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Solitude, Spinsterhood, and Single Blessedness:
The Brontës and Redundant Women in Nineteenth-Century Protestant England

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines how the works of Victorian novelists Charlotte and Anne Brontë respond to the growing population of unmarried women, dubbed "redundant" by nineteenth-century England. It engages a feminist reading of four primary texts, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853), and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), with scholarship that illuminates the historical moment and culture in which they were written, paying particular attention to the role of the Brontës' religious ideology in their work.

This thesis tracks the thematic threads that run through the four primary texts, while still acknowledging that each of the Brontës had her own distinct approach to analyzing the condition of women. Chapter 1 examines how Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* speaks to the underlying questions of woman's purpose, autonomy, and selfhood, in the redundant women debate. Chapter 2 deals with the portrayal of female solitude as independence in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*. Chapter 3 contrasts female independence with the image of marriage as bondage, which we find in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). These three chapters draw connections between each of the four primary texts, showing how they challenge Victorian society's elevation of marriage by suggesting that single life is, more often than not, the better option for women. This conclusion is reached by recognizing the influence of the Brontës' Protestant ideals in their work. In interpreting gender relations through the lens

of Protestant-Catholic doctrinal difference, the Brontës conclude that a single woman is not only a complete individual, but also a paradigm of Protestant individualism.

INTRODUCTION

Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) features an amusing episode in which the novel's two young female protagonists, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, shame the ignorance of Joe Scott, a chauvinistic foreman at the local mill. We are told that "Joe Scott's chin was always rather prominent," but "he poked it out…some inches further than usual" (277) as he asserted, "Women is [sic] to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics and religion: it's wholesomest for them" (278). To this, Shirley retorts, "You might as well say men are to take the opinions of their priests without examination. Of what value would a religion so adopted be? It would be mere blind, besotted superstition" (277-278). Shirley's analogy is crucial to understanding the influence of Charlotte Brontë's Protestantism in her interpretation of gender relations. In *Understanding the Victorians: Politics, Culture, and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Susie Steinbach explains that the evangelicals, whose influence "could be found in all Protestant faiths in the nineteenth century," "rejected ritual and clerical authority in favor of a direct and personal relationship with God, unmediated by authority or expertise" (Steinbach 223). This moment from *Shirley* betrays the influence of such Protestant principles in Charlotte's work. In applying the fundamentals of Protestantism to gender relations, she captures the significance of Protestant-Catholic difference to the question of woman's role in society. According to Shirley, in divesting their wives of an individual relation to God, Protestant men undermine the very tenets of Protestantism, and the core of what

distinguishes it from Catholicism. The possibility of single life for women thus comes with the benefit of not only physical autonomy, but also spiritual autonomy.

In this thesis, I will engage my own feminist reading of four primary texts, Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853), and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), with secondary texts that illuminate their cultural and historical context.[1] Through analysis of these four novels, and the cultural moment that produced them, I will track the Brontës' responses to one the greatest concerns of their time: the growing population of unmarried women in England. I will pay particular attention to the influence of their religious ideologies in their work and in their conception of the roles available to the women of their day.

Although the number of unmarried women in England had been a concern for several decades (Levitan 365), the Brontës wrote and lived in a time when anxieties were rapidly escalating. In 1851, Great Britain issued its first national census to survey marital status (Levitan 363), revealing that in a total population of 20 million, women exceeded men by more than half a million, and there were around 2.7 million unmarried women over the age of 15 (Willich 302-303). These unmarried women, referred to as "redundant" and "superfluous," were seen as a threat to all that distinguished England as a great nation. In "Redundancy, the 'Surplus Woman' Problem, and the British Census, 1851-1861," historian Kathrin Levitan writes that "the census sparked concern about the decline of the family as the [nation's] moral and reproductive basis …At a moment when a large population had come to be seen as crucial for maintaining Britain's imperial and

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[1] To avoid confusion, I will refer to the Brontës by their first names: Charlotte and Anne.

military strength, women's duties as wives and mothers were increasingly exalted, and women who did not fulfill these roles were viewed as especially problematic" (363). Most agreed that the redundant population was a problem. In her 1870 essay "Redundant Women," Mary Taylor sums up the urgency of the situation: "the phrase redundant women really means starving women" (Taylor 58). This was especially true of middle and upper-class women. Discouraged from labor, their only hope of survival outside of marriage was to be taken in by charitable relatives.

The solution to the redundant women problem was where nineteenth-century thinkers diverged. Political writer Sir William Rathbone Greg, for example, famously suggested in his 1862 essay, "Why Are Women Redundant?" that the "excess" women emigrate from England to wherever they could more feasibly find husbands. Greg proposed that ten thousand voyages be arranged to transport the half a million women to Britain's colonies and the United States. He believed that since male emigration to America and the colonies was largely responsible for the imbalance, it was only natural to relocate the women "from where they are redundant to where they are wanted" (52). However, as Jessie Boucherett argues in her 1869 essay "How to Provide for Superfluous Women," Greg's emigration plan was not a realistic solution. Sending women to the United States, for example, would merely exacerbate an already existing surplus of women on the east coast, due to the westward migration of men (Boucherett 55). Boucherett concludes that since "nobody wants them, either in the Old World or the New" (56), their only hope is to find employment in England. For Boucherett, the

answer was not to relocate the women, but to provide the means through which women could financially support themselves within England.

Greg's essay was followed by numerous other responses by social activists who campaigned for increased education and occupational opportunities for women. The census was, in Kathrin Levitan's words, "a catalyst for British feminism," and this discussion "a vital moment in the history of women's changing roles" (360). Feminist reformers such as Bessie Rayner Parkes worked against the thinking that labor was indecorous for middle and upper-class women. In her 1860 essay "What Can Educated Women Do?", she argues that "the idea that a young lady cannot engage in business without losing caste must be conquered if any real way is to be made" (164). For Frances Power Cobbe, in her 1862 essay "What Shall We Do with Our Old Maids?", the most insulting aspect of Greg's "enormous schemes for the deportation of 440,000 females" was that it constituted essentially forced marriage (355). Cobbe denounces all marriages "for wealth, for position, for rank, [or] for support" as "the sources of misery and sin, not of happiness and virtue" (356). This assertion challenged the traditional idea that marriage was the highest moral achievement a woman could attain. Yet, for women discouraged from labor, marriage was the only feasible means of survival. Jessie Boucherett sums up the limited options for such women: "marry or starve, sink or swim" (57). Nevertheless, Cobbe insists that an unmarried woman is, contrary to Greg's opinion, better off struggling to support herself than in a loveless marriage.

The Brontës' novels anticipate the concerns that later fueled this debate. For Brontë heroines, however, being single is not a misfortune wrought by geographic and

economic conditions, but rather a choice. The Brontës themselves opted out of the traditional female role of wife and mother. Charlotte once wrote, "I am certainly doomed to be an old maid. Never mind. I made up my mind to that fate ever since I was twelve years old" (Gaskell 122). By the age of 30, she remained convinced that "even a 'lone woman' can be happy," and concluded that "there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman, who makes her own way through life quietly, perseveringly, without support of husband or brother" (Gaskell 209). The work of the Brontës, although written in a society which viewed unmarried women with either contempt or pity, shows that unmarried life can be beneficial both to women and to society as a whole. Through each of these four novels—*Shirley*, *Villette*, *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*— the reader comes to realize that married life is not necessarily to be envied, nor spinsterhood to be pitied.

Charlotte Brontë, best known as the author of *Jane Eyre* (1847), was born in 1816 in Yorkshire England, to Reverend Patrick Brontë and Maria Brontë (Gaskell xxv). After the deaths of her mother and two older sisters, Charlotte became the oldest of a literary family, with younger siblings Patrick Branwell Brontë, Emily Brontë (author of *Wuthering Heights*) and Anne Brontë (author of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*). *Jane Eyre* was followed by *Shirley* in 1849 and *Villette* in 1853. During the composition of *Shirley*, Charlotte's remaining three siblings died (Gaskell xxvi), meaning that *Villette* was to be written in the loneliest chapter of her life. Her final novel consequently became the one which most effectively captures the essence of female solitude.

Anne Brontë, the youngest of the family, was in many ways the most exceptional of the Brontës. In her introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Josephine McDonagh asserts that "Of all the Brontë siblings, Anne was perhaps the most professionally committed, certainly the most steadily employed, and the one who spent the longest continuous period away from the family home" (xiii). Nevertheless, Anne remains the least known contributor to the Brontë family's literary legacy. Because her reputation as a writer has been obscured behind the success of her older sisters Charlotte and Emily, Anne has appropriately been called a "literary Cinderella" (Moore, qtd in Langland 29). *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, written by Charlotte's friend and contemporary author Elizabeth Gaskell, depicts Anne as Charlotte does in her personal writing: quiet, feeble, and sheltered. Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, suffered from poor editing and reproduction, and for a brief time was even falsely credited to the author of *Jane Eyre* (McDonagh xxxvi). Josephine McDonagh argues that Charlotte herself had the greatest hand in stifling Anne's literary career. In the biographical notice attached to a posthumous publication of *Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte writes:

> Anne's character was milder and more subdued [than Emily's]; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well-endowed with quiet virtue of her own. Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted. (C. Brontë, "Biographical Notice" 180)

Upon reading the brief and somewhat simplistic story of *Agnes Grey*, especially compared with the complexity and trauma of *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*, the reader may be inclined to agree with this estimation of Anne. However, there is nothing simple or mild about Anne's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. In fact, Charlotte found it "morbid," claiming that "nothing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived" (C. Brontë, "Biographical Notice" 178). *The Tenant* not only shows that Anne was every bit as talented as her sisters, but also that she, like Charlotte, was concerned with the limited options available to the women of her time.

At the heart of the discussion on redundant women were the larger philosophical questions of woman's purpose and the possibility of her autonomy and selfhood. Many shared Greg's opinion that "the essentials of a woman's being" are that "they are supported by, and they minister to men" (53). This definition of woman's purpose necessitates that she have a functional value in society; women must not live for themselves, but for others. For Frances Power Cobbe and her contemporary feminists, however, the discussion of women should not revolve around their relation to others: of equal or greater importance to their "usefulness" is that they be happy. For the Brontës, the purpose question should not be answered on behalf of all women, because each woman is an individual with her own goals and desires.

In nineteenth-century Protestant England, female identity was defined by woman's relation to both man and God. Therefore, discourse on the redundant women problem was intertwined with religious thought. The tension between Protestantism and Catholicism during the Brontës' time was crucial to their interpretations of the purpose

question, as each assigned different roles to women, held them to different standards, and had its own distinctive solution to the redundant woman problem. Charlotte's work in particular comprises continual comparison and contrast between Protestant and Catholic roles for women. This is mostly done through the juxtaposition of convent life with a more informal, Protestant notion of good works. In the Brontës' novels, female independence and autonomy are likened to the Protestant virtues of individual interpretation and direct relationship with God. Therefore, the doctrinal differences between Catholicism and Protestantism are most significant in distinguishing between female independence and dependence. The ways in which the Brontës perceive female independence and solitude are informed by their Protestantism.

In addition to contrasts, there also exist connections and similarities between Protestantism and Catholicism, particularly in Charlotte's work. In "Charlotte Brontë's Villette, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the turn to Secularism," Michel M. Clarke argues that in *Villette*, "Protestantism and Catholicism resemble each other not only in that each is a form of social power, but also in that each places similar restrictions on female behavior" (997). The idea that religion imposes limitations on women is not uncommon, and is undeniable in the context of nineteenth-century Protestant England, given the culture's adherence to the biblical doctrine of female subordination. Yet, religion in many respects enhanced the independence of unmarried women. A prime example of this is the leadership roles women fulfilled in nineteenth-century Protestant sisterhoods, which simultaneously helped to alleviate the redundant women problem and other "problem" populations such as the poor, the sick, and criminals. In *Independent*

Women: Work and Community for Single Women, 1850-1920, Martha Vicinus affirms that sisterhoods and deaconesses' houses proved "that women could lead women" and "offered important training in leadership and opportunities to exercise responsibility" (83). Vicinus insists that "a religious community empowered women, validating women's work and values in a world that seemed materialistic, godless, and male" (83). The independence enjoyed by these single women was secured by their work in all-female organizations, where they obtained provision of their physical needs through a dominant, rather than subordinate social role. The example of Protestant sisterhoods forges a direct correlation between Protestantism and female independence—a connection which the Brontës make subtly.

Neither of the Brontës would have accepted the idea that religion denies female autonomy, for it is in religious arenas that their heroines become most strong-minded, and that they themselves engage in as novelists. Michel M. Clarke observes that "like many women whose fathers, husbands, or brothers were ministers, writers such as Anne and Emily Brontë, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Elizabeth Gaskell, and Elizabeth Sewell, Charlotte Brontë used the novel to explore religious and theological concepts that would have been forbidden to them in the pulpit, lectern, or Parliamentary seat" (968). As daughters of an Anglican clergyman, all three Brontë sisters were well versed in religious discourse. But in biographical accounts of the family, Anne is always portrayed as the most pious of the Brontë sisters. Charlotte described her as "a very sincere and practical Christian" (C. Brontë, "Biographical Notice" 179). Due to the early death of their mother, the Brontë children were largely raised by their Aunt Branwell. As the youngest

sibling, Anne had the most exposure to her aunt and her Methodist values (McDonagh xii). In "Preaching to the Clergy: Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* as a Treatise on Sermon Style and Delivery," Jennifer M. Stolpa argues that while many critics have labeled the simple and brief storyline of *Agnes Grey* as evidence of Anne Brontë's underdeveloped writing skills, the novel's simplicity is actually a conscious choice on her part. According to Stolpa, Anne deliberately emulates what she believes to be the ideal format for a sermon—concise, accessible and relevant to all. In such a way the novel critiques showy religion that fails to reach people on a practical level (230). As both Brontës show, Protestants can be just as guilty of this as Catholics. Each of their novels are concerned with the problem of religious hypocrisy, particularly as it affects women. For the Brontës, female independence and religion were not incompatible.

Although religious solutions to the redundant women problem were most popular, some women adopted their own version of Greg's plan by emigrating or traveling to other parts of England, not in order to find husbands, but to find work. The only career that would not compromise the social status of a middle or upper-class woman was that of a governess. It is no surprise, then, that the governess is, like the aged spinster, something of a fixture in nineteenth-century British literature. Consider the character of Jane Eyre: she is a poor orphan who travels over the course of her life to whatever teaching position she can find. This type—the mobile, yet isolated orphan who assumes a teaching position— exists in some form in each of Charlotte's, as well as Anne's novels. This type that we encounter across Brontë novels reflects the common

phenomenon of single women who traveled from where they were considered a burden and a problem to where they could live a life of independent labor.

