Caroline she says, “He is very amiable –

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<sup>145</sup> Carol Bock, *Charlotte Brontë and the Storyteller’s Audience* (Iowa City: Iowa University Press, 1992), 109.

very excellent – truly estimable, but *not my master*...I will accept no hand which cannot hold me in check”, to which Caroline perceptively responds: “I thought you liked to do as you please: you are vastly inconsistent.” (485) But Shirley is not speaking to Caroline but to Sympson: he is the one who finds her ‘vastly inconsistent’, and his response is presented as anything but perceptive (*Shirley* 461). ‘Are you not enough to bewilder one’s brain with your self-contradiction?’, he says, to which Shirley replies: ‘It is evident I bewilder your brain.’ (461) Anna Krugovoy Silver makes the same misreading in her interpretation of Shirley as masochistic: ‘Shirley’s capitulation to Louis does not come as much of a surprise to the reader, for she has already admitted her masochistic tendencies to Caroline, musing that she wants a master ‘to hold me in check’, to obey and to fear’.<sup>146</sup> Again, Shirley says this to Sympson, not Caroline.

If we remember Shirley as confiding her desires to a friend (as she does in fact do earlier in the novel), she might seem to be ‘admitt[ing]’ and ‘musing’ here, words that can suggest guilt and unrealistic fantasizing. But in fact, she is defending her desires to an enemy – stating them with, as Sympson accusingly points out, ‘[n]o shame, no fear’ (465). The scene works as a neat demonstration of the operative limits of Shirley’s submissiveness. Faced with a ‘real tyrant’, albeit an ineffectual one – a man who actually wants to restrict her freedom against her will – Shirley not only says, but proves that ‘[a] tyrant would not hold [her] for a day – not an hour’ (461). Throughout the exchange Sympson is ‘perfectly incensed, and perfectly helpless’ (459), while Shirley is in command of them both; she maintains her position fearlessly, and finally makes him give up his efforts to control her. The structure of the scene itself acts as a counter-argument to Silver’s note that Shirley, with her ‘masochistic tendencies’, ‘capitulat[es]’ to Louis’s sexual control (96). Here, the text presents Shirley’s sexual desires as leading her into rebellion, not capitulation. Her expression of these desires can, then, be read as altering the context of her ‘capitulation’ to Louis, at least suggesting that it might be an active and desired decision.

Shirley herself seems to perceive her desire for a husband who takes the role of master as continuous with, rather than in conflict with, her own enjoyment of ruling and commanding. Vanskike suggests that ‘the disjunction

<sup>146</sup> Anna Krugovoy Silver, *Victorian Literature and the Anorexic Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 96.

between these two selves', Shirley as independent factory owner and Shirley as submissive, can be read as 'a radical and deliberate juxtaposition that is designed to call attention to itself' (484). But other characters call attention to this apparent disjunction, and Shirley regards this as a misunderstanding on their part. When Sympson expresses amazement that Shirley claims to have 'no taste for swaggering, and subduing, and ordering, and ruling', a taste that she is, after all, demonstrating at the moment, she says: 'Not my husband: only my uncle...There is a slight difference: that is certain.' (461) This 'slight difference', Shirley seems to suggest, is the erotic dimension. Sympson's sense of the transgressiveness of the scene ('You acknowledge no rules, no limitations' (460), 'She glories in it! She conceals nothing!' (465)) is understandable: his niece is telling him, forcefully and in detail, about her sexual needs, and insisting that they have to be met. Whether or not we accept Shirley's self-definitions, there are structural reasons for reading Shirley's submissiveness not as a knowing inconsistency or as a imposed reinvention by her dominant lover towards the end of the novel, but as a consistent pattern that recurs throughout the text.<sup>147</sup> In the conversation with Sympson, Shirley is rephrasing her initial description of her ideal partner, which comes within a chapter of her first appearance in the novel. Speaking to Caroline, she expresses the same desire for someone 'superior' to her, and the same frustration at being expected to marry someone who is not:

'Nothing ever charms me more than when I meet my superior – one who makes me sincerely feel that he is my superior [...] the higher above me, so much the better: it degrades to stoop – it is glorious to look up. What frets me is that when I try to esteem, I am baffled: when religiously inclined, there are but false gods to adore. I disdain to be a Pagan.' (184)

Shirley points out to Sympson that her desire for a master is, in a sense, quite

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<sup>147</sup> Joseph A. Dupras performs a deconstructive reading of Shirley, arguing that the submissive Shirley does not exist before Louis writes her in his diary ('Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* and Interpretive Engendering', *Papers on Language and Literature*, Vol. 24, No. 3, June 1988, 301-316). In response to this, Vanskike notes that this Shirley does appear outside and prior to Louis's 'little blank book' (Shirley 511), and that 'Caroline has already announced her startling irruption into the text' in the passage from 'Uncle and Niece' described above (Vanskike 485).

in keeping with society's conception of marriage: if she gets married she will be required to 'promise to obey' (461), and she wants to be able to keep that promise by marrying someone 'in whose presence I shall feel obliged and disposed to be good' (462). But far from applauding this theoretically conventional desire, society, in the person of Sympson, is shocked by it. This, if nothing else, should make us doubt the idea that Shirley is 'surrender[ing] to the hierarchy which she has been endorsing all along', as Tara Moore suggests (488-489). Shirley's speech beginning 'Your god, sir, is the World' casts Sympson as the worshipper of a repressive force that fills domestic life with inequality, deceit and lovelessness (466). Rather than surrendering to this conception of the 'World', Shirley resists it – not in spite of, but in direct defense of her submissiveness.

If Sympson's response to Shirley's desires is telling, then so, in a different way, is Caroline's. The review of *Shirley* in the *Examiner* saw Caroline and Shirley as having similar romantic and erotic desires: it described them as being 'of the family of Jane [Eyre]...having willful as well as gentle ways, and greatly desiring "masters"'. The quotation marks emphasise that a heroine who directly expressed a desire for a master was doing something out of the ordinary, rather than just conforming to Victorian gender expectations.<sup>148</sup> But the first long conversation between Caroline and Shirley makes it clear that they have very different attitudes to sexual power dynamics. Towards the end of this scene, their mutual admiration of Robert's beauty and virtues strengthens their sense of fellowship with each other. Shirley calls him 'both graceful and good', to which Caroline replies that 'I was sure you would see that he was: when I first looked at your face I knew you would.' (183) What divides the two women is their sense of how they would relate to this 'great, good, handsome man'. Caroline asks if Shirley thinks that a great man is really 'the first of created things': 'Above us?' (184) Shirley's response puts the question in the context of marriage: 'I would scorn to contend for empire with him [...] Shall my left hand dispute for precedence with my right? – shall my heart quarrel with my pulse?' (184). The parallel with religious worship in her remark that she 'disdain[s] to be a Pagan' disrupts the implied opposition between superior and inferior. Shirley imagines that loving someone 'superior' will make her feel not degraded

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<sup>148</sup> Review of *Shirley*, *The Examiner*, Issue 2179, 3 November 1849, 692-694, 692.

but 'glorious', as one might feel in relation to God. Each time Caroline asks whether Shirley considers women to be men's equals, Shirley responds with a reference to this sort of religious or erotic dynamic, in which one can be conceived of as superior without the other necessarily being inferior. Although Shirley says shortly afterwards that 'you and I will suit', this part of the conversation underscores the differences between the two women. Their different experiences and desires lead them to speak at cross-purposes. For Caroline, the question of gender equality is political in a deeply personal way: it has to do with her anger at the restrictions on women's lives and her misery at the constriction of her own life, and she does not seem to consider its erotic dimension. Shirley, who has greater power and scope for action in her everyday life, misses the political dimension of the question; for her the issue is immediately not only personal, but intimate and physical.

Louis describes Caroline as 'the soul of conscientious punctuality and nice exactitude', and considers that he could never be happy with her because she is too placid, too lacking in fire, too faultlessly neat: 'I fear I should tire of the mute, monotonous innocence of the lamb' (439). Critical conceptions of Caroline often bear some similarity to this description, casting her as traditionally feminine and passive to the point of self-destruction. Anna Krugovoy Silver sees her self-starvation as 'enact[ing] the same feminine self-renunciation that keeps her imprisoned' (90); Penny Boumelha writes of her 'characteristic [...] timorousness';<sup>149</sup> Martha Vicinus refers in passing to 'the rather limp Caroline'.<sup>150</sup> She is, of course, limp and timorous. But when she is courageous, outspoken or funny, it tends to be read as atypical rather than integrated into a critical conception of her. Judith Wilt describes her as showing 'an unexpectedly pertinent wit' when she argues with Joe Scott over the interpretation of a misogynist Bible passage (Wilt 5), and Boumelha notes of the same passage that 'it is in this instance Caroline who argues in favour of appropriative reading' (87). John Maynard calls Caroline's sharp reply when Hesther Yorke criticizes her for being led by her feelings 'something quite unusual for her'.<sup>151</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Penny Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 82.

<sup>150</sup> Martha Vicinus, 'Normalizing Female Friendship', review of *Between Women* by Sharon Marcus, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 50, No. 1, 2007, 81-86, 84.

<sup>151</sup> John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 158.

But reading Caroline as fundamentally inconsistent seems less rewarding than reading her as fundamentally complex – like Shirley, who does not just wear armour or a silk dress, but one under the other (341). Her speech to Mrs Yorke is analogous to Shirley’s speech to Sympson. In each, a character defends qualities of vulnerability – in Shirley’s case sexual submissiveness, in Caroline’s case being bookish, romantic, morbid, and in love with her cousin – through a performance of strength. Caroline is not proving Mrs Yorke wrong: she never claims not to be ‘pale, and sometimes to look diffident’, not to be ‘a romancing chit of a girl’, not to be ‘fond of books, and indisposed for common gossip’ (338). Instead, she says explicitly that her vulnerability is none of Mrs Yorke’s business, and in saying this demonstrates that she is also independent-minded and brave. Caroline, who is delicate, is also fierce ‘in answer to unprovoked insult’ (341); Shirley, who is commanding, is also submissive ‘when I promise to obey’ (461).

Caroline and Shirley can be read as instances of Brontë’s deployment of different kinds of power and powerlessness. Caroline is anxious and depressed, starves herself, lacks financial prospects, is socially awkward, suffers from painfully thwarted romantic longings, and is more direct about the social difficulties facing women, and the need for change, than anyone else in Brontë’s novels. Shirley is extroverted, energetic and physically brave, relishes her financial and social power, enjoys presenting traditionally masculine characteristics, and wants to be submissive in her romantic relationships. The two terms – Caroline’s conviction that ‘there is something wrong somewhere’ (328) and Shirley’s conviction that ‘I prefer a *master*’ (462) – are not presented as diametrically opposed concepts, but as issues that occupy a similarly central role in each character’s inner life. Nonetheless, Brontë’s decision to write Shirley as submissive, and Caroline as mostly uncomprehending of her submissiveness, makes it hard to read *Shirley*’s sexual power relations as something wholly externally imposed on women. If sexual submissiveness as it appears in *Shirley* was simply an adaptive response to oppression, then Caroline, beset by inner pain, a guardian who expects her to quell her pain by buying a new dress, and the prospect of an uncertain, purposeless future, might reasonably be expected to have such a response. But she does not. Caroline’s seeking-out of sources of pain and compulsion, her longing for ‘something

absorbing and compulsory to fill my head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts,' for 'varieties of pain' (193) and 'severe duties' (203), seem to be driven by a pragmatic rather than a masochistic impulse. She consistently thinks of pain and compulsion not as paths to pleasure in themselves, but as means of overcoming a different, greater pain. 'Bent on victory over a mortal pain, she did her best to quell it': Caroline goes for long walks, paces her room in the evening until she is faint, and plans for every moment of her time not because she takes pleasure in hurting or restricting herself, but because she wants to distract herself from her emotional suffering with work and exhaustion (158). Caroline's pain management, which has no tincture of fantasy or desire to transmute it into enjoyment, differs widely from the kind of pleasure that Shirley shows in her struggles with Louis. In Brontë's version, both are ways of addressing pain, but one of them also creates productive, albeit difficult, delight.

Caroline and Shirley read William Cowper's 1799 poem 'The Castaway' to each other, and talk about men. 'You never would have loved Cowper,' says Caroline. 'You might have sought Cowper with the intention of loving him; and you would have looked at him, pitied him, and left him: forced away by a sense of the impossible, the incongruous' (191). Shirley suggests that they have different tastes, and that 'submissive and contemplative yourself, you like the stern and the practical. By-the-way, you must miss that Cousin Robert of yours very much' (192). This addition suggests that Shirley reads Caroline and Robert's dynamic in much the same way that Louis does, with Caroline as 'submissive' (192) and 'conscientious' (439) and Robert as 'stern' (192) and 'fastidious' (439); Robert setting standards and Caroline obediently living up to them. But nothing we see in Caroline and Robert's interactions suggest that this is a true picture. Instead, it seems as if Shirley and Louis are projecting something like their own dynamic onto Caroline and Robert. Reflecting on why Caroline is suited to Robert, Louis seems aware that Robert does not enjoy being provoked the way he does, but seems to take this to mean that he actively enjoys *not being provoked*: 'where [in Caroline] is there anything to alter, anything to endure, anything to reprimand, to be anxious about?' (439) Louis does not take the next step in his analysis and realise that Robert's desires, and Caroline's appeal for him, is not conceived of in terms of provocation at all.



Louis's sexual imagination is intense but limited: creative and perceptive within its particular areas of interest, it lacks a sense of the possibilities outside these areas. Because he sees Caroline as lacking the fire and prickliness that interests him, he assigns her to a position on the opposite end of a scale from provocative to inert, and sees her in terms of 'the mute, monotonous innocence of the lamb' and 'the nestling dove which never stirred in my bosom' (439). He is not desexualising her – 'mute, monotonous innocence' is also, here, a particular kind of sexual fantasy – but he has little insight into the specific sexual dynamics between her and Robert.

