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“Making the Prude” in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

Julia D. Kent

In British nationalist discourses of the nineteenth century, Englishness is often defined in strong opposition to features that the English, particularly the middle classes, associated with the French.¹ In the English novel, however, comparisons of French and English national character serve less to draw clear distinctions between these cultures than to test the salience of various national traits.² This essay considers Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* in the context of a pattern that recurred in English novels of the second half of the nineteenth century — the structural pairing of Englishwomen with a cast of villainous French actresses. In Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, the Anglo-French Becky Sharp is placed beside the guileless Amelia Sedley; in *Jane Eyre*, both Jane and Rochester compare Jane’s self-discipline and discretion with the moral license of the French actress Céline Varens, Rochester’s lover in Paris; and in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea quietly suffers through her marriage to Casaubon while Laure, the actress whose story is recounted by Lydgate, calmly murders her husband because she finds him “too fond” of her. These oppositions are versions of what was perceived as a more general opposition between English and French culture — the English love of the home against French cynicism toward intimate communities, but it focuses on concepts of the roles of

¹Many examples of these oppositions can be found in Linda Colley’s well-known argument that Britons created a cohesive national identity in opposition to France and the French. While Colley focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many nationalized oppositions that take hold in this period persist in English nationalist discourse throughout the nineteenth century. More recently, Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever (12–13) have argued that English and French culture were less strongly opposed in the aesthetic sphere, where cultural and literary forms were freely exchanged throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the case of *Villette* the situation is further complicated by the presence of fictional Labassecurian culture, which is distinguished from the French (as of Vashti, Zélie St. Pierre, and Père Silas), as well as from possible Spanish influences of the olive-complexioned M. Paul Emmanuel.

²Throughout this essay I use the term “English” to describe English novels and novelists under consideration, unless “British” is specifically used to denote them in cited texts. “English” is the term used more frequently in *Villette*.

women within these cultures: whereas the Englishwoman protects the home and family in accordance with the Victorian “separate-spheres” ideology, the French actress offers her sexuality for mass consumption.³

Yet Victorian novelists’ treatment of French actresses is as complex as their treatment of English domestic ideology. While Becky Sharp may ultimately use acting for her own ends, her character also underscores the vapid obedience of the thoroughly English Amelia Sedley. In *Middlemarch*, the French actress Laure serves, like Céline, as a double to the British protagonist, since Laure’s choice to murder her husband provides both a contrast and a revealing analogy with Dorothea’s growing disenchantment with Casaubon and her suppressed wish that he should die.

The power of Frenchwomen is indirectly presented by the contrasting treatment of British colonial subjects with respect to naturalized gender traits. In *Jane Eyre* Céline Varens shares a transgressive sexuality with Bertha Mason Rochester — a sexuality from which Jane distinguishes herself in comparing herself to both women — yet Céline and her French daughter Adèle contrast quite strikingly with Bertha in other respects. While Bertha madly enforces her claims upon Rochester, Céline (as narrated by Rochester) performs mercenary manipulations of multiple lovers; Céline is in control, Bertha is not. This marked difference allows Jane to navigate a middle course between emotion and cool rationalism. Once she becomes Rochester’s wife, she moderates Bertha’s passion with self-control, but she also distinguishes herself from Céline’s lack of affection as both lover and mother.

Yet in *Jane Eyre* the theatricality of Céline and her daughter is also linked with enhanced perception. Whereas Bertha’s escape from behind the curtain that Rochester draws over her and her destruction of Jane’s wedding veil underscore the performed nature of self-representation in others as well as in herself, Céline and Adèle are associated with the aesthetics of theater as they seek to control or decipher acts of represen-

³A number of recent studies have examined the way Victorian novelists handle France within a more general framework. In his catalogue of Victorian novels’ treatments of France, for example, John Rignall (242–43) has noted that France is predominantly associated with two forms of desire from which Victorian standards of moral restraint distinguish themselves: Revolutionary violence (Dickens’s *A Tale of Two Cities* and Eliza Lynn Linton’s *The True History of Joshua Linton, Christian and Communist*) and sexual transgression (*Jane Eyre*, *David Copperfield*, *The Professor*, and *Middlemarch*). Clare A. Simmons (161) contends that Victorian novels associate French revolutionary violence with a lack of civilization. My essay questions these accounts by showing that French character is associated with forms of artistry and self-control that many Victorians ambivalently admire, especially when they are enacted by Frenchwomen.