Along with this mobility and independence, however, comes alienation. The work of Charlotte Brontë is arguably the most iconic depiction of female solitude found in the British literary canon. Their tendency to cling to isolation, rather than transform their solitary lives, is what makes her heroines so memorable. *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe in particular, embodies a seemingly paradoxical notion of solitude that is both a powerful source of anguish and an essential component of a radical freedom. As a writer, Charlotte appreciated the solitude afforded by her own single life. She once wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell, her married friend and contemporary author: "Do you, who have so many friends,—so large a circle of acquaintance,—find it easy, when you sit down to write, to isolate yourself from all those ties, and their sweet associations, so as to be your *own woman*, uninfluenced or swayed by the consciousness of how your work may affect their minds…?" (Gaskell 397). She sees not only singleness, but completely solitary singleness, as necessary for a writer. Once married herself, Brontë admits, "my time is not my own now; somebody else wants a good portion of it… My own life is more occupied than it used to be: I have not so much time for thinking: I am obliged to be more practical" (Gaskell 410-411). This raises the question of whether one can be what Charlotte calls "your *own woman*" (Gaskell 397), without absolute solitude. As Gaskell points out, this is a challenge particular to female authors: "A man has the luxury of this occupation, but "no other can take up the quiet, regular duties of the daughter, the wife, or the mother…a woman's principal work in life is hardly left to her own choice; nor can

she drop the domestic charges devolving on her as an individual, for the exercise of the most splendid talents that were ever bestowed" (245). It is quite possible, then, that knowing this double standard, the Brontës found singleness essential to the pursuit of a literary career.

The Brontës realized that a solitary, independent woman undermined society's definition of woman's role. In Chapter 1, I will discuss how Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* engages the question of woman's purpose. The novel does this not only by presenting a variety of possible answers, but also through numerous episodes in which female characters philosophize about the significance of their existence. Although she explores a number of possible fates for unmarried women, Charlotte refrains from selecting one. Even in her personal writing Charlotte did not pretend to know the answer for redundant women. She wrote in May 1848, during the composition of *Shirley*: "I often wish to say something about the 'condition of women' question—but it is one respecting which so much 'cant' has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it… When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident—when her destiny isolates her—I suppose she must do what she can—live as she can—complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible" (*Letters* 66). In *Shirley*, rather than elevating one option above the others, Charlotte underscores that there is no single answer for all women. Because each unmarried female character in the novel, as in reality, is different, she assigns her characters different fates. This choice is influenced by her value of Protestant individualism. Like a person's relationship with God, the choice of how to occupy one's life must be left to the

individual. Therefore, the purpose question cannot be decided by society on behalf of all women.

In Chapter 2, I will discuss how Charlotte's depiction of female solitude in *Villette* is also informed by Protestantism. Because in *Villette*, solitude is synonymous with independence, Lucy Snowe, the protagonist, isolates herself from others. Despite her moments of agonizing loneliness, she recognizes that there is no alternative that does not compromise her freedom. *Villette* shows that that despite the struggles faced by unmarried women, Charlotte finds that for a woman, independence is preferable to dependence, and solitude to companionship. I will show how Charlotte's religious views influence this novel, in which the protagonist's Protestantism depends upon her isolation.

In Chapter 3, I will discuss the juxtaposition of single and married women in Anne's novels. Anne's novels show that because of the limitations imposed upon women by society, the struggles of single life are preferable to the possible problems in married life. Although she died at the age of 29 and never married herself, Anne had closely observed in those around her, the negative consequences of marriage. Charlotte once said of her sister, "what she saw sank very deeply into her mind… She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail…as a warning to others" (Gaskell 254). The story of Helen Huntingdon from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* serves very much as a "warning" against marrying without realizing the gravity of taking such a vow, which for women was unretractable. What Charlotte suggests through incidents such as the Joe Scott debate and her general elevation of Protestant individualism, Anne describes through her depiction of marriage as bondage and the death of individualism.

For Anne, the most serious consequence of marriage was a woman's loss of spiritual autonomy.

In each of these novels—Charlotte's Brontë's *Shirley* and *Villette*, and Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—there exist both recommendations of unmarried life and warnings against marriage, showing that, contrary to society's definition of woman's purpose, single women can lead complete and meaningful lives. Through the juxtaposition of single and married women—both within each novel and across them—we become acquainted with the benefits of unmarried life. For women, the greatest benefit of single life is uninterrupted spiritual autonomy. The use of Protestantism to bolster the feminist cause was not unique to the Brontës. In *The Grounding of Modern Feminism*, Nancy Cott describes this phenomenon in the context of American feminism:

> Evangelical Protestantism in the nineteenth century supported the notion that women were morally superior to men and thus encouraged women to value themselves and their own contributions to social life. Quakerism and more antinomian varieties of Protestant belief, with their stress on the equal importance of all human beings before God, inspired some of the most eloquent and powerful nineteenth-century spokeswomen for equal rights and freedoms. (Cott 17)

Nevertheless, the Brontës do make some radical statements. They evidently felt that they were doing nothing immoral by remaining single themselves. On the contrary, they felt themselves particularly well equipped to instruct in religious matters through their novels.

Both women understood their own identities, and female identity as a whole, in terms of their religion. Their novels challenge society's elevation of marriage, suggesting that single life is nearly always the best choice for a woman. Although they make this point in distinct ways, this argument is informed by their notion of Protestant individualism. Looking at gender roles through the lens of their own religious ideologies, they ultimately point to the possibility that a woman must remain single, preserving her right to an independent mind, to be a true Protestant.

Chapter 1

"I shall be an old maid…What was I created for…?": The Purpose Question in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*

> Old maids, like the houseless and unemployed poor, should not ask for a place and an occupation in the world...[they] have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health: they are never well; and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. The great wish—the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don't want them; they hold them very cheap: they say—I have heard them say it with sneering laughs many a time—the matrimonial market is overstocked. (*Shirley* 329)

In this moment of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*, we find our young heroine, Caroline Helstone, reflecting upon the plight of unmarried women. She concludes that she will never marry, when the financial troubles of the object of her love, mill owner Robert Moore, convince him that "marriage and love are superfluities, intended only for the rich" (140). Robert must face the rioting of his laid off workers, and his debts are exacerbated when they retaliate by destroying his new machinery. Meanwhile, Charlotte

Brontë paints a satirical picture of the Anglican clergy, particularly through the hypocrisy of curate Joseph Donne. The female sphere is represented by Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, a wealthy heiress who is rumored to be engaged to Robert. Caroline and Shirley strike up a friendship and share some radical ideas about woman's role in society.

In "The 'Bitter Herbs' of Revisionist Satire in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," Jennifer Judge notes that *Shirley* has been "perennially charged with inartistic disunity" (par. 3), but the thematic threads of the novel are not unrelated. Although written in 1849, *Shirley* takes place in Yorkshire, England, during the economic depression which coincided with Luddite riots of 1811-1812, when international commerce was stunted by the Napoleonic wars (Gezari viii-ix). Because of its engagement with social issues such as international affairs and industrialization, *Shirley* has been singled out as Charlotte's least popular novel, lacking the feminocentricity that we have come to expect of her work. In the first few chapters, the trauma represented by the novel's male characters—business owners, poor workers, and clergymen—is prioritized over the events of the female sphere. Yet overall, the novel is very much about unmarried women, both directly and indirectly, through its engagement with other social "problems." Ironically, the language of the marketplace could not be more apt for describing the condition of unmarried women in this historical moment. As Caroline points out, the condition of "the houseless and unemployed poor" is not so different from the condition of England's spinsters. Particularly after the 1851 census, redundant women came to be discussed in terms of functional and economical value. Kathrin Levitan explains, "those who were considered redundant were usually those seen as failing to contribute to the economy"

(Levitan 361). Just as England's stunted commerce resulted in a surplus of goods, so had its "matrimonial market" a surplus of women. At the same time, the redundant women problem remained irreconcilable, as long as women were barred from economic independence.

The redundant women question was ultimately the question of woman's larger social role. Are all women are purposed for marriage? If so, what can and should be done with those who cannot marry? Although the redundancy problem was of personal relevance to her, Charlotte does not propose a solution to the difficulties faced by her unmarried female protagonists. She wrote in May 1848, during the composition of *Shirley*:

> I often wish to say something about the 'condition of women' question—but it is one respecting which so much 'cant' has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it…When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident—when her destiny isolates her—I suppose she must do what she can—live as she can—complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible. (*Letters* 66)

While it became clear that not every woman could live the traditional life of wife and mother, fears arose from the alternatives. In the introduction to the Oxford World's Classics edition of *Shirley*, Janet Gezari argues that while an advocate of women's labor, Charlotte also "cannot get past the idea that women ought not to compete with men for a limited number of jobs and may not neglect that job of their own—raising children and

running households" (xi). This dilemma troubled Charlotte during the composition of *Shirley*, as she reflected, "one can see where the evil lies—but who can point out the remedy?" (*Letters* 66). Even as *Shirley* is the product of Charlotte's grappling with the redundant woman question, she does not use it to suggest an answer. Instead, she uses the novel to explore and evaluate the possible solutions offered by the various social, political, and especially, religious, ideologies of her time. Charlotte's neglecting to choose an answer is not so much her own ambivalence as it is her advocacy of female autonomy. She does not provide an answer because there is no single answer for all women: each individual woman must choose the path of her own life.

In nineteenth-century Protestant England, the question of woman's purpose was inevitably intermingled with religious thought, as female identity was understood by her relation not only to man, but also to God and society as a whole. In *English Feminism: 1780* –1980, Barbara Caine asserts that because by the late eighteenth-century, women had become the moral nucleus of the household, "woman's mission" came to be understood in religious terms: "they were both to confine themselves to the home and to transform that home—and through it the whole world—by virtue of their religion and piety" (Caine 83-84). Women who did not marry, therefore, were seen as neglecting their moral duty to society. The tension between Protestantism and Catholicism during Charlotte's time was critical to her conception of the purpose question, as each assigned different roles to women, held them to different standards, and had its own solution to the redundant woman problem. As the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, Charlotte was particularly well versed in inter-denominational doctrinal difference; and her work

comprises continual comparison and contrast between Protestant and Catholic roles for women. The Protestant answer to the purpose question is nicely framed by Caroline Helstone when she realizes that she is destined to join the redundant population and questions her purpose in life:

> What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?... Till lately I had reckoned securely on the duties and affections of wife and mother to occupy my existence. I considered, somehow, as a matter of course, that I was growing up to the ordinary destiny, and never troubled myself to seek any other; but now, I perceive plainly, I may have been mistaken. Probably I shall be an old maid... I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world? (149)

What begins as Caroline's speculation about her own value becomes musing on the broader issue of redundancy. That she will be an old maid, she realizes, means that she will become part of a population with no functional value in society. She identifies her own purpose question as "the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve" and reflects that "other people solve it for them by saying, 'Your place is to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted'" (149). As the niece and dependent of a clergyman, Caroline is well aware of the moral obligation of women who neglect to fulfill their "natural" role: those who cannot marry must validate their existence by ministering to others.

This Protestant answer to redundancy—"to do good to others, to be helpful whenever help is wanted"—accounts for the popularity of the charitable spinster archetype among 18th and 19th century writers, and in the works of authors such as Jane Austen and Elizabeth Gaskell. This archetype is nearly always mocked, pitied, or villainized; and its narrative function is often little more than a comic diversion from the central plot. Charlotte, however, refrains from such use of the spinster. In *Shirley*, we are told that the spinster Miss Ainley is mocked by "gentlemen...who declared her hideous" (156), and that Robert Moore "amused himself with comparing fair youth" to "the vinegar discourse of [Miss Mann,] a cankered old maid" (152). Although the characters may find spinsterhood to be amusing, the narrative voice itself treats these women with only the utmost respect:

> Sincerity is never ludicrous; it is always respectable. Whether truth—be it religious or moral truth—speak eloquently and in well-chosen language or not, its voice should be heard with reverence. Let those who cannot nicely, and with certainty, discern the difference between the tones of hypocrisy and those of sincerity, never presume to laugh in the wrong place, and commit impiety when they think they are achieving wit. (156)

Sir William Rathbone Greg writes in his 1862 essay "Why Are Women Redundant?" that certain women are innately purposed for religious service, and should therefore remain single: "There are some who seem to be made for charitable uses...women…in whom the spiritual so predominates…that human ties and feelings seem pale and poor by the side of the divine; and to such marriage would appear a profanation" (51). Greg would likely

assign Miss Ainley to this category: "[She] talked never of herself—always of others. Their faults she passed over; her theme was their wants, which she sought to supply; their sufferings, which she longed to alleviate" (156). In such a way, the character of Miss Ainley functions not as a comic element in the novel, but as a standard of genuine piety and philanthropy.

What Charlotte satirizes is not the idea of charity itself, nor is it the charitable spinster archetype: it is the role of obligation and insincerity in charity work. The association of Miss Ainley with pure "truth" contrasts with the less sincere motives of other women in the parish, and those who represent "the tones of hypocrisy." In contrast with Miss Ainley's sincerity, we find women whose charity work is done out of obligation imposed upon them by male religious leaders. Such busywork was often assigned to occupy women, particularly unmarried women, who might otherwise feel useless. In *Shirley*, this is done through projects such as the "Jew-basket" and "Missionary-basket," whose contributions are made by "the willing or reluctant hands of the Christian ladies of a parish," and whose "proceeds...are applied to the conversion of the Jews, the seeking of the ten missing tribes, or to the regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe" (96). The satirical narrative tone highlights the insincere motives of all involved in the project:

> Each lady-contributor takes it in her turn to keep the basket a month, to sew for it, and to foist off its contents on a shrinking male public. An exciting time it is when that turn comes round: some active-minded women, with a good trading spirit, like it, and enjoy exceedingly the fun of

> making hard-handed worsted-spinners cash up, to the tune of four or five hundred per cent. above cost price, for articles quite useless to them; other—feebler souls object to it, and would rather see the prince of darkness himself at their door any morning, than that phantom-basket, brought with 'Mrs. Rouse's compliments, and please ma'am she says it's your turn now.' (96)

The Protestant answer for unmarried women is, as Caroline says, "a very convenient doctrine for the people who hold it" (149), as well as means of a means of placating women who wish to be useful. Although the emphasis on ritual and good works was traditionally one of the greatest criticisms of Catholicism, in *Shirley*, Charlotte utilizes the charitable works solution to depict hypocrisy among Protestants.

