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Emigrant Spinsters and the Construction of Englishness in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

By Anne Longmuir, Kansas State University

<1>As many critics have observed, the relationship of Lucy Snowe, the heroine of Brontë's final novel *Villette* (1853), to England and Englishness is troubled. Gilbert and Gubar argue, for example, that Lucy has "to seek her identity on foreign soil because she is metaphorically a foreigner even in England" (405), while Rosemary Clark-Beattie maintains that Lucy's flight is motivated by her desire to "escapes her insignificance within English society" (825). Amanda Anderson contends that Lucy's "famous elusiveness" is "less complicity in English conventions of femininity than a countermove of pure negation" that results in her "placelessness" (52). These critics have made valuable contributions to our understanding of Brontë's use of travel, and her notion of national identity as problematic for women like Lucy Snowe. However, existing interpretations of *Villette* have neglected to situate the novel within the specific historic context that enables us to understand why Lucy Snowe's negotiation of Englishness is so different from that of William Crimsworth in *The Professor* (1857), Brontë's other Belgian novel. In this essay, I seek to develop and modify these existing interpretations, by drawing on contemporary Victorian accounts of the emigrant spinster, including that of Brontë's close friend Mary Taylor, who emigrated to New Zealand in 1845. I maintain that calls for female emigration in the mid-nineteenth century confirm the metaphorical exclusion of Brontë's heroine from English national identity both at home and abroad. Unlike William Crimsworth, whose Englishness is reaffirmed in *The Professor*, Lucy Snowe is always "metaphorically a foreigner"in *Villette*. Furthermore, as Mary Taylor maintained a dialectical relation to emigration discourse, I suggest that Lucy's decision to travel to a continental "Elsewhere," rather than a colonial "Elsewhere," to use Rita Kranidis's term, signals her ultimate rejection of the normalising impulse embedded in contemporary British arguments in favour of the emigration of single women.

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<2>Though Brontë claimed that *Villette* "touches on no matter of public interest" (qtd. in Gaskell 390), the position of single women in English society had become very much a matter of public interest by the mid-nineteenth century. The spinster had increasingly become a topic of concern to the state, as the disparity between the male and female populations became apparent. By 1851, for example, two years before the publication of *Villette*, there were more than a million unmarried women over the age of 25 (Gordon 9), and around 405,000 more women in Britain than men (Jeffreys 86). Tellingly, as Sheila Jeffreys notes, the single female population was often described as an "excess" or "surplus" by male commentators who interpreted the population statistics as indicating a "problem" that must be "resolved" (86). For Victorian commentators like W. R. Greg there was something profoundly unnatural about the discrepancy in the British population. As Greg argued in 1862: "Nature makes no mistakes and creates no redundancies" (37). While individual spinsters were objects of pity, commentators regarded their collective presence as harmful to the health of nation, because they created what Greg called "an unwholesome social state" (5).

<3>Charlotte Brontë was sharply aware that nineteenth-century English society had no obvious role or place for the unmarried woman. As she wrote to her publisher, William Smith Williams: "When a woman has a little family to rear and educate and a household to conduct, her hands are full, her vocation is evident—when her destiny isolates her—I suppose she must do what she can—live as she can—complain as little—bear as much—work as well as possible" (Barker 189-90). While the vocation of the married woman was "evident," the vocation of the single middle-class woman was not. As critics and historians often remind us, middle-class women had very few employment options, and could adopt only the professions of teacher, governess, or lady's companion without a loss of class status. Unmarried until the age of 38, Brontë was clearly personally concerned with the question of what exactly unmarried women should do, though wary of discussing the issue publicly: "I often wish to say something about the 'condition of women' question—but it is one respecting which so much 'cant' has been talked, that one feels a sort of repugnance to approach it" (Barker 189). However, despite this reluctance to approach the role of the single woman, Brontë does devote much of *Shirley* (1848) to it, calling it "the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve" (190). As she contemplates a single life, Caroline Helstone asks, "What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?" (190). She visits the elderly Miss Mann and Miss Ainley, in an effort to discover how these women have dealt with the single life, but discovers that the life of the spinster is at best one of "abnegation of the self" (190), at worse one of "goblin-grimness" (194). Unable to imagine some solution outside of existing gender roles, Caroline yearns to have been born male so that she would have some

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purpose in life: “I should like an occupation; and if I were a boy, it would not be so difficult to find one. I see such an easy, pleasant way of learning a business, and making my way in life” (98-9). Caroline eventually resolves her situation in the most customary fashion possible—she gets married. However, the self-conscious conventionality of Brontë's final chapter, knowingly entitled “The Winding-Up,” reminds us that Caroline's solution is just that: a novelistic convention.

