“CES ANGLAISES INTRÉPIDES!”: ENGLISHNESS AND THE RENEGOTIATION OF GENDER IN CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S *VILLETTE*

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Hymned by writers like Coventry Patmore and John Ruskin, the ideology of separate spheres is one of the most familiar, if problematic, aspects of Victorian culture. While it was certainly not universally shared, static or coherent, it dominated Victorian discourse of gender and many women writers considered resistance to it crucial if they were to write with authenticity and sincerity. As a mid-Victorian woman writer, Charlotte Brontë tackled this issue most famously in *Jane Eyre* (1847), but her last novel, *Villette* (1853), is arguably a more subversive work. Unlike *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* is largely set outside England, in a fictional Belgium called Labassecour. The foreign setting opens the way for an exploration of Englishness that frames Brontë’s subversion of middle-class gender ideology. Initially a marker of restriction and confinement, in the presence of England’s others on the Continent Englishness is transformed into an enabling force, and while Brontë may ultimately be pessimistic about the potential for real change outside the fictional world of the novel, *Villette* nonetheless offers fertile ground for exploration and renegotiation of middle-class gender mores.

Mid-Victorian constructions of Englishness were deeply invested in the gender ideology that informed the ideology of separate spheres. In contemporary discourse, England was popularly associated with middle-class masculine qualities like rationality, taciturnity and practicality. Mid-Victorian Englishness was also connected with a sense of physicality – of actively going out and building the empire – expressed most intensely by exponents of muscular Christianity, as in the following description of a rowing race at Cambridge in Charles Kingsley’s *Alton Locke* (1850):

> It was a [. . .] sight such as could only be seen in England – some hundred young men, who might, if they had chosen, been lounging effeminately about the streets, subjecting themselves voluntarily to that intense exertion, for the mere pleasure of toil. The true English stuff came out there [. . .] the stuff which has held Gibraltar and conquered at Waterloo – which has created a Birmingham and a Manchester, and colonized every quarter of the

> globe – that grim, earnest stubborn energy, which [. . .] the English possess alone of all the nations of the earth. (143)

This is not to say that women and domesticity did not have an important role to play in middle-class mid-Victorian constructions of English national identity. Crucially, though, the Englishwoman's qualities were not imagined as distinctively English, but rather, as Pat Thane and Jane Mackay have pointed out in their essay on "The Englishwoman," as the epitome of middle-class feminine qualities that were "believed to be universal in Woman" (191). As middle-class wives and mothers, women assured England's moral superiority and superintended the domestic space that produced, to quote from Elizabeth Langland's discussion of *Tom Brown's Schooldays* in her essay on "Nation and Nationality," the "English sons" who were "invested with all the active virtues that [. . .] formed the empire" (18). This clearly mirrors the separate spheres of middle-class domestic ideology.

Set in England, the opening chapters of *Villette* trace the isolation accorded to women who do not conform to such ideology. This isolation is represented as both homelessness and exclusion from English national identity: as Lucy says, "If I died far away from – home, I was going to say, but I had no home – from England, then, who would weep?" (60). Lucy's alienation commences after the death of her family, when her failure to assume the domestic role allocated for her by English society and secure marriage with an eligible man renders her economically marginal. Unable to prove her respectable middle-class status with the visible trappings of financial success, she is left vulnerable to negative judgement in the wider world. When she travels to London on her way to the Continent, for example, she is treated condescendingly by the chambermaid and waiter at her hotel, the latter's "spruce attire flaunt[ing] an easy scorn at [her] plain country garb" (56). Only after they realise she is not a servant do they "hove[r] in a doubtful state between patronage and politeness" (56).

Lucy's exclusion from English society is a consequence not just of her plainness and (in a cruel circuit) her marginal social status. As has been amply addressed in Brontë criticism since the 1970s,[1] her narrative betrays resistance to the domestic service modelled by little Paulina, who masochistically "caresse[s]" Graham's "heedless foot" (38) when he kicks her, denies herself sweets and stabs herself with a needle in her attempts to be "womanly." Paulina is, in Lucy's words, a "little Odalisque" (35) whose "rather absurd" (17) attentions to the male members of the household bring little acknowledgment. The conventional Englishness of Polly's self-conscious domestic role-play is emphasised by the imperialist ideology that she parrots when reading to Lucy: "'Here is a picture of thousands gathered in a desolate

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[1] See, for example, Patricia Beer, *Reader, I Married Him*, 97; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, 403-04; Brenda R. Silver, "The Reflecting Reader in *Villette*," 741.

place [. . .] round a man in black, – a good, *good* Englishman, – a missionary, who is preaching to them under a palm-tree'" (36).