In *Shirley*, as well as in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, Charlotte is continually juxtaposing the Protestant answer with more institutionalized roles offered to women by the Catholic Church. In *Jane Eyre*, Eliza Reed, who joins a convent in France, represents the Catholic alternative to the Protestant Jane's life of independent labor, and to the traditional fate of marriage chosen by Georgiana Reed. In "Emigrant Spinsters and the Construction of Englishness in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," Anne Longmuir notes that "religious difference has crucial implications for the spinster, because while Protestant England had no obvious role for single women, Catholicism did: convent life" (par.14). The Catholic solution to redundancy is particularly palpable in *Villette,* in which the heroine, Lucy Snowe, is haunted by a spectral nun. It appears more subtly in *Shirley*, where Shirley and Caroline picnic at Nunwood, Caroline's "muslin dress was fashioned

modestly as a nun's robe" (258), and Shirley nearly becomes Mrs. Philip Nunnely. In this novel, the figure of the nun functions less as a formidable reminder of the Catholic answer, than as a way to explore the similarity between Catholic and Protestant roles for unmarried women. For example, Caroline cannot help but employ Catholic imagery in musing over Miss Ainley's selfless lifestyle: "She had tutored her thoughts to tend upwards to Heaven. She allowed there was, and ever had been, little enjoyment in this world for her; and she looks, I suppose, to the bliss of the world to come. So do nuns—with their close cell, their iron lamp, their robe straight as a shroud, their bed narrow as a coffin" (328). Caroline is unsettled by the prospect of living entirely for others, as is suggested by the Protestant charitable works answer, and likens it to the Catholic virtue of self-denial:

> Is this enough? Is it to live? Is there not a terrible hollowness, mockery, want, craving, in that existence which is given away to others, for want of something of your own to bestow it on? I suspect there is. Does virtue lie in abnegation of self?... The Romish religion especially teaches renunciation of self, submission to others, and nowhere are found so many grasping tyrants as in the ranks of the Romish priesthood. (149)

In this moment, Caroline comes to terms with how the Protestant and Catholic answers both make problems for female autonomy. Meanwhile, the Victorian reader must face the startling realization that Protestantism, which takes pains to distinguish itself from the Catholic Church, treats its redundant women similarly: both, whether formally or informally, require servitude to others and denial of personal interests.

In "Charlotte Brontë's Villette, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the turn to Secularism," Micael M. Clarke shows how Charlotte makes this same comparison with *Villette*. As previously mentioned, Clarke's argument is that, Lucy Snowe, as the novel's "representative Protestant" (975), differs from a Catholic only in that she has "built renunciation into ordinary life" (997). Therefore, in *Villette*, "Protestantism and Catholicism resemble each other not only in that each is a form of social power, but also in that each places similar restrictions on female behavior" (Clarke 997). It is doubtful, however, that Charlotte ever meant to depict religion as restricting for women, for it is in religious arenas that her heroines become most strong-minded and independent, and that Charlotte herself engages in as a novelist. Lucy Snowe's ability to participate in religious debates with M. Paul, defending her creed without faltering, is what primarily shapes his perception of her as masculine. The heroines of *Shirley* also make significant contributions to religious discourse, often putting their male counterparts to shame. Caroline, for example, boldly speaks out against the hypocrisy of the clergy, as we can see from her censure of the "audacious and impious" (99) curates. Shirley also "scorns hypocrisy" (213), but this is not the only way she helps to ameliorate the Church. As a wealthy heiress, she is able to make financial contributions that far surpass the charity work of the other women. The nature of her contribution puts her in a fundamentally "male" role. As they discuss her donation, she tells one of the curates, "You must regard me as Captain Keeldar to-day. This is quite a gentleman's affair—yours and mine entirely" (229). Although unable to make a charitable contribution of this nature, Caroline can join Shirley in engaging Joe Scott in religious discourse, a traditionally

"male" forte. When asked her opinion of Paul's commands regarding women, Caroline's reply is surprisingly radical: she not only asserts that Paul intended it "for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances," but also considers mistranslation from the Greek, suggesting that it could have originally said: "It is permitted to a woman to teach and exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace" (278). This is just one example of what Jennifer Judge calls "Caroline's feminist biblical hermeneutics" (par.30). Through her novels, Charlotte herself engages in the male-dominated arena of religious discourse. The Joe Scott incident not only illustrates how religious discourse could allow women to demonstrate and lay claim to their intellectual ability, but also hints at the possibility of radical thought on the part of the female author, who wrote under a male pseudonym.

In addition to solutions for redundancy offered by religious practice, Charlotte explores the options offered by various political and social agendas, often presenting marriage and emigration as binary fates for single women. "The Winding-up" chapter of *Shirley*, which marries off the protagonists, has traditionally been criticized as idealizing marriage for women, and as a compromise of Charlotte's feminist values. After reading the novel, her friend and fellow feminist writer Mary Taylor told her she was "a coward and a traitor" (*Letters* 392). However, considering that Charlotte herself turned down four marriage proposals before finally marrying Arthur Bell Nicholls at the age of 38, one can see why Elizabeth Gaskell said, "matrimony did not enter into the scheme of her life" (115). Had *Shirley* been written at another time in Charlotte's life, the ending may have been quite different. During its composition, Charlotte's remaining 3 siblings—

Branwell, Emily, and Anne—died, all within 8 months (Gaskell xxvi). In response to the criticisms of the novel's ending, she admitted, a "great part of it was written under the shadow of impending calamity; and the last volume, I cannot deny, was composed in the eager, restless endeavour to combat mental sufferings that were scarcely tolerable" (Gaskell 326). *Shirley*'s happy ending, therefore, was less a strategic plot choice than it was a way to cope with the deaths of her siblings. Charlotte openly confessed that the characters of Shirley and Caroline were based on her sisters Emily and Anne, although friends commented that Shirley was far from a realistic portrait of Emily. Janet Gezari argues that "it would be more accurate to say that Shirley is a portrait of Emily as well as Charlotte *needed* to imagine her, especially after her death" (Gezari xviii, emphasis added). To conclude that *Shirley*'s traditional ending marks a relapse in Charlotte's radical social commentary would be to neglect the influence of her personal life in her writing.

While the novel as a whole may adhere to the Victorian marriage plot, the marriage proposals themselves are far from traditional. In "'Virgin Solitude': Envisioning a Textual Space for Spinsters in Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley*," Anna Lepine suggests that Robert's proposal to Caroline is far from a romantic climax: "even though Caroline has been pining for Robert's love, his arrival in this scene seems intrusive; his 'dark' presence ominously supplants her recently discovered mother" (131). The proposal seems anti-climactic because it occurs not when she most desires him, but when her need for love has already been filled. His presence is an "intrusion" on the happiness she already has achieved with her mother. Before he arrives, we are told, "Caroline was

not unhappy that evening; far otherwise" (535). When Robert steals up behind Caroline in the garden, she is enjoying a moment of peace and contentment, gazing up at Venus, the "Star of Love" (535). Detecting his arm around her waist, she assumes it is her mother, saying "I am looking at Venus, mama; see, she is beautiful" (535). When she learns it is Robert, she is so startled she "dropped her watering-pot" (535), but there is certainly no indication that she is *pleasantly* surprised. An "intruder" with a "dark manly visage" (535), Robert interrupts this exclusively female paradise consisting of Caroline, Mrs. Pryor, and Venus.

The marriage of Shirley and Louis Moore is perhaps the most troubling aspect of the novel's ending, as it seems to compromise Shirley's "masculine" qualities and financial independence. Robert predicts that Shirley "will never marry" because she is "jealous of compromising her pride, of relinquishing her power, of sharing her property" (505); but Shirley herself claims that she would only marry given her future husband is a "*master*," saying "any man who wishes to live in decent comfort with me as a husband must be able to control me" (461). She speaks of such a husband as favorable, and necessary in order to check her "wild" nature. The master-slave language employed in the proposal scene is particularly disturbing. When Shirley refers to herself as "tameless," Louis replies, "Tame or fierce, wild or subdued, you are *mine*" (522). She then says, "I am glad I know my keeper, and am used to him. Only his voice I will follow; only his hand shall manage me; only at his feet will I repose" (522). Despite this image of servitude, there exists between Shirley and Louis is an interesting dynamic of mutual bondage. She teasingly calls him by her dog's name and "Shirley's pet and

favorite," commanding him to "lie down" (523). Claiming he would "die without her" (522), Louis calls her "my life and idol" (527). Furthermore, Shirley makes it clear that any power he has is that which she gives him: Louis "would never have learned to rule, if she had not ceased to govern" (535). The entire proposal scene is a negotiation of rights and power, with the central question being, "Are we equal at last?" (522).

One way that Charlotte equalizes marriage is through confusion of gender boundaries. The concluding marriage in *Jane Eyre* is warped by a traumatic switch in social rank and power, when Jane becomes independently wealthy and Rochester is emasculated by physical disability and the destruction of his own financial assets. In *Villette*, we find the emotionally distant Ginevra Fanshawe paired with Alfred de Hamal, who is "dainty" with "womanish feet and hands" (280). Shirley is masculine, and she knows it: "They gave me a man's name; I hold a man's position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood" (172). Louis is effectively feminized when the account of the proposal is given through his diary, entirely through his perspective. This underscores his vulnerability, as well as Shirley's reserve. Overcome by emotion, he tells the reader, "I am a strong man, but I staggered as I spoke" (522). Both Shirley's masculine qualities, which are not necessarily undermined by her "submission," and Louis's femininity, help to equalize them.

In *Shirley*, as well as in *Villette*, Charlotte pairs Protestant women with Catholic men in order to achieve this equalizing. Lucy habitually refers to Paul as "the little man," and finds his femininity inseparable from his Catholicism. It is his sincere piety that first attracts her, as she observes him "crossing himself as devoutly as a woman" (475). This

simile reveals the role of religion in the gender stereotypes of Charlotte's day. According to Barbara Caine, nineteenth-century feminists agreed that "women were innately more chaste, compassionate, virtuous, and dutiful than men" (89). Victorians perceived Catholicism to be flamboyant and feeble-minded compared to the plain, strong individualism of Protestantism. Therefore, it is not surprising that Charlotte would associate religious devoutness, particularly that of Catholic ritual, with femininity. Charlotte's work habitually associates Catholics—especially foreign Catholics—with femininity. As Susie Steinbach, Kathrin Levitan, and Anne Longmuir all point out, to be British was to be Protestant. Catholicism, therefore, was inherently foreign. Robert and Louis Moore's Belgian roots help associate them, like M. Paul, with Catholicism. Robert tells Caroline, "My mother was a Roman Catholic; you look like the loveliest of her pictures of the Virgin: I think I will embrace her faith, and kneel and adore" (508). This moment of returning to his roots demasculinizes Robert both in his embracing Catholicism, and in his subjugation to and "worship" of Caroline. In coupling Protestant women with Catholic men, Charlotte subverts traditional gender roles and creates a more "equal" marriage than could otherwise be obtained.

There still exists a great deal of misogamy within *Shirley* which is not necessarily undermined by the ending. Both male and female characters speak openly against marriage, for a variety of reasons. According to Shirley's governess, Mrs. Pryor, marriage "is never wholly happy" and "all the single [should] be satisfied with their freedom" (319). Caroline's uncle, Mr. Helstone, "always speaks of marriage as a burden" (183). Shirley rejects two proposals before accepting Louis Moore; and she and

Caroline give voice to some of the most severe misogamy in the novel. Early in the novel Caroline concludes, "I wonder we don't all make up our minds to remain single" (182). It is not uncommon novelists to soften their radical social commentary through a traditional ending. We must remember that Charlotte wanted *Shirley* to be accepted by publishers and the public. Having the novel's conclusion resemble that of the Victorian marriage plot would cushion the blow of the subversive ideas voiced by its characters.

Within the novel we also find several unmarried women who choose a less than traditional path for their lives. The prophecy regarding future spinsters Rose and Jessy Yorke makes Charlotte's detailed characterization of the Yorke family more than just a charming digression. According to the prophecy, the sisters will travel together to a "foreign country," where Jessy will die an early death and Rose will remain to enjoy its "wild, luxuriant aspect" (128). The narrator describes Rose's fate: "this is some virgin solitude: unknown birds flutter round the skirts of that forest; no European river this, on whose banks Rose sits thinking. The little, quiet Yorkshire girl is a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere" (128). This "virgin solitude" is both "lonely" and radically freeing—"wild" and "luxuriant." According to Anna Lepine, "Rose Yorke's scene of virgin independence, if read as an alternate ending to *Shirley*,…provides a hopeful answer to the novel's questions about female independence and spinsterhood" (121). By including Rose Yorke's future in a "foreign country," Charlotte allows her readers a glance at another possible option for unmarried women: emigration. The emigration solution is most palpable in *Villette* and *Jane Eyre*, in which the heroines embody female mobility. The impetus for their mobility is the desire to travel from

where they are considered a burden and a problem to where they can be useful, or even needed. For Lucy Snowe, as with half a million women in Charlotte's time, this means leaving England. Anne Longmuir argues that "Lucy Snowe's decision to travel abroad should therefore be read within the broader context of calls for female emigration; Lucy is not only unwelcome in England, she is literally considered a 'social problem' there" (par. 7). Emigration for work opportunities, and not with the intent of finding husbands, as in Greg's emigration plan, offered women the opportunity to create a new identity through labor in an environment that enables independence and a sense of self-worth.

Although an unmarried dependent of her brothers, Hortense Moore embodies a strong-mindedness and independence that sets her apart from the novel's other spinsters, even Margaret Hall, whose sole occupation is likewise to make her brother "happy in his single state" (229). Hortense is in England what Lucy Snowe is in Villette: a foreigner who chooses to isolate rather than assimilate: "She [Hortense] did not choose to adopt English fashions because she was obliged to live in England; she adhered to her old Belgian modes, quite satisfied that there was a merit in so doing" (54). But as Anna Lepine notes, Hortense is still accepted in England because she "adheres to Victorian recommendations concerning a spinster's duty" (124). She is "specially skillful with her needle" and considers darning socks to be "one of the first 'duties of woman' " (69). Although she remains within the domestic sphere and is a dependent of her brother, her attitude and physical appearance give the impression that she has a dominant, rather than submissive role in the household: "She seemed a little older than Mr. Moore, perhaps she was thirty-five, tall, and proportionately stout... You could never have persuaded her that

she was a prejudiced and narrow-minded person, that she was too susceptible on the subject of her own dignity and importance,...yet all this was true" (54-55). Unlike Caroline, whose dreams of meaningful independent labor are squelched by her uncle, Hortense's dependence is purely her own choice. Her brothers may be "almost sacred in her eyes" (55), but she has "an excellent opinion of herself" (54) as well. Family pride is central to her motives. In caring for her brothers she preserves "the sole remaining representatives of their decayed family" (55). [Isolating herself within the home allows her the responsibility and control of preserving her heritage and the superiority of the Moore family.] In doing so, she ultimately fulfills a dominant, matriarchal role.

