THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF FASHION: FACES, DRESS, AND THE SELF IN THE
JUVENILIA AND NOVELS OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË

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THE PHYSIOGNOMY OF FASHION: FACES, DRESS, AND THE SELF IN THE
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Charlotte Brontë’s visually detailed character descriptions illustrate her participation in the Victorian fascination with the legibility of the inner self. Although much has been said about her use of visual imagery to evoke interiority, critics have not yet addressed her treatment of dress as a signifier. This dissertation examines Brontë’s use of clothing in characterization, particularly how it engages the Victorian discourses of physiognomy and phrenology. In her writing she frequently employs these culturally accepted pseudo-sciences, which posit that the face and the skull offer clues to identity. These taxonomies presume that character is more or less fixed according to one’s physical features. This dissertation demonstrates how Brontë uses dress in order to subvert the pseudo-sciences’ notion that the body houses a relatively stable, unitary self. Over time, she shifts her attention from the coded face to clothing as a more suitable means of representing subjectivity since it better expresses the performative aspect of identity. The emergence of the plain heroine in the juvenilia and published novels contributes to this shift; her contradictory facial features and distinctly unfashionable mode of dress index her process of self-development. The first chapter addresses the influence of the silver-fork school on her early character descriptions and the first appearance of the plain heroine in the juvenilia. The second chapter demonstrates how,
in *Jane Eyre*, the protagonist manages contradictory elements of her character by dressing plainly, and the third explores how, in *Villette*, Lucy Snowe extends the boundaries of her identity by wearing unlikely costumes. By investing materialist pseudo-science and material garments with psychological meaning, Brontë achieves an unprecedented representation of women’s interior lives in nineteenth-century fiction.

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Introduction: Charlotte Brontë, Pseudo-Science, and Dress

Critics have often noted how Charlotte Brontë uses figurative language to depict inner life, but their investigations of visual imagery have inadequately addressed the significance of clothing and the face as material signifiers of interiority in her writing.¹ In *Desire and Domestic Fiction* Nancy Armstrong aptly writes that, in *Jane Eyre*, visual images “point to territories within the self that are beyond the scope of verbal representation” (213). Although, when referring to such imagery, she does not specify literary portraiture, the physical appearance—comprised of the body and the garments that clothe it—serves as a vital indicator of subjectivity in Brontë’s fiction.

Brontë’s strong visual sensibility forms a part of Victorian culture’s prolific iconographic imagination, abundantly evident in both the popular and fine arts. Coinciding with this enthusiasm for visual images is the nineteenth-century fascination with the legibility of inner character; this desire for readable interiors was symptomatic of the age’s anxiety about anonymity in the face of rapid urbanization. The culturally accepted pseudo-sciences of physiognomy and phrenology addressed this obsession with appearances by positing that the face and the skull held clues to identity. While physiognomy considered facial features to be a manifestation of inner character, phrenology claimed that bumps on the skull revealed inner propensities. Brontë frequently alludes to these Victorian taxonomies, validating their notions of visible

personality in her work. However, while the body offers a fairly immutable set of identity markers in facial features, dress is more conductive to representing the potential fluidity of the self. In her juvenilia and published novels, Brontë uses clothing in concert with faces in order to examine and articulate the constructed nature of identity.

Brontë was certainly not alone in employing details of physical appearance in characterization, though her psychological approach to these details is distinct from that of her contemporaries and predecessors. Other Victorian novelists, such as Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray, used physiognomy and dress to depict characters, but they most often did so in the spirit of caricature, a very different tradition in character description. Characters’ dress is rendered with exaggerated flourishes in Great Expectations and Vanity Fair; Dickens’ heightens Mrs. Joe’s abrasiveness with an apron full of pins and Thackeray portrays the vain pretentiousness of Joseph Sedley with his tight, flashy waistcoats. Brontë’s descriptions are also distinct from those in the “silver-fork” novels of the early nineteenth century, which allude to faces and dress in order to establish characters’ membership to the aristocratic set. Unlike such caricatures or appeals to fashion, which are secondary to plot, Brontë’s literary portraits take center stage. They do more than sketch personality; they paint an interior landscape that sets the tone for how characters negotiate their inner conflicts. Brontë’s descriptions of the female appearance are also distinguished from those of her eighteenth-century predecessors, Maria Edgeworth and Frances Burney, since she does not share their

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caution against emulating the aristocracy’s immoral behavior by consuming too much. She also differs from Jane Austen, who rarely provides details about female characters’ faces or dress.