Resigned to isolation and alienation, Lucy accepts a position as a nurse for the elderly invalid Miss Marchmont and "[t]wo hot, close rooms [. . .] bec[o]me [her] world" (45). In doing so, she partially submits to the domestic service fundamental to dominant conceptions of middle-class femininity, although, in contrast with Paulina, her servitude is directed towards exclusively female company. "I [. . .] wanted to compromise with Fate," she says, "to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains" (46). After Miss Marchmont's death, however, Lucy is again forced to acknowledge her vulnerability. If in England there is little possibility of rewriting gender ideology, Lucy's solution is to "act out her sense of exile" (Keefe 161) and depart for the more flexible boundaries of the fictional country of Labassecour.

When Lucy travels to the Continent, she is immediately marked out as English, her otherness ironically allowing her for the first time to participate in a collective English identity. While in England language was a source of difference – the "strange speech of the cabmen and others [in London], seemed [. . .] odd as a foreign tongue" (55) – in Labassecour the "Fatherland accents" (76) suddenly become a source of community. Moreover, the qualities that mark Lucy as English enable her to renegotiate the gender role to which she refused to conform in England. If Englishness there is associated with stifling domestic ideology, on the Continent it is turned on its head and signalled instead by intelligence, independence and emotional depth. At the heart of Lucy's Englishness is self-control, a quality which was closely associated with middle-class masculinity and conventionally represented in opposition to femininity. As the then Secretary to the Royal Institution noted in an 1843 lecture, women were regarded as "creature[s] of impulse and of instinct" (Barlow 245). The selflessness of Patmore's "angel in the house," likewise, was enabled not through self-discipline, but through passionlessness.[2] In other contexts, however, women *could* access self-control. In *Villette*, Lucy's self-control is closely linked with, and authorised by, her Protestantism. As Rosemary Clark-Beattie has pointed out, Brontë, like many English Protestants, located the difference between Catholicism and Protestantism in what she saw as Catholicism's conceptualisation of morality as a matter of form imposed by the Church. According to this view, because Catholicism did not require personal responsibility, its adherents were believed to be incapable of independent thought or genuine morality. Conversely, because Protestantism demanded that its adherents regulate their own behaviour – that is, exercise the middle-class, masculine quality of self-control – they were imagined to be independent of mind and morally sincere. In *Villette*, Madame Beck's "very un-English" (85) "system" of "Surveillance" (89) epitomises

[2] For discussion of female passionlessness in Victorian gender ideology, see Nancy Cott's essay "Passionlessness: An Interpretation of Victorian Gender Ideology."

Catholic moral control. "Rul[ing] by espionage," she "glid[es] ghost-like through the house, watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole, listening behind every door" and employing a "staff of spies" (90). Although she "seem[s] to know that keeping girls in distrustful restraint" is "not the best way to make them grow up honest and modest women," she "aver[s] that ruinous consequences w[ill] ensue if any other method [is] tried with continental children – they [are] so accustomed to constraint, that relaxation, however guarded, would be misunderstood and fatally presumed on" (89).

The Protestant system of self-regulation educates its women to be trusted as Catholic women cannot. When Lucy sails alone to Continent, she remarks:

> Foreigners say that it is only English girls who can thus be trusted to travel alone, and deep is their wonder at the daring confidence of English parents and guardians. As for the "jeunes Miss," by some their intrepidity is pronounced masculine and "inconvenant," others regard them as the passive victims of an educational and theological system which wantonly dispenses with proper "surveillance." (65)