Throughout *Shirley*, unmarried women such as Hortense raise the question of whether woman's happiness and fulfillment factor into their purpose. Anna Lepine notes that "though she insists that 'It is my duty to be happy where you are, brother' (65), Hortense cannot help ironically exposing the unhappiness resulting from her self-sacrifice" (125). Charlotte is asking whether fulfillment of duty should be sufficient for women to be happy. Is Mrs. Yorke correct in asserting that "solid satisfaction is only to be realized by doing one's duty" (336)? Once acquainted with Miss Mann's "goblin-grimness" (153), the reader may be inclined to agree with Caroline that "old maids are a very unhappy race" (151). To Caroline's suggestion, her servant Fanny retorts that old maids "can't be unhappy; they take such good care of themselves. They are all selfish" (151). Although nobody as charitable as Miss Ainley can reasonably labeled as selfish, Fanny does raise a point: unmarried women, not having the responsibilities of catering to their husbands, are better equipped to tend to their own needs and desires. Miss Mann,

for example, lives "surrounded by perfect neatness, cleanliness, and comfort; (after all, is it not a virtue in old maids that solitude rarely makes them negligent or disorderly?)" (152). Unlike the lonely spinster archetype whose only pleasure is found in rare companionship, Miss Mann is perfectly content in her "solitude." In fact, Caroline's visit is actually unwelcome. Because Caroline disturbs her "lethargic state of tranquility," Miss Mann "was scarcely pleased...to see Miss Helstone: she received her with reserve, [and] bade her to be seated with austerity" (153). Another way in which *Shirley*'s spinsters diverge from the spinster archetype is that they are not loquacious. The reader is never given direct speech from the spinsters, and any paraphrasing done by other characters of the narrative voice is sparing. Their "silence" confirms that they live in a society in which their "voice," particularly as individuals, is not valued. Consequently, as Caroline notices, the question of their purpose in life is "solved for them" (149) collectively. Therefore, Charlotte characterizes them not through their own words, but through a secondary account of their actions. In this way, the reader must primarily conceive them through understanding their functional value to society—whether or not they are "useful" and charitable—rather than as individuals with personal needs, goals and desires.

Although *Shirley* presents several answers to the redundant women question—marriage, independent labor, charitable work, convent life—Charlotte nevertheless remains puzzled for a "remedy" (*Letters* 66). In her introduction to *Shirley*, Janet Gezari argues: "Brontë is less interested in solving the problems she addresses in *Shirley* than in giving voice to the pain, frustration, misery, distress, degradation, and dependence that is

the lot of so many middle-class women in England" (xvi). While part of Charlotte's mission is certainly to give an unmarried woman's perspective, there is more at work in *Shirley*. In presenting the various options available to women without giving preference to one, she ultimately leaves the choice to the reader. Charlotte takes the religious, social and cultural dialogues surrounding the redundant women question and puts them in conversation with one another. She does this not to elevate one solution over the others, but to expose a peculiar plight to which there is no simple answer—one in which solitary independence is both crippling and freeing.

If Charlotte came to any conclusions, it is that the purpose question cannot be answered by society on behalf of an entire population: it must be decided by the individual. No two unmarried women in the novel, as in reality, are exactly the same. Therefore, the circumstances that make them feel happy and fulfilled vary. While some, such as Miss Ainley, can find fulfillment with the Protestant solution, it is not necessarily right for every unmarried woman. Caroline knows that "the life which made Miss Ainley happy could not make her happy" (157). Others find happiness in caring for loved ones. We are told that spinster Margaret Hall "is not unhappy" because "she has her books for a pleasure, and her brother for a care, and is content" (240). Rather than simplifying it with an answer, Charlotte exposes the complexity of the purpose question—its implications on female identity, national identity, and society as a whole—and ultimately leaves it to the reader to find the answer. Charlotte's Protestant way of thinking allows that like a person's relationship with God, the choice of how to dedicate one's life should be left to the individual.

Chapter 2

The Freedom of Solitude in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

"Nothing irks me like the idea of being a burden and a bore,—an inevitable burden,—a ceaseless bore! Now, when I feel my company superfluous, I can comfortably fold my independence round me like a mantle, and drop my pride like a veil, and withdraw to solitude. If married, that could not be" (*Shirley* 181). This image of solitude from Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* is crucial to understanding what Charlotte does with her next and final novel, *Villette.* Solitude, particularly that found outside of England, allowed redundant women an escape from being a problem or a burden. Not only is there irony in the use of the word "superfluous" here, but the mantle and veil conjure the image of convent life, confirming the necessity of celibacy for the degree of solitude desired. Similar illustrations of voluntary seclusion and self-confinement appear throughout *Villette*, yielding a peculiar fusion of restriction and independence. *Villette* suggests that despite the struggles faced by women termed "redundant," Charlotte ultimately favored independence to dependence, and solitude to companionship.

Villette is told in the rather withholding first person narration of the reserved and introspective Lucy Snowe, a young woman presumably orphaned at an early age. Lucy's story spans about a decade of her life, from her adolescence in England, to her emigration to the city of Villette, in the fictional nation of Laboucasseur, where she undertakes a teaching position at the Rue Fossette, a girls boarding school. Here, she struggles to defend her Protestant faith and "masculine" strong-mindedness from the school's chauvinistic professor of literature, Catholic M. Paul Emanuel. Meanwhile, she fights her

growing attachment to the charming John "Graham" Bretton, a childhood acquaintance from England who later reappears in *Villette* as Dr. John. For Lucy Snowe, independence depends upon continued solitude. As Charlotte's most solitary heroine, Lucy marks the progression of Charlotte's rejection of female dependence.

In a letter to her publisher George Smith, Charlotte Brontë wrote, "you will see that *Villette* touches on no matter of public interest. I cannot write books handing the topics of the day; it is of no use trying" (Gaskell 378). Despite this claim, both Charlotte's contemporaries and modern critics have applauded *Villette* for its vivid depiction of the plight of unmarried women, insisting that it is very much relevant to "public interest." In *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-century Literary Imagination*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue that "*Villette* is in many ways Charlotte Brontë's most overtly and despairingly feminist novel" (399), and that Lucy Snowe's "story is perhaps the most moving and terrifying account of female deprivation ever written" (400). In *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*, Irene Tayler notes that Charlotte's contemporaries found the novel to be "painful, even morbid" (201). Charlotte herself admitted that Lucy Snowe "is both morbid and weak at times," but added, "[Lucy's] character sets up no pretensions to unmixed strength, and anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid" (380). Charlotte makes clear that Lucy is a product of bleak circumstances. Themes of isolation and alienation cast a shadow over her story as a deprived orphan who must wander the world without friends or family.

Set in the French-speaking nation of Labassecour, a fictionalized Belgium, *Villette* explores both foreign and Catholic alternatives to the female roles available in England. Conflicts between Protestant and Catholic, and English and foreign, are central to the novel's plot and overall engagement with gender issues. Charlotte's use of religious motifs frames a fundamental bind between the construction of female identity and spiritual identity. *Villette* is a particularly striking example of Anne Longmuir's claim that "the convent and the figure of the nun haunt mid-nineteenth century discussions of the spinster" (par.14). Lucy Snowe's site of isolation is a medieval convent turned boarding school, where she is literally haunted by a spectral nun. Because of this, the possibility of convent life is more palpable for Lucy than for any other Brontë heroine. As a resident in a Catholic nation, she is continually reminded of this alternative lifestyle, reflecting, "I might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crécy in Villette" (235). Lucy's habitual contrasting of England's Protestantism with the Catholicism of Villette allows her to track the implications of each for unmarried women, and their differences are integral to her fluctuating attitude toward her own celibacy.

Lucy Snowe's explicit anti-Catholicism has led both Charlotte Brontë's contemporaries and modern readers to the assumption that Charlotte herself, like most of Protestant nineteenth-century England, held a harsh, dogmatic view of Catholicism. Susie Steinbach explains, "Because Britain saw itself as a Protestant country—great and free because Protestant, and Protestant because great and free—there was a lot of anti-Catholic sentiment" (220). Although Lucy states that "God is not with Rome" (515),

Charlotte Brontë was quite open-minded about other cultures. She believed that we should not "despise everything we see in the world, merely because it is that there are not unfrequent substantial reasons underneath for customs to appear absurd," concluding, "if I were ever again to find myself among strangers I should be solicitous to examine before I condemned" (Gaskell 224). Also, as Micael M. Clarke asserts, Charlotte's view of Catholicism "was complicated by several factors, including her experience in Brussels during the years 1842-43, where she fell in love with the Catholic Constantine Heger, and where, during a period of extreme loneliness, she went to Confession in the Cathedral of Sainte-Gudule" (972). Much of *Villette* is inspired by Charlotte's years at a boarding school in Brussels. During an illness which ensues from emotional anguish, Lucy Snowe confesses to the Catholic priest Père Silas, who is the only earthly source of comfort available to her. Although she claims, "the more I saw of Popery the closer I clung to Protestantism," (516) Lucy's positive experiences in the novel nearly always involve Catholic characters, whereas the Protestants—namely the Graham, Ginevra Fanshawe, and England itself—are the sources of rejection and alienation.

Although she wrote in a time of heightened tension between Protestant and Catholic, Charlotte's use of Catholicism in *Villette* does not follow suit with the anti-Papist fears that spawned gothic novels such as Matthew Gregory Lewis's *The Monk* and Anne Radcliffe's *The Italian*. Micael M. Clarke argues that "evidence of Charlotte's freedom from prejudice is that the love between Lucy and Paul Emanuel," who is widely believed to be inspired by Constantine Heger, "is the only instance of a happy relationship between Catholic and Protestant in the literature of the period" (968). Lucy

and Paul's progression from truce, to friendship, to romantic love, is certainly worth considering as "evidence" that Charlotte finds it possible for Protestantism and Catholicism to peacefully coexist. However, this is done only through willingness to overlook their differences in light of sincerity of heart. Paul eventually ceases his attempts to convert Lucy, saying, "I see we worship the same God, in the same spirit, through by different rites" (474). Likewise, despite their doctrinal differences, Lucy is attracted to Paul's "pure honor" and "artless piety" (474), concluding that "whatever Romanism may be, there are good Romanists" (488). Charlotte herself believed that people should be judged by their heart rather than their creed, finding that "good people—*very* good people—I doubt not, there are amongst the Romanists" (Gaskell 354). Lucy's attitude toward Catholicism, like Charlotte's, is a complex one, as we can see from her view of M. Paul: "never was a better little man, in some points, than M. Paul: never, in others, a more waspish little despot" (388). Overall, Charlotte's opinion of Catholicism was exceptionally lenient. At the same time, the idea that each Catholic should be judged individually, and not as a member of a community, betrays her very Protestant way of thinking.

Despite Charlotte's obvious inclination toward Protestant thought, certain aspects of Protestantism are perhaps her greatest targets of satire. This is particularly evident in her depiction of the hypocritical clergymen of *Shirley*, but even Lucy Snowe admits flaws in the Protestant faith. When comparing the three Protestant chapels of Villette—Presbyterian, Lutheran, and Episcopalian—she reflects, "I respected them all, though I thought that in each there were faults to form; encumbrances, and trivialities" (513).

Charlotte likewise believed "there were errors in every Church" (516). Any religion, Charlotte says, can be practiced with sincerity or hypocrisy. Therefore, the juxtaposition of Protestantism and Catholicism in her work is not purposed to elevate one over the other, but rather to compare, contrast, and dissect the implications of each with regard to their designated roles for women.

Another trend in the religious commentary of *Villette* is the comparison of extremes—namely, fanaticism and apathy. Charlotte's preference for moderation of religious expression is evident from the striking contrast between the painfully devout and devoted young Polly Holmes, and the fleshly coquette Ginevra Fanshawe. Each becomes an object of Charlotte's satire because each represents an extreme which neither she nor Lucy Snowe can fully embrace. Lucy witnesses Polly "kneeling upright in bed, and praying like some Catholic or Methodist enthusiast—some precocious fanatic or untimely saint" (69). Just as *Shirley*'s Caroline Helstone associates the Protestant charitable works answer with the self-denial of "the Romish religion" (*Shirley* 149), so does Lucy find Polly's fanatical Protestantism to be equivalent to this aspect of Catholicism. Polly's ritualistic servitude to men takes female subservience to an extreme. Her doting on her father, as well as her eventual obsession with John Graham Bretton, borders on idolatry and is uncomfortable to witness. Polly's "saintly" nature is enhanced once her father arrives at Bretton for a visit, and she is able to worship him in the flesh. Her obsession with serving her father manifests in her handkerchief project, in which self-inflicted physical pain is essential to her display of devotion:

> Opposite where he had placed himself was seated Mr. Home, and at his elbow, the child. When I say *child* I use an inappropriate and undescriptive term—a term suggesting any picture rather than that of the demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette, that might have just fitted a good-sized doll—perched now on a high chair beside a stand, whereon was her toy work-box of white varnished wood, and holding in her hands a shred of handkerchief, which she was professing to hem, and at which she bored perseveringly with a needle, that in her fingers seemed almost a skewer, pricking herself ever and anon, marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots; occasionally starting when the perverse weapon—swerving from her control—inflicted a deeper stab than usual; but still *silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly*. (73, emphasis added)

That Polly's toleration of self-inflicted pain is "womanly" implies that stoicism itself is inherent in womanhood. Most importantly, Charlotte satirically suggests that Polly fulfills her sex's purpose in sacrificing her own comfort for a man's. Charlotte later juxtaposes Polly's "womanhood" with that of Ginevra, in whom Lucy observes a "fragile style of beauty, an entire incapacity to endure" (118). In both cases, the ability to endure pain, whether emotional or physical, always finds a reciprocal relationship with religious devotion. In Lucy's first interview on the boat with Ginevra, the schoolgirl expresses total apathy toward religious discourse: "they call me a Protestant, you know, but really I am not sure whether I am one or not: I don't well know the difference between Romanism and Protestantism. However, I don't in the least care for that" (115). It is later that same night that the two become seasick, and Lucy witnesses Ginevra's "incapacity to

endure." In Charlotte's characterization of Ginevra, it is difficult to separate her religious apathy from her inability to tolerate discomfort. In this aspect of her character, among others, she is the perfect foil to Polly. The prevalence of religious diction and biblical allusions in Charlotte's work is more than the result of her upbringing; in working with the purpose question, she rightfully finds Christian motifs essential to portraying a society in which the role of woman is deeply imbricated in religious thought and practice.