<4>But while its ending is traditional, *Shirley* does point to another solution to the “problem” of “excess” women: emigration. According to *Shirley*'s narrator, the feisty Rose Yorke will grow up to be “a lonely emigrant in some region of the southern hemisphere” (168). Unlike the conventional Caroline who waits passively for marriage, her health deteriorating dangerously, the young Rose has determined that her “life shall be a life: not a black trance like the toad's, buried in marble” (384). In other words, Rose has determined to find an active solution to “the question which most old maids are puzzled to solve” (190). While the actual emigration of single middle class women was, in Sally Shuttleworth's words, “highly unusual for the time” (194), the idea was becoming increasingly commonplace. Rose's decision to emigrate reflects a broader social and political movement that sought to restore the balance between the male and female population in Britain by encouraging women—particularly single women—to leave the country. In the 1830s, women received official government support for emigration, for example, which prompted a number of working class women to leave Britain, while in the mid-nineteenth century there was a flurry of plans to assist single, middle class women, just like Rose Yorke and Lucy Snowe, to emigrate. In 1849 alone, the Governess Benevolent Institution tried to set up a emigration scheme for governesses, Hyde Clark drew up plans for a National Benevolent Emigration Fund for Widow and Orphan Daughters of Gentlemen, Clergymen, Professional Men, Officers, Bankers and Merchants and the British Ladies' Female Emigrant Society was formed (Hammerton 94, 99). Even Charles Dickens was attracted to the idea of emigration as a solution to “social problems” in Britain, and Caroline Chisholm's Family Colonization Loan Society featured in the first edition of *Household Words* (Hammerton 101).

<5>Many Victorians regarded the imbalance in the male and female population as detrimental to health of individual women and to the health of the nation and empire. As Rita Kranidis argues, the spinster's “removal came to be considered essential not only for her own well-being but for England's as well” (3). The perceived impact of celibacy on women was illness: if a woman's “natural” role of wife and mother was not fulfilled, she was likely to waste away, as commentators consciously and unconsciously drew on botanical and biological metaphors of fertility and sterility. Colonist Edward Gibbon Wakefield bemoaned the fate of single English women

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"fretting, growing thin, pale, listless, and cross" (365), for example, while Thackeray described Brontë herself, as "a noble heart longing to mate itself and destined to *wither* away into old maidenhood" (emphasis added 93). In contrast, emigration offered to release unmarried women from their abnormal single condition, by promising the possibility of marriage in countries in which the male population far exceeded the female population. Indeed, the notion that single women could find husbands abroad, and hence be normalised was soon prevalent. Ellen Clacy, who had accompanied her brother to Australia and married there, wrote an account of her life abroad, stressing that in the colonies, "the worst risk" facing a single woman was "getting married, and finding yourself treated with twenty times the respect and consideration you may meet with in England" (131). Similarly, the author of "The Colonist's Note Book" extolled the happiness of gentlewomen who had chosen to emigrate, who "had they remained in England, would too probably have become, like thousands and thousands, jaded, listless, unhappy women, unable to marry, and in many instances useless members of society" (344). Dickens himself presents emigration as a solution for the single woman in *David Copperfield* (1849-50). Martha Peggotty marries in her second year in Australia, for as Mr. Peggotty tells David, "wives is very scarce theer" (711), while even the "ruined" Emily and elderly Missis Gummidge are made offers of marriage.

<6>However, the single woman did not just risk her own health: she also risked that of the nation. For commentators like Greg the very presence of such "unhealthy" single women was dangerous, contributing to the "unwholesome social state" of England. Greg's argument for the emigration of single women focused on the good of the nation, as he advocated that Britain "must restore by an emigration of women that natural proportion between the sexes in the old country and in the new ones, which was disturbed by an emigration of men, and the disturbance of which has wrought so much mischief in both lands" (15). For such observers as Greg the middle-class spinster represented a genuine threat to the Victorian status quo. Not only did she challenge the separation of public and private spheres by working outside the home in many instances, but the very professions available to her, particularly that of the governess, threatened Victorian models of femininity, as Elizabeth Eastlake's famously hostile review of *Jane Eyre* illustrates. Governesses undermined class and gender boundaries, as Mrs Blenkinsop notes in Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), anticipating Mary Poovey's argument in *Uneven Developments*, because "They give themselves the hairs and hupstarts of ladies, and their wages is no betterthan you nor me" (75). In other words, the governess was an odd social chimera: her duties resembled those of the middle-class mother, while her wages resembled those of a working class man. Furthermore, her work also represented a commodification of what many Victorians considered a woman's

natural duty and role. As such, as Poovey has argued, the governess came to be seen as analogous to the prostitute, because like the prostitute, the governess sold the kind of feminine care normally given freely within family relationships (145). Fears also circulated around the potential sexual threat that an unattached young woman could pose in a stable family unit, fears illustrated again by the rapacious Becky Sharp in *Vanity Fair*. Indeed, some argued that the surplus of single women had a destabilizing impact on sexual morals in general. W. R. Greg saw one special benefit of female emigration as a reduction in extra- or pre-marital sex: "When female emigration has done its work, and drained away the excess and the special *obviousness* of the redundance; when women have thus become far fewer in proportion, men will have to bid higher for the possession of them, and will find it necessary to make them wives instead of mistresses" (28). Prone to economic metaphors, Greg suggests that a surplus of single women has the unfortunate consequence of cheapening their value.