In Caroline and Robert's first scene together, she takes on the pedagogical role that in Brontë's work is so often associated with erotic dominance. She makes him read *Coriolanus* as a 'lesson both in languages and ethics, with a touch on politics', and asks him to live up to her 'democrat' standards (80). Sally Shuttleworth points out that Caroline, like Shirley, recites a French lesson for her lover and argues that 'the taming of the women is enacted through their acquisition of their master's language',<sup>152</sup> but Caroline and Robert's dynamic does not seem to be imagined in terms of 'taming'. She does take on the role of 'happy, docile child' while reading him a poem, but this is preceded by a lengthy session of moral education with her as teacher and Robert as student (81). In this context, Caroline's statement that Cowper was 'not made to be loved by woman' might be seen not as a desire for sternness, but as a reflection on Robert's vulnerability. Both Shirley and Caroline identify Cowper himself with the drowning speaker of 'The Castaway', and Robert's business troubles are repeatedly figured in terms of drowning. He is described as 'drenched and blighted by the pitiless descent of the storm' (25), and when Shirley lends him money he says that he has been 'drowning, and rather wished the operation over' (201). Discussing his affairs with Caroline, he tells her that 'there is no controlling wind or wave. Gusts and swells perpetually trouble the mariner's course; he dare not dismiss from his mind the expectation of tempest.' (216) Caroline reflects that she is powerless to help him, much as she did in Cowper's case. But her perception of Robert's vulnerability and need for help, in contrast to Shirley and Louis's perception of him as stern and practical, suggests an affinity of desire.

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<sup>152</sup> Sally Shuttleworth, *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 214-215.

*negotiating desires: 'cut out for each other'*

The chapter 'Written in the Schoolroom', where Louis records the conversation with Shirley that ends in their engagement, is an interpretive crux. Is this power struggle best read as a scene of capitulation, with one character finally 'force[d] to accept the submissive role of the woman, to accept her gendered body' (Silver 99), as 'one stage in a continuing battle',<sup>153</sup> or as something else entirely? Elizabeth Gargano's reading of the tone of the encounter is persuasive: she emphasises the element of mutual aggression, as well as the spiky humour underlying all the intense earnestness. Unlike Gargano, and like Silver, I consider that the relationship that develops between Shirley and Louis can reasonably be described as having a dominant and a submissive party, rather than two parties 'vie[ing] for mastery' (Gargano 799). However, I read the conversation in 'Written in the Schoolroom' as a performative negotiation, not a forcible establishing of this relationship. Reading this scene alongside Robert and Caroline's conversation in the chapter 'Wherein Matters Make Some Progress, But Not Much', I want to suggest that what we see as the two couples draw closer to marriage is not just a reassertion of the heteronormative marriage plot. Rather, these scenes depict the growing realisation in each of the characters that their primary desires and fantasies might find a corresponding desire or fantasy in another person. Each of the four characters starts to imagine one of the others in terms of their specific needs and desires. This can happen in the form of brief images that gradually gain significance in context, as when Robert calls Caroline his 'pretty priestess' (505), or in the form of a more extended narrative, as when Louis imagines Shirley as a 'bête fauve' in need of taming (439). In each character's case these figures and imaginings are repeated over time, gaining cohesiveness and emotional and erotic import.

The characters' desires and lacks are not only sexual; rather, the two scenes show how closely sexual need in *Shirley* is bound up with the need for emotional and vocational fulfillment. Describing Shirley and Louis's conversation, Maynard notes that 'the writer seems to be groping for some way of expressing the way in which two persons reveal their sexual natures to each other' (162). The sense of uncertainty and awkwardness he conveys in this

<sup>153</sup> Elizabeth Gargano, 'The Education of Brontë's New *Nouvelle Héloïse* in *Shirley*', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, Vol. 44, No. 4, Autumn 2004, 779-803, 799.

process is keenly present: the world of *Shirley* is one of difficulty and pain, and desires do not perfectly and easily complement each other. But the revelation of 'sexual natures' nonetheless has wide implications. The characters' individual sources of pain – the things they lack the most – have the potential to be soothed, but, moreover, their particular structures of desire have the potential to become real. Desire is not just pain waiting to be overcome, it is also pleasure waiting to happen.

By the time we turn to Louis's little blank book of desire, we already know what Shirley wants most: to be made to be good. 'Caroline,' she says earlier on, 'I wish to tell you that I have a great weight on my mind: my conscience is quite uneasy, as if I had committed, or was going to commit, a crime. It is not my *private* conscience, you must understand, but my landed-proprietor and lord-of-the-manor conscience' (223). Shirley's unease is tied directly to her sense of vocation. She is a rich landowner in a time of soaring unemployment and poverty, aware that she urgently needs to use her power for good, and also aware that her ability to do this well is limited. Discussing her housekeeper's embezzling, she points out that Caroline would have dealt with it better: 'you...would have firmly shown my housekeeper she had done wrong; then you would have gently and wisely admonished her; and at last, I daresay, provided she had seemed penitent, you would have very sweetly forgiven her.' (224) Caroline reads Shirley's flaws as keenly as she would have read the housekeeper's: 'you will not manage properly...You must have a prime minister, or you will get yourself into a series of scrapes.' (224)

At first Miss Ainley acts as Shirley's prime minister, but eventually she casts Louis in the role. Explaining her own paralysis and shock after her engagement, she says that Louis 'would never have learned to rule, if she had not ceased to govern: the incapacity of the sovereign had developed the powers of the premier' (535). The phrase Shirley uses to describe herself seems like a reference to the Regency Acts of the United Kingdom, which provide a regent for the country in case of the sovereign's incapacity (for instance, if the sovereign is absent, a minor or, as in the case of George III, unable to act as sovereign due to mental illness). This allusion makes the issue of Shirley's agency and motivations at this point somewhat fraught. The narrator says that Shirley 'partly yielded to her disposition' and 'partly also acted on system',

suggesting that her passivity is both part of her sexual power dynamic with Louis and an attempt at reconfiguring the societal and financial power imbalance between them: 'Never was wooer of wealthy bride so thoroughly absolved from the subaltern part' (535). But in the context of her behaviour before the wedding – 'she sat or wandered alone; spoke little, and ate less' (534) – her reference to 'incapacity' also suggests an involuntary crisis. However, Shirley does not cast Louis as a regent, who steps into the sovereign's place; rather, she sees him as a prime minister, who has executive powers but is not the head of state. Her fantasy image is, then, an attempt at calibrating a complex power relation between herself and Louis, rather than completely abdicating power to him. Although the text does not suggest a causal relationship between the vocational and the erotic elements of her fantasy – implying that Shirley's desire to be managed and tutored by her lover comes out of her desire to be taught how to do her job, or vice versa – the two are interconnected. Accepting his proposal, she presents a fantasy that is vocational, emotional and sexual at once: 'teach me and help me to be good. I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property; but I ask you to share the burden, and to show me how to sustain my part well.' (523)

Shirley, then, fantasizes herself as a flawed sovereign, and Louis as her teacher and premier. Louis's fantasy is somewhat different: he imagines himself having 'the charge of a young lioness or leopardess', 'stilling the flutterings and training the energies of the restless merlin' (439). He fantasizes Shirley as a wild animal and himself as her tamer; his primary desire is to lead, to keep and to control. It seems significant that Robert predicts that Louis will go into politics after his marriage: 'all the district will feel his quiet influence, and acknowledge his unassuming superiority: a magistrate is wanted – they will, in time, invest him with the office' (539). Again, sexual desire and vocation echo each other. Louis imagines that his 'patience would exult' and his 'powers would revel' in 'training' and 'managing' Shirley (439); Robert hints that the same strength and patience will help Louis gain a position of power in the community.

In this conversation the characters are not wholly inside each others' fantasy-worlds, but trying to negotiate a fit between the two that will work, and because their fantasies both centre on curbing and controlling, this negotiation

is inevitably performed as a struggle. Their fighting both causes and soothes pain: it aims to test the limits of their own need for each other, to see how much struggle and pain their desire can withstand, but it is also a performance of the fantasies that represent what each of them most needs and lacks. When Shirley snaps that 'I shall insist upon my husband improving me, or else we part,' and Louis responds, 'God knows it is needed!', he is at once criticising her and performatively assuring her that he is going to give her what she wants. 'Never mind them: they were cut out for each other,' says Robert when Caroline worries about Shirley's mingled restiveness and passivity after her engagement (536). This might not satisfy a similarly worried critic, and perhaps it should not: ideal matches do not seem to exist in *Shirley*. But the two characters' pain and desires are close enough that they can play with, if not heal each other.

*compromised endings: 'some progress'*

Shirley wants to be made to be good; Louis wants to tame a wild creature (though as so often in Brontë, the focus of desire is on the endlessly renewing process rather than an end result of absolute subjection – far from wanting to make Shirley totally obedient, Louis is delighted that '[t]here is always something to chide in her' (435)). In the chapter 'Wherein Matters Make Some Progress, But Not Much', Caroline's and Robert's central desires similarly come to the fore and meet.

Judith Wilt perceptively interprets Robert's embattled sense of masculinity and power in terms of hard and soft, mechanical and organic: he is 'curiously both rigid and spineless', he 'signals a dim wish for an organic internal territory that would accommodate variation and surprise into his paradigm of development. But he prefers to believe he is fixed in the mechanics of helpless change' (4). Robert is identified with the 'grim, metal darlings' (*Shirley* 323) that put the millworkers out of work and spur them to riot; one of the first mentions of him in the novel are of 'Moore and his mill, and his machinery' (16). Having tried to sacrifice himself – his pride, his self-respect, his love for Caroline – to save his mill by marrying Shirley for her money, he describes himself as a failing machine: 'The machinery of all my nature; the whole enginery of this human mill; the boiler, which I take to be the heart, is fit to burst.' (444) Shirley says to Caroline that '[h]e often is hard to me. We

seldom converse tête-à-tête but I am made to feel that the basis of his character is not of eider down', and notes that he does not trust her fully because 'I am not considered iron-souled enough' (265). The growing love between Caroline and Robert is stopped short by another hard object: 'You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it' (89). The iron imagery turns literal and shatters itself at the same moment, when an assassin's bullet pierces Robert's body, leaving him alive but radically weakened.

This is Robert just before the scene where he begins to admit his feelings for Caroline: 'He had no iron mastery of his sensations now; a trifling emotion made itself apparent in his present weak state.' (498) We are given, briefly, Hesther Yorke's perception of him:

she was obliged to look up...There was beauty still in his pale, wasted features; there was earnestness, and a sort of sweetness – for he was smiling – in his hollow eyes. 'Good-bye!', he said, and as he spoke the smile glittered and melted... 'And what are you going to leave us for?' she asked: 'we will keep you, and do anything in the world for you, if you will only stay till you are stronger.' (498)

Robert's hardness has turned to beauty and sweetness, to melting and glitter. Hardness may be associated with masculinity both metaphorically and metonymically, hardness of both character and penis being central to traditional conceptions of masculinity, but Robert's softness is not presented as desexualising him. Hesther Yorke responds to him with subtle but distinct desire; she is about to 'bid him "avaunt"' when she looks up, sees his face, and changes her mind (498). His softness gives him access to different things than his hardness did. He is, he tells himself, 'sadder and wiser: weakly enough, but not worried' (499). His illness, with its enforced humility and dependence, has made him flexible, a kind of weakness that is also a kind of strength. 'Formerly, pecuniary ruin was equivalent in my eyes to personal dishonour'; now he is able to begin to disconnect himself from his machines (499). He imagines the solid tree of his fortunes being destroyed by iron, leaving him with something slight, flexible and fertile: "Ruin will come, lay her axe to my fortune's roots, and hew them down. I shall snatch a sapling' (499).

In this softened state, he meets a Caroline in the ascendant: 'All about her seemed elastic; depression, fear, forlornness, were withdrawn. No longer crushed, and saddened, and slow, and drooping, she looked like one who had tasted the cordial of heart's ease, and been lifted on the wing of hope.' (501) Robert asks her why she looks happy, and she replies, 'For one thing, I am happy in mama' (502). Her happiness is not detached from him, but nor is it wholly dependent on him. Like Shirley and Louis, who finally come together when they are able to say 'Go. I can bear to be left' and 'Perhaps, I too *can* bear to leave you' (522), Robert and Caroline come together when they are able to imagine living without each other, when the need for the other person to fill their lack has turned into a desire.

Shirley's and Louis's fantasies are both (fairly) explicitly stated and (fairly) explicitly sexual; Caroline's and Robert's need a little more teasing out to become visible. Caroline has a clearly expressed vocational desire. She wants and needs to do something with her life, but she is not specifically ambitious; she appears not to have considered working outside the home before she realises that she might not get married. But, limited as her career choices are, she chooses teaching: the abortive governess plan finally comes to fruition in Robert's prediction that she will run the day-school in Hollow's Mill (540). Her relation to Robert, too, can be seen as fundamentally teacherly. 'I am to be the teacher then, and you my pupil?' she asks at the start of the novel as she sits him down with *Coriolanus*, to show him 'at once how low and how high you are' – a very Brontëan negotiation of roles (77). Caroline wants Robert, and wants something to give her purpose: her central fantasy is a combination of these, to be given purpose by making Robert a better man. Her flirting with him is based on knowing him better than anyone and having a keen awareness of his faults. Unlike Louis, she seems more attracted to improving than to chiding, noting that Robert 'made a great blunder once, and we will hear no more about it' (505), telling him to 'sit down quietly, and guess your riddle' (508), to 'be good' (509). The text emphasises that this set of desires, too, can be difficult to comprehend from an outside perspective. Just as Caroline fails to comprehend Shirley's fantasies of submission, Shirley recoils at the idea of becoming her husband's teacher: 'Leading and improving! Teaching and tutoring!...I am not to set [my husband] his daily lesson and see that he learns it, and give him a

sugar-plum if he is good, and a patient, pensive, pathetic lecture if he is bad' (518). The text does not try to create a synthesis from the pleasure Caroline takes in teaching her partner and the disgust Shirley feels at the idea of doing so; rather, it keeps both these affects in play, making the novel's representation of desire more multivalent and multivocal.