Throughout *Villette*, Charlotte employs language of self-denial, sacrifice, and martyrdom in her portrayal gender relations and woman's role. This is likely because she wrote and lived in a time when, according to Barbara Caine, women "were only ever defined in relative terms as wives, daughters, or mothers" and "their primary duty was to subordinate their own wishes and desires to the needs of their family and of the wider society" (Caine 82). Because female identity was defined as subordination to and servitude of others, even at six years old, Polly has already learned that her father's comfort comes before her own. Mr. Home calls her "my comfort" (72), and it is only natural—"womanly"— that women should minister to men at the cost of their own comfort. This gender relationship is so "natural" that it is not until this moment that Graham finally notices Polly as "a young lady" (73). It is this same "diligent" femininity that attracts him to her once they are reacquainted years later, when he "followed with his eye the gilded glance of Paulina's thimble, as if it had been some right moth on the wing, or the golden head of some darting little yellow serpent" (375). Polly's subservient attitude, as well as her ability to efficiently execute a traditional woman's duties, is what captivates him and ultimately motivates their courtship.

Polly is a dramatization of the aforementioned "essentials of a woman's being," as described by Sir William Rathbone Greg: "they are supported by, and they minister to men" (53). Her entire existence depends upon her relation to or servitude of another. In observing young Polly's attachment first to her father, and then to Graham, Lucy concludes that the little girl "had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another" (83). When her father leaves Bretton, Polly transfers her services to Graham because "she must be busy about something, look after somebody" (80). She forfeits her own individual identity to "have her being" in Graham, telling him, "if you were to die...I should 'refuse to be comforted, and go down into the grave to your mourning'" (87). Once separated from Graham, she metaphorically dies, becoming a cold, shivering "small ghost" (92). The temporary physical union obtained when Lucy "took her in" her bed and "warmed her in my arms" (92) is what finally revives her. Once Polly has joined Lucy, she is no longer a ghost, but a living being with "glittering eyelids" and "wet cheeks" (93). Lucy wonders how she will "bear the shocks and repulses, the humiliations and desolations, which ... are prepared for all flesh" (93). The transformation from "ghost" to "flesh" is done only by the temporary transference of Polly's identity from Graham to Lucy. In such a way, Polly exemplifies Greg's ideal woman—one completely lacking any sense of selfhood or autonomy.

The idea of not thinking for oneself is problematic for Charlotte, whose Protestant values result in a high regard for individual thought and interpretation. She satirizes the ignorance of Ginevra, who identifies herself as Protestant only because she is told she is. By Charlotte's definition, Ginevra is certainly no Protestant, for to be Protestant is to be

an individual, independent mind. Conversely, to be Catholic is to be "ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning" (196). The nature of the Joe Scott debate in *Shirley* also reveals Charlotte's sensitivity to the connection between religious thought and female autonomy. Charlotte habitually commends individual interpretation and critiques blind trust in hierarchy—not just with regard to religion, but also to gender relations.

The complex notion of solitude found in *Villette* is also informed by Charlotte's Protestantism. For Lucy, solitude is the source of both agonizing loneliness and an exhilarating freedom. Being alone in the world allows her to think for herself and be an individual, and her identity depends upon no other as long as she maintains distance. Despite her miserable moments of loneliness, she prefers to be alone: "I might have had companions, and I chose solitude" (194). Because she lives in a Catholic nation, being Protestant guarantees alienation: "the Catholic household were then gathered to evening prayer—a rite, from attendance on which, I now and then, as a Protestant, exempted myself" (173). At this time, Lucy enjoys the "precious minutes" (173) of her solitary walks in the garden. These walks are inspired by Charlotte's second experience in Brussels, when she chose to spend her free time alone. According to Elizabeth Gaskell, "every Sunday she [Charlotte] went alone to the German and English chapels. Her walks too were solitary, and principally taken in the allée défendue, where she was secure from intrusion. This solitude was a perilous luxury to one of her temperament; so liable as she was to morbid and acute mental suffering" (Gaskell 173). That these walks were a "perilous luxury" reveals that the dual nature of solitude we find in *Villette* is one which

Charlotte herself had experienced as a single woman alienated in a strange land. In each case, solitude secures Protestantism, and Protestantism secures solitude.

Throughout Charlotte's work, solitude and independence find a direct correlation; when one is threatened, the other is threatened as well. According to Anne Longmuir, Lucy rejects the offer to be Polly's governess because it means returning to England, and "as a single middle class woman, becoming British again entails a serious loss of autonomy for Lucy" (par. 11). However, Lucy makes it clear that she would be averse to a governess position in any country, because it would constitute a decline from the solitude-independence she has obtained at the Rue Fossette. Money is not a sufficient motivation for such a change: she rejects the position even though it would pay three times her present salary. In fact, she would rather "deliberately have taken a housemaid's place, bought a strong pair of gloves, swept the bedrooms and staircases, and cleaned stoves and locks, *in peace and independence*" (382, emphasis added). For Lucy, independent poverty is preferable to wealth found in any type of dependence. This idea points to a similar statement made by Charlotte herself, who had her own tendency toward independence and solitude. She once admitted, "I am much happier black-leading the stoves, making the beds, and sweeping the floors at home, than I should be living like a fine lady anywhere else (Gaskell 125). Similarly, Lucy is more than willing to sacrifice social rank and prestige for her independence. Her employment at Madame Beck's is preferable to a governess position because it does not mean her belonging to any one person: "I was not *her* companion, nor her children's governess; she left me free: she tied me to nothing" (383). Madame Beck knows how much independence is worth to Lucy.

She says, "one thing, however, I *can* do to please you—leave you alone with your liberty" (383). This wording—"alone with your liberty"—acknowledges that solitude is indispensible with independence. Rather than calling independence a gift, Madame Beck, acknowledges it as something Lucy has already, and she chooses not to take it away from her. While Madame Beck does not seek Lucy's companionship in any way, Polly does: "if I withdrew to my room, she [Polly] would speedily come trotting after me, and opening the door and peeping in, say, with her little peremptory accent,—'Come down. Why do you sit here by yourself? You must come into the parlour" (382). This intrusion upon Lucy's privacy is connected to the idea of being a governess, for we are told that "in the same spirit she urged" (382) Lucy to become a more permanent companion and return to England with the family. Because being a governess would threaten her solitude, it is a threat to her independence.

In *Villette*, solitude can not only mean independence, but also oppression, protection from rejection, or a combination of these. Although Lucy actively seeks and chooses her own type of solitude, she resents solitude when it is imposed upon her by outside influence or circumstances beyond her control. Near the beginning of Madame Beck's fête, Lucy retreats "to the school-rooms, now empty, quiet, cool, and clean; their walls fresh stained, their planked floors fresh scoured and scare dry; flowers fresh gathered adorning the recesses in pots, and draperies, fresh hung, beautifying the great windows" (201). The solitude found in this room is one of aesthetic virginity—"clean" and "fresh"—in contrast with the solitude Lucy experiences shortly after, when M. Paul locks her in the attic to learn her role for the play. The sterile classroom offers a "virgin

solitude"—to borrow from Rose Yorke's in *Shirley*—that is a sort of safe haven for Lucy. M. Paul's "solitary and lofty attic," on the other hand, is "no pleasant place" (203). Unlike the pristine classroom Lucy chooses as her place of solitude, the attic is characterized by filth: "old dresses draped its unstained wall—cobwebs its unswept ceiling. Well was it known to be tenanted by rats, by black beetles, and by cockroaches—nay, rumor affirmed that the ghostly Nun of the garden had once been seen here" (204). Lucy resents the attic not merely because of its aesthetics, but because Paul has momentarily infringed upon her autonomy. The space comes to represent oppression and confinement. Lucy is so put off by the "dust, lumber, and stifling heat of the place," that she decides to "open and prop up the sky-light, thus admitting some freshness" (204). The action of opening the window shows that she desires a different and distant site of solitude—one that she creates for herself, and one that secures her independence.

While it is tempting to assign the novel's themes of confinement and suppression of female desire as a critique of Catholicism, the most formidable source of restriction for Lucy Snowe is not the surveillance of Catholics Madame Beck and M. Paul, nor is it the formidable nun spectre that haunts her: it is herself. Nicholas Armitage argues in his article "Melting Miss Snowe: Charlotte's Message to the English Church," that "Lucy's identification of Catholicism with Sentimentalism appears to be mirrored by her own identification of Protestantism with Reason" (209). As a Protestant, Lucy takes self-responsibility for checking her own passion. As she points out, this is strikingly different from the Catholic idea of surveillance by religious hierarchy:

> Foreigners say that it is only [Protestant] English girls who can thus be trusted to travel alone, and deep is their wonder at the daring confidence of English parents and guardians. As for the 'jeunes Miss,' by some their intrepidity is pronounced masculine and 'inconvenant,' others regard them as the passive victims of an educational and theological system which wantonly dispenses with proper 'surveillance.' (114)

To travel on her own and be her own chaperone is a more freeing—and more Protestant—type of solitude. This radical self-surveillance, according to Catholic foreigners, makes the mobility of English women a challenge to gender roles. Such judgments on female mobility perpetuate a vicious cycle. A mobile, financially independent woman is considered "masculine" and therefore unmarriageable; but she is forced to be mobile and financially independent *because* she is unmarriageable. This dilemma also presents itself in *Shirley*, where the heroines are well aware that "hard labour and learned professions, they say, make women masculine, coarse, unwomanly" (193). But Caroline must ask, "what does it signify, whether unmarried and never-to-be married women are unattractive and inelegant, or not? provided only they are decent, decorous, and neat, it is enough" (193). This cycle accounts for a seemingly paradoxical notion of solitude. Solitude can mean freedom for redundant women, but it is a freedom which results from being neglected. Lucy sees her own independence as the result of her being forced to face life's struggles alone: "I know not that I was of a self-reliant or active nature; but self-reliance and exertion were forced upon me by circumstances, as

they are on thousands besides" (95). These "thousands" can be seen as any woman termed "redundant."

The psychological state of the neglected orphan is a recurring motif in Charlotte's work. But she is less concerned with orphanhood than she is with spinsterhood. In *Villette*, Lucy struggles to mediate between her own "Reason" and "Feeling." Her fantasies and imagination are continually stifled by "Reason," who is "vindictive as a devil" and "envenomed as a step-mother" (308). This "step-mother" simile is telling: "According to her [Reason], I was born only to work for a piece of bread, to await the pains of death, and steadily through all life to despond" (307-308). The image of the stepmother reappears in "The Long Vacation" chapter, when the only other inhabitants at the Rue Fossette are "a servant, and a poor deformed and imbecile pupil, a sort of cretin, whom her stepmother in a distant province would not allow to return home" (227). As Gilbert and Gubar argue, Lucy's torment is worsened by the presence of the crétin because she is a "nightmarish version of herself—unwanted, lethargic, silent, warped in mind and body, slothful, indolent, and angry" (414). Just as the crétin is exiled by her stepmother, so is Lucy, as a redundant woman, by her mother country. That Lucy calls Reason a stepmother points to an orphan's resemblance to the redundant population, England's unwanted stepchild.

The miserable moments of solitude experienced by orphans Caroline Helstone and Lucy Snowe are nearly always related either to their unrequited romantic love towards Robert Moore and John Graham Bretton respectively, or to the absence of familial love. Like Lucy's physical ailments resulting from depression, Caroline's fatal

illness ensues from the feeling of being unloved. Mrs. Pryor observes of Caroline: “your mind is crushed; your heart is almost broken; you have been so neglected, so repulsed, left so desolate” (361). Caroline runs the risk of following in the footsteps of her aunt Mary Cave, who, neglected by her husband, had “died of a broken heart” (46). However, for Brontë heroines, familial love is just as valuable, if not more valuable, than romantic love. After all, it is the discovery of her long lost mother, Mrs. Pryor, that revives Caroline from the fatal illness that resulted from rejection by Robert: “if you *are* my mother, the world is all changed to me. Surely I can live—I should like to recover—“ (362). Once she has found familial love, she is content and seeks no other kind. Similarly, at the end of her story, Jane Eyre is more pleased to have inherited a family in the Rivers than a large fortune. In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe “grew quite happy—strangely happy” (501) to find “*true* friendship” (500) with M. Paul; and seems to value being M. Paul’s “adopted sister” (508) more than she would being Graham’s lover. Gilbert and Gubar sum up the pattern of Charlotte’s orphaned heroines: “Brontë charts a course of imprisonment, escape, and exclusion until the heroine, near death from starvation, fortuitously discovers a family of her own” (418). The friendless orphan type we encounter across Charlotte’s novels speaks to the half a million English women who are essentially unwanted by their mother country, and must wander through life alone.

Lucy’s solitude is oppressive not just when it is imposed upon her, as in M. Paul’s attic, but also when it becomes synonymous with loneliness. These are the moments most replete with inner torment and suppressed desire. During the long vacation Lucy spends alone at the Rue Fossette, loneliness takes a physical toll on her: “a want of

companionship maintained in my soul the cravings of a most deadly famine...At last a day and night of peculiarly agonizing depression were succeeded by physical illness" (230-231). Yet, Lucy does not see companionship as the antidote for her ailments. She thinks she would feel better if she "got out from under this house-roof, which was crushing as the slab of a tomb, and went outside the city to a certain quiet hill, a long way distant in the fields (232). Her answer to the misery of her current solitude is, strangely, to adopt a new, fresh, "distant" place of solitude. This is because Lucy's tendency toward solitude is often fueled by the need to remove herself from people, places, and situations that invite rejection. Lucy's tendency to create distance, both emotional and physical, is something of a defense mechanism she has developed in the course of her life as a friendless orphan. As Mark Lilly suggests, Lucy sustains distance both as an individual and as a narrator: "Lucy's reticence (not merely towards the other characters but towards us, the readers) is tantamount to deception" and "an extension of that habit of solitude" (*Villette* 607). For heroines such as Lucy Snowe, Jane Eyre, and Caroline Helstone, solitude allows emotional distance and protection from being hurt or rejected. In spite of her reserved demeanor, Lucy admits dreading "that insufferable thought of being no more loved" (232). While she desires love, she chooses not to indulge herself in entertaining hopes and making herself vulnerable.

As Charlotte's most psychologically aware novel, *Villette* is particularly sensitive to the identity crisis of unmarried women. Throughout the novel, the bounds of Lucy's religious, national, and sexual identities are challenged, both by herself and others. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that the sequence of mirror episodes in *Villette* help to "define

Lucy's sense of herself" (437). First viewing herself alongside Ginevra, and then the Brettons, she is "the object of another person's observations" (437), and it becomes clear that Lucy conceives her "self" only through the eyes of others. The psychological realism of the novel appreciates the continual internal battles of women who struggles between the role assigned to them by society and the role that circumstances force them to take. This is why we find that in *Villette*, paradoxes and contradictions are spawned from an identity which is constantly contradicting itself.

