Victorian Women Writers, Radical Grandmothers, and the Gendering of God

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Charlotte Brontë was fourteen when she wrote “The Violet,” spoken by her Angrian hero, the Marquis of Douro. Cataloguing famed classical writers, the Marquis desires to be numbered in a modern “Parnassas.” When Douro asks Nature to reveal herself, she appears as a goddess with raiment made from “mountain hoar,” “plume-like trees,” and an “azure river.” After a description of the sartorial flair exhibited by the “Mighty Mother,” the deity grants the Marquis’s request for eternal renown (CB, Poems #51; MS. Bonnell 127, poem 102). In 1837 in another version of the Great Mother motif, Brontë wrote a lyric poem under the guise of Thomas Aird, a Scotsman and sometime contributor to Blackwood’s Magazine. The young Charlotte portrays Aird as a bounder who begins the poem with a hair-raising apostrophe: “ Gods of the old mythology, arise in gloom and storm” (Poems #90). As Brontë imagines him, the scandalous Aird bellows that he will not allow pagan deities such as Baal and the “sons of Anakim” to intimidate him when he meets them in hell after his demise (Poems #90). Then, more respectfully, he appeals to the goddesses Ashtaroth and Semele to “Picture forth thy Goddess story” (CB, Poems #90).
Marianne Thormälen astutely argues that Brontë’s treatment of religion is so dynamic and ambiguous that critics need not “rea[d] against the grain” (5). I suggest, however, that Brontë’s writing is dynamic because, despite trying to suppress it, she herself wrote against the grain of Christian patriarchy, calling forth the “goddess-story” in one form or another all her life. As “The Violet” and “Gods of the old mythology” reveal, however, by the age of ten, she knew that wearing a male mask would aid her in telling the “goddess” and other stories. As Christine Alexander points out, the adolescent Brontë created a sophisticated repertoire of male voices that afforded her vicarious access to masculine privilege, aiding her in becoming a keen competitor with the brotherhood of authors (Early Writings 227; “Autobiography and Juvenilia” 154–55). But notwithstanding the young writer’s use of the male mask, while “The Violet” is written in the voice of the Marquis of Douro, at the end of the lyric the teenage prodigy boldly signs her own name as the author of that persona and his oeuvre. As with “The Violet,” Brontë’s own outsized personality exceeds the male persona’s masculinity in “Gods of the old mythology.”

The use of a male mask, of course, held over into the novels Brontë published as an adult—she remained concealed behind the pseudonym of “Currer Bell” as long as she could and was angry when G. H. Lewes publicly revealed her identity. Brontë received a striking example of masking from her father, who described to Elizabeth Gaskell a pedagogical tool he had used with the children when they were very young. Believing that they “knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from under cover of the mask” (Gaskell 48). Catechizing Brontë, he queried, “what [is] the best book in the world,” to which she replied, “The Bible.” He directed her to name “the next best” and she answered with Romantic precision, “The Book of Nature” (48). Gaskell remarks of this experiment on the sisters, “Wild, strong hearts, and powerful minds, were hidden under an enforced propriety and regularity of demeanour and expression, just as their faces had been concealed by their father, under his stiff, unchanging mask” (61). Gaskell’s statement is telling in its reflexivity as well as its understanding of this odd example of Patrick Brontë’s patriarchy.

Recognizing that Brontë’s reasons for using a male mask are manifold, I suggest that Brontë vicariously presented herself as one capable of calling forth the gods (“Gods”) and receiving power from them (“The Violet”). Indeed, Victor A. Neufeldt opines that “The Violet” is an obvious rendition
of Brontë’s artistic aims (CB, Poems #401). In keeping with Alexander’s argument that as an adolescent Brontë was a “self-conscious author,” I surmise that “The Violet” and “Gods of the old mythology” are metonymic expressions of a pattern in her writing that crosses over into her adult writing, usually in more muted form (Alexander, Early Writings 231). If the adult author feelingly portrays the oppressed condition of women in Victorian culture, Brontë’s novels are grounded in her adolescent writings that feature pagan mythologies, including powerful goddesses whose stories have been suppressed and are in need of recuperation. Thus, although Brontë was temperamentally incapable of rejecting traditional Christian mythologies outright, she reinvigorated the Christian cosmogony with pre-Christian mythoi featuring women in empowered roles. “The Violet,” especially, suggests that Brontë believed that the ambition to be an author had to be legitimized metaphorically by an omnipotent feminine essence that understood and extolled her unique genius.5

Her belief is particularly astonishing because, as the daughter of a perpetual cleric, the adolescent author was immersed in the daily negations of patriarchal language. Brontë understood that nineteenth-century Protestantism worshipped a male God that was demanding and disciplinary toward women. Ruth Y. Jenkins argues that although the individual Victorian woman might generally have experienced a fulfilling private spiritual life, “institutionalized religions severely restricted, even denied, her a voice in the dialogues that shaped theological doctrines and informed secular mores.” As to the specific conditions affecting Brontë, Jenkins asserts that her demanding father and the provincial West Riding district in which she was reared made it all but impossible for her to live up to evangelical expectations (Jenkins, Reclaiming Myths 16, 66). Thormählen, however, persuasively argues that Patrick Brontë had friendly relationships with Nonconformists and that since his daughters constantly shifted in their allegiance to Catholic, evangelical, and High Church dogma, it is all but impossible to pin down their ambiguous approaches to spirituality and religion (2). Thormählen stops short of calling Brontë a thoroughgoing radical, conjecturing instead that the author’s fierceness is the “heroism of the pilgrim rather than the wrath of the rebel” (8). I suggest that attending to the heroic and wrathful stories in the juvenilia, with their evocation of pagan gods and Mother Nature, helps the reader navigate the eruptions of non-Christian matter and savage intensity in Brontë’s adult narratives.

If Brontë regularly uses nature images as “‘objective correlatives’ of subjective states,” she also was deeply influenced by George Sand, whose fiction, according to Pam Hirsch, is inundated with “‘mother-want’” for which
Nature serves as the replacement (Lindner 126; Hirsch 214). On the most primal level, mother-want is found throughout Brontë’s work because she lost her own mother at such a young age. But her astute close reading of Victorian culture also made the author sensitive to the disparagement of women. One of Brontë’s comments about the Woman Question indicates her recognition of how difficult it was to get at the roots of misogyny. Responding to the argument that women were responsible for their subordinate condition, she concurred that “there are evils which our own efforts will best reach.” Nevertheless, she remarked that “there are other evils—deep-rooted in the foundations of the social system—which no efforts of ours can touch; of which we cannot complain; of which it is advisable not too often to think” (qtd. in Gaskell 356). In this statement, Brontë previews, avant la lettre, Frantz Fanon’s understanding that if the minority group “is a neurotic society, . . . we are driven from the individual back to the social structure. If there is a taint, it lies not in the ‘soul’ of the individual but rather in that of the environment” (Fanon 213). I would argue that the traces of a female divine in Brontë’s oeuvre helped heal the misogyny the author saw incised on the Victorian female body by a network of institutional interdictions. Concomitantly, Brontë’s ambitious enactment of authority as a female writer endowed by God with hierophantic powers resisted patriarchal gender ideology.