<7>As the phenomenon of the emigrant spinster reveals, then, single women like Lucy Snowe were literally unwelcome in England in the mid-nineteenth century. Lucy Snowe's decision to travel abroad should therefore be read within the broader context of calls for female emigration: Lucy is not only unwelcome in England, she is literally considered a "social problem" there. Understanding this context alters our analysis of the motivation behind Lucy's journey across the English Channel. Critics have made much of Lucy's description of her decision to travel: "A bold thought was sent to my mind; my mind was made strong to receive it" (104). Lucy's apparent passivity has been interpreted as evidence that Lucy is "controlled by inner imperatives that seem barely understood that elude the logic of subjectivity or will" (Hughes 720). However, understanding Lucy's decision in the context of contemporary calls for female emigration suggests that "the bold thought … sent to [Lucy's] mind" may not be a manifestation of Lucy's "inner imperatives" so much as a manifestation of an external imperative: the collective social and political will inviting Lucy and women like her to go overseas. In other words, Lucy may not so much choose to emigrate, as be encouraged to leave England. Amanda Anderson expresses concern over the "aggrandized form of agency" (37) that some feminist critics have attributed to nineteenth-century women. Situating *Villette* against the historical background of calls for female emigration enables us to understand Lucy's emigration not as a product of an "aggrandized form of agency," but instead as an act precipitated by the social climate of Britain in this period.

<8>Indeed, Brontë makes Lucy's social exclusion from English society manifestly apparent in *Villette*. Lucy is never depicted at home in England, for example. When we first encounter her, she is "liv[ing] as a child in someone else's household"

(Eagleton 72). While she is clearly more welcome than Jane Eyre is in the Reed's home, nonetheless she is swiftly dispossessed of her petted role as the "one child in a household of grown people" (61) by the arrival of little Polly Home. Polly's temporary displacement from her real home serves only to magnify Lucy's permanent exclusion. While Polly's surname suggests "rootedness," Lucy's reluctance to name herself signals her fundamental social alienation. This alienation is confirmed by Lucy's oblique description of the catastrophe that befalls her: she has "fallen over-board" (94). After the death of her employer, Miss Marchmont, Lucy finds herself literally homeless, with no obvious job prospects and only fifteen pounds to her name. Indeed, it is this sense of homelessness that prompts Lucy's decision to travel abroad: "If I died far away from—home, I was going to say, but I had no home—from England, then, who would weep?" (110). Furthermore, Lucy's exclusion from constructions of Englishness is apparent not just in her literal and metaphoric homelessness. While her nationality is not hybrid, like that of Franco-Scottish Mr Home or Anglo-Scottish Graham Bretton, her relationship to her Englishness is clearly problematic, as her trip to London illustrates. She receives no "poetic first impressions" (106) on arriving in London and is, instead, aware only of "the vastness and the strangeness" of the city, whose language, she claims, "seemed to me as odd as a foreign tongue" (106). London, Lucy states, robs her of any "self-possession" (106). Alienated from her own capital city, Lucy is unable to assert herself as a subject in English culture. Lucy's emigration thus represents her fundamental alienation from English society—and from herself, as Bronte sets up an opposition between socially privileged characters, who are always "at home", and the socially marginalized, who are permanently in exile.

<9>Crucially, the idea of "home" was central to nineteenth-century conceptions of Englishness. As Sarah Ellis's comments in 1839 illustrate, there was a perceived connection between the private domestic space and national identity: "It is the domestic character of England—the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated" (qtd. in Glen 232). In 1852, Henry Mayhew even went so far as to suggest that there is something intrinsically English about the notion of home itself: "The word 'home' in the real English sense, is not more peculiar to the language, than is the word 'comfort' itself. The French people have no terms in their vocabulary to express either notion. The adjective *comfortable*, they have been obliged to borrow to the letter from us, and as for their phrases *à la maison* and *chez nous*, they stand for mere eating and sleeping places" (261). Both of Brontë's Belgian novelssupport this association of domesticity and Englishness, connecting domestic objects and practices with national identity. Lucy enjoys "an English tea" (246) at Mrs. Bretton's, for example, while Crimsworth instructs Frances on "how to make a cup of tea in rational English style" (227), in order that she can provide

him with “a proper British repast” (227) in *The Professor*. However, while the Brettons’ successful recreation of their English home in Villette confirms their English identity, Lucy’s exclusion from the English domestic space both at home and abroad should be understood as a direct expression of her troubled national identity.