The story of Lucy's life tells of the struggle to create and lay claim to her own identity. A useful way to trace the complexity of Lucy's identity is to note how she both resembles and differs from the other women in the novel. In "*Villette*: 'The Surveillance of a Sleepless Eye,'" Sally Shuttleworth refers to Polly as Lucy's "alter ego" (111) and "ideal counterpart" (119). However, as Gilbert and Gubar point out, no single female character in the novel completely encompasses Lucy's ideal self: "not the little girl lost (Polly), or the coquette (Ginevra), or the male manqué (Madame Beck), or the buried nun (in the garden), Lucy cannot be contained by the roles available to her. But neither is she free of them, since all these women do represent aspects of herself" (419). That Lucy can identify with each of these very different women exposes the complexity of her identity.

Despite their differences, the women of *Villette* share several qualities. Gilbert and Gubar's observation that the women of *Villette* "are linked, defined, and motivated by their common attraction to Dr. John" (412) is crucial, because their central differences lie in the ways they express or internalize this attraction. Each possesses a certain degree of "masculinity" which is most obvious in their relation to him. It is what makes these

women “masculine” that make them admirable to Lucy. Ginevra, for example, makes an apt alter ego for Lucy not merely because her beauty and charms have effectively captivated Dr. John, but because she is able to remain callous toward him in spite of his attentions. Ginevra represents the kind of cold, emotional distance toward which Lucy strives. Polly’s reserve is similar. Despite what Sally Shuttleworth calls Polly’s “passionate excesses,” (111), Polly maintains, throughout the novel, extraordinary self-command. Shuttleworth contrasts how Lucy and Polly each receive and respond to Graham’s letters, concluding that Polly has the “superior psychological powers of self-control” (119). Although she appears to be the most feminine of *Villette*’s women, Polly denies the stereotypes of female inconstancy and excitability. She may care the most how she is perceived by men, but she is also the most withholding towards them, particularly in her adulthood. Lucy esteems Ginevra and Polly first and foremost because they are not manipulated by their own passions.

Lucy’s ideal self is also mirrored by the financially independent women of *Villette*—Madame Beck, Mrs. Bretton, and Madame Walraven. These women represent Lucy’s ambitions as “a rising character” (394). Madame Beck is what Lucy desires to be and will be by the novel’s conclusion—a single, wealthy proprietor of a boarding school. This aspect of Lucy’s ideal self also underscores her masculinity. Sally Shuttleworth notes that Lucy associates Madame Beck with male, rather than female authoritative figures (111). Madame Walravens, with her “voice rather of male than of female old age” and “silver beard [that] bristled her chin” (482), is likewise portrayed as masculine. Both women’s masculine qualities emphasize their matriarchal positions. Dr. John’s

rejection of Madame Beck and eventual union with Polly means the rejection of Lucy's strong, independent side. This exposes Charlotte's concern that men habitually rejected women with "masculine" independence, preferring instead to be needed by a dependent. What makes each of these women admirable to Lucy is what makes them masculine, female anomalies, or unattractive to the ideal male—Graham.

The nun ghost is another "character" that, in obscuring gender boundaries, speaks to Lucy's divided self. Early in the novel, we are told that in the garden of the Rue Fossette lie "the bones of a girl whom a monkish conclave of the drear middle ages had here buried alive, for some sin against her vow" (172). This legend comes to Lucy's mind when she is visited by "a figure all black and white; the skirts straight, narrow, black; the head bandaged, veiled, white" (325). Because it appears to Lucy in moments when she struggles with her own passion, a common interpretation of the spectral nun is that it represents, in Michel M. Clarke's words, "celibacy and the suppression of female desire" (977). In "Empty Letters and the Ghost of Desire in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," Rachel Jackson likewise suggests that "the visitations of the nun can be seen to plot the haunted trajectory of Lucy's desires" (103). For Gilbert and Gubar, the nun is "symbolic for Lucy of the only socially acceptable life available to single women—a life of service, self-abnegation, and chastity" (426). Yet, neither the idea of chastity nor the self-confinement of convent life can alone describe why the nun haunts Lucy. According to the legend, this particular nun was buried alive as punishment. Therefore, her ultimate confinement is the result of outside oppression, and not her own decision. It is not surprising, then, that when M. Paul locks Lucy in the attic, she associates this location

with the nun who was likewise contained against her will by a male entity. Later, the nun appears to Lucy in that same attic, as the manifestation of her fear of oppression. The suppression of female desire interpretation is also complicated by the discovery that Lucy's "ghost" is in reality a man—Ginevra's lover Alfred de Hamal who disguises himself to conceal their secret meetings. The highly celibate figure of the nun is, strangely enough, a mask for sexual escapades, and its violation of gender boundaries the most tangible found in the novel. Such hidden or complicated identities in the novel mirror Lucy's own identity crisis—her inner struggles between desire and restraint, reason and feeling, masculinity and femininity.

Charlotte's attention to dress, both in her novels and in her own life, betrays her concern with hidden or complex identities. Throughout her work, she uses clothing to blur gender boundaries. This is most obviously done through cross-dressing: de Hamal masquerades as a nun, Lucy is the fop in the play, and *Jane Eyre*'s Edward Rochester pretends to be a gypsy. Clothing is a key indicator of a person's social role and status, as well. Charlotte herself was cautious with wardrobe choices, finding that they betrayed a person's disposition. Harriet Martineau once described Charlotte as "a young-looking lady, almost child-like in stature, 'in a deep mourning dress, neat as a Quaker's, with her beautiful hair smooth and brown, her fine eyes blazing with meaning, and her sensible face indicating a habit of self-control'" (Gaskell 298). This image holds uncanny resemblance to the aforementioned description of young Polly, the "demure little person in a mourning frock and white chemisette, that might have just fitted a good-sized doll" (73). Through her characterization of Polly, Charlotte mocks certain aspects of herself.

Discussions of women's fashion throughout the novel reflect her own attitude toward traditional feminine attire. Elizabeth Gaskell refers to Charlotte's "love for modest, dainty, neat attire" (Gaskell 343). Her color and style choices allowed her to both detract attention from herself and reject flamboyant femininity. Gaskell's biography includes an anecdote in which Charlotte chooses a certain bonnet that "seemed grave and quiet there amongst all the splendours," but afterwards regrets the purchase because "it looks infinitely too gay with its pink lining" (344). Lucy similarly declares that the pink dress Mrs. Bretton suggests "is not for me" (283), preferring the widow's own attire: "*She* was clad in brown velvet: as I walked in her shadow, how I envied her those folds of grave, dark majesty" (284). Dark colored vestment would better match Lucy's mood and attitude toward life, but most importantly, it would allow her to escape her conspicuous identity as a redundant woman. Her desire to walk in the shadow, or footsteps, of a widow shows her desire to be inconspicuous and respected. Being a widow would also mean being independent without the stigma attached to spinsterhood.

By the end of the novel, Lucy has become all that she admires in Madame Beck and Mrs. Bretton: an independently wealthy, solitary woman. The last chapter finds her the proprietor of her own school, engaged to M. Paul, and awaiting his return from a sea voyage. The novel's ambiguous conclusion implies that Paul is shipwrecked on his way home, but withholds definite information, instead telling the reader to draw his own conclusions: "Leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy

succeeding life" (596). Many have suggested that for *Villette*, an ambiguous conclusion is necessary in order to allow the possibility of continued female independence. Gilbert and Gubar state that "the ambiguous ending of *Villette* reflects Lucy's...recognition that it is only in his [Paul's] absence that she can exert herself fully to exercise her own powers" (438). Rachel Jackson likewise suggests the "emancipating potential" (98) of the novel's open ending and the significance that Lucy chooses to tell her story in such a way. While Shirley and Caroline, living under the care of their uncles, were already dependents, marriage for Lucy would mean a tremendous loss of autonomy. Whether or not M. Paul dies, Lucy, as a narrator telling her own story, can immortalize her own independence by withholding closure from her readers.

Charlotte did not originally intend for the ending to be a mystery, however. Lucy gives several hints that her story ends with sorrow rather than happiness. Early in the novel she reflects, "about the present, it was better to be stoical: about the future—such a future as mine—to be dead" (175). It seems highly unlikely that Paul does return, since the three years Lucy spends hopefully waiting for his return are "the three happiest years of my life" (593). The ambiguity of the ending in and of itself does not necessarily hold that Charlotte was making some complex statement about the condition of women. The novel's ending was no ambiguity to Charlotte, who "from the beginning…[had] never meant to appoint her [Lucy] lines in pleasant places" (Gaskell 379). Gaskell recalls that "the idea of M Paul Emanuel's death at sea was stamped on her [Charlotte's] imagination till it assumed the distinct force of reality" (379), but in order to appease her father, who wanted a happy ending, she chose "to veil the fate in oracular words, as to leave it to the

character and discernment of her readers to interpret her meaning" (Gaskell 379). With the novel's ambiguous ending, Charlotte allows each individual reader to create his own ending. The choice to allow individual interpretation in the ending of *Villette* betrays yet again the influence of Charlotte's Protestant values. Furthermore, Charlotte quite possibly intended for Paul had to die because he was and always had been a direct threat to Lucy's Protestantism, and therefore to her independence of mind.

If in nothing else, Charlotte succeeded in showing that "Men and women never struggle so hard as when they struggle alone, without witness, counsellor, or confidant; unencouraged, unadvised, and unpitied" (*Shirley*, 158). Yet, she saw no alternative to solitude that does not compromise female independence and autonomy. That despite the misery of loneliness, Lucy Snowe clings to solitude, shows the extent to which a woman must sacrifice for independence. It is no wonder Charlotte writes that "peril, loneliness, an uncertain future, are not oppressive evils, so long as the frame is healthy and the faculties are employed; so long, especially, as Liberty lends us her wings, and Hope guides us by her star" (*Villette* 117). Charlotte's advocacy of independence of mind, which is informed by her own religious ideology, is inseparable from her concept of what a single woman should be. Solitude may leave Lucy lonely, but she must cling to her solitude in order to avoid rejection, and most importantly, to maintain independence. This dilemma informs an unmarried woman's choice to remain single. Single life may offer some sorrows, but as Anne Brontë's work shows, the alternative often promises greater sorrows.

Chapter 3

Marriage and Spiritual Autonomy in the Novels of Anne Brontë

Although Charlotte Brontë's work provides a survey of all the courses an unmarried woman can follow, she does not fully explore the option of marriage. If her heroines marry, their story ends with their marriage, and the reader is left to surmise that their troubles are over. Through Anne Brontë's two novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), we are given a closer look at the marriage answer to redundancy, finding that a married woman's future is often much more dismal than unmarried life. The miserable married women of Anne's novels serve as apt foils to the independent single women of Charlotte's. Even the agonizing loneliness of *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe seems preferable to the oppressive married life of Helen Huntingdon from *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

As I have previously illustrated, those on Sir William Rathbone Greg's side of the redundant women debate argued that marriage was a woman's ultimate purpose, for "the essentials of a woman's being" are that "they are supported by, and they minister to men" (53). Both Brontës challenge the idea that marriage is the best option for women, though in different ways. While Charlotte Brontë portrays singleness as freedom, Anne Brontë chooses instead to show that for women, marriage means bondage. In doing so, Anne looks at the reasons women marry and the consequences of these motivations. Like Charlotte, Anne's Protestantism informs how she thinks about gender relations. But as the more religious writer, Anne felt that the most serious implication of marriage for

women was not the loss of physical autonomy, but rather the loss of spiritual autonomy. What Charlotte hints at through comparing gender relations to Protestant critiques of Catholicism, Anne illustrates clearly: marriage compromises a woman's individual relationship with God. In following the pattern of unhappy married women in Anne's novels, compared with the independence of unmarried women throughout both Brontës' works, the reader is inclined to agree that "Marriage *may* change your circumstances for the better, but…it is far more likely to produce a contrary result" (*Tenant* 318).

Anne Brontë's second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was immediately controversial because it challenged society's idealization of traditional domestic life. The novel's narrative frame is a letter from Gilbert Markham to his brother-in-law, telling of his intrigue and romance with the mysterious Mrs. Graham, a widow who has recently moved into the vacant Wildfell Hall, in the quiet town of Linden-car. Markham's narrative is interrupted by the insertion of a lengthy passage from Mrs. Graham's diary, which reveals her true identity as Helen Huntingdon, a woman who has fled from her adulterous and abusive alcoholic husband, Arthur Huntingdon, in order to preserve her young son from his corruptive influence. Helen's diary tells of her courtship with and marriage to Huntingdon, and describes in detail the nature of his and his friends' degeneracy. Because of its engagement with betrayal, alcoholism and domestic violence, *The Tenant* scandalized its first readers, who dubbed it "vulgar," "coarse," and "brutal" (McDonagh ix). After reading *The Tenant*, Charlotte Brontë was, like the rest of Anne's audience, appalled. She wrote: "The choice of subject was an entire mistake… The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid" (C. Brontë,

Agnes Grey, appendix 178). In the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant*, Anne replies to her critics, saying that her intention was "not simply to amuse the Reader," but "to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it" (3). While admitting that "the case [of Arthur Huntingdon and his friends] is an extreme one," Anne insists, "I know that such characters do exist, and if I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain" (A. Brontë, "Preface" 4). Helen's "natural error," of course, is that she marries Huntingdon against her better judgment, and she is miserable for it. If her reader takes anything away from this novel, Anne wants it to be that for a woman, marriage is a serious decision that cannot be reversed.

It is vital that Helen secures the secrecy of her identity in Linden-car because her escape to Wildfell Hall with her son is illegal. In her introduction to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Josephine McDonagh notes that "under the law in the 1820s, even as a betrayed wife, she [Helen] has no rights to custody of her child, nor to possess her own property" (xxx). Barbara Caine explains the legal identity of an early nineteenth-century married woman:

> Legally, the status of married women was defined by the common law doctrine of coverture which dictated that when a woman married, her legal personality was subsumed by her husband… Moreover, he assumed legal rights over any property she might have at marriage and any property that came to her once she was married… The husband also had other rights in

> law: he decided the family domicile, and he had the right to correct his wife physically, albeit 'not in a violent or cruel manner', and to confine her, if necessary, to ensure her compliance with his domestic and sexual needs. Women who were unhappily married had no redress: prior to the Divorce Act of 1857, the only way to end a marriage—other than by ecclesiastical annulment—was by private Act of Parliament, which was an extremely expensive and costly undertaking. (Caine 66)

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's Arthur Huntingdon takes advantage of his legal leverage, asserting a double standard of marital fidelity. While he may do as he pleases regardless of being married, he tells Helen, "it is a woman's nature to be constant—to love one and one only blindly, tenderly, and for ever" (199). When Helen discovers Huntingdon's affair with his friend's wife, Lady Annabella Lowborough, she tells him, "we are husband and wife only in the name" (260). Despite Helen's figurative singleness, she vehemently rejects the attentions of family friend Walter Hargrave, and eventually even those of Gilbert Markham, the man she loves. Although Lord Lowborough's spouse has also been unfaithful to him, Helen cannot fully appreciate his empathy, reminding him, "you are a man, and free to act as you please" (290). Furthermore, Lowborough's financial situation allows him leverage that Helen simply does not have. His eventual divorce of Annabella is an example of the rare cases in which a divorce could be obtained at high expense.

