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Charlotte Brontë's Spiritual Vision

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Charlotte Brontë's Spiritual Vision

By

Andrew James Weiler

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
through the Department of English Language, Literature, and Creative Writing
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts
at the University of Windsor

Windsor, Ontario, Canada

2019

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I explore the Victorian poet and novelist Charlotte Brontë's remarkable understanding of scripture and powers of analysis. As a daughter of the notable reverend Patrick Brontë, Brontë's dissenting feminist views of the Bible are particularly significant. Although Brontë demonstrated a lifelong belief in God, and in the individual's right to develop and maintain a direct relationship to God, personal tragedies in her life shaped the ways in which she interpreted scripture and informed her ideas regarding the spiritual realm. As the number of personal tragedies increase, Brontë's spiritual vision, which migrates from one novel to the next, becomes less tethered to a specific denominational view but more individualistic, bold and inclusive of other religions and belief systems. By examining her spiritual vision at different stages in her life – encapsulated within each novel – I hope to illuminate how her faith fluctuated. This study will examine the effects of personal loss and physical disconnection from her mother (Maria Branwell) on a quintessentially dissenting feminist lay theologian, suggesting her overall message to Christian women, and later, women of all religious backgrounds and beliefs, of the dangers inherent in allowing men to mediate their relationship, knowledge and understanding of the divine.

DEDICATION

To my mother, sister, and grandmother for their unwavering support. Without you, this would not have been possible. Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

Beyond Haworth

*“You also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood”
- 1 Peter 2:5*

Charlotte Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ has garnered increasing attention since the 1960s. Unlike the terms “spiritual belief,” “religious affiliation,” or “philosophical views,” the phrase ‘spiritual vision’ incorporates all the above. At present, there are two schools of thought regarding Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’. The first school views her fiction as a rejection of Christianity and a move toward a pagan female religion; the second reads her ‘spiritual vision’ as an expression of orthodox Anglican piety. When considering the sources of her inspiration, many critics begin the search by examining her formative years at Haworth. Lucasta Miller argues that this inclination stems from Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography of Brontë, as it portrays the Brontë sisters as isolated women surrounded by a limited number of books and magazines as their only access to the outside world (Miller 47). In reality, the physical space Haworth occupied was not isolated but situated within a short walk to other homes, businesses, and pubs. Despite the historical inaccuracy, Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) has created the perception that the Brontë sisters were isolated and eccentric literary prodigies. However, if we consider a wider historical and cultural context, Brontë is but one dissenter amongst many whose ‘spiritual vision’ participates in a centuries old pan-European tradition of dissent.

Contemporaries of Brontë, like the famous poet Matthew Arnold, tended to view her writing as nothing more than “rebellion and rage” or “anti-Christian.” the latter sentiment still evident in more recent scholarship. In “The Brontës and Religion” (2002), John Maynard makes several important claims directly relevant to this thesis. First, under their father’s influence the

Brontë children saw “religion as a living force within the individual, as a set of living connections between individuals, rather than as an institution or set of beliefs” (Maynard 196). Second, Maynard acknowledges Charlotte’s and Anne’s status as “churchwomen” but insists that they “seem to have staked their own positions as primarily secular ones...bringing spiritual and moral issues into the secular discussion in literature” (196). Third, Maynard claims that the Brontë sisters directed their energies toward subversive ends, that is, “into alternative religious energies moving towards pagan, female, or pagan and female new religion,” (196). In “The Turn To Secularism” (2011), Micael Clarke admits that Brontë would not have considered herself to be secular but argues that her works “evinced an open-minded stance toward religious questions that anticipates the revolution in moral and spiritual horizons that characterize contemporary life” (986). In other words, the shift she predicted was an universal secular spiritual vision.

In “Creation Theology in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë” (2011), Simon Marsden acknowledges the importance of the Bible in shaping the subject and narrative of Brontë’s fiction. He points to the influential work *Natural Theology* (1802), in which William Paley argues that ‘nature’ is evidence of ‘intelligent design’ and that, through the scientific study of the natural world, one can know the divine outside of religious narrative (239). Marsden suggests that, in *Shirley*, Brontë appropriates Christian myth and narrative to locate a romantic feminine identity, such that when “Shirley looks at nature... what she sees is not God but an idealized spiritual femininity that is refracted through the biblical image of Eve” (242). He focalizes biblical influences in Brontë’s new feminist mythology, ignores her infusion of the classical and Celtic myths, the female gender Brontë assigns to the divine at strategic moments, and the implications of her sincere faith. Thus, while Marsden acknowledges the influence of the Bible in shaping Brontë’s worldview, his arguments align with scholars like Maynard, Clarke, and

Lyndall Gordon's assumption that Brontë distanced herself from the orthodox pieties of the Anglican church (Gordon 69).

The "pagan" interpretations of Brontë's works largely ignore women's participation in the Evangelical movements of the nineteenth-century. It should be stressed that women were still grossly underrepresented as they comprised the majority of churchgoers. But cultural shifts, even small ones, tend to facilitate long-standing progress. In Evangelical ministries, women increasingly fought for the right to preach. This movement continued to build throughout the nineteenth-century, culminating in Catherine Booth's *Female Ministry; or, a Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel* (1878). The 1901 census revealed the existence of over 4, 803 ministries led by women in England alone (Krueger 150).

In 1859, Travers Madge, a friend of Elizabeth Gaskell, reflected on his decision to step away from the Unitarian denomination and start a new church in the city of Hulme:

Religious life in our fair cities takes more varied forms than most people are aware of. Not even the divergent types of the Anglican church ... can satisfy the relentless individuality of the human soul.... Probably there is no large town but has... some half dozen of these little sporadic churches... carrying on their humble work and worship, and aiming at something nearer to their ideal of what the church of Christ should be, than their members have been able to find... in the religious world." (Cunningham 1975: 31).

Madge's reflection gives us a critical insight regarding the implications and consequences of dissent. Religious and ideological differences prompted the faithful to take action, to form new groups, and to worship God in accordance with individual conscience. All Brontë's protagonists display a tenacious individuality that is never satisfied by the various Low Evangelical denominations, nor the Anglican church. Thus, Brontë's oeuvre appears to be an accurate reflection nineteenth-century women's religious participation and experience.

However, some Brontëan scholars analyze the spiritual views of the "Brontë Sisters" as though they were an isolated, homogenous group, and not individuals. It is true that the sisters

grew up together, collaborated on earlier works, and that their later fiction to respond to each other (Lodge 149). Yet their spiritual beliefs, views of nature, and the Anglican church differed, making this approach is potentially misleading. Henceforth, this thesis will consider the ‘spiritual vision’ of Charlotte Brontë alone. I hope to demonstrate Brontë’s remarkable knowledge of scripture, classical myths, Celtic lore, narrative, and insights into human nature but, most importantly, to illuminate her ability to synthesize these complex views into a single theology.

Scholars such as Marianne Thormählen, John Peters, Susan Gallagher, and Emily Griesinger, read Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ as one that operates within an orthodox Anglican piety. Concerning the divine female portrayed in Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, Griesinger gets the closest to identifying the maternal divine figure, claiming that Jane: “sees an angel or Diana, the Roman goddess of chastity, perhaps the feminine face of God,” (50). Griesinger argues, and I tend to agree, that due to the environment and ways of life Brontë grew up in and adopted, her faith was mostly likely a genuinely Christian theology mixed with subversive feminist elements, but Christian nonetheless (47). She presents a semi-autobiographical reading of *Jane Eyre* and convincingly points to how many of the events in Brontë’s life are writ large in the novel.

Griesinger’s identification of the divine female figure is not definitive, or even strongly suggestive. In “Mother, I will” (2016), Amanda Scott argues that Brontë projects a feminine identity onto God creating a “polymorphic” gender identity for the divine (207). The postmodern world favours a view of gender as fluid and contingent upon the subjective feelings of the individual rather than biological sex but it is doubtful that Brontë or the Victorians saw gender this way. Instead, I side with Susan Gallagher’s view of Brontë’s canon as one that “fuses feminist revisions of religious and secular discourse to recreate and represent the realities of

female experience” (72), and examine one of Griesinger’s suggestions, that Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* portrays the female face of God, within the wider context of Brontë’s body of work.

Here, I analyze three of Brontë’s works: *Jayne Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1848), and *Villette* (1853) from a new historicist perspective, explore the cultural, religious and environmental conditions informing her spiritual views. Brontë’s *The Professor* (1857) has been deliberately omitted for two main reasons. First, it was published posthumously, rebuffed by her publisher multiple times and is generally regarded as her least accomplished work. Second, Toni Wein notes that “*Villette* is Brontë’s reworking of her first novel, *The Professor*” (734). Wein provides another critical insight on Brontë’s canon: “... [the] identities, bodies, gender and genre have all been said to migrate; and, indeed, all of these migrants wash up on the shores of Belgium’s *Villette*” (733). Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ is not an exception, migrating from one text to the next, expanding and adapting. As Kate Lawson argues:

Jane Eyre is in part an exploration of Brontë’s childhood exposure to Evangelicalism, while *The Professor* and *Villette* are both concerned with the alien power of Roman Catholicism... *Shirley*...may be considered...her examination of the relationship of dissent to orthodoxy ... [and] the claims made outside the Church of England (729).

Because her works are semi-autobiographical, this thesis considers each novel in the order they were published, as the natural progression or maturity of Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’.

Furthermore, it is imperative that we understand how the Victorians viewed fiction. As Margaret Maison explains:

The Victorian age saw the transformation of the religious novel from a literary outcast into a most respectable and widely fashionable form of fiction. Religious novels of that time were not, as twentieth-century readers might imagine, novels merely coloured by Christian thought and feeling ... they bore a far more distinctive label To the Victorian reader religious novels meant “theological romances”, “Oxford Movement tales”, novels of religious propaganda designed to disseminate a variety of forms of Christian belief (1) Fiction became the pulpit (5).

Maison's description, of how the Victorians perceived and used the fiction novel, is an apt description of Brontë's oeuvre. In broad terms, her criticism of Catholicism and Protestantism is that they do not conform to the teachings of Christ but perversions taught by men who desired power. Although critical of both religions, she remained Evangelical. During her entire life, the Protestant faith was constantly evolving and fracturing into different sects, giving rise to the hope that one day a dissenting group might embrace 'true religion' and follow Christ.

According to David Bebbington there are four clear characteristics of Evangelical dissenters of Victorian Britain: "*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible, ... *crucientrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross" (Bebbington 3), and, that "Hearers needed to be aroused to concern for their spiritual welfare" (5). If these elements motivate the behaviours and actions of Brontë's protagonists, one could argue that Brontë used her fiction as proverbial pulpits to disseminate a feminist historicist Evangelical hermeneutics.

Elizabeth Jay argues that during the Evangelical revivalist movements, distinctions between conversion and conviction were not always clear. This led to the promotion of a "long-drawn-out pattern" for conversion (60). By the standards of Brontë's time, genuine conversion was an elongated process that could take years or a lifetime, and was categorized as a "gradual growth into the Gospel" (59). Jay explains that, from an early Victorian Evangelical perspective, a person's convictions about God were separate from the proof of their conversion to Christianity, and the 'converted' and the 'pagan' were differentiated by their behaviour (60).

The narrative trajectory in *Jane Eyre* is determined by a life long process of conversion that demonstrates Jane's growth into the Gospel. When the eight-year-old Jane tells Mr. Blocklehurst "I like Revelations, and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis, and Samuel, and a little

bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, Job and Jonah...Psalms is not interesting” (40), it is clear that she has not grown into the Gospel. Within an elongated process of conversion, the book of Psalms helps to merge Old Testament beliefs with New Testament convictions. Psalms depicts a heartfelt and intimate relationship between various speakers and God; the prayers, reflections and meditations in Psalms were held in high regard by nineteenth-century Evangelicals and were the expected patterns of behaviour for those who claimed to have been converted. Thus, I argue that *Jane Eyre* is the story of a young woman’s spiritual inheritance, borne of a genuine conversion, and verified by her growth into the Gospel.

If *Jane Eyre* is Brontë’s exploration of the Bible, *Shirley* is her exploration of mid-nineteenth-century dissent. Keeping with the notion that Brontë’s fiction operates as proverbial pulpits, one of the most prominent aspects of Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ is the ‘woman-Titan’ in *Shirley*. At a glance, the woman-Titan figure in chapter eighteen looks similar to the divine maternal figure in *Jane Eyre*; however, as she migrates from *Jane Eyre* to *Shirley*, she is expressed through the ‘poetic vision’ instead of a dream vision. Moreover, Brontë employs the Later Romantic not the Victorian version of ‘poetic vision’. This would suggest that Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ was influenced by Romantic philosophers and poets. She was influenced most by Coleridge, who considered himself a philosopher poet, and believed that the philosopher poet could attain divine logos, and glimpse spiritual ‘truths’. Reading *Shirley*’s sermon on the moor through the aporias of a romantic hermeneutic, I argue that Brontë finds, in scripture, the authority to resist tyrannical patriarchal authority.

Within Brontë’s canon, *Villette* is the most ideologically driven and the least spiritual in vision. The lack of supernatural events, divine revelation or providence is exchanged for a closer look human subjectivity and what constitutes ‘truth’; Lucy’s quest is overshadowed by the

tension between Catholic and Protestant belief, various Evangelical faiths, between Celtic and Anglo, and, between pagan and Christian. As the ‘woman-Titan’ in *Shirley* migrates to *Villette*, she is renamed ‘Titaness’, and the dream vision and ‘poetic vision’ are replaced by mythic figures, metaphors from the English theatre, and Lucy’s imagination. Regardless, Brontë’s *Villette* relies on a lesser known genre called ‘place myth’ and her ‘spiritual vision’ articulates ‘true religion’ by uncovering the past and exposing the myths of national and religious identity.

Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ is complex, and, although it is woven with many Evangelical threads, it nonetheless stands outside, but not in opposition to, orthodox Anglican piety. In terms of her religious and spiritual identity, she was undoubtedly Protestant and believed that the individual consciousness was the highest seat of authority for interpreting scripture and understanding the world. Like Brontë, John Locke was deemed a heretic and a radical dissenter for his religious beliefs despite taking the sacrament and remaining a loyal churchman his entire life (Taylor 144). He argued that the ‘true religion’ could only be found by the individual in the natural state, that religious authorities and governments could use coercion to enforce stated belief, but force cannot bring the ‘believer’ to true faith (145). Brontë appears to side with Locke on the issues of power and religion, on what constitutes the ‘true’ religion, and how one finds it.

In May of 1971, feminist theologian Mary Daly gave a sermon at Memorial church in which she condemned the androcentrism of Christianity (Palazzo xi). Steeped in the second wave feminist movement, Daly staged a “walk-out” to reinforce the notion that women are “spiritual exiles” within patriarchal Christianity. I believe this is the critical issue that underlies Brontë’s mystico-Christian-Celtic view: a feminist theology that seeks to provide all women with a spiritual promised land, rejects conventional views of women as innately sinful, and synthesizes classical, Celtic, and Christian myths and beliefs. Further, I aim to show that the “anti-Christian”

charge against Brontë could be more accurately described as a cultural rejection of an “unpalatable” paradigm shift toward gender equality and the view of scripture as a living breathing force within a sincerely Christian theology.

Personal, Literary, and Cultural Influences

“A father to the fatherless, a defender of widows, is God in his holy habitation” – Psalm 68:5

Charlotte Brontë was born in Thorton 1816 and raised in Haworth. As the eldest surviving daughter of Maria Branwell (1783-1821) and Irish reverend Patrick Brontë (1777-1861), Brontë was the product of not only religiously minded parents, but outspoken individuals who had a great respect for each other. Duckett notes that Maria Branwell was intelligent, lively, social, and often the first person her family would turn to for advice (46). During their courtship, Maria once wrote to Patrick: “For some years now I have been perfectly my own mistress” and, with regard to his intentions, she writes: “I do not, cannot, doubt your love, & here freely declare, I love you above all the world besides!” (ibid). Maria Branwell took great pride in her independence, something that Brontë would strive to maintain throughout her adult life. The romance between Maria and Patrick was genuine and heartfelt and, for their time, neither chose to marry early in life.

Sadly, Brontë suffered the loss of her biological mother at age five and we know very little about the relationship between Maria Branwell and her children. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* provides a glimpse of their relationship. Allegedly, a family servant told Gaskell:

[Maria] was not very anxious to see much of her children, probably because the sight of them, knowing how soon they were to be left motherless, would have agitated her too much. So the little things clung quietly together, for their father was busy in his study and in his parish, or with their mother, they took their meals alone (30).

Maria Branwell experienced intense pain in the final months leading to her passing. The account seems probable and is consistent with Brontë's perspective. Duckett recounts that Brontë had but one hazy memory of her mother playing with her brother Branwell (47).

In recent years, fewer scholars consider the implications of such a loss to a devout Protestant churchwoman living in nineteenth-century England. Lucile Dooley, Robert Keefe, John Malham-Dembleby, and others have paid attention to Maria's death but with the intent of understanding Brontë's subconscious drives. Tenuous connections have been made between the timing and causes of their deaths - Charlotte and Maria both died at age 38; it was assumed (incorrectly) that Maria's death, like Charlotte's, was related to complications from child labour (Miller 142). Keefe argues that the loss of her mother was the "sole traumatic event" of Brontë's life, leaving her incapable of accepting 'adult reality.' Even more dubious is Malham-Dembleby's claim that the lack of attention paid by Brontë, to Maria's death, is proof of her lifelong obsession with her dead mother (266).

Like Lucasta Miller, I find these claims untenable. In *The Brontë Myth* (2003), Miller notes that Brontë wrote two novels (*Shirley* and *Villette*) after the deaths of her siblings thus refuting Keefe's claim (142). She demonstrates that Malham-Dembleby's assessment is extremely reductive, dismisses everything Brontë accomplished (despite her gender) and ignores the preternatural quality of her fiction. From the 1920s to 1980s, waves of psychoanalysts attempted to construct Brontë as mentally and emotionally depressed, and sexually repressed (Rosengarten 183). Some suggested Brontë had an Electra complex, and bore the "unconscious" guilt her mother's death resulting in her own untimely passing (Miller 138, 141).

At present, most Brontëan scholars acknowledge the semi autobiographical nature of Brontë's fiction. For example, most recognize personal experiences writ large in *Villette* as it was

based on Brontë's visit to Belgium in 1842. Thus, one might reasonably read Brontë's loss of her mother as rendered in the "motherless" quality of each young female protagonist. Further, that these protagonists eventually seek maternal guidance in the divine can be read as a dissenting interpretation of passages like Psalms 68-5 (NIV). While I resist viewing the early death of Mrs. Branwell as the "singular traumatic event" that defines Brontë's life, I contend that Brontë was aware of the void created by losing her biological mother: an awareness and a reality shared and displayed from the point of view of each protagonist in Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*.

In "A mother and her substitutes," Bob Duckett provides an in-depth look at the maternal figures Maria Branwell, Elizabeth Branwell, and Margaret Wooler in relation to Charlotte Brontë. Duckett reviews a series of letters written by Maria that display her bold leadership, acute intelligence, and prudence (46). He concludes that Brontë had only one hazy memory of her mother. In Brontë's fiction, we see this 'hazy' memory reflected in the point of view of each protagonist, especially in the narrator-protagonist Lucy Snowe's recollection of her godmother in the opening chapter of *Villette*. Though Brontë's aunt attempted to fill the void left by Maria's early death, there was tension between the young, ambitious Brontë and her miserly, inactive, 'old-fashion' Aunt Elizabeth (48). Duckett argues that this tension prevented the development of a close relationship despite Elizabeth's financial support and help raising the Brontë children.

Brontë eventually found a female mentor in her supervisor at Roe Head School, Margaret Wooler. As both pupil and teacher, Brontë thrived under Wooler in a way her siblings did not. Later in life, Brontë continually sought Wooler's advice on potential suitors, her ambitions of starting a school, and her desire to remain financially independent (51). Despite Wooler's kindness and mentorship, Brontë did not consider Wooler a substitute as a mother. In a letter written by Brontë to her friend Ellen Nussey in February of 1850, she reflects on reading Maria's

lively and spirited letters: “There is a rectitude, a refinement, a constancy, a modesty, a sense, a gentleness about them indescribable. I wish [s]he had lived and that I had known her” (Smith 2:237). Brontë could only glimpse Maria’s character from her letters. Curiously, Brontë’s description of Maria’s ‘indescribable’ quality, mirrors multiple religions in their conception of the indescribable qualities of God.

When we acknowledge the void left by Maria’s death, the identity of the divine female figure in Brontë’s fiction begins to take shape. In “Jane’s Crown of Thorns: Feminism and Christianity in *Jane Eyre*” (2002), Maria Lamonaca points out one of the pitfalls of twentieth-century explorations of Victorian women’s literature: “*Jane Eyre* proclaims what could be considered a message of radical spiritual autonomy for women. Yet... twentieth-century understandings of a woman’s freedom and empowerment are not easily applied to the self-conceptions of Victorian women of faith” (247). If we accept the seriousness and sincere piety through which Brontë contemplated religious matters, and embrace the idea that the case of curiously absent mother points toward Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’, we begin to sketch out the identity of this divine woman.

For obvious reasons, Brontë obscured the identity of the divine figure by switching the subject matter of her fiction back and forth, from the literal to the metaphysical and back to a literal meaning, and a narrator’s voice (or multiple voices) that to oscillate between dissenting feminist and traditionally patriarchal points of view. We cannot not ignore the material, legal, and political oppression that women faced during the Victorian period, but we must also acknowledge the possibility that, from Brontë’s perspective, there was more at stake. Thus, strictly focusing on women’s quotidian oppression obfuscates the spiritual oppression Victorian women experienced every time they stepped foot inside a church, or felt a connection to a notion

of the divine outside traditional patriarchal interpretations of God; a spiritual oppression Brontë wrestled with during her waking and sleeping life (Smith 1:162). I argue that Brontë takes up the issue of women's spiritual oppression, in addition to their mundane oppression, and that the battle for the right of Christian women to have a spiritual guardian was not only a deeply personal matter but the driving force of Brontë's dissenting feminist historicist hermeneutics.

Moreover, Brontë challenges the portrayal of women in Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Rendered as a collaborator with the abject "other" (Satan) or as naïve, childlike, and unthinking, Milton's portrayal of women is undeniably negative. Still, his rendering of the fall does not direct all the blame onto Eve.¹ The cultural perception characteristic of medieval England, that held Eve responsible for the fall, had, by Brontë's time, mostly died out (Reed 35). Throughout the nineteenth-century, most Protestants saw Adam's lackadaisical oversight of Eve as the true cause of the fall, and a mistake Victorians were not wont to repeat. By the 1830s, conventional Victorian wisdom endorsed the enforcement of a 'natural' social order, specifically, traditional patriarchal family structure. Through patriarchal control of young women's education, marriage and property laws, and the restriction of women to the domestic sphere, nineteenth-century women were non-persons (Hiltner 327).

Exploring this Victorian zeitgeist, John Reed highlights Coventry Patmore's poem "Espousals," arguing that it typifies Victorian efforts to promote the infantilization and subjugation of women: "There's nothing left of what she was; / Back to the babe the woman

¹ Milton makes it explicit that Eve was subordinate and inferior to Adam (4.633). Raphael instructs Adam not be subordinate to Eve (8. 561). Adam's decision to eat the forbidden fruit at Eve's request makes him subordinate to Eve, and is explained as Adam being overcome by Eve's "charm" (9. 821-5). Adam's sin is worse than Eve's since he was instructed (educated) by celestial beings, was older and wiser hence more capable of resisting temptation. Thus, Milton's suggestion is that Adam's idolatry (placing earthly love over God) is the original sin. Not surprisingly, Brontë's fiction demonstrate an acute awareness of the pitfalls of idolatry.

dies, / And all the wisdom that she has / Is to love him for being wise” (36). Evidently, Victorian Britain allowed women to be ‘saints’ so long as they were of the docile, self-denying, and domestic. Charles Kingsley’s work *The Saints Tragedy* (1848) presents the image of the Victorian ‘domestic saint’ as the, “...obedient and loving wife, moral guide, selfless... benefactor of the poor” (38). Clearly, there was little difference between the oppression of the nunnery and Victorian England, as British common law put women soundly at the mercy of their husbands or fathers (44).

Despite a cultural environment that was hostile to women writers, Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ takes up Milton’s influential work for its problematic construction of gender. Namely, its failure to recognize the socially constructed nature of gender roles, expectations, limitations, and gender oppression. Polarized and hierarchical, Milton’s notion of gender articulates a false gender superiority in which the first man acts as the “head and guide” (4.440), “author and disposer” (4.663) of the first woman who is represented as childlike. This portrayal of women went unchallenged by the majority of writers in both secular and religious literature (Reed 44). Victorian notions of gender roles and the family reflected a cultural narrative that simultaneously demonize and or infantilize woman with the intent on maintaining this status-quo indefinitely. Faced with oppression on so many fronts, most Victorian women felt no option but to submit (35). Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ promotes a gender equality that was for her time yet many twentieth and twenty-first-century scholars are keen to point out its limitations (Hiltner 328).

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane employs a patriarchal rhetoric when speaking to Rochester about the importance of relying on God (her advice invokes Proverbs 3:5-6; Brontë 364). Yet, in Jane’s private meditations and times of need, she employs a feminist rhetoric that allows her to commune with a God the mother (Brontë 433). This rhetorical misdirection, the interweaving of

patriarchal (public) and feminist (private) rhetoric, distracts but does not erase the spiritual truths that Jane, and likewise Shirley and Lucy, acquire from the divine during personal moments of spiritual reflection. In their germinal text *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), Gilbert and Gubar argue that many early women writers created “palimpsestic” novels whose surface designs veil other levels of meaning that are “locked up” in the attic (73). However, it seems that the feminist historicist hermeneutics Brontë employs are encoded within a series of misdirections, and, what appears to be patriarchal religious rhetoric, often eclipses the more subtle, private prayers to a divine maternal God associated with Christ.

In *Villette*, Lucy Snowe tells us of her initial comparison of the young Paulina and her father, claiming, “her mind had been filled from his, as the cup from the flagon” (17). The imagery also reflects Patrick’s contribution to Charlotte’s ‘spiritual vision’. In “The Religions of the Brontë’s” (2004), Miriam Burstein outlines the core, perhaps the extent, of Patrick Brontë’s Christian faith: “the free gift of Grace for all through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross ...and ...that humans had a free will to accept or deny faith,” (434). As a reverend who saw to the needs of massive dissenting populace, in addition to his Anglican flock, Patrick’s relaxed theological views were nonetheless informed by Wesleyan Methodism. He was critical of few religious denominations or scriptural interpretations, notwithstanding Calvinism and the notion of the predestined elect (*ibid*); while Patrick preached a message of tolerance, his tolerance had limits. The particulars of Brontë’s spiritual vision were likely developed from a sound interpretation of scripture that placed Christ at its centre. She was certain that salvation was for the many, not the few.

John Maynard notes that “the children could be said easily to side with their father in placing emphasis on religion as a living force within the individual” (196). Seeing scripture as a

living, breathing force carries several important implications regarding the development of a spiritual vision. Nature becomes an agent through which one conceives of, and communes with, God. This view of scripture is the foundation from which Brontë's vision grows: a vision that is philosophically Protestant, yet sounds Catholic in its acknowledgement of saintly figures and the paranormal (Fisher 9), and echoes the pre-Christian-Celtic by infusing depictions of nature into the divine (Crowe 308). Brontë's nuanced view of God and scripture is further complicated by numerous references to the classical myths and the Old Testament.