Madame Beck is astonished by Lucy's solo journey: "'Il n'y a que les Anglaises pour ces sortes d'entreprises [. . .] !'" (80) Later on, paying tribute to "'les Anglais'" (365), whom "'il n'est pas besoin de [. . .] surveiller'" (366), Madame Beck shrewdly recognises that the best way to secure Lucy's loyalty is to "leave [her] alone with [her] liberty," and removes "[e]very slight shackle she ha[s] ever laid on [her]" (372). Symbolically, as the practitioner of self-disciplined Protestant morality, Lucy is admitted into the masculine world. When she breakfasts alone at an inn after first arriving in Labassecour, she imagines the other diners justifying her behaviour with "this word: 'Anglaise!'" (73). The very independence that excluded Lucy from the English community in England is thus transformed into a marker of her Englishness. Lucy's admittance into the world of masculinity by means of her self-disciplined morality is later illustrated again when M. Paul discovers her, unchaperoned, viewing a sensuous painting of Cleopatra. Outraged by her "[a]stounding insular audacity" (251), M. Paul (who himself considers the Cleopatra to be "[u]ne femme superbe") asserts that only alliance with a man in the form of marriage may authorise women to view what is clearly an overt appeal to masculine sexuality. His concern for Lucy is misplaced, however, because, as her sardonic comments reveal, she is in little danger of being corrupted by the painting's sensuality:

> [the Cleopatra] could not plead a weak spine; she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa. She ought likewise to have

> worn decent garments [. . .] out of abundance of material – seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery – she managed to make inefficient raiment. (250)

Other "English" qualities in *Villette* are filtered through self-control. The absence of moral sincerity produced by the Catholic system is manifested in particular by continental dishonesty. According to Lucy, there is "[n]ot a soul in Madame Beck's house, from the scullion to the directress herself, but [is] above being ashamed of a lie" (100-01). By contrast, in an inflection of the beloved "English" quality of honesty, the Protestant system of self-disciplined morality endows Englishwomen with, in Madame Beck's words, a "more real and reliable probity" (89). Even Ginevra, whose English identity has been corrupted by her cosmopolitan education to the extent that she knows neither English, French nor German well – and, worse, has "quite forgotten [her] religion" (66) – will "never [be] f[ou]nd [. . .] lying, as these foreigners will often lie" (280).

Another aspect of Lucy's self-control that illustrates Brontë's revision of gender roles within the ideology of Englishness is her emotional restraint. Throughout the novel, she grapples with the impulse to show emotion, a conflict that is portrayed by the figures of "Reason" and "Feeling" or "Imagination." Much like the middle-class mid-Victorian man, whose profound inner feeling was imagined to contrast with women's frivolity and superficiality, Lucy's emotional restraint is symptomatic of the power of her emotions. As she says when describing her regard for the adult Paulina, "[a]n admiration more superficial might have been more demonstrative; mine, however, was quiet" (466). Lucy's emotional restraint contrasts her with characters like Monsieur Paul, whose emotional nature draws upon familiar stereotypes of the French, and Madame Beck, whose unruffled demeanour is the result not of self-discipline, but lack of feeling. In Lucy's words, she has never known "the fire which is kindled in the heart or the softness which flows thence" (88). Tellingly, the adult Paulina also possesses emotional self-restraint, but it is hidden under a cool exterior that outwardly satisfies Graham's requirement that she conform to the conventional English ideal of passionlessness (in another episode, Lucy remarks with distaste the "vindictive thrill" that "passe[s] through" (273) Graham at his apprehension of Ginevra's sexuality). Brontë emphasises the artificiality of Paulina's coolness. When replying to Graham's love letter, she works hard to satisfy his "fastidious" (471) tastes and present him with a suitably passionless letter: "I wrote it three times – chastening and subduing the phrases at every rescript [. . .] till it seemed to me to resemble a morsel of ice flavoured with ever so slight a zest of fruit or sugar" (471). Paulina's inner strength is, Lucy says, more "than Graham himself imagined – than she would ever show to those who did not wish to see it" (391).

Self-control also enables Lucy to appropriate intellectual power as a sign of her Englishness. She is quick to point out that the "superior intelligence" (89) that

Madame Beck herself admires in Englishwomen is the result not of natural talent, but of English self-discipline. Where, she says, "an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility, would quietly take a theme and bend herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back at you," demanding that it be simplified. Thus while a pair of French teachers are amazed by one of Lucy's essays, it is, she says, "not remarkable at all; it only *seem[s]* remarkable, compared with the average productions of foreign school-girls; in an English establishment it would [. . .] pa[ss] scarce noticed" (501). The Englishness of Lucy's intellect is further signified by her independence of thought, which is positioned in opposition to Catholic passivity. In one episode, Lucy is amused by the "somewhat naïv[e]" way in which a pensionnaire parrots Catholic slogans at her:

> "Mademoiselle, what a pity you are a Protestant!"
> "Why, Isabelle?"
> "Parceque, qurand vous serez morte – vous brûlerez tout de suite dans l'Enfer." quand
> "Croyez-vous?"
> "Certainement que j'y crois: tout le monde le sait; et d'ailleurs le prêtre me l'a dit."
> Isabelle [. . .] added, *sotto voce*:
> "Pour assurer votre salut là-haut, on ferait bien de vous brûler toute vive ici-bas."
> I laughed, as, indeed, it was impossible to do otherwise. (103)

Lucy, by contrast, appreciates the relative nature of all Christian denominations. To Père Silas's horror, she goes

> by turns, and indiscriminately, to the three Protestant Chapels of Villette – the French, German and the English – *id est*, the Presbyterian, Lutheran, Episcopalian [. . . .] I had often secretly wondered at the minute and unimportant character of the differences between these three sects [. . .] I saw nothing to hinder them from being one day fused into one grand Holy Alliance, and I respected them all, though I thought that in each there were faults of form; incumbrances, and trivialities. (525)

Concomitantly, when faced with a Catholic tract that "appeal[s] [. . .] not to intellect" but rather seeks "to win the affectionate through their affections, [and] the sympathizing through their sympathies," she resists its "spell" by consciously exercising rational thought. She reminds herself of the things that the tract omits: the "utterance of Rome's thunders" and "blasting of the breath of her displeasure" that

have been used to "persecute." In the same vein, she dismisses "one capital inducement to apostacy [sic] [. . .] held out in the fact that a Catholic who ha[s] lost dear friends by death c[an] enjoy the unspeakable solace of praying them out of purgatory" with the observation that "[t]he writer did not touch on the firmer peace of those whose belief dispenses with purgatory altogether; but I thought of this, and, on the whole, preferred the latter doctrine as the most consolatory" (518).

Brontë covertly seeks English approval of Lucy's version of Englishness by displacing the middle-class domestic ideal to which she is pressured to conform onto Roman Catholicism. In one episode, M. Paul directs Lucy to a set of paintings titled "La vie d'une femme," depicting the Catholic ideal of femininity:

> The first represented a "Jeune Fille," coming out of a church-door, a missal in her hand, her dress very prim, her eyes cast down, her mouth pursed up [. . . .] The second, a "Mariée" with a long white veil, kneeling at a prie-dieu in her chamber, holding her hands plastered together, finger to finger [. . . .] The third, a "Jeune Mère," hanging disconsolate over a clayey and puffy baby [. . . .] The fourth, a "Veuve," being a black woman, holding by the hand a black little girl. (252)

Authorised by her Protestantism, Lucy rejects the passive feminine ideal embodied by the paintings, denouncing the women as "insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless non-entities!" (253). As this suggests, Brontë in particular relocates English fear of female intellectual success to Catholicism. In a tirade that closely resembles certain expressions of middle-class English gender ideology, M. Paul characterises a "woman of intellect" as "a luckless accident, a thing for which there [is] neither place nor use in creation, wanted neither as wife nor worker." He "believe[s]" instead that "lovely, placid, and passive feminine mediocrity [is] the only pillow on which manly thought and sense c[an] find rest for its aching temples; and as to work, male mind alone c[an] work to any good practical result" (445). M. Paul's fear of feminine intellect is shown to be ridiculous. As long as Lucy's intellectual efforts are "marked" by what she calls "a preternatural imbecility" he is gratified, and "words can hardly do justice to his tenderness and helpfulness" (441). However, when her struggles begin "at last to yield to day [. . .] the light change[s] in his eyes from a beam to a spark" and, Lucy says sardonically, he "harasse[s] [her] ears" with "the bitterest innuendoes against the 'pride of intellect'" and "vaguely threaten[s] [her] with [. . .] doom, if [she] ever trespasse[s] the limits proper to [her] sex and conceive[s] a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge" (441).

