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"The Condition of Women:" Gender, Sexuality, and The Patriarchy in Charlotte Bronte's Shirley and Villette

Alexis Noelle Robinson

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**"THE CONDITION OF WOMEN:" GENDER, SEXUALITY, AND THE PATRIARCHY
IN CHARLOTTE BRONTE'S SHIRLEY AND VILLETTE**

An honors paper submitted to the Department of English, Linguistics, and Communication
of the University of Mary Washington
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Departmental Honors

Alexis Noelle Robinson

May 2017

By signing your name below, you affirm that this work is the complete and final version of your paper submitted in partial fulfillment of a degree from the University of Mary Washington. You affirm the University of Mary Washington honor pledge: "I hereby declare upon my word of honor that I have neither given nor received unauthorized help on this work."

Alexis Robinson
(digital signature)

05/08/17

“The Condition of Women:”

Gender, Sexuality, and The Patriarchy in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and *Villette*

Departmental Honors Project By: Alexis Robinson

Project Overseer: Dr. Eric Lorentzen

Papers From: English 449L: The Brontës Seminar

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Abstract

The primary focus of this honors project is analyzing the ways in which Charlotte Brontë strategically deconstructs traditional heteronormative constructs of feminine gender and sexuality in two of her novels, *Shirley* and *Villette*. This project is split into two analytical documents: the first, an annotated bibliography assessing the critical, scholarly discourse on *Shirley*; the second, a critical assessment of Brontë's "novel of alternatives," *Villette*. Although this project is entitled "The Condition of Women," as Brontë scholars have dully noted the author's continued progression and revolutionary approach to Victorian normalizations of women, the didactic messages behind Brontë's novels ultimately need to be applied to the ways in which our contemporary society continues to adhere to these arbitrary and daunting heteronormative social constructs. Ultimately, the purpose of this paper is to evoke a critical assessment and awareness for the ways in which our society problematically normalizes and scrutinizes the ways in which people express their gender and sexuality.

“The Condition of Women”:**Feminism, Gender, Patriarchy, and The Woman Question in *Shirley***

Introduction

Shirley, Charlotte Brontë’s second published novel, was a mystery to me—my only experience with Charlotte Brontë’s work previously being limited to her first novel, *Jane Eyre*. I wouldn’t say I chose *Shirley* for any particular reason. If I had to provide an explanation, I guess I looked at *Shirley* as the neglected yet very complex offspring of Charlotte’s literary creations. I guess I wanted a challenge, and I found one.

In adopting a critical lens to examine this work, I chose to remain close to the familiar territory of issues of gender, patriarchy and the women question that have drawn me to the genre of Victorian Literature, but also acquainted me with Charlotte Brontë. *Shirley* does not stand equal to *Jane Eyre* in the critical eyes of the literary world. *Shirley*, a known experiment for Charlotte to expand her female voice in a male dominant profession, has been deemed a novel of inconsistencies, lacking a coherent plot, and losing its vigor as a result of its omniscient, third person narration. Although I agree that Brontë’s second novel falls short in comparison to first, I feel that this comparison is problematic and prevents Brontë’s “novel of ideas” to be appreciated for what it excels at: constructing a dualistic narrative that both grapples with the conditions of England, but most importantly the conditions of Victorian women. Ultimately, I was going in blind—I held onto my air of resistance and took the ride through Brontë’s narration of the relationship and lives of her contrasting female characters, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone.

After familiarizing myself with the novel's plot and characters, I do not regret my decision to explore the feminist conversations that examine Charlotte's tackling of the women question in her strikingly introduced narrative—"something that is real, cold, and solid...something as unromantic as Monday morning, [yet still potentially promising] a taste of the exciting" (Brontë 5). I found awe in the construction of the thematic importance of Shirley's character being both a masculine and feminine presence in the novel. Throughout my readings, I became drawn to the relationship between Shirley and Caroline, their contrasting demeanor's creating a complex partnership that both passively and actively subverts the patriarchal ideologies of their male counterparts. I resented the novel's ending in the marriages of the two female protagonists, but I was curious to further understand its purpose. I admired Brontë's tactfulness in creating a diverse population of female voices throughout the novel that represent different levels of subjugation to the oppressive nature of patriarchal society. I was captivated by this "novel of ideas," but I was overwhelmed and fearful that my research would not satisfy my interests, or resolve my conflicts and questions concerning Brontë's choices in reinventing her familiar themes.

In approaching my research, I expected my findings would be restricted, as byproduct of many scholars failing to explore *Shirley's* more compelling moments from a variety of critical lens, and ultimately the reality that the literary conversation concerning this novel being limited to only a few passionate and dedicated Brontëan voices. I honestly wasn't sure what I was going to find. I expected to find articles examining Shirley's character in depth, as well as one's addressing the marriage-plot. Although not surprised, I was outraged by Brontë's choice to wed these characters to the Moore brothers; however, my research provided me with solace in explaining ways in which the marriage-plot of the novel comes secondary to the relationship

between Caroline and Shirley. Specifically concerning the novel's tactfulness in demonstrating the woman's struggle and question of existence within patriarchal society, many scholars tend to focus more on how Brontë's two female protagonists, Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone, are subjected within the system. Additionally, many scholars chose to analyze multiple thematic elements within this novel in one sitting by comparing the public narrative of the struggle of the working class to the private struggle of the women within the newly industrialized Yorkshire. Although these comparisons are fruitful, these were not critical works I wanted to make up my research. I found many articles delving into the contrasting existence of the public and private spaces within this narrative and how they relate to the contrasting gender spheres, but there were only a few that I felt focused on the female characters in the ways Brontë had initially intended.

The sources I include in this bibliography are diverse in their assignment of the relationship between Caroline and Shirley, their marriages, and more strikingly, how the Genesis myth serves a reinforcement of patriarchal ideals, as well as a mechanism that evokes resistance and attempts at subverting the normalizations that the myth encourages. Most of the following scholars would proclaim themselves as feminists, yet some more than others provide a critical examination that shows Brontë's attempts at constructing a narrative that provides a realistic discussion of the woman question. Being proclaimed by one scholar as "a condition of women" novel, I am not surprised that the discourse is not more cohesive. As Brontë reveals in her novel *Shirley*, the perspectives concerning the existence of women, their identity and role within society, are not unified. The women question that Brontë attempts to answer in this novel, for most scholars, appears unresolved. Through my research, I have come to find that this not an observation relating to how successful Brontë is in constructing the themes of her novel; rather, it reflects the true nature of the women question—still remaining a question.

Annotated Bibliography

Dupras, Joseph A. “Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley and Interpretive Engendering.” *Papers on Language and Literature* 24.3, 1988: p. 301-316. EBSCOhost. Web.