Prior to this dissertation, scholarship has not examined the interrelationships among phrenology, physiognomy and dress as external signifiers of the self in Brontë’s novels. Earlier scholarship argues the importance of physiognomy and phrenology in Brontë’s work, but less successfully contends that she characterizes physical appearances as deceptive. The latter argument does not account for the ability of lovers to read each others’ faces correctly; nor does it demonstrate how dress is an alternate but closely related surface that complicates such a position. This dissertation finds that Brontë uses appearances to signify inner character in more nuanced ways. Recent criticism on this topic offers compelling reasons for her attraction to these pseudo-sciences, but, like the early scholarship, it too overlooks dress as a vital component of characters’ appearances.

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There are fewer, but more recent, examples of scholarship on dress in Brontë’s novels, but they do not deal with clothing’s relationship to faces or its integral role in shaping identity. In “Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel,” Suzanne Keen addresses how, in Jane Eyre, Jane’s Quakerish style of dress could be read as a sign of sexuality as well as respectability, both valuable assets in the marriage market.⁵ Although Jane’s face is as plain as her clothing, Keen does not address how her face contributes or detracts from the attractiveness of her simple style.⁶ In “Women’s Fashion in the Age of the Brontës,” Katina Bill describes women’s clothing from 1830 to 1850 and points out passages in Brontë’s letters where she is concerned with dress, but the essay provides more biographical details and fashion history than literary analysis.⁷ Again, these essays fail to explore the relationship of dress to physiognomy in her work.

Unlike the previously noted criticism, this dissertation considers faces and dress together. They not only represent complementary components of a literary portrait, but their meanings are also potentially at odds. This site of tension between clothing and the body reveals Brontë’s complex attitudes about the ability of the appearance to signify

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interiority. It explores how Brontë evokes the psychological complexity of her protagonists. With its doctrine that bumps on the skull reveal emotional and psychological propensities—i.e., its creed of self-development—phrenology particularly lends itself to being paired with dress. It “assimilated the Protestant culture of self-advancement” (Shuttleworth 57). Internalizing this, Brontë uses dress as an external expression of the process of self-fashioning. Although Brontë also uses physiognomy, phrenology, and dress to sketch character in *The Professor* and *Shirley*, the dissertation focuses primarily on the juvenilia, *Jane Eyre*, and *Villette*. While the juvenilia reveals important origins of Brontë’s literary portraiture, these novels are particularly concerned with feminine subjectivity.

Brontë combines her use of dress and phrenology in her character descriptions; however, over time, she increasingly focuses on dress rather than the body as a surface that more accurately expresses personality since, as a signifier, clothing better articulates the role of agency in constructing the self. Chapter 1 traces Brontë’s attention to dress to her early passion for drawing and immersion in nineteenth-century visual culture. Examining Brontë’s use of clothing and faces in character sketches from her juvenilia, the chapter illustrates the strong influence of silver-fork fiction and engravings on her early character descriptions. Also emerging from the juvenilia is the figure of the plain heroine, first embodied in Elizabeth Hastings from the novelette, *Captain Henry Hastings*, and later refined in *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Because of her lack of beauty and deliberately restrained style of dress, this plain protagonist enabled Brontë to better portray feminine subjectivity. By creating unattractive heroines, she rendered them less
marriageable, liberating them both from social scripts and the potentially stifling expectations of genre.

Through these characters’ “irregular” facial features and choices in clothing, Brontë communicates different attitudes towards identity and its legibility. Chapter 2 illustrates how, in Jane Eyre, Jane’s facial features indicate her inner struggle to balance her equally strong propensities for reason and passion. She deliberately cultivates a plain appearance by unfashionably wearing Quakerish, drab gowns. Her consistently restrained style of dress represents her attempt to manage contradictory elements of her nature. The image of neatness and professionalism that she projects helps her to maintain self-control. Here Brontë views identity as something that could be constructed, contained, and inscribed on the body. Although Jane’s insistence on dressing plainly demonstrates her process of self-fashioning, Brontë implies that Jane’s inner contradictions, as separate states of mind, are still parts of an integrated whole. This view of the self is compatible with the premise of physiognomy, which presumes a relatively stable set of personality traits from facial features.

Chapter 3 will address how, in Villette, Brontë’s conception of identity becomes more fluid and less bound to the idea that the body signifies an essential self. By emphasizing Lucy’s manner of dress more than her physiognomy, Brontë takes the idea of self-fashioning a step further. She casts doubt on the pseudo-science’s revelatory claims, setting up a scene where her future lover, M. Paul, immediately shows interest in
her inner life. He examines her head and makes the vague pronouncement that she is capable of both good and bad. While it is true that, like Jane Eyre, Lucy also has “contradictory” features which signal internal conflict, faces are more consistently depicted as theatrical masks than as reliable indicators of inner character. Brontë also transforms clothing into theatrical costume, which, at key moments in the text, exposes the instability of the body as a signifier and marks Lucy’s inner transformations as she continually expands her self-perception.