Swinburne, Gaskell, May Sinclair, and Brontë scholars comment in passing on the author’s description of a female divinity, while others recognize a pagan female Nature worship in her writing. But when describing this divine female, said critics assert that Brontë was only representing her sister Emily’s experience rather than limning her own unique vision. Janet L. Larson briefly mentions Brontë’s use of “female messianism” in Shirley, but her major focus is on how Brontë used and defied the male bardic heritage (72). In her classic study, Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë, Irene Taylor examines Brontë’s use of a “Mighty Mother” to fulfill the need to narrate her own genius, but Taylor admits that Brontë probably saw the Magna Mater as a created being and not a life-giving goddess (139–40, 171, 185). Taylor concludes that the God Brontë sought was male because the author was caught between wanting to be her ambitious father and wanting his love (7–17, 292). Kate Lawson sees the vision of “Mother/Eve/Nature” as the heart of “feminist dissent” and suggests that Shirley offers an alternative Trinity of Gaea, Eve, and Mother Nature. However, Lawson sees this view as a weak inversion of the patriarchal God story (“Dissenting Voice” 737; “Imagining Eve” 415–16). Thus, there has been no in-depth analysis of the difference that Brontë’s feminine metaphor for the divine makes to feminist or Victorian scholarship.
Temperamentally a Romantic, Brontë viewed literary genius as the sacred mediator of the divine. In “Reflections on the fate of neglected Genius,” fourteen-year-old Brontë (who referred to herself in the Angrian saga as the Chief “Genii”) claimed that God, or “Genius,” raised its followers’ minds to “mightier worlds” (Poems #56). In a letter to G. H. Lewes in 1847, the mature Brontë still makes special pleading for the imagination, saying that it is “a strong, restless faculty,” and she worries that restraints on women might force her to “be quite deaf to her [imagination’s] cry” (Letter to G. H. Lewes 6 Nov. 1847; qtd. in Gaskell 268). Apparently Brontë was not deaf to the cry of genius, for, on at least one occasion, she insisted that she heard a voice dictating poetry to her, and one scholar suggests that from a young age Brontë wrote her fiction “spontaneously,” even in a “trancelike state” (Gaskell 100, 111; see also Lonoff in CB, Belgian Essays 243). For example, in a prose manuscript attached to the poem “Look into thought & say what dost thou see,” written at Roe Head in 1836, Brontë describes a voice that “wakens me up” and reveals “the divine, silent, unseen land of thought, dim now & indefinite as the dream of a dream the shadow of a shade.” This voice arouses a “dormant power,” she analogizes to a wind “pouring in impetuous current the air, sounding wildly unremittingly from hour, to hour, deepening its tone as the night advances, coming not in gusts, but with a rapid gathering stormy swell” (CB, Poems #117). Elsewhere, she describes how a “trance seemed to descend on a sudden” at the crepuscular hour when a “still small voice” enraptured her and “whirled me away like heath in the wilderness for five seconds of ecstasy” (“Well, here I am at Roe Head”). She also complains about students interrupting her reveries and analogizes herself with God in the process, saying, “I fulfil my duties strictly & well,” adding, “I, so to speak,—if the illustration be not profane,—as God was not in the . . . wind, nor the earth-quake, so neither is my heart in the task” (“Well, here I am at Roe Head”). On another occasion at Roe Head, she is “ecstatic” because “All this day I have been in a dream” that “showed almost in the vivid light of reality the ongoings of the infernal world” (“All this day”).

Brontë’s script is revealing, particularly in “Well, here I am at Roehead.” Usually, her handwriting is neat, regular, and steady, with neither an up- nor a downhill slant. But in this trance, the punctuation and capitalization are inconsistent. Where her writing is normally very even-keeled and legible, in the transcription of her vision one line of writing will often merge with a previous or following line, almost making the words illegible as the writing undulates across the page. The script also seems hastily put to paper, and many words are lined or blotted out, which is uncharacteristic of the usually
tidy author. Although I do not intend to overstate the difference between her normal penmanship and the handwriting that limns her visionary states, I do believe it to be another element that should be considered when studying Brontë’s writing practices, particularly in regard to the goddess story.10

Grace M. Jantzen imagines a “feminist symbolic” of “becoming divine” that sustains the imagination, values birth, and centers on life and spirituality, in contrast to what she calls the “necrophilia[c]” Christian religion that focuses on punishment and death (4, 8, 95). Jantzen understands feminist spirituality as focusing on human potentialities or “horizons” for divinity rather than on spiritual deities who expect to be worshipped. As Jantzen explains, “becoming divine is understood at least partly as being divine for one another” (94). Certainly Brontë’s literary imagination is attached to a feminist religious symbolic, but she was also wracked by an internal battle between creative polytheism and the demanding Christian God with which she was saddled. Her dual spiritual praxis—the two gods contending in her very flesh, if you will—was mirrored in her emotional life. Like Lucy Snowe, who was torn between masochistic “Reason”—which in Villette is a synonym for repression—and self-indulgent passion or imagination, Brontë teetered between obsessive and complete immersion in the passionate world of Angria and the too-often-deadening self-discipline Christianity proffered (Villette 251). Sadly, much of Brontë’s writing is a casebook for Jantzen’s delineation of the Christian God as a “disembodied, omnipotent, and omniscient” male who expects His adherents to be obsessed with justice, self-renunciation, sadism, and death (10, 2).

Brontë often berated herself for her inability to sacrifice herself to such a God. For example, in a letter to Ellen Nussey on 6 December 1836, she worries that she cannot fulfill the demands of the Church: although she wishes to practice “self-denial,” she worries because she inevitably returns to the “gratification of my own desires.” Acknowledging her “evil wandering thoughts,” Brontë desires holiness but confesses that she will “never, never obtain” it (Bonnell 162 BPM). Entrenched in Christian self-abnegation, Brontë dutifully admits, “The right path is that which necessitates the greatest sacrifice of self-interest” (qtd. in Gaskell 238). Thus, in crippling grief after the deaths of her three remaining siblings within nine months, leaving her as the last living child in the family, Brontë felt “tamed down and broken” and focused intently on “recalling my thoughts, cropping their wings, drilling them into correct discipline” (qtd. in Gaskell 212, 348). Brontë certainly may have attended to the “drilling” she found in the family library, wherein Jeremy Taylor’s manual for Christian living (1655) exhorts his reader not to “faint in the labours of mortification, and austerities of
repentance: for in hell, one hour is more intolerable than a hundred years
in the house of repentance” (45).11

Although I do not have the space here to discuss the many poems in
the juvenilia that illustrate Brontë’s ritual summons of the divine, it is
important to outline their structure.12 In the Angrian saga, the poems are
often spoken in the first person by Brontë’s fictional characters, but I agree
with Neufeldt that Brontë is also finding her own voice in these poems.
In these verses, Brontë conceives of a numinous veiled entity that must
be approached through ritualistic stages. Often the epiphany is of a fairy
world, but at other times the poem’s persona merges with a more profound
fundament. In one verse fragment, for example, a vision occurs when radi-
ant beings “Cras[h] through the firmament.” The poem ends with the onset
of a trance, “veil[ing] my eyes with a holy fear / For the coming visions
no mortal may bear” (CB, Poems #41). Typically these visions feature the
luminous transformation from day to night presided over by the moon,
which acts as a metaphorical eye—I watching and mediating the vision.13 If
the moon is a recurring emblem in Brontë’s writing, it is associated with
the fact that Brontë could indulge in her fantasy world only in the evening
after her dull daytime duties were done. When she specifically genders the
moon, it is always designated as female, while the sun is always male.14 At
the start of the visions, the moon is often veiled but then throws off obscuring
clouds as the speaker moves closer to an epiphany. The moonlight mystifies
and brilliantly radiates the world in ways the sun’s light cannot, revealing
a heightened, sacred state. For example, in Brontë’s essay “The Immensity
of God,” the “majestic” moon shows “nature under a new aspect,” as “more
artistically arranged than when the sun shone on it” (Belgian Essays 48).