Joseph Dupras critiques Brontë’s success in constructing a coherent discourse of the woman question in *Shirley*. Dupras chooses to approach this through a concrete analysis of how Brontë depicts the presence of gender’s “overt and covert place in communication and understanding” (301). This article focuses on the central female protagonists, along with their future husbands, the Moore brothers, and how they struggle to nurture their sexual identities in relation to one another. The primary root of their struggle being that the two genders interact poorly and have little understanding of the self-delusions they have contrived for themselves as a result of their sex. For example, Robert Moore, a character described as completely “in love with his machinery [that he has been entirely] stripped of romance” (64, 181), is partnered with Caroline Helstone—a character that readers pity as being a victim to this unromantic, hyper-masculinized figure. Dupras most striking argument in his analysis of Caroline and Robert’s relationship stems from his proposal that the victimization imposed on Caroline is related to what he calls, “the subversive conspiracy between author and audience” (312). Furthermore, Dupras ultimately argues that the success or failure of Brontë’s novel maintaining a feminist story line is reliant on the gender of the reader. Dupras criticizes Brontë’s novel as placing extraordinary pressures on her characters to define and refine their gender identity, while also demanding her readers to use careful precision in examining the novel. Ultimately, Dupras’ article is more centered on how the perspective and gender of Brontë’s readers and critics distorts certain

moments in the novel, primarily those directly critiquing and or attacking a particular gender. Thus, in order to solve these issues, Dupras urges that readers must make compromises of engendering, speaking from a personal perspective, to avoid loss of one's own identity.

Dupras' is very different from the rest of the article I chose to include in my research. The critical lens in which he chooses to examine Brontë's novel is that of his own construction, and is by no means feminist in nature. I did not chose to include Dupras' work in further support of feminist discourse I have explored in my research. In fact, I chose to omit his analysis of key moments in the novel concerning gender normalizations and marriage because I found his interpretations to be more opinionated than factual, more informal than professional, and more rebellious than progressive to the literary conversations concerning *Shirley*. I chose to include Dupras' piece because I felt that it demonstrates a reaction that Brontë hoped for, but Dupras seemingly failed to really grasp or was too frustrated by pay mind to: Brontë's inconsistencies, although partially a byproduct of her disorganized plot, reveal the absurdity of the conversations concerning gender normalizations within her narrative. I do not agree with Dupras' interpretation of Brontë's novel, but I think the framework of his argument is something that needs to be kept in mind, and is especially fruitful to the remainder of my research. Dupras' notion of engendering Brontë's novel seems a little too extreme and further constructs a barrier between reader and author; however, his recognition of the relationship between perspective and gender in coherence with analyzing the novel, both holistically and minutely, influences how certain aspects of the novel are perceived by certain readers. Although this is something experienced readers recognize and remain conscious of in their close readings, I think Dupras' piece reveals a concrete example of misinterpretation as a result of prejudice and gender bias. In my perspective, and as a presence in my research, Dupras critical voice echoes that of patriarchy.

Gubar, Susan. "The Genesis of Hunger, according to 'Shirley'." *Feminist Studies* 3.3/4, 1976: p. 5-21. *Jstor*. Web.

In this essay, Susan Gubar focuses her analysis of *Shirley* by examining Brontë's usage of images of imprisonment and starvation throughout her novel; which the scholar suggests allows Brontë to concretely trace the suicidal effect of female confinement and submission and ultimately demonstrate how traditional gender norms destroy women. To begin her analysis, Gubar briefly touches on the secondary character of Mary Cave, deeming her an emblem and warning "that the fate of women inhabiting a male-controlled society involves suicidal-renunciation" (7). Gubar then shifts her attention to Caroline and the moment in which she comes to terms with Robert fulling removing his affections towards her. Brontë's "you expected bread, and you got a stone" passage is assessed by Gubar as demonstrative of Brontë explicitly laying out the cause and effect of women's suffering, that: "with no sustaining nourishment, growth is impossible and so is escape...women can only witness their imprisonment and withdraw into it with the ambiguous solace that comes with from being hidden" (8). Therefore, like her aunt Mary Cave, Caroline draws within herself and begins to become a ghost of her former self from lack of love and food. Before Caroline reaches the point of total paralysis from her starvation, Brontë introduces Shirley Keeldar. Gubar argues that in some ways Shirley is Caroline's projection of her repressed desires. The things that Caroline longs to do but can't, Shirley can. However, Gubar argues that because Shirley is merely a projection of Caroline's mind, Shirley's fate is psychological and idiosyncratic--a double existing solely to contradict Caroline's oppressed existence. Ultimately, Brontë's character of Shirley represents how male society defines even women who obtain independence and that she too is incapable of escaping

gender norms.

Gubar further outlines critical moments in the novel in which Caroline questions her existence and proclaims her desire for purpose. When Caroline falls ill and doesn't eat, Gubar argues that Caroline's starvation and her associating with eating is carefully associated with the curates, the Sunday school feast, and Mr. Helstone's table, and thus Caroline's rejection of food is simultaneously her rejection of these characters. Projecting off this idea, Gubar delves into her analysis of the placement of the Genesis myth within the novel, and how it reveals "that women are damned for eating [and how this idea] reflects male hatred of the female and of her sustaining and strengthening herself" (16-17). Gubar argues that, from the male perspectives present in the novel, food is forbidden for women, and ultimately women should be ashamed of their own gender. Gubar also argues that fasting is an act of revolt, suggesting that women will continue to starve until new myths are created to provide them with the agency to name and control their world.

Susan Gubar is noted as one of the primary feminist critiques of the Brontë Canon. In this essay, Guba advocates for the study of *Shirley*, proclaiming that its failure in possessing an integrated, coherent plot allows it to define the contradictions experienced by women writing within a male literary culture, and thus allows it to equally stand to next to her other works that balance between overly and secretly rejecting patriarchy. Additionally, Gubar focuses on the balance Brontë constructs between depicting the generic conventions of the historical novel by outlining the historical change undergoing within her novel's setting while also tracing the seemingly unrelated, struggles of her female characters. Gubar's focus on hunger and starvation in relation to the Genesis myth adheres to traditional script of how this narrative functions as a reinforcer of patriarchal ideals, while continuously subjecting women to oppressed and

marginalized existences. This essay is complex because it aims at examining this paradigm through historical, feminist, and psychological lens. Being a mechanism imposing patriarchal ideals, Gubar's multifaceted examination reveals the concretization of women's suffering in *Shirley*.

One critique that I have of Gubar's essay is that I feel she forces Shirley to also be a victim of gender norms. Although I can see merit in her argument, I think this interpretation severely undermines crucial plot elements in which Shirley actively manipulates the system to maintain her agency. Also, in personally finding the images of imprisonment reoccurring throughout Caroline's transformation throughout the novel fascinating, I was hoping for a more expansive examination of how this relates to Caroline being a seemingly more passive participant in her social world in comparison to Shirley. I found Gubar's assessment of the "bread, stone" passage very crucial to her argument, and a moment she thematically carries out to follow Caroline's transformation throughout the novel. Although I think Gubar presents the myth in ways that enhance its oppressive function, her examination of Caroline's choice to starve as a form of protest demonstrates how the "patriarchal symbol" of food can be subverted. Although I find Gubar's notion that there is no happy ending for women as long as normalizations within cultural works and literature are reinforced by society depressing, I do not think her argument is invalid. I feel that Gubar's interpretation of the Genesis myth in relation to the woman question in *Shirley* mirrors the motivation behind Brontë's choice to include the traditional myth in the places that she did throughout her novel. As long as the norms are reinforced and imposed on the existence of women, with no alternative and empowering script being offered, the strife of women and their hunger for liberation will continue.