As this dissertation demonstrates, Brontë’s visual depiction of identity becomes more complex over time, with external details serving as a significant means of rendering character. She engages the Victorian fascination with materialism and its potential to express subjectivity. At the same time, however, she challenges Victorian notions of female identity by subverting the idea that appearances reflect a stable, self-contained self. The paradox is that by investing materialist pseudo-science and material garments with psychological meaning, Brontë achieves an unprecedented representation of interior life in nineteenth-century fiction.

8 Brontë mistakenly refers to phrenology as physiognomy in this scene. While M. Paul is called a physiognomist, his study of her skull more accurately resembles a phrenological reading.

9 In this regard, Armstrong notes that the Brontës “had more to do with formulating universal forms of subjectivity than any other novelists.” See Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (New York: Oxford, 1987) 187.
Chapter 1: The "Lure of the Fabulous": The Silver-Fork Genre and Charlotte Brontë’s Juvenilia

Even as a child, Charlotte Brontë had what Christine Alexander calls a “fetish for pictures” (Art of the Brontës 37). She and her siblings steeped themselves in popular engravings from the period, found in Thomas Bewick’s History of British Birds and hand-colored lithographs by John Martin. The illustrated gift books and annuals of the 1820s and 1830s held a particular fascination for young Charlotte; the fine copper engravings of society beauties strongly influenced her juvenilia.¹ Literary images in “silver-fork” fiction, which emphasized the material trappings of aristocratic life, likewise captivated her. Brontë’s immersion in the graphic and textual iconography of this genre had a significant impact on her creative development. It contributed to the visual concreteness of her juvenilia’s literary portraits, which presages her mature style of character description. In the juvenilia, she emulates the silver-fork novel’s material fixations on dress and physiognomy. Her accompanying drawings of these figures attest to her preoccupation with the appearances of aristocratic women; the engravings she diligently copied became the template for her early female characters.

The period between 1838 and 1839, during which Brontë wrote the novelettes, Caroline Vernon, Captain Henry Hastings, and Stancliffe’s Hotel, marks a crossroads in her creative development. While all three include superficial elements of the silver-fork

¹ For the most part this chapter will address Brontë’s novelettes, which Brontë wrote from the ages of twenty to twenty-three. Although Winifred Gerin says they are technically not juvenilia, this chapter considers them part of it because, as Gerin also notes, the novelettes are connected “indissolubly with her earliest work.” See Gerin’s introduction to Five Novelettes (London: Folio Press, 1971) 7.
genre, they also exhibit Brontë’s emergent concern with interiority in character
description. Stancliffe’s Hotel, an ironic imitation of a fashionable novel, and the
contrasting protagonists of Caroline Vernon and Elizabeth Hastings, from Caroline
Vernon and Captain Henry Hastings respectively, represent Brontë's attempt to transcend
the limitations of silver-fork fiction. As opposites in appearance and style, these heroines
embody Brontë’s creative dilemma of depicting female subjectivity. The first part of this
chapter will trace the influence of silver-fork iconography on Brontë’s depiction of dress
and physiognomy in her juvenilia. The second half will address the dilemma in her
novelettes about her heroines’ appearances and its resolution’s implications for later
heroines.

Brontë’s juvenilia borrows many elements from silver-fork fiction. Popular from
the 1820s well into the 1840s, these novels featured descriptions of fashionable dress,
jewels, and other explicit details of aristocratic life. This fiction had such a material
focus that it sometimes included obvious advertisements for particular merchandise such
as home furnishings and cuisine.\textsuperscript{2} Typical plots ranged from the courtship of heiresses to
the rise of fashionable young men to positions of power. Lord Charles Florian Wellesley
from Brontë’s adolescent story "High Life in Verdopolis" (1834) aptly expresses Brontë’s
fascination with aristocratic life: "I like high life. I like its manners, its splendours, the
beings which move in its enchanted sphere. I like to consider the habits of those beings,
their ways of thinking, speaking and acting." Although, as a clergyman's daughter living

\textsuperscript{2} See Sally Mitchell, ed. Victorian Britain (New York: Garland, 1988). See also
Adburgham and Matthew Whiting Rosa, The Silver Fork School (Port Washington:
on the moors in Haworth, she had no actual experience observing such society, she
peopled her rich imaginary world with powerful rulers and high born women inspired by
her highly idiosyncratic childhood reading, including father's copies of Blackwood's and
Arabian Nights. Characters were often inspired by famous figures of the day; Brontë’s
Duke of Zamorna is based on the Duke of Wellington, and his female admirers are
modeled on society beauties. Like silver-fork plots, Brontë’s stories also revolve around
political struggles and illicit romance.