An article prominently featuring the moon was published in 1830 in
Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, one no doubt the Brontë children read,
especially since the essayist repeatedly refers to his companion named
“O’Bronte.” The piece, titled “The Moors,” describes a trek through northern
England and Scotland and features a mystical description of the moon
that must have appealed to Brontë:

And, lo, and behold! There is Diana—but not crescent—for round and
broad is she as the sun himself—shining in the south, with as yet a need-
less light—for daylight has not gone down in the west—and we can hardly
call it gloaming. Chaste and cold though she seem, a nunlike luminary
who has just taken the veil—a transparent veil of fine fleecy clouds—yet,
alas! . . . and now, though Day is still lingering, we feel that it is Night.
When the one comes and when the other goes, what eye can note, what
tongue can tell—but what heart feels not in the dewy hush divine, as the power of the beauty of earth decays over us, and a still dream descends upon us in the power of the beauty of heaven! (604)

The writer also limns the “moonlight” as “carr[y]ing the imagination on—on—on—into inland recesses that seem to lose at last all connexion with the forgotten sea,” for “All at once the moon is like a ghost;—and we believe devoutly—heaven knows why—in the authenticity of Ossian’s Poems” (Wilson 605). Such Romantic rhetoric indicates not only the powerful influence of Ossian but also how important moon imagery was in this infamous text. Of Ossian, Hugh Blair wrote, “The sun, the moon, and the stars . . . form the circle, within which Ossian's comparisons generally run” (qtd. in Thacker 105).

We know that Ossian had a great influence on the impressionable, Brontë children, who glossed and critiqued their copy of the poem, while also writing essays about it in their hand-made journals (BPM 206 [1222H]).

The epiphany in Brontë's early poetry is not a manifestation of dogma. Rather, the vision may facilitate a brief merging of the mortal with a supernatural entity that brings knowledge of supernal love, somewhat similar to what the Beguine mystics experienced. Indeed, more often than not, relationality with the divine as well as the human potential to be divine is the feminist matter of Brontë’s epiphanies. I am thinking, too, of Jantzen’s feminist theology in which humans “become God for one another” by being a God for rather than over others (93). In “The Violet,” the moon’s link to a “Mighty Mother” is not only part of a ritual setting for accession of the divine; it is the metonymic talisman of a female deity. We see this spirituality associated with the moon in Brontë’s non-Angrian juvenile poems as well. “The Vision,” for example, describes the moon as a “glorious gem” watching over an incandescent group of immortals who “Dazzl[e]” the poet (CB, Poems #28). Likewise, “When thou sleepest” features a landscape “Robed in moonlight,” wherein the poem’s speaker flies on the “spirit’s waiting wings” to see “’mid transcendency” that “Star to star was mutely telling / Heaven’s resolve & fate’s decree” (CB, Poems #128).

The depiction of the moon in Jane Eyre also alludes to a divine presence. The famous red room scene features a “preternatural voice” or “haloed face” that will later appear as her mother in the guise of the moon (48). The vision occurs at a liminal moment when day is turning to night. Recalling that her child self saw an ethereal light gleaming on the wall and ceiling of the room, the adult Jane notes that “I can now conjecture readily that this streak of light was, in all likelihood, a gleam from a lantern” outside (49). Yet the mature narrator has it both ways—as a mundane and a mystical
manifestation. She recalls that the young Jane thought the light “herald[ed]” a “coming vision from another world” and that only later did she understand that what seemed to be “the rushing of wings” and something descending upon her was just the feeling of “oppress[ion]” from being in the frightening room (49). However, although the adult Jane gives rational reasons for the “vision,” the text uses the same language the young Charlotte Brontë had used to describe her trances in poetic and diary form. Jane’s later “vision” of light that “was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever” also bears strong resemblance to Brontë’s trances. In fact, Jane’s vision cribs from Brontë: “I watched her come—watched with the strangest anticipation; as though some word of doom were to be written on her disk. She broke forth as never moon yet burst from cloud.” At this point, the moon becomes a gynomorphic God with a “glorious brow,” who “gazed and gazed on me” and “spoke to my spirit” (346).

Brontë’s personal trances conform to the ritual she describes in the poems and novels: a subject moves from the mundane world into an epiphanic state brought about by hypersensitive awareness of nature during a liminal moment, usually that between day and night. On 11 August 1836, having spent the morning teaching “fat-headed oafs” the difference between an “article and a substantive,” Brontë was overcome by the thought that her life was to consist of this kind of “wretched bondage” forever (“All this day”). When Brontë finished teaching the students that day, she experienced a reverie, with the “murmur” of her charges studying acting as a hypnotic chora. Gazing out the window, she hears an “uncertain sound of inexpressible sweetness.” Watching a mist on the hills, Brontë hears a “liquid” sound that comes from the nearby church bells. Like a Proustian madeleine, the sound initiates a vision of “the mighty phantasm,” causing Brontë to realize that “this had conjured from nothing,—from nothing to a system strange as some religious creeds” (“All this day”). Brontë reveals that when the afternoon turns to dusk, she actually sees her fictional characters in the flesh with her “bodily eyes” (“All this day”).

Under the influence of her visions, Brontë speaks like an ineluctable force in a poem describing the process of writing about Angria: “Succeeding fast and faster still / Scenes that no words can give, / And gathering strength from every thrill / They stir, the[y] breathe, they live. / They live! They gather round in bands, / They speak, I hear the tone; / The earnest look, the beckoning hands, / And am I now alone?” (qtd. in Alexander, The Early Writings 141) Living a double life in which her imaginary characters live with more vitality than the real students and teachers she works with every day, Brontë is not in the moment when she is teaching at Roe Head.
She throws off enervation only when god enters her flesh and, godlike, her imagination is as “quick as thought.” Feeling that she could write about the Angrian world “gloriously” if she could escape from classroom drudgery, Brontë asserts that the result would be “some narrative better at least than anything I ever produced before.” But, of course, “just then a dolt came up with a lesson” (“All this day”). Brontë is unfailingly bitter about the price of teaching, commenting, “I thought I should have vomited” (“All this day”).