<10>Significantly, Brontë was familiar with the notion of emigration as a solution to the “problem” of the spinster in practice as well as theory. Indeed, *Shirley*’s Rose Yorke is widely believed to have been based on Brontë’s friend, Mary Taylor, who emigrated to New Zealand in 1845.(1) Taylor set up home in Wellington, which was itself one of the first settlements founded by the New Zealand Company, whose directors included Wakefield. However, Mary Taylor did not emigrate hoping to marry. Instead, the feminist Taylor explicitly rejected the normalising impulse of much discourse on spinster emigration by writers such as Wakefield. Indeed, she later indignantly responded to W. R. Greg’s suggestion that single women should emigrate in order to marry in her collection of essays, *The First Duty of Women*, arguing: “The men who emigrate without wives, do so because in their opinion, they cannot afford to marry. The curious idea that the women, whom they would not ask in England should run after them to persuade them would be laughable if it were not mischievous” (43). Taylor’s emigration was motivated not by marriage, but by her desire for a vocation and by her frustration at the limited options available to her in England. As Charlotte wrote to Emily in 1841: “Mary has made her mind that she can not and will not be a governess, a teacher, a milliner, a bonnet-make nor housemaid” (Barker 90). Like other middle-class women, Taylor discovered that emigration freed her from British class expectations, as her comments to Brontë indicate: “Classes are forced to mix here, or there wd be no society at all” (Stevens 105). Emigration also allowed her to adopt a vocation and lifestyle that would have been considered unsuitable at home. Thus, Taylor built and let a house in Wellington, before setting up a shop there in 1850. Taylor also explicitly recognized that travel abroad could alleviate the mental stress faced by spinsters in Britain. She saw the confinement and tedium of life in Britain as deeply unhealthy, writing “To receive few impressions, then—to lead the uneventful and almost solitary life which is often thought fit for women—is to approach the borders of insanity; of the state in which the mind cannot distinguish the real from the ideal, and is more under the domination of the latter than the former” (qtd. in Hammerton 22). In contrast, she was so pleased with her venture abroad that she attempted to persuade her friends to join her. As she wrote to Ellen Nussey:

> What in the world keeps you? Try and persuade some of your twenty brothers to fit you out for New Zealand. You could get your living here at any of the

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> trades I have mentioned which you wd only d<…> of in England. As to 'society' position in the world you must have found out by this time it is all my eye seeking society without the means to enjoy it. Why not come here then? And be happy. (Stevens 81)

Most importantly, Taylor valued emigration not as an opportunity to be rehabilitated into English domestic society ("it is all my eye seeking society without the means to enjoy it"), but as an escape from the stultifying conditions and limited options facing spinsters in England.

<11>Understanding Taylor's refusal of the normalizing impulse embedded in contemporary Victorian writing on the emigration of single women, allows us to understand Lucy Snowe's migration to Labassecour, rather than any part of the British empire, not as an attempt to "participate in a collective English identity" (112) as Carla Molloy contends, but instead as a rejection of that identity. Brontë makes Lucy's alienation from the English social scene apparent in her dealings with the British émigré community in Villette. With them she never asserts her Englishness or expresses patriotic sentiments, while they scarcely recognise her as English. Though he has encountered Lucy repeatedly, for example, Graham Bretton remains unaware of her nationality, taking her instead "for a foreigner, addressing me as 'mademoiselle,' and giving in French the requisite directions about the children's treatment" (170). Furthermore, Lucy's refusal of the position of companion to Paulina confirms her self-conscious rejection of this community. She declines Mr Home's job offer, because as Patrick Parrinder recognises accepting this employment would implicate Lucy in the English social system once more: "To become Paulina's governess would be to become 'British' again, but Lucy is not prepared to do this if it means living as a subordinate in someone else's household" (244). As a single middle class woman, becoming British again entails a serious loss of autonomy for Lucy. She declares that rather than become a governess or companion, she would "deliberately have taken a housemaid's place" (382), because it would guarantee her "peace and independence" (382), suggesting that if she were forced to rejoin English society, Lucy would prefer to lose class status rather than endure the socially marginalised position accorded to single middle class women in English society. As it is, Lucy chooses to remain a "foreigner."