tation. Narrating the story of his relationship with the actress, Rochester endows Céline with a self-possession that makes him a dupe of her performances. In a tone of cool chagrin Rochester reports that Céline had always complimented his "beauté male" but that she "waxed rather brilliant on [his] physical defects" for the benefit of another lover (164). According to Rochester, there is no nature of which Céline's affects are a reflection; even her distress upon learning that Rochester has overheard her scheming is described as a series of representational strategies — "screams, hysterics, prayers, protestations, convulsions" — whose falseness is underscored by their rapid readjustment to the cause of regaining his patronage (164). In the child Adèle, who in Jane's words has inherited from her mother a "superficiality of character, hardly congenial to the English mind" (165), theatrical finesse is accompanied by the ability to see through the performances of English characters. With a precociousness Jane finds unnatural, Adèle manifests a "genuine French scepticism" toward Rochester's fairy tales, "denominating Mr. Rochester 'un vrai menteur,' and assuring him that she made no account whatever of his 'Contes de fée'" (300).

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë controls the degree to which Jane can share the qualities associated with the French actress. At the conclusion of the novel, Jane adopts Adèle and, as it were, tames her, replacing the child's French characteristics with a discreet English femininity: "As she grew up, a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects; and when she left school, I found in her a pleasing and obliging companion: docile, good-tempered, and well-principled" (499–500).

Yet Brontë's *Villette* offers a more sustained and complex distinction between French and English models of character. The novel explores an idea more vaguely suggested by Jane's failure to acknowledge the effect of her forced consistency of character in comparison to Céline's role-playing: strong forms of character regulation promote an unreflective relationship to the self. The following sections examine two aspects of this pattern in *Villette*: the Englishwoman's character tends to be constrained within the home, the nation, and the discourses that underwrite them, yet theatricality can lead to a self-fashioning that breaks through these constraints.

Containing Bretton

In spite of Brontë's well-known patriotism, most famously manifest in her life-long admiration for the Duke of Wellington, recent criticism

has given little attention to the novel's understanding of British national character in relation to France, even though the novel contains several caricatured French figures, such as Mademoiselle St. Pierre and Rosine Matou who work at the Pensionnat de Demoiselles where *Villette's* protagonist, Lucy Snowe, takes a position. One likely reason for this omission is that the greater part of the novel is located not in France but in a fictional town based on Brussels, the city where Charlotte and Emily Brontë spent two years studying French. There is also a great deal of slippage between allusions to France and the Continent, which is apparent in Lucy's tendency to make generalizations about Frenchness while acknowledging that the object of her scrutiny is not really French. While observing, for example, the clothing of M. Paul Emmanuel, Lucy notes: "Like a true Frenchman (though I don't know why I should say so, for he was of a strain neither French nor Labassecourien), he had dressed for the 'situation' and the occasion" (425). Yet the novel's willing exposure of such inconsistencies in its understanding of France actually makes it an interesting topic of analysis.

Unlike many Victorian travel narratives, *Villette* does not present the departure from England as a break from the familiar. The novel's narrator, Lucy Snowe, is alien in her English frameworks as well. A poor relation to the novel's English characters, she practices ethnography on her own kin, recording social patterns in which she does not actively participate. Lucy pays particularly close attention to the various positions of women within the family, as in the opening lines of the novel:

My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean and ancient town of Bretton. Her husband's family had been residents there for generations, and bore, indeed, the name of their birthplace — Bretton of Bretton: whether by coincidence, or because some remote ancestor had been a personage of sufficient importance to leave his name to his neighbourhood, I know not. (Brontë 1979: 61)

The association of Bretton with Britain presents the family as a miniature version of the national social body, a representation found in nationalist discourses. Mrs. Bretton is tied to her national and family homes not in her own right but through her husband and through patriarchal name-transference.