As an accomplished writer, Patrick was aware of the religious, political, and vocational potential literature had in reaching a wide audience and developing a career (Avery 474). As the eldest of ten children born to a poor Irish tenant farmer and notorious storyteller, Patrick taught himself to read and write (Barker 26). This paid dividends and eventually led to a career as a tutor. Patrick never ceased writing, maintained his reputation as a scholar, and networked with prominent members of the Anglican church who would later advocate for his attendance at Cambridge University. His reliance on simple language reflects his political stance, as he saw literature as a force that could improve the lives of common, especially rural, people and grant them access to religious and spiritual ideas. Consider Patrick's *Epistle to the Labouring Poor*:

But, all who worship God aright,
In Christ his son and image bright;
With minds illumed by Gospel Light,
 Shall find the way,
That leads to bliss: and take their flight
 To heavenly day (119).

Patrick was acutely aware of the untapped audience of the working poor, the particulars of that subculture, and their appetite for stories. His use of simple language, to conveying a surprisingly eloquent and powerful message, is a strategy Charlotte employs in her fiction.

Moreover, Patrick educated Charlotte after she returned to the parsonage (Barker 30). He encouraged his daughters to read widely, taught them geography, history, and science, took their lessons outdoors when possible, and had them write reflections and stories based on these lessons. In “The Father of the Brontës,” Duddy Green counters the stern, dreary image of Patrick put forth by Elizabeth Gaskell in her biography of Charlotte Brontë. He points to statements made by Sarah Gars, their nursemaid, who claims Mr. Brontë made sure his children had plenty of food, and after lessons with him, let them wander the moors where “their fun knew no bounds ... and they ... played with zest” (39). Green notes that Mr. Brontë was a lover of music. He bought the children a piano, paid for their lessons, and would go with them to hear different bands play in town (ibid).

Patrick proved to be a template by which his children could model their own success. As Carol Bock states, “his children knew, Patrick had raised himself from obscurity in rural Ireland to a position of great status in England through his facility with print,” (44). On her trip to Brussels, Charlotte wrote to her Aunt “Papa will perhaps think it a wild and ambitious scheme; but who ever rose in the world without ambition? When he left Ireland... he was as ambitious as I am now” (Smith 1: 269). From an early age, Brontë knew she could achieve greater recognition from her father and raise her own social status by running her own school and becoming a world-renowned writer. Such a vocation would provide the ideal outlet whereby she could promote her spiritual, religious and philosophical views. Denied a pulpit due to her gender, Brontë appears to have utilized her fiction as a proverbial pulpit to spread her feminist, historicist hermeneutics.

In order to achieve a greater understanding of Brontë’s form of authorship, consider the last chapter in *Villette*. Regarding the ‘problematic’ ending, she writes to her publisher:

The spirit of romance would have indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting; it would have fashioned a paramount hero, kept him faithfully with him, and

made him supremely worshipful... but this would be unlike real life – inconsistent with truth – at variance with probability (December 6th, 1852) (*Villette* xxi).

For Brontë, even fiction must remain plausible. The earnest portrayal of her spiritual vision was no different and took part within a growing consciousness, or the cultural movements, starting to take root in Victorian culture by the mid-century. These movements are often viewed by historians as unintended by-products of the crisis of faith. Yet, for Brontë, these movements complimented her individualistic theology due to her focus on faith, sound interpretation of scripture, and her resistance to a literal interpretation of the Bible.

By mid-century, three important movements entered mainstream Victorian culture: the spiritualist movement that began in 1848 in New York (Good 7), the women's rights movement in 1848 and in America (Reed 35), and the revival of Irish Celtic folklore, earmarked at 1850 and originating in Ireland (Fitzgerald 65). As a point of comparison, consider the publishing dates of Brontë's works: *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853). Spiritualism, women's rights, and Celtic folklore are writ large in her body of work, as all three veins of thought merge into her 'spiritual vision'. Traditional Brontëan scholarship has placed an emphasis on the works of Romantics, like Byron, Shelly, and Scott, crediting them as her 'literary' birth parents (Bock 16). With the recognition that Brontë was a literary pioneer in helping to carve out space for all three movements, one must cede that either too much attention has been paid to the sources she read as a youth or too little to the works informing her adult views.

In *Roman Catholic saints and early Victorian Literature* (2012), Devon Fisher distinguishes between the "porous self" and "buffered self" as two differing worldviews. He argues that the "porous self" offers a way of thinking and believing characterized as pre-reformation thought in that the individual was open to an active, enchanted spiritual world. Conversely, the "buffered self" situates the individual's consciousness as the highest authority of

all interpretation; a view that tends to discredit the belief in anything paranormal (8). The protagonists in Brontë's canon operate within both world views, which suggests that her fictions centre on the lives of Protestant 'saints'. Unquestionably, her oeuvre remains a hybrid of Romantic and Victorian styles and conventions but also moves beyond them, leading to the suspicion that another influence lay beneath her 'spiritual vision'.

During the nineteenth-century, Victorian readers expected Christian authors show their ability to think like a pagan but pagan belief. In "Old Deities, New Worlds: the return of the Gods in Fiction" (2012), Marion Gibson argues that there was a literary tradition within Christian Britain dating back to the twelfth-century in which authors, like Geoffrey Monmouth, portrayed pagan figures with empathy. Specifically, Monmouth imagines "early Britons as transplanted worshippers of classical deities, whom the Trojans (now Britons) had adopted during their exile in Greece and Italy" (38). Similarly, Laghamon portrays the pagan "other" as "us." Consider his portrayal of Brutus's plea at the Temple of Diana: "Lady Diana, beloved Diana, lofty Diana, help me in my need. Guide me and govern me.../ Diana his lady gazed lovingly towards him; / with an attractive smile, she amicably promised [to help him], / graciously laying her hand on his head" (40). In Laghamon's poem, Diana and Brutus become mirrors of the courtly knight seeking the blessing of the Lady of the Lake or the Virgin Mary.

Further, Gibson argues that what we read is "a fruitful slippage between Christian and pagan, official and unofficial, text and subtext, British and other" (ibid). She claims that author's ability to think two or more imaginative worlds was hallmark of many of the greatest English writers such as Shakespeare, Donne, and Spenser (41). Brontë's fiction consistently demonstrate this habit of mind when articulating her 'spiritual vision'. This fact becomes more pertinent when we consider the Victorian tendency to connect English history to the Roman Empire: an

ancient people who were staunchly patriarchal, culturally Greeks, and conquered the Celtic tribes just beyond their borders (Gibson 38). If we think of the English as a cultural group tied to a geographical location, then layered under the Protestant Victorian myth of religious and national identity, is a cultural history spanning millennia, and belonging to a Celtic, then classical Roman, then Roman Catholic past. By examining different modes of history preferred by Victorians, Brontë seems to suggest that English Protestant Victorians were a race with amnesia. Throughout her canon, religious hypocrites act out classical Roman or Celtic behaviours, and uphold pagan virtues despite their seemingly 'Christian' rhetoric.

CHAPTER 2

Jane Eyre: An Orphan's Dissent in the Victorian Evangelical Context

The Symbiosis of Scripture and the Victorian Novel

“I like Revelations, and the Book of Daniel, and Genesis, and Samuel, and a little bit of Exodus, and some parts of Kings and Chronicles, Job and Jonah...Psalms is not interesting” - Jane Eyre

In 1831, Thomas Carlyle eerily predicts the future of literature and religion: “Literature is but a branch of Religion and always participates in its character; however, in our time, it is the only branch that shows any greenness; and, as some think, must one day become the main stem” (23), and lamented that “faith has well-nigh vanished from the world” (19). A decade later, John Keble reasserts Coleridge’s philosophy, arguing that “poetry was the ordained vehicle of revelation” (189). Carlyle and Keble were not just articulating personal views but identifying trends in Victorian culture. George Paul Landow notes that typology experienced a revival during the first half of the nineteenth-century and, although it was often used to secular ends, types “permit the Victorian writer to communicate with his audience in terms of a recognizable, culturally acceptable narrative or structure which has many powerful associations attached to it” (151). Brontë’s fiction advances a spiritual vision through biblical language and allusions, articulated by characters who operate as antitypes to figures of the Old and New Testaments.

In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Brontë combines Old Testament types with New Testament spiritual beliefs, and imagery associated with the Sermon on the Mount. For example, scholars note that the young Jane is first ‘witnessed’ to by Helen Burns. However, what is often overlooked is Jane’s role in helping Helen reproduce Christ’s message. Jane’s ostensible subversion of Christ’s

Sermon on the Mount operates as what I am calling a “dialectical misdirection,” and serves a didactic purpose:

[*Jane Eyre* - Jane:] But I feel this, Helen, I must dislike those who, whatever I do to please them, persist in disliking me... It is unnatural that I should love those who do not show me affection.

[*Bible* - Christ:] Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy.

[*Jane Eyre* - Helen:] Read the New Testament, and observe what Christ says....

[*Bible* - Christ:] But I say unto you,

[*Jane Eyre* - Helen:] Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and despitefully use you.

[*Bible* - Christ:] Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; do good to them that hate you and pray for them that despitefully use you (Matt 5:44, Brontë 68, 69).

Although the young Jane Eyre is unacquainted with Christ, their dialectic is a clear reflection of Christian moral philosophy and foreshadows the narrative trajectory.

Brontë’s fiction draws on mid-nineteenth-century Evangelical distinctions between the “pagan,” living in the fallen state, from the “saved” living in Christ. David Bebbington explicates that for Evangelical denominations of Victorian Britain, conversion “marked the boundary between a Christian and a pagan” (5). He claims that, Calvinists notwithstanding, “Evangelicals were not fatalists,” conversion was a choice, and this view finds expression in Johnathan Edwards’s *Freedom of the Will* (1754) (60, 64). Elizabeth Jay contends that many mid-nineteenth-century Evangelicals believed conversion was an elongated process that could take years or a lifetime, and was characterized as a “gradual growth into the Gospel” (59). She stipulates that an individual’s convictions about God were separate from their conversion, and that behaviour differentiated the ‘pagan’ from ‘convert’ (60).

When the eight-year-old Jane Eyre tells Mr. Blocklehurst she does not like the New Testament but prefers the Old Testament except Psalms (40), it is clear she has grown into the Gospel. The scriptural bridge between Old Testament and New Testament beliefs is the book of

Psalms. The prayers, reflections, and meditations in the book of Psalms were held in high regard by Evangelicals living in Victorian Britain and formed the foundations of their piety. In response to Jane's tantrums, Miss Abbot claims "I wouldn't have her heart for anything" (16). The implication is that Jane's behaviour reflects her 'pagan' heart.

If we accept Susan Gallagher's claim that *Jane Eyre* is a feminist Christian *bildungsroman* (71), then typological analysis is essential. Catherine Tkacz notes that recent editions of *Jane Eyre* include introductions that suggest Brontë may have been 'pagan' and "exclude Brontë's description of reading, memorizing, and reflecting on the Bible, which certainly show how familiar with Scripture she designed her characters to be" (4). Thus, newer editions ignore Brontë's Christian faith, the faith of her protagonist, and gloss over many biblical references within the novel. As Tkacz explains:

The biblical book most often quoted in *Jane Eyre* is the Gospel of Matthew, and the passage from it drawn on most frequently and significantly is the Sermon on the Mount. Brontë interweaves her repeated and coordinated references to the Sermon on the Mount with allusions to both Daniel 4 and 1 Kings 19. Tracing these three strands through the novel ... sheds light on ... Rochester's losses ... their actual and figurative restoration to him... the tree imagery associated with Rochester, and also Jane's and Rochester's [supernatural] hearing of each other's voices (8).

Tkacz does not use the term "typological" but argues that Rochester represents Nebuchadnezzar, a pagan king, who, through a series of tragedies, learns that his relationship with God is paramount and grounds all human relationships (12).

To this end, Tkacz highlights points of contact between Rochester and Nebuchadnezzar. For instance, Jane tells Mr. Blockhurst that she likes the book of Daniel, where we find the story of King Nebuchadnezzar. Tkacz argues that the significance of Jane's description of the destruction of a chestnut tree by lightning parallels "the tree in Nebuchadnezzar's dream ... that 'a holy one came down from heaven' and cried, 'Hew the tree down, and destroy it; yet leave the

stump and roots thereof in the earth (Daniel 4:13, 23)” (12). Tkacz notes that, soon after Jane and Rochester’s reunion at Ferndean, Rochester alludes to Nebuchadnezzar’s dream and bemoans “I am no better than the old lightning-struck chestnut tree in Thornfield,” to which Jane replies, “You are no ruin, sir – no lightning-struck tree...Plants will grow about your roots whether you ask them to or not, because they delight in your bountiful shadow” (512). Jane reframes Rochester’s view, making him a stalwart tree foreshadowing the children they will bear.

Moreover, Tkacz demonstrates how Brontë infused teachings of the Old and New Testaments into single speeches, and that the allusions to Nebuchadnezzar’s tree mirror the tree in the Sermon on the Mount: “Ye shall know them by their fruits... Every tree that bringeth not forth good fruit is hewn down, and cast into the fire” (Matthew 6:16,19). After Rochester has been thrown into the fire at Thornfield, he admits “only of late – I began to see and acknowledge the hand of God in my doom. I began to experience remorse, repentance, the wish for reconciliation to my Maker” (514-5). Like Nebuchadnezzar, Rochester’s self reliance cost him dearly. Once their pride abates, their relationship with God begins to develop and their wealth and relationships are restored (Tkacz 14). Rochester’s punishment mirrors the Sermon on the Mount through the lost eye and hand motif (10). Thus, Brontë situates the typical Nebuchadnezzar within the nineteenth-century and a New Testament moral philosophy.

As for Jane’s type, Tkacz is less certain but states that there may be “inviting comparisons” to Christ (7). However, this seems to be a false equivalency. The atonement had far reaching implications for humanity whereas Jane’s sacrifice only affects her and Rochester. Yet, the scenes, events, and plot twists in *Jane Eyre* demonstrate typological associations between Jane and King David. For example, the young Jane likes the book of Samuel which outlines the story of David. At a second glance, the tree imagery from Nebuchadnezzar and

Christ's sermon contains overlapping imagery with the prophecy of David in Isaiah 11:1: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch shall bear fruit" (NIV). The age difference between her and Rochester suggests that Jane is the shoot growing from the stump. The story of David becomes the quintessential *bildungsroman* if the quest is spiritual truth and Godliness. As the antitype of David, Jane operates with a New Testament understanding of spiritual laws. Thus, Brontë appears to be appropriating the story of David such that Jane Eyre becomes the exemplar for young Christian woman.

Of the chapters of the Bible eight-year-old Jane prefers, three of them deal extensively with king David (Kings, Chronicles and Samuel). The young David is treated as a burden by his family, and relegated to tending sheep in isolation. As the youngest, he could not rely on an inheritance and would have to accept a lower social status than his eldest brothers. However, David rejects his original role within society on the authority of God's word. In 1 Samuel, God calls the prophet Samuel to visit the house of Jesse and anoint the next King. Jesse assembles all his sons except David. Samuel selects Jesse's tallest and strongest son but God tells him he has chosen the wrong person, for, after all, man sees not as God sees. Samuel asks Jesse if he has any more sons, and David is summoned. God tells Samuel that David is to be the future king and David receives the anointment (1 Samuel 1:1-13). Quite literally, God's words empower David to reject his original role within society.

There are two direct connections between the stories of Jane Eyre and David. In chapter nineteen, the fortune teller (Rochester) tells Sam to summon all the young women to have their fortunes read. After the daughters of wealthy land owners have their fortunes read, they insist that all young women have seen the fortune teller. However, the fortune teller (Rochester) claims that there is one more, and Sam identifies Jane. As a lowly orphan and a governess, Jane

shepherds Rochester's adopted child, educating her and ensuring her social and emotional well being. Once the bigamous plot is uncovered, it would have been audacious (by Victorian standards) for a young orphan governess to marry a man like Rochester, much less reject his marriage proposal. However, Jane's adherence to God's laws force her to reject the marriage proposal; hence, the word of God empowers Jane to defy Rochester.

Enduring constant cruelty from multiple family members, David is said to have "encouraged himself in the fields." The years of social isolation facilitates his reliance on God. This mode of living is exemplified by one of David's famous prayers recorded in Psalm 143:10 (NIV). Further, the Bible explains that, as king, David strove to see the world the way God saw the world (1 Kings 11:4). Likewise, Jane is mistreated by her extended family. Yet, in her isolation, she turns away from God, mistaking Christian hypocrites for agents of God's will. Both Jane and Rochester make the claim that "God sees not as man sees." This becomes the cornerstone of Jane's faith, as she learns to trust God's plan over man.

David's entire existence was solitary. As a boy, his family despised him; as a youth, King Saul attempted to murder him; as king, his own men consider turning on him and, his son Aslom, attempted a coup d'état (2 Samuel 15). Few individuals experienced the social isolation David felt, and fewer still were strengthened through social isolation. One of the most widely recognizable quotations from Jane goes as follows: "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself; I will keep God's laws" (205). Like David, Jane looks to no institution, culture, group, legal authority or person to support her ambitions or her desire for autonomy. Yet their resistance to society's prescribed roles stem from their shared desire to live in obedience to God.

For example, Jane desired to be Rochester's wife yet another held that coveted throne. Jane must accept God's timing, for Bertha Mason to commits suicide at Thornfield, which allows Jane to take her place. Likewise, after his anointing by the prophet Samuel, David knows he is to be king but waits for God's timing. In what looks like legacy suicide, Saul and his sons are said to have all died in a single battle (1 Samuel 31:3-6). This allows David to become king and is portrayed as an act of divine providence: "After removing Saul, He made David their King. God Testified concerning him: 'I have found David son of Jesse, a man after my own heart; he will do everything I want him to do'" (13:22). If any biblical character offered spiritual and ontological solutions to a member of an oppressed or marginalized group, it was king David. The righteous formula for non-conformity is one's love and obedience to God, not society. In fact, to ignore God's plan for one's life becomes an act of idolatry. As *Jane Eyre* reveals, sometimes following God requires the faithful to reject familial expectations, a marriage partner desires, friends, society or one's personal ambitions.

Unsurprisingly, this stance characterizes Brontë's personal opposition toward societal norms. In the preface of the December of 1847 edition, Brontë (still under the pen name Currer Bell) defended her novel against the 'anti-Christian' charge, stating: "Conventionality is not morality." Brontë described the offended masses as incapable of understanding the novel because, to them, "whatever is unusual is wrong; [their] ears detect in each protest against bigotry...an insult against piety" (*Jane Eyre*, 2nd ed, p. 5). In her personal life, the thinly veiled reserve Brontë displayed towards an oppressive society rarely censored her dissent. As her friend and biographer recounts, Brontë countered bigotry in the same vague but direct manner as her fiction. Upon being told that women have no business pursuing a career as an author, Brontë sternly replied "I trust God will take from me whatever invention or expression I may have,

before he lets me become blind to the sense of what is fitting or unfitting to be said!” (Gaskell 532). Thus, her feminist Protestant faith empowered Brontë to unapologetically pursue God’s plan for her life.

As a boy, David accomplished remarkable feats: the slaying lions, wolves and bears. The Bible offers an explanation in the account of David’s duel with Goliath. In 1 Samuel we are told that the Philistines and Israelites had met on the battlefield but neither had the will to engage. During this lull, Goliath taunted the Israeli soldiers, challenging them to single combat and promising that the victor would enslave the people of the defeated combatant. Frightened by Goliath’s massive size (almost 10 ft tall), none of the Israelites accepted his challenge. Curiously, David was not intimidated by Goliath’s stature, claiming, “Who does this Philistine think he is to challenge the armies of God?” (1 Samuel 17:27). Before David challenges Goliath, Saul interrogates David, asking why he believes he will prevail against the giant. David replies “The lord that delivered me out of the paw of the lion, and out of the paw of the bear, he will deliver me out of the hand of this Philistine” (17:37). David’s boldness was his faith. Although his prospects in life were limited, his family’s cruelty toward is pronounced, leaving some Jewish scholars to believe his mother was a victim of rape. Likewise, Jane is positioned as a cousin orphan and the cruelty she experiences lines up with the interpretation that David was not Jesse’s biological son. Thus, both David and Jane are forced to find alternative parents. As in the story of David, *Jane Eyre* suggests that parental relationships can prevent a connection between the individual and God. This fruitful slippage between by Jane and David enables an Old Testament type to model Christian Evangelical behaviour.

As Jay explains, “[t]he concept of *Original Sin*... was the linchpin of the Evangelical creed” (54). Jay notes that this belief separates Evangelical writers from the Romantics who used

phrases such as “Child of Innocence” to mark a shift in perspective outside Edenic myth. This dichotomy is ubiquitous in Brontë’s body of work. This juxtaposition situates characters in relation to one another, separating the hypocrites from the sincere, and is the primary “spiritual truth” each of Brontë’s heroines intuitively understand. The narrative starting point for the novel *Jane Eyre*. In other words, each protagonist views all men as fallible, and attributes the focalization of the human subject as the direct result of the “buffed self” (Fischer 8). However, once the trials of life expose the limitations of self reliance and understanding, Brontë’s protagonist adopt the “porous lens” and rely on or commune with God.

The significance of her protagonists’ quest for spiritual truth must be situated within the context of the action and conflict of the novel. To woman authors of Victorian Britain, like Rosetti, Barton, and Brontë, who tenaciously kept their faith, the spiritual “laws” of the Gospel empowered their willingness to challenge conventional morality (Thormählen 150). Thormählen argues that, unlike many Protestants of the early nineteenth-century who depicted the spiritual world existing beyond the grave, the fiction produced by the Brontës portrays a spiritual realm that overlays, or intersects with, the material world (67). One quickly notices the ways in which the human behaviours and spiritual forces ebb and flow, and a character’s actions in *Jane Eyre* are rewarded or punished deepening on the degree to which they violate or obey a God’s laws. In this way, the fortunes of characters are shaped by spiritual forces.

Contemporary critics interpret the rise and fall in a character’s fortunes in the novel as the product of divine providence (Beaty 216). Of the siblings, Brontë is consider by most scholars to be the ‘realist’ which necessitates a pragmatic understanding to illuminate the manner divine relation is received. In other words, divine providence and revelation are governed by the same spiritual laws of the Gospels. Thormählen’s interpretation seems accurate as Brontë’s

appropriation of scripture reveals more than a belief in divine providence along the lines of “luck” or “happenstance.” For example, before learning of Aunt Reed’s poor health and the overall demise of their family fortunes, Jane tells us she believes in signs: “Presentments are strange things! And so are sympathies; and so are signs” (254). After discovering Rochester’s bigamist plot and decided to leave him, Rochester asks for Jane’s advice on how he should live without her. Jane’s charge to Rochester echoes David’s last words to his son Samuel, “[Jane:] Do as I do: Trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven... live sinless... die tranquil” (364); “[David:] be strong...observe what the Lord your God requires; Walk in obedience to Him and keep his ... laws... so that you may prosper” (1 Kings 2:2,3). In Brontë’s view, human beings are both spirit and biological, situated in a Christian moral philosophy; her fictional worlds highlight the ways human experience reveals the intersections of spiritual and material realities.

During the Victorian era, moralists from many denominations saw nature as “fallen,” women as evil, and Satan as the prime mover of both women and nature (Lamonaca 242). Peters argues that critics who read *Jane Eyre* as subversive of Christianity assume Blocklehurst is typical of Victorian Christian faith (60). Gallagher, one of the first to acknowledge the possibility that Brontë was espousing Christian values in the novel, notes “the novel might embody a Christian feminism that sees God as both masculine and feminine and advocates the values of love, sexuality, and a marriage of partnership” (67). This alternative feminist “Christian” belief might bear a strong resemblances to pagan beliefs or animism, but it is rooted in a sound interpretation of scripture. Brontë addresses this issue in the second edition of *Jane Eyre*, when she states: “narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world redeeming creed of Christ” (3,4). Thus, Mr. Blocklehurst, Mrs Reed are

scripturally ignorant and or Christian hypocrites, appropriating scripture to justifying their maltreatment of others.

Yet, despite the hypocrisy of Blockelhurst and Aunt Reed, and misappropriation of the scripture, Jane Eyre's story reveals the 'truth' the Gospel. To justify his decision to starve the orphans, Blockelhurst tells us: "Man does not live by bread alone but by the word of God (Matt 4:4). However, Brontë reveals the meaning of this scripture through the divine revelation Jane receives. After discovering Rochester's bigamous plot, Jane is beside herself. Foreshadowing her growth into the Gospel, Jane offers up a prayer that is a direct reference to David's prayer in Psalm 22:11: "Be not far from me for trouble is near: there is none to help" (342). This presents a critical moment in Jane's spiritual development. Previously, the eight-year-old Jane found the Psalms "not interesting" and the eighteen-year-old Jane Eyre spent much time talking of elves, fairies, mermaids, and other folklore. However, when her life experiences a major setback, Jane's plea is a word for word replica of David's prayer. In her time of need, Jane forsakes fairies and folklore, Rochester, and her own desires, and trusts in God. Here, we see the connection between David, Christ and Jane in the figure of Job who, when his "friends" advise him to forsake God, he replies, "yea thou he slaw me, yet I will trust in him" (Job 13:15). Job, David, Christ and Jane accept any difficulties set before them as challenges designed to test their faith. Thus, David's prayer becomes the scriptural bridge that allows the young Jane's fondness of Job to adopt a David-like faith and exemplify a Christian, spiritual relationship with God.

Initially, Jane relies on the "still small voice," her individual conscience and sense of right and wrong, sometimes referred to as synteresis: the last spark of divinity within human consciousness. In a moment of meditation, Jane feels these words spring from inside her: "none shall help you: you shall yourself pluck out your right eye; yourself cut off your right hand: your

heart shall be the victim, and you the priest to transfix it” (343). Jane’s marshals the strength to reinforce her conviction that leaving Rochester is the right maneuver. Despite her efforts, Jane’s spirit is crushed; having no friends and family to rely on, her resolve wanes as all her hopes for family and wealth were invested in her earthly, pagan romance with Rochester. Jane’s idolatry is made clear by her own words as she compares her previous “hopes” to the dead first born in the plagues of Egypt (341).

Moreover, Rochester’s attempts to guilt Jane into staying with him begin to overwhelm her: “[W]hile he spoke, my very conscience and reason turned traitors against me and charged me with the crime of resisting [Rochester]” (365). Faltering in her conviction to leave, that night Jane enters a dream state (366), and receives a divine revelation:

A slumber fell on me as soon as I lay down in bed. I was transported in thought to the scenes of my childhood: I dreamt I lay in the red-room at Gateshead; that the night was dark, and my mind impressed with strange fears. The light... recalled in this vision, seemed glidingly to mount the wall...the roof resolved to clouds high and dim: the gleam was such as the moon imparts to vapours she is about to sever... a hand first penetrated the sable folds and waved them away; then not a moon, but a white human form shone in the azure, inclining a glorious brow earthward. It gazed and gazed on me. It spoke to my spirit: immeasurably distant was the tone, yet so near, it whispered in my heart –
‘My daughter, flee temptation.’
‘Mother, I will.’ (367)”

While Jane’s previous prayer provides the scriptural bridge for Jane to take the leap of faith intellectually, this scene confirms not only God’s acknowledgement of Jane’s desire for a relationship but also marks the genesis of her spiritual walk with God.

Jane’s revelation begins where she originally lost her faith, as a young girl at Gateshead in the red room, and feeling “strange fears.” During this period in her life, she rejected God due to the poor treatment she received by others. Too young to understand the implications of this choice, her ‘strange fears’ are a premonition received by her eight-year-old self as a warning of the dangerous, Godless path she had unknowingly taken. This scene offers Jane a view from

outside herself, and the images and fears experienced in this revelation, display the omniscience of God; specifically, that God knew Jane in her troubled childhood and was never far from her.