Lucy's English identity fits her for middle-class economic labour and throughout the novel she works, like the middle-class man figured by conventional mid-Victorian gender ideology, towards the goal of independence. This labour itself becomes a sign of her Englishness, contrasting her with the continental girls who

unscrupulously accept money or, like Madame Beck, coldly acquire money for mercenary ends in the fashion of the Catholic church. As Lucy works towards her goal, however, Brontë increasingly critiques the viability of her English identity, a tendency that ultimately testifies to her inability to conceive of Lucy's Englishness existing outside fantasy. This pessimism is signalled by the entrance of the Brettons and Homes into the novel. Before Lucy is forced to acknowledge the Brettons (and it is significant that she initially withholds her identity from Graham), her alliance with Ginevra enables her to maintain a sort of fiction of belonging to an English community. While Lucy professes not to know "why I chose to give my bread rather to Ginevra than to another; nor why, if two had to share the convenience of one drinking-vessel [. . .] I always contrived that she should be my convive" (293), the source of her affinity is made clear a few paragraphs later:

> When I first came, it would happen once and again that a blunt German would clap me on the shoulder, and ask me to run a race; or a riotous Labassecourienne seize me by the arm and drag me towards the play-ground [. . .] but these little attentions had ceased some time ago [. . . .] I had now no familiar demonstration to dread or endure, save from one quarter; and as that was English I could bear it. (294)

Lucy implies that her isolation in Labassecour is the consequence of a conscious choice not to associate with foreigners. She claims, "I might have had companions, and I chose solitude," and describes how "[e]ach of the teachers in turn made me overtures of special intimacy" (155). Lucy "trie[s] them all" (155), she says, and rejects each one for her immorality.

Lucy's fantasy collapses with the arrival of the Brettons and the Homes in Villette. When she is taken in by the Brettons after a nervous breakdown, the domestic vision of Englishness from the beginning of the novel is suddenly present again, the home in Bretton that symbolised her alienation from the English community bizarrely lifted intact to haunt her in Labassecour:

> How pleasant it was in its air of perfect domestic comfort! How warm in its amber lamp-light and vermilion fire-flush! To render the picture perfect, tea stood ready on the table – an English tea, whereof the whole shining service glanced at me familiarly; from the solid silver urn, of antique pattern, and the massive pot of the same metal, to the thin porcelain cups, dark with purple and gilding. I knew the very seed-cake of peculiar form, baked in a peculiar mould, which always had a place on the tea-table at Bretton. Graham liked it, and there it was as of yore – set before Graham's plate with the silver knife and fork beside it. (217)

The itemisation of property in this passage – the fireplace, tea-set and cutlery set – potently symbolises the middle-class domestic vision of Englishness from which Lucy's economic status excludes her. She immediately recognises that she has no part in this world. "[S]teep[ing]" her "pillow with tears," she "entreat[s] Reason" to moderate her desires: "Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly [. . .] let me not run athirst, and apply passionately to its welcome waters [. . . .] Oh! would to God – I may be enabled to feel enough sustained by an occasional, amicable intercourse, rare, brief, unengrossing and tranquil: quite tranquil!" (223) She and Mrs. Bretton are, she says, vastly different people:

> The difference between [Mrs. Bretton] and me might be figured by that between the stately ship, cruising safe on smooth seas, with its full complement of crew [. . .] and the life-boat, which most days of the year lies dry and solitary in an old, dark, boat-house, only putting to sea when the billows run high in rough weather, when cloud encounters water, when danger and death divide between them the rule of the great deep. (226)

Lucy's fears are justified: the English "community" is reduced to a system of patronage that renders her a "grovelling, groping, monomaniac" (308) over a single letter. In contrast to the visibly wealthy Ginevra and Paulina, she is excluded from playing love-games with Graham. Moreover, the English identity that Lucy has constructed for herself in Labassecour is incomprehensible to the other English characters. In one exchange, Paulina is shocked to learn that Lucy maintains herself by working as a teacher. Paulina later shows herself unable to comprehend the desire for independence that motivates Lucy by offering to pay her to be her companion. Far from recognising the qualities of self-control, strength and intellect that constitute Lucy's Englishness, Graham, too, fails even to accord her an identity, describing her as an "inoffensive shadow" (394). Lucy's pain at being judged as a creature without character echoes throughout the novel. She recognises that in Graham's presence her identity has again been reduced to the worth of her visible social status: "Ah Graham! [. . . .] Had Lucy been intrinsically the same, but possessing the additional advantages of wealth and station, would your manner to her, your value for her have been quite what they actually were?" (392). Unconsciously exposing the artificial nature of the mid-Victorian feminine ideal, Graham instead absurdly idealises Ginevra as a "thoroughly artless [. . . .] [s]imple, innocent girlish fairy" (185-86). Graham's relationship with Paulina, too, is also critiqued, though more subtly. Bronte hints at the artificiality of Paulina's character: she is unnatural in Lucy's eyes, a "spectral illusion" who hides her true character, showing only Lucy the "eccentricities" of character that belie the façade of a "docile, somewhat quaint little maiden" (66).