<12>Comparing Lucy's story to that of Frances Evans Henri in *The Professor* makes Lucy's rejection of the marginal English identity available to her apparent. At first Frances seems to be the literal embodiment Lucy's metaphorical foreignness. When she first appears in *The Professor* she has even less claim to English nationality than Lucy: she was born on the continent to an English mother and Swiss father. Frances

is also linguistically excluded from English identity, having forgotten her mother tongue as a result of her mother's early death. But while Lucy rejects her English identity, Frances attempts to recover hers. Though she has never visited her England, her motherland has taken on a mythical role in her imagination: "she said 'England' as you might suppose an Israelite of Moses' days would have said Canaan" (131). She dreams of travelling to England, and has even endeavoured to build an English home in Brussels, though—tellingly—she succeeds in creating only "England of a hundred years ago" (160), a lost and irrecoverable maternal space. Significantly, Crimsworth informs Frances that her life in England as a single woman would not be easy, as Lucy's life was not easy in England: "in England you would be a foreigner; that too would deprive you of influence, would effectually separate you from all around you; in England you would have as few connexions, as little importance as you have here" (133). Unlike Lucy, however, Frances is normalised through marriage: the very process advocated by writers like Wakefield and Greg. Crimsworth's courtship of Frances is a systematic attempt, as Buzard notes, to "de-gallicize" (*Disorienting Fictions* 190) Frances (here the pun of *France*s's name should be noted). This process of de-gallicization is most apparent in Crimsworth's attitude to language. He instructs Frances to respond to his proposal of marriage in English, "Will my pupil consent to pass her life with me? Speak English now, Frances" (207), and continues to punish her for slipping back into French, "Talk French to me she would, and many a punishment she has had for her wilfulness" (233). Crimsworth also initiates Frances into the rites of tea-making (227), a commodity inextricably linked, then as now, with British national identity. Furthermore, their marriage bestows on Frances rights accorded to other married British women.(2) Frances's eventual move to England, then, is as both a respectable wife and mother, and as an independent businesswoman. However, Frances is haunted by her other possible fate, as she comments:

> an old maid's life must doubtless be void and vapid, her heart strained and empty; had I been an old maid I should have spent existence in efforts to fill the void and ease the aching—I should have probably failed, and died weary and disappointed, despised and of no account, like other single women. (236)

Here Frances acknowledges it is only by virtue of her position as a married woman that she has enjoyed both personal and professional success. As an unmarried women, Frances could not have become fully English—just as Lucy Snowe cannot.

<13>In contrast to Frances, Lucy Snowe is not Anglicised in *Villette*, but Gallicised. While Frances learns English, Lucy learns French, with the result that even her most patriotic outburst is expressed in this language: "Vive l'Angleterre, l'Histoire et les

Heros! A bas las France, la Fiction et les Facquins!” (429). Frances finally acquires a genuine English home, but Lucy Snowe is never given access to an English domestic space. Instead, Lucy’s final dwelling is thoroughly continental. In the apartments arranged for her by M. Paul, she enjoys hot chocolate rather than English tea, and instead of an English hearthside, she has a stove, a characteristic of continental homes that she once disliked: “the black stoves that pleased me little when I first came” (309). Her apartments are not English, but thoroughly European with their “French clock” (584), “gueridon with a marble top” (585) and “French window” (588). That Lucy is Gallicised is also confirmed by her romantic relationships, as her affections shift from the British Bretton to the continental M. Paul. As James Buzard argues, this shift in Lucy’s affections subverts the consolidation of British identity familiar from the National Tale (255). Furthermore, Brontë’s coyness over M. Paul’s own nationality is key here. Whereas Crimsworth’s Englishness is increasingly affirmed through *The Professor*, until he is able to reclaim his own little part of his “native county” (237), M. Paul’s nationality remains obscure. Though Lucy describes him as being “like a true Frenchman,” she also informs us “he was of strain neither French nor Labassecourian” (425). He apparently has some Spanish roots, possessing a “Spanish face” (505) and “deep Spanish lashes” (583), and yet he is not conclusively identified as Spanish (he is certainly never presented speaking Spanish). In other words, Lucy’s proposed alliance with Paul will not align her conclusively with another “Fatherland,” in the manner that Frances’s marriage to Crimsworth does. Instead, this relationship disrupts rather than consolidates national identity, confirming once more than Lucy’s perpetual metaphorical status as a “foreigner.”