Jane's revelation mirrors God's depiction in Psalm 139:12, 13: "even the darkness is not dark to You, but the night shines like the day, for darkness is as light to You. You formed my innermost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb." In this scene, the divine hand parts the clouds making the night shine brighter than the moon on a clear night. The divine figure has control over nature as she waves aside the clouds and sends light toward Jane, and is similar to how the New Testament depicts Christ as lord over nature (Mark 4:335-41). Further, the red-room is viewed not from Jane's eyes but from a force outside of her; the text suggests that Jane is being given a glimpse of her early self from God's point of view. The above scripture says that God knows our innermost being; Jane tells us that the voice spoke not to Jane but to her "spirit" (367), which, by Evangelical definitions, is her innermost being (Philippians 5:5). Clearly, the divine revelation in this scene is taken straight from the Psalm and reflects a New Testament understanding of the very spiritual essence of humanity, a cornerstone belief of nineteenth-century Evangelicals. Given the clear parallels to scripture, a 'pagan' reading of *Jane Eyre* becomes untenable. These critics ignore the action leading up to Jane's spiritual vision as well as the events that succeed her vision, thus divorcing the pagan reading from the text. The only divergence, between Brontë's feminist dissenting Christianity and traditional notions of the almighty, is God's gender. Yet, according to John 1:4, God is a spirit, thus God's gender was rhetorically determined by men. Since Brontë believed that women must do everything men do, she could rhetorically invert God's gender without being sacrilegious or pagan.

Throughout the novel, Jane refers to God as 'he' or 'him' leaning into the traditional understanding of the Christian God as a 'father'. For example, once Rochester realizes Jane's

decision to leave him is final, Rochester asks her: “What shall I do? Where turn for a companion and for some hope?” (364). Jane advises Rochester to “Do as I do: trust in God and yourself. Believe in heaven...live sinless.... We were born to strive to endure” (364). Her reply echoes Proverbs 3:4-6, and conceals the sex of the divine by using scripture that avoids gendering God. Throughout the remainder of the novel, Jane refers to God as “he” or “him” and proclaims that God is leading her life. We might assume Jane’s discovery of a female God might be something she would share with other characters in the novel. However, Jane concealment of God’s female gender foregrounds the spiritual autonomy Jane has achieved by not letting men mediate her relationship with the divine.

Jane’s encounter with St. John reinforces the importance of the individual having unmediated access to God. As he attempts to recruit Jane for a missions trip to India, demonstrates St. John’s idolatry and Jane’s Coleridgean view of Christianity:

[St. John:] ...my ambition is unlimited; my desire to rise higher, to do more than other, insatiable. I honour endurance, perseverance, industry, talent; because these are the means by which men achieve great ends...”

[Jane:] You would describe yourself as a mere pagan philosopher,

[St. John:] ... I am not a pagan, but a Christian philosopher Won in my youth to religion, she has cultivated my original qualities thus: ...she has reared a due sense of divine justice ... she has formed the ambition to spread my Master’s Kingdom, to achieve victories for the standard of the Cross. So much has religion done for me... (432-3).

In the place of Christ, St. John has made the religious institution his God, violating the first commandment. His virtues are not those given to him by Christ but by the concurring Romans exemplified by Aeneas in Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Harris 870). Conversely, Jane is not tethered to established religion. David Jasper argues that the Brontës were working toward a secular worldview yet acknowledges that Brontë remained a loyal churchwoman. Jasper frames Brontë’s religious beliefs by an excerpt from Coleridge’s *Aids to Reflection* (1825): “He who begins by loving Christianity better than Truth, will proceed by loving his own sect better than Christianity,

and end in loving himself better than all” (218). However, St. John’s ambition echo the famous brag of Emperor Augustus when he claimed, “I have found Rome a city of brick but I left it a city of marble” (Harris 858). Absent religious overtones, Augustus preferred the idea Romans as a people who were culturally Greek, mandated superficial changes in architecture to reflect this desire, and appears to have loved himself above his predecessors due to personal accomplishments. Thus, St. John is not the ideal Christian. Although he is perhaps the typical conservative Evangelical, he acts out his Christianity through classical pagan virtues in a cult of personal achievements and state religion.

Conversely, Jane’s Christianity models a belief in signs, the desire to commune with God, and an obedience to God’s will over her own desires. Seemingly aware of how the Victorian audience would respond to such a “childish” belief system, Jane states: “I have never laughed at presentments in my life, because I have had strange ones of my own” (254). The protagonist Jane Eyre must seek God’s plan for her life and take action such that divine providence is not merely the transmission of God’s will onto the believers but a partnership in which both parties, that is, God and the individual, manifest God’s will on earth. Pushing aside any religious or secular attempts by men to guide the course of her life, Brontë portrays Jane Eyre as an active agent in cultivating limited autonomy, material, fortunes and spiritual development through the complete submission to a maternal, albeit Christian, God.

Among the hash of pagan and Christian beliefs in *Jane Eyre*, two important names emerge directly relevant to a feminist reading: Diana and Mary. Like most characters in Victorian fiction, names tended to freight an implied meaning. Griesinger postulates that they could reflect possible identities of the divine female entity Jane communes with in private (52). However, Marian Gibson notes the long-standing tradition of English writers’ use of overlapping

imagery between Diana and Mary. She argues that this overlap purposefully creates an area of “fruitful slippage between Christian and pagan” (40). Viewed this way, Brontë deliberately draws our attention to a direct connection between these two young women. Jane notes Diana’s and Mary’s response to St. John’s reckless fanaticism and authority over them, was a “sigh” (404). Thus, Brontë appears to be gesturing toward root cause of women’s oppression in Victorian Britain.

Both classical Roman and Christian Roman cultures were extremely patriarchal, and forbade women from holding any religious, military or civic authority.² Both appropriated cultural myths to promote masculine deities, which in turn, legitimize male political, legal, economic, military and religious authority (Jenkins 23). Diana, as the symbol of ideal femininity in the classical era, and Mary, Dianna’s Christian antitype, both yield a reluctant “sigh” in response to assertions of male authority on the part of St. John. This symbolic recognition expresses the response of marginalized women, of classical and medieval eras, as little more than a sign and a failure to respond effectively to male suppositions of gender superiority.

Unlike her foremothers, Brontë provides far more than a gentle rebuttal or “sigh” to patriarchal authority. Brontë’s response to the patriarchy is found in Jane’s divine revelation and her systematic dismemberment of the hypocrisy supporting it. Brontë’s dissent was so unapologetic and conspicuous it left many of her contemporaries confused and angry. Bereft of any intellectual argument, her contemporaries resorted to simple ad hominem like “pagan” and

² Some have suggested that the classical era was more open-minded regarding women in power, citing Cleopatra and other matriarchal anomalies. This is tantamount to the idea that because Queen Victoria was the head monarch, Victorian Britain could not have been a “true” patriarchy. While classical and Christian cultures certainly had differences, attitudes towards women in authority was not one of them.

“anti-Christian.” However, Brontë’s fiction were a problem not because she opposed conventional norms, but that her ideas were mass produced and disseminated around the world.

Thus, Brontë’s dissenting feminist hermeneutics promote notions of gender equality in a conventional sense, one founded upon scripture through a feminist historicist hermeneutics. It is not the “pagan female new religion” that she projects, but the inconvenient and forgotten truths of scripture that render her Christian faith unrecognizable. Brontë’s response to patriarchal confinement of women is two-fold. First, she addresses the problems of associating God with any gender. Second, she provides a glimpse of a world where cultural appropriation of Christian myths become gynocentric, and, in doing so, legitimizes the female spiritual authority necessary for a Christian feminist *bildungsroman*.

“Mother, I Will:” or; Charlotte Brontë’s Spiritual Vision

“Whatsoever ye shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever ye shall loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” - Matthew 18:18

Marianne Thormählen notes that “Brontë’s novels reveal a thorough going quests for spiritual truths” (147). Jay’s argument, that conversion was marked as “a growth into the gospels,” becomes a yardstick by which to measure the spiritual development of Jane Eyre. In this regard, there are two themes that must be understood in relation to one another. First, Jane Eyre’s indifference to the Psalm has been fundamentally challenged after receiving divine revelation that portrays God as rendered in the Psalms. The framing of God through the Psalms was a Victorian Evangelical belief, but more than that, this understanding facilitates Jane’s growth into the Gospel.

Brontë’s brilliance shines brightest in her ability to discern the crux of the hypocrites use of scripture but reveal the truth of that scripture. In other words, what originally marks Jane Eyre

“pagan,” by Victorian standards, is her refusal to allow hypocrites to preach their interpretation of the Gospel to which, because it is being misinterpreted to support their selfishness and mistreatment of others, Jane is resistant. Thus, Brontë’s feminist historicist hermeneutics separates the religion of the hypocrite from true Christianity by revealing the maxims of Lowood and the words of Mr. Blocklehurst were correct but not in the context they were originally used.

Toward the end of the novel we are told that Jane shines in Rochester’s estate (520). The imagery is compelling if we read *Jane Eyre* as a feminist Christian *bildungsroman* in that it echoes the Lowood scripture, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your great deeds and glorify your father in heaven” (Matt 5:16). Within the context of Lowood, these words are Blocklehurst attempts toward self promotion via fake religiosity which enables his abuse of orphans to show his ‘Christianity’ to the world. However, Jane’s light, as the allegorical representation of her Christian faith, shines for all the world to see.

Not only is she able to discern spiritual truths and develop a righteous way of life but, in doing so, the novel suggests that Jane’s spiritual development has been rewarded her romance with Rochester, a family, and the financial security she craved. In addition, through her faith, Jane is able to resist the biggest threat to her life and faith, that is, her cousin St. John. Many overlook the danger from “within” religion the faced young Victorian women. From the perspective of a feminist Christian, men are the biggest barrier to a woman’s relationship with God, and they manifest in a young Christian woman’s life through the examples of Blocklehurst (religious hypocrite), Rochester (romantic pagan), and St. John (pagan philosopher).

Some critics take exception to Jane’s ambition for being Rochester’s wife but this concern seems to ignore historical realities, the severity of women’s oppression, during the mid-nineteenth-century (Reed 35). Further, Amanda Scott notes that the structures and the position of a

character in relation to a structure, inform the degree of the oppression a character experiences in a particular moment (154). Using Scott's interpretation, Jane has not achieved the height of ambition for women. Under the roof of Rochester's manor, she remains oppressed by the patriarchy. The suggestion from Brontë is that Jane has, in her spiritual walk with God, done well for herself despite other men's attempts to misuse her, not that she is free or living an ideal life for all women.

More importantly, within Brontë's fiction, the term "face-to-face" echoes Christ's words regarding the ability of human beings to discern spiritual truths (1 Corinthians 13:12). This term is used by Jane to suggest that, on a spiritual level, she and Rochester are equals: "I love Thornfield ...because I have lived in it a full and delightful life...I have not been trampled on...[or] buried with inferior minds... I have talked, face to face, with what I reverence, with what I delight in...I have known you, Mr. Rochester" (292). Jane's knowledge of him is a spiritual recognition that he is a good soul regardless of appearance or life-history. As Jane attempts to leave Rochester, he protests, and tries to persuade her to stay with him. Jane's rhetoric parallel's Christ's even closer, when she says, "it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both of us had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal – as we are" (292). Thus, Brontë makes it clear that men and women are spiritual equals, which is the main thrust of her dissenting feminist hermeneutics.

Jane's faith allows her to resist the "religious authority" of men like St. John but, at the same time, able to see how God can use infidels like Rochester for her good. The supernatural ability, of Jane and Rochester, to speak to each other across as vast distance occurs through Rochester's pleas to God. Prior to their separation, Rochester tells Jane what she has always known, "man sees not as God sees." This implies that God sees Rochester's heart and, once his

pride abates, he is no longer an impediment between Jane's relationship with God. Jane's spirituality is inclusive in the sense that it allows her to form a relationship with a 'good' man who is not religious, and would have been shunned by most conservative Evangelicals for his debauchery.

Jenkins notes that Brontë was working toward the "gnostic gospels" spiritual egalitarianism, the notion that men, women, and children had equal access to God (23). Jenkins observes that it is unlikely Brontë had direct access to gnostic gospels as they had not been known to the public until 1945. Despite patriarchal attempts to canonize a masculine God, gnostic "spiritual truths" make their way into the New Testament. The uncanny resemblance between Brontë's spiritual vision and gnostic conceptions of God can be explained as Charlotte's dissenting views of scripture, her insistence on truth and her childhood experience which, as the daughter of a minister, surely highlighted for her the distinction between the men carrying the message of God and the portrayal of God in scripture.

Brontë's pursuit of spiritual truths was influenced by a number of factors and, as mentioned in the introduction, Patrick Brontë deserves credit for his stance against the indoctrination of children and his laissez-faire approach to spirituality. With one exception, that Calvinist doctrines of the chosen elect would not be tolerated in the Haworth personage, Brontë and her siblings were free to formulate their own beliefs of God (Green 38). She read widely and, as Thormählen notes, Brontë's spiritual beliefs were influenced by Coleridge's notions of "reason" and "understanding" as well as Matthew Arnold's belief that the welfare of others can only prosper in harmony with self-improvement (145, 152).

Although it could be argued that Rochester and Jane are reconciled to God and benefit from providence, Jane is the only one to receive divine revelation. In other words, Rochester is

aided by God in the supernatural connection where he calls to Jane through the spiritual realm and Jane hears him and answers. However, this supernatural aid concerns the material world. On the other hand, Jane experiences God on a metaphysical level. As Brontë's 'spiritual vision' migrates from *Jane Eyre* to *Shirley*, the phrase that "face to face" continues the theme of spiritual equality between men and women. In *Jane Eyre*, the phrase "face-to-face" is quickly followed by Jane's proclamation: "At the feet of God imperfect, equals as we are." The implication is that from God's view, we are all equally inferior.

The "Other" not of this Fold

In a thesis articulating the 'spiritual vision' of Brontë's fiction, it would be remiss not include an analysis of folklore and depictions of nature in *Jane Eyre*. If many twenty-first-century readers are unfamiliar with the Bible, more seem unfamiliar with Celtic myths and Folklore. In many parts of Victorian Britain, rural populations believed in a mixture of Celtic lore and Christianity, right until the First World War (Harris 92). Among the various folklore beliefs, distinctions between fairies, elves, changelings, dwarves, imps, sprites, dryads, mermaids, and a host of other entities, definitions were not always clear and many of these terms were used interchangeably. Often referred to as the "good people," fairies became scapegoats for a range of events, including, but not limited to, changes in weather, kidnappings and paranormal activity (Sugg 35). During the mid-nineteenth-century, the invocation of fairies was taken seriously as the "good people" were not to be trifled with.

A significant difference between the literature of the Romantics and Victorians was the middle class began moving away from rural folklore toward empirical ways of knowing (Silver 145). The supremacy of empiricism, however, was adopted and promoted almost entirely by

English middle class. To the rural population and work class, a sincere belief in fairies was not an affront to their Christianity. Many positioned their belief in fairies within the metanarrative of the Bible, and often regarded fairies as a portion of fallen angels (Silver 147). Given the lack of empirical evidence, Victorian literature dismissed the belief in fairies.

Carol Silver notes that, in general, Brontë's inclusion of fairies in *Jane Eyre* was an attempt to tie the enchanted view of fairies to the forests and nature. Brontë's association between fairies and the land was a means of explaining natural phenomenon, happenstance, and to resurrect a motif common among the Romantics of lamenting the encroachment of industry on nature (Silver 34). When Rochester refers to Jane as a 'changeling', Silver argues "he is attempting to fathom what to him is a transformation in personality or behaviour" (59). When Rochester first meets Jane, she spooks his horse and Rochester falls, injuring his ankle. Rochester blames the incident on the "fact" that Jane is a fairy (87). Moreover, Silver suggests that *Jane Eyre*'s status as half-human half-imp makes her the quintessential "unChristain" fairy bride, which primarily functions so that Brontë can set up a pagan romance (Silver 62).

Simpson explains Jane's and Rochester's "fairy banter" as a reflection of their states of mind and their "otherness" within society (Simpson 52). The young rebellious pagan Jane and atheistic self-reliant Rochester entertain notions of fairies because they have not "found" God for themselves (Tkacz 47). These arguments are convincing as, once disaster strikes, both Jane and Rochester begin to trust not only in signs but in God out of necessity. Consequently, their "fairy-talk" is conspicuously dampened for the remainder of novel (Simpson 51). While their initial romance allows for frivolity, once Rochester's plot is uncovered and their faith is truly tested, conversations about fairies reflect their misplaced faith in each other over God. As a cautionary tale, *Jane Eyre* warns of the dangers of idolatry, either in the case of romance between Rochester

and Jane, or a psychotic sense of self assurance, in the case of St. John. Within her Christian moral philosophy, Brontë viewed these mistaken beliefs as acts of idolatry. However, once Jane and Rochester develop a new understanding of God, both characters replace explanations for events in their life from the works of the “fairies” and “changelings” to divine providence, signs, and presentiments.

Tkacz’s and Simpson’s interpretations of *Jane Eyre* are consistent with Brontë’s own claims regarding the existence of good and evil and the potential influence of literature on human psychology. On 4 July 1834, Brontë writes to her friend Ellen Nussey: “If you like poetry let it be first rate... Shakespeare.... Now Ellen, don’t be startled at the [name] Shakespeare You will know how to chuse the good and avoid the evil Omit the comedies of Shakespeare” (Smith 1:130). Brontë recognized great value in Shakespeare’s tragedies. In these plays, contemporary critics observe consistent attempts to candidly render male insecurities regarding female autonomy, a theme readily observed in Brontë’s fiction. The examination of the points of contact between the works of Shakespeare and Brontë is another thesis. For my purposes, Brontë’s view of the comedies of Shakespeare are noteworthy. Many other scholars have identified parallels to occult practices and beliefs and Shakespearean comedies, and she clearly saw men like Shakespeare as fallible. Due to her judicious approach to literature, these works did not threaten her Christian faith or values.

Despite numerous attempts of twenty and twenty-first-century critics to associate Brontë with the occult, these analyses are often formalist and either ahistorical or speculative (Thormählen 7). Of the contemporary articles that thoroughly examine Brontë’s Protestant faith and dissenting views, none conclude she was pagan or anti-Christian. Further, within the three volumes of the Smith letters, there is, unfortunately, not a single piece of evident that would

suggest any pagan or occult affiliation on Brontë's behalf. On the contrary, all of her spiritual beliefs can be explained by the tenets of a nineteenth-century dissenting feminist Evangelical faith. Curiously, the idea that the daughter of a forward-thinking minister produced forward thinking feminist Christian criticisms of a patriarchal culture has been slow to take root.

However, as the above quotation demonstrates, Brontë, like most reasonable people, could entertain an idea without fully believing it. Brontë's use of fairies is a prime example. Often in connection to nature, fairies more accurately represent the marginalized or "other". After being advised by a divine forces to flee Rochester, Jane Eyre sojourns into nature with the mistakenly belief that nature will provide home and hearth: "Nature seemed to me benign and good; I thought she loved me, outcast as I was" (372) To her chagrin, nature neither nurtures nor restores Jane but remains indifferent to her suffering. We see this "neutral" dynamic between nature and Jane in earlier in the novel. When she is at Lowood, the girls are forced to march in the snow to church; the trips are exhausting as the girls are underdressed for the cold. In Brontë's 'spiritual vision', the role of nature expands as it migrates to *Shirley*. Yet, within *Jane Eyre*, nature remains an impartial force despite her hopeful rhetoric.

Victorian Fiction: Brontë's Pulpit

"To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisees is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns."³ Frequently misunderstood, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) has been hailed a sacrilegious, anti-Christian, pagan-feminist text but simultaneously and conversely described as a feminist Christian *bildungsroman*. Since the 1960s, Brontë's most famous work

³ Defending *Jane Eyre* against multiple charges of the novel's anti-Christian sentiment, Brontë responds with a single sentence that was added to the preface of the second edition.

has garnered interest by many academics precisely because of the novel's "rebellion and rage" (Gilbert 779). Like the Bible, few scholars have been able to prove an authority for interpreting Brontë's religious and spiritual views. Highlighting the wide range of viable interpretations of Brontë's seminal work, Jerome Beaty argues that all readings of this timeless classic are "misreadings." In fact, he goes so far as to suggest that even Brontë "misread" *Jane Eyre*. He concludes that, so long as a reading accurately encapsulates the "historical moment of its utterance," it can be said to be a valid "misreading" of the text (217).

Beaty's claim draws attention to a critical flaw in most attempts to analyze the work. Whether it is a Marxist lens, a feminist lens, a psychoanalytical lens, a post-colonial, a secular or a religious lens, each point of view expresses a particular set of values, thus bringing to bear an implicit agenda and often becoming too narrowly focused on certain issues to the exclusion of others. Hence, each reading becomes a "misreading" because it fails to provide a comprehensive approach: one that considers the religious, the feminist, the Marxist, the pagan, the cultural and historical contexts of a work that was designed to privilege "spiritual" experiences in the pursuit of truth (Thormählen 7). More specifically, *Jane Eyre* explores spiritual beliefs alongside scriptural revisions, and how these points of view intersect and directly relate to issues of gender equality. While the various discourses have been set in competition with each other, more likely, they compliment each other.

Among recent scholarship two critics stand out at opposite ends of the "pagan-Christian" spectrum for interpretations of *Jane Eyre*: John Maynard and Emily Griesinger. Although both scholars read *Jane Eyre* in radically different ways, they are equally confounded by the finer details of Brontë's spiritual vision, specifically the identity of her divine female figure. While Maynard concludes that Brontë attempts to establish a female, pagan new religion (165), his lens

necessarily excludes the possibility of discovering the identity of this figure within monotheism. Similarly, Griesinger suggests multiple possible identities for this elusive divine female but, as orthodox Anglican beliefs offer no viable explanations, her religious lens also falls short (42). Like two witnesses to the same event who report different details, Maynard's analysis actually compliments Griesinger's attention to the intricacies of Brontë's orthodox Anglican piety. However, if we are forced to accept the unspoken premise that differing lenses of analyses are mutually exclusive, each lens will fall short of a precise articulation of Brontë's spiritual vision.

Brontë's contemporaries were also confounded by the views disseminated in *Jane Eyre* (Peters 54). John Peters examines a number of reviews that were published shortly after the novel's release and concludes that what Victorian reviewers labelled "anti-Christian" is more accurately understood as an objection to an orphan "living outside her prescribed social roles" (55). Peters suggests that the vague religious language in the novel offended Victorians but also made it difficult to criticize her, as no clear message was detected. Thus, her contemporaries mislabeled Brontë. In correspondence with her publishers George Smith and William Smith Williams, Brontë admits that her intent was to write a 'timeless classic' and, to this end, she deliberately used vague language in order to distance her works from the theological debates of the era (Letters, *Smith* 1:517). The result is a novel containing very subtle but ubiquitous biblical references strewn throughout the entire work. Due to a lack of familiarity with scripture, few twenty and twenty-first-century scholars are able to detect these references much less understand their implications within the work. However, Brontë's audiences would have been able to identify the subtle references, even if they could not discern their implications. Yet, without criticizing the scriptural basis for Brontë's defense of women's autonomy, her contemporaries were nonetheless offended by the message behind *Jane Eyre*.

At present, many critics remain apprehensive about advancing definitive interpretations of the ways in which religion is presented or criticized, often citing Tom Winnifrith's poignant observation: "It is obvious that much of what the Brontës saw, heard and read was concerned with religion. It is not obvious how their original minds reacted to the variety of religious beliefs which they encountered" (28). Even fewer critics have been as bold as Maynard in attempting to unveil the spiritual vision portrayed in Charlotte Brontë's fiction. More specifically, the novel presents a refutation of women's oppression in a manner as biting and as overwhelming as Martin Luther's theses. Although Brontë may have intended to create a novel untethered to specific religious and spiritual controversies of her era, she was only able to veil the tethers with vague language.

The focus of this section of the chapter is first to identify key sections of the text that display a feminist dissenting view of scripture and, second, to examine how scripture operates in *Jane Eyre*. This type of analysis represents a major challenge to modern scholars who are generally unfamiliar with the Bible. Contemporary scholars tend to be even less familiar with how a feminist Protestant view could operate within the bounds of a genuinely nineteenth-century Christian faith. Peters offers some insight:

the novel presents an individualized Christianity - not one necessarily opposed to Anglicanism – but one possible within Anglicanism. This individualized Christianity is not a relative Christianity that changes from one individual to the next but is instead an individual incorporation of Christ's teachings, those that society accepted in theory but rejected in practice. Jane advocates internalizing Christ's teachings (60, 61).

After examining the deluge of negative reviews written when the work was first published, Peters concludes that what Victorian reviewers labelled "anti-Christian" was not Brontë's criticism of religious hypocrisy. Instead, it was an objection to a young woman's conscious decision to live "outside her prescribed social roles" (55). Further, Peters argues that, had Jane

been a real person, the Victorians could have simply ignored her, since few would have encountered her dissenting feminist individualized Christianity (54).

Thus, instead of constricting Brontë's criticism of Victorian culture, it was precisely her individualized Protestant faith in God and the individual's right to interpret scripture that empowered Brontë's bold defiance of cultural norms (Thromählen 9). If we acknowledge the religious implications of this text, one immediately recognizes why her contemporaries deemed it "heretical." Like Luther's theses, *Jane Eyre* was not a threat because it encouraged poor and oppressed (women) to live differently, but because the mass distribution of their dissenting views became impossible to suppress. As Gilbert notes, *Jane Eyre* so thoroughly and systematically dismembered patriarchal societal conventions that the work was deemed an "invasion" by Brontë's contemporaries (780).

This focus, on what Ruth Jenkins calls Brontë's "radical feminist Protestantism" (165), is by no means a rejection of more secular or even pagan interpretations of *Jane Eyre*. Unlike patriarchal readings of scripture that sought to restrict members of society to certain roles, Brontë's feminist dissent – as I will show - stresses the humanity of women and all "others," and is writ large in the semi-autobiographical nature of the text. For example, in her private letters Brontë admitted that she felt her brother Branwell was saved by grace even though he had lost the "faith" at the time of his death (Smith II:205). Like her father, Brontë was a staunch critic of Calvinism but, unlike her father, there is evidence to suggest that Charlotte considered the atonement to extend to all humanity, Christian or otherwise. After all, if Christ died for everyone's sins, who had the power to overturn God's grace to any individual or group?

While essays such as Peters and Griesinger reveal the sincere Christianity behind Brontë's views, they do not articulate her spiritual vision and for good reason: orthodox

Anglican belief does not account for what the protagonists in Brontë's fiction experience. Hence, this thesis aims to show the ecumenical nature of Brontë's dissenting views, specifically toward other spiritual beliefs, revealing the merit of more secular or pagan interpretations have within the larger schema of Brontë's syncretic spiritual vision. Further, it should be stressed that Brontë's Protestant feminist faith was not just a subversive individual belief system but actually functions in accordance with the main tenets of the "Christian Life" as presented in popular devotionals published during the early nineteenth-century. Thus, when Jane Eyre claims that she believes in "signs," we must resist the temptation to label her pagan or mystic. On the contrary, this belief was a typical view of many Romantic and early Victorian notions of Christian faith, one that emphasizes the individual's role in decoding 'signs' and providence and was generally expressed in very heartfelt and emotional ways (Thormählen 145).

Understanding Brontë requires an examination of how she positioned her dissent among the mainstream ideas of the Anglican church, and the Evangelical movement more broadly. In this respect, while Griesinger articulates Brontë's faith, Maynard articulates her spirituality. Most importantly, Maynard notes that Brontë viewed scripture as a living breathing force between individuals (196). Admittedly, eighteenth-century beliefs do not always translate well; unfamiliar and seemingly illogical concepts such as the scripture as a "living" force represent a form of religious thought so far removed from our time and place it becomes difficult to evaluate these claims. However, what is critical is that we understand how Brontë understood scripture to be "living." In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë articulates this belief:

If I could always live with you, and "daily" read the Bible with you, if your lips and mine could at the same time, drink the same draught from the same pure fountain of Mercy – I hope, I trust, I might one day become better, far better, than my evil wandering thoughts, my corrupt heart, cold to the spirit, and warm to the flesh will now permit me to be (Smith 1:156).