As an outsider to this family, Lucy remains attuned to the ways in which the connotations of "Bretton" fail to capture the diversity of individuals bearing this name. Throughout the chapters set in England, the names ironically point to a lack of correlation between individuals and their places of origin. National and racial typologies are used to delineate

this difference: Mrs. Bretton is "dark for an Englishwoman" (61), while her son, Graham is distinguished by the "fair Celtic (not Saxon) character of his good looks" (73). Mr. Bretton's "friend and distant relation" (62) Mr. Home is himself Scottish and French, and impatient to leave England which has "become wholly distasteful to him" (87). The addition of the term "friend" to "distant relation" also undermines the natural bonds within this "national" family, revealing that a family bond may not imply a strong relationship. Thus the Bretton family appears to contain as much of the Continent as it does of England: the Celtic races belong to the Continent as much as to Britain; Mr. Home feels more at home "settled amongst his maternal kinsfolk on the Continent" (87); and it is not clear which home his daughter Paulina longs for: "no furrowed face of adult exile, longing for Europe at Europe's antipodes, ever bore more legibly the signs of home sickness than did her infant visage" (69).

Lucy's passage from England to the Continent disturbs even more forcefully the belief in the cohesiveness of Britain and its distinction from cultures outside it. As Dominic Rainsford (2002) and Christopher Keirstead (2005) have observed, the border between France and England is fraught with particular intensity, representing the line through which nationalist differences can be both questioned and affirmed. During her voyage from Margate to Villette, Lucy presents herself as a nexus of national dichotomies and, for the first time, identifies herself as a member of the nation that had marginalized her. This moment of national affiliation is occasioned by an encounter with a seasoned continental traveler, Ginevra Fanshawe, who dismisses Lucy's seasickness by affirming that she herself is "quite blasée about the sea and all that" (114). This casual relationship to travel and comfort with displacement is specifically associated with France and the French language:

"And where are you now?" I inquired.

"Oh! At — *chose*," said she.

Now Miss Ginevra Fanshawe . . . only substituted this word "*chose*" in temporary oblivion of the real name. It was a habit she had: "*chose*" came in at every turn in her conversation — the convenient substitute for any missing word in any language she might chance at the time to be speaking. French girls often do the like; from them she had caught the custom. "*Chose*," however, I found, in this instance, stood for Villette — the great capital of the great kingdom of Labassecour. (115–16)

Along with Lucy's observation that French is the language that Ginevra speaks "when about to say something specially heartless and perverse" (155), Ginevra's substitution of the French noun "thing" for the name of

her temporary home might seem to associate France with more negative forms of French deracination and characterological instability. The English connotations of *chose*, Ginevra's term for home, mark as arbitrary her relationship to national culture, a "chosen" relationship that might look affectively thin compared to Lucy's passive homesickness and sense that she goes where destiny leads her.

Yet Lucy's insistence that her life is determined by her national origins soon becomes suspect since her national affiliation emerges as a studied practice rather than an inherent national trait. Moreover, her adherence to national gender ideals prompt her to deny patterns of experience that do not conform to these ideals.

In contrast with the forms of theatricality attributed to Continental actors, including Ginevra, Lucy's way of inhabiting her national identity is strongly associated with Protestant interpretations of the Bible and a secularized version of the belief in predestination. It is the discourse of "Fate" that she calls upon to explain to Ginevra that her travels are in the hands of forces outside of and beyond her. Later in the novel, Lucy will also denigrate Catholicism, with its "casuistic" and theatrical misrepresentations of life and morals. Yet as the boat approaches the shore of Labassecour (a fictional name for Belgium), Lucy begins to experience a certain pleasure upon seeing — or thinking she sees — the European continent in the distance. The scene foregrounds the pleasures of European travel (not just its dangers) and registers Lucy's difficulty identifying herself once she has left England's insular shores:

I was not sick till long after we passed Margate, and deep was the pleasure I drank in with the sea-breeze; divine the delight I drew from the heaving channel-waves, from the sea-birds on their rides, from the white sails on their distance, from the quiet, yet beclouded, sky, overhanging all. In my reverie, methought I saw the continent of Europe, like a wide dream-land, far away. Sunshine lay on it, making the long coast one line of gold; tiniest tracery of clustered town and snow-smooth pasturage and veiny stream, embossed the metal-bright prospect. For background, spread a sky, solemn and dark-blue, and — grand with imperial promise, soft with tints of enchantments — strode from north to south a God-bent bow, an arch of hope.

Cancel the whole of that, if you please, reader — or rather let it stand, and draw thence a moral — an alternative, text-hand copy —

Day-dreams are the delusions of the demon. (117–18)

The self-cancellation in the direct address to the reader dramatizes the ways in which British self-making demands a stubborn consistency, a

ritual rejection of new patterns of experience. It is also important that this occurs at one of the moments at which the narrative is signaled as a literary text.