In both of Anne's novels, she employs language of bondage to describe marriage, and juxtaposes unhappy married women with the independence of single ones. Although

much less tumultuous than *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne's first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847), also contains cautions against rushed or imprudent marriages. The storyline follows the life of Agnes Grey, a young and sheltered clergyman's daughter, who decides to become a governess in order to finally "act for myself…exercise my unused faculties…try my unknown powers… [and] earn my own maintenance" (12). After being dismissed from the care of the unruly Bloomfield children, she obtains a second governess position with the Murray family. There, she assumes responsibility over two teenage girls—the tomboyish Matilda Murray, and her older sister, the beautiful and flirtatious Rosalie Murray. For Rosalie, the idea of marriage is oppressive and confining. When Agnes's sister Mary marries the parson Mr. Richardson, Rosalie responds to the news with pitying scorn, saying Mary will be "cooped up" with "*no* hope of a change" (66). A fun-loving flirt, Rosalie "never had a fancy for living with my husband like two turtles in a nest" (150). Her conception of marriage as confining proves true when, pressured by her mother, Rosalie consents to marrying Lord Thomas Ashby. She complains that her marriage requires her "to lead the life of a nun" (161) and "to play the hermit, I suppose, for life" (156). Like *The Tenant*, *Agnes Grey* makes it clear that marriage is confining for the wife only. Rosalie explains the double standard of her husband who, although enjoys the company of other women, is exceedingly jealous of his wife's society: "*he will* do as he pleases—and I must be a prisoner and a slave" (161). In Anne's second novel, Helen Huntingdon echoes Rosalie, calling herself "a slave, a prisoner" (*Tenant* 312). Such language of bondage is used to describe marriage

throughout both of Anne Brontë's novels, reinforcing that a married woman had no legal means of escape from an unhappy marriage.

Rosalie's stagnant marriage contrasts with the freedom of independent labor represented by her governess, Agnes Grey. As I have previously asserted, the only occupation open to middle-class and upper-class women was teaching. Anne's *Agnes Grey* and Charlotte's *Jane Eyre*, largely inspired by the authors' own experiences, paint the plight of the Victorian governess. Although Anne quietly endured the struggles of her occupation, Charlotte quite openly expressed her repugnance toward it: "I *hate* and *abhor* the very thoughts of governess-ship. But I must do it" (Gaskell 125). In her *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell recalls, "teaching seemed to her [Charlotte]…as it does to most women at all times, the only way of earning an independent livelihood" (Gaskell 115). It was indeed a popular option for single women in Anne's time. According to M. Jeanne Peterson's "The Victorian Governess: Status Incongruence in Family and Society," there were about 25,000 governesses in England in 1851, the same year as the census (4). Peterson explains that at the time, the term "governess" encompassed female teachers in schools, as well as those who worked in private homes (4). For an unmarried middle-class or upper-class woman in need of income, a teaching position of some sort was the only vocation that did not compromise decorum or class status.

In providing a single woman the means to support herself, the option of becoming a governess helped to alleviate the redundant women problem; but it also created some problems of its own. As Anne Longmuir shows, the governesses "undermined class and

gender boundaries" because "her duties resembled those of the middle-class mother, while her wages resembled those of a working class man" (par. 6). Furthermore, the governess's ambiguous social status prevented her from making any real connections to those at her place of employment. In Peterson's words, "She [the governess] was a lady, and therefore not a servant, but she was an employee, and therefore not of equal status with the wife and daughters of the house" (Peterson 11). Both Brontës were clearly concerned with the questions of class, status, and belonging that surrounded the Victorian governess. In *Agnes Grey*, as well as in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, the motif of invisibility underscores the ambiguous social status of the governess characters. Agnes Grey describes how she feels around her pupils, the Murray girls, and their friends: "if their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy—as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so" (94). Because of her questionable social status, *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe is likewise "invisible." John Graham Bretton views Lucy as an "inoffensive shadow" (403), and M. Paul comments, "people in this house see you pass, and think that a colourless shadow has gone by" (226). Many are puzzled as to what to make of her, as we can see from Ginevra Fanshawe's intrigue: "Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?" (*Villette* 392). Such moments that confuse the identity of governess characters speak to the complexity of their social, gender, and class status.

As both Brontës show, governesses were often treated with suspicion and contempt, when it was not indecorous ambition, but poor financial circumstances that forced them to take their position. While the stories of Agnes Grey, Jane Eyre, and Lucy

Snowe familiarize us with the psychological condition of women who society struggles to categorize, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë gives us a more objective view of the governess, through the character of Miss Myers. Like the typical Brontë governess, Miss Myers is "a clergyman's daughter, and had been left an orphan from her childhood" (325). But this time, our heroine is not the governess, but the employer. Helen is suspicious of Miss Myers, and the reader is encouraged to share in her suspicion. According to Helen, "there was a look of guile and subtlety in her face, a sound of it in her voice. She seemed afraid of me, and would start if I suddenly approached her" (324). Helen feels it her "duty to watch and scrutinize" Miss Myers (235), and the servant, Rachel, "watched her quite as narrowly" (325). This is an example of how governesses were ostracized by both employers and servants. However, in this case, Helen and Rachel are justified in their suspicions. Miss Myers turns out to be another mistress of Arthur Huntingdon's, whom he has hired under the guise of being their son's governess. This type of situation was not uncommon, as Peterson explains. The archetypical governess is "a homely, severe, unfeminine type of woman," because, fearing the corruption of the male members of the family, women seeking a governess for their children would decline a young, attractive girl (Peterson 15). Through the character of Miss Myers, Anne combines her concerns with infidelity and the condition of the Victorian governess.

The Tenant's narrative frame structure has been criticized as disruptive and awkward, ultimately "a sign of the author's lack of maturity" and "failure to have found—unlike her sisters—an authentic voice of her own" (McDonagh xxxiv).

However, Anne's structural choices are, in fact, both purposeful and original. That Helen's narration is embedded within Markham's, comments on a society in which woman's voice was habitually contained by man's. A Protestant critique of religious hierarchy and elevation of individual interpretation are also at work in the novel's structure. As the translator of Helen's voice, Markham ultimately controls the reader's interpretation of her story.

The Tenant's narrative structure also allows for a unique layering of perspectives that neither Charlotte nor Emily's work possesses. Through the interlacing narratives of Gilbert Markham and Helen Huntingdon, the reader of *The Tenant* is given both male (or what Anne perceives as male) and female perspectives on marriage, love and spinsterhood. Josephine McDonagh notes that "descriptions of characters rely on the techniques of physiognomy throughout the novel" (xxiv). But it is more than character that Markham assesses through women's physical appearance. As a letter from a male to another male, his narrative indulges its reader in descriptions that evaluate women based on physical appearance, age, and marital status. For example, he offhandedly refers to Rachel, Helen's elderly house maid, as "the old virgin" (337). He relates his shallow infatuation with the vicar's daughter, Eliza Millward, early in the narration: "her complexion was remarkably fair and brilliant, her head small, neck long, chin well turned, but very short, lips thin and red, eyes clear hazel, quick and penetrating" (17). Physical descriptions of plain, matronly women, on the other hand, are brief. The "bewitching" (17) Eliza is contrasted with her older sister, Mary Millward, who "was several years older, several inches taller, and of a larger, coarser build" (17). Because he

does not consider her marriageable, Markham does not focus on Mary's physical appearance, instead measuring her in terms of how she has served others in her single life:

> [Mary] had patiently nursed their mother, through her last long, tedious illness, and been the housekeeper, and family drudge, from thence to the present time. She was trusted and valued by her father, loved and courted by all dogs, cats, children, and poor people, and slighted and neglected by everybody else. (17)

Since she attracts the interest of no man, Markham later remarks that Mary is "good for nothing else" but "conciliating and amusing children" (59). The contrast between descriptions of Eliza and Mary betrays the gender of our primary narrator. Furthermore, that Mary is described by her "use" to others reinforces that single women are measured by their functional value.

As I have previously argued, because women of the Brontës' time were defined by their relation to others, they were expected to be "useful" either as a wife, or through active benevolence. Markham's depiction of Jane Wilson confirms this societal view. Jane Wilson chooses an autonomous life by leaving her family to live alone in what Markham calls "a kind of closefisted, cold, uncomfortable gentility" (372). She spends her days "doing no good to others…loving no one and beloved by none—a cold-hearted, supercilious, keenly, insidiously censorious old maid" (372). According to Markham, Jane Wilson remains single because she is a snob. But her greatest offense is that she

lives completely for herself. Because she neither marries nor does any “good,” she neglects to validate her existence.

The association of single women with heartlessness or insensitivity occurs throughout Anne’s work, and is fostered by both male and female characters. A woman who declined a marriage proposal was seen as unusually callous. This is because, although marriage was seen as every woman’s fate, the surplus of women to men made proposals a rare occurrence for a woman. According to the 1851 census of Great Britain, there were over 21,000 more unmarried women between the ages of 25 and 40 than unmarried men (Willich 303). Women who received marriage proposals, particularly those without wealth or status, were considered fortunate. Rejecting a proposal could mean leaving a woman without the means to survive. For a woman to forfeit such an opportunity was considered not just foolish, but unnatural. In *Agnes Grey*, the young coquette Rosalie Murray is proud of herself for rejecting the marriage proposal of the local minister, Mr. Hatfield:

> I am delighted with myself for my prudence, my self-command, my *heartlessness*, if you please; I was not a bit taken by surprise, not a bit confused, or awkward, or foolish; I...was completely my own mistress throughout…though he came upon me all alone and unprepared, I had the wisdom, and the pride, and the strength to refuse him—and so scornfully and coolly as I did: I have good reason to be proud of that! (*Agnes Grey*, 110)

Rosalie realizes that her refusal of Hatfield makes her unusual because she lives in a society in which a woman simply does not decline the chance to become a wife. Her "*heartlessness*" makes her not just unusual, but unfeminine. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, when Helen rejects the advances of Walter Hargrave, he calls her "heartless, icy" (283), and after multiple attempts, finally concludes, "You are the most cold-hearted, unnatural, ungrateful woman I ever yet beheld!" (304). That a woman's decline of a marriage offer made her not only "unnatural," but also "heartless," shows the extent to which marriage was assumed to be every woman's fate and ultimate goal.

Anne's novels show that regardless of whether a woman wants to marry, she often feels obligated to relieve her family of her dependence. As I have pointed out, Shirley's greatest aversion to marriage is "being a burden and a bore" (*Shirley* 181). Here, Charlotte emphasizes that a married woman is a dependent of her husband. But as Anne's novels show, marriage was also the easiest way out of dependence on the family. When Helen's young friend, eighteen-year-old Esther Hargrave, declines a marriage proposal from her mother's chosen match, her mother calls her "the most ungrateful, selfish, and undutiful daughter that ever was born," and "does all she can…to make me feel myself a burden and incumbrance to the family" (370). Her brother is likewise "seriously displeased" by Esther's "absurd caprice" (317). But Helen reminds Esther that her family's displeasure is not a sufficient reason for her to marry. She tells her, "you have a *right* to the protection and support of your mother and brother, however they may seem to grudge it" (318). Helen knows firsthand that even dependence on resentful family is preferable to the bondage of marriage: "You might as well sell yourself to

slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life" (317-318).

Agnes Grey's Rosalie Murray is also swayed by the wishes of her family when she finally consents to marrying Lord Thomas Ashby. Once Rosalie finally marries Ashby, it is because her mother has decided her days of coquetry are over, and because Rosalie "*must* have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me" (104). As Sally Shuttleworth asserts, once married, Rosalie is "clearly unhappy, the victim of both of her mother's unprincipled quest for social status, and her own greed" (Shuttleworth xxiv). Rosalie's fate serves as a warning against marrying for financial reasons. Agnes notes the difference in Rosalie's appearance once married: "a space of little more than twelve months, had had the effect that might be expected from as many years, in reducing the plumpness of her form, the freshness of her complexion, the vivacity of her movements, and the exuberance of her spirits" (153). Anne would agree with Frances Power Cobbe's previously mentioned philosophy that marriage "for wealth, for position, for rank, [or] for support" are "the sources of misery and sin, not of happiness and virtue" (356). Anne's novels show that marriage is only beneficial to a woman under the right circumstances.

Another reason girls were eager to marry was to avoid the societal stigma of spinsterhood. *The Tenant*'s Esther Hargrave exclaims, "If I thought myself doomed to oldmaidenhood, I should cease to value my life" (318). If it were not for the disgrace of being an old maid, Rosalie Murray would never marry:

> If I could be always young, I would be always single. I should like to enjoy myself thoroughly, and coquet with all the world, *till I am on the*

> *verge of being called an old maid*; and then, *to escape the infamy of that*, after having made ten thousand conquests, to break all their hearts save one by marrying some high-born, rich, indulgent husband, whom, on the other hand, fifty ladies were dying to have. (*Agnes Grey* 71, emphasis added)

Annabella Lowborough also marries to avoid this stigma. She says, “If I waited for some one capable of soliciting my esteem and affection, I should have to pass my life in single blessedness” (167-168). Annabella marries a man she does not love because she fears the alternative, and she eventually has an affair. Through the fates of Rosalie and Annabella, Anne suggests that those who rush into marriage ultimately regret it. Meanwhile, the “happy” endings belong to those—such as Agnes Grey and Esther Hargrave—who patiently endure ridicule for their singleness.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall deals with one consequent of rushed or imprudent marriages that Anne knew all too well: infidelity. She felt a “duty to speak an unpalatable truth” (A. Brontë, *Tenant*); and the truth was that two of her siblings had fallen in love with married people. While Elizabeth Gaskell withholds her knowledge of Charlotte’s passion for the married M. Heger (Uglow xvii), she does, although reluctantly, include the story of Branwell Brontë’s moral decline. For two years, Anne and her brother Branwell were both employed by the Robinson family, where Branwell had an affair with the lady of the house (McDonagh xiii). According to Elizabeth Gaskell, Branwell had been “beguiled” by the much older Mrs. Lydia Robinson, a “mature and wicked woman” (193). McDonagh suggests that it was “around that time,

[that] she [Anne] recorded cryptically that she had had 'some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human nature'" (McDonagh xiv). After being dismissed by Mr. Robinson and forever separated from the woman he loved, Branwell "began his career as a habitual drunkard to drown remorse" (Gaskell 200). Anne was perhaps the closest witness to Branwell's gradual dissipation. The influence of this experience makes for a strikingly "truthful" portrayal of marital infidelity, coupled with the pitfalls of substance abuse, that we find in the character of Arthur Huntingdon.