Here, we discern two important beliefs: first, the gospel of John states, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (KJV). The draught refers to the spirit of God, and implies that to be filled by the spirit requires the believer to consume the wisdom of scripture. It may be tempting to ignore this notion in favour of the idea that, in reading scripture, the Christian finds emotional encouragement and is not filled by God’s spirit. However, this analysis dismisses Brontë’s proclaimed view and assumes to be a greater authority on Brontë than Brontë herself.

Second, this excerpt reveals that the young Brontë (aged 21) viewed herself as existing in a fallen state which is an important distinction as most “saved” Evangelicals of the nineteenth-century did not proclaim to feel this way (Bebbington 15). However, Brontë’s conviction that her fallen state was a symptom of an evil heart is consistent with the Evangelical notion that all evil originates in the human heart (Thromählen 143). Despite anxieties about being “saved,” Lamson notes that Brontë remained a loyal churchwoman and, unlike other Victorians such as Charles Dickens or George Elliot, she never lost her faith (242). Brontë’s words to Nussey inversely echo Romans 8:6, which states “For to be carnally minded is death; but to be spiritually minded is life and peace” (KJV). Simply put, to be saved meant to sever all connections to the world and to commune with God (i.e., live in the “spirit”). In *Jane Eyre*, the metaphysical awakening, or spiritual aspect of the Christian life, that ‘assured’ the faithful of their grace by making them “anew” in Christ, is the primary issue addressed in Brontë ‘spiritual vision’ (Jay 61). Like many of her contemporaries, Brontë’s belief, that conversion could take years or a life time, is underscored by the fact that *Jane Eyre*’s conversion occurs over the course of decades.

The degree to which the *Jane Eyre* is a *bildungsroman* is really a matter of a scholar’s willingness to openly acknowledge the extent to which the Bible shaped the novel. Catherine

Tkacz observes that many scholars are simply unaware of just how much of the sacred text is woven into the fabric of Brontë's fiction. In "The Bible in *Jane Eyre*," Tkacz notes the following: "*Jane Eyre* contains 176 scriptural allusions: at least 81 quotations and paraphrases from 23 books of the Old Testament, and 95 from 15 books of the New Testament" (3). This is more than two and a half times the number of allusions and references cited in even the most comprehensive explanatory notes such as Margaret Smith's (ibid). Thus, when scholars like Heather Glen contend that much of Charlotte's thinking was framed by religious discourse, we should not underestimate nor underappreciate the inherent implications of the claim. Viewed in this way, the notion that Brontë used her novels as a 'proverbial pulpit' becomes less hyperbole, more a matter of fact.

As a sign of the times, Brontë's novels were not uncharacteristic in her liberal, perhaps gratuitous, use of biblical references. Barry Qualls explains:

Of the roughly 45,000 books published in England between 1816 and 1851, well over 10, 000 were religious works far out-distancing the next largest category – history and geography – with 4,900, and fiction with 3,500. There was also an immense circulation of periodicals and tracts. A good many middle-class readers would read nothing but devotional works (Qualls 12, 13).

Clearly, mid-nineteenth-century Victorian authors were comfortable writing religious fiction.

Moreover, Qualls states that most secular fiction included appropriations of scripture and religious tropes, in particular, the Christian pilgrim's journey popularized by John Bunyan (14).

Still, there is a danger in assuming that the presence of biblical allusions and references equate to a Christian worldview on the part of the author.

To understand Brontë's spiritual vision, one must understand how she employs scripture. In *Jane Eyre*, scripture functions to establish priorities for human endeavours (i.e. truth), a new system of role models based on biblical figures, albeit in subtle and sometimes vague ways. The

character types and anti-types, and depictions of God stem from Brontë's dissenting feminist historicist hermeneutics. As these typical and anti-typical characters migrate from holy writ to Victorian fiction, their nineteenth-century antitypes do not experience a consistent gender reversal. For example, using a typological analysis, Jane Eyre becomes the antitype of King David and Rochester becomes the antitype of King Nebuchadnezzar. Gender roles are not consistently inverted; Jane takes on a masculine biblical antitype as does Rochester. This inconsistent gender reversal points to the thrust of Brontë's feminism - that is, the patriarchy's false equivalency between gender and moral status, and that man can be barrier between woman's relationship with God just as a woman can obstruct man's relationship with God.

Brontë takes familiar biblical characters and events and defamiliarizes them, hence the confusion and inability to readily identify them on the part of her contemporaries and today's critics. Her spiritual vision grows out of this defamiliarization, one which is not suspended in the novel, nor free of any narrative framework, as some critics would have us believe. Instead, divine revelation is anchored to the dissenting interpretations of scripture. Gallagher's notion that *Jane Eyre* is a feminist Christian *bildungsroman* was accurate; however, this is a means to an end not the end itself. Brontë was not simply suggesting alternative ways for women to live a Christian life but deliberately revealing long-forgotten spiritual truths.

Unlike many of the sermons popular in the mid-century, which stress an extensive examination of the Gospels (Bebbington 11), Brontë's tendency to incorporate the Old Testament in a liberal, secular or at least atypically Victorian (Christian) way, merits further examination. With direct references to Moses, the Witch of Endor, Samuel, and the subtler references to King David and Nebuchadnezzar, Brontë challenges common Evangelical beliefs regarding the atonement - namely, that one must be saved in Christ to know God. Further,

Brontë's preference for the lessons learned in the Old Testament undermine nineteenth-century Evangelical notions of 'assurance' (Bebbington 15). The belief in 'assurance' was a popular among nineteenth-century Evangelicals, who claimed that evidence of divine providence equates to a sign of God's grace extending to that individual. This view was problematic for Brontë, who was well aware of the subjective nature of human perception. To her, the atonement was part of God's divine will, and thus not beholden to human ideas, even popular ones. The discrepancy between humanity's understanding of salvation and God's reoccurs throughout *Jane Eyre*. In one way or another, the characters constantly remind us that "man sees not as God sees."

When Brontë explores sections of the New Testament, especially the books of Matthew and John, she does so with a heightened sense of human subjectivity, that, in turn, forms the basis of her feminist dissent. Keenly aware that the rhetorical situation in which both sections of the Bible were written and canonized, Brontë highlights the subjectivity of male dominated societies which privilege certain scriptures and interpretations. The silencing of women's voices in religion created the illogical presupposition that God was male,⁴ through a series androcentric Judeo-Christian *bildungsroman* that portrayed of women as sinful, devils, and barriers to God.⁵ Moreover, in the patriarchal myth structure, exemplarily patriarchs are fruitful and multiply through the subjugation of women and nature. In the Puritan view of the Eden Myth, nature is seen as the devil's playground.

In her spiritual vision, Brontë interprets the New Testament through a gnostic reading of scripture. She bridges the gap between patriarchal interpretations of divine revelation and the spiritual experiences of English women by appropriating Christ's description of human extra-

⁴ John 1:4 states that God is a spirit. Sex is biological thus God cannot be gendered.

⁵ The negative portrayal of Eve, as the direct result of an androcentric view of womankind, being of central importance to Brontë's critic of Victorian British attitudes and her feminist dissent.

sensory perception and an individual's experience of divine revelation as rendered in the Gospels. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Christ outlines humanity's ability to discern supernatural truths: "For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known" (KJV). The phrase "face to face" appears not only in *Jane Eyre* but in *Shirley* as well, at moments when her protagonists begin to articulate spiritual beliefs or revelation.

While past and contemporaries critics have decried the "vague" language used in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë provides an explicit explanation regarding the source of her protagonist's spiritual revelations. As Thormählen explains:

Evangelicalism and Coleridge inspired theology had centered on religious experience, and hence the destiny of the soul, in the human heart; but as Jeremiah said, and the Victorians knew, 'the heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked: who can know it?' The Brontës constantly pursue such knowledge, chronicling the vicissitudes of the heart without restraint and prejudice... This agrees with the New Testaments teachings on the nature of love, both in the Gospels and the Epistles (143).

Brontë's own words reflect this association between the role of the poet, truth, and the soul when she writes: "I believe that all real poetry is only the faithful impression of something which happens or has happened in the soul of the poet" (Bently 380). In the episodes wherein a character shares or experiences a spiritual vision, the scene uncannily mirrors scripture, specifically Matthew 16:13-18. In an iconic exchange between Christ and his disciples, he asks them "Who do men say I am?" to which Peter claims that he is the "Messiah." In response, Christ says: "Blessed are you [Simon-Peter] for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my father in heaven" (NIV). Romantic and early Victorian expressions of faith were tailored to close readings of the New Testament. Just as the neo-classics resurrected Plato's ideas regarding transcendental truth, the Wesleyan Evangelical movement had resurrected antiquated depictions of the individual's experience of divine revelation.

Brontë's use of these portrayals also rely on her dissenting interpretations of scripture. The androcentric views of God "legitimized" male authority in Victorian society and were often cited as the justification for preventing women's participation in the public sphere. Thus, Brontë had no choice but to "throw the book"⁶ at Victorian Britain's long held belief in a God the "Father." Brontë's portrayal of Jane's divine revelation, one that closely parallels Simon-Peter's and Christ's depiction of humanity's ability to peer into the spiritual realm, carries multiple implications regarding Brontë's spiritual vision. Moreover, this suggests that she was familiar with the religious debates of her day, maintained serious faith in her God, and desired nothing less than to peruse a writing career and worship God her own humble way (Miller 12).

Works like Marianne Thormählen's *The Brontës's Religion* (2004) and Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2004) have made it impossible to ignore Charlotte Brontë's Anglican Protestantism. Further, any close reading of all three volumes of her letters would draw one to a similar conclusion. Yet her letters also suggest that she was sometimes uncertain about her dissenting spiritual views. This uncertainty is reflected in the persistent and creeping suspicion that the Calvinist doctrine of predestination might in fact be true (Smith 1:156). Some critics have suggested that this anxiety is due to the fact that Brontë conspicuously leaves "Christ" out of her religious novels and have used this lack of an explicit reference to argue that she was affiliated with a paganism. However, Thormählen notes that, just as most of Brontë's biblical references are subtle, so too are her references to Christ (152). Although Brontë does not be explicitly reference the trinity or Christ, there are multiple instances her protagonists and

⁶ "Throw the Book" – To cite scripture that clarifies, corrects or provides a superior understanding of conventional beliefs loosely based on the Bible.

narrators refer to God as the “redeemer.” To anyone who identifies as Christian, there is only one redeemer; hence, this misconception must be corrected.

Brontë’s powerfully imaginative and Romantic mindset becomes the lens by which she criticizes Victorian appropriations of scripture. As Sandra Gilbert notes, *Jane Eyre* is the “book of books” (789), and it is an apt description for the first in a series of fiction designed to liberate women. Thus, Brontë carried the imagination and belief of the Romantics into her daily life, and her interpretations of scripture. Thus, it should come as no surprise that Brontë was able to position herself within the “religion of the heart,” which prized a spiritual faith and existence over a religious one. Effectively, Brontë was a child of two worlds, and her novels - and the scholarly confusion about her spiritual vision - evidence this claim.

The spiritual vision experienced by the protagonists in Brontë’s canon springs from a specific context of the action and conflict of the novels. More than just an accompaniment to the story of *Jane Eyre*, the divine revelation reveals a Protestant Evangelical understanding of spiritual laws. Those, like Brontë, who tenaciously kept their faith, believed the spiritual laws of the Gospels in a way that empowered all believers. One cannot help but notice the ways in which the literal or material realities and actions of the characters in *Jane Eyre* are shaped by an unseen spiritual reality, or dimension, which many others have assumed is providence. Simply put, Brontë portrays *Jane Eyre* as an active agent in cultivating her material fortunes as a by-product of her spiritual development and ability to trust God’s plan for her life.

Despite the fact that Brontë not only kept her faith but remained an unapologetic supporter of the Anglican church her entire life (Jay 60), some modern critics have a difficult time understanding how one could be a devout Christian and a feminist. Hence, their reluctance to accept Brontë’s claims. Marianne Thormählen is the foremost scholar on Brontë’s religious

beliefs in the context of nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, and how her views of doctrine, specifically the spiritual realm, manifest in her fiction. Thormählen assures us that “[Charlotte’s] novels reveal a thorough-going quests for spiritual truths” (152). While much of the scholarship in recent decades would agree, many contemporary scholars prefer formalist and ahistorical analysis of Brontë’s fiction. These type of analyses tend to favour the view that Brontë was pagan or anti-Christian and stand in stark contrast to historical and cultural analyses. Hence Thormählen’s lamentation that “[t]here will likely not be an exploration of Charlotte’s spiritual views in the foreseeable future” (11). To complicate matters, many critics view novels written in the mid-nineteenth-century from a twenty-first-century perspective instead of acknowledging how Victorians viewed fiction novels (Maison 8).

As a loyal churchwoman who maintained her faith to the bitter end (Smith II: 658-70), one of the best ways to discern her spiritual vision lies in a typological interpretation of Brontë fiction. Keith Allen Jenkins’s doctoral thesis attempts this type of examination. However, Jenkins asserts that Brontë’s fiction revoke notions of divine providence and re-write holy script, arguing that “[Brontë’s] ‘heretic narratives’ ... attempts to create an alternative religion in which paradise is present possibility... Neither her inability to articulate this consistently nor her reluctance to embrace all of its implications can finally invalidate her glorious vision” (34). Jenkins is a prime example of an ahistorical analysis that omits the function of scripture in the work and ignores or rejects Brontë’s claims about her faith, where the lack of evidence for a pagan spiritual vision becomes the cornerstone of the argument. Consequently, Jenkins reads her fiction as a secular feminist revision of the New Testament (35), viewing Brontë’s heavy handed references to the Old Testament morals (Mosaic Laws) and character types as refutations of Christian moral philosophy (138). Jenkins is correct in his assertion that the young Jane Eyre

does not subscribe to Christ's teachings. However, she is the exemplar of a young Evangelical woman's process of conversion, which is only possible precisely because the young Jane has not been indoctrinated. Moreover, Jane's growth into the Gospels over the course of the novel reveals the stand view of conversion by mid-nineteenth-century Evangelicals and, in doing so, she typifies the early Victorian view of religious fiction novels as the author's opportunity to preach religious dissent (Maison 6). Through Jane's adherence to God's laws and plan for her life, and a faith that allows her to receive divine revelation, the story of Jane Eyre becomes an accurate reflection of women's participation in religion during the mid-nineteenth-century.

CHAPTER 3

Shirley and the Spiritual Exiles of Victorian Britain

“And unto Me you shall be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words you will speak to God’s people” – Exodus 19:6

In January of 1848, Brontë’s publisher, Mr. Williams, advised Brontë to write a novel on the ‘condition of England’ (Smith 2:4). The need for such a novel was due to the growing awareness among Victorians of new cultural trends; in fact, it could be argued that mid-nineteenth-century England was the first modern pluralist society and thus the first to face issues of cultural divide (Prickett 244). Despite misconceptions of Victorians as conformists, the individuals and groups living in this period were intellectually, religiously, and culturally diverse. Due to a series of reforms in the 1820s and 1830s, the Anglican church, which had once been a unifying force within the culture, lost most of its authority and faced political obscurity by the 1840s (Fisher 4). Further, the 1848 uprisings across Europe stoked fears of a revolution in England. Confronted with concerns regarding individual and national identity, English novelists and poets sought to unify the various religious and cultural groups of Great Britain.

Acquiescing to Williams’s request, Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) may have accurately articulated the condition of mid-nineteenth-century England but the work lacked the romantic ‘charm’ of Currer Bell’s debut novel. Unsurprisingly, the initial reviews of *Shirley* were mostly negative. The novel’s multiple narrators, lack of character development, fractured plot, anti-climactic ending, and a general lack of thematic unity may have reflected England in 1849 in some way, but Victorian readers could not help being disappointed. After all, it was Currer Bell’s adherence to Romantic conventions in *Jane Eyre* that lent to the novel’s success despite its controversial content. There was at least one contemporary reviewer who enjoyed *Shirley*

enough to declare it “the first impressive regional novel in the English language” (Briggs 204). Still, most Victorians would regard *Shirley* as Brontë’s forgotten novel and, for her, the novel’s poor reception would be a hard lesson learnt on the dangers of writing historical fiction.

Unlike her contemporaries, and some modern critics, I am not concerned with the novel’s lack of “charm” but with its substance. Specifically, I explore the degree to which Brontë accurately mirrors the condition of women’s religious experiences in mid-nineteenth-century England. Protestantism gave everyone the right to a personal apprehension of God, and argued that “no human mediator is admitted to distance the relationship between God and man” (Jay 51). Consequently, Victorian Britain was fast becoming a culture of dissenting voices, a priesthood of the people. Arminians believed atonement extended to all who claimed a faith in Christ (Bebbington 17). Calvinists preached that only the ‘elect’, God’s chosen, were predestined to enter heaven (ibid). Owenites used their Evangelicalism as the basis for a Christian socialist movement, and multiple sects attempted to establish communes within Britain (Talyor 160). Thus, the nineteenth-century could accurately be termed the ‘Evangelical century’.

For many high Evangelicals, the differences between orthodox Anglicanism and dissenting groups seemed trivial. Elizabeth Jay explains that, with the exceptions of the extremes sects of Calvinism and Arminianism (Methodists), both high and low Evangelicals believed in the original sin, conversion, justification for faith, and that the scripture was the ultimate authority on God and truth (20, 69). Despite core commonalities, dissenting groups were constantly struggling with each other for more power and influence. This constant struggle between various dissenting groups plays out in *Shirley* in multiple ways. Most notably, the Whitsuntide chapter depicts a conflict between the high Anglicans and the military, against dissenting groups who are forced off the road and into a ditch (Lawson 734).

However, all Protestants believed in the right to private judgement and unmediated access to God, ideals that became the cornerstone of English national identity (Chadwick 14). Yet, to approximately fifty percent of the population, this national identity was at variance with their experience. Protestant men were determined to fight for their spiritual autonomy but, by and large, did not support women having the same access to God or private judgement. Unfortunately, the popularity of conservative Evangelicalism was a direct correlative of the increasing industrialization that began in the 1830s in Britain (Taylor 124). To those unlucky multitudes of women who faced constant marginalization within English society, the source of their oppression was not always easy to discern. Still, spiritual autonomy had not always been denied to Protestant women.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, dissenting feminist Protestant sects existed in England (Millenarians), America (Shakers) and France (Saint Simonians). There were even sections of English Socialist Owenites who believed in a female messiah (162). The leader of a feminist Protestant subgroup, known as the Millenarians, died the year before Brontë was born (161). Whether or not Brontë knew about Joanna Southcott is uncertain, but Southcott seems to have left a mark on Brontë's 'spiritual vision'. Southcott's rhetoric positioned her as the self-appointed bride of Christ and, by 1815, her feminist dissent attracted more than 100 000 followers in the London area alone (162). Her dissenting claims included calls for spiritual equality between the sexes and that her arrival signaled womankind's freedom from the fall. Preaching from the point of view of Christ, Southcott would remind followers:

Now I answer thee of women: they followed Me to My Cross, and stood weeping to see Me crucified; they were the first at my sepulchre to see My resurrection: now I will not refuse women... Let it be known unto all men, the work at first was carried on by women. The first presents that were made were from women. So they showed their love and faith before men showed any. So now suffer women to be present and forbid them not (Harrison 108).

Conservative Evangelicals may have used scripture to prescribed a subordinate role for women but, in the minds of feminist dissenters, scripture was the source of their empowerment.

In this sense, Southcott was a pragmatic liberator more than a spiritual messiah. Her rational hermeneutics informed her rhetoric (Mueller 57), which drew on appeals to logos as evident in one of her most famous lines: “If the woman is not ashamed of herself, then the devil cannot shame her” (Taylor 164). Southcott’s rhetoric was clear, effective, stirred the audience, and empowered women to challenge (internalized) sexism and face the ‘true’ enemy Satan, for “if a man can’t tame a woman’s tongue, how shall the devil?” (165). Further, she argued that if Satan was able to trick Eve, it was because Adam and God ignored Eve’s desire for autonomy and left her mind uncultivated. Southcott’s stormy rhetoric was commonplace for later Romantic and early Victorian preachers (164), but her brilliance lay in her ability to take scripture and myths used to subjugate women, and turn them on their heads. Consequently, myths like Eden became cautionary tales.

Feminist Evangelical sects offered membership to both sexes, and their interpretations of scripture formed the foundations of faith for many men. In 1842, John Goodwyn Barmby produced the following poem:

Woman-Saviour now we muster / To await they advent sure, / In thy cluster of thy lustre,
Come and leave thy earth no more? / ... Woman-power! / Incarnate Love!
Human Goddess come and be, / If the Bridegroom’s tears can / move, /
Bride unto Humanity. / Thou alone of all can save us.... (*The Promethean* I: I, 1842).

Barbra Taylor notes that feminist dissent moved believers “towards a Rational Religion in which social processes took the place of sacred decrees, and radical self-determination replaced self-abnegation” (157). What concerns us are the parallel arguments between these forms of feminist

Protestant dissent, exemplified by Southcott and Barmby, and Brontë's feminist, historicist hermeneutics.

In *Shirley*, Brontë uses the phrase 'woman-Titan' multiple times mirroring the compound word structure in Barmby's poem. Shirley's 'woman-Titan' is described as intellectual, spiritual, physically powerful, godly, and autonomous (303). While we cannot be certain that Brontë was aware of Southcott or Barmby, the probability remains high. Her father Patrick was a leader of the Broad church movement, and part of his role was tracking dissenting groups and arranging visitations with prominent members (Markwick 110). Further, Barmby's poem fits within the historical and cultural period and the suffrage movement of the mid-nineteenth-century, that grew out and alongside women's right to preach the gospel (Bebbington 15). In *Shirley*, the 'Sermon on the Moor' parallels Southcott's emotionally charged and forceful rhetoric.

In nineteenth-century Britain, "dissent" could become "heresy" if it threatened the cultural or religious assumptions that legitimize the authority of the establishment. In 1822, at the age of twenty-nine Edward Irving began preaching in London at the church of Scotland. Initially, his bold views did not present a challenge to orthodox belief, and his persuasiveness of his rhetoric and personal charisma garnered a large following; even the rich and powerful attended his sermons (Bebbington 78). In 1824, Irving denounced the London Missionary Society, a move that upset many within the Anglican clergy, but his popularity insulated him from consequences. Irving's dissent became heresy when, in 1830, he began preaching that Christ was "fallen," not divine, but remained sinless through a close connection to the Holy Ghost (79). In Irving's defense, the books of Mark, Luke and Isaiah claim that the Messiah was "marked among the transgressors" (NIV), and the paradoxical claim that Christ was fallen yet divine confused scholars for centuries. However, Irving's followers were supposed to follow Christ, not Edward

Irving, and this ‘heresy’ had the potential to position Irving as a messiah figure. Unsurprisingly, the Presbyterian Church wasted little time deposing him, but Irving’s followers remained loyal and he used this leverage to establish the Catholic Apostolic church (79). Clearly, the “heretic” Irving saw his message as genuine and followers wise, but the liberating Moses figure of one group is usually little more than a false prophet to another.

On individual and national levels, the various cultural, intellectual, and religious groups of mid-nineteenth-century Britain viewed themselves and their country as a holy nation, as speaking to God’s “chosen” people. English authors developed a historical, national narrative that stretched farther back than the glorious revolution of 1688 (Chadwick 75). English Protestants tethered their national identity to the motif of God’s chosen people, modelled by the nation of Israel and the exodus led by Moses (Ward 608). Centuries earlier, the first Briton authors imagined themselves as the “transplanted worshippers of classical deities, who the Trojans (now Britons), had adopted while in Italy and Greece” (Gibson 39). However, Brontë’s feminist, historicist hermeneutics would outdo them all.

Since most Protestants questioned the authority of any supernatural claim outside the Bible (Fisher 89), it seemed the time of miracles had passed, and the only true saints were immortalized in the Bible. However, some writers attempted to establish the idea of ‘Protestant saints’. For example, Kingsley’s 1842 *The Saints Tragedy*, invokes the medieval literary tradition of the saint’s history (Fisher 92). Unsurprisingly, the play was not well received. As for Brontë, her contempt of Catholic dogma, and Kingsley’s overt endorsement of the subjugation of women, rendered Kingsley’s mode both offensive and in direct conflict to common conceptions of English national identity. Conversely, women like Southcott and Wollstonecraft may have gone too far in terms of the broader implications of their claims. Southcott became a ‘heretic’ the

moment she declared herself a messiah figure for women. In *Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1790), Wollstonecraft's support for the French revolution marked her a 'traitor' (Taylor 125). Thus, if a protest for spiritual equality between the sexes was too closely associated with France, or dependent on a female messiah, it was considered "anti-British" or "anti-Christian." Brontë's solution was a female protagonist who 'seems' anti-Catholic, anti-French, and staunchly supportive of the Anglican church but 'is' gnostic, inclusive, and open-minded.

In *Shirley*, the "chosen people" motif is writ large. The typical Moses figure becomes a both referent and prototype for many characters. According to Exodus, Moses had to interpret God's plan for his life and act in accordance God's plan, which is explanation for his success. Conversely, his failures are explained as moments he ignored or misinterpreted God's plan (NIV). Thus, the "success" of a movement in *Shirley* becomes the baseline measurement by which the credibility of a dissenting character's cause genuinely lines up with the perceived will of God. Hence, at times Brontë's narrator mocks those who would associate themselves with the typical Moses figure (132) and, at other times, allusions between a character and Moses highlights subjectivity. For example, Brontë draws daring parallels between Napoleon and Moses, claiming that to the French, Napoleon is their Moses and they are God's chosen. Brontë's emphasis on subjectivity, which underwrites all nation's histories, sets up a greater argument that underscores the subjectivity that underwrites all hermeneutics (Mueller 54).

Brontë's suggestion that Napoleon represents Moses leads to the natural conclusion that the Duke of Wellington becomes the Moses of the English. In the earliest record we have from Brontë, the twelve-year-old Charlotte recounts her father's return from Leeds: "next morning Branwell came to our Door with a Box of Soldiers Emily and me Jumped out of Bed and I snatched up one and exclaimed this is the Duke of Wellington it shall be mine... Branwell chose

Bonuparte - March 12, 1829” (BPM: MS Bon 80, 11). This portrait of Brontë reveals the personality traits of boldness, daring, duty, and heroism that are talismanic of Moses, Wellington, and Napoleon. Within the context of the “priesthood of the people,” the implication is that she likely felt that women must interpret the Bible for themselves, and achieve unmediated access to God, just as Protestant men were wont to do.

In 1848, Brontë expressed her respect for religion in a letter to her publisher. As a means to cope with the disappointment resulting from the “anti-Christian” and “pagan” accusations made about *Jane Eyre*, Brontë encouraged herself, claiming that “it would take a great deal to crush me, because I know, in the first place, that my intentions were correct; that I feel in my heart a deep reverence for religion” (Smith 2:3). With respect to the subject matter of *Shirley*, Brontë writes to her publisher in May of 1848:

I often wish to say something about the “condition of women” question – but it is one respecting so much “can’t” has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it.... Many say that the professions filled only by men should be open to women also.... Is there any room for female lawyers, female doctors, female engravers, for female artists, more authoresses? One can see where the evil lies – but who can point out the remedy? (Smith 2:66).