Robert's fantasy is perhaps the most counterintuitive and also the simplest: he wants to be safe. Brontë sketches his past and its effects at the opening of the novel: 'if a childhood passed at the side of a saturnine mother, under foreboding of coming evil, and a manhood drenched and blighted by the pitiless descent of the storm, could painfully impress the mind, *his* probably was impressed in no golden characters' (25). Throughout most of the novel his drenched and blighted manhood's sense of what safety might be is comprised of iron, stone and violent resistance. 'I only wish the machines – the frames – were safe here, and lodged within the walls of this mill...My mill is my castle,' he says to Malone (21-22). 'You will not find safety in submission', he warns Sykes (111). His eagerness to fight the framebreakers does not come from fearlessness, but from an inability to imagine safety as anything other than rigidity. He needs, literally, to maintain his frames: 'I shall get new frames in to-morrow: - If you broke these, I would still get more. *I'll never give in.*' (118)

So desperate to keep his business safe that he will put his own employees out of work and propose to someone he respects but does not love to get hold of her money, Robert's image of Caroline is, again, different from but congruent with hers. He sees her not as his teacher but as 'my little pastor, my pretty priestess' (505). She is forgiveness and safety: 'It has occurred to me when, weary and vexed, I have myself gone to bed like a heathen, that another had asked forgiveness for my day, and safety for my night.' (105-106) In the course of their conversation in 'Wherein Matters Make Some Progress, But Not Much', she becomes the ultimate divine intercessor. He describes 'thoughts of falling on the floor at your feet' (507), and addresses her as the Virgin Mary: '*Rose céleste, reine des Anges!*' (508) Her retort is a reminder that he turned her down for money: "*Tour d'ivoire, maison d'or*": is not that the jargon?' (508) Robert and Caroline are quoting the Litany of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in which each line of description is followed by the here unspoken words 'Pray for us'. In Catholicism prayers to Mary are prayers for intercession, as Mary herself is not divine; when



Robert imagines that ‘another had asked forgiveness for my day’ he is already casting Caroline as Mary.<sup>154</sup> The unspoken, repeated pleas for help are the background of Robert’s fantasy – the need for safety, the desire for someone to keep him safe. He venerates her; she instructs him. Louis, who shares Robert’s Catholic upbringing, also imagines Shirley as a Mary figure, but where Robert emphasizes the rescuer aspect of Mary, Louis emphasizes her virginity. He links this with other qualities he finds desirable in Shirley, like her supposedly untamed nature and lack of sophistication: ‘I could call her nothing in my own mind save “stainless virgin.” To my perception, a delicate splendour robed her, and the modesty of girlhood was her halo.’ (436) The fact that both characters compare different women to the same religious archetype makes clear that there is considerable idealisation at work here, but since all four characters are more or less consciously casting their lover in a fantasy role, this is hardly surprising. The different images of Mary become points at which Louis and Robert’s different fantasies can be read.

But Robert and Caroline’s conversation in this chapter has another mode, too. ‘[W]e will resume our gossip,’ says Robert, interrupting his ‘agitating allusions’ to their romantic future (506). Their gossip about Shirley and Louis (though for most of the conversation only Caroline knows who Shirley’s lover is) holds another agitating allusion, in this case to *Much Ado about Nothing*. Shakespeare’s Beatrice interrupts her own equivocal confession of love, ‘I confess nothing, nor I deny nothing’, by saying: ‘I am sorry for my cousin.’<sup>155</sup> ‘I confess nothing,’ says Caroline, adding: ‘but I say that haughty Shirley is no more free than was Hagar.’<sup>156</sup> (507) Robert tries to get her to admit to being a ‘fellow-slave’ of Shirley’s, similarly bound by love, but their conversation

<sup>154</sup> Considering the anti-Catholic rhetoric in much of Brontë’s other work, Robert’s references to his mother’s faith pass with surprisingly little comment on the narrator’s part, although Caroline does tell him not to be ‘absurd’ when he says he wants to kneel in front of her (508). The text might, in this sense, be seen as subordinating the specifically Catholic content of Robert’s image to its erotic content: there are clear parallels between Robert’s expression of his desire to adore Caroline and Shirley’s expression of her desire to adore her future husband, which is phrased in non-specific religious terms.

<sup>155</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado About Nothing*, 1600 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 4.1.271.

<sup>156</sup> In Genesis, Hagar is Sarai’s handmaiden. Because Sarai can no longer bear children, she asks her husband Abram to have sex with Hagar so that ‘I may obtain children by her’ (Gen 16:28). After Hagar conceives, the two women turn against each other: ‘I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes’ (Gen 16:5). Sarai punishes Hagar, and Hagar flees. Caroline, then, imagines Shirley’s sexual subordination in terms of a woman’s subordination to another woman, and the reference could imply anger on Caroline’s part at apparently having lost Shirley.

strongly suggests that she is not (507). Their confessions of love ('I confess nothing' is precisely a confession in this context, corresponding to Robert's 'I have twice this evening had some thoughts of falling on the floor at your feet') are not power games so much as just games; Robert and Caroline are sure enough of each other to be casual and playful (507).

But the Shakespearean intertext brings back *Shirley*'s underlying pessimism. The conversation between Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado About Nothing* is not about the prospective marriage of their friends, but about the ruin of a marriage. Caroline foresees Shirley's happiness; Beatrice pities Hero. The echo, amplified by Robert's references to the man he doesn't realise is his brother – 'Abraham; the hero of a patriarch' (507), '*le grand Turc*' (508) – brings back the novel's never-absent dread of marriage. It joins the passage's other echo, 'pray for us', to remind the reader of the immense good fortune these romantic ventures will need if the participants are to be happy. 'There is no danger,' Caroline tells Robert; his response, 'I am not convinced of that,' is emblematic of *Shirley* (509). Like a Shakespearean comedy, *Shirley* ends with a double wedding, and the novel's vexed critical history shows how difficult it is to accept this kind of imperfect solution. *Shirley* shows how foolish and ignoble one's desires can look to other people (Mrs Yorke decrying Caroline for her 'romancing' (340), Sympson mocking Shirley's submissiveness, Shirley reacting with disgust to Robert's proposal) and imagines the possibility of someone who, though they may not entirely understand or sympathise with them, might begin to fulfill them anyway. It is about the pain of getting something like what one wants: matters make some progress, but not much.

## Fantasy

‘Exactly what sexual, emotional maturity is in psychoanalysis is not altogether clear, but generally speaking one rarely meets anyone who has achieved it. And descriptions of it usually produce a plethora of vague clichés about rich, fulfilling mutuality or fantasies of wholeness that are full of holes.’

Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (1994)

*sharing fantasies: ‘I cannot describe what I mean’*

‘Well here I am at Roe Head’, writes nineteen-year-old Brontë, ‘it is seven o’clock at night the young ladies are all at their lessons the school room is quiet the fire is low...I now assume my own thoughts; my mind relaxes from the stretch on which it has been for the last twelve hours & falls back onto the rest which no-body in this house knows of but myself.’<sup>157</sup> She begins to recount, and, it seems, to re-experience a sense of being transported to a different place: ‘Last night I did indeed lean upon the thunder-wakening wings of such a stormy blast as I have seldom heard blow, & it whirled me away...while all the rest were at tea the trance seemed to descend on a sudden & verily this foot trod the war-shaken shores of the Calabar & these eyes saw the defiled & violated Adrianopolis’ (158).

The Roe Head journal enacts a repeated, endlessly frustrating (for their writer) conflict between Brontë’s existence as a teacher at Roe Head School and her fantasies about her and Branwell Brontë’s fictional Angria. ‘Two radically

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<sup>157</sup> Charlotte Brontë, ‘The Roe Head Journal’, 1836, in Anne Brontë, Branwell Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal: Selected Writings*, ed. Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 158. Page references are to the print edition, but my reading also makes use of the scanned manuscript in the Morgan Library online collection (Charlotte Brontë, diary, February 1836, manuscript, Morgan Library and Museums Online Collections, web, 16 October 2012).

different kinds of writing, thought and being coexist,' writes John Bowen of this passage.<sup>158</sup> There are a number of things to note about Brontë's depiction of the fantasy: it is involuntary, a forcible carrying-away from her everyday life, but it is also assumed, put on like a garment or a role. It is less of an effort than not fantasising, a 'rest' after the torturous 'stretch' of the rest of her life. It is profoundly sexually charged, not just in the breathless description of the sleeping Quashia Quamina, 'his tusk-like teeth glancing vindictively through his parted lips, his brown complexion flushed with wine, & his broad chest heaving wildly as the breath issued in spurts from his distended nostrils', but in the frantic pleasure she takes in everything Angrian (160). This pleasure is based less on physical participation than on intense seeing, as it will be later for Jane in *Jane Eyre*: 'while he was full before my eyes... while I watched...& beheld...while this apparition was before me' (160). Brontë's avatar in the fantasy is her own physical form; she moves through the Angrian landscape and experiences it sensuously, and her body becomes her source of authority for the fantasy: '& verily this foot trod...& these eyes saw' (158). Most strikingly for the purposes of this chapter, the situation in which the fantasy occurs, its outside setting,<sup>159</sup> which she delineates carefully, is about being alone – mentally isolated, incompatible with her surroundings, a heterogeneous thing.

Paradoxically, in order to dismiss the possibility of communion with anyone else in the house, Brontë has to assume a kind of omniscient awareness of their minds, which she knows have no blazing towns and half-undressed, wine-flushed, warlike men in them: 'the rest which no-body in this house knows of but myself...the ark which for me floats alone' (158). The act of fantasising sets her apart, distinguishes her, makes her alone. Brontë fantasises '[w]hile all the rest were at tea': fantasising keeps her from being 'all the rest' (158). The fantasy, and the entry, end when 'Miss W', the headteacher Miss Wooler, comes in with a plate of butter and tells Brontë that it is a stormy night. But the sense of separateness remains in Brontë's response, which sounds ironic if you are privy to the fantasy and entirely straightforward if you are Miss Wooler: 'It is

<sup>158</sup> John Bowen, 'The Brontës and the Transformations of Romanticism', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: Vol. 3: The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1880*, eds. John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203.

<sup>159</sup> I will use the phrase 'outside setting' to denote the in-text situation in which a character does her fantasising: in this case, the outside setting is the quiet schoolroom at Roe Head; in the case of Jane's fantasy of stirring up mutiny in Rochester's harem and enslaving him, the outside setting is a carriage returning from Millcote to Thornfield.

ma'am' (160).

We might see this switch from 'solitary revelling' to butter and observations on the weather as a bathetic deflation, prosaic reality making the fantasy fall apart (160). Something like this process is described in Freud's 'Formulations on the Two Principles of Mental Functioning', which in Laplanche and Pontalis's reading 'sets the internal world, tending towards satisfaction by means of illusion, against an outside world which gradually imposes the reality principle upon the subject through the mediation of the perceptual system'.<sup>160</sup> Reading the Roe Head entry, Susan Meyer distinguishes between "apparition" and 'literal apparition': 'Brontë mockingly juxtaposes the "apparition" of Quashia, who aptly embodies the wildness and disorder of the storm, with the literal apparition of Miss Wooler who, with her butter plate and polite commentary on the weather, becomes, in contrast, the epitome of banality'.<sup>161</sup> 'Everyday life suddenly punctuates fantasy and forecloses the pleasures of the female gaze,' Bowen writes, though he goes on to point out that the different modes collaborate as well as conflict with each other in Brontë's work (204). But the syntax of the third-to-last sentence of the entry – the sentence that describes both Quashia and the butter-plate – complicates the relation between fantasy and outside setting. This long sentence is structured by the word 'while', which is repeated three times:

While he was full before my eyes, lying in his black dress on the disordered couch, his sable hair dishevelled on his forehead...while I watched the fluttering of his white shirt ruffles starting through the more than half-unbuttoned waistcoat, & beheld the expression of his Arabian countenance savagely exulting even in sleep, Quashia triumphant Lord in the halls of Zamorna! in the bower of Zamorna's lady! while this apparition was before me, the dining-room door opened and Miss W came in with a plate of butter in her hand. (160)

The reader does not know at the start of the sentence that what the word 'while'

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<sup>160</sup> J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, 1973 (London: Karnac, 1988), 315.

<sup>161</sup> Susan Meyer, "Black" Rage and White Women: Ideological Self-Formation in Charlotte Brontë's African Tales', *South Central Review*, Vol. 8, No. 4, 1991, 28-40, 35.

repeatedly heralds is the butter-plate, but at the end it becomes clear that the two planes, fantasy and outside setting, have been running in parallel throughout the sentence. Rather than the outside setting breaking into and destroying the fantasy at the end of the sentence, the repeated 'while' plays a trick with narrative time, making Miss W's entry into the schoolroom (which would only have taken a moment) *present throughout* Brontë's lingering examination of Quashia (which seems to take much longer). Meyer notes that 'it is the head teacher, for whom Brontë felt some affection, who forcibly returns her to drab reality': 'She disrupts Brontë's brief moment of privacy, and acts in this instance to represent, despite all of Brontë's affection for her, the oppressive conditions of her working life' (36). But the syntactic structure of the climax of the fantasy seems to open up another possibility: that in Brontë's narrative Miss W is not just interrupting or stopping the fantasy but walking in on it. The sentence blurs the distinction between the outside setting and the fantasy itself, so that it is not quite clear whether Miss W walks in on Brontë writing in the empty schoolroom, or on Brontë and the apparition of Quashia. John Kucich notes that Brontë's expression of her fantasising practices 'reflect [her] belief that her writing marked a passional separation from the world of others'.<sup>162</sup> But the sentence reads as though, rather than puncturing the fantasy, Miss W enters into it; she opens the dining-room door and sees Brontë *while* Brontë is gazing at the sleeping Quashia. The fantasy, rather than creating a chasm of separation between the two women, links them. In this version, '[a] stormy night, my dear' could be read in a very different tone, and we would have to rethink what Brontëan fantasy does with the concepts of privacy and separation.