Having examined excerpts from the juvenilia, I suggest that the trope of a female god in Jane Eyre and Shirley is not just an outlier but rather a continuation of Brontë’s supple aesthetic. I focus the remainder of this chapter on Shirley, which features subliminal and explicit manifestations of mother-god-want, including 1) a masked or cross-dressed narrator and heroine; 2) trances or epiphanies initiated by a supernal moon; and 3) a revision of the Eve mythos that mirrors the radical voices of Southcott, Sharples, and Wright.

The most intense vision of a mother god in Shirley appears in the middle of the novel. It acts as an entr’acte amid severe conflicts between lower-class weavers and the nouveau riche manufacturers that transpired during the Luddite revolts near Haworth in the 1820s. The class combat is duplicated in the warfare between the “misogamist[s]” who view women as inferior and the “womenites” who see them as intelligent human beings who desire more than just to marry (Shirley, Penguin 176, 175). Shirley’s trance occurs during the liminal time when Mother Nature is “at her evening prayers” after a long day in which the town’s Anglicans celebrate their dominance in the community (314). Tired after the day’s festivities, Shirley asks her friend Caroline to remain outside with her. She refuses to go into the chapel to hear the sermon given by Caroline’s uncle, whose speech she knows will reiterate the communal norms of patriarchal Christian society. If this is a political book dealing alternately with the Condition of England and the Woman Question, I suggest that it politicizes the culture’s metaphor for God, intimating that how a society constructs the divine will have implications for all sociocultural manifestations. Ruth Yeazell’s argument that the social problem novel quickly changes to a love story when the narrative can no longer suture the intractable wounds inherent to a class society should be revised to acknowledge the ties between women and class unrest (Yeazell). Indeed, it is important to recognize that Shirley’s vision is so incendiary that although it seems to burst out of nowhere like an opium dream, it is more revolutionary than the coming skirmish between the Luddites and the manufacturers. Thus, Brontë defuses the provocative implications of a divine female with the entrance of the radical Luddites and their opponents.
As laid out in chapter 1, many feminist utopians and millenarians referred to a female messiah and a mighty Eve who supported the establishment of a new political order (B. Taylor, *Eve* 161–63).18 These radical revelations of a divine female commingled with progressive politics when, for example, the heretical notion of the female savior occurred among women in the egalitarian English Civil War sects (B. Taylor, “Woman-Power, 122”).19 We know that the notion of a female messiah was revived at the end of the eighteenth century in response to the French Revolution, when the rhetorical apotheosis of a female savior and millenarian sects led by women went hand-in-hand with a relatively small but intense movement advocating women’s rights and socialist agendas (B. Taylor, “Woman-Power” 122). Feminist utopian socialists such as Eliza Sharples, as we have seen, recuperated Eve as a powerful, semi-divine figure, as did the millenarian prophetess Southcott. Sharples applauded an Eve who gladly eats the fruit, declaring, “well done woman! LIBERTY FOR EVER!” [new paragraph] If that was a fall, sirs, it was a glorious fall, and such a fall as is now wanted” (“Tenth Discourse” 132). Similarly, another radical writer known as “Syrtis” declared that if the Fall had been written by a woman, “we should have had a very different version of it” because it would have been written so that Eve’s “great folly” would have been not the eating of the apple but sharing it with Adam (qtd. in B. Taylor, “Woman-Power” 143n73). Meanwhile, republican Frances Wright laments the fact that modern Eves have been warned by the Christian church against seeking the “fair fruit of knowledge,” and she implores them to utilize God’s “first best gift—your reason” (Wright, “Lecture I” 38, 76).

That Brontë might have had knowledge of these radicals is a possibility: in the early 1800s Southcott visited the West Riding near Haworth, and many weavers in that area became followers (Balleine 45; Harrison, *Second Coming* 222).20 It would not be improbable that Brontë ran across this information during her research in preparation for writing the novel.21 Her father had been the prelate at Dewsbury and knew many of the Luddites, and since Roe Head was located in the middle of the area that experienced the Luddite revolts, Brontë’s teacher from Roe Head, Margaret Wooler, also might have told her of the struggles (Alexander, *Oxford Companion* 100, 465). Brontë might have learned about these earlier radicals from her friend Mary Taylor, whose family held radical republican views (Alexander, *Oxford Companion* 490). Since Patrick Brontë subscribed to *Fraser’s Magazine* after 1830 and the children avidly read it, Brontë may have read an article in it attacking Owenite feminism titled “Woman and the Social System” (1840). But whether Brontë was aware of the millenarian and feminist efforts to recuperate Eve, her own evocation of a female deity uncannily mirrors the
rhetoric of these grandmothers. The linking of heretical incarnations of a female deity with republican politics during the Luddite insurrections certainly goes a long way toward explaining what others find inexplicable in Brontë’s Condition of England novel: that is, how does the titanic Eve figure in a tale ostensibly about the management of radical socialist politics?

In fact, cross-dressing in her gender designation, Shirley crosses class lines when she openly espouses her love for the bourgeois Louis Moore rather than the effete aristocrat Sir Philip Nunnely. The title and the placement of the chapter featuring Eve mirror the disruption of class lines. Set in the very center of Shirley, the vision of Mother Eve is masked by the physical bulk of the chapters surrounding the epiphany. The ironic chapter title reiterates the Invisible made visible: “Which the Genteel Reader is Recommended to Skip, Low Persons being Here Introduced” (Shirley, Penguin 314). This titular mot appears to advise the reader to pass over the chapter yet also entices with its seeming reference to “low” doings. Implying that the chapter will be about the working classes, in fact, it begins with a vision of a divine Mother Eve in rebellion against the Anglican sermon being preached in the nearby church. Thus the narrator associates Shirley with the rebellious Luddites who contend with a traditional class hierarchy.

A radical in a mask, Brontë’s narrator ironically asks her audience not to read the subversive chapter on Eve, thus putting the reader in Eve’s position, requiring that she/we desire the forbidden fruit of knowledge. When the reader accepts the challenge to partake, she obtains the knowledge that a female divinity acts upon and underlies the cosmos. Putting forward a “feminist challenge to patriarchally privileged hermeneutics” by making a mother god visible, Brontë’s writing is simultaneously heretical and eminently practical (Jenkins, Reclaiming Myths 80). Indeed, as Kathryn Bond Stockton suggests, Brontë’s tendency to take Romantic and Christian doctrines literally leads to surprisingly subversive revisions of the letter of the law (Stockton 116–17). Indeed, Brontë’s hardheaded literalism and insistence on experiential connections to the deity cause her to imagine Nature as a real mother, for no father, even a God, could procreate without a woman (116–17). I would suggest that the subliminal anxiety is most intense at this point in the novel because of the interlineation of rebellious causes—political and religious, gendered and classed. In fact, the vision of Eve, which shatters the generic conventions of the novel, marches side-by-side with the convention-busting workers, creating an ecstatic feminist social(ist) rapture at the text’s center.