We have little cause to doubt the authenticity of Brontë’s stated desire. Taking Brontë at her word, *Shirley* would certainly render the problem and solution to women’s oppression from the perspective of a middle-class Anglican woman. However, to do so, Brontë would have to encrypt a feminist reading of scripture and subvert the heart of this message by adhering to the patriarchal roles for women - at least superficially - lest the novel be denied publication.

The ending of *Shirley* reinforces the imperative of sound albeit subjective interpretation, as the narrator states: “The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him on his quest” (608). Thus, the “woman question” is concealed, not within the

shadows of the narrative, but the reader's subjectivity; the reader must decide whether Caroline's and Shirley's feminist dissent and solutions for navigating the patriarchy are acceptable and or successful. If *Jane Eyre* is a feminist Christian *bildungsroman*, as a reflection of Brontë's growth into the Gospels, then *Shirley* can be read as Brontë's mid-nineteenth-century exploration of dissenting Evangelical faiths and doctrines; doctrines that had fractured the power of the established church while simultaneously empowering dissenting beliefs (Lawson 730).

In correspondence with her publisher, Brontë broached the topic of criticizing the religious establishment in *Shirley*, stating, "I hope such reviews will not make much difference with me, and that if the spirit moves me in future to say anything about priests &c. I shall say it with the same freedom as heretofore" (Smith 2:50). Her own words reveal the depth of her faith and the empowerment it provided. Thus, as a proverbial pulpit, *Shirley* could be a healing voice for women if the spirit of God moved in that direction.

Brontë's nuanced view of the established church sits in the juxtaposition between the curates in the opening scene and the portrayal of Mr. Hall, who functions as the positive potential for the establishment to care for the needs of its people (Pearson 295). True to the Evangelical belief that all the evil comes from the human heart, the establishment in *Shirley* can only be as good as the 'hearts' of its curates. Moreover, Mr. Hall is depicted with children around him mirroring the iconic image of Christ in Matthew 19:4 "let the little children come and refuse them not, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to these" (NIV). Thus, Brontë depicts genuine Christians through a close association with Christ's teachings.

If the authenticity of a character's dissent is measured via an Evangelical understanding of the Moses figure, the measure of a character's Godliness is determined by how closely they align with the teachings of Christ. Conversely, those characters who can only produce self-

serving “babble” are associated with the apostles. For example, the reverend Malone is eponymously associated with the apostles as his full name is Peter Augustus Malone (10). Malone’s name carries the association of the historical oppression of women from classical Rome in the middle name Augustus, and the medieval period through the name Peter. Just as Brontë associates women’s history with Diana and Mary in *Jane Eyre*, she associates the legacy of male tyranny via curate Malone, whose misogyny is so blatant that his host, Mrs. Gale, wants to stab him (9).

Toward the end of the novel, the narrator returns to the curates to re-evaluate their character development, or lack thereof. Talismanic of the spiritual ‘dead’ and self-serving “babble” of patriarchal Christianity, the character Malone seems to have morally regressed:

Peter Augustus, we can have nothing to say to you.... Are you not aware, Peter...that the unvarnished truth does not answer... that the squeal of a real pig is no more relished now than it was in the days of yore? Were I to give the catastrophe of your life and conversion, the public would sweep off in shrieking hysterics.... Whenever you present the actual, simple truth, it is, somehow, always denounced as a lie... whereas the product of your imagination...the sheer fiction, is adopted [as]...sweetly natural.... Such is the way of the world, Peter; and as you are the legitimate urchin, rude, unwashed, and naughty, you must stand down (594).

In Malone’s final assessment, the narrator reminds readers of the distinction between truth and imagination. The narrator’s condemnation of Peter Augustus inversely inflects the Apostle Peter’s message in Acts 10:13, whose dream vision from God was said to reveal that it was morally permissible to eat pork and shrimp (urchin), and that no humans should be referred to as unclean either (NIV). The narrator uses Malone as living proof to refute the apostle Peter’s ‘spiritual vision’ that depicts all men as clean. The narrator’s words suggest the Malone’s self-interested lies are worse than most dissenting ‘babble’ and akin the noise of a squealing pig, precisely because he is not capable of discerning spirituality from imagination.

Yet, the narrator does not portray all curates like Malone. Mr. Macarthey is described as sincere and hardworking but also fallible thus possessing “clerical faults; that many would call virtues” (596). The narrator seems to suggest that Macarthey is persnickety, making him less effective in his support for the Broad church movement. Despite being hard work and charitable, Mr. Macarthey completely missed the message of Christ’s teaching, summarized as a single commandment for God’s people to love one another (John 13:34). Brontë’s use of Macarthey to represent most curates suggests that his failure to understand Christ’s only commandment was widespread among church authorities. By ignoring this commandment, the Anglican church failed to provide a “healing voice” during the mid-nineteenth-century.

To locate the “healing voice” in *Shirley*, we must, as Virginia Woolf implores us, “think back through our mothers” (79). In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s ‘spiritual vision’ comes from her divine mother. In a literal sense, Jane Eyre thinks through her heavenly mother to see her past and recognize God’s plan for her life. In response to her divine mother’s advice, Jane replies, “Mother, I will.” Likewise, Shirley tells Caroline, “I will stay out here with my mother Eve.” Both protagonists hint at the need for young women to think through their mothers. The silent women of classical Rome and medieval Europe finds representation in Jane’s cousins Diana and Mary. There too, Brontë hints at the need for readers to think through their mothers, both pagan and Christian. Thus, the act of seeing the world through our mothers becomes necessity if we are to understand Brontë’s theology of spiritual equality.

Shirley's Sermon on the Moor

"I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help. My help cometh from the Lord who made heaven and earth" – Psalm 121:1-2

Shirley's 'Sermon on the Moor' resurrects Christ's message of love and provides a healing voice for English women based on a feminist, historicist hermeneutics. Bearing in mind that a feminist reading of the Bible was an act of heresy in the eyes of mainstream conservative Evangelicals during the mid-nineteenth-century, Brontë's incorporation of mythical figures into Shirley's sermon operates as a dialectical misdirection. This misdirection allows readers to distance themselves from the sermon by identifying with the protagonist Caroline whose skepticism mocks yet decodes Shirley's vision. More importantly, Shirley represents Brontë's engagements with a lesser known form of hermeneutics known as romantic hermeneutics (Rajan 23). Reading Brontë's 'spiritual vision' through romantic hermeneutics allows for an interpretation of Shirley's titan-visions that both illuminates the foundation of Brontë's feminism, that men and women are spiritual equals.

From this interpretation, Shirley's "woman-Titan" stands at a crux within Brontë's canon and, like her incorporation of Christ, changes how we interpret events in Brontë's fiction. The "woman-Titan" represents moment of intertextuality and intercultural criticism that situates much of the meaning of Shirley's sermon outside the text and Victorian culture. However, Shirley's dissent incorporates more than a moment of divine revelation and, just as Jane Eyre's dissent is understood within context of a few key events prior to and post dream vision, Shirley's dissent is best understood via critical moments in the text that reveal Shirley's character, subjectivity, and religious beliefs. Hence, this section will examine the critical moments that frame Shirley's sermon, points of contact between the 'spiritual vision' proposed in *Jane Eyre*

and the spiritual vision in *Shirley*, and the texts and figures that exist outside the novel but nonetheless contain the keys to articulating Brontë's feminist, historicist hermeneutics.

The opening lines of the novel frame the context of Shirley's sermon, from a distinctly Protestant perspective where the onus for interpretation on the individual. On the first page, the narrator states: "If you think ... that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you were never more mistaken... Something real, cool, and solid lies before you" (5). This excerpt is preceded by an exceptionally elegant and poetic opening paragraph, disrupting the narrative before it has begun. The narrator draws the reader's attention to fact that all texts have set parameters, or values, and the viewpoints expressed therein operate within those values regardless of eloquence or plain speech. Here, Brontë's use of the term "real" is a curious one; like today's readers, the Victorians were cognizant of the artificial nature of fiction. From the outset, *Shirley* becomes a text designed to make the reader aware of the juxtaposition between what 'seems' and what 'is'. This juxtaposition establishes the narrative framework for the novel in its examination of religious dissent. Thus, Shirley begins her assessment of the claims made by dissenting groups in terms of how well their claims align with pragmatic realities.

Refusing to blindly accept her uncle's ideas of marriage, and revealing Shirley's natural inclination towards a dialectical misdirection by wandering 'off the point', Shirley tells Mr. Sympson: "Indeed, uncle, I wanted to do so; and I shall be glad to lead you away with me" (515). Thus, the text invites a reading of Shirley's discourses as a series of misdirections. In fact, every aspect of Shirley is a misdirection. For example, her name was considered a masculine in nineteenth-century. Brontë appropriates the masculine prefixes 'esquire' and 'captain' as alternate titles for Shirley, again reinforcing a masculine identity and drawing the reader's attention to the discrepancy between what seems and what is. The explanation from the novel is

that Shirley's parents desperately wanted a baby boy but, upon having a girl, they gave her a boy's name. However, these masculine titles become sources of empowerment as she meets societal expectations associated with assumed male gender her name implies.

Despite traditional gender roles and expectations, Shirley is a strong-willed individual with a strong sense of self. Like Brontë, Shirley expresses a view of the poet as the medium for spiritual truth and promotes the value of honesty (Bently 380). Toward the end of the novel, Shirley makes two bold claims that invite a revision of the images she produces in chapter eighteen. First, Shirley declares herself an "honest woman" (520), and the implication is that she is honest about her subjective beliefs. Second, Shirley defends poetry against Mr. Sympson's empiricism, stating "there is nothing really valuable in this world, there is nothing glorious in the world to come, that is not poetry" (517). Thus, 'truth' operates in the novel from Protestant worldview, as both subjective and socially constructed, and with the caveat of the existence of spiritual or transcendental truths (Thormahlen 53). Hence, Mr. Sympson and Shirley's discussion, of what constitutes reality, represents the clash between Protestant Romantic ideas of truth and poetry, and the Protestant Victorian endorsements of empirical knowledge.

Striking the heart of the matter, Shirley argues that the difference, between her uncle's (Victorian) empiricism and her (Romantic) belief that love is essential to discern truth, reflects the difference in the God or idols they worship. An effective way to frame Shirley's 'Sermon on the Moor' is via Shirley's and Mr. Sympson's disagreement on marriage. Tired of her uncle's inability to see her side of the argument, Shirley states:

Mr. Sympson ... your gods are not my gods.... I walk another creed, light, faith and hope, than you... Your god... is the World. In my eyes, you [are an] infidel [and] an idolater. I conceive that you ignorantly worship: in all things you appear to me superstitious... your god, your fish-tailed Dagon, rises before me as a demon. In his realm there is hatred...there is treachery...children grow unloving between parents who

never loved.... All that surrounds him hastens to decay: all declines and degenerates under his sceptre. *Your God is masked Death*" (521-2).

In 1 Corinthians 13:1-4, it says that if a religious mentor has memorized scripture, or a prophet claims to understand spiritual mysteries, but they do not have love for their fellow humans, they *are* nothing (NIV). Thus, practitioners of a loveless Christianity are themselves dead as well as their religion. Brontë's use of italics in the term 'your' implies Mr. Sympson's God was not discovered through life experience, making his religion little more than superstition. For Shirley, the cold, empirical Evangelicals within Victorian culture were the prime movers of industrialization, progress, and champions of 'fertility at any cost'. They unwittingly spelt death for the land, and treachery for women and children, by espousing a loveless religion diametrically opposed to the teachings of Christ.

The ubiquitous and sexist nature of Victorian 'superstition' is addressed by Caroline's and Shirley's examination of the mermaid. Familiar with the classics, Brontë was likely aware of the misogynistic cultural inheritance passed down from the classical histories and myths, through medieval Europe, and to Victorian Britain. In *Shirley*, Brontë examines the classically contrived notion of 'womanhood' embodied in the mermaid as a point of contact between Victorian and classical cultures. Considering a trip to Scotland, Caroline and Shirley banter:

[Caroline] I suppose you expect to see mermaids [?]

[Shirley] One of them at any rate / ... I show you an image / We both see the long hair, the lifted and foam-white arm, the oval mirror brilliant as a star... a human face is plainly visible; a face in the style of yours, - whose straight, pure lineaments, paleness does not disfigure.... Temptress-terror! Monstrous likeness of ourselves!

[Caroline] But, Shirley ... we are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters.

[Shirley] ...There are men who ascribe to "woman," in general, such attributes. (232-3)

As a text designed to interrogate the discrepancy between what 'seems' and what 'is', Shirley's remarks wax satirical, as she overstates the dangers of a mythological creature. Shirley's remind

us of the ‘real, cool, and solid’ fact that women can only be dehumanized within mythic narratives, or classical superstition, carried on by those who ignorantly worship.

There are several striking parallels between Shirley’s mermaid and Milton’s mischaracterization of women in *Paradise Lost*. Unlike medieval and Puritan interpretations of original sin, which blamed Eve for the fall, Milton’s influential text placed responsibility for the fall squarely on Adam (Reed 35). However, this slight improvement assumed that Eve’s mind was too childlike to understand the implications of her actions that are no less harmful, and the alliance between womankind and Satan no less pronounced. In book X, Milton portrays the first act of misogyny through Adam’s new Iaspasian worldview. Reflecting on their ejection from Eden, Adam says:

Out of my sight, thou serpent, that name best / Befits thee with him leagued, theyself as false / And hateful; nothing wants, but that thy shape, / Like his, and color serpentine may show / Thy inward fraud, to warn all creatures from thee / Henceforth; lest that too heav’nly form, pretended / To hellish falsehood, snare them (867-73).

In his anger, Adam, as Eve’s ‘author and guide’, produces mythic images to overlay reality. The overlapping imagery between Shirley’s mermaid figure and Adam’s serpent-like Eve is compelling. Both descriptions render womankind as deceptive, false, monstrous temptresses, who spell nothing but the doom of ‘mankind’. Further, both portrayals are socially constructed narratives designed to legitimize the authority of men.

In 1971, feminist theologian Mary Daly gave a sermon at Memorial church in which she condemned the androcentric view that dominated Christianity (Palazzo xi). Steeped in the second wave feminist movement, Daly staged a “walk-out” to reinforce the notion that women are “spiritual exiles.” Although Shirley’s sermon begins with the unmistakable parallel to Daly’s walkout, there are key differences. First, Daly leaves the church where as Shirley refuses to enter

(302). Second, Shirley claims that “[t]he grey church and greyer tombs look divine with this crimson gleam on them” (ibid). Scott explains the divine ‘gleam’ as an expression of hope that the establishment will one day be restored to God and serve the needs of God’s people (27). I would take Scott’s argument a step further. The name Noah appears multiple times throughout *Shirley* and, like Moses, Noah learns to accept God’s plan for his life. Thus, the ‘divine gleam’ is more than a generic symbol of hope but a direct reference to the rainbow symbolizing hope Noah perceived after the effects of the flood ‘restored’ humanity unto God. The implication is that, like Shirley’s uncle who believes to worship Christ but ignorantly worships, the Anglican church has become ‘of this world’. Conversely, Shirley’s creed is like Noah’s, one of faith and hope. Thus her ‘Sermon on the Moor’ becomes a rhetorical ark that allows Christian women refuge until the deluge of androcentric Christianity subsides.

The connection between Shirley’s creed and Noah’s ark concerns the types of histories that were popular during the later Romantic period. For example, M. Rollin’s *Ancient Civilizations of the World* (1731) was a popular form of history and one owned by Patrick Brontë. Brontë was so fond of the work she recommended it to her friend Ellen Nussey (Smith 1:130). In the preface, Rollin anchors the history of the ancients, specifically, the Greeks and Romans, to the decedents of Noah. The invocation of the Greek culture seems to represent Brontë’s affiliation with the German High criticism (Gallagher 62). However, throughout Victorian Britain many still believed humanity to be the decedents of Noah, and that various factions would rise or fall by the will of God alone. M. Rollin makes this case:

[T]he Scriptures inform us, that amidst the trouble and confusion that followed the sudden change in Noah’s decedents, God presided invisibly over all.... It is true indeed that God, even in those early ages, had a particular regard for that people, whom he was one day to consider his own (iii).

Throughout Shirley's sermon, Brontë alludes to the titans of Greek myth, the Nephilim of Genesis, Englishmen, and Christ but the subject always returns to 'that Eve', which suggests that women are God's chosen people too. In fact, Brontë makes it clear that without women, God could not have brought Christ into this world.

Shirley's desire to preach outside the tabernacle stands in line with Christ's message to the early church, wherein he reminded his followers that God does not gather in temples of brick and marble but where people gather (1 Corinthians 3:16; Draper 71). Thus, Brontë positions her dissenting, feminist, historicist hermeneutics outside the church but inline with Christ. In other words, Shirley abstains from entering the church because she desires to be close to God, not because she hates religion. Further, her faith empowers to reject Milton's Eve (303). Outside orthodox religion, Shirley begins her sermon with the phrase "Nature is now at her evening prayers: she is kneeling before those red hills" (302). The opening lines follow the logic expressed in William Paley's *Natural Theology* (1802), who, in trying to understand why God remains 'hidden' from the world', provides a radical interpretation of Romans 1:18-25 and argues that God wrote scripture in trees, skies and stars (59).

Shirley then claims, "I see her prostrate on the great steps of her altar, praying for a fair night for mariners at sea, for travellers in deserts, for lambs on moors, and unfledged birds in woods" (302). During the nineteenth-century, mainstream English culture was largely anti-Catholic, refusing to admit Catholics into universities, and limiting the jobs they could occupy within the military and government (Frazer 318). Moreover, the lack of acceptance for Kingsley's 1842 play proved that Brontë could not write a well received classic that overtly depicted saints. Yet, the second statement of Shirley's vision implicitly invokes the imagery of saints and, due to novels constant criticism of Roman Catholicism, many have overlooked this

imagery. Detailing four different saints, Brontë leans on the medieval literary tradition of employing saints as role models for the Christian life. Thus, while *Shirley* undoubtedly ‘seems’ anti-Catholic, we must consider if it ‘is’ anti-Catholic or simply opposed to social or religious barriers between God and the individual.

With regard to the identity of these saints, *Shirley* alludes to the following: Stella Mare (Mother Mary), patron saint of mariners at sea; Saint Anthony, patron saint of desert travellers and the father of monks; Saint Agnes, patron saint of daughters, virgins, chastity, lambs and gardeners; and Saint Francis (French monk of the twelfth-century), patron saint of birds, ecology, and famous for preaching the gospel to animals and nature (Stouck 72). At present, practitioners of Roman Catholicism remembered these saints for their dedication to God above society. In *Shirley*, each saints’ cause is acknowledged by a maternal Holy Ghost figure suggesting that God indeed hears the prayers of Catholic saints. Hence, Brontë’s theology creates the space for the aspects of, or figures within, Catholicism that encourage followers to serve God, not the Pope.

Stephen Harris notes that the Romans borrowed the figures Zeus (Jupiter), Hera (Juno), Apollo and Athena (Minerva) from the Greek pantheon (864). The Roman adoption of Greek deities allowed for the maintenance of a shared cultural perspective that was intensely patriarchal. Brontë appropriates her Protestant saints from the Catholic pantheon and reverses the ordering of these figures by gender. Virgin Mary is the head of the family of saints as her dedication to God was second to none. Then Anthony, the father of saints who was arguably the most pious man not a disciple of Christ. Next, daughter Agnes and son Francis (Stouck 57). By making women the head of the family, the imagery of familial sainthood challenges traditional Victorian notions of the family, and provides equal representation of gender among God’s ‘saints’ or ‘chosen people’. Toward the end of the novel, *Shirley* claims that she follows a different faith from her

uncle's, one of love and hope. This creed finds expression through the imagery of Shirley's pantheon of saints, who represent four different corners of the earth, and are united by the image of a spiritual "woman-Titan." In this way, *Shirley* reminds English Protestants that God's people exist in all corners of the earth, and are affiliated with different forms of Christianity but nonetheless make their relationship with God of prime importance; that God's 'chosen' are not determined by national boundaries or established religions but marked by their love and devotion to God. This concept, that God's people are united by a "kingdom of heaven," mirrors Christ's claim that he has come to earth not to establish a new state of Israel but a "Kingdom of Heaven." Thus, Christ's prime directive to his followers was that they should "seek ye first the Kingdom of God" (Matt: 6:33), which is precisely what Shirley seeks by remaining outside the church.

The first line in Shirley's sermon uses a rhetorical misdirection in that the stated subject of the sentence is not the subject being described; Shirley is not concerned with nature alone but with God's presence in nature, or, God's Kingdom of Heaven. Her portrayal of God incorporates the four walks of life, serves as a reminder that even children, who were often viewed as expendable, have the same capacity for sainthood, love, and devotion to God. This imagery finds scriptural justification in Matthew 19:14-15: "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them! For the Kingdom of Heaven belongs to such as these" (NIV). The importance of valuing children is reinforced through exemplar clergyman Mr. Hall. The narrator claims he is the establishment's best hope for the future and notes his attentiveness to children (542). The Evangelicals of the later Romantic period certainly believed that wisdom comes from the mouth of babes, as poets like William Blake sought to address their conviction that children were closer to God than adults. Thus, Shirley's pantheon produces the imagery of an inclusive faith that acknowledges members from different creeds, regions, eras and walks of life.

Shirley's third statement points toward the identity of the woman-Titan: "Caroline, I see her! And I will tell you what she is like: she is like what Eve was when she and Adam stood alone on earth" (302-3). Lawson believes the subject of this phrase to be a strictly female trinity, the Mother, Daughter, and Holy Ghost (730). Marsden claims that Shirley's Eve is nature personified and positioned as the redeemer figure within a secular paradigm (238). Gilbert and Gubar see her as a Promethean Eve (195). However, the first three statements in Shirley's sermon establish the thrust of Brontë's feminist, historicist hermeneutics as the pursuit of spiritual truths and Godliness. While Eve is discussed later in the sermon, she is not the reason Shirley refrained from entering the church, and the above quotation tells us that the core of Shirley's feminist apology concerns a being that was "like what Eve was," but not Eve.

Realising that Shirley has yet to disclose the identity of this divine figure, Caroline says "you have not yet told me who you saw kneeling on those hills" (304). Shirley proclaims:

I saw – I now see – a woman-Titan: her robe of blue air spreads to the outskirts of the heath, where yonder flock is grazing; a veil white as an avalanche sweeps from her head to her feet, and arabesques of lightning flame on its borders. Under her breast I see her zone, purple like that horizon: through its blush shines star of evening. Her steady eyes I cannot picture; they are clear – they are deep as lakes – they are lifted and full of worship – they tremble with the softness of love and the lustre of prayer. Her forehead has the expanse of a cloud, and is paler than the early moon, risen long before darkness gathers: she reclines her bosom on the ridge of Stilbro' Moor; her mighty hands are joined beneath it. So kneeling, face to face she speaks with God. That Eve is Jehovah's daughter as Adam was his son (304).

Bearing in mind that Shirley loves to mislead people, we cannot accept every claim at face value.

Regarding the sentence "[t]hat Eve is Jehovah's daughter," we know from the third line of her sermon that the subject is "like Eve," hence the "Eve" Shirley refers to is entirely different from the woman in Genesis. Moreover, to those who believe the Gospel of John to be true, as Brontë did (Thormahlen 153), the claim that Adam was God's son is inherently false as John 3:16

proclaims Christ to be God's only "begotten" son (NIV). The names Adam and Eve have been repurposed by Brontë to address other entities.

The titans of classical myths were often read as the personification of natural phenomena or human concepts such as 'forethought', and, like their Olympian successors, were spiritual or metaphorical beings not biological creatures. Given the syncretisation of the classical and biblical myths, Shirley's Eve is a spiritual or metaphorical representation of womankind, one that posits the first woman as 'heaven-born'. While it could be argued that the Eve in Genesis was the consort of pro-creation, the scripture does not claim Eve to be divine nor responsible for creation. Yet the crowning achievement of Shirley's "Eve" was her active role in creation, and for that she wears the 'consort crown' (304). Critics tend to overlook this fact, and suggest that Brontë employs the timeless mythical association between womankind and the fertility of nature personified, sometimes referred to as Mother Nature, or woman-Titan Gaia. This assumes Brontë adopted a secular or pagan worldview which we know she did not. Moreover, Shirley's sermon reveals a rhetorical situation that is gynocentric in that the only characters present are Shirley and Caroline (302).

Patrick's library contained works from multiple classical authors like Homer, Virgil, and Horace. His library included Dryden's translation of the *Aeneid*, as well as Milton's *Paradise Lost* (Lodge 143). A focal point of Shirley's sermon is Milton's misrepresentation of women. In her rebuttal to Milton, Shirley proclaims "that the first men on the earth were Titans and Eve was their mother: from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus" (303). All of Eve's titan offspring are male but, due to their classical associations, are understood to be personifications. Brontë appears to present a gnostic revision of Genesis 6:4. The Nephilim are no longer literally framed as the "sons of God" but "sons of Eve," the first woman heaven-

born. The titan Saturn (Cronos) was the personification of liberation and renewal through revolution and reform; Hyperion was the personification of light, wisdom, observation, reason, and understanding; Oceanus was the “father of all” but associated with the rivers and oceans, and his realm separated the underworld from the land of the living; the name Prometheus means “forethought,” and, as a mythical figure, Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and gave it to the mortal races, and act for which he was severely punished. Thus, he personified courage through forethought and duty through sacrifice (Harris 74).

Each titan of Greek mythology relates to the history of England, and English national identity, in profound ways. England’s history is characteristic of Cronos (Saturn) in its participation of the Protestant Reformation and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 (Smollett 3). The revolution occurred during the enlightenment era and English philosophers and scholars like Bacon and Milton prized the Hyperion ideals of the enlightenment (Bebbington 50). The connection between Britain and Oceanus is more obvious. The English Channel, more specifically the British fleet, acted as a bulwark preventing Napoleonic expansion and the French Revolution spilling onto English soil, and separated Protestant Britain from the Romish underworld of Europe.

Allegorically, Prometheus represents English patriotism through the historical figure Admiral Horatio Nelson. Nelson famously sacrificed multiple limbs in service to England and, at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, stole Napoleon’s “fire” by obliterating the combined Spanish and French navies in just a few hours (Simpson 72). Outnumbered but keenly aware of the existential threat Napoleon’s fleet posed to Britain, Nelson secured the future of England through his sacrifice. Thus, Shirley “would beg to remind” Milton, as the stereotypical John Bull, that the most principled revolutionaries, enlightened philosophers, stalwart sailors, and bravest heroes

England could produce all came from a woman; “that Eve” was “their mother,” hence English mothers, though left out of the pages of history, were nonetheless consort creators of British civilization (Brontë 303).

The connections between the Greek myths and geo-political tensions of England and France, reappears in *Villette* in direct connection to Lucy Snowe’s foray onto the continent. Leaving London by the river Thames, Lucy conceptualizes the continent as the ‘underworld’ separated from Britain by the river Styx (56). Further, there is a direct connection between English national identity and Greek mythology. After examining the differences between Chinese and European histories, Frank Chin concludes:

Freud found the key to the subconscious and the dreams of the Western man in Greek myth.... The Western believer sums his life in the form that expresses the religious context of the civilization, the autobiography, a combination of confession and testimony that follows the rise, and fall, of the heroes of religious literature (33, 36).

From the Victorian perspective, all human beings were directly descendant from Noah, and the rise and fall of nations, including pagan kingdoms, was ordained by God.

In the preface to M. Rollin’s *Ancient Civilizations of the World* (1738), he justifies the study of ancient civilizations thusly:

Besides the visible and sensible connection of the sacred and profane history, there is another more secret and more distinct relation with respect to the Messiah, for whose coming the Almighty... prepared mankind from afar, even by the state of ignorance and dissoluteness in which he suffered them to be immersed during four thousand years. It was to make mankind sensible of the need of having our Mediator (x).