The idea that *Villette* reveals the British self, and the British woman, to be a social rather than a natural formation has been complexly theorized by James Buzard. In his influential work on the "autoethnography" of English fiction, Buzard argues that British novelists represent cultures, including their own, through the lens of ethnographic observation, a perspective that requires a "controlled self-alienation," or a form of participant-observation that involves a chiasmic movement between positions outside and inside (10). Buzard claims that in *Villette*, Lucy Snowe's voyage to the Continent allows her to elaborate a version of English culture against the monitory French characteristics, one example of which he finds in Ginevra's attraction to a home that it is not a place but a "thing." Buzard's study shows how the novel, and British fiction more generally, call into question the essentialized conceptions of the British self that were idealized in other sites of British culture. Yet this treatment of *Villette* elides Brontë's use of French cultural traits and gender roles to question the nationalized gender ideals attributed to British women. If Ginevra's cultural stance is in this scene presented as dangerously unrooted, and prompts Lucy to calibrate her own position between automatic devotion to her national ideals and detachment from them, they also lay the groundwork for a revaluation, later in the novel, of the Continental woman's more rebellious relationship to her national and family homes.

Villette's engagement with cosmopolitan ideals has been explored by Amanda Anderson who argues that Victorian novels give a complex assessment (less negative than many theories of the novel have suggested) of a range of attitudes, practices and aesthetic forms of modern "detachment" (7, 31–32).⁴ In *Villette*, these forms include sociological observation of cultural norms and gender roles, but they also extend to surveillance, a form of observation practiced both by Lucy and Madame Beck, the director of the *pensionnat* where Lucy works and resides; to

⁴In Victorian intellectual life, Anderson shows, this Enlightenment ideal continues to underwrite many of the goals of science and critical reason; in projects of self-cultivation and character-building, it also animates practices such as *Bildung*, cosmopolitanism, and stoicism. While Anderson compellingly demonstrates that in *Villette* various forms of detachment cannot be located within a single culture, she also notes the failure of Lucy's attempts to describe English culture and individuals in terms of a coherent or idealized set of national traits.

cosmopolitan affiliation with those outside one's culture of origin; and to aesthetic practices such as theater. I support Anderson's view that the novel has particularly strong implications for our understanding of Victorian conceptions of gender, placing a middle-class British woman within the forms of modern distance that were supposedly reserved to men of the same class, ostensibly the managers of the public sphere. But I would also note that this framework is particularly relevant to Victorian novels that compare French and English national characters, especially with respect to the limitations imposed on women by tradition, custom, and cultural norms. Those Victorians who were invested in exposing the moral problems associated with English national ideals are particularly drawn to the possibilities of French models of character.

The Theater of National Character

A number of critical studies have demonstrated the power of theater to disrupt or resist novelistic forms and to question the Victorian novel's realist ambitions. In particular, Joseph Litvak (1992) and Lynn Voskuil (1995) present theatricality as a form that questions cultural patterns, including those of gender, as natural or real.⁵ These studies provide an important starting point from which to examine the specific nature of Brontë's treatment of gender and nationality as linked ideals. Just as the novel presents privacy, modesty, and commitments to the domestic sphere as enacted characteristics, neither natural, in Voskuil's terms, nor upheld by the novel's realist codes, theater underscores the ways in which national character is performed.

In the context of the oppositions I have been tracing, theater has particular powers when placed beside what Litvak would call the "antitheatrical" stances of Lucy Snowe. In her famous letter to George Henry Lewes following the latter's review of *Jane Eyre*, Brontë forges a specific

⁵Contesting Foucault's distinction between "spectacle" and "surveillance," Litvak argues that the nineteenth-century novel "installs" theater within the home. At the same time, however, he recuperates some of theater's subversive power by showing that theatrical structures can both enable and subvert "coercive cultural mechanisms" (vii–xiii and 75–107). Voskuil makes a strong claim for the power of Brontëan theater to subvert gender norms, arguing that Brontë resists the expectation that women actors embody Nature. She compares Brontë's views of women and theatricality to those of G. H. Lewes, whose "idealistic" theory of performance overlaps with mid-Victorian theories of sexuality. More specifically, Voskuil writes that both discourses "postulated an authentic subjectivity whose inner essences were categorically distinct from its outer enactments" (419–20).