For Anne, the most serious consequence of marriage was a woman's loss of spiritual autonomy. In *The Tenant*, Arthur Huntingdon poses both direct and indirect threats to Helen's faith. Jealous of his wife's devotion to God, Huntingdon makes several attempts to compromise Helen's piety. He tells Helen, "You are too religious…it may be carried too far…a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord" (173). This idea is crucial to understanding how marriage threatened a woman's individual spirituality. Helen finally decides to leave him not because of his affair, not because he has physically confined her, but because of his corrupting influence on her son. Huntingdon's depravity threatens the morality of his wife and child. Therefore, they must be removed from him. This motivation shows that Anne is more concerned with spiritual autonomy than physical autonomy.

The theme of solitude enhancing spiritual communion with God that we find in Charlotte's novels is also present in Anne's. The difference is that Anne explores how this is threatened by marriage. A palpable example of divine sustenance occurs when

Helen discovers her husband's affair. She explains her recovery from the shock as nothing less than divine intervention:

> My burning, bursting heart strove to pour forth its agony to God, but could not frame its anguish into prayer, until a gust of wind swept over me, which, while it scattered the dead leaves, like blighted hopes, around, cooled my forehead, and seemed a little to revive my sinking frame. Then, while I lifted up my soul in speechless, earnest supplication, some heavenly influence seemed to strengthen me within: I breathed more freely; my vision cleared; I saw distinctly the pure moon shining on, and the light clouds skimming the clear, dark sky; and then, I saw the eternal stars twinking down upon me; I knew their God was mine, and He was strong to save and swift to hear. 'I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee,' seemed whispered from above their myriad orbs… I felt He would not leave me comfortless: in spite of earth and hell I should have strength for all my trials, and win a glorious rest at last! (258)

It is Helen's experience of God through solitude in nature that leaves her "refreshed, invigorated if not composed" (258). This connection to God is broken when she enters the house and leaves nature behind: "much of my newborn strength and courage forsook me, I confess, as I entered it [the house], and shut out the fresh wind and the glorious sky" (258). The house not only represents removal from nature, but also the oppression of her married life.

Throughout *The Tenant*, Helen's moments of communion with God are habitually interrupted by men or the idea of marriage. Helen rejects the advances of Walter Hargrave by exclaiming, "If I were alone in the world, I have still my God and my religion" (284). The fusion of divine sustenance with solitude and nature reoccurs later in the novel when Huntingdon is entertaining a group of boisterous guests (his mistress included), and Helen retreats to the library. Looking out the window, she quietly observes the night sky: "One bright star was shining through, as if to promise…'they who trust in God…are never wholly comfortless'" (288). This moment is intercepted when, having just learned of his wife's affair, a disgruntled Lord Lowborough enters the room. His entrance serves as a reminder that marriage complicates a woman's relationship with God. For Anne, uninterrupted communion with and devotion to God were the greatest benefits of single life.

Individual interpretation of the Bible was important to Anne, because women were the most susceptible to the control of religious hierarchy—whether it be the clergy or their husband. Shirley and Caroline's conflicts with the "audacious and impious" (*Shirley* 99) curates of *Shirley* are in dialogue with the problems Anne lays out through characters such as *The Tenant's* dogmatic Reverand Millward and *Agnes Grey*'s Mr. Hatfield. Reverand Millward is "a man of fixed principles, strong prejudices, and regular habits, —intolerant of dissent in any shape, acting under a firm conviction that *his* opinions were always right, and whoever differed from them, must be, either most deplorably ignorant, or willfully blind" (17). We find a similar character in *Agnes Grey*'s Mr. Hatfield, the reverend of Horton Lodge, where Agnes has obtained her second

governess position. Hatfield enjoys lecturing his parish on “the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion, or to be guided by their own interpretation of Scripture” (74). Each of these men insists that his own opinion on matters of religion be blindly adopted by everyone else. They are both presented as hypocrites because, although Protestants, they deny individual interpretation.

As a solitary, elderly widow, *Agnes Grey*’s Nancy Brown is particularly susceptible to the control of male religious leaders. Mr. Hatfield instructs her, “you must come to church, where you’ll hear the scriptures properly explained, instead of sitting poring over your Bible at home” (81). She later overhears him calling her “a canting old fool” (83), and it is clear that he does not think her capable of thinking for herself. We must wonder if Hatfield’s advice to Nancy would have been the same if she were a man instead of a woman. The case of Nancy Brown shows how gender was relevant to questions of intellectual and religious autonomy.

Anne’s engagement with individual interpretation in *The Tenant* is a development of this issue in *Agnes Grey*. Much of Helen’s conflict with others results from her being a woman whose religion is founded on pure independent interpretation of the Bible. Early in her narrative, she debates with her Aunt Maxwell regarding the possibility of her influencing Huntingdon’s degeneracy. Helen “adapts and conflates” (McDonagh 428) numerous scriptures in order to prove her point. Aunt Maxwell is appalled at her niece’s radical Biblical interpretation: “is *that* the use you make of your bible?” (150). Helen is similarly criticized by Reverend Millward, not just because she steadfastly defends her

opinions on matters of morality against his own, but because she is a woman with individual beliefs. Helen's religious views are influenced by her own interpretation of gender expectations. A strong believer that "God will judge us by our own thoughts and deeds, not by what others say about us" (308), Helen denies the pressures of society (even religious circles) in dictating woman's role. That her neighbors gossip that she is Frederick Lawrence's mistress does not bother her, since God knows the truth. What is important is that God looks on the individual's heart and not how society construes and labels them. This idea comes up in Lucy Snowe and M. Paul's truce in *Villette*, which is based on the grounds that "God is good, and loves all the sincere" (516), regardless of whether they identify as Catholic or Protestant. However, Helen's point is meant to counter gender, rather than denominational, stereotyping. God does not use society's categories. He sees an individual woman, and not a member of the redundant population. This distinction is crucial to Anne, who uses the Protestant value of individualism in order to reconfigure female identity.

In illustrating a woman's limitations in marriage, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* suggests the broader implications of these limitations on society. In this way, the novel is in dialogue with both difference and sameness arguments that fueled nineteenth-century women's rights advocacy. The sameness approach argued that women and men were equally capable of contributing to society as agents in the public sphere. In John Stuart Mill's words, "Giving to women the free use of their faculties…would be that of doubling the mass of mental faculties available for the higher services of humanity" (96-97). The difference approach stressed instead that women were morally superior to men,

and therefore, beneficial to the public sphere. As I have previously noted, Barbara Caine explains, "All [feminists] accepted the idea that women were innately more chaste, compassionate, virtuous, and dutiful than men" (89). According to Caine, they "used this image of women as a means of arguing that... Their qualities and merits…were vitally needed in public organizations and in the state" (Caine 89). Depending on the situation and those they were arguing against, women's rights activists would fluctuate strategically between the difference and sameness arguments, giving their voice what Nancy Cott calls "a see-saw quality" (19-20).

Threads of both the difference and sameness arguments are woven through *The Tenant*. Helen's independence and ability to financially support not only herself, but her son, make her a case for the sameness argument. At the same time, the juxtaposition of Helen's fervent religion with the dissipation of Arthur Huntingdon is very much a dramatization of the moral superiority of women. Helen is referred to as an "angel" countless times by Huntingdon, "divine" (353) by Markham, and Hargrave tells her, "You are only half a woman—your nature must be half human, half angelic" (281). Helen's selfless actions concur with this estimation of her. From their engagement and beyond, she assumes the task of Huntingdon's moral amelioration, saying, "I shall consider my life well spent in saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue" (128). Helen's Christlike role is fully realized when she returns to Grassdale to nurse Huntingdon on his deathbed, telling him, "I would give my life to save you, if I might" (377). Huntingdon is convinced that Helen has the power to save him from eternal damnation: "I wish to God I could take you with me

now!...you should plead for me" (380). This exaggerated image of woman's morality confirms Barbara Caine's claim that the mother had become the "embodiment of piety, [and] the moral and spiritual guide" (Caine 83). However, as a woman, Helen cannot fully exercise her "divine" wisdom, because she is under the authority of her husband. Helen describes how she would "consult him [Huntingdon] in a business-like way on household affairs, deferring to his pleasure and judgment, even when I know the latter to be inferior to my own" (272). As McDonagh points out, *The Tenant* is very much a response to the tension between woman's moral and legal capabilities: "The wife's proper role in marriage was as moral guide and guardian of the family. But…her authority was curtailed by the fact that a wife's 'reverence of' and obedience to her husband…were established as principles of Scripture" (xxvii-xxviii). Both difference and sameness arguments are useful to Anne, because whether a woman is morally superior or equal to her husband, marriage could stifle her potential benefit to society.

Despite her overall depiction of marriage, let it not be understood that Anne is a misogamist. Both her novels, after all, end in what we are told to be happy marriages. But as Anne shows, the consequences of a decision are only as good as the motives that dictated it. Through the fates of Rosalie Murray, Annabella Lowborough, and Helen Huntingdon, Anne illustrates the common phenomenon of young women who marry without careful consideration, and the consequences of this irreversible decision. For Anne, there are some circumstances under which marriage is beneficial to a woman. As I have previously argued of Charlotte, Anne equalizes marriage by pairing strong-minded women with men who are in some way progressive or "feminine." Agnes Grey's

marriage to Weston is equalized in that he is a sensitive man who is kind to the poor, the elderly, and animals. With his uncompromised Protestantism and consideration of women, Weston also serves as a foil to the chauvinistic and hypocritical Mr. Hatfield. Helen's marriage to Markham following Huntingdon's death may come as more of a surprise, however, considering the sorrows she had experienced in married life. But by the end of the novel, Helen's inheritance has given her both financial and social superiority to Markham. Furthermore, Markham allows her full control of her affairs, telling her, "Do what you will with your own" (415). Josephine McDonagh asserts that in this moment, Markham "proves that he is an ideal husband by allowing Helen her own property, even though it is now legally his" (McDonagh 441). Whether or not Markham is "ideal," he is certainly more of Helen's equal than Huntingdon ever was.

Overall, Helen and Markham's happy ending does not undermine the novel's cautions against marriage. Recall that Anne's mission with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was to have "prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine" (Preface 4). In doing so, she shows the reasons why women marry, the consequences of these motivations, and the circumstances under which a "happy" marriage can exist. At the same time, she cannot get past the idea that marriage compromises a woman's spiritual autonomy. In framing the consequences of this "natural error" through the lens of her own religious ideology, she ultimately raises the question of whether Protestant individualism is not fundamentally contradicted by the institution of marriage. Anne shows that ultimately, happiness in marriage cannot be guaranteed, and for a woman, marriage was a particularly dangerous bargain.

CONCLUSION

It is evident from their work that both Brontës had a deep reverence for the Protestant principles of individual interpretation of the Bible and direct relationship with God. Their novels are concerned with all that threatens or contradicts Protestant individualism—whether it be Catholicism itself, overbearing and dogmatic religious officials, or marriage. They ultimately suggest that for a woman, the best way to ensure physical and spiritual autonomy is in single life. The first step is acknowledging that women can and should be autonomous. The Brontës reevaluate the question of woman's purpose in making their heroines' unmarried status not predetermined, but the product of their own individual choices. Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* "answers" the purpose question, not by designating the same fate to every female character, but by showing that each woman is best equipped to determine the path of her own life. *Villette* is in many ways a development of this concept of individualism. The story of Lucy Snowe and her quest for solitude suggests that even if a single woman does achieve autonomy, it will inevitably be threatened, and absolute solitude is the only way to guarantee her continued freedom. The miserable married women of Anne's novels contrast with the freedom of solitude embodied by *Villette*'s Lucy Snowe. Both Brontës were concerned with a woman's loss of physical autonomy in marriage. But for Anne, the most serious consequence of marriage was the loss of spiritual autonomy. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s Helen Huntingdon does not mind that she is physically bound to her husband, so long as he does not compromise her personal morality. In interpreting gender relations

through the lens of Protestant-Catholic doctrinal difference, the Brontës conclude that a single woman is not only a complete individual, but also a paradigm of Protestant individualism.

The issues raised by the Brontës indirectly through their novels are explicitly stated by the rhetoric of the post-1851 redundant women debates, and continued and complicated by 20th century feminism. According to Barbara Caine, "The 1850s and 1860s saw the emergence of the first women's movement in Britain, with headquarters, journals, and a host of different campaigns aimed at the emancipation of women" (88). Writing in the 1840s, the Brontës were at the cusp of this movement just as it was beginning to take form. Recall Caroline's purpose question in *Shirley*: "I shall be an old maid... I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?" (149). The unspoken questions of woman's role in society are later answered by Greg's "essentials of a woman's being" (53). That women were thought of in terms of functional and economical value, as suspected by Charlotte in her portrayal of "the matrimonial market" in *Shirley* (329), is confirmed by the language of the redundant woman debate of the later nineteenth century. The struggles faced by unmarried Brontë heroines illustrate the limited options available to women. These limited options are discussed by later social reformers such as Cobbe, Parkes, and Boucherett: "marry or starve, sink or swim" (Boucherett 57). Anne's depiction of mercenary motives for marriage, and the detrimental moral consequences of such marriages, is reinforced by Cobbe's statement that marriages "for wealth, for position, for rank, [or] for support" are "the sources of misery and sin, not of happiness and virtue" (356). Through writing their

own observations and experiences as single women into their work, the Brontës illustrate what is made explicit by social reformers and politicians by the end of the century.

The Brontës anticipate the issues that fueled the post-1851 census redundant women debate, which in turn is continued and complicated not only by late nineteenth-century thought, but also by women's liberation movements and feminism into the 20th and 21st centuries. Novelists of the later nineteenth century took up the topic of women's rights, underscoring the injustices suggested by the Brontës. George Gissing's 1893 novel *The Odd Women*, for example, directly engages women's issues through "bluestocking" protagonists who work toward educating young women and preparing them for professional life. The novel also includes a young girl who faces detrimental consequences after marrying for financial security. Anne Brontë's novels inform such depictions of marriage found in later works. *The Odd Women* features several passages of heated debate on women's rights, and although they admit there is still much work to be done, the protagonists agree, "It's better to be a woman, in our day" (Gissing 97). We may be inclined to say the same of our time. But conversation on woman's role in society by no means ends in the nineteenth century. As society's definition of gender, marriage, and personal autonomy continue to change, the questions raised by the Brontës remain relevant today.

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