If all history is ordained by God, then those nations and groups who stand outside Christendom have been placed there by God. Brontë likely viewed history in this light, as did many of her readers, and she leans into this pan-European, biblical history in her account of womankind.

According to Tilottama Rajan, “romantic hermeneutics” situates the author at the center of meaning within a text (Rajan 23). In *Juvenalia*, Brontë inserts herself into the narrative

through the character Wellington (Glen 11). In *Shirley*, Brontë articulates her views on religion, and the ‘woman question’, through the character Shirley. Rajan explains that, in order to understand “romantic hermeneutics,” we must read through the contradictions contained within the poetic vision, by the claims made outside the vision or novel, and strewn throughout the author’s canon, belief systems, or other works (27). She argues that the tension between fiction and reality produced by romantic hermeneutics is never solved within the text (8). Thus, Eagleton’s claim, that Brontë exploits “fiction and fable to sooth the jagged edges of conflict,” is correct but she does more than just smooth the edges of conflict. Brontë’s exploitation of fact and fiction creates the effects championed by Coleridge, and demonstrates how the poet and poetry provides access to spiritual ‘truths’ that exist beyond a strictly empirical worldview.

Brontë’s reveals her affiliation to Coleridge in letter to Charles Hubert Millevoeye. In 1843, she writes: “I believe that all real poetry is the only faithful impression of something which happens or has happened in the soul of the poet.... [It is a matter of] genius, co-operating with some sentiment affections or passion” (Bently 380, 382). For Brontë, the ‘genius’ comes from the higher truth of intellectual reason and perception, more than emotional faith or belief. Like Coleridge, Brontë believed that the attainment of ‘truth’ could not come through “understanding” alone, but by “reasoning” beyond “understanding” to intuiting divine truth (Thormählen 149).

In Shirley’s sermon, Milton’s ‘sin’ is his reliance on reason alone to attain truth. In *Paradise Lost*, he is guilty of observing the physical alone through the intellect alone then making judgements of Eve’s interior mind, soul, and motivations without understanding Eve. Milton seems unaware of his spiritual, intuitive blindness from a Coleridgean philosophical approach to poetry, especially in terms of Coleridgean conceptualizations of “reason” and “understanding.” Milton was able to rationalize what he observed in his world but remained

blind in that he could not “reason” beyond it. Thus, Brontë derides Milton, not only for his misrepresentation of women, but his stoic understanding of ‘truth’.

Reclaiming Eve, Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ is rendered in a poetics Danielle Coralie describes as a “vernacular mode of natural history” that becomes a “generative aesthetic resource” for people seeking escape from the creeping sprawl of industrialization (119). Brontë’s association with the generative, life-giving qualities of nature is so unconventional that Caroline immediately questions the source of this portrayal of nature and womankind, stating “And that is not Milton’s Eve, Shirley” (303). Shirley’s response follows a close examination of Adam’s failure to recognize Eve’s humanity in *Paradise Lost*:

[Shirley:] Milton’s Eve! ... by the pure mother of God, she is not! Cary, we are alone: we may speak what we think. Milton was great; but was he good? His brain was right; how was his heart? ... Milton tried to see the first woman; but, Cary, he saw her not.

[Caroline:] You are bold to say so, Shirley.

[Shirley:] No more bold than faithful. It was his cook he saw... (303).

Brontë’s overarching condemnation of patriarchal views of women is that it lacks the empathy necessary to view women’s humanity. This claim mirrors Malone’s treatment of the host and cook, Mrs. Gale, in the opening chapter of *Shirley* (7). Consequently, Brontë’s dissenting, feminist, hermeneutics voices Eve’s humanity from the perspective of a loving daughter looking, feeling, and thinking through her mother.

However, there are parts of Shirley’s Sermon in which the statements about Eve line up with the portrayals of Eve in Genesis, as Shirley tells Caroline:

The first woman’s breast that heaved with life on this world yielded the daring which could contend with Omnipotence: the strength which could bear a thousand years of bondage - the vitality which could feed that vulture death through uncounted ages - the unexhausted life and uncorrupted excellence, sisters to immortality, which, after millenniums of crimes, struggles and woes, could conceive and bring forth a Messiah (303).

Here, we are misled by Shirley. The Eve in Genesis lived on this earth and yielded a daring that could contend with omnipotence. This omnipotence is foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15 when God tells the serpent: “And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel” (NIV). The ‘seed of woman’ is a direct reference to Christ as the son of God and woman. The phrase “sisters to immortality” is a reminder to men, who view women as being like Milton’s Eve, that they had no role in bringing forth the Messiah. Due to the recent deaths of Anne and Emily, this phrase contained a personal sentiment for Brontë.

A new meaning emerges from Shirley’s sermon. The phrase “That Eve is Jehovah’s daughter as Adam is his son,” echoes the narrator’s call to action, to all fathers and men of England to stand up for their daughters. The reward for their activism is that they will find no better “companions in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness; your most faithful prop in age” (371). In Shirley’s titan-visions, Brontë has made it clear that humanity’s redemption was only possible because God trusted his daughter Mary to ‘conceive and bring forth a Messiah’. Operating from this belief, Brontë recognized that women’s oppression was man made, and reinforced by the myths assumed to be true by those who ‘ignorantly worship’. Thus, Brontë was of the belief that her struggle for autonomy is with man not God.

There is an important discrepancy in how the “poetic vision” functions in later Romantic poetry in comparison to their Victorian successors. Most Victorians sided with Arnold’s “anti-Christian” criticism of Brontë’s body of work, and his belief in transcendental truth. In terms of the poetic vision, he argues that it should begin “with an Idea of the world in order not to be prevailed over by the world’s multitudinousness” (Arnold 97). In effect, this worldview takes a religious principle, belief, or idea and attempts to explain the human experience. In sum, this

analysis works backward; instead of trying to understand the world through demonstrable proofs and empirical evidence, then working from rational beliefs to explain spiritual truths, Victorians like Arnold started their analysis with a conclusion. Conversely, Romantics like Coleridge operated within a paradigm much closer to Aristotle's in that, although the ultimate goal is Platonic 'truth', they first make pragmatic distinctions between the "apparent" and the "real".

Later Romantic poets tended to view the 'poetic vision' as a 'dialectic of being' that first establishes an understanding the world through their own experiences. Only once this framework has been established, can the 'dialectic of being' evaluate claims of a religion or society, separating superstition from spiritual truths. As John Keble observes:

[All things] which at any time have occurred or will occur to us, seem mutually connected in an infinite, though mysterious, sequence; each detail in the sequence has its exact significance and position. And ... when anyone has the gift – and this gift has always been deemed the special prerogative of inspired genius - of picking up a thread and clearly and effectively following it through all its windings, there is nothing to prevent his linking the humblest beginnings with the noblest issues.... Undoubtedly ... there is a common bond which links together all [branches of knowledge] ... indeed ... all votaries of poetry well know, that whatever subject comes to hand or occurs to their mind may be turned to their purpose, if only the writer has the true spiritual fire and devotes himself heart and soul to this task (Francis 120-1).

Like Coleridge and Brontë, Keble viewed poetry as "the ordained vehicle of revelation" (Keble 189). From a Romantic view, one begins by detaching from religious myths and by 'picking up a thread and clearly and effectively following its windings' being cognizant of the difference between images and reality, or the discrepancy between what "seems" and what "is."

Susan Gallagher does not use the term "romantic hermeneutics" in her analysis of Brontë's 'spiritual vision' but nonetheless concludes that Brontë developed a gnostic reading of the Gospel (80). Gallagher accepts Brontë's claims to be a God-fearing Protestant and labels this spiritual purview "radical Protestantism." According to Gallagher, Brontë's radical Protestantism adopts a rational view, and, by detaching from the myths and images of the Bible, she saw that

“the restrictions on her life were not divine but patriarchal design” (68). Brontë’s incorporation of classical myths into her ‘spiritual vision’ allows us to follow the thread of women’s oppression back to its source: Greek myth.

Some critics suggest that Shirley’s *devoirs* reinforce patriarchal values. Keble’s use of the term “genius” is important for any feminist reading of *Shirley*. In Shirley’s *devoir* there is an episode between a spiritual Eva character and a masculine redeemer “Genius,” who rescues Eva from the depths of despair and hopelessness (456). Coping with the deaths of her siblings as she continued to write *Shirley*, Brontë records in her journal the following: “The faculty of imagination lifted me when I was sinking, three months ago; its an active exercise that has kept my head above water...its results cheer me now” (Smith II: 426). Brontë uses the term “genius” in her description of how it operates within the poet, and renders an understanding of how the genius, or gift, of a poet comes from within to render a poetic vision. The central action in Shirley’s *devoir* is the face to face meeting of Genius and Eva, and it mirrors Shirley’s ‘titan vision’ in the phrase “face to face.” Within the context of Brontë’s claim that she actively exercised genius to lift her spirit, it becomes clear that Shirley’s *devoir* reflects not an imbalanced relationship between an independent man and dependent woman, but different aspects of Brontë’s psychology attempting to lift her spirits in the face of personal tragedy.

However, Shirley’s “woman-Titan” is “kneeling, face to face she speaks with God” (304). The phrase ‘face to face’ closely mirrors imagery in Revelations depicted through the eyes of the Apostle John:

I saw a new heaven and a new earth...the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned before her husband.... And there came one of the seven Angels, saying... come hither, I will shew thee the Bride, the Lamb’s wife...And he carried me away in the spirit...to the holy Jerusalem, descending out of heaven from God, having the glory of God: and her light was unlike a stone most precious, even like a jasper stone, clear as crystal... And I saw no temple therein: for he

Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun ... for the glory of God did lighten it... (Rev 21) ... but the throne of God shall be in [the river of water of life]; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be on their foreheads (Rev 22: 3-4).

John describes the kingdom of heaven as a 'holy city' without a temple or need of light for God is a temple and is (divine) light. God's kingdom is a city of light that depicts the Bride of Christ with as having a stone like shine.

John likens the Kingdom of Heaven to a 'bride adorned before her husband'. In 2 Corinthians 11:2, God says "I have espoused you to one husband, that I may present you as a chaste virgin to Christ," and in Ephesians 5:25 proclaims that Christ gave his life for the church so that "he might present it to himself a glorious church ... holy and without blemish" (NIV). In Revelations 19:7, John says "let us be glad and rejoice, and give honour to him: for the marriage of the lamb is come, and his wife hath made herself ready. And to her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen ... for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints" (NIV). Last, in Amos 5, God refers to the nation of Israel as 'my virgin' or 'daughter' (NIV). Throughout the Bible, the salvation of humanity seems to apply to a specific group of the saints who, because they sought God's kingdom, have become 'God's chosen people' and are allegorically represented as the Bride of Christ. Hence, when Shirley proclaims "That Eve is Jehovah's daughter, As Adam was his son" (304), she is referring to the Bride of Christ, who has become God's daughter through union with Christ.

Shirley's "woman-Titan" is a bride without blemish, with a "robe of blue air... a veil white as an avalanche.... Her steady eyes... are clear – they are deep as lakes ... full of worship.... Her forehead has the expanse of cloud and is paler than the moon" (304). Initially, Brontë presents this divine image praying on the moors, eyes full of prayer, suggesting a saintly

divine figure whose mind is always seeking God. As Caroline prompts Shirley to enter the church, Shirley replies:

I will not: I will stay out here with my mother Eve... I love her – undying mighty being! Heaven may have faded from your brow when she fell in paradise; but all that is glorious shines there still. She is taking me to her bosom, and showing me her heart. Hush, Caroline! You will see her and feel her as I do, if we are both silent (304).

Throughout the Bible, God's chosen are referred to as God's daughters or the Bride of Christ yet Christianity was most commonly expressed through traditional classical values. Believing conservative Evangelical 'worship ignorantly', Brontë resurrects Christ's message of love and reminds Victorians that the holy church of God is like a chaste virgin (162).

Brontë's poetic vision may operate outside orthodox Anglican piety but not in opposition to Christ. On the contrary, her poetic vision focalizes Christ's divinity. Taylor notes that many of feminist dissenters opted for a "reinterpretation of the Puritan code.... If it was not exactly a secular creed, it was a Godless one... [in which] paradise moved down from the mists of heaven to co-operative communities in Britain" (157). Taylor's remark highlights key differences between Barmby's secular creed and Brontë's dissent. The subject of Barmby's poem is described as "Human Goddess," "Woman-Saviour," and "Bride unto Humanity." Each designation replaces Christ as redeemer and appears to be an attempt at a female new religion. Brontë uses the term "woman-Titan" whereas Barmby uses "Woman-Saviour." The strategic use of capitalization is also telling of their priorities. Barmby consistently capitalizes words that note the subject's gender as well as her divinity. However, Brontë capitalizes the terms noting the subject's saintly or divine qualities, but never gender.

Regardless, Barmby and Brontë work toward the same pragmatic goal as Wollstonecraft and Southcott. Taylor explains that the aim is the "unshackling women from the mythic rule of a patriarchal God... freeing them from the fate (and image) of Eve, but also breaking the Pauline

connection between feminine virtue and social dependency” (148). Shirley’s ‘titan vision’ attacks the problem of a patriarchal God from a nuanced understanding, one that assumes (correctly) that rampant misogyny was the by-product of classical myths and traditions, and the failure of most Evangelical sects to discern how scripture assumes tradition. Brontë appears to be siding with the Protestant reformer Philip Melancthon (1497-1560) who interpreted Paul as imitating Cicero (Eden 81). Categorically, Paul becomes a rhetorician responding to his audience instead of strictly preaching the message of Christ. Thus, Shirley’s sermon reclaims the image of Eve based on a dissenting, feminist, historicist hermeneutics. She emphasizes the role of women in relation to the Messiah and God’s prophecies in Genesis, the history of saints, the gendering of God’s chosen people as the “Bride of Christ,” and the pragmatic reality that all humans come from women therefore all women are human. In this way, Brontë presents a multi-layered titanic hermeneutic challenge to traditional patriarchal interpretations of scripture.

The Trial of Saint Paul

Brontë’s interest in ‘scandalous’ literature seems to be didactic. She argued that the best education for Christians included works from Shakespeare and Byron (Lodge 143-5), and personally recommended them with a word of caution: “These were great Men and their works are like themselves, you will know how to chuse the good and avoid the evil, the finest passages are always the purest, the bad are invariably revolting” (Smith 1:130). In *Shirley*, Shakespeare’s *Coriolanus* is mentioned several times as a means for Caroline to teach Robert Moore about the most effective way to interact with his subordinates (127). Clearly, Brontë understood that tragedy reveals truth and is best learnt vicariously. In the same letter, Brontë recommended several writers, poets, historians, and philosophers including: Milton, Thomas, Pope, Campbell,

Wordsworth, Southey, Johnson, Hume, Rollin, and Smollett (Smith 1:130). Her list of authors is peculiar for a woman living in rural England during the mid-nineteenth-century, and not the typical authors of religious magazines, fiction, or pamphlets preferred by most Victorians. Regardless, this letter provides a glimpse of how Brontë may have interpreted scripture.

Her father Patrick was Oxford educated and owned several works by the authors previously listed (Glen 19). Brontë not only had the opportunity to read these texts multiple times but access to a very competent, Christian educator and guide. Important lessons learnt from these texts seem to form the compound from which her ‘spiritual vision’ grows. Patrick’s opened minded views toward literature, despite his Evangelical affiliation, reflects the mindset of most university graduates. Susan Gallagher explains that Patrick’s support and involvement in the Broad church movement was due to his Arminian Methodist convictions. Specifically, he believed Christ died for the sins of all humanity and that no or individual or group could overturn the gift of grace through Christ’s sacrifice on the cross (63). Brontë view toward education and the atonement were likely the result of her father’s influence.

Brontë’s framework for examining the role of subjectivity in constructing knowledge parallels the dialectical reasoning employed by classical philosophers (Bizzell 169). She appears to aligns the protagonist Shirley with Isocrates, an anti-foundationalist and contemporary of Plato and Aristotle. Unlike Plato and Aristotle, Isocrates was studied by European scholars for his ideas regarding the purpose of education and his belief in ‘probable knowledge’ (Bizzell 33). Moreover, Isocratic notions of “probable knowledge” appear to shape many of Southcott’s ideas about the role of women in the Bible, and Shirley interrogates patriarchal interpretations of scripture shortly after her sermon using the Socratic method.

In Brontë's canon, her protagonists turn patriarchal interpretations of scripture on their heads by adopting a rational, historical detached point of view anchored to personal experience. They interpret the Bible with a critical eye, attempting to explain 'probable' interpretations of scripture and separating them from dogmatic interpretations. For example, Shirley questions the claim that Paul or any man, could speak on behalf of God, and utilizes the simple but compelling rhetoric of Joanna Southcott. Although Southcott is not explicitly named in *Shirley*, her patriarchal doppelganger, Joe Scott, is endowed with her initials and a very similar name. Joe Scott can be read as the hermeneutical inversion of Southcott, and stresses the overarching argument made by Shirley: interpretations empower men when men alone interpret the bible, but when read by women, the 'word of God' takes on new meaning, empowers women, and unshackles them from patriarchal tyranny.

In *Theory and Method on the Study of Religion* (2003), Mircea Eliade argues that "the historian of religions is forced by his hermeneutical endeavour to "relive" a multitude of existential situations and to unravel a number of presystematic ontologies" (172). Rosalind Shaw contends that feminist scholarship values historicism as it provides the opportunity to reveal the difficulties of eradicating male bias in religion (172). As Shirley challenges Joe to consider the rhetorical situation of St. Paul's speech, to that 'certain type' of Christians (Romanised Greeks), she engages in a feminist, historicist hermeneutics.

Shirley tests the foundation of Joe's worldview, using the Socratic method to establish a probable truth, querying, "Joe, do you seriously think all the wisdom in the world is lodged in male skulls?" (311). Joe deflects her question with a reference to St. Paul:

[Joe]: I've great respect for the doctrines delivered in the second chapter of St Paul's first Epistle to Timothy.... Let the woman learn in silence.... I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man... For the man was first formed, then Eve"

[Shirley]: What has this to do with the business?

[Joe]: And, Adam was not deceived; but the woman, being deceived, was in transgression.

[Shirley]: More Shame to Adam to sin with his eyes open! (311).

Joe is the type of person Shirley warned Caroline about in their previous conversation about the mermaid figure. In classical cultures, Greek myth often dehumanize women. In Victorian Britain, this trend continued with the blessing of St. Paul.

William Farmer explains that the vast majority of Christ's sermons were not recorded in real time but decades after his death: "For almost a generation the memories of Christ' life and his teachings were kept by oral traditions.... Paul might have been the first Christian missionary to ... [write] letters to the Church communities under his care" (110, 111). The Gospels are suspect in terms of the degree to which they accurately reproduce Christ's teachings. After Joe demonstrates an inability to accurately interpret scripture, Shirley's primary apprehension of interpretation concerns the identity of the interpreter, and Caroline joins the discussion:

[Caroline]: You allow the right of private judgement... Joe?

[Joe]: My certy, that I do! I allow and claim it for every line of the holy Book.

[Caroline]: Women may exercise it as well as men?

[Joe]: Nay: women is to take their husbands' opinion, both in politics and religion: it's wholesome for them....

[Shirley]: Consider yourself groaned down... for such a stupid observation. You might as well say, men are to take the opinions of their priests without examination... a religion so adopted ... would be mere blind, besotted superstition (312).

By denying women the right to interpret the Bible, women's experiences stood at odds with the national and religious values of Victorian Britain, outside the English Protestant prerogative of private judgement. Thus, conservative Evangelical denominations made women spiritual exiles.

The second aspect of interpretation is rhetorical, and concerns the audience's role in developing and constructing meaning. Joe asks Shirley and Caroline how they interpret Timothy:

[Joe]: And what is your reading of ... o' St Paul?

[Caroline]: I account for it in this way: he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under particular circumstances; and besides ...if I could read

the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether. It would be possible...with a little ingenuity, to give the passage quite a contrary turn; to make it say, "Let the woman speak when ever she sees fit to make an objection...it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace" and so on.

[Joe]: That will n't wash, Miss.

[Caroline]: I dare say it will. My notions are dyed in faster colours than yours, Joe. Mr Scott, you are a thoroughly dogmatical person (312).

The debate between Shirley and Joe exemplifies the discrepancy between rational and dogmatic belief. As Perelman explains, "ordinarily a spoken or written discourse... combines a great number of arguments with the aim of winning the adherence of the audience.... The arguments interact with the minds of the audience" (Bizzell 1400). Since Paul bore the responsibility of preaching to non-Jews, it was Paul, not Christ, who rejected Mosaic laws to make Christianity more palatable (Farmer 53). The disagreement between Joe and Shirley is never resolved but Brontë gives Shirley that last word and she reminds Caroline (Brontë's audience) that we are all products of our environments (314). Here, Brontë appears to be echoing the Protestant theorist Matthius Flacius Illyricus. In *Clavis Scripturae Sacrae* (1567), Flacius argues that if the scriptures are not properly understood, the interpreter lacks sufficient knowledge and a proper education (Mueller 2).

Pyper argues that feminist Christian critics often "sought to let the voices of silence speak, to read out the suppressed stories of women from the patriarchal language of the biblical text" (34). Hence, a feminist Gospel becomes the next logical step. The Gospel of Shirley addresses how the church should function through the imagery of five entities: four saints and the bride of Christ. Her emphasis on the number five may seem trivial but creates the space for a fifth Gospel. Consider the argument made by Bishop Irenaeus of Lyons Gaul around 180 CE:

It is not possible that the Gospels can be either more or fewer in number... since there are four zones of the world... four principal winds, and since the church is scattered throughout the whole world ... it is fitting that we should have four pillars breathing out immortality all over and reviving men. From this it is evident that the Word, the Artificer of all, He that sits upon the cherubim has given us the Gospel under four aspects.... For the scripture says, "The first living creature was like a lion," ... symbolizing his leadership and royal power; the second was like a calf, signifying his sacrifice... "but the third has, as it were, the face of a man," an evident description of his advent as a human being; "the fourth was like a flying eagle," pointing out the gift of the spirit hovering with his wings over the church. And therefore the Gospels are in accord with these things among which Jesus Christ is seated... For the living creatures are quadriform and the Gospels are quadriform... For this reason were the four principal covenants given to the human race, one, before the flood, under Adam; the second, after the flood, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law under Moses; the fourth, that which revives man and sums up all things by means of the Gospel (A .H. 3.11.8-9).

Irenaeus's exemplifies the thought of the early church, as his reasoning for why the Gospels must remain 'quadriform' was widespread. His argument is strikingly similar to the imagery created by Shirley in the opening lines of her sermon. Like Mr Sympson, who puts his faith in the fish-tailed Dagon, Irenaeus puts his faith not in God but mythical creatures and superstition.

Conversely, Shirley places her faith in God who moves her to create a spiritual vision that focalizes women's role in facilitating humanity's salvation through Christ. The 'woman-Titan' imagery counters the view of God as four aspects by Irenaeus through the image of a titan Eve and her four Greek titan sons. While Irenaeus makes mention to the four areas of the globe, he neglects the globe as a whole, an oversight corrected by Shirley's constant reference to nature and reflects Brontë's belief that God is in nature.

The addition of a fifth Gospel would have been crossed the line between dissent and heresy in the nineteenth-century, even though the four contradictions of the Gospels were common knowledge among the educated elites. In fact, Biblical scholars have long recognized the set of contradictions in the Gospel and is addressed in "Muratorian text." While we cannot be certain who wrote the Muratorian text, the author(s) were aware of these contradiction, noting:

“though various rudiments are taught in the several Gospel books, yet that matters nothing for the faith of believers, since by the one guiding Spirit everything is declared in all concerning ...the birth, the passions... resurrections ... and two comings” (Gamble 32). In other words, the faithful only need to believe Christ is the Messiah and understand how this affects their spirituality, for ‘true faith’ is not found in a book. Shirley follows this line of reasoning by not directly attacking or criticizing the four contradictions of the Gospels. Instead, she and the narrators remain critical of characters who adhere to a dogmatic interpretation scripture, the types of people who would dogmatically oppose the addition of a fifth Gospel.

Hence, Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ should be measured in terms of the degree to which it remains Evangelical, not Anglican. Looking back on the century, Gladstone tried to characterize the Evangelical movement of the nineteenth-century thusly: “It aimed at bringing back, on a large scale, and by an aggressive movement, the Cross, and all the Cross essentially implies” (Gladstone 207). Gladstone’s strikes close to the mark if we accept that the cross meant different things to different dissenting groups. Comparatively, David Bebbington’s defines mid-nineteenth-century Evangelicals as any Protestant individual or group beholden to all four of the following tenets: conversionism, the belief that lives need to be changed but not necessarily baptised; activism, the expression of the gospel in effort; biblicism, a particular regard for the Bible; crucentrism, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (3). Each tenet can take a different shape or meaning within an Evangelical group, but all four elements must be present for a belief system to be classified as ‘Evangelical’.

Shirley’s sermon fulfills all four tenets of Bebbington’s definition. First, she examines the Gospels and Genesis close enough to bring them into harmony via that pact between Eve and God that brought forth a Messiah (biblicism). Her Gospel is founded upon a belief in Christ’s

divinity and role as Redeemer for humanity (crucentrism). She remains outside the church because she is called to act (activism) on her reading of scripture, moved by the spirit of God and her desire to seek the kingdom of God. Last, she is intent on bringing Caroline to the ‘true’ religion (conversionism). In closing her sermon, she says:

I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature. I love her – undying, mighty being! Heaven may have faded from her brow when she fell in paradise; but all that is glorious on this earth shines there still. She is taking me to her bosom and showing me her heart. Hush, Caroline! You will see her and feel her as I do if we are both silent (304).

Nature becomes their alter, providing closer access to God and the space for private mediation and worship. After delivering a fiery sermon, Shirley encourages an outdoor alter call.

Jay argues that scenes like this were standard practice in the ‘religion of heart’. She explains that the “short-lived nature of some conversions affected at revivals where spiritual activity was felt to be worked up rather than prayed down was a major factor in the Evangelical distrust of revival” (61). The heart is key to understanding Evangelical faith, and was viewed as the source of wickedness or divine love. During the Victorian period, one of the most famous paintings of Christ depicted him holding a lamp and knocking at a door. Allegorically, the lamp is the light of God, Christ is the truth, and the door represents the heart of a potential convert as they decide whether to let Christ into their life (Jay 47). Thus, Shirley’s and Caroline’s thoughtfulness and meditations following this sermon reflect a genuine religious experience in nineteenth-century England.

Even if we accept Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ to be categorically ‘Evangelical’, there is the matter of the woman-Titan’s identity. Toni Wein argues that characters, figures, and concerns in Brontë’s novels migrate from one text to the next. As the divine female figure migrates from *Jane Eyre* to *Shirley*, she goes from the representation of the ‘true God’ to the representation of the

‘true religion’. By obscuring her identity, her womanhood is foreground in a way otherwise impossible. The closest direct association between divinity and womanhood occurs in the narrator’s comments regarding Caroline’s interpretation of the sermon “Shirley had mentioned the word ‘mother:’ that word suggested to Caroline’s imagination not the mighty and mystical parent of Shirley’s vision, but... the form she ascribed her own mother; unknown, unloved, but not unlonged-for” (305). As Virginia Woolf implores us to think through our mothers, this strategy becomes a prudent method for interpreting Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’.