link between French theater and gender transgression. Lewes had given the novel glowing praise, yet he also wrote: "There is . . . too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating library" (692). Responding to Lewes in her own role as Curren Bell, Charlotte Brontë returned the criticism with an arch comment about his preference for Jane Austen's narrative restraint: "If I ever do write another book, I *think* I will have nothing of what you call 'mélodrame'; I think so, but I am not sure" (Brontë 2000: 10). She continues with sardonic quotations from Lewes's review: "I *think* too I will endeavor to follow the counsel which shines out of Miss Austen's 'mild eyes'; 'to finish more, and be more subdued'; but neither am I sure of that." Brontë seems to have a droll awareness that her correspondent, believing (or perhaps not believing) that she is Mr. Curren Bell, has counseled her to more closely imitate a female novelist. She pushes the sly jokes further, remarking that she finds the world of Austen too confined, preferring that of George Sand, who "has a grasp of mind which if I cannot fully comprehend, I can very deeply respect" (10). In this provocative letter, Brontë takes over the role of the French actress: she changes the language in which Lewes writes the word "melodrama" in his review from English to French and aligns herself with a French writer known for adopting a male persona in the public sphere, one that undermines the gendered and national standards that Lewes uses in his praise for Austen.

The letter confirms the arguments of Litvak and Voskuil in so far as it links theatricality with the violation of Victorian gender roles. At the same time, the fact that Brontë translates "melodrama" from Lewes's English into French adds another dimension to this rebellion, one that points to a striking pattern in *Villette*. Throughout the novel, Lucy repeatedly turns to French in narrating her appreciation for theater. The first time that Lucy's speech is rendered in French is also the first occasion on which she is given the opportunity to do a kind of theater, to mount the *estrade*, or platform, on which the teachers of Madame Beck's school lecture to their students. Lucy has hung back from the opportunity to teach, concerned about her inability to master the French language and to control the rebelliousness of Continental students. Here the presentation of Madame Beck's speech in English throws into relief the French of Lucy's reply:

"Will you," said she, "go backward or forward?" indicating with her hand, first, the small door of communication with the dwelling house, and then the great double portals of the classes or schoolrooms.

"En avant," I said. (141)

In a parallel scene, when M. Paul exhorts her to participate in the school play, Lucy also gives her affirmative reply in French: “A thousand objections rushed to my mind . . . but looking up at M. Paul, and seeing in his vexed, fiery, and searching eye, a sort of appeal behind all its menace — my lips dropped the word ‘oui’” (203).

The dialogues are marked by a sudden splitting of Lucy’s voice: in both, she adopts a French voice that sounds different from her narration, which she elsewhere gives in English unless she is rendering the voices of Continental characters. In the second scene, moreover, Lucy registers an uncanny sense of distance from her own voice: it is Lucy’s lips, and not Lucy, that drop the word “oui.” Lucy comments on this pattern explicitly when she describes the beginning of her performance in the play: “That first speech was the difficulty; it revealed to me this fact, that it was not the crowd I feared, so much as my own voice” (209). As soon as she begins to perform, however, Lucy betrays a well-monitored delight in her own theatrical performance, which draws upon “Continental” teaching practices of stringent discipline and dramatic humiliations of students, as when she shuts the disobedient Blanche Melcy — of the “pale face, hair like night, broad strong eyebrows, decided features, and a dark, mutinous, sinister eye” — in the broom closet (143–44). Lucy’s admiration for theatricality pervades the novel, although she works to control it by subordinating it to forms of Protestant inwardness. Hence her ambivalent response to Madame Beck’s calmly acted confidence in front of the parents of her school’s pupils: “little Jesuit though she might be, yet I clapped the hands of my heart, and with its voice cried ‘brava!’ as I watched her able bearing, her skilled management, her temper and firmness” (165). As with the disembodied lips, Lucy’s voice is here again oddly represented through a corporeality that makes the acting self a separate entity: her “heart” has both “hands” and a “voice,” as though this new experience required its own body. Also striking is the way this description tempers this appreciation for theater within a quaint Protestant modesty.