This ambiguity between separation and connection runs through the journal entry. 'I now, after a day's weary wandering, return to the ark which for me floats alone on the face of this world's desolate & boundless deluge,' writes Brontë (158). The ark is a place of refuge, but as she highlights with 'which for me floats alone', it is also a place of exclusion. Almost no one is allowed inside, and anyone who is not allowed inside drowns: in this sense it is an image of solace to herself and aggression to everyone else. (The latter point is somewhat complicated by the ambiguity in Brontë's phrasing: depending on how you read

<sup>162</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 56.

‘for me’, she might be emphasising her own imaginative isolation rather than a sense of being imaginatively elect.) The point of the ark is to sustain the possibility of procreation, to ‘keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth’: being alone in it defeats the purpose (Gen 7.3). An ark that floats alone for one person is not, in Biblical terms, an ark. Isolation and exclusiveness form the outside setting for the fantasy, but here Brontë gives an image of isolation and exclusiveness that contains within it the idea of the presence of someone else, the idea that these thoughts might always already be shared. This is key to how her later work conceives of fantasy.

Fantasy, as I define it in the context of Brontë’s work, has a factual, a structural and an affective aspect: it is a counterfactual narrative or series of images that the fantasising person invests with some kind of emotion (fear, desire, revulsion, longing, sadness). By ‘counterfactual’, I mean that it is not part of the fantasising character’s current experience – obviously all fictional content is counterfactual from the reader’s perspective. But this use of the word ‘counterfactual’ does not have to mean that what is imagined has never happened or could never happen: in *Shirley*, Shirley’s fantasy of seeing a mermaid is obviously counterfactual, but so is Caroline’s fantasy of ‘a herd of whales rushing through the livid and liquid thunder down from the frozen zone’, although it describes something she anticipates seeing in the future (206). Recollections of the past can also become fantasy when they involve counterfactual elaborations, elisions, interpretations or expansions, as in Rochester’s song in *Jane Eyre* (see below), which reimagines his courtship with Jane.

In the Roe Head journal, the process of fantasizing can be seen to perform an interlocutor. ‘If I could call up some slight and pleasant sketch, I would amuse myself by jotting it down,’ Brontë writes in the next entry, but in what follows she is apparently not just interested in amusing herself: ‘I appeared to realize a delicious, hot day in the most burning height of summer...Dear me! I keep heaping epithets together and I cannot describe what I mean. I mean a day whose rise, progress & decline seem made of sunshine. As you are travelling you see the wide road before you’ (160). Here the process of fantasising and the process of writing the fantasy down, making it available for a reader, seem to work almost in tandem. Laplanche and Pontalis emphasise

the centrality of narrative in the psychoanalytic concept of phantasy, although they describe it as ‘scripts’ or ‘sequence[s]’: ‘Even when they can be summed up in a single sentence, phantasies are still scripts (*scénarios*) of organised scenes which are capable of dramatisation – usually in a visual form...It is not an *object* that the subject imagines and aims at, so to speak, but rather a *sequence* in which the subject has his own part to play and in which permutations of roles and attributions are possible.’ (318) Although Brontë’s use of fantasy has this narrative element, these scripts can be pared down to nothing but a particular set of images or roles that imply a narrative. For instance, in *Shirley* Louis Moore does not describe a full fantasy narrative of taming and rebellion every time he uses the word ‘leopardess’ to describe Shirley Keeldar. But the word still functions as fantasy by suggesting a script along these lines – partly because he consistently uses it in contexts of sexual longing, and partly because he does have full-scale fantasies where the word ‘leopardess’ is central, so that the word, when used later on, works as a kind of shorthand.

Considering this, what distinguishes Brontë’s fantasy in the second Roe Head entry from the fantasies described by Laplanche and Pontalis is that Brontë is concerned not only with telling herself the story, but also with telling it, almost simultaneously, to someone else. The prose sounds, and in the manuscript version looks, as if it is being put down in a stream-of-consciousness rush, but it is also full of revisions, words crossed out and replaced to reflect some subtlety of meaning (‘giant’ for ‘colossal’, for instance). The transcription of the fantasy is being tweaked first to bring the reader or readers as close as possible to ‘what I mean’, and finally to bring them into it: ‘As you are travelling you see the wide road before you’. And the two processes seem intimately connected: fantasising creates the need to transmit the fantasy. The first Glass Town and Angria stories are, of course, themselves shared narratives, written in collaboration with Branwell Brontë. In the journal ‘Haworth & home’, the place where these first stories are written, is identified with Brontë’s sense of distraction from her work at the school and her desire to imagine and write: ‘It is the still small voice alone that comes to me at eventide...It is that which takes my spirit<sup>163</sup>...& like Haworth & home, wakes

<sup>163</sup> The Oxford transcription has ‘takes my spirit’, whereas the Morgan Library transcription has ‘wakes my spirit’; the handwriting in the scanned manuscript is unclear, but seems closer to ‘takes’.



sensations which lie dormant elsewhere' (158). The journal, then, suggests that Brontë's (at least Brontë the narrator's) inner life is from the start conceived of as something that even while it creates itself also shares itself with an other.

This is not just to say that imaginative creation consolidates Brontë's self-identity as isolated and special, while also creating an ideal collaborator and listener. Rather, the construction of fantasy that we find in Brontë's work creates spaces where notions of identity, being alone, and being with someone work differently. 'I now assume my own thoughts', Brontë writes, which immediately suggests the question of whose thoughts she had before (158).<sup>164</sup> The word 'assume' suggests putting on a garment, something that is associated with you but that is not you – indeed, it can imply something that makes you appear different, as when you assume a role or a position. Brontë's thoughts are 'my own' but also assumed. There is a similar ambiguity in the way Brontë uses the word 'you' in the second entry: 'As you are travelling you see the wide road before you, the field on each side & the hills far, far off, all smiling, glowing in the same amber light, and you feel such an intense heat, quite incapable of chilling damp or even refreshing breeze...Such a day I saw flaming over the distant Sydenham Hills in Hawkscliffe Forest.' (161) 'You' can be a general-purpose pronoun here; its synonyms are 'one' or perhaps, conversely, 'we'. But 'you' also means you specifically, the reader or readers to whom Brontë needs to describe the fantasy, the actual you who needs, in order for this writing to work on Brontë's terms, to imagine seeing the wide road and imagine feeling the intense heat. And 'you' also means 'I': Brontë is using the word 'you' to describe what she herself has experienced, so 'you see' means 'I see'. So there are several people engaged in this fantasy, or there are two, or there is one. The fantasy not only allows for but also requires – or makes – this multiplicity.

*parenthetical fantasies: 'which I never thought thus to have declared aloud'*

This chapter explores Brontëan fantasy as an uncontrollable, sometimes involuntary form of intimacy that creates unpredictable links between characters. The end of the first Roe Head entry, with the repeated and crucial use of 'while', suggests a way of thinking about how Brontë's fantasies work within the text: as parentheses. Without using actual lunulae, to use John

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<sup>164</sup> The context suggests that 'assume' is a possible mis-transcription of 'resume', but the scanned manuscript does clearly read 'assume'.

Lennard's term for the marks of parenthesis as opposed to their content,<sup>165</sup> the sentence nests the fantasy within its outside setting. But this nesting, as I have suggested earlier, is not necessarily a complete closing-off. Lennard quotes William Cobbett's warning that the parenthesis is an interrupter that 'breaks in upon the regular course of the mind' (142), while his own study argues that parentheses, rather than 'additional, irrelevant, extraneous, subordinate, or damaging to the clarity of argument', are in practice 'often original, relevant, central, emphatic, or indicative of the crux of the argument.' (242) Both ways of thinking about parentheses are relevant to the idea of fantasy. Parentheses interrupt the single-mindedness or coherence of the text, but also, precisely because they are experienced as subordinate or extraneous, function as spaces of license within it.

Most importantly for the idea of fantasy, they are only nominally enclosed or separate from the rest of their sentences. Take this parenthesis by Adam Phillips: 'If I eat every time I feel hungry I may never find out what my hunger is (for).'<sup>166</sup> Here the parenthesis encloses an alternative, and in a sense, this is just a more compact way of saying 'what my hunger is, and/or what my hunger is for'. But this is not quite how the sentence reads: the contents of the lunulae leak through to the rest of the sentence, so that neither 'what my hunger is' nor 'what my hunger is for' becomes available for reading. What the text seems to want, rather, is an unstable, playful (in the 'free movement' sense of the word 'play') balance of legibility: the parenthetical word can neither be overlooked nor read as an ordinary part of the sentence. Brontëan fantasies introduce a similar play of legibility into relations between characters. Brontë's use of actual lunulae is fairly scant, and with a few exceptions most of the lunulae in *Jane Eyre*, for instance, contain a factual side-note to the substance of the sentence. But it can be fruitful to think of Brontëan fantasy as working parenthetically: fantasies are something her characters want to close away but also to share, to disavow but also to have confirmed, and even when they are not explicitly part of the discourse between characters (as parentheses are not quite part of their sentences), they seem to permeate it anyway.

The 'Eastern allusion' exchange in *Jane Eyre*, after Jane has been loaded

<sup>165</sup> Lennard explains his use of this term in *But I Digress: The Exploitation of Parentheses in English Printed Verse* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), 2.

<sup>166</sup> Adam Phillips, *On Flirtation* (London: Faber and Faber, 1994), 44.

with wedding gifts and sits in the carriage filled with a sense of ‘annoyance and degradation’, shows this process in action (268). Jane reluctantly glances at Rochester, who is eagerly trying to make eye contact with her, and describes his smile as ‘such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched’ (269). On first encountering this idea the reader can already trace its origins. It seems like a development of Jane’s own images of herself, earlier in the paragraph, being ‘dressed like a doll by Mr Rochester’ and ‘sitting like a second Danae [sic] with the golden shower falling daily around me’ (268). In the myth of Danaë Zeus takes the form of falling gold in order to impregnate her while she is imprisoned in her tower, meaning that gold here is not just a gift implying a sexual or soon-to-be-sexual relationship, but a means of actually having sex.<sup>167</sup> The sexualisation of the concept of gold combines with the dependency, decorativeness and helplessness implied by the doll image to create the image of the sultan smiling at ‘a slave his gold and gems had enriched’, which the preceding images might lead us to read as ‘a slave he had had sex with’, or ‘gotten pregnant’. In other words, the text makes it easy to read the chain of thought, influence and inspiration that leads to this fantasy as taking place entirely inside Jane’s head: her thoughts lead into each other in a basically causal way.

But then Jane squeezes Rochester’s hand hard and tells him to stop looking at her like that, and he says that ‘I would not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk’s whole seraglio; gazelle-eyes, houri forms and all’ (269). Discussing *Jane Eyre’s* sultan-and-slave imagery in terms of feminist orientalism, Joyce Zonana says of this moment that ‘Jane does not tell Rochester that she is mentally comparing him to a sultan. She simply asks him to stop looking at her “in that way”. Rochester is astute enough to understand Jane’s unspoken reference, suggesting that feminist orientalist discourse is so pervasive as to be accessible to the very men it seeks to change.’<sup>168</sup> I would suggest, though, that Rochester’s allusion does something stranger than that: it makes us reread the origins of the fantasy, and see it instead as something

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<sup>167</sup> In art Danaë is often depicted with the gold pouring into her lap or between her legs, so the word ‘around’, rather than ‘onto’, suggests that Jane is trying to reduce the sexual impact of her deployment of the myth.

<sup>168</sup> Joyce Zonana, ‘The Sultan and the Slave: Feminist Orientalism and the Structure of *Jane Eyre*’, *Signs*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1993, 592-617, 596.

already shared.<sup>169</sup> ‘The Eastern allusion bit me again,’ says Jane (269). The word ‘bit’ forms part of the shared vocabulary of penetration, piercing and stabbing that I described in Chapter 1 as central to Jane and Rochester’s relationship. But while Jane is bitten by the allusion, and apparently provoked by having this painful idea repeated by Rochester, she does not seem bitten by or even surprised at his direct reference to what she was just thinking about. Instead she elaborates on the fantasy, and the two of them follow each other to the image of Rochester the slave-keeper in chains, and Jane the liberator setting the ‘peculiar terms’ of their marriage contract (269). Rochester’s immediate inhabiting of the terms of Jane’s fantasy suggests that what is fantasised in this novel is in parenthesis: it is closed away but legible, and it leaks through to and alters the text.<sup>170</sup>

We are brought back to the start of *Jane Eyre*, where the enclosing/isolating and opening/collaborative aspects of fantasy are figured physically: the scarlet drapery on one side of Jane, the clear pane of glass on the other. When her cousin John comes looking for her he is initially unable to locate her in the room, because he is ‘not quick of vision or conception’; the half-isolated, half-open space where vision and conception take place does not exist for him. Eliza, on the other hand, knows where she is right away, and later in the novel she turns out to be obsessed with isolation, with being ‘independent of all efforts, and all wills, but [her] own’ (236), until finally she goes to live in a convent in order to be ‘quiet and unmolested’ (241). In this sense she has an imaginative understanding of half of Jane’s fantasising space – the drapery, but not the glass.

The scene between John and Jane is a sort of broken conversation, one that constantly interrupts itself and stops itself from working. Right away he re-scripts her dialogue for her: ‘Say, “What do you want, Master Reed?”’ (9) Then

<sup>169</sup> Zonana does imply that this kind of intimacy of thought is present in the fantasy on an unconscious level: ‘At this point in the narrative, Jane is not yet aware that in planning to marry her Rochester is consciously choosing to become a bigamist. Yet the imagery she chooses...signals that not only despotism but bigamy...are on Jane’s mind’ (592-593).