<14>It is important at this point to consider the construction of foreignness in *Villette*. As Rosemary Clark-Beattie argues, Brontë conceives the fundamental difference between England and Labassecour largely in terms of religion, supporting Linda Colley’s contention that Protestantism was key to the formation of British identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. This religious difference has crucial implications for the spinster, because while Protestant England had no obvious role for single women, Catholicism did: convent life. Furthermore, the convent and the figure of the nun haunt mid-nineteenth century discussions of the spinster. In *A View to the Art of Colonization*, Edward Gibbon Wakefield, for example, argued that the spinster population ensured that “Great Britain differs from all other countries at all times, and, surpassing those countries in which the institution of nunneries has most flourished, is the greatest and saddest convent that the world has seen” (798). While in *England and America* he claimed “The proportion of English women who pine in celibacy is far greater than that of Spanish or Italian women who languish in convents” (364-5). Similarly, Catherine Gore

claimed in “A Bewailment from Bath”: “Every body knows that Great Britain is the very fatherland of old maids. In Catholic countries, the superfluous daughters of a family are disposed of in convents and *beguinages*, just as in Turkey and China they are, still more humanely, drowned” (200). Wakefield and Gore invoke the convent for a number of reasons. On the one hand they remind their audience that, unlike Catholic societies, Protestant England has no accepted, institutionalised role for the single woman. On the other hand, they reinforce existing anti-Catholic prejudices, by insisting on the unnaturalness of this particular solution to the problem of “superfluous daughters.” Gore even suggests that life in the convent is equivalent of euthanasia, or “humane drowning.” However, both Gore and Wakefield employ the convent to ask for better treatment of unmarried woman. But while Gore, who writes as Tabitha Glum “for the old maids of England” (201), does not seek to change their state, so much as ask “the guardians of the public weal to afford due protection and encouragement to spinsters” (200), Wakefield uses the figure of the convent to call for the normalisation of the spinster. As the nun and the convent are “unnatural” continental institutions, so by extension Wakefield implies that the single woman is an aberration in English society.

<15>Significantly, the figure of the nun appears regularly in Brontë’s fiction: Eliza in *Jane Eyre* “take[s] the veil” (272), while Shirley and Caroline picnic at Nunnwood, the site of an old convent in *Shirley.* However, in no Brontë novel is the nun quite so central as she is in *Villette*. Madame Beck’s school was once a nunnery and is allegedly haunted by a young novice “buried alive, for some sin against her vow” (172). Taking advantage of this legend, Colonel Arthur de Hamal facilitates his secret trysts with Ginevra by disguising himself as a nun. M. Paul’s first love was Justine-Marie, a young woman who entered a convent after her parents forbade their marriage. Even Lucy Snowe admits that she could have become a nun. Had she accepted Pere Silas invitation, she concedes that she “might just now, instead of writing this heretic narrative, be counting my beads in the cell of a certain Carmelite convent on the Boulevard of Crécy in Villette” (235). Brontë ostensibly presents the convent as a fate to be dreaded by any right thinking English spinster. Yet despite her avowed distrust and dislike of Catholicism, she is clearly deeply attracted to the religion, and to the figure of the nun in particular. This ambivalence towards Catholicism is played out most explicitly through Lucy herself. While Lucy claims to despise Catholicism, she is clearly fascinated by it as her trip to the Catholic confessional after the breakdown of the long vacation indicates.

<16>Lucy’s attraction to Catholicism derives from the alternative view of the self that it offers her, and in particular, its alternative approach to discipline of the self. As Lucy frequently comments, discipline in Villette, unlike in England, is exercised

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through *external* surveillance, exemplified by that dominant mechanism, the "sleepless eye" (503) of the Catholic Church. Immediately on her arrival at Madame Beck's pensionat, then, Lucy understands she is to be spied on and observed. Madame Beck rifles through her belongings while Lucy pretends to sleep, prompting to Lucy to comment, "All this was very un-English; truly I was in a foreign land" (132). Through the course of the novel M. Paul repeatedly rifles through her desk and reads her letters, while the "benevolent" Pere Silas begins a strenuous campaign of surveillance after her visit to his confessional. Lucy discovers that even her journey alone to Villette would have been deemed impossible by the culture of Labassecour. As she states, "Foreigners say that it is only English girls who can thus be trusted to travel alone, and deep is their wonder at the daring confidence of English parents and guardians" (114). However, while Sally Shuttleworth argues that Lucy's travels to Villette "inaugurates the system of surveillance," (223) it is essential to understand that Lucy has already been subject to another form of surveillance in England. As Amanda Anderson stresses "it will not do … simply to say that Lucy and the other English characters themselves inhabit or engage forms of power that the narrator projects as 'continental'" because of "a near equivalence of many of the English and continental practices" (51). Furthermore, the method of discipline exercised in England represents, in Foucault's words, "the perfection of power," because "its actual exercise [is] unnecessary" (201). While Snowe is subject to external surveillance abroad, in Protestant England she subjects *herself* to continual surveillance. Thus, even before she reaches Villette, Lucy Snowe ceaselessly monitors and curbs her own actions and emotions, as her stealthy observation of little Polly Home, one of her psychological doubles, illustrates. In other words, Lucy has long internalized the disciplinary mechanisms of power, and requires no external surveillance.