Biographers Winifred Gerin and Lyndall Gordon both characterize the world of
Angria as an impediment to Brontë’s maturation as a writer, discounting its influence on
her creative development. In Gerin's biography, Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of
Genius (1967), Gerin states that, at twenty-two, Brontë needed to resist "the lure of the
fabulous" in Angria in order for her to better function in the everyday world: "Bravely
she determined to combat [Angria's] power, as if aware that the flame if unchecked
would overpower her. Every influence of her formative years had fanned it, and try as
she might there remained a furnace smouldering inside her, perpetually ready to leap into
flame" (40). Similarly, in Gordon's Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life (1994), the

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4 For critical study of the juvenilia, see Christine Alexander, The Early Writings
of Charlotte Brontë (Buffalo: Prometheus, 1983). For the early juvenilia, see Brontë,
juvenilia, see Five Novelettes.

5 On the other hand, Christine Alexander does not. In The Early Writings of
Charlotte Brontë, she specifically discusses how the juvenilia helped Brontë develop her
“visual imagination.”
author states: “Charlotte’s gains [. . .] did not lie in Angria, except for the habit of writing and its professional aspirations.” Gordon writes that Angria was “the wrong world” for Charlotte, and that, for a time, she “worshipped false idols: women who fawned on men and existed solely as their diversion” (36). It is true that as immature writing the juvenilia is limited by its use of Byronic clichés, but rather than stunting her growth or serving as a mere exercise in self-discipline, Brontë’s early writing provides a training ground for the development of a highly visual style of character description.

Silver-Fork Beauties and Dandies in the Juvenilia

In *The Brontës and Their Background* (1973), Tom Winnifrith discounts Brontë’s familiarity with silver-fork novels, arguing that “the description of the Ingrams [in *Jane Eyre*] would suggest little acquaintance with the Silver-fork school” (244). He does concede, however, that Brontë was familiar with Bulwer-Lytton and Disraeli, whose *Pelham* and *Vivian Grey* are definitive examples of this fiction. Although it is difficult to say whether Brontë read other fashionable novels, much of the literature in the annuals was penned by novelists of the genre. Because Brontë read the decorative books so voraciously, she presumably was well-acquainted with their fiction. Silver-fork novelists

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6 Winnifrith also refers to a letter Brontë wrote to Mrs. Gore on 27 August 1850 as additional evidence for Brontë’s unfamiliarity with the genre. What suggests this interpretation is the following comment: “I knew nothing of the circles you describe before I read ‘The Hamiltons’ but I feel I do know something of them now” (Letters 2: 456). Considering that Brontë was already familiar with Blessington, Bulwer-Lytton, and Disraeli, her statement does not necessarily mean she never read a silver-fork novel until she read Gore’s novel, but possibly, that she never read such an accurate seeming portrayal of high society. See Winnifrith, *Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1973).
Mrs. Catherine Gore, Lady Charlotte Bury, Lady Marguerite Blessington, Edward Bulwer-Lytton, and Benjamin Disraeli all contributed to the annuals. Their short fiction often dealt with love among the rich and titled. The influence of silver-fork fiction is everywhere in Brontë’s juvenilia, particularly in her depictions of beautiful protagonists, handsome dandies, and their fashionable clothing.

The gift books and annuals of the 1820s and 1830s were considered to be what Alison Adburgham refers to as the “coffee table books” of the early nineteenth century. Edited by aristocratic women and primarily aimed at middle-class, female readers, these visually attractive volumes were sold as holiday gifts. The annuals featured poems, short stories and accompanying steel engravings of society beauties, which were their real selling point. In the Brontë household, Charlotte and her siblings treasured such

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7 Occasionally, famous authors such as William Wordsworth, Walter Savage Landor, and Walter Scott were successfully solicited as contributors to the annuals due to generous compensation, but the majority of contributors were popular but minor literary figures. See Alison Adburgham, *Silver Fork Society: Fashionable Life and Literature from 1814 to 1840* (London: Constable, 1983) 250-56.


9 See Frederick Winthrop Faxon, *Literary Annuals and Gift-Books* (Boston: Boston Book Company, 1912) xxii. Most of Faxon’s work is devoted to indexing
volumes as *Friendship’s Offering* (1829), *The Literary Souvenir* (1830), *Forget Me Not* (1831), and *Heath’s Book of Beauty* (1836). They pored over these books and painstakingly copied their own versions of these images in pencil sketches. It is likely that they also read the accompanying literature often inspired by the subjects of the engravings.

A typical poem of the gift annual, titled “Lady Ashley,” is a tribute to the engraving of a woman with dark flowing hair on the facing page. Written by Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, the poem appears in *Heath’s Book of Beauty* (1836) and describes the subject’s eyes, lips, and hair in flowery detail:

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Eyes—like the sun in morn’s young hour,
When heightened beauty, softened power,
[. . .]
Lips—that like bruised pomegranates blush
Still with a deep and deepening flush,
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American and English gift annuals, but his descriptive introduction is informative about the genre.