Hunt, Linda C. "Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in Shirley and Villette." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 1.1, Spring 1982: p. 55-66. Jstor. Web.

Linda Hunt's essay explores the presence of intimate female relationships in Charlotte Brontë's novels. Specifically, in *Shirley*, Hunt argues that Brontë demonstrates that a woman can find a close relationship within her gender community, while also suggesting that the bond between two women could be a solution to the strife faced by single women within Victorian society. Similarly, Hunt suggests that Brontë even probes the notion that female friendship could be an alternative to romantic, and submissive, attachments to men. In exploring the friendship of Shirley and Caroline, Hunt argues that economic and social systems that influence the lives of these two heroines ultimately dictates that their bond is valuable, but it only a prelude rather than a substitute for marriage. Caroline and Shirley's friendship, according to Hunt, subscribes to the traditional feminine values of Brontë's time. The pair provide emotional support and affection for the other, and also provides an intellectual equal for the discussion of shared desires, interests, and irritations--this sphere of "sympathy" cannot be found in the relationships these women have with their male counterparts. Hunt is not suggesting that Brontë is committing to the world of "patterned young ladies," and argues that characters such as Misses Sykes and the Sympson sisters are severely satirized to the point their characters seem surreal and unnatural. Contrasting this notion of a universal female personality, Brontë constructs characters like Shirley, Caroline, and Mrs. Pryor who possess individualized personalities and can construct a productive and progressive female community.

The second half of Hunt's analysis of *Shirley* looks at how marriage is discussed within the novel, examining the plethora of toxic and horrendous marriages of characters that have adhered to the traditional views concerning gender and the marriage market. At first, the two

heroines viewed their male counterparts as beings they possessed little knowledge over, and Hunt briefly explores the potential of Brontë proposing that a same-sex relationship between the heroines. Although Hunt states this novel provides a convincing exploration of relationships between women, the scholar magnifies the novel's adherence to the conventional ending of marriage, and thus indicates Caroline and Shirley's acceptance of traditional social roles. Hunt ultimately states that Shirley and Caroline's friendship is dependent upon masculine realities and economic relationship.

The article acknowledges Brontë's aim of portraying men and women as complete contradictions to one another, but ultimately concludes that Brontë abandons the notion that female relationships can fulfill emotional desires because "Brontë cannot envision women offering one another 'elation' (60). Hunt states that the novel's marital ending reveals the unresolved question of what kind of alternatives are possible for women who do not marry: a question Brontë raises throughout the entirety of her novel. Ultimately, Brontë choice of ending is deemed as a means simply telling a story rather than providing a guide to subverting the limitations imposed by on women of her time.

Upon completing Hunt's essay, I found myself dissatisfied with the end result. Although I find her discourse useful in providing an alternative examination of Caroline and Shirley's relationship, one that is rather oppositional to the one constructed by Gardner in "Neither Monsters, nor Tempresses," I find her argument inconsistent and a failed attempt at a feminist examination of Brontë's novel. Although I think her initial aims at focusing on the importance of communities of women in Victorian society important, Hunt's argument completely shifts once she examines the marriages of Shirley and Caroline. Hunt briefly looks at the possibility that Brontë is suggesting that same-sex relationships as an alternative to a submissive union, but

proclaims that this notion was refuted by Brontë as a result of her decision to have the two female protagonists married by the novel's end. I almost find Hunt's critique superficial, and I feel that her piece could have been strengthened by focusing singularly on the relationships of women throughout the novel as a means of constructing a feminine identity, as well as completely omitting the marriage-plot as a component of her analysis. Hunt's choice to focus on the marriages is what threw off my initial expectations for this article. I had hoped that she would be advocating for Brontë's construction of a strong female connection in the novel; rather, I was left dissatisfied with the scholar's choice to dismiss *Shirley* as Brontë simply telling a good story, which is a false conclusion. I will, however, agree with Hunt on her concluding remarks concerning *Shirley*: it leaves the women question unresolved and does not seem provide an alternative solution to marriage.

Gardner, Julia. "Neither Monsters, nor Temptresses nor Terrors': Representing Desire in Charlotte Brontë's 'Shirley'." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 26.2, 1998: p. 409-420. *Jstor*. Web.

In following Brontë's lead to disavow the marriage-plot as stated in the introduction of her novel, Julia Gardner chooses to focus on the motif of desire throughout *Shirley*. Gardner constructs the foundation of her argument on the clear warning given by Brontë to her readers—that her narrative will not follow conventions of heteronormativity. As a byproduct of this, Gardner argues that Brontë sets herself up with the complicated task of subverting the limitations of representing unconventional desire as well as sexual identity in the nineteenth-century. Gardner thus proposes examining instances of desire throughout the novel allows a clear analysis of the ways in which the two female protagonists, Shirley and Caroline, subvert sexual systems

and reconfigure the economics of desire. Shirley and Caroline's desire, as Gardner proposes, is both the central focus and problem of Brontë's second novel. The two women differ in social position, experience, and performance of gender roles; however, according to Gardner, the match works as a result of the individual desire to reconfigure market and sexual economics.

Shirley, being the more obvious challenge to the traditional script of Victorian femininity, is accompanied with images of nature, yet cannot be deemed natural. as a result of her ability to co-opt both gender spheres. Gardner explains that Shirley is able to occupy both masculine and feminine characteristics at the same time, being able to compete in the male world through her social position of power as landowner and still maintain a feminine persona through her appearance and flirtatious demeanor—Shirley's very existence disassembles gender stability and the ability to naturalize gender. Gardner argues that Shirley's adoption of masculine qualities in the public, male sphere allows her to occupy the position of being a potential suitor for Caroline and a rival to Robert. Shirley's "masculine manners" that she takes on in the public sphere also signify that performance is a constitutive element of gender. Shirley recognizes that she is both woman and "something more," and although does not overly occupy a lesbian identity, her claim to performing masculine manners acts a direct threat to the heterosexual, patriarchal system. Additionally, Gardner notes that Shirley's resistance of marriage acts as Shirley's continued attempt to maintain the power, male public persona she has constructed for herself.

Conversely, Gardner argues that Caroline, a character who seems to more willingly adhere to the script of Victorian womanhood, provides a greater threat to the normalized gender spheres. Caroline is not clearly oppositional to the system like Shirley—her challenge to the system is more subversive, being seen in subtle behaviors that only appear in a private space between her and Shirley. Gardner focuses primarily on these moments to demonstrate Caroline's

escape from traditional systems of sex, most prominently the scenes in which Caroline and Shirley are alone in the woods together. It is within this natural and descriptively erotic space that Caroline functions as an active and controlling participant in erotic exchanges with Shirley, proclaiming that she can, with ease, guide Shirley through the female landscape of the woods. The woods, Gardner argues, is a female world in which Shirley and Caroline have constructed for themselves, completely separate from traditional configurations of gender and patriarchy, and one in which Caroline fits comfortably, contrasting her depressed and undesirable existence within the domestic space of her home.