Brontë’s brilliant use of masking is intrinsic to her characterization of the heroine. Like Brontë, who was still going by the pseudonym Currer
Bell and the narrator of the novel *Shirley*, the eponymous heroine is a cross-dresser. Although she regards the Luddite rebellion as a personal insult to her class standing, she recognizes that she is also a “rebel” (*Shirley* MS. BL [674/101]). The stubborn conservative Mr. Helstone playfully suggests that she may be a “‘Jacobin’” and “‘free-thinker’” (*Shirley*, Penguin 210). Shirley understands that her female body contradicts mainstream patriarchal religious and political codes, and her masculine pretensions amplify that disruption. An aristocratic, young, unmarried woman without parents or other close family to restrict her, she styles herself as “gentlemanlike,” “Captain,” “Esquire,” and county leader (213, 217, 247, 273, 274, 326). Repeatedly referring to herself in the masculine third-person pronoun, Shirley knows that even her Christian name is the “same masculine family cognomen [her parents] would have bestowed on a boy” (211).

Jill Liddington convincingly suggests that Shirley may be based on Anne Lister, a young unmarried aristocrat who was the heir to Shibden Hall, which was just ten miles away from where the Brontës lived in Haworth. The lesbian Lister regularly wore mannish-looking clothing and referred to herself in masculine terms. Emily Brontë would almost certainly have known of Lister from her time as a teacher at Law Hill School in 1838 because Shibden Hall was not far from the school (see Liddington). Throughout *Shirley*, Brontë consistently and approvingly figures its heroine as being guided by “feeling,” particularly about her culture’s “misogam[y]” (*Shirley*, Penguin 176, 226, 313, 359, 374, 387). In many ways, then, Shirley and her vision of a female deity recuperate the radical feminists of the early nineteenth century, although Brontë adds an aristocratic cast to her “womanism.”

A number of scenes in the novel feature the moon as harbinger of the visionary. The narrative, for example, explains that before the age of eighteen, “our world is heroic; its inhabitants half-divine or semi-demon; its scenes are dream-scenes. . . . What a moon we gaze on before that time! How the trembling of our hearts at her aspect bears witness to its unutterable beauty! As to our sun, it is a burning heaven—the world of gods” (121). In another rendition of the moon’s importance, while the eponymous protagonist is reading, a light suddenly streams in through the window and illuminates the pages she peruses. She looks up to see that the lunar body is the source of the light (373, 374). The moonlight causes her to go into a “trance,” because the “‘sweet regent,’ new throned and glorious” is capable of making “earth an Eden, life a poem” (374). The narrator evokes a Romantic vision, asserting that the transcendent moon provides Shirley with “the pure gift of God” and “the free dower of Nature,” which gives her “experience of a genii-life” (374). The reference to the “genii” is, of course, Brontë’s own
private reminder that she herself was the Chief Genii, Tallii, in the Angrian saga, who, like a God, could create and kill off fictional characters at will. Thus we might gather that Brontë’s narrator links Shirley to the Romantic writer’s divine powers and foreshadows her receptivity to visions that might make earth an Eden through the creation of new kinds of human relations and new ethical systems.

In another epiphany associated with the moon, the novel highlights mother-want and later links it to the protagonist’s mother-god-want. Shirley’s companion, Mrs. Pryor, is an unsociable character who conceives a warm interest in the orphaned Caroline. Late in the narrative, Mrs. Pryor nurses and saves Caroline from grave illness, thereby providing her with a kind of rebirth. She then dramatically reveals to Caroline that she is her long-lost mother. The narrator describes the moment before Mrs. Pryor makes this sublime revelation: “She threw back the curtain to admit the moonlight more freely” (409). Without knowledge of Brontë’s repeated linking of the moon with a female divine in the juvenilia, the reader would not gather the implications of the imagery. The narrative further strengthens the association of the moon with mother-god-want because in the major vision of a mother god, Caroline’s desire to know her real earthly mother merges with Shirley’s description of Mother Eve.

As Shirley’s vision of the goddess ends, the narrator states that the word “‘mother’” “suggested to Caroline’s imagination not the mighty and mystical parent of Shirley’s visions, but a gentle human form—the form she ascribed to her own mother; unknown, unloved, but not unlonged-for” (316). If, as Jenkins suggests, “Caroline’s mother is the physical, earthly counterpart to Shirley’s maternal creation stories,” Brontë creates a female god that is human, divine, and ultimately relational (Jenkins, Reclaiming Myths 87). After all, the narrator’s point is that the titan Eve created all the gods and the human race, thus implicitly creating others with whom to associate intimately. Indeed, occurring when the township is celebrating its Christian heritage, the “Pagan” mythos Shirley professes explicates the class and gender warfare in which England is embroiled, melding the orphan Caroline’s mother-want with Shirley’s mother-god-want (Shirley, Penguin 315).

As Pamela Sue Anderson notes, in the patriarchal version of the Adam and Eve story, Adam, by virtue of his masculinity, has a different, more sacred relation with God, while Eve, as woman, is prohibited from the highest form of communion with deity (152). Brontë’s novel defies this mythology. In rhetoric similar to that used by feminists like Sharples and Wright, Shirley explicitly reviles Milton’s version of Eve, saying,
I would beg to remind him [Milton] that the first men of the earth were Titans, and that Eve was their mother: from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus. . . .

I say, there were giants on the earth in those days; giants that strove to scale heaven. The first woman’s breast that heaved with life on this world yielded the daring which could contend with Omnipotence. . . . The first woman was heaven-born: vast was the heart whence gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations; and grand the undegenerate head where rested the consort-crown of creation.” (Shirley, Penguin 315)

Here Brontë retailors the Christian view of Eve, merging the Judeo-Christian and polytheistic traditions to show that Eve was the foremother to all things, including the gods. A “woman-Titan” and “mighty and mystical parent” who comes before what were thought of as the original gods of Western civilization, Brontë’s Eve is a primeval force powerful enough to give birth to “all living.”

According to the staid Caroline, Shirley’s vision is “a hash of Scripture and mythology” (315). Imagining the primal scene of the cosmos as female generated, Shirley’s “hash” limns the titan Eve as Mother Earth herself, much in the same way she is depicted in “The Violet.” Exclaiming “I see her! and I will tell you what she is like,” Shirley presents the pagan gods as more primal and powerful than the Christian divinity (314). Thormahlên points out that in Brontë’s fiction the heroines often receive spiritual inspiration in Nature, but never inside a church (68). And, in fact, when timid Caroline suggests that they should go to the parish church, Shirley declares that they are already in a holy place: “I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature. I love her—undying, mighty being! . . . She is taking me to her bosom, and showing me her heart” (Shirley, Penguin 316). At the heart of the universe, there is no longer a possibility for words as Brontë’s cross-dressing goddess and heroine magnify the mystic moment. For a brief time in the center of the novel, the mannish heroine undresses the masculine representation of God to find that the Holy of Holies is female, and the reader obtains the forbidden knowledge that male depictions of deity were just a garment after all.