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10 See Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars, *The Art of the Brontës* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995) 15. See also Gerin’s editorial commentary in *The Five Novelettes*. Alexander notes that ten engravings from the first three annuals were “painstakingly copied by Charlotte, Branwell and Emily” (15).

11 Lady Emmeline Stuart-Wortley, the daughter of the Duke of Rutland, was a typical contributor for the gift annuals because of her aristocratic status, a selling point for the gift books. Annuals were often edited by women from high society, “whose names were constantly in gossip columns.” Stuart-Wortley edited *The Keepsake* in 1836. Disraeli considered the “poetess’s person more beautiful than her poetry.” See also Adburgham 258-59.
Rich hair—like Berenice’s own,
Which, erst unmatched, unrivalled shone
Those clustering locks, those glistening braids,
Too precious for these earthly shades [. . .] (36-37)

In the novelettes, Brontë emulates the effusive, panegyric style of Stuart-Wortley
and other contributors to the annuals. In Caroline Vernon (1839), Brontë's description
of Caroline similarly lingers over her charms:

[. . .] she was made like a model--She could not but be
graceful in her movements, she was so perfect in her
proportions--As to her splendid eyes--dark enough & large
enough to set twenty poets raving about them--her
sparkling even teeth--& her profuse tresses, glossy, curling
& waving--she never counted these as beauties, they were
nothing [. . .]. (Caroline Vernon 311)

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12 As is the case with the criticism on silver-fork novels, critics have not yet
addressed the influence of the annuals on Brontë’s early writings. While Alexander and
Gerin mention how the engravings developed Brontë’s visual imagination, they do not
discuss the literary content. Until recently, attention to annuals was limited to
Adburgham’s history and indexes such as Faxon’s. Critics are now exploring this
literature from feminist, cultural, and economic perspectives. See Harriet Devine Jump,
Feminist Readings of Victorian Popular Tests: Divergent Femininities, eds. Emma
Liggins and Daniel Duffy (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001) 1-17; Cindy Dickenson, “Creating
a World of Books, Friends, and Flowers: Gift Books and Inscriptions, 1825-1860,”
Winterthur Portfolio: A Journal of American Material Culture 31 (1996): 53-66; and
Kathryn Ledbetter, “‘The Copper and Steel Manufactory’ of Charles Heath,” Victorian
Lady Marguerite Blessington, who edited *Heath’s Book of Beauty*, also wrote several novels in the silver-fork style, including *The Two Friends*, *The Victims of Society*, and *The Magic Lantern*. She had a more sentimental approach to describing women’s faces, writing about delicate beauties with “pale cheeks,” “languid eyes,” and in one character’s case, a “tinge of seriousness” in her beauty due to the death of her mother (*The Two Friends* 20-21). Brontë imitated many of these mannerisms in her early writings. Her purple-prose descriptions of Caroline Vernon resemble those of Blessington, who also invokes poets, painters, and sculptors (often all at the same time), at the sight of every beautiful young lady or handsome gentleman. Brontë’s novelette *Staneliffe’s Hotel* is similarly indebted to silver-fork novels. It refers to refined interiors, beribboned bonnets, and dandyish accessories.¹³

Inspired by the aristocratic women in fashionable novels, Brontë carefully describes the attire of her Angrian ladies. In “Albion and Marina,” written at the age of fourteen, Brontë details the particulars of Zenobia Elrington’s costume: “Her dark glowing complexion was set off by a robe of crimson velvet trimmed with ermine and a nodding plume of black ostrich feathers, added to the imposing dignity of her appearance” (Brontë qtd. in *Charlotte Brontë* 50). Julia Wellesley, yet another one of Brontë’s fashionable beauties, wears “a violet silk mantle and hat with a long white veil which concealed her face” and "a rich dark satin robe ornamented with a profusion of

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¹³ This novelette was unpublished until recently, when it appeared for the first time in *The London Times* on March 14, 2003. Attesting to the abundance of clothing allusions, its debut was also accompanied by articles about Charlotte Brontë’s interest in fashion.
jewels. A diamond aigrette glittered in her hair surmounted by a stately drooping plume of white ostrich feather" (Brontë qtd. in Five Novelettes 15).

Brontë’s representations of fashion, however, did not always earnestly imitate those found in silver-fork fiction. She satirizes dandies in Stancliffe’s Hotel, where she mocks Charles Townshend and William Percy. In chapter 5, the narrator Townshend expresses an ironic willingness to discuss fashion with a lord, earning him a cold dismissal: “Can you tell me what the newest fashions are? I’m quite out just now in dress, for really one sees little in that line in Cutta-Curafee.” With tongue in cheek, Brontë pokes fun at the contents of Townshend’s carpetbag, packed with curling irons, silk stockings, and a pot of “cream of roses.” At the end of the long list of clothing and accessories, he exclaims, “C’est tout! I’m my own valet now!” (ch. 2). Her ironic attention to dandy attire—the velvet waistcoats, white tights, and “frogged” dress coats—strongly suggests familiarity with Bulwer-Lytton’s Pelham, considered to be the quintessential silver-fork novel about dandies. Brontë’s acquaintance with silver-fork novelists helped shape her sense of aristocratic life in her juvenilia. She also emulates their use of dress as a means of establishing the high social status of characters.