Brontë’s mother, Maria Branwell, died when Brontë was only five. Brontë was thirty-three when *Shirley* was published and, soon after the novel’s release, Brontë tried to discern her mother’s personality. Writing to her friend Ellen, Brontë shares an incredibly personal reflection: “There is a rectitude, a refinement, a constancy, a modesty, a sense, a gentleness about them indescribable. I wish she had lived and that I had known her” (Smith 2:237). Brontë most likely felt this sentiment while writing the novel. In *Shirley*, Brontë’s tendency to think through her mother finds expression via Caroline’s private reflections on Shirley’s sermon. Brontë veils the identity of the divine woman in Shirley’s sermon through vague language but also misdirecting the reader through Caroline’s pragmatic worldview. Caroline’s interpretation allows Brontë to anchor her dissenting, feminist, historicist view of life for women in mid-nineteenth-century England. Thus, Caroline functions as the means by which Brontë addresses the ontological aspects of the ‘woman question’, whereas Shirley functions as the means by which Brontë attends to higher spiritual truths. In tandem, their exchange addresses the cause, symptoms, and cure for and of women’s oppression.

Moreover, Brontë was likely thinking ‘through her mother’ as she read Psalm 68:5. Just as the Psalms in *Jane Eyre* facilitates Jane’s growth into the Gospel, in *Shirley*, Psalms facilitates

Brontë's reconceptualization of God. This revelation comes through the narrator's depiction of Caroline's private meditations on Shirley's sermon:

The longing of her childhood filled her soul again. The desire which many a night had kept her awake in her crib, and which fear of its fallacy had of late years almost extinguished, relit suddenly, and glowed in her heart: that her mother might come some happy day, and send for her to her presence – look upon her fondly with loving eyes, and say to her tenderly... 'Caroline, my child, I have a home for you: you shall live with me. All the love you have needed, and not tasted, from infancy, I have saved for you carefully. Come! It shall cherish you now' (305).

Psalm 68:5 tells us that God is a father to the fatherless and defender of widows. John 14:2, Christ tells his followers that his father's house has many rooms and that he has prepared a place for all believers (NIV). As she read the Bible, Brontë likely configured her mother in scripture.

Brontë's *Shirley* provides a new mindset for women toward the divine, one that replaces oppression with love, myth with history, portrays women as saints, and stresses the importance of female Evangelical solidarity echoed in the creed "sisters to immortality." Seemingly in response to Charlotte Elizabeth Tonna's *Truth and Falsehood* (1841), which calls on orthodox Evangelicals to take a stand against those critical of the Bible, Brontë throws her powerful imagination and superior intellect against the dogmatic views of mainstream religion. This is apparent in Shirley's description of Eve, when she claims, "heaven may have faded from her brow when she fell from paradise; but all the all that is glorious shines there still" (304). As the light shines gloriously on the church and the tomb stones, we get a sense that Shirley is referring to 'all that is glorious' as the body of Christ.

Shirley's Gospel is motivated by the need for religious reforms that set reasonable limits on the interpretation of St. Paul's spiritual vision, as she laments:

I wonder people cannot judge more fairly of each other and themselves. When I hear... chatter about the authority of the Church, the dignity and claims of the priesthood, the deference due to them as clergymen; when I hear the outbreaks of their small spite against Dissenters; when I witness their silly narrow jealousies and assumptions...

traditions, and superstitions... their insolent carriage of the poor, their often base servility to the rich, I think the Establishment is indeed in a poor way, and both she and her sons are in need of reform (349).

Brontë seems to be cognizant of the fact that changes in doctrine have little effect unless the message of this Gospel is harnessed by a movement that puts humanity before dogma. The Bible was supposed to bring people closer to God, but hermeneutic differences turned high Anglicans against low, Protestants against Catholics, men against women, Christian against pagan, England against France - "All that surrounds him hastens to decay: all declines and degenerates under his sceptre. *Your* God is masked Death." Thus, to Brontë, conservative Evangelicals were unknowingly acting out classical pagan modalities while masquerading as Christians, and this leads to her call for reform: "Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!" (285).

CHAPTER 4

Villette and the Spiritual Vision of Historical Allowance

*“[Those] enquiring into the exploits and adventures of their ancestors commonly exercises regret that the history of remote ages should always be so much involved in obscurity, uncertainty and contradiction...that the history of past events is immediately lost or disfigured, when intrusted to memory and oral tradition.... All ancient writers agree in representing the first inhabitants of Britain as a tribe of Gauls or Celtae, who peopled the island from the neighbouring continent. Their language was the same, their manners, their government, their superstition; varied only by those small differences, which time or communication with the bordering nations must necessarily introduce” – David Hume, *The History of England**

In 1851, Scottish ethnologist Sir Daniel Wilson declared that archeology had become “an inseparable link in the circle of sciences” (Wilson xii). The first edition of *Villette* (1853) was published less than two years after Wilson’s declaration. Amid a torrent of new archeological evidence, and encouraged by the possibility of new discoveries, the imagination of British historians expanded to incorporate ancient Celtic and Saxon kingdoms. Thomas Wright, founder of the British Archeological Association, exemplifies this sentiment:

Our modern cottage is a copy... of the mansion of the Anglo-Saxon chieftain, and if only the remains of the cottager’s residence were reduced to the bank and ditch ... we should have a diminutive example of those earthworks which formed the four walls of the dwelling-place of the Saxon chieftain, and which now puzzle eager antiquarians, and give rise to dreams of Celtic kings and prehistoric peoples (Wright 464).

Wright’s vision may have been encouraged by the discovery of new artifacts, but he was nonetheless participating in a longstanding English tradition. Marian Gibson argues that the ability to think in two or more imaginative worlds was one of the hallmarks of all great English writers. (41). Refusing to write another romance or historical fiction, Brontë’s *Villette* participates in this tradition through a new genre known as the ‘place myth’.

The emergence of the ‘place myth’ reflects changes in Victorian attitudes toward history. Maura Coughlin notes that mid-nineteenth-century European historians reproduced the

past to “reconstruct the complex ways that geographic locations intersected with the production of cultural representations.... Thus a landscape and its cultures are always intertwined in historically contingent process of representation, performance and interpretation” (130). In *Villette*, the religious superstition, rituals, and festivals produce a fruitful slippage in which the Celtic and classical pasts are acted out within Catholicism. Within Brontë’s oeuvre, *Villette* is the most ideologically driven and the least spiritual in vision. Lucy Snowe’s quest for truth is overshadowed by tensions between Catholics and Protestants, dissenting groups, Celts and Anglos, pagans and Christians. As Brontë’s ‘woman-Titan’ in *Shirley* migrates to *Villette*, she is renamed the ‘Titaness’ and Shirley’s divine revelation is replaced by Lucy’s imagination. The result is a ‘spiritual vision’ as mythic as ‘Labassecour’. If *Shirley* is Brontë’s exploration of mid-nineteenth-century dissent, *Villette* is her examination of how mid-nineteenth-century views of history informs religious and national identities (Lawson 925).

The notion that Brontë’s *Villette* functions as a ‘place myth’ is writ large in the title. The word ‘villette’ comes from the Latin ‘vilar’ meaning village and, is temporally and etiologically ambiguous. “Villette” could reference the Celtic, classical, or Catholic past as all three eras contain pastoral landscapes. Coughlin argues that from the French Revolution onward, travellers to Brittany (France) identified the Bretons as the last ‘pure’ Celtic group, often noting the “biblical quality” of the traditional Celtic way of life that was absorbed and replaced by medieval Catholics (131). One of the best examples of ‘place myth’ was written by Jules Michelet in 1844. In his examination of different neolithic structures in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Brittany, Michelet credited these works to an ancient ‘druidical’ civilization (133), and claimed they were sites of haunting. Coughlin points out that late medieval religious structures, with scenes of the *danse macabre*, occupy a similar cite of haunting in Gothic and early Victorian literature (134).

Although *Villette* can be read as Brontë's Protestant foray onto the Roman Catholic French-speaking continent, it can also be read as an exploration of Brontë's personal history which parallels the national history of England through a shared Celtic origin.

Chris Manias explains that Victorian ideas of the past had a direct link to "national politics, empire and social development. Yet understandings of the movement of history ... were frequently subject to debate, with a strong tension between two narrative models" (49). Manias identifies the 'migratory' mode and 'civilizational' mode - colloquially known as the 'progress narrative' - were the two popular historical narratives during the nineteenth-century. While these modes are not exclusive, Manias notes that the migratory mode contextualized the history of England as waves of successor kingdoms that subjugated the native Bretons (Rollin xii). Conversely, the progress narrative focalized 'universal phases' of civilization, beginning with barbarism and moving toward the modern.

Most introductions to *Villette* cite Robert Knox's *The Races of Men* (1850), and Darwin's *Origins of the Species* (1859) as works that infuse English national identity with racist notions and influence Brontë's fiction (49). However, Brontë died years before Darwin published his influential work, openly preferred the 'migratory' mode of history, and remained skeptical toward progress. For example, in *Shirley*, Brontë depicts Moore's mill as the 'tower of Babel', one that unleashes a plague upon the earth (Glenn 136). Additionally, both Darwin's and Knox's influential pieces reinforce the 'civilizational' mode and operate outside the biblical past.

Hume's introductory quotation represents the 'migratory' mode. Brontë enjoyed Hume's work so much, she recommended it to her friend Ellen Nussey. As a Scot and cultural outsider, Hume had cause to show England's shared Celtic ancestry with those cultures on its borders. Likewise, Brontë belonged to an ancestry stereotyped as 'Celtic'. Brontë's grandfather,

Hugh Punty, was born around Drogheda in Ireland. He was adopted as an infant and grew up in Northern Ireland during the 1760s (Chitham 408). Hugh's hometown in County Down consisted of multiple cultural enclaves of Scots and Anglos among a predominantly Irish Catholic population. The most common beliefs consisted of an infusion Celtic folklore and Roman Catholicism. Although Brontë's ancestry is not well documented prior to the eighteenth-century, she was most likely the descendant of generations of poor Irish farmers affiliated with a variant of Roman Catholicism infused with Celtic folklore (Chitham 403). Hugh's first language was Gaeltacht; he was a notable storyteller in the Celtic tradition, and claimed no religious affiliation (Chitham 409). However, Brontë's father was raised Catholic by his mother, his first language was English, and he was affectionately dubbed 'Papish Pat' (403). In this theological bricolage, Patrick found few distinctions between superstition and piety. Nonetheless, he had ample exposure to the native Irish language, the tales of Cuchullainn, the Tain Bo, and other folklore.

Brontë's early works were often collaborations with her siblings and featured multiple words of Gaeltacht origin. For example, they use words such as "Glasstown" (Glas meaning Green), the Island of "Ula" (the anglicized spelling of Uladh meaning 'Ulster'), "Galdine" ('geall' meaning 'promise', and 'deen' is the anglicized spelling of 'daoine' meaning 'men') to list just a few (405, 406). Chitham and Constable note Brontë's awareness of her Irish ancestry in a drawing titled 'Temple of Shamrocks'. Chitham posits that these words and myths were likely taught to her by Patrick at the breakfast table (405). In *Villette*, Brontë's use of the Gaeltacht "keening" (meaning 'wailing') appears on the last page, and employs the wail of Banshee to represent the sound of wind blowing from the Southwest, the location from which Patrick's family supposedly hailed. In *Villette*, Brontë appears to be signaling her Celtic roots through the

English Protestant Lucy Snowe (407), destabilizing national and religious identities, and blurring the lines between Celtic and Christian, Protestant and Catholic, French and English.

Labassecour as Brontë's Belgium

In 1842, Brontë and her sister Anne travelled to Belgium. Sue Lonoff argues that their experience at the *pensionnat* boarding school in Brussels is writ large in *The Professor* and *Villette* (107). Brontë enjoyed her experience enough to return as a pupil in 1843. Lonoff notes Brontë's love for French language, art and, culture spurred her to these adventures (ibid). She suggests that the sisters were exceptionally shy but gifted and determined to learn as much as they could. Approximately thirty essays (written in French) survived and it seems Charlotte outpaced Anne in her acquisition of French and instruction on religion (108). Further, Lonoff explains that Brontë's progress was partly motivated by her affection for her tutor Mr. Heger, despite differences in age, religion, and language. In addition to theology, he taught them French Romantics and the classics. Brontë appears to have been attracted to Heger's intellect. He was the reason she stayed in Belgium long after Anne returned to England, until it was clear the affection was one sided (Smith 1:317).

The anti-Catholic charges against Brontë, for her depiction of Catholic characters in *Villette*, seems untenable. However, not all critics read Lucy Snowe's biases as a reflection of Brontë's beliefs. Micael Clarke observes that "Lucy's view of Catholicism is harsh, but is ... a representative of Protestant perspective on Catholicism, one that evolves beyond its initial narrowness but is never entirely repudiated, even as Lucy comes to love M. Paul" (975). Similarly, Lisa Wang suggests that the anti-Catholic rhetoric is necessary for Lucy's character development and "represents a pointed and effective means of working toward the infusion of

real theological content into the novel as whole” (343). Specifically, Wang examines the ‘interior journey’ of Lucy Snowe and how theological questions reflect personal eschatological exploration for spiritual truth that contemplates her past and place in the world (345). Clarke’s and Wang’s analyses recognize the personal spiritual journey that epitomised much of mid-nineteenth-century fiction (Maison 5). Wang explains that Celtic pagan holidays, traditions, and rituals were often absorbed by medieval Catholic holidays, traditions, and rituals (347). Building on Wang’s idea of ‘interior journey’, *Villette* seems to represent Brontë’s exploration of her Celtic origins beneath a Catholic past.

Kate Lawson notes the semi-autobiographical nature of *Villette*. She claims *Villette* is deliberately removed from all notions of ‘real’ history such that the protagonist/narrator is free to develop a psychological, personal, and invented history allows us to:

[...] investigate the fantastical construction of a nation within history.... Lucy’s complicated relationship with the real England, can be read as a meditation on the modes by which nations are imagined and on the ways in which the individual is confined or liberated by an interpellation into a specific imagined national identification. The opening paragraph immediately raises these issues (926).

She suggests, and I tend to agree, that British characteristics in *Villette* are shown to be imaginative and constructed. She notes that young Lucy refers to John as Celtic (not Saxon) and ‘unfaithful.’ After losing contact with John for several years, she unknowingly sees him again and tells us that John is so “British” she would follow him to the ‘world’s end’ (927). Lawson explains that with a foreign king, intricate history and desires for independence, Labassecour becomes the ‘national project’ Lucy Snowe discovers the artifice of national identity. Unlike *Shirley*, *Villette* puts the examination of Empire at a distance through the lens of an oppressed groups observed by a Protestant outsider.

Lawson's analysis of Lucy Snowe as human subject is superb. In every defining moment within Lucy's journey, Lawson provides an in-depth look at the interiority of Lucy's mind by highlighting the motivations behind certain behaviours. For example, she notes that Lucy's rejection of Miss Sweeney is enabled by Lucy's comparatively superior grasp on the English language 'proper', while Sweeney struggles with a convoluted accent that combines an urban Irish accent with the poor east London cockney accent. Lawson demonstrates the motives behind such a behaviour, stating "Lucy's rejection of Miss Sweeney directly correlates with her own desperate need to be 'placed'" (934). Further, Lawson notes that Lucy's inclination to cling to her "Englishness" is most pronounced after she loses her luggage, "her last material connection to England" (933). Moreover, Lucy's desire to be "English" intensifies as the nation fails to provide for her a home, a meaningful place within English society (Ibid). Lawson's keen insights provide the justification for a wider examination of how Victorians constructed their national and individual identities and histories.

Brontë uses the term Celtic in *Villette* to describe certain physical features and attributes of the characters in her fiction. What is curious is that the characters described as ostensibly "Celtic" transcend this identity and claim a life respectable by English standards. If *Villette* read along the lines of Robert Knox's theory, that the Saxon English were superior to Catholic Celts (Knox 150), then a character's Celtic ancestry should prevent any meaningful engagement in society. On the contrary, the 'Celtic' Dr. John prospers both professionally and personally, whereas the Saxon English Lucy struggles in all areas of life. Further, Mrs. Bretton (John's mother) is said to be of good breeding 'stock' despite her Celtic features. There is no denying Brontë's use of racially explicit terms, but her fiction draws attention to the artificially and socially constructed nature of such terms.

The principal surface tension in *Villette* is produced by the opposing views of Protestantism and Catholicism. However, Brontë's Protestant characters are not always talismanic of Protestant values or characteristic. The most superficial character is Ginevra, who, when asked about her religious affiliations, replies "They call me a Protestant, you know, but really I ... don't well know the difference between Romanism and Protestantism" (60). Superficial, flirtatious, malicious, callous, decedent, wasteful, lazy and manipulative, Ginevra is the exact opposite of what it is supposed to mean to be an English Protestant. Like the term 'Celtic', the phrase 'English Protestant' loses all meaning when applied Ginevra. Through these shallow and surface definitions, Brontë demonstrates how labels often mischaracterize human subjects whose behaviours are motivated by their internal desires and their environment, not national or religious identity. In this way, *Villette* appears to be carrying on the principal lesion of *Shirley*, that one must learn to distinguish what "seems" from what "is."

This impetuous for such a didactic message seems to be the increasing contact between English Evangelicals and Catholics. Micael Clarke notes that the Irish potato famine lead to an approximately seven-fold increase in the number of Catholics living in England in between 1840 and 1850. Fisher argues that during the nineteenth-century, the principle of "liberty" in England gave rise to the "individual rights" of many citizens, including Catholics. Although legal reforms did not have an ease tensions between various religious and cultural groups, the shift toward a secular liberal state was herald in by three major civil rights reforms: the first was granted to Dissenters in 1828, then to Catholics in 1829 (Chadwick 3), culminating in the Reform Bill of 1832, which in granted voting rights to a much greater portion of the Victorian populace (ibid). Most conservative Evangelicals living in the mid-nineteenth-century held the perception was that England was changing quickly in monumental ways (Froude 355).

Starting with the Oxford Movement in the 1830s, Victorian writers began to look to the history of saints, the unquestioned authority of the Church, and the seeming ‘stability’ of the social order of the medieval world (Fisher 7). Devon Fisher argues that during 1830s, the Oxford movement was forced to “resolve tensions between private judgement and collective memory” (68). He notes that English Protestant writers like Kingsley adopted the ‘medieval saints’ under the belief that European saints could have been Protestant. Fisher notes that to those outside Catholicism, ‘sainthood’ was believed to be a social construct not an objective truth, and, that prior to the Protestant reformation, Christians were confined to Catholicism (92-3). According to Fisher, Kingsley’s adoption of St. Elizabeth in *The Saint’s Tragedy* (1842) “pits the natural, inward goodness of Elizabeth of Hungary against the desire of Conrad, the Pope’s prelate, for the benefit of the church” (92). St. Elizabeth submits to her vows but dies of starvation and self-flagellation, realizing (too late) that self-abnegation does not serve God, nor benefit the church.

Similarly, Brontë’s oeuvre responds to the tensions between private judgement and collective belief, and appears to lean into the notion of a protestant saint but in a direct way. For example, Jane Eyre tells us she believes in ‘signs’ and ‘presentiments’, and relies on her own reading of these signs and scripture to discern God’s plan for her life. Like Kingsley, Brontë pits Jane’s desire to follow God’s plan against the will of both pagan (Rochester) and Protestant (St. John) men. In this regard, the protagonists Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe run parallel but share an inverse relationship. For instance, the Protestant saint Jane learns to accept God’s plan and is rewarded with a family and modest income. Conversely, Lucy is not able to discern God’s plan much less follow it. In *Villette*, Paulina’s piety mirrors Jane Eyre’s but is mocked by Lucy. As Paulina awaits her ‘father’s return’ Lucy tells us “I found her seated in a corner alone, her head in her pigmy hand, that room seemed to me not inhabited but haunted... I beheld her figure,

kneeling up right in bed, and praying like some Catholic or Methodist ... or untimely saint” (15). Lucy’s projects onto Pauline words that echo Christ’s last moments on the cross, “Why has thou forsaken men?” (25). She frames this scene as a haunting, which suggests her faith is more formulaic than sincere. Instead of praying for the child, Lucy’s thoughts are a preamble to a witch hunt.

In *Middlemarch* (1871), Eliot states “Who that cares much to know the history of man has not dwelt, at least briefly, on the life of Saint Theresa” (1:125). Saint Theresa (1515), also known as Teresa Avila, was the daughter of a wealthy Spanish merchant. After her father died, she was forced to give her inheritance to Church authorities. Despite this, she maintained her faith and believed the restrictions placed on her life were the designs of men not God. Teresa’s faith and brilliance left its mark on the world. Pointing out the corruption within the church, and a severe lack of piety among the congregation, Teresa established a system of prayer and reconceptualized Catholic piety by encouraging women to speak directly to God. She is like Jane Eyre, Shirley Keedlar and Paulina Home but dissimilar from Lucy (Jenkins 118). Confined to Catholicism, Teresa nonetheless embodies the Protestant belief in direct access to God, the right of private judgement, and used her faith to combat the will of Church authorities who demanded her execution after laying charges of heresy.

Instead of employing saints like Teresa, Victorian conformists wrote religious fiction that left women immured by men. In 1853, Brontë’s acquaintance Elizabeth Gaskell wrote her second novel. *Ruth* portrays acts of kindness as a form of redemption for fallen characters. Of the women writers publishing fiction in the 1850s, Gaskell’s work is desperately conformed to societal expectations. The acts of charity, which redeems Ruth, come from a Mr. Bradshaw who has declared that he stands with “Christ against the world” (93). In Gaskell’s works, women are

consistently rendered as dependent on men, not only for societal approval but as mediums to God. As a close friend of Brontë, some scholars assume the devours of Shirley depict a spiritual message like Gaskell's *Ruth*. However, Gaskell's desire for acceptance, and willingness to conform, was met with indignation from Brontë (Smith 3:142). The 'saints' motif employed by Gaskell was by no means improved the status of women, spiritually or ontologically.

Conversely, Jenkins points to the bold defiance of Florence Nightingale as the type of Protestant saint who did not look to men for empowerment but God. In 1852, Nightingale wrote that "Women [have] passion, intellect, and moral activity... and a place in society where no one of the three can be exercised ... unity between the woman as inwardly developed and outwardly manifested [no longer exists]" (30). As a social reformer who genuinely believed God spoke to her four times in her life, Nightingale might be the most accurate representation of a Protestant saint. Throughout her life she sought to serve God directly and more than resist the oppression women. Moreover, her desire to enact her faith and follow God's plan for her life, set in motion events that would lead to modern nursing becoming a profession (33). As a real-life example of how women in the mid-nineteenth-century were living their faith, Nightingale was bolder than Shirley, and more individualistic than Jane Eyre. While Brontë was not a cultural conformist, she was more sensitive to, though not controlled by, conventional beliefs.

The evidence that would position Lucy among these figures is not immediately apparent. Lucy's appears to believe in a God and the Bible, yet she does not receive divine revelation and the Bible is not a substitute for a relationship with God. Nonetheless, she relies on the religious teachings of her Protestant upbringing, namely unmediated access to God and the right of private judgement, which provide her autonomy but not faith. Her lack spiritual development is replaced by a better understanding of humanity. By emptying terms like

“Protestant,” “Catholic”, “pagan,” “Christian”, “English,” and “French” of conventional meaning, Brontë reveals how these stereotypes harm and divide humanity. Through a close examination of the self, the message of *Villette* seems to be that a person’s religious identity is, like their nationality, determined by where they happen to be born and their environment.

For example, Lawson explains that Lucy’s xenophobia is directly tied to her relationship with Anglicised-Celt, Dr. John Bretton (939). She suggests Lucy begins to recognize that having a place in the world matters more than national identity. The English stereotypes Lucy initially applied to Dr. John begin to destabilize as she teases out his superficial nature, saying “full well, do I know that Dr John was not perfect, anymore than I am perfect. Human fallibility leavened him throughout, there was no hour... I spent with him ... that he did not display something that was not of a god” (220). Lucy describes John as self indulgent, possessing a masculine ‘self-love’, and a cruel vanity. Like Milton’s Adam, Lucy’s emotional bitterness, at Dr. John’s rejection, influences how she feels toward him which alters her perception.

Only once she realizes that Dr. John is not interested in a romantic relationship does she consider a relationship with the French Catholic M. Paul. (940). Lawson argues that despite stereotyping M. Paul, he is nonetheless more ‘English’ in character and principle than Dr. Bretton. M. Paul is self-sufficient, provides for the needs of others, and sees through Lucy’s pretention. M. Paul exemplifies the English ideals of independence and liberation “despite his loyalty to the Catholic Church” (ibid). The novel’s ending reinforces this idea as M. Paul provides Lucy’s financial independence. Through his generosity and self sacrifice, M Paul becomes the closest character in the novel to Christ. His honest assessment, lack of pretension, and sincere faith allow him to observe the world with more clarity than Lucy. Even though Lucy criticizes Catholic priests for the ‘silly’ robes they wear, it is Lucy’s who is pretending to be

someone she is not, and her surface level observations prevent spiritual development. M. Paul criticizes Lucy for her mythic mindset, saying “you think like the very ravings of a third-rate London actor” (405). Lucy’s obsession with being able to view the world without being seen have placed an unhealthy investment in pretension. Given the choice, between pretension and reality, Lucy prefers the imaginative lens of a London actor, she continues to personify conception like “Reason” “Hope” and “Happiness” and refers to a young woman sitting in front of her as “like a fairy queen” (503).

The ‘Protestant’ Lucy appears to be living in a Shakespearean drama. She personifies concepts like “Reason” and “Will,” and refers to people as mythic beings. Realizing her imagination has been her ‘spirituality’ all along, she contemplates:

I underwent a presentiment of discovery, a strong conviction of coming disclosure. Ah! When my imagination runs riot where do we stop? ... hitherto I had seen this spectre only through a glass darkly; now was I to behold it face to face (512). I always, through my whole life, liked to penetrate the real truth; I liked seeing the goddess in her temple ... O Titaness amongst deities! ... define to us one trait (514).

This scene is sad but comical; Lucy believes she can see ghosts and is spiritual, but the ghost turns out to be a hoax. Lucy reveals her flawed perception when she laments that too few people are able to quickly ‘feel the truth’ (305). Her ‘spiritual’ vision is an imagination shaped by Shakespeare and classical myth. For example, she refers to Cleopatra as ‘Venus of the Nile’, and appropriates Othello’s final words to her articulate feelings of rejection: “I loved him well – too well not to smite out of my path even Jealously herself” (529). Despite being ‘Protestant’, Lucy’s faith acts out the classical myths reproduced in Shakespearean drama.

Through Lucy’s imagination, Brontë draws our attention to the “missing” spiritual ‘God the mother’ who is not configured within orthodox Evangelical belief. Heather Glen discusses the curious repetition of the first-person pronoun “I” as it occurs eight times in a single paragraph

in *Jane Eyre* (24). Glen argues that this repetition displays a shift in focus from the subjectivity of Jane Eyre's perspective to the objects within her environment. In *Villette*, Brontë's replaces the repetition of 'I' with the repetition of "godmother," and seven times in the first chapter. Her memory is so nebulous that details fade away and, as her godmother's appearance is not described, the image of a God mother is rendered through the repetition. Moreover, Lucy's hazy memory recalls that, through her association with her godmother, she had a place in the world: "my godmother, having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with who was at that time fixed my permanent residence" (8). Lucy is an orphan but, unlike Jane, she remembers belonging to a family. In *Shirley*, the reunification of Mrs Pryor with Caroline provides a narrative misdirect that pulls draws the reader's focus away from Brontë's spiritual vision toward the pragmatic. Here, the dichotomy between 'spiritual vision' and the narrative misdirect occurs through the juxtaposition of Lucy's dream-like memory and literal action Lucy depicts.