<17>Indeed, this internalized discipline becomes a marker of true Englishness in *Villette*, as the depiction of Ginevra Fanshawe and Polly Home reveals. Ginevra has been brought up on the continent shifting from school to school, with the effect that "I have quite forgotten my religion; they call me a Protestant, you know, but really I am not sure whether I am one or not: I don't well know the difference between Romanism and Protestantism" (115). Her morals are also "continental" as her relationship and elopement with de Hamal indicate. In contrast, and despite her Scottish and French ancestry, Polly Home is a model of protestant English feminine modesty. Furthermore, that this is played out as a contrast between internal and external discipline is made apparent—bizarrely—by the differing states of the cousin's underwear, as Lucy's comments on undressing Polly after she collapsed at the theatre reveal:

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> I was not in a sufficiently collected mood to note with separate distinctness every detail of the attire I removed, but I received a general impression of refinement, delicacy, and perfect personal cultivation; which, in a period of after-thought, offered in my reflections a singular contrast to notes retained of Miss Ginevra Fanshawe's appointments (345-6).

While Ginevra's "external wear" is "well and elegantly supplied" (149), she cares little for the clothes not readily visible and therefore not subject to censure. In contrast, Polly, who subjects herself to extreme self-surveillance, ensures all her garments are pristine—even those not usually on public display.

<18>However, the impact of internalized discipline on Lucy's subjectivity is acute. It results in a violently divided self, as Lucy's Reason strives to subdue her Feeling, and in numerous doubles, like Polly Home, as Lucy externalises desires and longings that her English Protestant self cannot encompass. In contrast, the external surveillance of Catholicism allows Lucy to maintain a more coherent self, by offering Lucy a mode of expression that is impossible for her in Protestant England. Just as Catholicism has a clearly defined place for the single woman, the convent, so it has a ritualised mechanism of expression: the confessional. Protestant Lucy spends much of the novel curbing and containing words and feelings: she writes and rewrites her letters to Dr. John in order that they "grant no expansion to feeling" (307), before finally burying his letters in a hermetically sealed jar. In contrast, in the confessional at least, Catholicism expects her to give voice to her inmost thoughts and feelings. Furthermore, the spying and manipulation of the Catholic Church ensure that Lucy need no longer suppress or control her own emotions herself: they will do this for her. Indeed, it is when she is most oppressed by outside forces that Lucy is finally able to voice her desire for the first time. On discovering that "the secret junta" of Pere Silas, Madame Walravens and Madame Beck has conspired to end her relationship with M. Paul, Lucy voices her feelings at last "Pierced deeper than I could endure, made now to feel what defied suppression, I cried—'My heart will break!' What I felt seemed literal heartbreak; but the seal of another fountain yielded under the strain" (580). In other words, like John Kucich, I argue that "repression heightens and vitalizes emotional autonomy" (2-3) in Brontë's fiction. But while Kucich maintains that in "both *The Professor* and *Villette*, externally imposed Romish restraints are repeatedly described as defective" (92), I maintain that, on the contrary, it is the external repression of continental Catholicism, not the apparently solicitous kindness of the novel's British characters, that grants Lucy autonomy.

<19>This liberation through repression can also be understood through the figure of the nun, that dogs Lucy—and Brontë's fiction. The significance of the nun

in *Villette* is multiple. On the one hand, she clearly symbolizes Lucy's repressed desire: the ghostly nun who haunts Madame Beck's school was reputed to have been "buried alive, for some sin against her vow" (172), while Justine Marie, M. Paul's fiancée, died in the confinement of the convent after her family forced her to reject him. On the other hand, just as the surveillance of the Catholic Church ironically frees Lucy to express her desire, so the figure of the nun also represents a manifestation of passion. As Kucich argues, "the usual interpretation of the nun as a symbol of Lucy's repression returning to torment her seems obvious enough. But the nun is also, quite literally, a piece of acting—a theatrical use of 'repression' in disguise" (69). The nun witnessed by Lucy on several occasions throughout the novel is, in fact, Colonel Arthur de Hamal on his way to romantic meetings with Ginevra Fanshawe. In other words, de Hamal employs the garments of celibacy to enable sexual passion, just as the repression of Rome finally allows Lucy to voice her desire for the first time. That de Hamal leaves the nun costume in Lucy's bed, signals its connections to her sexuality, while her destruction of the costume signals again the freedom of expression that Lucy experiences in the supposedly oppressive culture of Villette. Indeed, Lucy's destruction of the nun's costume should also be understood as angry assault on the employment of the nun as a kind of bogeyman in contemporary emigrant discourse by writers like Wakefield. Lucy's rejection of the popular Protestant characterisation of the nun as an "unnatural" monster, also constitutes a rejection of English depictions of the spinster as an aberration.