<sup>170</sup> In some SF fiction this process is literalised, as Lennard points out: ‘Where telepathic communication is transcribed, or alien languages in translation, or ulterior thoughts, it is necessary to find ways of distinguishing these strata from ordinary speech and the authorial voice: and the most popular solutions have been to employ italics or lunulae, separately or in combination.’ (238) He cites some lines of dialogue from Alfred Bester’s *The Demolished Man* (1953), with telepathic communication in parentheses: “Change your (I kiss you as you are) self, Mary?” “If I only (You never really do, Linc) could.” (238-239) Obviously this requires a more thoroughly fantastical fictional universe than *Jane Eyre*’s, but the shared/disavowed aspect of the parenthetical content is similar.

he positions her in front of him and ‘spend[s] some three minutes in thrusting out his tongue at me as far as he could without damaging the roots’ (9). This extraordinary image is physically unpleasant – aggressive, intimate, sexually threatening – but, moreover, it seems as if John is trying to say something, but doing it by breaking down or parodying the idea of talking. His tongue is moving, but as if it is trying to get out of his mouth and attack her. But once something actually does pass between them – Jane thinks of his ‘disgusting and ugly appearance’ and then wonders ‘if he read that notion in my face’, which it turns out he did when he mentions ‘the look in your eyes you had two minutes since, you rat’ (10) – he has to interrupt the passage, break the connection, by hitting her.

Jane tries again, doing something similar to what Brontë does in the *Roe Head* diary when she tells the reader that ‘you see the wide road before you’. She attempts to bring him into her imaginative life, which in Jane’s case is formed by history books: ‘I had read Goldsmith’s *History of Rome*, and had formed my opinion of Nero, Caligula, &c. Also I had drawn parallels in silence’. (11) Jane’s parallels are initially just that, a set of similes with a common theme, but without enough cohesion to turn them into fantasy: ‘You are like a murderer – you are like a slave-driver – you are like the Roman emperors!’ (11) But as John attacks her, the simile that keeps the tyrannical Nero-figure and the bilious fourteen-year-old boy barely separate breaks down, and Jane experiences an almost hallucinatory fantasy: ‘I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer’ (11). John attacks Jane by trying to destroy the possibility of talk – Jane says she ‘never had an idea of replying to’ his abuse (10) – while Jane attacks John by trying to encompass him in her fantasy. But her strategy fails because she is unable to create any vision or conception in John’s mind: again, ‘I cannot describe what I mean.’ The scene confirms for Jane that she is ‘uncongenial’ (16), un-co-spirited with her surroundings. The word holds an echo of the *Genii*, the spirits representing the Brontë siblings that preside over, play with and determine the course of the juvenilia: Jane cannot make up stories with anyone here.

The opening of the novel, then, suggests that Brontë’s use of fantasy draws on both solitude and communality. This comes up again at Lowood, where, in her position as ‘a little castaway: not a member of the true flock, but

evidently an interloper and an alien' (66), Jane has repetitive fantasies of bland food before going to sleep each night. When Miss Temple takes her back into the fellowship of the school, she begins to have varied and vivid fantasies 'which I saw in the dark' of 'ideal drawings...freely pencilled houses and trees, picturesque rocks and ruins' (74). The opening of the novel also suggests that the desire to bring someone into a fantasy can be aggressive and destructive – although it is always also an act of intimacy and vulnerability, as Jane points out when she says that she had drawn her parallels about John 'in silence', and 'never thus thought to have declared [them] aloud' (11). The fantasy is divulged in spite of herself. This element of the scene has an echo later on, even down to the reading of Jane's facial expression: "Why do you smile, Jane? What does that inexplicable, that uncanny turn of countenance mean?" "I was thinking, sir (you will excuse the idea; it was involuntary), I was thinking of Hercules and Samson with their charmers—" (261)<sup>171</sup> The parenthetical apology is a demand, a prediction and a tease as well as an excuse: the comparison is involuntary because it is so apt. But the vulnerability of this reflexive openness means that there is a conciliatory thread to the way Jane insults John, as there is to the way she teases Rochester. If John was able to respond in kind, their relation to each other would change completely.

*connecting fantasies: 'a quiet mind, stirred'*

In the midst of Jane and Rochester's courtship there is a small but suggestive scene of fantasy. The passage just after Rochester tells Mrs Fairfax about the engagement is another scene of interrupted reading: 'The old lady had been reading her morning portion of Scripture...her eyes, fixed on the blank wall

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<sup>171</sup> Rochester's word 'uncanny' is apposite: Hercules and Samson are both powerful men brought low by the women they loved, which is why Jane mentions them when Rochester describes himself as 'influenced – conquered' by her (261). But they also foreshadow what will happen to him. The name Samson is applied to Rochester three times in the book: here he is Samson telling Delilah the secret to overpowering him; later, after the botched wedding, he longs 'to exert a fraction of Samson's strength' to break the 'hitch in Jane's character' (302); towards the end of the novel Jane describes the blinded Rochester as a 'sightless Samson' (431). But if Jane in some sense functions as Rochester's Delilah, the parallel to Hercules seems like one of this part of the novel's many gestures towards Bertha, and a peculiarly sad one. When Hercules falls in love with someone else, his wife Deianeira gives him a robe soaked in the blood of Nessus, which she has been told will restore his love to her. Instead it turns out to be poisoned; he burns to death, and Deianeira kills herself. Whether or not we read this as a reflection of Bertha's motivations, Jane's imagining Rochester as Hercules and Samson seems to have a kind of predictive force – another instance of the uncanniness of Brontëan fantasy.

opposite, expressed the surprise of a quiet mind, stirred by unwonted tidings.' Along with Adèle and her 'fund of genuine French scepticism' about Rochester's fairy stories (268), Mrs Fairfax's is one of the few outside perspectives we are given on this relationship. Both are primarily disbelieving: 'I was so hurt by her coldness and scepticism, that the tears rose to my eyes', says Jane (265). Adèle is sceptical about the story and Mrs Fairfax is sceptical about the marriage, but in this story-driven relationship that amounts to the same thing.

'Why? – am I a monster?...is it impossible that Mr Rochester should have a sincere affection for me?' asks Jane, and Mrs Fairfax answers her with a different word – still suggesting something not fully human, but with a domestic undertone rather than a threatening one: 'I have always noticed that you were a sort of pet of his.' (265) This exchange of one noun for another has a peculiar effect. Since Mrs Fairfax saw Jane and Rochester kissing the previous night she has been cast as the 'gloomy monitress' (265) of their relationship, shocked, amazed and uncomprehending of their love (263). But her conversation with Jane has an echo of the previous scene, where Jane and Rochester flirt through an exchange of teasing and flattering descriptors. He calls her 'pale, little elf', 'Mustard-Seed', 'Fairfax Rochester's girl-bride' (258), 'beauty', 'sylph' (259), 'angel' (262), 'downright Eve', 'sprite', 'salamander', 'thing', 'fire-spirit' (262) and 'good little girl' (263), she calls him 'dear master' (260), 'king Ahasuerus' (261) and 'blue-piled thunderloft' (262), and they call themselves variously 'your plain, Quakerish governess', 'an ape in a harlequin's jacket' (259), 'the very devil' (260), 'Jew-usurer' (261) and 'Christian' (262). The roles spin off from each other and thicken each other's meaning. 'Salamander', for instance, can mean a fire-spirit or an animal able to live in fire, but also a woman living chastely in the midst of temptation, which gives a different emphasis to 'good little girl' and to Rochester's statement that no one else has the same 'pure' love for him (263). Moreover, the sheer amount of descriptors exchanged in this scene suggests the pleasure the characters take in taking up, imposing, changing and redefining fantasy roles; in fact, this kind of role-casting runs through their relationship.

When Mrs Fairfax – who also names herself 'Alice' in this scene – casts Jane as 'a sort of pet' and Rochester as 'almost...your father' (264), she is entering into a game of definition and redefinition that the previous scene

shows to be central to the Jane/Rochester dyad. For much of the novel Mrs Fairfax is defined by not using language the way Jane and Rochester do. Jane points out that she seems to have ‘no notion of sketching a character, or observing and describing salient points, either in persons or things’ (105); Rochester calls her ‘simple-minded’ (129) and places both her and Adèle, as conversationalists, a degree above his dog and inanimate objects. This is possibly intended more neutrally than it sounds: in Rochester’s view she is simple-minded as opposed to double-minded; she uses language straightforwardly, as suggested here by her faintly awkward, careful deployment of the figurative cliché ‘all is not gold that glitters’ (265). And yet in this scene she echoes not only their use of language, but also two major scenes of Brontëan fantasy: the interrupted reading scene at the start of the novel (although she reads the Lesson of the Day rather than Bewick), and Brontë’s Roe Head Journal scene (although she falls half asleep rather than entering a trance). She says:

I feel so astonished...I hardly know what to say to you, Miss Eyre. I have surely not been dreaming, have I? Sometimes I half fall asleep when I am sitting alone, and fancy things that have never happened. It has seemed to me more than once when I have been in a doze, that my dear husband, who died fifteen years since, has come in and sat down beside me; and that I have even heard him call me by my name, Alice, as he used to do. (264)

Here Mrs Fairfax, who is otherwise seen to lack the linguistic and imaginative easiness that drives Jane’s and Rochester’s collaborative fantasy life, takes on attributes associated with Jane’s interior life: reading, desire, communion with spirits. Her fantasy is of her dead husband sitting beside her and calling her by her name, recalling Rochester’s earlier spinning of fantasy out of Jane’s statement that she has been with her aunt, who is dead: ‘A true Janian reply!...She comes from the other world – from the abode of people who are dead’ (245). Mrs Fairfax’s fantasy is the reverse of outlandish and extravagant; it is domestic, at home, but a home penetrated by the dead who both belong and do not belong there, and who are and are not still yours: here she calls Mr



Fairfax 'my dear husband', but earlier she tells Jane that 'I have no family' (96). In this sense, like much of the rest of the narrative at this point, the fantasy prefigures Bertha, whom Rochester later compares to a dead presence in his house, and whom he wishes he could disavow as though she were dead: 'For a wife I have but the maniac upstairs: as well might you refer me to some corpse in yonder churchyard' (316).

Balanced against Mrs Fairfax's lack of co-spiritedness with Rochester and Jane is her name, which is the same as Rochester's; in the previous scene he underscores this commonality by referring to himself as 'Fairfax Rochester' (258). Considering how 'distantly related' she is to Rochester – she is the wife of his second cousin once removed, so not a blood relative – the fact that they share a surname at all creates a link where it is surely least to be expected, though she would 'never presume on the connection' (100). The Fairfax in Rochester underscores the other point the scene makes, which is that on a practical level Mrs Fairfax knows more about sex than Jane does. She has been trying, albeit ineffectually, to protect Jane from an awareness of the sexual dimension of Jane's and Rochester's relationship: 'I did not like to suggest even the possibility of wrong. I knew such an idea would shock, perhaps offend you' (265). This is along the same lines as Rochester saying of Richard Mason, 'I cannot say "Beware of harming me, Richard"; for it is imperative that I should keep him ignorant that harm to me is possible': it is unsettling to realise that Jane has been a Richard Mason figure for Mrs Fairfax all along. In the previous scene Jane and Rochester try to exorcise a third person from their relationship, disposing of the issue of Blanche Ingram so that Jane can 'enjoy the great good that has been vouchsafed to me, without fearing that any one else is suffering the bitter pain I myself felt a while ago' (263); in this scene they turn out not to be alone in their dyad after all. Fantasy, rather than creating a unique, impermeable and defining bond between two people, creates proliferating, promiscuous and unexpected linkages.

These weird linkages are key to the earlier moment when Jane, watching over the 'spectacle' of Rochester and Blanche's flirting (185), imagines a different Blanche:

If she had managed the victory at once, and he had yielded and

sincerely laid his heart at her feet, I should have covered my face, turned to the wall, and (figuratively) have died to them. If Miss Ingram had been a good and noble woman, endowed with force, fervour, kindness, sense, I should have had one vital struggle with two tigers – jealousy and despair: then, my heart torn out and devoured, I should have admired her – acknowledged her excellence, and been quiet for the rest of my days: and the more absolute her superiority, the deeper would have been my admiration – the more truly tranquil my quiescence. (186)

The context is that Jane has just admitted to herself that she loves Rochester, and ‘could not unlove him now, merely because I found that he had ceased to notice me’ (187). This chapter and the previous one, then, are about painful, ceaseless excitement. Jane knows that she has been supplanted by a rival, but the inadequacy of this rival makes her aware of her own potential ability to win ‘a silent conquest’ over Rochester (187): ‘to witness *this*, was to be at once under ceaseless excitation and ruthless restraint’ (186). A few pages earlier, when Rochester talks to Jane for the first time after bringing Blanche to Thornfield, he consciously brings tears into her eyes. ‘[A] few more words would bring tears into your eyes’, he says, then keeps talking and watches her reaction (181). But he leaves her before the ‘shining and swimming’ dams burst, interrupting what seems about to be an endearment or a statement of possession – although it is also a statement of endearment or possession in itself, the more potent because it apparently has to be stopped, bitten back: “Good night, my –” He stopped, bit his lip, and abruptly left me.’ (181)

Excitation and restraint accompany each other. The erotic content of this section is about delayed orgasm, about the constant prospect, and constant impossibility, of consummating, climaxing, ending, finishing, dying. These terms operate narratively as well as erotically: at this point in the text the narrative is striving towards the consummation of Rochester’s marriage, which the reader and Jane do not yet realise seems so impossible because it has already happened. In the previous chapter the pain-spiked pleasure Jane experiences in looking at Rochester is imagined as penetrative: ‘I looked, and had an acute pleasure in looking,—a precious yet poignant pleasure; pure gold,

with a steely point of agony' (174). Here, on the other hand, the 'point' that is the source of her excitement seems to be imagined as clitoral, as a nerve-filled place rather than a piercing extremity: 'This was the point – this was where the nerve was touched and teased – this was where the fever was sustained and fed: *she could not charm him*' (186). Blanche's inability to charm Rochester creates a fever in Jane, feeding her excitement rather than ending it. I have suggested earlier that penetrative imagery is not stably gendered in *Jane Eyre*, but the use of clitoral imagery to depict Jane's response here makes it even harder to determine whether the cause of her excitement is external or autoerotic, male or female. As in the Roe Head diaries, we are led to ask how many people there are in this fantasy: one (Jane) or two (Jane and her beloved, Rochester), or three (Jane, her beloved, Rochester, and the person who is driving her crazy, Blanche)?