Lucy reveals that her godmother is Mrs. Bretton. The surname 'Bretton' points to the Celtic region and tribe located in North Western France. This group of Celts (Britons) successfully migrated to Southwestern England and Wales in the sixth-century, making them the dominant tribe on the island and endowing the region with their name.⁷ The narrator alludes to the connection between the familial-tribal and place: "Her husband's family had been residents there for generations, and bore, indeed, the name of their birth-place – Bretton of Bretton" (7). Her Godmother's last name serves as a reminder that all cultures are eventually lost to memory, and foregrounds this tribes matriarchal orientation. Brontë establishes - via Lucy's subjectivity - a women's spiritual history that harkens back to beliefs of the Celtic tribes but remains steeped in, what Griesinger refers to as, 'biblical feminism'. This history is similar to *Shirley's* feminist

⁷ <https://www.britannica.com/place/Brittany-region-France>

historicist hermeneutics. In addition, Lucy's memory reflects Brontë's hazy memories of Maria Brontë, and it is likely that Brontë is again gesturing toward the notion, that we must think through our mothers when contemplating the divine

Second, the godmother's origins are not clear, as Lucy states: "My godmother lived in a handsome house in the clean ancient town of Bretton.... Time always flowed smoothly for me at my godmother's side...like the gliding of a full river through a plain," (7). This atypical representation of time serves establishes another dichotomy between Lucy and Paulina. Unlike Lucy, Paulina remembers minutes details and events accordance with a chronologically sequencing (307). Her ability to accurately and chronologically catalogue time gives credence to her claim that the girl of seven (Paulina's seven-year-old self) lives within her present self at seventeen. Likewise, the cultural memories of a Celtic past still linger within the Victorian British self, or cultural memory, buried by the tides of history, but revived by mid-century authors and archeologists.

As embodiments of nations, the Scottish and French Paulina aligns with English national identity. On the contrary, Lucy embodies the unacknowledged fractured British culture of Celtic origin: that amalgamation of Celtic tribes, conquered by the Romans, absorbed by Roman Catholicism and excavated by Protestant England. In chapter twenty-one, tension between conscious reasoning and subconscious truths comes to the fore. M. Paul's criticism of Lucy, that she thinks like a third-rate London actor, is most evident in her internal, mental, and emotional struggle in the chapter twenty-one. Lucy's sojourn to her godmother's house provides temporary reprieve from the isolation of Villette but has ended, and she is forced to face the reality of her life's isolation. She quarrels with the plain facts of her situation, stating "Reason is vindictive as a devil" and is equated with the stereotypical "envenomed" step mother (256). In this scene,

“Imagination” is also personified along with “Help” and “Hope” who are in league with the divine forces of the universe, “A spirit, softer and better than “Human Reason” (256). Lucy’s pathological thinking has a crippling affect on her ability to cope with life, and her religion is left to attempt to fill a void it could never reasonable fill, “before this dark comforter... a patient journeying through the wilderness of the present, enjoying a reliance of faith...checking for a far-off promised land...never to be reached save in dying dreams” (257). Lucy’s longs to embrace an individualized spirituality, similar to Jane Eyre’s and Shirley’s, but has difficulty escaping the images and ideas of English literature and culture. Her Protestant musings are formulaic. Lucy’s criticism of Catholicism is unconvincing as there is no indication she has found ‘God’ or the ‘true’ religion.

In this scenario, history becomes the only spiritual home Lucy has ever known. The consistent references to godmother sadly reveal that the closest Lucy gets to experience a divine maternal love is the civility of the godmother and the place, or home, Mrs. Bretton can temporarily offer her. The novel’s ending leaves us with many uncertainties. In addition to M. Paul’s fate, Lucy’s character development, her realization that home is more important than nationality, and that piety is more important than religion, has not solidified as seems contingent on her financial needs being met by others. To the fatalist Lucy Snowe, the events of life are erroneously attributed to the sole making of God as if humans had no control over their own actions. The fatalists’ history, on both the personal and national levels, becomes the spiritual vision of historical allowance; the evidence for the belief of God’s love for the English rendered in the plain facts of England’s prosperity and imperial expansion. Likewise, the evidence for God’s ‘love’ of Lucy Snowe is M. Paul’s generous gift of a home.

A Faith in Flux

Heather Glen accepts Brontë's anti-Catholic claims in *Villette* at face value. She argues that millenarian language employed during the early Victorian period was by and large anti-Catholic, and since Brontë's use of similar language, her fiction must work toward the same end (282). Glen's analysis of 'the NUN' – the symbolic representation of Roman Catholicism – assumes that Lucy Snowe is Brontë 'ideal' English Protestant woman. Although there is a strong association between Babylon and Villette as sites of Godlessness, Lucy's lack of spirituality and genuine faith, creates a protagonist who fails to 'light' up Villette. Unlike Jane Eyre, whose light shines at the end of the novel, Lucy's 'light' never shines. This suggests that Lucy is not the exemplar Protestant woman but the typical conservative Evangelical whose worldview is problematic if the goal is to, as it is rendered in Shirley's Sermon, seek first the kingdom of God. That is to say, *Villette* is Brontë's critique of the problems of Protestantism and Catholicism. While I tend to agree with the view that the millenarian language is critical of Roman Catholicism, Brontë's use of the 'place myth' offers more than a critique of popery. The festivals, spectres, and the Celtic and classical myths, all find expression within a worldview that is as Shakespearean as it is millenarian. As 'place myth', *Villette* showcases a broad view of history: layered beneath Protestant England is a rich history of a Catholic Britain informed by the rituals and traditions Celtic and classical cultures.

Brontë's greatest misdirection is, perhaps, leading us to believe Lucy Snowe represents an honest appraisal of Brontë's spiritual vision. While Lucy presents a strong critic of Catholicism, M. Paul receives divine revelation, and provides saintly advice to Lucy not vice versa (541). On a pragmatic level, M. Paul represents an ideal Christian. His faith, like all saints, grants a sturdy, independent spirit, indifferent to how others view him. As a devout Christian, he

is emblematic of the Catholic St. Isadore and the Oxford Movement's notion of a Protestant saint. Brontë's saintly portrayal of M. Paul creates a fruitful slippage between Roman Catholicism and Anglican Piety that is often overlooked and suggests that her views were considerably influenced by the Oxford Movement. Chadwick provides a distilled explanation for the Oxford Movement's use of history and saints, and the response of its leaders toward changes in early nineteenth-century culture:

The Oxford Movement was against the big swing of Reason as the Age of Reason understood it.... There is little in common, of religion, between Keble and Goethe... the skeptics of Hume and Kant, the romantic novelists and poets, the new historians... the Evangelical or pietistic theologians.... The leaders wanted to find a place for the aesthetic or poetic judgement; their hymnody shared in feelings and evocations of the romantic poets; they wished to find a place and value for historical tradition, against the irreverent or sacrilegious hands ... whom no antiquity was sacred.... (Chadwick 2).

The increase in secular poetry and fiction, the growing dissent amongst Evangelicals, and the rise of Catholicism in England must have certainly felt to conservative Protestants that their world was coming to an end. One could argue that the Oxford Movement was outwardly 'Catholic' during the years in which most Evangelicals shared some of the strongest anti-Catholic sentiments. There was a renewed faith in history and tradition, a focus on prayer to any creed, an earnest theoretical dogma could enable men to become saints (Chadwick, 1-2). As the Victorian world began to experience rapid cultural change, the Oxford Movement tried to offset the effects through a unified and venerated history.

Brontë adopts these tenets but applies them through a female perspective in which obedience to God grants autonomy, and rejecting Kingsley's version of the Protestant saint. Lucy Snowe's Protestant saint qualities are most notable in the porous lens, or worldview, she adopts. However, the question remains: to what degree is she a saint if the traditional role of the saint is to ward off evil forces attempting influence the course of humanity or haunt a community (Fisher

8)? This narrow definition of a 'saint' ignores the possibility that Lucy is her own saint, responsible for using her imagination to fend off despair. Yet, if we compare Lucy Snowe's tentative 'saint' status to Jane Eyre's or Shirley's, there are considerable differences.

The degrees to which Lucy and Jane represent traditional notions of 'saint' directly affects the narrative trajectory in each novel. Jane adopts more of a Protestant saint status in that she learns about God through personal revelation, divine logos, dream vision, and constant prayer. Eventually, Jane begins to exhibit a growth into the Gospels by placing her relationship with God before all others. Thus, 'St. Jane' becomes all that her cousin St. John is not, willing to turn her back on society if it is God's plan, never operating from a place of ego or ambition. Moreover, Jane's understanding of God is one untethered to a patriarchal construction of God the Father. On the contrary, Jane's God is maternal yet, as discussed in chapter 2, this view of God nonetheless places a belief in Christ at the centre of her spiritual paradigm. Inversely, Lucy does not experience God the mother through divine logos nor any God or any divine wisdom. From beginning to end, the narrative trajectory is correlated to circumstance and Lucy's pathological and fanciful frame of mind. For Lucy, the notion of God the mother comes through a vague personal history that mirrors aspects of Britain's national history, one that relies on a dialectical misdirection and exploits a fruitful slippage between history, tradition, and religion through the repetitive use of the term "godmother."

The narrative trajectory of *Jane Eyre* and *Villette* provide a meaningful context for understanding the different roles of 'St. Jane' versus the skeptic Lucy Snowe. Unlike Caroline and Shirley, both Jane and Lucy begin their lives as orphans and persist through many trials attempting to find a 'home' or place in their world. As mentioned earlier, Brontë's *Jane Eyre* was largely a success because it adhered to the Victorian generic conventions of Romantic

fiction, the orphan Jane adopts middle class values, a sense of piety through the Psalm and her growth into the Gospel, achieves financial and social status through an inheritance and gets married in accordance with God's will. Conversely, God is absent Lucy's life and *Villette* largely ignores Victorian conventions for romantic fiction. Lucy sleeps with a Bible under her pillow and engages in a way of life that appears to be more Catholic, her faith is based on religion and history, more so than personal knowledge of the divine.

Toward the end of the novel, Lucy's 'Godless' Protestant stripes reveal a certain indignation at the suspicion she might not 'saved', to which she replies, "I am not unchristian... you believe in God and Christ and in the Bible as I do" (462). Sadly, this is the sum total of Lucy's faith, a sincere belief in God (undefined), Christ (not personally known) and the Bible (not a substitute for faith). Understandably, Pere Silas tests the spiritual legitimacy Lucy's faith, asking "Do you receive divine revelation?" (463). Lucy does not inform the reader of her response, but we learn that Père Silas considers all Protestants "irreverent Pagans" which would suggest that Lucy did not change his skepticism toward her 'Christian' faith. In stark contrast to Jane Eyre and Shirley Keedlar, Lucy Snowe is the only protagonist who does not experience genuine faith or walk with God. Hence, Lucy's nominal Protestant identity counts for nothing. Lucy does not achieve a place in the world but is given one by a prominent member of the church who, it is most often presumed, dies in a shipwreck.

However, Lucy's development is more religious and cultural. While she never develops a spiritual walk with God, and her growth into the Gospel remains indeterminate, she claims that all Protestant sects will likely be "fused into one grand Holy Alliance" (464). Lucy expresses the view of Patrick Brontë's Broad church movement, when she states "the guide to which I looked... must always be the Bible itself, rather than any sect, of whatever nation or name"

(ibid). This belief positions Lucy as her own priest and exemplifies the typical Protestant faith as the movement toward a priesthood of the people. Even as she condemns the leaders of the Catholic Church as “lover of power” (465), she learns to judge Catholics on an individual basis and is rewarded with financial independence via the Catholic M. Paul’s belief in self-abnegation and charity (536).

Critics have suggested that *Villette* is Brontë’s attempt at re-writing *The Professor*. While I agree with this sentiment, *Villette* also seems to be a ‘realistic’ version of *Jane Eyre*. The young Jane defies societal expectations, rejects the original role society assigned the hapless orphan, and is obstinate in her resistance to male authority. Through an unwavering faith in and commitment to God, Jane asserts her interpretation of God’s plan for her life onto the world. Conversely, Lucy is disconnected from God and, even as a youth, does not display the capacity to make her voice heard or influence the events in her life. She is always struggling with feelings of rejection, social anxieties and financial concerns as the external world refuses to fully accept her or provide a home. Lucy claims that she prays but relies on herself, not God, to navigate her world. Lucy’s melancholia and pathological existence are connected; she exists within the interior landscape of the images, thoughts, and feelings of her mind rather than actively engaging with the outside world.

Conversely, ‘St. Shirley’ finds her voice standing nearer to God and in a faith that galvanises Shirley to stand outside the church and preach dissent. Shirley’s dissenting view of scripture does not effect a miraculous transformation of marriage laws, and she is nonetheless contained within Victorian patriarchal expectations regarding marriage. However, her faith grows through fellowship with Mrs. Pryor and Caroline, a budding sisterhood that eventually includes a vision of God as a maternal loving figure. Moreover, at no point does the reader

wonder if Shirley or Caroline will have a home, as the big questions in *Shirley* concern the lack of professional options for women and the pernicious effects of a corrupt, unloving religion masked as Christianity. Thus, ‘St. Shirley’ reminds us that the struggle for women’s empowerment is not with God but against the tyranny of a patriarchal society.

Villette is the exploration of national and religious identities that exclude women. Lucy does not attain a sense of belonging with British society. Her faith is never more than imagination and her Protestant religion provides autonomy but not faith. Before departing from London, Lucy visits St. Peter’s Cathedral only to discover that the clouds obscure her vision, which suggests that while Lucy might nominally identify as English Protestant, she lacks the ability to see these identities as mere constructs. Lucy represents the typical English conservative Evangelical woman not the exemplar. Though negatively affected by Victorian Protestant attitudes toward women, she does not understand how systems of oppression work in tandem. The bitter realism of *Villette*, and Brontë’s refusal to follow conventions, is often attributed to the fact that it was written without the love and support of her siblings. Both her father and publisher urged her to conform to conventions. Brontë’s response to Smith was the following:

The spirit of romance would have indicated another course, far more flowery and inviting; it would have fashioned a paramount hero, kept faithfully with him, and made him supremely worshipful... but this would have been unlike real life – inconsistent with truth – at variance with probability (December 6 1852).

The story of Lucy Snowe is more than a statement about the ugly truth that life is constant struggle. As an expatriate, Lucy is free to adopt Catholic orthodoxy but remains Protestant despite not having any real connection to God.

Lucy’s saintly status stands parallel to her very average, unprivileged, religious but not spiritual life, the type of women that Reed argues likely felt had no option but to submit to patriarchal authority. Lucy’s sainthood is not measure by her life’s exceptionality but in the

intensity of her struggle to keep the faith despite a lack of connection to God. *Villette* is loosely based on Brontë's trip to Belgium in 1842. There, Brontë experienced the pain of unrequited love but eventually married the puseyite Bell Nichols, an Irish curate she found to be initially revolting and narrow minded. Likewise, Lucy's interest in Dr. John is not reciprocated; her unlikely union with a Catholic priest is not even considered by Lucy until the final few chapters, until she experiences a change in heart toward him produced by an awareness of his generosity and selflessness which alters her perspective.

This connection between faith and charity must be considered within the wider scope of Brontë's 'spiritual vision'. To suggest that Brontë's "proof of faith is charity without all's hypocrisy" (Taylor 184) is partially correct, and this view finds representation Jane's analysis of Mr. Blocklehurst, Shirley's charity to the impoverished community, and M. Paul's charity to Lucy. Critics like John Maynard believe Brontë was pagan, while others such as Glenn suggest Brontë was working to subvert the claims of Christianity. Critics such as John Peters, Thormählen, and Greisinger believe that Brontë's religious and spiritual beliefs operate within orthodox Anglican piety. If we put aside definitions of 'identity' and religious affiliation, there is a fruitful slippage between Maynard's view of Brontë, as working toward a female religion, and Peters' claim, that Brontë's faith is categorically Anglican. Peters is correct that Brontë took the sacrament, remained a loyal Church woman, and put Christ at the heart of her religious and spiritual beliefs. The 'pagan female new religion' Maynard identifies seems to me more likely Brontë's move toward reform via greater inclusivity of women, and to provide a healing voice, or Gospel, for women with that reformed religion.

Brontë's religious and spiritual identity was undoubtedly Protestant in terms of believing that the individual consciousness was the highest seat of authority, so long as that individual

consciousness was not contained within a logocentric worldview. Unlike Roman Catholics, who are forced to accept orthodox views lest they be deemed heretical, Evangelical dissenters tend to favour a Lockean view of religion, power, and spirituality. Like Brontë, Locke was deemed a heretic and a radical dissenter for his religious beliefs in spite of the fact that he took the sacrament and remained a loyal churchman his entire life (Taylor 144). Locke believed that the ‘true religion’ was could only be found by the individual and that, although religions and governments could use coercion to enforce belief, the use of force cannot bring a ‘believer’ to ‘true’ faith. He believed that institutions of power are motivated for power, not salvation, despite any claim to the contrary, and that only in the natural state the individual is free to develop a belief system for intrinsic reasons (145).

Henry Newman’s conversion to Roman Catholicism stemmed from a negative view of dissenters, that the dissenter believes that no person or authority can know God but them. Contrary to Locke, Newman felt that religion had the power to make people acknowledge religious arguments they could otherwise ignore. Newman’s criticism of dissenters points to what seems to be an internal contradiction within the Evangelical denominations (Chadwick 3, 54), a misperception the Broad church and Oxford Movements worked hard to correct. However, Brontë likely sided with Locke on this issue of power, and on what constitutes ‘true’ religion. Brontë’s feminist views are not so much radical as they are heterodoxic, and pushed for women to have access to England’s public sphere, the right to private judgement, to preach the word of God, and to develop their own faith outside of strict or narrow orthodox view beliefs. Susan Gallagher claims that Brontë employed a radical Protestant feminism, but this stands in opposition to Brontë’s claims; Charlotte made it abundantly clear that she had great reverence for religion, and she was a loyal Churchwoman until her death. I must take issue with this term

‘radical’ as she was a reformer and a progressive but not a revolutionary, never violent, and always strove to see the humanity in people like Joe Scott and M. Paul, to divorce ideas and beliefs from individuals.

Brontë’s dissent is uncharacteristic of Arian heretics or men like Edward Irving. As a devote Christian, she believed in the divinity of Christ, and this belief was central to her argument that women were the spiritual equals of men. A distinction must be made between heretic dissenters like the Unitarians, who reject Christ’s divinity and the atonement, and non-conformist Protestants like Brontë, who whole heartedly believed in the Arminian view of the atonement. Brontë’s dissenting views are not heretical but a nuanced, feminist, and inclusive spiritual vision that brings the Protestant faith to its most natural and logical conclusion.

To articulate Brontë’s ‘spiritual vision’ requires the acknowledgement that each novel reflects changes in her beliefs. The young but pagan Jane grows into the Gospels, producing a belief from which springs Shirley’s advanced creed of love, hopeful, and faith. Contrary to the Protestant work ethic, which *Shirley* condemns as superstition and the idolatrous worship of money, one’s faith and love for God was not to be tethered to material or personal success (Matthew 19:21). Although Lucy does not share Shirley’s spiritual vision, Shirley’s creed of love, faith, and hope remains as it migrates from *Shirley* to *Villette*. The stories of Saint Jane, Shirley, and Lucy demonstrates the inadequacies of unreformed orthodox Anglican beliefs. Their experiences allows readers to see the inextricable links between history and religion, tradition and piety, and pagan beliefs masquerading as Christian. Although the Protestant saints of Brontë’s novels experience different outcomes, they share a similar ‘spiritual vision’.

Proverbial Pulpits and Protestant Saints

During the eighteenth-century, the puritan belief that fiction was the devil's book prevented the dissemination of religious views via the novel. This view began to change in the first decades of the nineteenth-century as prominent members of the Oxford and Tractarian movements realized the potential of fiction to reach a wide audience. The popular London journal known as *Frazer's Magazine* (1830-1882) identified the fathers of Tractarian fiction as Rev. Williams Gresley and Rev. Francis Edward Paget (Maison 16). Gresley's *Portrait of the English Church* (1838) and *Charles Lever* (1841) established the hallmarks of religious fiction. For example, the use of saint and sinner stock characters, and protagonists that combine "deep thought" with "youthful ardour," "practical piety" and novels that advised Anglican youth to "shun the agreeable infidel and the accomplished profligate" (ibid). In Brontë's oeuvre, Jane Eyre shuns the agreeable infidel Rochester, *Shirley* portrays many curates as lazy profligates, and *Villette* promotes autonomy through a practical piety.

Margaret Maison argues that most mid-nineteenth-century religious novels promoted one of three beliefs: an orthodox Christian belief, a secular belief that employed Christian values to encourage social reform, or a non-conformist Christian belief (324). She contends that these genres were not rigid and some novels incorporated aspects of two or all three beliefs. She notes that writers of non-conformist religious fiction were rare and were usually assumed to be anti-Christian by their contemporaries. Among the authors of non-conformist religious fiction, Maison highlights the works of Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and Benjamin Disraeli (204). In contrast to the fiction of religious conformists Charlotte Tonna and Elizabeth Gaskell, these religious non-conformists clung to a particular set of Christian values, and positioned humanity as the possible saviour via social reforms or some aspect of the divine (289). For example, she

explains that Disraeli's *Tancred* (1847) infuses the ecstatic and sensual delights of a Wesleyan-style sermon paired with an urgent sense of the need for religious reform (324). Conversely, Dicken's *Oliver Twist* (1839) reveals how the greed and corruption of church and government officials, are indifferent to the Christian tenets of charity and hospitality. Within the Haworth context, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) both operate within the genre of non-conformist religious fiction albeit in separate ways. In *Wuthering Heights*, Heathcliff is constructed as the saviour figure for Catharine and vice versa; in *Jane Eyre*, Rochester is constructed as both infidel and convert but not as Jane's salvation. Instead, Jane's growth into the Gospels is facilitated by her reliance on God. Yet, both novels challenge social mores and conventional beliefs.

Marion contends that non-conformist novelists, who maintained their faith, were often champions of Arminianism teachings (187). Disraeli's *Tancred; or, The New Crusade* and Brontë's *Shirley* depict scenes that exemplify what Marion identifies as "New Testament Fiction" (326). She explains that this subgenre focuses on the individual's spiritual growth and, as they are tested through trials of faith, their experiences reinforce the 'truth' of the New Testament (327). Protagonist of this subgenre ultimate learn to seek a loving, active spiritual relationship with God. Maison's characterization of the subgenre "New Testament Fiction" accurately describes *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. Brontë's protagonists mature and experience biblical truth through the trials of life, trials that are so overwhelming that they must learn to rely on God. In fact, Brontë's protagonist *Shirley* might be most talismanic of this subgenre, especially in the move away from orthodox religion and toward the 'Holy Land'. In chapter eighteen, Shirley refrains from entering the church to commune with God in nature.

In *Jane Eyre*, the eponymous protagonist is the typical King David. Jane's solitary life as an orphan, and her mistreatment at the hands of her relatives reflects the solitary life of David and mirrors the mistreatment he received by his family. Jane's prayers echo David's in Psalms. Both Jane and David reject the original role society assigns them, and are empowered to do so through an unwavering faith in God. I would argue that both King David and Jane Eyre operate as saints. Fisher argues that a number of mid-century Victorians believed the concept of 'sainthood' was socially constructed not objective or divine truth. He argues that Catholic saints could have been Protestant because, before the reformation, all Christians were confined within Catholicism but commune directly with God. Building on Fisher's argument, I would contend that David and Jane's desire to love and commune directly with God, their battles against societal expectations, and their faith operate allows these figures to operate like St. Joan of Arc or St. Teresa. In other words, mid-century Protestants of England adopted the idea that sainthood was a way of life that could apply to individuals outside of Catholicism and Christianity so long as the individual prayed to the God of Abraham.

Moreover, Brontë's fiction conceptualize the 'saint' along a parallel line to the Oxford Movement's definition of 'saint'. In *Shirley*, this notion of Protestant 'sainthood' is much more pronounced. She appropriates saintly figures from the Catholic pantheon, leans into the history of saints, and the motif of God's chosen people gendered as the daughter of God or bride of Christ. Shirley Keedlar is a saint of a different type than Jane Eyre, and her story is very similar to St. Teresa. Both women come from middle class families, received divine revelation, and develop creeds that empower women by encouraging an unmediated relationship with God. In this respect, St. Teresa operates from a Protestant outlook on God. Although 'St. Shirley's' dissent does not win her the accolades St. Teresa acquires, she exploits a loophole in the

conventional understanding of the phrase ‘word of God’ and develops a fifth Gospel tailored for a female or feminist audience.

As the most hermetic Protestant saint in Brontë’s non-conformist religious fiction, Shirley’s ‘Sermon on the Moor’ reaffirmed the Coleridgean notion of the poet as philosopher, and poetry as capable of revealing divine truth. The tension between Shirley’s rejection of the Epistle of Paul and her unwavering support for the Apostle John is resolved by her nuanced view, one shared by early Christian scholars, that true faith is not found in a religious text but in individual’s relationship with God. This is precisely the defense used by Shirley when she claims that her heretical Gospel is “No more bold than faithful” (303). Shirley’s sermon operates in the oral tradition, and marks a shift in what constitutes the ‘word of God’. She makes it clear that, because her words articulate divine revelation, they are as close to the word of God as any written Gospel or Epistle could presume to be.

Colby argues that Lucy is much different kind of Protestant protagonist from Jane and Shirley. Overall, *Villette* depicts the “humbling, crushing, grinding” process of life more than the ‘folly’ of certain religions (181). Lucy is an altogether a different ‘saint’ than Jane or Shirley. Her faith constantly wanes, and she confuses imagination for spirituality (256). As M. Paul points out, Lucy speaks like ‘third rate London actor’. As the symbolic representation of England’s collective consciousness and cultural heritage, Lucy’s worldview is an agglomeration of Celtic folklore, classical myths, and Christianity. While living in England, Lucy does not develop a Protestant Christian. Her conceptualization of the Catholic continent as ‘under world’ is ironic; she is entirely pathological and lives within interiority of the images, concepts and figures ingrained into her psyche. Simply put, her imagination is a layer cake. As a ‘place myth’, *Villette* provides a damning exploration of the shallow spiritual life of Protestant England during the

mid-nineteenth-century. Unlike Jane and Shirley who interact with God and experience divine revelation and providence, the fatalist Lucy Snowe struggles to believe a hidden God. Her faith is based on scripture not a practical piety, and the only people who attempt to put Lucy on the 'right' path are Catholic priests. Lucy is not an exemplar Protestant but the average.

Following the deaths of Emily and Barnwell, Brontë writes to her publisher that "hope has proved a strange traitor" (Smith II: 165). The correspondence between Brontë and her publisher prove that Brontë practiced what her fiction preaches. Unfettered to conventional views, she wrote non-conformist religious fiction in accordance with what she perceived to be God's plan for her career as an author (Smith II: 50). Charlotte Brontë's dissent aims at a type of religious reform, at discerning the 'true God' and 'true religion', views the grace as a divine gift to humanity, and establishes an ideology of spiritual equality. Thus, the anti-Christian claims made by Brontë's contemporaries rings as hollow, as do the 'anti-Catholic' claims made by critics today. Both groups fail to understand the full implications of Brontë's Arminian leanings, nor do they make the critical distinction between a person criticism of an idea or theory versus a prejudice toward those who might hold such an idea or theory. The lives of Brontë's Protestant saints depict express the grim realities of Evangelical women's religious experiences living in England during the mid-nineteenth-century. As spiritual exiles within their own nation and religion, Brontë's 'spiritual vision' advises young Anglican women to follow the model of David, develop their own feminist historicist hermeneutics and Gospel, and to ignore conventional Victorian beliefs root in classical tradition masquerading as Christian. Her non-conformist Protestant beliefs were borne of an exposure to various forms of dissent, a superior understanding of scripture, habits of prayer, and constant reflection that established a faith 'dyed in faster colours' than traditional patriarchal Christianity.

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