<20>The success of Lucy's venture abroad is indicated by the confusion of the young English woman, Ginevra Fanshawe, as she tries to understand Lucy's social position. Her insistent question, "Who *are* you, Lucy Snowe?" (392), indicates not that Lucy belongs to an English community abroad, but that Lucy has become unreadable according to accepted English models of social identity. As Lucy states, it is inconceivable to Ginevra "how any person not bolstered up by birth or wealth, not supported by some consciousness of name or connection, could maintain an attitude of reasonable integrity (394). The root of Ginevra's confusion is the juxtaposition of Lucy's unmarried and dependent status with her now apparently secure social identity. Lucy's social position absolutely contradicts the marginal status usually accorded to spinsters in Victorian society in England. Furthermore, Ginevra notes Lucy exhibiting "an attitude of reasonable integrity," suggesting Lucy is able to maintain a more coherent self under the gaze of the Labassecourians than she ever would have been expected to in England.

<21>Lucy's migration to a continental rather than colonial "Elsewhere" does not just represent her refusal of the normalising impulse embedded in pro-emigration discourse, however. It also represents Lucy's refusal of the very imperial project that

lay behind calls for the emigration of spinsters. Colonists like Edward Gibbon Wakefield regarded the emigration of single middle class women not only as beneficial to the women themselves, but also as integral to the success of Britain's colonies. As Wakefield wrote:

> in colonization, women have a part so important that all depends on their participation in the work. If only men emigrate, there is no colonization; if only a few women emigrate in proportion to the men, the colonization is slow and most unsatisfactory in other respects: an equal emigration of the sexes is one essential condition of the best colonization (840)

Lucy's migration to Labassecour rather than a colonial space thus represents a challenge to the imperialistic ideology behind calls for the emigration of single women. Indeed, Lucy's reluctance to participate in colonization is apparent even in her relation to Labassecour. While Lucy eventually enjoys a French domestic space abroad, the British expatriate community, like Frances in *The Professor*, endeavour to create English domestic spaces in Villette. Indeed, the Brettons' attempt to reproduce their English home in Labassecour is so successful that when Lucy wakes in their house, she asks "Am I in England?" (242). However, it is important to recognise the re-creation of English domestic spaces abroad as a strategy of colonization. Lucy's rejection of the English domestic space, therefore, also signals her rejection of the impulses behind the imperial project itself. Indeed, as critics have noted *Villette* offers a general critique of imperialism. Not only are Labassecour's own imperial ambitions depicted as mercenary and shallow, they are of course also responsible for the death of M. Paul, Lucy's fiancé, a move which fundamentally undercuts the normalising impulse of emigration discourse. For Lucy Snowe, involvement in a European imperialist project results not in her rehabilitation as wife and mother, but in confirmation of her "aberrant" single status.

<22>Thus while the travel of characters like Crimsworth in *The Professor* confirms the model of colonization identified by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism*, allowing him to consolidate his national identity, resolve problems at home, and succeed materially, Lucy Snowe's travels reveal the anomalous position of unmarried women in mid-nineteenth century Britain. Like other single women of the period, Lucy has no place in English society, while her very existence is regarded as a demographic problem by many commentators. Given this liminal status at home, Lucy Snowe discovers, like Mary Taylor, that it is easier to assert herself as a speaking subject abroad. Crucially, emigration frees Lucy from English societal expectations and in particular allows her to resist the English power structures that she has internalised for so long. As such travel abroad enables Lucy to achieve a

more coherent subjectivity, confirming Mary Taylor's prediction that travel abroad could save many English women from mental breakdown. However, while Lucy does achieve a more secure position in Villette than would ever have been possible for her in mid-nineteenth century Britain, it is important to recognise that, finally, Lucy's position is still ambivalent. The novel leaves Lucy in an undecided and undecideable state, perhaps poised to marry M. Paul, or perhaps fated for a life of celibacy by his death at sea. In either instance, Lucy remains "in exile" from English society, excluded either by her single status, or by her marriage to a foreigner and a Jesuit. Indeed, that Lucy will never be truly welcome in English society is made clear by the response of one contemporary reviewer, Anne Mozley, who deemed Brontë's heroine finally a "character unfit for this home which she yearns for" (110).

Notes

(1)Taylor noted the resemblance herself, complaining to Brontë: "What a little lump of perfection you've made me" (Stevens 97).(^)

(2)As M. Page Baldwin puts it: "The Aliens Act (1844) had provided that any woman married to a British subject would have the rights of a natural born subject (for reasons of property and inheritance) (526). Despite her Swiss nationality, Frances will thus enjoy many of the same rights as other British subjects.(^)

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