In order to protect her identity, Lucy unites with a foreigner. Instead of erasing her Englishness, M. Paul casts it into relief, his fiery temperament contrasting with her self-control. Unlike the English characters, M. Paul recognises Lucy's passion, and thus the magnitude of her self-restraint. As he says to her, "'I know you! I know you! Other people [. . .] see you pass, and think that a colourless shadow has gone by. As for me, I scrutinized your face once, and it sufficed'" (191). Their union is ultimately based upon acceptance of difference, the realisation that each must follow the faith that belongs to them, and the recognition of similarity within that difference.

Unlike *The Professor*, in which Crimsworth and Frances return to England where, as Firdous Azim discusses in her chapter on that novel in *The Colonial Rise of the Novel*, the anglicised Frances is incorporated into the English community, Lucy shows no sign of intending to leave Villette. Neither do the Brettons seem to have much part in Lucy's future, the last sentences of the novel only detailing the fates of the French characters. Instead, Lucy marshals the qualities that constitute her English identity in order to obtain both her own successful business and the home that she was denied in England. Her school is simultaneously the site of her economic success and a Labassecourien alternative to the English home:

> Opening an inner door, M. Paul disclosed a parlour, or salon – very tiny, but I thought, very pretty. Its delicate walls were tinged like a blush; its floor was waxed; a square of brilliant carpet covered its centre; its small round table shone like the mirror over its hearth; there was a little couch, a little chiffoniere – the half-open, crimson-silk door of which, showed porcelain on the shelves; there was a French clock, a lamp; there were ornaments in biscuit china; the recess of the single ample window was filled with a green stand, bearing three green flower-pots, each filled with a fine plant glowing in bloom; in one corner appeared a guéridon with a marble top, and upon it a work-box, and a glass filled with violets in water. (604)

The fusion of the English and the continental is signified by the "hearth," which is present instead of the "black stoves" (289) that take the place of English firesides in Labassecour, and the "coffee service of china" (605) that replaces the English tea-set.

M. Paul's role in Lucy's attainment of home and independence is potentially problematic. After all, it is he who acquires the school, which suggests that Lucy has not after all achieved independence. But Lucy's agency is crucial. It is she who commences the plan: she had been doing her best to save money for it before M. Paul heard about her goal of owning her own school. Furthermore, the economic responsibility of the school does not rest on M. Paul. He does not own it, and Lucy

is entirely responsible for the rent. Lucy's independence is such that M. Paul's death has no economic impact on her: the school flourishes and expands.

Nonetheless, for all that Lucy appropriates a middle-class masculine project, she neither wishes to relinquish her femininity nor entirely discard the dominant middle-class English vision of domesticity. Lucy's school modifies, but does not abandon, this vision: the love of a caring man is an essential part of her self-fulfilment. She describes her "delight inexpressible in tending M. Paul" (608) with tea and her "promis[e] to do all he told me [. . . .] 'I will be your faithful steward,' I said [. . . .] he gently raised his hand to stroke my hair; it touched my lips in passing; I pressed it close, I paid it tribute. He was my king [. . .] to offer homage was both a joy and a duty" (607). Yet for all Lucy's joy, M. Paul's presence does inevitably undermine the independence that is crucial to her identity. In a sense, his death is a compromise, simultaneously enabling her to experience love and ensuring her independence.

M. Paul also plays an important role in the novel in helping Lucy to modify damaging aspects of her identity. While her self-control is central to her English identity, it also harms her. Ironically, her repression of sexual passion in particular indicates that she is still trapped by the Victorian middle-class ideology that condemned female passion as immoral. The prospect of hinting to Graham that she is a sexual being would, she says, "kindl[e] an inward fire of shame so quenchless, and so devouring, that I think it would soon [. . .] li[ck] up the very life in my veins" (319). Lucy's repression manifests itself in various ways, eventually culminating in physical illness and her visit to the Catholic confessional.