The ideal rival Jane imagines is endowed with 'force, fervour, kindness, sense', the final noun balancing the concepts of good judgment, acute perception, and sensuality.<sup>172</sup> She is someone who would be able to dominate both her and Rochester – making Rochester yield and lay his heart at her feet, making Jane cover her face, turn to the wall, and die 'to them'. The phrase 'die to them' holds two opposing readings: that Jane becomes insensible to Rochester and Blanche (as in 'that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness' (1 Peter 2:24)), or that Rochester and Blanche become insensible to her. This is also where we find one of *Jane Eyre*'s most striking uses of actual lunulae: although we might think that 'die to them' makes it clear that Jane does not mean a literal death, she adds '(figuratively)', which rather muddies than clarifies the point. Death, as a figure, can represent self-dissolution or orgasm; in this case it seems to stand for both. The figurative death here puts an end to both restraint and excitement, and is desirable not because it gives pleasure, but because it makes desire stop. The state of silence and stillness Blanche creates in Jane is not one of deeper, even more ruthless restraint, but 'truly tranquil'. The fantasy of this impossible Blanche is a fantasy of a missing orgasm: the text passes from arousal to calm, from struggling with tigers to the balanced antithesis of 'the more absolute her superiority, the deeper would have been my admiration', but the climactic moment itself is elided.

<sup>172</sup> See William Empson's picking out of these valences of the word in 'The Structure of Complex Words', *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, Spring 1948, 230-250, 233, 238.

In this fantasy both Jane and Rochester have to give up their hearts. Rochester's is laid at Blanche's feet, Jane's torn out, as it will be figuratively later in the book, when Jane steels herself to leave Rochester by telling herself that 'your heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to transfix it.' (297) But to whom are they giving them up? The fantasy woman is Jane herself, because she represents her ability to gain power over Rochester. In the strategy Jane lays out, 'she might, by merely sitting quietly at his side, saying little and looking less, get nigher his heart', this conditional 'she' is both Jane herself and the fantasy woman (187). The fantasy woman is Blanche, because she bears her name and her position in the narrative. She is Rochester, because she has the qualities Jane loves in Rochester: force, fervour, kindness, sense. Finally, she is Bertha, the woman who actually did get Rochester to marry her, whose unacknowledged presence is at the centre of these chapters' insoluble tension. This last aspect of the fantasy woman creates one of the book's most unpleasant ironies: Jane's comment that 'his wife might, I verily believe, be the very happiest woman the sun shines on' (187).

This fantasy, which is about the end of desire, actually has the effect of bringing Jane closer to the object of her desire. The other she invents is someone who comes between her and Rochester, but also binds them together by making them equal in their inferiority to her. She is someone they can both love, and, in Jane's description, someone they can both marry: 'It seemed to me that, were I a gentleman like him, I would take to my bosom only such a wife as I could love; but the very obviousness of the advantages to the husband's own happiness, offered by this plan, convinced me that there must be arguments against its general adoption of which I was quite ignorant: otherwise I felt sure that all the world would act as I wished to act.' (187) This reading of the marital habits of 'their class' is presumably a little sardonic, but it also seems to function as a genuinely mitigating circumstance in Rochester's favour: 'I was growing very lenient to my master,' Jane writes, with what seems like mingled irony and sincerity (187). She may want to distance herself from him, but she cannot: rather than using the conditional mood to refer to marrying a wife she could love – writing 'as I would have wished to act', meaning as she would have wished to act if she were a gentleman – she is direct. One could read this to mean that Jane has started to desire the figure she has created specifically to

stop herself desiring Rochester, but this also seems like an instance of the weird intimacy of fantasy. Just over the course of the sentence, her identification with Rochester becomes strong enough that she feels that she feels what he feels, directly: we can trace this through the grammatical shift from the counterfactual 'were I' to the factual 'as I wished'. In Jane's version, what he feels is desire for 'such a wife', who here is both the fantasy woman and Jane, 'as I', who here is both Jane and Rochester, 'could love'. Jane is creating a fantasy that she imagines that Rochester has, and entering into this fantasy in identification with him.

The paragraph that follows emphasises her increasing identification with and lack of outside perspective on him: 'I was forgetting all his faults, for which I had once kept a sharp look-out. It had formerly been my endeavour to study all sides of his character..Now I saw no bad' (188). Her desire for him merges with desire for his desire, his fantasies, his inner life. We have already had intimations of her difficulty in separating the two: before Jane meets the real Blanche Ingram, she tries to discipline herself out of wanting Rochester by drawing contrasting portraits of herself and Blanche. After imagining the punitive process of drawing her own face, she goes into a reverie that is sensual as well as disciplinary. Thinking about drawing 'the loveliest face you can imagine', she finds herself applying Rochester's features to Rochester's putative object of desire: 'the raven ringlets, the oriental eye; – what! you revert to Mr Rochester's as a model!' (161). Here the desired person is glimpsed through their (imagined) desires, as though one has been superimposed uneasily over the other, but in the later scene the reverse seems to be happening. When Jane looks at Rochester himself, it is with a longing for his fantastically imagined interiority:

And as for the vague something – was it a sinister or a sorrowful, a designing or a desponding expression? – that opened upon a careful observer, now and then, in his eye, and closed again before one could fathom the strange depth partially disclosed; that something which used to make me fear and shrink, as if I had been wandering amongst volcanic-looking hills, and had suddenly felt the ground quiver and seen it gape: that something, I, at intervals, beheld still, and with

throbbing heart, but not with palsied nerves. Instead of wishing to shun, I longed only to dare – to divine it... (188)

Once again, the mystery, the delays and the tension of this part of the novel turn out to be structured around the missing term, Bertha; in retrospect it is impossible not to read the expression that is either ‘sinister’, ‘sorrowful’, ‘designing’ or ‘desponding’ as a reference to Rochester’s concealment of her (188). But for Jane this expression represents an entry into his inner life, which is depicted as something strange, mysterious and frightening, but also something that she can find her way into and wander around in, rather as Brontë imagines herself wandering around Angria in the Roe Head diaries.

One striking difference between the Angrian landscape and this inner landscape is that the latter is imagined at least partly as vaginal. The something in his eye that opens and closes, the strange depths partially disclosed, the volcanic hills, the quivering and gaping ground, the ‘abyss’ that Jane thinks Blanche Ingram is lucky to be able to explore at will: these are threatening qualities – ‘that something which used to make me fear and shrink’ – but also ones that draw her in, that make her heart throb (188). What is strange, vague and abyssal turns out to be completely, closely familiar, while still preserving its strangeness: Rochester’s depths, like Brontëan fantasies in general, are only ‘partially disclosed’. Once fantasy starts to be used to create intimacy, the imagination itself becomes an object of desire: Jane imagines Rochester’s imagination as something fantastical and frightening, but also something she wants to be inside (her word ‘divine’ balances ‘comprehend’ with ‘dive in’). Her fantasy of his fantasy life does not erase his otherness, but allows her to go inside it. To rework Adam Phillips’s phrase, this is a fantasy full of holes.

*disciplining fantasies: ‘restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement’*

In 1837, Brontë sent some of her poems to Robert Southey, asking him for advice about her prospects as a writer. He responded with some praise for her work, but discouraging her from writing professionally. ‘The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and, in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and

unprofitable, you will be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else', he advised, adding that she should write poetry for its own sake rather than to pursue literary celebrity.<sup>173</sup> Brontë wrote back:

...You do not forbid me to write; you do not say that what I write is utterly destitute of merit. You only warn me against the folly of neglecting real duties for the sake of imaginative pleasures; of writing for the love of fame; for the selfish excitement of emulation. You kindly allow me to write poetry for its own sake, provided I leave undone nothing which I ought to do, in order to pursue that single, absorbing, exquisite gratification. I am afraid, sir, you think me very foolish...I find enough to occupy my thoughts all day long, and my head and hands too, without having a moment's time for one dream of the imagination. In the evenings, I confess, I do think, but I never trouble any one else with my thoughts.<sup>174</sup>

The last line is often read as a deliberate riposte to Southey's statement that 'literature can never be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be' (166-167).<sup>175</sup> It is tempting to read Brontë's response as ironic: it seems almost too painful to consider that 'You do not forbid me', 'You only warn me' and 'You kindly allow me' might be even partially sincere recognitions of Southey's right to forbid or allow Brontë anything, even if she did seek him out as an authority.

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<sup>173</sup> Robert Southey, letter to Charlotte Brontë, 12 March 1837, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Vol. 1: 1829-1847: With A Selection of Letters by Family and Friends*, ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 166.

<sup>174</sup> Charlotte Brontë, letter to Robert Southey, 16 March 1837, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Vol. 1*, 168-169.

<sup>175</sup> Carol Bock writes that 'her letter is complexly ironic...The humble tone tells us relatively little, I would argue, about Brontë's poetic identity' ('Gender and Poetic Tradition: The Shaping of Charlotte Brontë's Literary Career', *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, Vol. 7, No.1, Spring 1988, 49-67, 62). Lyndall Gordon assumes that the response is sarcastic: 'Charlotte replied with apparent propriety which completely reassured Southey, but her letter reverberates with veiled sarcasm. The brilliant verbal glide of her abjection to Southey was her first public performance of a role she was to make her own: hiding undaunted creative fire under the public mask of perfect docility' (*Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Vintage, 1995), 65). Lynn Pykett, conversely, notes that her own speculation is just that: 'Brontë's apparently prim acceptance of Southey's version of a woman's proper duties...displays an ironic awareness (or so I like to think)' ('Women and the Sensation Business', *Writing: A Woman's Business; Women, Writing and the Marketplace*, eds. Judy Simons and Kate Fullbrook (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 19). Tanya Gold's *Guardian* article on Brontë's reputation in the wake of Gaskell's biography concludes that 'Charlotte ignored Southey but Gaskell couldn't believe it' ('Reader, I shagged him', *The Guardian*, Friday 25 March 2005, web, 16 October 2012).

But while it may be impossible to recover Brontë's intended tone, if we choose to read the response at face value, it depicts a peculiar power dynamic between the two writers. Brontë recapitulates Southey's advice in list form, reiterating his evaluation of her work, what her approach to it should be, and when she is allowed to do it: both his letter and her response focus on the necessity of keeping Brontë's imagination on a timetable, if not completely suppressed.

'I never trouble any one else with my thoughts,' Brontë writes, but she troubled Southey with them for a reason (169). Her response can be seen as performing a dynamic that will become important in her novels, in which the intimacy of fantasy – the 'crude rhapsody' Brontë sends to Southey (168), which makes her feel ashamed and exposed when she receives his response – engages with a structure of discipline and restraint. This dynamic runs through the elements of teaching and learning in *Villette* and *Shirley*, and it constitutes much of the plot of *The Professor*, where it is played out through the tropes of language learning, having one's work evaluated, and creative work being overheard or over-read. *The Professor* contains echoes and rewritings of Southey's letter, with Zoraïde Reuter taking up Southey's position. William Crimsworth, a teacher of English in a Belgian school, is increasingly impressed with his pupil Frances Henri's literary ability. After he has one of her *devoirs* read out loud to the class, Zoraïde, the director of the school, remarks that Frances

rather needs keeping down than bringing forward; and then I think, Monsieur – it appears to me that ambition – *literary* ambition especially, is not a feeling to be cherished in the mind of a woman; would not Mdlle. Henri be much safer and happier if taught to believe that in the quiet discharge of social duties consists her real vocation, than if stimulated to aspire after applause and publicity? (150-151)

'Indisputably, Mademoiselle,' replies William (151). Penny Boumelha points out that although William's response here seems ironic, in fact Frances never does fulfill any literary ambitions: 'Her *devoirs* are sternly criticised, ignored and treated as the disguised expression of personal feeling. Her only "public



readings” are in fact solitary performances’.<sup>176</sup> She describes William’s relation to Frances’s creative work as ‘control and censorship’ rather than ‘outright discouragement’, but concludes that ‘[t]he woman, here, may write only when empowered by the man’ (57). Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar similarly read William’s response to Frances’s work as discouraging and limiting her creative powers: ‘as Crimsworth becomes an ever more moralizing master...he comes to incarnate a male literary tradition that discourages female writers even while it seems to encourage integrity, idealism, and Romantic rebellion against social hypocrisy.’<sup>177</sup> (327) William himself presents himself as a watchful and caring tender of Frances’s potential, which we may or may not find convincing (148). In his initial, carefully moderate response to her work, he too echoes Southey. Southey tells Brontë that ‘[y]ou evidently possess, and in no inconsiderable degree, what Wordsworth calls the “faculty of verse”. I am not deprecating it when I say that in these times it is not rare’ (166). William, with a little more warmth, tells Frances that ‘[t]aste and fancy are not the highest gifts of the human mind but such as they are you possess them...in a degree beyond what the majority can boast’, and advises her to derive comfort from ‘their strength and rarity’ (137). This reworking maintains the measured, condescending quality of Southey’s praise, but, importantly, it also orders Frances to use her abilities: ‘take courage; cultivate the faculties that God and Nature have bestowed on you’ (137). But whether we read William’s criticising, directing, and revealing of Frances’s creative work and self-expression as fundamentally sinister or benign, the act of disciplining itself is a central aspect of how the novel conceives of fantasy, eroticism and intimacy.

Although *The Professor* is often mentioned in terms of an ‘imaginative break’ from the ‘unbounded passional subjects’ of the juvenilia, most critics go on to complicate this break, drawing connections between the fantasy-world of the juvenilia and the apparent realism of the mature novels.<sup>178</sup> John Maynard describes Brontë as ‘clipping off the romance and yielding to the predominant flow of her century toward the everyday world of the realist novel’, but also

<sup>176</sup> Penny Boumelha, *Charlotte Brontë* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 56.