Gardner shifts her focus away from analyzing the two characters as separate entities, and focuses on the women's marriages to the Moore brothers at the novel's end. Although deemed unsatisfactory by most critics, Gardner looks at the marriages as ways in which Caroline and Shirley reconfigure the exchange economy of marriage through their chosen partners. Shirley marries her economic and social inferior, and Caroline marriage does not alter her family situation—she remains within the family circle by marrying her cousin and thus her position does not change. Being that no exchange occurs, and that both characters ultimately stay within the same social status as before, their relationship can continue as it always has been. Furthermore, Gardner argues that the double marriage allows the women to join under heterosexual convention while still co-opting the system by hiding their relationship. Their relationship is masked with the presence of their future husbands, yet their relationship is also openly existing within the church: a symbol of patriarchal authority that becomes a contradictory location as a result of being a place in which Shirley and Caroline are present together. Gardner notes that seemingly heterosexual union is deemed of no importance as a result the complete omission of the ceremony from the novel plot. Ultimately, Gardner argues that Brontë utilizes

the marriage-plot within her novel to create a cross-gender union while also demonstrating alternative expressions of desire.

Gardner's article makes use of both feminist and psychological examination of Caroline and Shirley's relationship, specifically in relation to their gender and sexual identity. This article stands novel to other feminist scholar's examining *Shirley* because it examines the intimacy and erotic interactions of Caroline and Shirley for what they strikingly are. Like other critiques, Gardner looks at the marriage-plot in Brontë's novel, yet does so in a way that further strengthens her examination of the same-sex relationship between the two female protagonists. Gardner proposes Brontë's marital ending as demonstrating the ways in which Brontë constructs a narrative aiming at subverting the patriarchal system and breaking the limited identities prescribed to women within Victorian society. Of all the articles included in this bibliography, this is by far my favorite because I feel it most accurately captures Brontë's aim at attempting to address the "woman question." Gardner's examination of Shirley's character captures the complexity of this character's ability to openly challenge societal norms, but also claim them. Unlike her peers, Gardner does not subscribe to the narrative that suggests Shirley is ever mastered; rather, she utilizes the master narrative to manipulate gender norms in her favor. My only critique is that I wish Gardner spent more time on examining Caroline's character development and transformation through the novel. Although I think she looks at Caroline in ways that fulfill her aim at examining how desire is used as to subvert gender normalizations, Caroline's character is repeatedly undermined by critiques, placing her as a second string rather than an equal to Shirley.

Lawson, Kate. "Imagining Eve: Charlotte Brontë, Kate Millett, Helen Cixous." *Women Studies* 24. 1995: p. 411-426. EBSCOhost. Web.

Kate Lawson chooses to focus her analysis on Brontë's aim at subverting the Genesis myth twice within her novel: first, when Shirley Keeldar constructs a narrative for Eve that challenges traditional gender roles and second, Shirley's essay about Eva—a piece Lawson argues that Brontë uses a mode to understand the production of gender normalizations rather than overtly challenging them. Lawson ultimately suggests that this second revision of Genesis, the story of Eva, is demonstrative of Brontë's abandonment of her aim to co-opt the patriarchal script of cultural myths, and chooses to abide by the traditional narrative to illustrate the limitations placed on women's roles within society. The idea of tackling a revision of the original narrative of the original woman, the symbol of the essence of all women, Brontë is given a platform to denote, explore, and expose the harsh reality of the scripts that have been imposed on women within Western Civilization.

In organizing her analysis, Lawson begins with the assessment of Brontë's construction of narratives that abide by the traditional Genesis myth within the novel by male voices, and how these instances act as catalytic forces for the reinvented narratives presented through the voice of Shirley Keeldar: the most notable, St. Paul's first letter to Timothy employed by Joe Scott and the critique of Milton's *Paradise Lost* by Shirley and Caroline Helstone. Joe Scott utilizes Paul's argument with Timothy in the New Testament as a means of enforcing the patriarchal ideology of Victorian society: "women should not be allowed to teach or have any authority over men, but must be silent" (Lawson 413). The other traditional version of Eve used by Brontë, Milton's *Paradise Lost*, is presented in a more openly critical discourse between her two female protagonists. In this scene, Lawson notes Shirley's argument that Milton did not properly write

the first woman, that he failed to creatively “combine femininity with greatness and nobility of character,” and rather uses his cook as a model to construct his image of Eve—indicating Brontë’s belief that Milton trivializes her by bringing forth his concerns of marriage and the domestic female role.

To challenge this misrepresentation by Milton and the mistranslation of St. Paul by Scott, Lawson argues that Brontë chooses to construct her own myth of origin through Shirley’s story of Eve. The issue Lawson notes that, in Brontë’s ideal to construct her own Genesis myth that subverts the patriarchal design of the origin, Brontë ultimately falls victim to the same faults she sees in Milton’s—being impersonal and lacking relation to concrete human life. Unlike Shirley, who outlines this powerful, godlike “mother” figure, Caroline’s imagination wanders to a more gentle, real human form—an image she has ascribed to her unknown mother. Ultimately, Lawson suggest that Caroline’s image of the original mother speaks more to human longing and desire, whereas Shirley’s constructs a female figure that ultimately has to simultaneously subvert and prescribe to patriarchal norms—inverting the traditional image of Eve by adopting masculine power.

Lawson acknowledges Brontë’s first attempt at subverting the patriarchal ideology, of cultural mythology as a “unable to escape the pitfalls of the essentialist definition of feminine,” and defines it as a general pitfall for contemporary feminism; however, Lawson argues that Brontë acknowledges this issue by giving a second reinvention of the Genesis myth: one that more appropriately constructs a contemporary definition of the word “feminine” (420). Lawson provides two critical examinations of this story, the first subscribing to previous interpretations that examine the Eva story as a rape fantasy, one in which the female lead welcomes and desires her violent possession and is “saved” as a result. This interpretation gives way to the continued

subscription to the patriarchal notion of women being feeble and passive, and can only be restored by a male savior. The second, Lawson argues, provides a clear examination of the true nature of femininity and how men and women coexist, specifically through the language employed by Brontë in describing Eva as “a clear, candid page waiting to be written over by knowledge,” knowledge that belongs to men (413). Lawson argues that Eva is the virginal space that is made subject to male desire, and this is necessary for her to reach her full self. Ultimately, Lawson states that this story denotes the establishment of what it means to be feminine: a byproduct developing within culture and social relations. Eva stands as a symbol of the subjection of women by the established patriarchal ideology and discourse—she is not an origin, but she is a product of experience. Lawson notes that the placement of this story, being recited by Shirley to Louis in the schoolroom, allows the story to serve as a “mode of recitation that illustrates the problems of both defining and challenging traditional roles of men and women” (424). In concluding her analysis, Lawson states that Brontë’s attempt to re-write the Genesis myth serves as an outline for the author to demonstrate the various social relations that subject women, which is why the Eva story, although not providing any optimistic alternatives to the patriarchal script, succeeds in demonstrating that the problematic idea of femininity as it exists in Western Civilization.