A later iteration of this revolutionary vision occurs when Louis Moore, in another form of cross-dressing, recites from memory a devoir Shirley had written when he was her tutor. Titled “La Première Femme Savante?” the essay is based on the biblical passage that reads, “And it came to pass when men began to multiply on the face of the earth, and daughters were
born unto them, that the sons of God saw the daughters of men that they were fair; and they took them wives of all which they chose” (Gen. vi.1–2). Mixing religious myth traditions, Brontë rewrites the fall by turning Eve into a more pagan “Eva,” who, like the early nineteenth-century socialist feminists, makes no apology for seeking knowledge. Eva marries a son of God to whom she exclaims ecstatically, “Oh, take me! Oh, claim me! This is a god.” “[C]hosen” by this Christ-like titan-man, she obtains the status of “Seraph.” A typical Brontëan liminal setting appears at the beginning of the essay; “before the Flood,” Eva finds herself alone watching day turn into night. The rising of the moon signals the oncoming trance: “The Evening flushed full of hope: the Air panted; the Moon-rising before—ascended large” (Shirley, Penguin 457–59). As evening approaches, Eva thrills to the “boundlessly mighty” cosmos. In the same situation as Brontë had been at Roe Head, Eva desperately hopes that her life will not be “waste[d].” In response to her “agony,” the cosmos rejoins,

as if Silence spoke. There was no language, no word, only a tone.

Again—a fine, full lofty tone, a deep, soft sound, like a storm whispering, made twilight undulate. (457–58)

Christ then speaks to her, but in thoroughly Romantic terms, with no hint of a curse upon Eva for eating of the tree of knowledge:

Such was the bridal-hour of Genius and Humanity. Who shall rehearse the tale of their after-union? . . . Who shall tell how He, between whom and the Woman God put enmity, forged deadly plots to break the bond or defile its purity? Who shall record the long strife between Serpent and Seraph? . . . [page break] this faithful Seraph [Eve] fought for Humanity a good fight through time; and, when Time’s course closed, and Death was encountered at the end, barring with fleshless arm the portals of Eternity, how Genius still held close his dying bride, sustained her through the agony of the passage, bore her triumphant into his own home—Heaven; restored her, redeemed, to Jehovah—her Maker; and at last, before Angel and Archangel, crowned her with the crown of Immortality. (459–60)

As representative of the capitalized “Humanity,” Eva fills a liminal role as both divinity and mortal. She is married to “Genius,” a Romantic term for God (and reminiscent of Brontë’s childhood pseudonym, “Genii,” thus suggesting that it may be her own artistic genius that saves her). Rather than
Chapter 2

being punished for seeking knowledge, Eva is a monumental heroine and protector of mortals. All but equal to the man-God Christ, she makes it possible for mortals to receive “the crown of Immortality,” hence repeating Southcott’s blasphemy that salvation could be made available only through Eve as initiator. In Brontë’s version, Eva is “faithful,” not fallen, and she fights “a good fight,” braving Death to bring humankind through “the portals of Eternity.”

The fair copy of these two scenes suggests their importance and Brontë’s need to manifest and mask the female deity. The introduction to the Clarendon edition notes that there are more alterations to the fair copy of Shirley than there were to Jane Eyre, with volume three of the former including the most changes to the text. There are 271 changes in volume one, 458 in volume two, and 707 in volume three (Shirley, Clarendon xxvi). The Clarendon editors, Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith, explain that the revisions increased in volumes two and three because they were written “during the ‘dark and desolate’ period of bereavement” after Emily and Anne died. Hence, Brontë’s writing shows “greater uncertainty of composition and more laborious revision” (xxvi). The scene of the colossal woman Eve occurs at the beginning of the second volume, which features “fourteen actual excisions, varying from [page break] three lines to half a leaf, many extensively altered passages, and a number of phrases so heavily cancelled as to be almost indecipherable” (xxvi–xxvii). Rosengarten and Smith assert that most of these excisions have to do with Shirley’s character and speeches, which, they argue, are based upon the recently deceased Emily. They write that the “painful, even raw, reality” of this tragic, enigmatic sister could not “easily be adapted into the fictional framework” (xxvii).

But it should be added that the heaviest changes occur in the scene depicting Shirley’s vision in volume two and in Shirley’s devoir describing “Eva” (xxvii). Thus one also must consider the matter of Shirley’s vision and devoir in order to understand why they are so heavily amended. Having examined the fair copy at the British Library, I conclude that the changes are indicative of aesthetic and ideological concerns as much as of Brontë’s supposed loss of creative control due to the deaths of her siblings. The large excisions from and careful small incisions into the pages having to do with the vision contrast sharply with the first volume of Shirley, which is seldom marred by such edits. The physical look of these pages is like a literal suturing, with paper seemingly glued over the cuts. I suggest that the incisions highlight the tensions and double-duty of the rhetoric. Indeed, the fair copy simultaneously exhibits the experience of the trance state while also illustrating Brontë’s conscious aesthetic. That she so heavily edited the scenes
John Bryant observes that revisions of manuscripts, whether by author or by publisher, indicate “hot spots of cultural contestation” (1044). To my mind the alterations to the chapter on Eve show that Brontë knew that the intense visionary nature of these scenes would be problematic to her readers, but, like Shirley, she cannot fully collude with patriarchal religion. Hence, replacing “My Eve” [strikethroughs in original] with the phrase “That Eve,” she expands the concept of a female god from Shirley’s (or the author’s) own personal icon to that of a more universal entity (Shirley ms. BL Smith Bequest). Brontë also replaces the term “dream” with “trance” to describe Shirley’s apparition, figuring it as resembling more a revelation than a hallucination (ibid.). At the end of the trance in the fair copy, Brontë squeezes in the sentence “She is very vague and visionary!” spoken by Caroline (ibid.). This editorial afterthought perhaps indicates Brontë’s savvy understanding that the goddess could be boldly revealed to Shirley only if there were also a female character who undermined that vision. Caroline acts as that mask through this comment and when she immediately adds, “Come, Shirley, we ought to go into church” (Shirley, Penguin 316).

I argue, too, that the changes to the fair copy may indicate that originally Brontë described a more radical divinity. After “And that is not Milton’s Eve, Shirley,” as Rosengarten and Smith correctly point out, “the remainder—just over half—of f.157 is cut off” and the “word ‘Juno’ is visible above the cut” (Shirley, Clarendon 359n4). It appears, too, that possibly Brontë was trying to connect the word “milk[?]” to “the first woman’s breast that heaved with life on this world” (Shirley ms. BL Smith Bequest). Did Brontë originally include a paragraph on an Eve merged with Juno? Was she going to include an image, similar to Barrett Browning’s, of a gigantic female figure whose breasts the universe sucks for informing energy and life (Aurora Leigh 5:213–22)? A few lines later, the rest of f.159 is cut away, and the first 8 lines of f.160 are also excised (Shirley, Clarendon 360). More than any other section in the fair copy, Shirley’s vision, then, is heavily redacted, with some sections completely excised and other phrases blackened out.