<sup>177</sup> Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 327.

<sup>178</sup> John Kucich, *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 34.

notes that it is ‘no such thing’ as ‘cold-blooded slice-of-life writing’.<sup>179</sup> Gilbert and Gubar consider that ‘Brontë was not always entirely conscious of...the extent, for instance, to which her entranced reveries about escape pervaded even her most craftsmanlike attempts at literary decorum’ (315). John Bowen notes of *Shirley*’s similarly disciplined and disciplining preface that ‘the novel is full of what it claims here to eschew’ (216). In all, few critics take Brontë at face value when she writes, in ‘Farewell to Angria’, that she wants to ‘quit for awhile that burning clime’ and ‘turn...to a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober’.<sup>180</sup>

But whether or not the novels actually do represent a restraining of fantasy, Brontë repeatedly presents herself as hard at work at this restraining and disciplining process, suggesting that the process, or the performance, of restraint is more important than the result. ‘I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement,’ she wrote to G. H. Lewes of her work on *The Professor*.<sup>181</sup> Her preface to her first novel, written after the appearance of *Shirley* with a view to a publication that she never lived to see, presents her creative work as hard, disciplined labour: ‘the pen which wrote it had been previously worn down a good deal in a practice of some years’, ‘many a crude effort destroyed almost as soon as composed’, ‘the reader will comprehend that...this brief narrative must have gone through some struggles’ (3-4). But this self-imposed wearing-down of her style and tastes from the ‘ornamented and redundant’ to the ‘plain and homely’ does not find favour with the publishers who receive her work; they would have preferred exactly the kind of ‘highly wrought fancy’ that she has trained herself out of (4).

Both this preface and Brontë’s exchange with Southey can be read in terms of a desire to have creative work subjected to discipline, a desire for a collaborator in restraint. But the system of discipline that takes form in the Southey exchange is unsatisfactory because it is too completely prohibitive. Unlike the ‘Master’ Frances writes about in her poem, Southey does not demand great things of the person he guides; specifically, he wants her not to seek

<sup>179</sup> John Maynard, *Charlotte Brontë and Sexuality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 72-73.

<sup>180</sup> Charlotte Brontë, ‘Farewell to Angria’ (1839), in Anne Brontë, Branwell Brontë, Charlotte Brontë and Emily Brontë, *Tales of Glass Town, Angria and Gondal: Selected Writings*, ed. Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 314.

<sup>181</sup> Charlotte Brontë, letter to G. H. Lewes, 6 November 1847, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë: Vol. 1*, 559.

publication. Conversely, in the preface to *The Professor* the publishers who rejected the manuscript are not restrictive enough; they want her work to be less restrained, more ‘wild wonderful and thrilling’ (4). In both cases the result is that her creative work finds no audience. But in *The Professor*, as in her later writing, Brontë enacts meetings of fantasy and restraint that are not silencing, but erotically and creatively productive.

*translating fantasies: ‘nearly literal’*

Towards the end of *The Professor*, William visits Frances’s apartment to propose to her after ten weeks of absence and six weeks of silence: ‘I had answered her letter by a brief note, friendly but calm, in which no mention of continued correspondence or further visits was made’ (213). At her door he has to (or decides he has to) stop himself from ‘rush[ing] in and get[ting] up a scene’ (214). This self-control allows him to overhear Frances, ‘self-addressed’, reciting two poem fragments to herself on the other side of the door. The first, ‘Sir Walter Scott’s voice, to her a foreign far-off sound, a mountain-echo’ (215-216), is the opening of ‘The Covenanter’s Fate’. James Buzard notes that this poem parallels both Frances’s and William’s expatriate status: ‘Like that wanderer in a time of civil war, William and Frances both have hidden themselves away from Britain’s domestic conflict’.<sup>182</sup> This fragment is followed by the opening of another poem, this one in ‘the language of her own heart’, in more than one sense: the poem is by Frances herself, it is in French, and it is a fantasy (216). The poem as a whole is about a teacher-student relationship with a similar dynamic to William and Frances’s – the teacher’s desire emerging in harsher treatment of and higher expectations for the student he loves, the student’s adulation, gratitude and increasing ambition – but with a mostly invented plotline of trials, half-suppressed tenderness and a parting with a promise of future reunion.

This weird, awkward poem is an overdetermined site for the meeting of fantasy and restraint. The first thing to note is that the poem is overheard: in a literalisation of the concept of fantasy as parenthetical, both closed away and legible, Frances is enclosed behind a door, but the poem permeates the barrier. Buzard writes that Brontë is ‘scrupulous to distinguish what she regards as good

<sup>182</sup> James Buzard, *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novels* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 189.

Protestant overhearing from Catholic eavesdropping' (188), but here the ethics of privacy invasion do not seem that easily resolved. '[I]t would not do to be surprised eaves-dropping,' William thinks as he knocks to avoid discovery (215), but shortly afterwards he gets hold of a written copy of the poem using open, calmly described physical force:

I put by resistance with the decision I knew she never long opposed,  
but on this occasion her fingers had fastened on the paper; I had  
quietly to unloose them; their hold dissolved to my touch; her hand  
shrunk away; my own would fain have followed it, but for the present I  
forbade such impulse. (217)

Between the semicolons here is an array of bewildering assignments of motive and odd choices of phrase: 'put by resistance', 'her fingers had fastened', 'I had...to', 'quietly', 'dissolved', 'shrunk'. Frances's resistance to his reading the poem, William's decision to read it anyway, the fact that he actually pries her fingers off the paper, her giving in (as if she is disappearing: shrinking and dissolving); all of this is presented as a kind of inevitability, the actions of hands rather than people. While this chapter has described Brontëan fantasies as inevitably, sometimes involuntarily shared, this takes on a different and perhaps more troubling dimension here. The process of involuntary sharing is shown taking place, and in spite of William's use of language that disavows responsibility for his actions, it is shown as something he is actively doing to Frances. The sharing of fantasy, then, not only renders fraught the idea of privacy even within one's own mind, but can be used by one person against another.

Gilbert and Gubar write about the overhearing of fantasy as a fantasy in itself: 'So Brontë herself might have wished to be overheard by Héger, and of herself, too, she might have written that, as Crimsworth says of Frances, "Solitude might speak thus in a desert, or in the hall of a forsaken house"' (329). A wish to be overheard is a wish to communicate without being responsible for what one is saying, since one is theoretically just talking to oneself, as William has to remind himself that 'only crazy people' do (209). Reading through William's eyes, we cannot know whether Frances does long to be overheard

when she talks to herself. Just before he reads her poem, he considers the ‘rigid and formal race of old maids’ that he assumes Frances has resigned herself to belonging to: ‘Self-Control is so continually their thought, so perpetually their object that at last...they die mere models of austerity, fashioned out of a little parchment and much bone’ (216). We could read the apparently involuntary sharing of the fantasy-poem as a way for Frances to put off some of her self-control, a self-destabilising that leads directly to her turning into a ‘cherished wife’ and ‘proud mother’ (216). But the whole notion is also clearly a projection on William’s part: when he talks about old maids feeding themselves, ‘from youth upwards, on maxims of resignation and endurance’, he is describing himself as well (216). Rather than a transparent account of Frances’s fantasy, we are getting William’s annotated version, mediated and, of course, translated from Frances’s French to William’s English.

What should we make of this language shift? Throughout the novel William has tried to train Frances out of speaking French to him, and in this scene his attempts and her resistance come to a head; the two literally speak different languages until, urged by him, she accepts his proposal in English. This language struggle has received some critical attention, with readers often arguing that, as Anne Longmuir notes, ‘teaching and colonization are related activities’.<sup>183</sup> Penny Boumelha describes the English language as a problematic inheritance for Frances as creative writer, a lost ‘mother tongue’ that ‘can only be restored to her by the offices of a male teacher’ (54). James Buzard sees the process of rooting out Frances’s French as an act of violent authority on William’s part: ‘Nowhere in the novel does the temptation to conceive of national pedagogy as the authoritative extirpation of foreignness make itself more plainly felt than in the curt command that ensues the proposal: “Will my pupil consent to pass her life with me? Speak English now, Frances.”’ (190) Longmuir demonstrates how Belgium, as the site of Waterloo and a middle ground between English and French values in the mid-nineteenth century, represents a significant location for national conflict in Brontë’s work. But while she notes that Frances has complex feelings about her nationalities and languages, Longmuir follows Buzard’s straightforward interpretation of

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<sup>183</sup> Anne Longmuir, “‘Reader, perhaps you were never in Belgium?’: Negotiating British Identity in Charlotte Brontë’s *The Professor* and *Villette*”, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, Vol. 64, No. 2, September 2009, 163-188, 181.

William's side of it: 'Crimsworth's plans for Frances are explicit, constituting what James Buzard calls a "radical de-gallicization"...Not only does Crimsworth instruct Frances to respond to his proposal of marriage in English...but he also continues to punish her for slipping back into French' (252).

Carl Plasa reads a sexual dimension into Crimsworth's demands that Frances speak English, seeing it as a combination of 'linguistic colonization' and sexual repression: 'a drive not only to quarantine Frances from the rabidly libidized bodies of her classmates but also rid [her] of the sexuality Crimsworth strives to exile from himself.'<sup>184</sup> He, too, focuses on the proposal conversation, seeing it as wholly repressive: '[t]he prosecution of such sexually repressive policies under the guise of linguistic instruction is at its clearest in the moment of Crimsworth's marriage proposal' (19). But while I think the sexual element of the language struggle is central, to read this dynamic only in terms of colonization, de-gallicization, extirpation and repression – in terms of things William does to Frances in order to permanently quash her difficult Frenchness – is to miss a great deal. It is necessary to put the English/French conflict into the context of the dynamics of William and Frances's relationship, in which desire is expressed and pleasure gained from processes like the evaluating and correcting of creative work, the suppression of spontaneous emotional responses, and the learning of languages.

After the couple are married, Frances often speaks French to William, 'and many a punishment she has had for her wilfulness – I fear the choice of chastisement must have been injudicious, for instead of correcting the fault, it seemed to encourage its renewal' (253). William seizes her and holds her down, Frances changes from a 'vexing fairy' to 'a submissive and supplicating little mortal woman', and William makes her read English to him as penance, deliberately choosing an author she finds difficult (253). In this way their former teacher/student relation is temporarily reinstated or replayed, with Frances having to 'ask questions; to sue for explanations; be like a child and a novice and to acknowledge me as her senior and director' (253). Language, Plasa writes, is this scene's 'sado-masochistic medium' (24), but his use of this specifically sexual term does not lead him to consider the element of sexual enjoyment here. It seems necessary to incorporate a recognition of the passage's

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<sup>184</sup> Carl Plasa, 'Charlotte Brontë's Foreign Bodies: Slavery and Sexuality in *The Professor*' (*JNT: Journal of Narrative Theory*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Winter 2000, 1-28, 19).

sexual power dynamics – the ‘vex[ing], teas[ing] and pique[ing]’, the physical restraint, the punishment that ‘encourages [the] renewal’ of the ‘fault’, the roleplaying of a power differential that no longer exists in reality (253) – into an understanding of the language struggle as an eroticised and pleasurable exchange. Plasa describes Frances as moving across ‘the fragile border between sexual self-control and sexual excess’ (23), but in this passage control (‘arrested’, ‘steadied’) and exorbitance (‘wild and witty wickedness’, ‘elfish freak’) seem not to be separated but feeding into, enabling and enriching each other (*The Professor* 253). The linguistic struggles of the novel are about authority, colonization and foreignness, but they are also sexual play. This holds true, too, for Frances’s fantasy-poem and the proposal that follows it. John Kucich notes that ‘Crimsworth's expression of...desire stays well within the catechizing, performative role we have seen him adopt in the course of his teaching, which is one reason he has always struck readers as a peculiarly starchy romantic hero’ (43). It is peculiarly starchy to read one’s beloved’s fantasy about oneself and make notes in the margin, but when that fantasy is specifically about a teacher/student relationship, it is also a way of engaging with it –even a way of enacting it.

This is not to say that his interpretation of the poem is necessarily the same as Frances’s. The ‘Master’ of the poem describes the speaker, ‘Jane’, as his ‘foster child’ (221), and William takes this to mean that the Jane of the poem is younger than Frances, thus desexualising the poem in contrast to his own desire: “‘Jane’ was now at my side, no child but a girl of nineteen, and she might be mine’ (222). But if William reads the teacher/student fantasy as desexualised, Frances quickly sets him straight. Her French responses to his English proposal are a negotiation of roles. She asks whether he will be a good husband as he has been a good master, whether he will always be somewhat self-willed and hard to please, and finally describes herself as, translated from her French, ‘your devoted pupil, who loves you with all her heart’ (224). She is laying out the terms that will allow her fantasy of devotion to and occasional provocation of an ‘exigeant’ master to be performed or roleplayed within a relationship. When William calls her ‘my pupil’, he is echoing her phrase ‘votre...élève’, indicating that he has understood and accepted her wishes. By ordering her to speak English when she accepts his proposal, he is essentially

agreeing to maintain the role of teacher as well as the role of husband. In demanding that she speak his language, he is speaking hers.