Kate Lawson’s article places itself among scholars who denote *Shirley*’s strong emphasis of “the woman question.” Lawson chooses to stem her critical voice off the work of Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Like, Gilbert and Gubar, Lawson extends from simply examining the materiality of women’s lives in Victorian society, and focuses on the source of the material conditions of women’s lives—cultural mythology. I think Lawson’s analysis of Brontë’s revision of the Genesis myth is both masterfully written, and

properly supported through her appraisal of the importance in which these revisions are placed within the novel's plot; conversely, how they relate to the development of Brontë's female protagonists as well as thematically to the social issues concerning gender normativity these characters subvert and challenge. Although other critiques, such as Gubar's "Genesis of Hunger," examine how Brontë's employment of this myth function in relation to the gender and patriarchal issues making up her storyline, I find Lawson's take on the presence of the myth more progressive as well as more representative of Brontë's purpose in defining and redefining this patriarchal narrative. Gubar's aim in demonstrating Brontë's attempt at reconstructing the traditional woman, as well as constructing a new definition to what it means to be "feminine" is both thoroughly accomplished and realistic. Gubar both applauds Brontë's aims at reinventing the origin of women, but recognizes Brontë's failure to do so as a result of the complexity in which patriarchal ideals imposes themselves on the identities and existence of women.

What I appreciate most about Lawson's article is that she takes time to shift her focus away from the two female leads to acknowledge the importance of Brontë's construction of female characters that fall throughout the spectrum of gender normalizations. In her introductory remarks, Lawson expresses her support of this accomplishment by recognizing the novel's plethora of female characters, and notes that these women were strategically designed by Brontë to represent "both the variety of, and the limitations on, female roles" (Lawson 411). What I find disappointing is that these characters are not expanded on more in depth. Although I recognize that doing so may not be an appropriate addition in strengthening her argument, I wish Lawson or other feminist scholars would expand on the importance of these characters in demonstrating the daunting presence of the patriarchal ideology.

McLaughlin, Rebecca A. "I Prefer a Master": Female Power in Charlotte Brontë's Shirley." *Brontë Studies* 29, 2004: p. 217-222. EBSCOhost. Web

The driving force of McLaughlin's argument stems from her assessment of Shirley's confrontation with her uncle concerning her prospects of marriage and her refusal of several proposals throughout the last third of the novel. The focal point of McLaughlin's appraisal of the thematic importance of this dialogue is Brontë's emphasize on Shirley's declaration of, "I prefer a *master*." Although the term "master" presents it several times throughout the novel, specifically in the Shirley-Louis interactions, McLaughlin proposes why Brontë places emphasizes on the term specifically in this interaction. First, this scene indicates how Shirley has defined the term: being a "man who can 'check, 'control,' or 'command' her." McLaughlin proposes careful consideration on how seriously readers are meant to take Shirley's insistence of a "master" by focusing her attention on Shirley's aim at "leading her uncle away from her" by confusing him with her banter. McLaughlin suggests an alternative reading of Shirley's use of the word "master" as being a reference to Louis' occupation; it may then be suggested that reading the term jocularly can provide a better assessment on whether or not Shirley remains in independent woman with power and potential in her marriage to Louis. In order to answer this question, McLaughlin assesses the rhetoric of the classroom within the novel, a space of nostalgia and representative of a clear power dynamic between the couple.

McLaughlin chooses to focus on three pieces Shirley recites within the schoolroom and addresses how they relate to her relationship with Louis. The first, "Le Cheval Dompte" (The Broken-In Horse), being a story of the taming of a passionate horse by its master until the rider and the horses desired are united and equal. McLaughlin proposes that instead of the horse's passions being destroyed by being broken-in by its master, it is the horse that learns to master its

own passions. Relating to Louis' aim to tame Shirley, it is easy to attribute the story to Louis. Being in an economically and socially inferior position to Shirley, Louis must "master Shirley through an interpretation of his making," which he does through his journal, which completely omits Shirley's voice and suggests her potential fate as being subjected to the submissive role of wife. McLaughlin dismisses Louis' journal as contradictory and exaggerated, since he switches between themes of control of Shirley and motifs of Shirley as an untamable animal. This complicated dynamic of control and power is further acknowledged in the second piece Shirley recites, "Le Songe d'Athalie:" a piece denoting the cyclic gain and loss of female power. Shirley's first loss of power is indicated in her fears of death after being bitten by a dog, and looking to Louis for consolation--this scene strategically taking place shortly after the first piece is recited. The second piece is placed right before Louis proposes to Shirley, a moment deemed by McLaughlin in which Shirley follows the pattern of female power maintenance and one in which her power is restored. In the proposal scene, Shirley is placed in the position of power through her questioning and mocking of Louis. Shirley refuses to indulge Louis' demand of her to profess her feelings for him, and instead resorts to calling him "Poor Tartar" and caressing him like a pet. Louis' final attempt at taming Shirley through his proposal is unsuccessful; instead of him simply declaring her wife, Shirley challenges him by constructing her own proposal of marriage, setting her own rules for their marriage and asking him to "share the burden" of the domestic space—to which Louis accepts.

McLaughlin concludes her analysis by examining the final piece Shirley recites: "Le Chene et le Roseau," a story of the oak and the reed. This final story's didactic message demonstrates how bending like a reed assists the rigid oak from breaking. McLaughlin states that this story reflects Shirley's disposition of both acting via her own devices and partly on the

system of marriage. Shirley does not fully relinquish her female power through her marriage to Louis; rather, as McLaughlin points out, Shirley simply learns to balance the power she possessed as an independent woman between herself and her husband. Although McLaughlin acknowledges that Brontë falls within the conventional beliefs of her society, McLaughlin urges that feminist scholars must continue to reevaluate marriage-plot novels and step away from the traditional belief that marriage correlates to the loss of feminine power.

Rebecca McLaughlin's article aims at challenging the notion her peers uphold concerning the notion that marriage and female power cannot coexist. Critics like McLaughlin, who examine the novel as proto-feminist, ultimately deem Shirley as representing the notion that "a woman can find a satisfactory role for herself and that woman have the potential not only to survive in society but also to rule over it" (217). These critiques acknowledge the marriage-plot and ultimately suggest that Brontë's intention for this ending was meant to demonstrate an alternative view of woman's power. On the other hand, scholars who focus primarily on Shirley's marriage to Louis argue that she undergoes a dissatisfactory transformation from an "independent landlord to a subservient wife" (217). This discourse stems off the traditional ideology that marriage: an institution in which female "power and potential" is defeated. McLaughlin's aim is ultimately to challenge the latter perspective concerning Shirley's marriage by providing a close reading of instances in which Shirley's character provides an account of her views on marriage, as well as a critical assessment of Shirley and Louis' relationship.

I feel that McLaughlin accurately supports her argument by demonstrating how the marriage-plot within the novel can be viewed in multiple and complex ways, and urges an alternative assessment of how previous scholars have merely written off Shirley's marriage as her acceptance to sacrifice her power and willingness to submit to masculine authority.

McLaughlin's analysis of the power dynamic of master and pupil existing between Shirley and Lewis is presented in way that show that this paradigm does not function linearly as a result of Shirley's progressive characterization. I find McLaughlin's essay structure being mapped out through the three pieces that Shirley is forced to recite representative of the overall struggle of women to maintain power within a male dominant society. The way McLaughlin approaches these instances are more complimentary to the idea that Shirley does not become a submissive participant in her social world through her marriage; rather, as McLaughlin argues, Shirley subverts the system in ways that allow her to situate herself as she wants to exist. This point is crucial for it shows that, although Brontë subscribes to a contemporary ending for her novel, she does not completely abandon her quest to examine the woman question in more complex ways. Brontë does not dissemble the system in ways she does in *Eyre*, but, as McLaughlin suggests, she demonstrates how women can function within the system, as long as they are conscious of the realities of how it operates.