If the narration first insists on Lucy’s passive relation to all things theatrical, she later recognizes theatricality as a more reflexive and comprehensive mode of observing the self. What Lucy finds in this public and French role are not so much other, culturally contingent forms and typologies but rather ways of standing back from cultural forms themselves. On the morning of Mme Beck’s fête, Lucy finds herself cast in the leading role by M. Paul, the teacher of literature with whom there develops a tense and antagonistic flirtation that strongly resembles *Jane Eyre’s*

erotic sparring with Rochester. Strikingly, M. Paul's choice of Lucy for the production is described as a violation of her attempt to read privately — he interrupts, as it were, her adherence to already-written narratives, first with a theatrical aside:

two eyes first vaguely struck upon, and then hungrily dived into me.

"C'est cela!" said a voice. "Je la connais: ç'est l'Anglaise. Tant pis. Toute Anglaise, et par conséquent, toute bégueule qu'elle soit — elle fera mon affaire, ou je saurai pourquoi." (201–202)

This erotic invasion of Lucy's "sanctuary" (201) is inspired by a penetration to which M. Paul indirectly refers in his own theatrical aside, his phrenological reading of Lucy's skull on the night of her arrival in *Villette*. Paul's declaration, "Je la connais" ("I know her") is further explained when he tells Lucy that her skull bore the signs of unique theatrical talents: "Play you must. I will not have you shrink, or frown, or make the prude. I read your skull, the night you came; I see your moyens: play you can; play you must" (202). Paul's conclusion also confirms Lucy's pleasure in acting; he goes beyond the obvious surface of an enacted interiority just as he draws her away from the textuality that constitutes that surface. Paul has read Lucy's prudishness as a persona but phrenology helps him to distinguish between individual qualities and a national type. This attention to the particular individual gives credence to his sense that Lucy's prudish English traits are mere artifice, an association that comes through with particular vividness in his English calque "make the prude" (*faire la prude*).

Paul's claim that aptitude for theatricality is an individual rather than a national trait, a claim supported by the scene that follows, marks a shift away from enactments of gendered and national types, toward a more flexible model of the self, one that stresses personal vocation through productive self-fashioning and active choice based upon a broad range of experience. In this episode Lucy not only accepts the opportunity of new experience but also plays an active role in the creation of her role, departing, on the one hand, from English discretion and reserve, while refusing, on the other, to act her part as Paul prescribes it to her. When acting in the school play, she plays the role of a man, suitor to a character played by Ginevra, while retaining parts of her feminine dress, thus practicing an artistic form associated with the French while also signaling her determination to retain some constituents of her own persona. The scene presents the individual as capable of inhabiting multiple cultural types, none of them determinative, and presents theater as a mode through which different cultural forms can be integrated.

If here, theater looks neither English nor French, it is the French language that marks the particular transgressions that Lucy performs. In the play, Lucy acts the part of a fop, her idea of one of Ginevra's admirers, Count de Hamal, while she draws her inspiration from another admirer, the Englishman Dr. John, whom Ginevra has ridiculed for unrefined gallantry, calling him *ours*, the French for "bear." Here, as in previous scenes, Lucy's French reflections take on a pointed double sense. "I know not what possessed me," observes Lucy, "but somehow, my longing was to eclipse the 'Ours:' i.e., Dr. John" (210). The desire to eclipse the "ours" puns on the very condition of living within the national collectives that Lucy had earlier claimed as her own.

The episode is one of several sustained experiments with the pleasures and possibilities of theatrical expression, and will be repeated again in the scene in which Lucy attends the play in which Vashti, the actress based on the famous French Jewish actress, Rachel Félix, performs.⁶ Here as in the scene in which she observes Vashti with divided admiration and fear, Lucy promptly negates her pleasure, and more importantly, her reflections on the appeal of theater:

Cold, reluctant, apprehensive, I had accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself. A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and the longing must be put by; and I put them by, and fastened them in with the lock of a resolution that neither Time nor Temptation has since picked. (211)

This scene, like many others, repeats the moment where Lucy annuls the daydreams that are the "delusions of the demon." Here, however, it is significant that pleasure is not exorcised as an external threat or demon, but is rather fully owned as part of the self, as something that "had revealed itself as part of [Lucy's] nature." Importantly, this pleasure is aligned with a secular conception of vocation: as a "gift" and a "new-found faculty," Lucy's ability for acting is valued for a certain productivity that she rejects in favor of continuing as a "mere looker-on at life." In this provocative moment, Lucy's national and religious self-conception is shown