Why waste the ink to blacken out words when in other places Brontë merely lines through the matter she wishes to delete? Why spend laborious amounts of time cutting and pasting when she could have lined the offending paragraph out? Certainly the careful changes speak to the author’s habit of neatness. But might Brontë have seen this passage as so central to her vision of the numinous while at the same time she knew it was so blasphe-
mous about the Christian God that it required masking of the deep structure of divine feminine effulgence? When Caroline begs Shirley to return to the chapel, Shirley resists because the sermon would be “all sense for the Church, and all causticity for Schism,” with schism carrying radical connotations about the heroine (Shirley, Penguin 314). Or perhaps the vision Brontë describes is just the dying ember of the prophetic apparition she originally conceived. In any case, critics have not considered in any depth why the normally precise writer makes a hodgepodge of this scene in the fair copy. To my mind, not to analyze the importance of the woman titan at the center of this text is to rend and score the very material garment with which the narrator-author addresses and redresses her.

Similarly, in volume three, chapter 26 (“Le Cheval”), which includes Shirley’s devoir on Eva, the editing is heavier than that in the rest of the fair copy, with the exception of Shirley’s vision of Eve. The beginning section of the devoir is neatly written and includes only minor changes. But on page 672/99 the top half of the page is cut away, and it is clear from marks around that excision that this deleted half-page included writing. More importantly, perhaps, the excised section comes immediately after the question, “Who shall, of these things, write the chronicle?” This question leaves the reader to wonder about the entity described in the answer. The passage after the half-page excision on page 672/99 reads: “‘I never could correct that composition,’ observed Shirley.” The heroine adds, “‘Your censor-pencil scored it with condemnatory lines whose signification I strove vainly to fathom.’”

Only the fair copy makes the irony of the editing choices apparent: Brontë censored her fictional heroine who complained that her male tutor censored her vision of a female quasi-deity. Thus, the question “Who shall, of these things, write the chronicle?” will never be answered. The material deleted will never be known. But given the surrounding text and its incisions, presumably “these things” refers to an even more expansive vision of Eva and Shirley’s trance-like powers to reveal her. The visionary Brontë, I suggest, recognizes that this more visible depiction of deity as female was too revolutionary for her audience. If she had allowed “these things” to remain in the text, she risked being viewed as a ridiculous, even mad, woman preacher, creating her own religion, like the ostensibly loony Southcott.

On the following page (673/100) the editing is more substantive: two-thirds of the page is cut out, and the markings around the cut indicate that there is text missing. This excision comes after Moore explains that he was not censoring Shirley:
“I never said that the lines I drew were indications of faults at all. You would have it that such was the case, and I refrained from contradiction.”

“What else did they denote?”

“No matter now.”

And quite literally there is no matter now—the text following this statement is deleted. Just after the large section that has been excised, it reads: “‘Mr. Moore,’ cried Henry, suddenly wrenching the discourse from its present bent. ‘Make Shirley repeat some of the pieces she used to say so well by heart’” (Smith Bequest BL 673/100). Henry’s attempt to begin a new conversation hints that the deleted matter was unseemly and that Henry was trying to steer the conversation to a more conventional topic.

On the very next page (674/101), Shirley exclaims, “Certainly, I was a rebel!” which suggests that explicit descriptions of her rebellious views must have been what was cut out. Given that her mythic devoir regarding Eva initiates this scene, it is not unlikely that Shirley’s “rebellion” has to do with belief in a female deity and that Brontë decided that such radical views needed to be masked. Given the similarities in subject matter and the fact that these are the most heavily redacted sections in the novel, I contend that the excisions in chapter 26 very likely have to do with Shirley’s “Schism[atic]” visions of a female divine. My sense is also that Brontë’s handwriting is different in these redacted scenes. As with the diary entries at Roe Head, in which Brontë describes her trance experiences, her handwriting loses its characteristic neatness. In the scenes describing Eve and Eva, the pressure on the page seems heavier, the letters darker and more intense, and the script larger and more passionate.

Brontë inserts another goddess story when Louis Moore soliloquizes about Shirley, whom he believes he is losing to Sir Philip Nunnely. He exclaims,

I think of the fable of Semele reversed.

It is not the daughter of Cadmus I see: nor do I realize her fatal longing to look on Jove in the majesty of his god-head. It is a priest of Juno that stands before me, watching late and lone at a shrine in an Argive temple. For years of solitary ministry, he has lived on dreams: there is divine madness upon him: he loves the idol he serves, and prays day and night that his frenzy may be fed, . . . She has heard; she will be propitious. . . . The doors of the temple are shut: the priest waits at the altar. (Shirley, Penguin 491)
Then, while the whole city sleeps, a bolt from heaven “wrapt in sudden light” crashes “Through the roof—through the rent, wide-yawning, vast, white-blazing blue of heaven above, pours a wonderous descent—dread as the down-rushing of stars.” The light blinds the priest, and an “insufferable glory burning terribly between the pillars” destroys the temple of Juno (491).

The next morning all that is left is a “shivered” shrine. Only the statue of Saturnia is left untouched. At her feet lie the ashes of the priest who worshipped her (491–92). This last iteration of the goddess is an objective correlative for Louis’s seemingly unrequited love for Shirley. But Brontë’s use of this trope should be aligned with the whole of her oeuvre, from the juvenilia onward. Each rendition reverses, if you will, the myth tradition associating godhood with masculinity. Likewise, it seems important to Brontë to have the hero, on at least two occasions (here and when he recites Shirley’s devoir on Eva), vocally reciting the goddess story, as though he is memorizing a new scripture. Whether she uses Moore as a mask for her own persona, as she was wont to do with male characters in the juvenilia, or whether she believes Shirley’s theology would be rendered more valid in the readers’ eyes because it is spoken by a man, Brontë subliminally uses the mask to validate the goddess story.

But can Shirley’s subliminal goddess story resolve the disjunctive narrative? The story of the Yorkshire weaver’s revolt against the manufacturers combined with a minute description of the literal death by boredom of the Victorian middle-class woman is not, according to many critics, of a piece. Philip Rogers rejects the notion that “Brontë’s proto-feminism” equates with progressive politics, contending instead that Shirley represents Brontë’s “anti-democratic” leanings (146). Albert D. Pionke argues that Brontë’s novel uses Luddism as a palimpsest through which to comment on the 1848 Chartist threats to the status quo (Pionke 82; see also Zlotnick 284). I suggest, however, that the Eve at the novel’s center acts as the mediating device ensuring that the two stories—the Condition of England and the Woman Question—intersect. This mediation illustrates that the scenes in the women’s private sphere are inseparable from the social struggles of which the domestic sphere was a central component. Thus, despite Brontë’s “Wellington panegyrics” and seeming contempt for radical unrest, one should be alert to Shirley’s similarities with the rhetoric of millenarians and feminist socialists (Rogers 144).

Mirroring the arc of these radical groups, Shirley’s rebellions against patriarchy and the Industrial Revolution reach an ecstatic crisis only to end with the subordination of women in marriage and lower-class submission to the owners, a plot that undermines the insurgencies of the novel and
ostensibly heals the communal rupture they have caused. Yet the association of heretical incarnations of Eve with radical politics acts as a subliminal counterbalance to the novel’s ostensibly reactionary proclivities, especially when we realize that Brontë’s revisions to the sections that describe Eve are considerable in an otherwise clean fair copy. Furthermore, as Tim Dolan points out, “in *Shirley* the sexual-provincial counter-discourse endeavours to re-define the territories of Victorian fiction and challenge the voices of territorial sovereignty over them” so that even though Luddite revolt seems to vanish, “nonetheless the novel’s passionate allegiance to its own—to the north and to the woman novelist—never abates” (201, 212). Dolin’s insights remind us just how much there is that is rebellious in *Shirley* and how much Brontë was risking as a woman writer from Northern England when she placed it before the public.