Conclusion

The articles that I chose to include in this discussion, aside from Dupras, are among the more complimentary feminist examinations to what Brontë is achieving in her experimental novel. As stated in the introduction, there are scholars within the discourse that recognize Brontë's tackling of the women question, gender oppression and the influences of patriarchal ideology within *Shirley*, but chose to take their analysis in a direction that show how her characters are co-opted within the system as well as how their existence relates to the historical

setting of the novel. These voices are important in obtaining a holistic appraisal on how Brontë's presentation of these themes work both progressively and problematically within the novel.

Although I chose to omit these critiques from this presentation, I have included a few of them in the additional sources section that I encourage my peers to explore.

Ultimately, from the documents that I chose to explore in depth, I have concluded that the marriage-plot can be viewed in both a positive and negative way. Among those who chose to utilize the marriage-plot in their analysis, I feel Lawson's notion that this element is secondary to the relationship of the female heroines is more reflective of Brontë's intent to spend the majority of her novel focusing on how these two characters contrast, as well as act as reinforcers of growth and resistance for one another as they attempt subvert, invert and co-opt patriarchal ideals, gender normalizations and limitations. I also found the repeated usage of the Genesis myth throughout the majority of my sources as both rewarding and fruitful. Although I recognize that some of the works I included in my research seem to contradict one another, I included them for a purpose. Because Brontë's novel is so scattered, and attempting to cover a wide range of ideas and didactic messages, the readings of some of her more feminist plot elements can be both progressive and problematic as a result of their presence being co-opted by a wide range of oppressive, marginalizing voices throughout the novel. I don't think that this should be deemed a failure of Brontë's novel; rather, I think the ability for these more progressive moments to be read in various ways shows the cyclic and daunting nature of patriarchy on the lives and existence of women both then and now. As Brontë states in her novel, her intent was not to create perfect characters—they were not constructed to fit a model. For this reason, her didactic message may appear to be presented imperfectly, but I find it to be a more realistic representation of how the system functions and how women who chose to co-opt it can be both

liberated and constrained—depending on how they operate within their society as well as how their society responds to them.

I wouldn't say that I was disappointed by my research finding, since I did approach this project with very minimal expectations; however, there are elements of the discourse that I felt could be expanded upon or revised in order to fully represent the various ways in which Brontë tackles the woman question in *Shirley*. First, I would have liked to see more analysis concerning Mrs. Pryor and why it is so important that she is the one who was able to revive Caroline. Second, I desire expansion upon Brontë's secondary female characters and how they demonstrate various levels of patriarchal ideologies and sociocultural normalizations shaping the identities of not just one, but multiple female identities and perspectives. These characters are touched on briefly, but I feel more could be done with them, especially more problematic characters like Mrs. Yorke and complex ones like Hortense Moore. Finally, I feel the lack of sources examining the moments in which the more progressive female characters partake in a rather confrontational discourse with the more traditional ones is a gap that could provide a more expanded and accurate examination of Brontë's approach to the woman question in this novel. Although I feel these things would strengthen the feminist conversations concerning *Shirley*, I know that no one will provide a completely satisfying examination. Brontë's second novel is inconsistent: there are moments that throw readers off and make us question what her didactic message really is. Be that as it may, I stress that Brontë's "novel of ideas," although imperfect, is more reflective of the realities of how women exist within their society. There may be no clear "happy ending," there may not be a satisfactory one, but that is not a flaw of Brontë's characters nor a flaw of her writing. It's the "real, cold" reality.

That mind my own. Oh! narrow cell;
Dark-imageless-a living tomb!
There must I sleep, there wake and dwell
Content, with palsy, pain, and gloom.'

Again, she paused; a moan of pain,
A stifled sob, alone was heard;
Long silence followed then again,
Her voice the stagnant midnight stirred.

' Must it be so? *Is this my fate?*
Can I nor struggle, nor contend?
And *am I doomed* for years to wait,
Watching death's lingering axe descend?

And when it falls, and when I die,
What follows? Vacant nothingness?
The blank of lost identity?
Erasure both of pain and bliss?

-Lines from Charlotte Brontë's poem, *Frances*

Additional Sources and Dissertations

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A Novel of Alternatives: Gender and Sexuality in *Villette*

Among the many facets that mark her as a progressive, feminist writer, Charlotte Brontë's most notable quality is the multifaceted, didactic layering she employs in her critical assessments concerning societal normalizations of female gender and sexuality. Brontë's creative tactfulness in challenging these norms only continues to progress throughout her canon, as seen in her explicit exploration of alternatives to these constructs in her last novel, *Villette*. In *Villette*, Brontë dissects the heteronormative societal constructions of gender and sexuality in order to reveal their uniformity as unrealistic and severely undermining of the multiplicity of these entities. Brontë scrutinizes and challenges these norms by presenting queer performances of gender, critical contrasts of sexuality, along with exploring the concept of "liminal gender." Ultimately, Brontë's "novel of alternatives" functions to deconstruct the constitutive binaries of gender normalizations as misrepresentative, and strategically advocates for constructing a more fluid, heteroglossic discourse when approaching these subjects in order to better represent the fluid and diverse spectrum of human expression.

Brontë begins her delineation of the arbitrary nature of heteronormative binaries through constructing a queered performance of gender. Stylistically, Brontë deploys a strategic co-opting of the gender binary through Lucy's choice to cross-dress for her role as "the fop" in the *vaudeville*. Although Lucy has accepted the performative script of her role by, "consenting to take a man's name and part," she refuses to adopt the necessary garb to complete her transformation: declaring that, "[dressing] like a man did not please, and would not suit [her]," and thus resolves to "keep her own dress" (Brontë 153). Lucy, although willing to play the part of a man, refuses to allow her dress to be determined or altered by others as this requires full relinquishment of agency over her own body, and submission into a predetermined gender script

with which she does not identify. Lucy's resistance to the demands of M. Paul to fully change into the "costume" of her role thematically functions as a direct defiance of indoctrination to patriarchal ideals concerning gender roles. In this act of defiance, Brontë critically conceptualizes gender roles, or identities, as sociocultural scripted frames that stylizes certain acts and behavior as representation of either a masculine or feminine gender identity. Ultimately, Brontë uses Lucy as an agent of subverting socially defined performances of gender by rejecting these normalizations, and constructing an alternative representation of gender. Instead of submitting to a heteronormative gender script, Lucy maintains agency over her own body by "retains [her] woman's garb without the slightest retrenchment," and only adding "a little vest, a collar, and cravat" over her dress in a design that allows her to "pass" as a male (Brontë 154). In this reveal, Brontë uses her protagonist's refusal to relinquish her agency as a means of destabilizing the heteronormative binary by culminating a performance that takes on expressive qualities of both genders; ultimately constructing a queered performance of gender as Lucy's appearance does not fully cling to an inherently masculine or feminine gender script, but a liminal agent capable of access to both gender spheres.