The foreign setting offers Lucy the possibility of exploring and coming to terms with her passion. Authorised by her Protestantism, she draws attention to the unnaturalness of the passionless, self-sacrificing middle-class English feminine ideal that, displaced onto Catholicism, M. Paul holds up to her. She challenges him with her own experience of domestic self-denial: her care of the cretin Marie Broc, which resulted in a nervous breakdown. With his outrageous hyperbole, M. Paul also forces Lucy to confront and assert her right to passion. Unlike Graham, who regards her as sexless, M. Paul crucially recognises her sexuality, as shown by his horror at her "scarlet gown" (418) and his frequent resort to fire metaphors. (Lisa Surridge points out that nineteenth century discourse "depicted unrestrained female sexuality as fire" (849).) Lucy is goaded into responding to M. Paul's tirades with "just wrath," exclaiming, "'Oui; j'ai la flamme à l'âme, et je dois l'avoir!'" (396). Symbolically, after her initial horror at the pink dress, she refuses to be bullied by M. Paul into not wearing it, and even wears a new one to his fête.

Lucy's education in gender is not just confined to femininity, however. During the course of the novel she learns concomitantly to reconstruct masculinity. Her love for Graham is instructive. When she first meets him in Villette, she idealises him with middle-class English stereotypes of gender. For example, she admires his "manly self-control" – one of the very qualities that the novel has worked so hard to

de-gender. Tellingly, Lucy suppresses the "fair, Celtic (not Saxon) character of his good looks" (19) that she noted in England, imagining his beauty as characteristically English, with "English complexion, eyes, and form" (117) (Ginevra, by contrast, ridicules Graham's "orange-red" (182) whiskers). Lucy situates Graham in opposition to de Hamal, whom she satirises in conventionally gendered stereotypes of Frenchness:

> he was pretty and smooth, and as trim as a doll: so nicely dressed, so nicely curled, so booted and gloved and cravated – he was charming indeed [. . . .] "What a dear personage!" cried I, and [. . .] asked [Ginevra] what she thought de Hamal might have done with the precious fragments of that heart she had broken – whether he kept them in a scent-vial, and conserved them in otto of roses? I observed, too, with a deep rapture of approbation, that the colonel's hands were scarce larger than Miss Fanshawe's own, and suggested that this circumstance might be convenient, as he could wear her gloves at a pinch. (181)

Learning to love M. Paul means in part relinquishing English conventions about masculinity. This is not to say that he is effeminate; rather, he represents a different, more feminine masculinity. In contrast to the self-controlled ideal of middle-class Victorian masculinity, he is passionate and "as capricious as women are said to be" (414), and his emotionality gives him compassion that is "tender beyond a man's tenderness" (425). In place of her relentless admiration of Graham's manliness, Lucy comes to admire M. Paul's childlike artlessness.

M. Paul's rearticulated masculinity is particularly significant, because he ultimately functions in the novel as a kind of honorary Englishman. There is some similarity between Protestantism and his austere Catholicism. As Terry Eagleton puts it, "Paul unites a 'sensible' anti-radicalism with fiery reformist zeal, Protestant rationalism with Catholic spirit" (68). Appropriating the positive, Protestant elements of Catholicism, M. Paul also resists its corruption – its bigotry and dishonesty. "[F]ierce and frank, dark and candid, testy and fearless" (387), he is reminiscent of the English gentleman. In Lucy's words: "he [is] [. . .] like a knight of old, religious in his way, and of spotless fame. Innocent childhood, beautiful youth [are] safe at his side. He ha[s] vivid passions, keen feelings, but his pure honour and his artless piety [are] the strong charm that ke[eps] the lions couchant" (480). Marilyn Demarest Button has described how the otherness of certain characters[3] gives them "[i]ndependence from the ideological and sexual constraints of English life" (xvii). Authorised by his foreignness, then, M. Paul plays out the blurring of gender roles implicit in Lucy's construction of Englishness. Perhaps, though, the

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[3] Button cites Aurora Leigh and Marian Halcombe as examples.

fact that M. Paul's Englishness must be performed in a foreign body – on, indeed, the stage of a fictional country – is further testimony to Brontë's doubtfulness about the possibility of Englishmen consenting to a renegotiation of middle-class gender ideology.

Yet the novel's achievement in examining and reworking gender mores cannot be denied. In particular, *Villette* reveals the potential of the others outside the nation ironically to enable the others within the nation to resist and subvert the identities imposed upon them. Even if we cannot dismiss Brontë's pessimism about the transferral of Lucy's reformed vision of gender ideology beyond the fictional world of Villette, and even if, too, Lucy and Brontë are unable to imagine Englishness outside the dominant masculine, middle-class discourse (in particular, the novel perpetuates ideas and assumptions that marginalised the working classes), we can still see possibilities for empowerment of the other within the discourse.

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