Buzard draws attention to William's claim to a 'nearly literal' translation of Frances's poem: 'informing us of the existence of an absent original permits us to register his *suppression* of it...as if, in "silencing" it, he could make his translation *itself* an original' (189). But from a different point of view, by calling attention to his translation, William is calling attention to the fact that there is, literally, no original. Trying to stop William from reading her poem, Frances describes it as 'nothing, a mere copy of verses', and in fact this is literally true (217). The poem beginning 'I gave, at first, attention close' in *The Professor* is an adaptation of the Berg Manuscript, Brontë's draft of an earlier poem beginning 'At first I did attention give', which is reproduced at the end of the Clarendon edition of *The Professor*. Gilbert and Gubar write that Brontë 'evidently composed [Frances's poem] before writing *The Professor*, about her own feelings for M. Héger...it was skillfully assimilated into this fictionalization of their friendship' (329). But the relation between Brontë's draft and Frances's poem is more complicated than this suggests. The Clarendon editors note that Brontë adapted the first four stanzas of the draft for the first five stanzas of Frances's poem, comprising the section she reads out loud.<sup>185</sup> In both poems, these stanzas describe the speaker's increasing admiration and respect for a male figure, his severity towards her, and her desire to be praised by him (I describe both speakers as 'her' for convenience's sake, but while the speaker of Frances's poem is named 'Jane', the speaker of the draft poem is not named or gendered). The two texts then diverge plot-wise. In Frances's poem, the speaker becomes ill, and her teacher watches over her on her sickbed. When she recovers, he shows her some tenderness, but quickly returns to his usual sternness. The speaker wins a laurel wreath for academic achievement at the end of her education, and cries with grief at the prospect of being parted from her teacher. Before she leaves, he embraces her and asks her to '[c]ome home to me again' (221). In the draft poem, the speaker falls in love with the male figure, but is beset by obstacles: 'might & right & woe & wrath / Between our spirits stood' (299). Defying these obstacles, she rushes towards him, but finds that a

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<sup>185</sup> Charlotte Brontë, 'Appendix IV: "At first I did attention give": The Berg Manuscript', ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten, in Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), 297.



rival has gained his affections, and that he no longer cares for her: ‘Cold – hard to me – but tenderly / He kissed my rival now’ (300). The poem ends with a reflection on the speaker’s rival’s happiness.

While the first four stanzas of the draft poem appear in Frances’s poem, the rest of the poem – with a few stanzas omitted, the unhappy ending changed to a happy one and the narrator’s love object changed from male to female – appears in *Jane Eyre*, where Rochester sings it to Jane. After their engagement, Jane is trying to keep her distance from Rochester and asks for a song in order to avoid having an intimate conversation with him. What she gets sounds like a chivalrous narrative of love against all odds, and is actually a fantasy of self-reassurance. Rochester is aware that there are obstacles between him and Jane that he has not passed, and that Jane has not promised to die with him (indeed, she notes afterwards that she has no intention of doing so), but the song, while replaying shadowy, fantastical trials, treats them as at least tentatively overcome: ‘I care not in this moment sweet, / Though all I have rushed o’er / Should come on pinion, strong and fleet, / Proclaiming vengeance sore...My love has sworn, with sealing kiss / With me to live—to die’ (272). In the context of the novel, the provenance of the song is unclear. Both Jane and Rochester behave as though it is basically a spontaneous explication of Rochester’s own feelings, making this one of the novel’s less-remarked moments of nonrealism, in the vein of musical theatre rather than the supernatural. Jane and Rochester consider the song’s narrator and Rochester to be one and the same, and the Clarendon editors write that ‘for obvious reasons, the narrator in *Jane Eyre* is masculine’ (‘Appendix IV’ 297), but as in the draft poem, there is no actual reference to the narrator’s gender in Rochester’s song. Considering the song’s actual extratextual provenance, it seems important to preserve this ambiguity.

The most sustained expression of fantasy in *The Professor* is not the narrator’s but Frances’s, and not originally Frances’s but Brontë’s, and not just Brontë’s but Rochester’s, too. The draft poem fits the outlines of Brontë’s relation to Constantin Héger: the power differential, which is not quite explicitly cast in student/teacher terms here; the suggestion of unrequited love; the obstacles between the two characters; the rival who slanders the speaker and eventually triumphs over her. The draft poem ends with the speaker essentially shut out of her own fantasy and the successful rival established in the central

role. The effect is reminiscent of Lucy's descriptions of Paulina in *Villette*, where the successful rival begins to occupy the protagonist role in the narrative: 'She seemed my rainbow to have seized / Around her form it closed' / And soft its iris splendour blazed / Where love & she reposed' ('Appendix IV' 300). Of course, like *Villette*, *The Professor* in general draws extensively on Brontë's experiences in Belgium and her relationship with Héger. In his introduction to *The Professor* Herbert Rosengarten describes this as a kind of compulsive replaying of fantasy, with the male narrator allowing her to 'distance herself from the most immediately painful recollections' (xvi). He notes that 'through the veil of fiction, Charlotte could explore her fantasies about Heger and play out a dream of what might have been...but the devices of fiction were not enough to overcome the autobiographical impulse; once Crimsworth reaches Belgium, *The Professor* increasingly reflects the author's own feelings and concerns.' (xvi)

But this split fantasy seems like something stranger than an original and its two reflections. These formally shaped narratives of desire – Frances's poem, Rochester's song – are not just ghostly versions of Brontë's own narrative of desire; they make Brontë's draft, with its missing phrases and its displaced speaker (displaced by the rival, then by the two other speakers), ghostly as well. For Brontë, it is when people are most alone, most at home with themselves – at a desk in a schoolhouse after class hours, tucked into a windowsill behind a drapery, talking to themselves in an empty house, alone with their thoughts and desires – that they turn out to be not alone, not at home, not wholly themselves. What is most one's own is what is already shared.

## Afterword: The Point

‘So. Tell me. How can this be erotic? Why does he do this to himself?’

Robert Stoller, *Sweet Dreams: Erotic Plots* (2009)

‘...to describe fascination can never, *in the last analysis*, exceed this utterance: “I am fascinated.”’

Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse* (1979)

‘The Point of Agony’ is a title that cuts, or stabs, several ways. Most obviously, it refers to the passage in *Jane Eyre* that this thesis keeps returning to – a moment of ‘acute pleasure’, made up of sharp angles (174). Here, Jane imagines the point of agony as a steely tip on gold. In spite of Brontë’s distrust of hagiography, this passage recalls Teresa of Ávila’s account of being stabbed through the heart by an angel holding an iron-pointed golden spear:

I saw in his hand a long spear of gold, and at the iron’s point there seemed to be a little fire. He appeared to me to be thrusting it at times into my heart...The pain was so great, that it made me moan; and yet so surpassing was the sweetness of this excessive pain, that I could not wish to be rid of it...The pain is not bodily, but spiritual; though the body has its share in it.<sup>186</sup>

Jane’s experience is emotional, but her body has its share in it: her ‘irids...fix on’ Rochester, and in looking at him, she takes something into herself (174) This is a materially imagined, textured depiction of a combination of pain and

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<sup>186</sup> Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, *The Life of St Teresa of Jesus, of the Order of Our Lady of Carmel*, trans. David Lewis (London: Thomas Baker, 1904), 256, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, web, 29 October 2012.

pleasure. Although Jane distinguishes between the ‘pure gold’ pleasure and the ‘steely’ agony, the element of pleasure is described in terms of sharpness, penetration and intensity (‘acute’, ‘poignant’), while the word ‘agony’ can refer to intense, convulsive pleasure as well as to pain.<sup>187</sup> The two sensations have different metallic textures, but their affects seem to run into each other: pleasure becomes painful and pain becomes pleasurable. The point of agony is, here, a switchpoint between two apparently distinct modes of feeling.

But in the context of reading sexual power dynamics in literature, the phrase ‘the point of agony’ takes on other shades of meaning, too. Robert Stoller, an American psychoanalyst whose work explores issues of sexual excitement, fantasy, pornography and non-normative sexualities, touches on this in an evocative passage from *Sweet Dreams: Erotic Plots*. He describes a particular instance of exhibitionist sexual behaviour, which (to me and to Stoller, at least) appears self-destructive and not obviously enjoyable, and writes: ‘So. Tell me. How can this be erotic? Why does he do this to himself?’<sup>188</sup> For my purposes, the most illuminating aspect of this is not the list of putative answers Stoller throws up to his question ‘why?’: ‘Flawed genes? Disrupted synaptic chemistry? Agenesis of the corpus callosum? Too much testosterone? Conditioning? Original sin? Post-natal bargain with the devil?’ (195). Nor is it the rational explanation he goes on to give. Rather, it is the moment of enquiry itself, the moment where Stoller asks what the *point* of this behaviour is. The demand ‘[t]ell me’ is rhetorical in two ways: by being addressed to the reader, who can hardly answer, and by *not* being addressed to the exhibitionist himself, who does obviously see its erotic appeal, whether or not he can explain it to someone else. The rhetorical quality of the demand ‘[t]ell me’ implies that we cannot respond. It also performs incomprehension on Stoller’s part: having to ask proves that he does not experience such desires himself. ‘Tell me’ is, then, an act of distancing. But it is also precisely the opposite: it is a demand for a particularly intimate kind of knowledge, one that has the potential to change one completely.<sup>189</sup> Getting the point of a particular sexual behaviour or desire

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<sup>187</sup> ‘With adjective or *of* indicating the sensation or emotion: intense pleasure bordering on pain; an instance of this, a paroxysm of such pleasure’ (‘Agony’, entry 1, definition 5b, *Oxford English Dictionary*, web, 29 October 2012).

<sup>188</sup> Robert Stoller, *Sweet Dreams: Erotic Plots* (London: Karnac, 2009), 195.

<sup>189</sup> While the performance of judgment and incomprehension is part of Stoller’s rhetorical strategy here, I should note that he aims to understand rather than dismiss this kind of desire. This section of Stoller’s argument deals with what he sees as the fundamentally

might be the next thing to beginning to desire it ourselves. When it comes to sexual desire, asking what the point is can be both an act of judgment and distancing, and the beginning of a transformative intimacy.

I wrote in the introduction that my intention in this thesis was to read (as Eve Sedgwick puts it in *Touching Feeling*) reparatively, drawing sustenance, possibility and hope from what I read, rather than in a paranoid mode, focusing on discovering and exposing the truth. Even so, the thesis is clearly fascinated by discovery, exposure and unveiling – though I hope to show that this, too, plays into my reparative aims. My argument returns compulsively to the scenes in Brontë's work where people choose or feel compelled to reveal their desires, their potential sources of pleasure and pain (which desires always are), to each other. To reveal not just the existence but the form of one's desires is to become vulnerable, all the more so when these desires are very specific. In *Shirley*, revelations of desire occur through gradual, performative negotiations. For instance, when Louis calls himself Shirley's 'votary' and kneels in front of her, she asks him to 'rise; when you do so, I feel troubled and disturbed' (529). He obeys, and Shirley is able to resume her own performance of submission: 'she trusted, and clung to me again' (529). But in spite of Louis's remark that 'it would not have suited me to retain that attitude [of kneeling] long' (529), the word 'votary' recalls one of his earlier fantasies about Shirley, which he describes as 'the fable of Semele reversed' (440). He imagines himself as a priest of Juno, praying to see the goddess in her full glory, as Semele asked to see Zeus. When she grants his wish, he is consumed by flames at the sight: 'Saturnia's statue rises chaste, grand, untouched: at her feet, piled ashes lie pale' (440). This submissive fantasy of worship and immolation is one of the strands of Louis's desire for Shirley, coexisting with his desire to dominate and control her. Shirley's own sexual interests chime with his dominant tendencies, but her request for him not to kneel in front of her suggests that she has more difficulty accommodating his submissive streak. In Brontë's novels, revealing one's desires does not guarantee finding an answering desire in someone else.

At other moments in the novels, the revelation turns out to be mutual. *Villette* piles on moment after moment of one-sided, almost involuntary revelations of desire. While Paul is berating Lucy for her attachment to 'people

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rational basis of types of sexual behaviour that can appear self-destructive to outside observers.

remarkable chiefly for so many feet of stature...and an enormous amount of fatuity' (that is, to John Graham Bretton), Lucy notices that 'the little man's voice was for a minute choked' (331-332). As Paul is about to board a ship and leave her, Lucy, 'made now to feel what defied suppression', cries out: 'My heart will break!' (481). Finally, at the end of the chapter 'Faubourg Clotilde', after endless delays, frustrations, brief releases of tension and more delays, Lucy writes: 'I spoke. All leaped from my lips', and Paul responds: 'Lucy, take my love. One day share my life. Be my dearest, first on earth.' (491) Importantly, though, the novels never actually end at this point of shared intimacy and vulnerability. The novels' sexual power dynamics contribute to making the moment of revelation possible: for instance, in *The Professor*, the scenes of eroticised discipline and instruction between William and Frances throughout the novel eventually lead to the scene where he proposes to her. But the moment of revelation itself also creates the potential for further power play. The proposal scene does not set up a relationship of peaceful unity, but one of power struggles and punishment scenes.

Brontë's novels tend to end badly. In *Shirley*, the narrator announces that there are no more fairies in the Hollow, then imagines 'the judicious reading putting on his spectacles to look for the moral', which, the narrator implies, we will not find (542). *The Professor* ends with gossip about Zoraïde Reuter's weight gain (though William's unfortunate son gets the last line). *Jane Eyre* ends with Jane anticipating St John Rivers's death in India. *Villette*'s final paragraph leaves us uncertain about what happens to Paul, and instead tells us the fate of everyone the reader cares about least: 'Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell.' (496). Writing this thesis, I found myself dwelling on each of these endings and reading them in reparative terms, trying to reconcile the reader to them. This is partly because attending to how people experience desire in these novels, and what kinds of things and events could meet that desire, can often make an apparently chilly, unsatisfying, unfair or unsettling ending seem richer and more meaningful. But beyond this, the sexual power dynamics that run through romantic relationships in Brontë's work have the effect of resisting endings. Rather than seeking resolution and an end state of static bliss, sexual power dynamics eroticise process; they aim to create more

struggles and further complications. Reading sexual power dynamics in Brontë's novels allows us to attend to otherwise obscured forms and modes of desire, to refigure what have previously been seen as oppressive elements, and to find new sources of pleasure. But it should also make us think differently about the structures of the texts, seeing them as devoted to continuation rather than closure. In this thesis, I have read sexual power dynamics through many tiny, specific revelations, each leading not to the truth or to the point of such dynamics, but to more riddles and new stories. The point is not the point, and the endings are not the end.

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