By employing a queered gender performance, Brontë displaces conventional notions of gender performativity as fabricated norms that systematically function to objectify and dehumanize the body, and instead refashions traditional gender roles in a way that reveals the human body as a fluid and complex canvas. To further her subversion, Brontë aims at disassembling the idealizations of heterosexuality embedded in these gender performative scripts by utilizes Lucy's queered gender performance to explore "alternative" sexual possibilities. As a part of her role in the *vaudeville*, Lucy is situated as romantic suitor to the "fascinatingly pretty" female lead, played by Ginevra Fanshawe (Brontë 155). Once on stage, Lucy "thought of

nothing but the personage [she] represented,” and uses her adopted masculine persona in order to partake in a covert expression of homosexual attraction to Ginevra; while directly rivaling heterosexualized practices exemplified in Dr. Graham’s idealization of Ginevra (Brontë 155). By only adopting certain male qualities, Lucy is provided with the mobility of co-opting gender binary while simultaneously accessing and challenging male power and dominance. In providing her protagonist with this mobility, Brontë not only further subverts the binary of masculine and feminine gender performances but also strategically explores alternative expressions of sexuality by consciously utilizing Lucy’s masculine imitation to project homosexual identity exploration. Brontë’s strategic reconstruction of these normalized masculine qualities in a display of homosexuality reveals the capricious nature of hegemonic heteronormative gender roles and their aims of projecting the ideal of normalizing heterosexuality. Ultimately, Brontë systematically utilizes a queered performance of gender to illuminate on the anxieties of heteronormativity in subjecting the human body to subscribe to its marginalized binary in order to preserve itself and thus demonstrating the arbitrary hegemonic function of this ideology.

In her strategic subversion of heteronormative notions of gender and sexual expression, Brontë exemplifies the despotic nature of normalizations by delineating hegemonic gender notions are arbitrarily constructed social entities. A contemporary example of the method of dissemblance Brontë employs in her queer performance of gender can be seen in a critical assessment of the function and misconceptions concerning drag culture. As a performative art, drag allows for an explicit subversion of traditional prescriptions of masculine and feminine gender representations. When partaking in drag, an individual is strategically constructing an alternative persona to their everyday gender and sexual performances. One of the most common misconceptions of drag culture derives from the assumption that individuals who participate in

drag have a desire to become and/or identify as a woman. In reality, this idealization of obtaining a conventionally “feminine identity” is rarely, if ever, the case. These performers systematically structure their “costumes” as a means of disrupting normative gender and sexual scripts, not in means of converting over to the opposite gender sphere. In fact, one of the core principles of drag culture is a clear acknowledgement that the performers are biologically male--a fact that they satirically reference during their performances. Another misconception of drag lies in the perception that the males who participate in drag are inherently less masculine. These misconceptions are a byproduct of the cognitive dissonance experienced by individuals who try to conceptualize drag under heteronormative scripts of gender and sexuality; which is the desired effect these performances aim at creating. The concept of drag, like Brontë’s queered gender performance, situates itself as a mechanism meant to strategically blur the gender binary and ultimately call its validity into question. Additionally, drag performances force audiences to critically think about what it means to be male, what it means to be female, and where the lines intersect. The reality of it is, there is no standard for what qualifies as drag. Just as the lines of gender are incredibly blurred, so are the lines of what counts as drag. The perception of gender identity and drag go hand-in-hand, as drag is one of the more revolutionary, contemporary acts of heteronormative resistance as it actively aims at illuminating on the reality that there are no standards for what qualifies a person as male or what qualifies them as female: the same didactic principle Brontë is eliciting in her novel.

To further challenge heteronormative prescriptions of gender and sexuality, Brontë facilitates a meta-criticism on two contrasting representations of female gender and sexuality, and their respective sociocultural functions. During Lucy’s visit to an art gallery, she is exposed to two paintings: the “Cleopatra” and “The Life of Women.” In assessing the “Cleopatra,” Lucy

notes it as representing a large, healthy looking woman, who “had no business loung[ing] away the noon,” and reviews her as needing to apply a better form of dress than “the drapery she inefficient[ly] raiment[ed]” (Brontë 223). Instead of focusing on the hypersexualized representation this “gipsy-queen” elicits, Lucy is repulsed by the laziness and overindulgent demeanor the painting perpetuates and declares this portrayal as an unrealistic. Brontë elicits this interpretation as a focal point in scrutinizing heteronormative objectification of the female body, and ultimately how these norms represent ideals of women that performatively stereotype them as sexual objects, rather than sexual subjects. Brontë strategically designs this scene as means of exemplifying the daunting presence of heteronormative regulation of female sexuality by plotting Lucy to be caught in her subversive gaze of the erotic “Cleopatra” and subjected to chastisement by M. Paul, whom forcibly repositions her towards a “more appropriate” piece entitled “La vie d’une femme [The Life of Women]” (Brontë 224-225). This painting provides a critical breakdown of the traditional heteronormative ideal of a pure, chaste woman: the religiously-devoted young woman, a “white veil[ed]” bride, a mother “hanging disconsolate” over her child and finally, a widow (Brontë 226). Lucy’s criticizes this painting as depicting “insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities, and ultimately deems it as “bad in their way as the indolent gipsy-giantess, the Cleopatra, in hers” (Brontë 226).

These representations function on two levels: first, they demonstrate instances in which two seemingly contrastive notions of a heteronormative gender scripts for women systematically function to objectify them: one that situates women as an exotic object of male desire and one that forces them to adhere to a submissive, undersexed subordinate gender script. Second, it revisits the didactic reveal of these scripts as severely absurd and unnatural in their ideals through Brontë’s scathing criticism of the “insincere” caricature-like projections they create.

Brontë complexifies her meta-criticism of heteronormative expectations concerning female gender and sexuality by employing Lucy to contextualize these representations in relation to her social world. Brontë accomplishes this by situating her protagonist as an analyst of the male gazes of Colonel de Hamal, Dr. Graham and M. Paul. Brontë—all rather satirically described as employing heteronormative judgments that assess these representations of women, specifically the “Cleopatra,” solely on the degrees in which they adhere to the gender performance imposed on their bodies. Ultimately, Brontë utilizes her protagonist as a critical lens to assess the heteronormative oppression these representations encourage, and ultimately establishes their function as reinforcers to the marginalization of women as either objects of the male gaze or submissive agents to patriarchal ideals.

In aid of this satirical, deconstruction of heteronormative sexual and gender roles, Brontë advocates for a critical assessment of how these representations of women are marginalizing and objectifying. In examining representations of women in media and popular culture, specifically in magazine periodicals direct towards women to “self-improve,” the hazardous and daunting implications of gender and sexuality roles applied to women are revealed and evoke a high level of concern. Headers of such periodicals, such as the generic examples: “How to Get that Sexy Summer Body” or “10 Ways to Satisfy your Man,” denote ideals women should adopt in order to become more sexually appealing or desirable to their male counterparts. The representations that accompany these periodicals are typically of women who are very petite, with exaggerated curves, and a flat, defined stomach. Additionally, the ways in which these women are posed in such images highlight aspects of their bodies, such as their breasts and buttocks, that are sexually appealing to men and are typically qualities male’s focus on to evaluate the sexual attractiveness of a female. The “masculine gaze” applied to these particular physical features ultimately serves

as a symbolic dismemberment of the female body by applying “cultural” value to only certain parts of a woman. Not only do these representations, along with their “attractive” periodical titles that suggest they are positive “tips and tricks,” display an ideal that women should desire to make themselves sexually appealing to their male counterparts, but it also encourages the notion that women should change aspects of themselves in order to accomplish these ultimately unrealistic and objectifying criteria.