The Interdependence of Drawing and Writing in Brontë’s Character Descriptions

Closely related to the influence of silver-fork fiction on Brontë’s early descriptive style is the interdependence of writing and drawing.\(^{14}\) She drew her Angrian characters as

\(^{14}\) For helpful discussions of how visual art influenced Brontë, see Charlotte Brontë: The Evolution of Genius, Art of the Brontës, and The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë.
well as writing about them, again turning to the annuals as a source. Her sketches attempted to reproduce the society beauties and dandies from the engravings, mimicking the annuals’ own thematic pairings of illustration and text. She not only sketched copies of these images, but critiqued them as well. While researching *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell “found among the papers there a sheet of notepaper covered in minute childish handwriting, with a rapturous and detailed criticism of the plates in *Friendship’s Offering* for 1829” (Adburgham 248). Her background in drawing and familiarity with fine art is particularly evident in her detailed descriptions of dress.

Drawing was closely intertwined with writing during Brontë’s childhood and adolescence. She and her siblings created miniaturized versions of *Blackwood’s* that mimicked its page layout, complete with tiny engravings. Brontë’s earliest extant manuscript is a miniature hand-sewn booklet from 1828 that includes an illustrated story about her sister Anne. Illustrations of protagonists and maps and landscapes of imaginary settings also accompanied Brontë’s early literary efforts, as well as sketches of several literary characters. Brontë’s interest in drawing continued though her late teens. Although rudimentary training in art was quite common for middle-class women, Brontë did not simply consider art to be an accomplishment. In the early 1830’s, she aspired to becoming an artist. In 1834, she exhibited two drawings at the summer exhibition of

15 See Alexander and Sellars 156, plate 6.

16 Patrick Brontë hired a Leeds artist, William Robinson, to tutor his children in art. Of all the Brontë children, only Branwell continued in his ambitions as an adult. In *Art of the Brontës*, Alexander points out the discrepancies between male and female education in art. While young women were taught to sketch after engravings, young men were encouraged to copy from life. Alexander persuasively implies that gender had
the Royal Northern Society for the Encouragement of the Fine Arts in Leeds. The exhibition catalogue lists her two landscape drawings, “Bolton Abbey” and “Kirkstall Abbey,” only eight items down from the work of J. M. W. Turner, whose paintings she had also imitated (52).

Some examples of her drawings of literary characters are catalogued in Art of the Brontës (1995), which includes one-hundred and seventy-three pencil sketches, ink drawings, and watercolors, not counting another sixteen drawings dubiously attributed to Charlotte. Many of these feature the characters that appear in both the juvenilia and artwork include “Zenobia Marchioness Ellrington” (plate 100), “Alexander Percy” (105), and the Duke of Zamorna (plate 113). Alexander speculates that “The Maid of Saragoza” (plate 127) represents Mina Laury from the novelette of the same title, and, because they are both dated 1839, Gerin suggests that Caroline Vernon and “Woman in Leopard Fur” represent Caroline Vernon.17

Brontë was particularly interested in drawing what she imagined to be fashionable clothing. Winifred Gerin credits this to her early fascination with visual art: "The pictorial origin of Charlotte's early heroines explains why she, a provincial clergyman's daughter with few opportunities of seeing fashions even belatedly, and herself a girl factored into Charlotte’s decision to discontinue her art. See Alexander 41, 51-52, and Lyndall Gordon, Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life (New York: Norton, 1995) 40.

17 For information on these recurring characters, see “Glossary of Persons and Places” in Charlotte Brontë, Juvenilia 1829-1835 (London: Penguin, 1996).

The similarities between the coloring and the style of dress in Caroline Vernon and the woman in the watercolor suggest that Brontë, in both writing and painting, was working with a definite type of beauty, common in the gift annuals of the period.
noticeably uninterested in clothes, should give such prominence to the costumes of her heroines” (Charlotte Brontë 52). Gerin credits the engraver William Finden as an important early influence, comparing the women in Brontë’s juvenilia to his engravings of Byronic heroines. Gleaning what she could from silver-fork fiction and engravings, Brontë developed her own fanciful notions of fashion.¹⁹ She writes: “There was no extravagance of feathered head-dress, bunched ringlets, flowered corsages, and leg-of-mutton sleeves with which [Brontë] was not acquainted; she closely scrutinized the setting of their jewels, sometimes spending months over the task” (Charlotte Brontë 49).