⁶Lucy's descriptions of Vashti emphasize less her Frenchness than her transcendence of any familiar categories: "She was a study of such nature as had not encountered my eyes yet"; she is "neither of woman nor of man," for "in each of her eyes sat a devil" (338).

to limit another strongly valued Victorian notion, that of self-fashioning. It is therefore unsatisfactory to suggest that Brontëan "repression" discounts "authentic" feeling: here, Brontë is putting into competition two *different* models of selfhood and allowing one to prevail at the expense of the other. This self-cancellation is not represented, however, as a necessary compromise, for Lucy's account sharply underlines the paucity of what is gained by her choice: inertia and spectatorship. It calls into question her earlier attempts to establish interiority or reticence as a distinctly English ideal.

The experimentation with Lucy's difficulties in reconciling different types of experience under various cultural categories leads to psychic divisions, and an unraveling of her narrative particularly in moments of isolation. Unable to place herself, "immeshed in a network of turns unknown" (235–36), Lucy reports delusions and states of attenuated consciousness, a condition in which "the divorced mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite" (237). This split is signaled through the appearance of the ghostly nun, Justine Marie, a "buried" character who makes visible to others her forgotten presence in unwelcome visitations, and of the "crétin" who lives an insulated and isolated life in the *pensionnat*.

Yet this splitting and doubling is not the same in *Villette* as in *Jane Eyre*, where doubles such as Bertha and Céline act out transgressive desires that Jane never owns.⁷ In *Villette*, Justine Marie and the *crétin* do not represent violations of cultural or gender norms, but rather hypostatize a state of entrapment within the structures that organize power in *Villette*. If Mrs. Bretton represents the British woman's fusion with her familial home, Justine Marie and the *crétin* find themselves literally entombed within social structures identified by Lucy as limiting to women, the monastery and Madame Beck's *pensionnat*. Lucy's relation to these figures deviates in an important way from prominent structures of Victorian characterization, including those used by Brontë in *Jane Eyre*. Typically, a transgressive double who represents certain aspects of the female protagonist's psyche prompts the protagonist to monitor her behavior more assiduously, seeking a distinction: Bertha, Céline, and Adèle lead Jane to insist on her adherence to the rules of propriety that govern women

⁷Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar devote considerable attention (404, 412, 435–36) to the role of doubles in Charlotte Brontë's fiction, characters who either exemplify or violate codes of Victorian femininity. In *Villette*, these doubles include Polly, who takes pleasure in making sacrifices for her father and for Graham Bretton, and Ginevra, who resists and actively dismisses expectations of sexual and social modesty.

of a certain class and nationality. In *Villette*, on the other hand, Lucy's confrontations with monitory doubles prompt her movement *away* from her habitual domestic persona. Lucy's decision to leave the "wilderness" of English rural life is immediately preceded by the death of the invalid Miss Marchmont, a female character self-imprisoned within the home, and both Lucy's choice to perform in the vaudeville and her attendance of Vashti's performance are immediately preceded by sightings of the nun. In a remarkable shift, the positions occupied by Brontë's earlier cultural others are taken up by a range of characters, both English and Continental, whose psychological and material limitations unevenly regulate their lives.

Up to the end of the novel, Lucy faults Continentals for a theatricality that serves to manipulate others, and a lack of significant engagement with any one of the communities in which they act out their social roles. Yet while such nationalized characterizations remain asymmetrically applied, Lucy increasingly comes to characterize the traits of her British companions in terms of surface rather than depth, thereby contesting the metaphorical system in which Continentals occupy an unreliable surface and the English an "insularity" protected from the false manipulation of forms. Whereas Dr. John had once appeared as a model of a "true young English gentleman" (125) in relation to Continental fops whose clothing makes claims to such a masculine ideal, Lucy begins to register Dr. John's ideal gentlemanliness as a partially "public" view (273). And while Continental characters are consistently faulted for their "spectacles" in education, religion, and morality, Lucy also notes that in *Villette*, citizens are "infinitely less worried about appearance, and less emulous of display" than they are in "dear Old England" (450). These reversals become the occasion for Lucy to scrutinize the highly moralized traits of privacy and interiority attributed to British women and to inhabit an alternative — the actress — that affords significant new powers of self-representation.

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