To further demonstrate the problematic implications of these representations, the psychological distress and dissonance that accompany women’s desire to obtain aspects of these “perfect” body types or to increase their sexual lure raises several points of concern. The representations of women within these periodicals typically undergo severe photoshopping and editing before publication or, even more worrisome, the women in these illustrations may have undergone rigorous physical training and dieting. Women readers who attempt to reach the ideals such representations convey, and ultimately in their failing to do so, leads to feelings of low self-esteem, body discomfort, and over-critical appraisals of self-worth. The messages that these contemporary representations project onto women demonstrate the cyclic, daunting influence of these normalizations and the limitations they apply to a woman’s place and value in society. In comparing these periodicals to Brontë’s treatments of the “Cleopatra” and “Life of Women,” the ways in which women are taught to project their sexuality in our 21st century society have not changed, as much as we would like to believe otherwise. Both Brontë’s representations of sexuality in *Villette* and those within modern periodicals ultimately adhere to the heteronormative ideology that women have two purposes: they are either meant to be sexual objects or submissive to the desires of men. In understanding the severity of the psychological and problematic representations of sexual and gender norms brought forth by such mediums,

paired with the awareness of the “insincerity” of such representations as demonstrated in Brontë’s novel, the immediate need for liberating women from social pressures that encourage their objectification becomes extremely imperative.

For the final component of this paper, the term “liminal gender” will be used to describe the following excerpt from the “Vashti” chapter of Brontë’s novel. This term was selected to encompass the complexity and uniqueness of the “performance of gender” that will be assessed. In this chapter of the novel, the performance of an “actress” is illustrated: one in which does not clearly or actively prescribe to traditional gender performances, and can ultimately be distinguished as not representing either. The choice to define this performance as “liminal gendered” is to reflect the dynamic and didactic qualities that are presented, while solidifying its stance as an alternative performance of gender. Alternative gender identities were not used to define this performance in order to neutrally situate this analysis in a way that does not make any false, inaccurate, or potentially harmful generalizations towards individuals who do not identify with traditional gender identities.

Brontë furthers her strategic subversion of the pathologizing, heteronormative gender binary by explores the alternative of "liminal gendering." In the “Vashti” chapter, Lucy observes a performance by the actress, Vashti, whom Lucy initially perceived as “only a unique woman [but realizing her mistake] . . .found her something neither man nor woman” (Brontë 286). In distinguishing Vashti as a performative agent that cannot be distinctively characterized as inherently masculine or feminine, and consequently "liminal gendered," Brontë elicits the necessity for an alternative means of conceptualizing expressive performances of the human body other than the heteronormative binary. The placement of this "liminal gender" performance right after the “Cleopatra” encounter once again allows Lucy to become a critical agent for

Brontë to exemplify how hegemonic heteronormativity enforces a severely reductionist appraisal and marginalization of the human body. In analyzing Vashti's performance, Lucy assesses the actress as projecting, and ultimately embodying, emotion:

To her, what hurts becomes immediately embodied: she looks on it as a thing that can be attacked. . . torn in shreds. Scarcely a substance herself, she grapples to conflict with abstractions (Brontë 287).

Brontë utilizes Lucy's appraisal of Vashti as a means of advocating a divergence away from pathologizing human bodies to mere performers of gender norms, and towards a psychological assessment that examines external behaviors as expressive representations of human thought and feeling. Lucy's mystification with Vashti's "liminal gender" performance drives her to inquire her male companion, Dr. Graham, about his assessment of Vashti's performance; which Lucy characterizes as a "branding judgment" as he chooses to "judge her as a woman, not an artist" (Brontë 289). Dr. Graham's interpretation ultimately prescribes to heteronormative judgments concerning proper conduct and behavior of women, and brands women who deviate from these norms as unfeminine. Ultimately, Brontë didactically situates the "liminal gender" performance of Vashti as meta-critical subject to reveal the cyclic, pathologizing oppression the heteronormative gender binary elicits in attempts of conceptualizing external behaviors under dehumanizing and psychologically oppressive marginalizations.

Brontë's "liminal gender" performance advocates for the necessity of establishing a more fluid, heteroglossic examination of gender identity to better encompass the multiplicity of human expression. The pitfalls of traditional gender identities that Brontë demonstrates in her "liminal gender" performance can be explored in current discriminatory discourses towards individuals who choose to adopt alternative gender identifiers. In recent years, it can be argued that society

has become more liberal in their views concerning the LGBTQ community; however, a more appropriate appraisal of contemporary views is a more progressive acceptance towards expressions of homosexuality. This acceptance does not appear to encompass individuals who openly reject or subvert the gender binary by choosing more self-appropriate identifiers, such as: “transgender,” “gender fluid,” “pangender,” “agender/gender neutral,” etc. Contemporary society faces severe cognitive dissonance with conceptualizing diverse gender identifiers; which can be seen in the critical discourses that alienate these individuals by not only rejecting the validity of their identity, but further chastising them by declaring them as mentally ill. These prejudices ultimately exemplify a sociocultural handicap that hinders a transcendence from the heteronormative gender binary: a hindrance Lucy briefly experiences when trying to make sense of Vasthi’s performance and one in which Dr. Graham epitomizes in his heteronormative judgments. The debate concerning the validity of alternative gender identities is counterproductive and ultimately facilitates contemporary avenues of exerting oppression out of the habitual need to maintain the strict classifications the traditional gender binary offers. In reflection upon Brontë’s subversion of capricious and oppressive gender norms, it becomes evident how prevalent their influence remains in our perception of gender identity and expression today, and the hindrances they impose upon individuals who choose to adopt these alternative gender identities to better express themselves, and alleviate psychological distress.

Throughout her strategic subversion of heteronormative models of gender and sexuality, Brontë provides a critical assessment of these social constructs as misrepresentative of the complexity of these entities. By eliciting a multi-faceted array of alternative gender and sexuality performances, Brontë forces her readers into an adaptive, critical lens that conceptualizes the fluid and complex expressions she depicts outside of marginalized heteronormative boundaries.

This recognition is crucial and severely vital if there is any hope of liberating women, and those who do not prescribe to heteronormative identities, from the limitations and oppression that accompany traditional notions of gender and sexuality. Therefore, Brontë's strategic deconstruction of heteronormative notions of gender and sexuality, along with the impending presence of such norms in our 21st century lives today, should serve as critical motivators to revitalizing how we as a society actively subjugate the mind, body, and expression of human beings under these arbitrary social constructs.

Ultimately, through Brontë's alternative representations of gender and sexuality, the necessity for disassembling strict normalized discourses concerning gender and sexuality becomes adamantly apparent. Although it is evident that the means to liberation from these norms are not overtly laid out for us, Brontë does provide us with the awareness of their arbitrary, destructive function by pitting them against alternative performances of gender identity and sexual expression. Therefore, it is through Brontë's "novel of alternatives" that we are able to truly recognize that these heteronormative concepts are by no means absolute—just normalizations of socially defined performances.