Both Gerin and Alexander trace Brontë’s description of Marian Hume, an Angrian character from the novelettes, to William Finden’s engraving “Countess of Jersey,” which Brontë had copied and renamed “English Lady.” Like the Countess, Marian appears with bright eyes, “small delicate features,” and “beautiful nutty curls and frail-looking form” in Brontë’s childhood story, “A Peek into a Picture Book.” Also, Brontë’s short story, “The Bridal,” has Marian wearing a long chain hanging below her waist and a small crescent of pearls (Art of the Brontës 56), a direct allusion to the costume in “The Countess of Jersey.”

Alexander writes, “[Brontë’s] analysis and copying of popular picturesque scenes and her familiarity with the conventional artistic attitudes of contemporary Annuals and periodicals taught her a particular way of representing reality that was translated into her writing.” (Art of the Brontës 54). Playing the roles of both artist and writer, she could

¹⁹ Brontë and her siblings would have viewed the current fashions in their Aunt’s copy of The Lady’s Magazine, which also featured the literature and household advice for women. For information on this magazine, see Sally Mitchell, Victorian Britain (New York: Garland, 1988).
"see" an image from both textual and visual perspectives—types of representation that overlapped and interpolated each other. By producing visual and textual images, Brontë developed her style of literary representation: a method that could be called *ekphrasis*, a term originating from the ancient Greek to describe the "literary genre, or at least a topos, that attempts to imitate in words an object of the plastic arts" (Krieger 6).

In modern usage, ekphrasis is a literary term that usually refers to the textual description of a work of art, with the purpose of getting the reader to “see” it. In ancient Greece, it was defined more generally as a type of speech that vividly describes a subject for its audience, depicting people, battles, or objects. Brontë’s early practice of describing literary characters that also appear in her drawings uniquely relates to both senses of the term. Because she references her own “works of art” when describing characters in the juvenilia, she creates ekphrastic images, though her character descriptions never directly allude to their sources in the annuals. Brontë continued to

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21 Murray Krieger’s *Ekphrasis: the Illusion of the Natural Sign* contends that language, however ekphrastic, is incapable of transcending its limited ability to be purely visual, or to “fill space” as art does. According to Krieger, the notion that language can have a solely visual purpose derives from the reader and poet’s shared desire for transparent language. As such, ekphrasis represents “an image at once grasped and yet slipping away through the crevices of language” (11).
employ this technique in her mature work, where she often alludes to paintings and artists.22

Brontë’s novelettes Captain Henry Hastings, Caroline Vernon, and Stancliffe’s Hotel, all include examples of this literary mode. Stancliffe's Hotel features the most ekphrastic imagery because of its quantity of specific fashionable details. The political thrust of the plot is only secondary to the often comic references to the excesses of young men’s dress, particularly that of narrator Charles Townshend and his friend William Percy. In nearly all nine chapters, both men and women are identified by their adherence to fashion, sometimes with disembodied clothing. Louisa Dance is introduced first as a soft voice and a bonnet with trailing ribbons. Her shawl, boa, and gloves “of French kid” mark her presence throughout the narrative. Townshend also watches the “umbrellas, cloaks, and mackintoshes” gathered below his window at Stancliffe’s Hotel (ch. 3). As if they are following the prescriptive advice of a fashion magazine, Percy wears “a blue dress-coat with velvet collar, velvet waistcoat and charming white tights,” and Townshend dons “a well-made green frock and light summer jeans” (ch. 5).

Many examples of Brontë’s visual imagery in the novelettes also feature descriptions of paintings and drawings in the text. Stancliffe’s Hotel features a painting of the “most noble Frederick Stuart, Earl of Stuartsville and Viscount Castlereagh, Lord Lieutenant of the Province of Zamorna” (ch. 4), who wears an unusual costume of robes,

22 Mack Smith contends that Brontë uses painting ekphrastically to delineate character: "Charlotte Brontë makes Jane Eyre a painter because her paintings reflect her view of herself and the world." See Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition (University Park: Pennsylvania State UP, 1995) 246. In Jane Eyre, ekphrasis is also present in Brontë’s description of works of art, namely where Jane shows Rochester her surreal sketches.
a detail that emphasizes the fine, exotic interior of his home. Art in Captain Henry Hastings, however, goes beyond this rendering of high life. As Elizabeth Hastings’ admirer Sir William Percy watches her at the ball, he notices that she stands in front of a painting of a battle. Watching her face, he reflects on what she may be thinking as she wipes a tear from her eye. He imagines that "the peculiar aspect of gloom & horror" in the painting caused her tears, and speculates on her internal state. Their mutual sympathy has much to do with their common hobby of sketching. Percy reveals a portrait he sketched of Elizabeth to her, and Elizabeth paints "a landscape of Grecian ruins and olives" for Jane Moore (210).