In fact, although Brontë’s solution to class warfare is underwritten by Victorian horror of mob violence as well as Shirley’s tendentiousness, Brontë structures the chapter describing the titanic Eve so that it concludes with a conversation about gender and class between Shirley and the lower-class William Farren and Joe Scott. Shirley’s engagements with Eve must not, then, be separated out from the Luddite rebellion. Indeed, when Shirley, like Moses, comes down to earth after having seen divinity, the chapter insists on examining Shirley’s interactions with the lower classes to see whether there is any hope for a level playing field between men and women, the lower and middle classes. This section reads as though Brontë wanted to see if the feminist deity Shirley has evoked can make any difference in the material reality of “low persons introduced” of the chapter’s title. It is a move reminiscent of feminist republican Sharples, who requires Christianity to make a real difference. The structure of this chapter suggests that if a feminist religion is needed to forestall class warfare, the negotiations for peace must occur in a practical dialogue between diverse entities.

Joe Scott works as Moore’s trusted manufacturing hand and is one of the chief “misogamists” in the novel. William Farren, Moore’s former employee, had been out of work for three months and his family on the brink of starvation when Moore finds him a job as gardener, after which he is able to raise the family’s standard of living. Thus Shirley speaks with a member of the lower class who is loyal to his betters (Scott) and one (Farren) who was on the verge of becoming a “rebel—a radical—an insurrectionist” (*Shirley*, Penguin 319). Just after her trance, Shirley meets William coming out of the church, and he complains that the preacher talks “to poor folk fair as if they thought they were beneath them” (318). Shirley agrees with his estimation but insists that William has his own class pride. Nonetheless, she asks him
about lower-class suffering and sympathizes when he asserts that “starving folk [page break] cannot be satisfied or settled” and thus “The country’s not in a safe condition” (319–20). She asks him what more she can do to help, and William avers that she has done everything she can by giving her money to the poor.

In fact, he notes earlier that it was when she came to give him money that he thought of becoming an “insurrectionist” because “I thought it shameful that, willing and able as I was to work, I sULD be i’ such a condition that a young cratur . . . suld think it needful to come and offer me her bit o’ brass” (319). William’s lower-class “misogamy” and Shirley’s and Brontë’s inability to fully engage with the need for class equality weigh down the conversation. However, given Brontë’s Tory tendencies and the usual move by the middle-class Victorian writer to quash eruptions of lower-class desire, I argue that this conversation indicates the author’s recognition that such interclass, intergender dialogues must occur in order for the culture to solve working-class distress and woman’s need for purposeful work. The earlier vision of Eve impels the tentative solution: the classes and genders must be psychically, spiritually, emotionally, and politically willing to see each other in their material reality.

At this point, Joe Scott appears and Shirley asks about his political leanings, remarking that she did not know whether he was Tory or Whig (321). Joe asserts that the Tories “carries on the war and ruins trade” and that “I’m of that which is most favourable to peace, and, by consequence, to the mercantile interests of this here land” (321). Shirley responds boldly, “So am I, Joe.” Joe does not label himself a Whig, and neither does Shirley identify herself as a Tory. Rather, Brontë seeks a way to find common ground between them by eliding labels that divide the classes. But here again, Joe’s sexism gets in the way of converse, and Shirley responds with frustration, saying, “do you seriously think all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls?” Scott’s reaction returns the reader to the beginning of the chapter and its focus on Eve. “Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection,” he proclaims, and “suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; . . . For Adam was first formed, then Eve” (321–22). Seeking communion, Caroline asks whether he believes in “the right of private judgment,” which Joe enthusiastically affirms. Caroline responds that women have the right to such “private judgment,” but he disagrees, asserting that they should “take their husbands’ opinion, both in politics and religion” (323).

Exasperated, the far-from-feminist Caroline sets forth a revolutionary credo, as another rebellion occurs in the novel. Indeed, if the long-suffering
Caroline can find feminist common cause with the fiery Shirley, there may be hope for a dialogical engagement with the bull-headed misogynist Joe. Speaking as though she herself is filled with the rapture with which Shirley began the chapter, Caroline invites Scott to abandon Pauline views of women: “‘he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances,’” she declares, and “‘besides, I dare say, if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether.’” Then Caroline’s oracular speech is filled with jouissance as she articulates the rebel’s (and utopian feminist and millenarian) translation of Paul. “‘It would be possible,’” she avows, to make the passage say, “‘Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection;’—‘it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace’” (323). In this moment, the usually conventional Caroline makes a “contrary turn” in her own gendered behavior (323).

When Joe scoffs at her, Caroline fumes that he is “‘a thoroughly dogmatical person.’” Shirley mediates the angry exchange, noting, “‘Joe is well enough in his own house,’” for there is not a “‘better nor a kinder husband in Briarfield. He does not dogmatize to his wife’” (323). Calibrating Joe’s politics, Shirley recognizes that the personal is political and that Joe’s actions toward his wife in the domestic sphere compensate greatly for his rant about women in the public sphere. But, brutally realistic, Brontë does not leave it there. In his rejoinder to Shirley’s gracious words, Joe complains that women like Caroline and Shirley are full of “‘superficial sort o’ vanities’” and cannot be counted upon to understand the world as men do (324). Shirley, though, has the last word of the chapter, brusquely telling Joe that he is a “‘real slanderer.’” “‘I would give you your answer,’” she says, “‘only the people are coming out of church.’” And one must wonder what those words would have been if Brontë had decided to write them in a novel that already had so many politically motivated deletions. But Shirley’s last words to him are telling enough: “‘Man of prejudice, good-bye’” (324).

Having carried on an intelligent exchange, on their side, with Joe about gender and class politics, Shirley and Caroline cannot pursue a monological and therefore futile conversation. Yet the protagonist does not give up her efforts to achieve what Brontë would have seen as a mediating conclusion to their discussion about class, even though Joe undermines the mutual understanding established between the genders. Symbolically and literally leaving the door open for further exchange, she turns to William’s children and utters the last words of the chapter: “‘come up to Fieldhead to-morrow, and you shall choose what you like best out of Mrs. Gill’s store-room’” (324).
Although patronizing, this response implies that it is for less-oppressed and less-prejudiced future generations to pick up the short-circuited conversation between the classes and genders, a future Brontë seems to have hoped that her own novel might help make possible. What she did make possible was the deconstruction of gendered notions about who may be a writer and who might be God. Further, *Shirley* puts the reader into the habit (dress) of thinking fluidly and nonconventionally, of imagining and knowing the world through a trope for god that is, at least in part, symbolically feminine, and that was available in the voices of her sister millenarians and republican feminists.