In her mature novels, the evocation of visual art has meaning. The Professor begins with a description of a portrait of narrator William Crimsworth’s mother, whom he resembles in both appearance and character. In Jane Eyre the eponymous heroine, as a child, peruses the woodcuts in Bewick’s History of British Birds, and later sketches the surreal drawings that captivate Rochester. In Shirley, family portraits allow characters to speculate on the personalities of their dead subjects, e.g., Mr. Helstone’s deceased wife, Mary Cave. Contrasting portraits, such as those of Mr. Helstone and his brother, Caroline’s father, also emphasize differences in temperament. Lucy Snowe in Villette studies a miniature of John Graham at Louisa Bretton’s home and criticizes a painting of Cleopatra at a museum in Brussels. These artworks help to express the interiority of

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23 Art later serves as a catalyst for the attraction between Jane and Rochester in Jane Eyre.
characters. The painting of Crimsworth’s mother becomes the reader’s first clue to Crimsworth’s character; Jane’s surreal drawings reveal aspects of her personality to Rochester; Mary Cave’s marble-like passivity in her family portrait cautions Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar from marrying men they do not love; and Lucy Snowe’s criticism of Cleopatra shows readers that she is a confident art critic who does not prize the glorification of materialism.

Although the novelettes are still inspired by the “burning Clime” of imaginary aristocratic life,\textsuperscript{25} they also indicate Brontë’s decreasing concern with closely emulating the superficial details of high life. Here the depictions of dress and facial features transform into imaginative evocations of inner character. In addition, what is left out or changed in her “copies” of aristocratic life becomes the richest source of meaning. In Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology, W. J. T. Mitchell references Socrates’s argument that a visual image is just as imperfect a rendering of the "real" as the written image. Socrates contends that a visual image is necessarily imperfect, "representing things both by likeness and unlikeness" because if it were able to represent every quality of the represented object, it would be a duplicate and not an image (92). As post-structuralist theorists would also contend, it is partly through omissions that we can find textual meaning.

\textsuperscript{24} Margaret Anne Doody argues that the description of the Cleopatra painting in Villette is a type of ekphrasis that expresses Lucy’s conscious alienation. See The True Story of the Novel (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1996) 395-96.

\textsuperscript{25} Brontë referred to the world of Angria as “the burning Clime.” See Charlotte Brontë 40.
The interdependence of drawing and writing collapsed well before the publication of *Jane Eyre*, signaling the changing nature of Brontë’s interest in surfaces. Judging from the catalogue of her surviving artwork, she stopped sketching character’s heads by 1843 and landscapes by 1845. The somewhat abrupt discontinuation of her art work was marked by her refusal to illustrate the second edition of *Jane Eyre* in an 1848 letter to W.S. Williams, who represented her publisher, Smith, Elder & Co. Though flattered, she explains that she lacks the talent to continue with it: “It is not enough to have the artist’s eye, one must also have the artist’s hand to turn the first gift to practical account. [. . .] I feel much inclined to consign the whole collection of drawings to the fire. (The Letters of Charlotte Brontë 2: 40-41).

As the letter goes on, what appears to be a self-effacing demurral gives way to distrust of illustration:

If then ‘Jane Eyre’ is ever to be illustrated, it must be by some other hand than its author. But I hope no one will be at the trouble to make portraits of my characters: Bulwer- and Byron-heroes and heroines are very well—they are all of them handsome—; but my personages are mostly unattractive in look and therefore ill-adapted to figure in ideal portraits—At the best, I have always thought such representations futile. (41)

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26 The last sketch of a possible character is “Abercrombie,” a young Scottish gentleman. The last landscape is called “Ashburnham Church on the Valley-Land.” See plates 160 and 163 in Art of the Brontës.
Brontë’s own history of sketching lies in the subtext of this letter. As a mature writer, she exchanged fashionable faces for plain ones in order to render more complex characters. It seems that, for Brontë, fiction surpassed drawing in its ability to convey unconventional characters.

By 1848, she recognized the creative limitations of Angrian “high life.” With the exception of the novelettes, where she began to explore using surfaces as psychological signifiers, many of the silver-fork-style heroes and heroines of her juvenilia rarely surpass their origins in fashionable fiction and engravings. By turning away from imitating the content of the annuals, she established her creative preference for depicting what is "imperfect" or more complex about the self. Yet she was still interested in the details of visible surfaces.

Physiognomy and the Emergence of the Visible Self

References to physiognomy and phrenology in the novelettes indicate that Brontë had an early interest in surfaces that coded interiority. These pseudo-sciences, which both proposed methods of reading inner character from the body, were appropriate vehicles for her to meditate on the relationship between faces and character, a concern that spanned her entire career. Physiognomy, first defined in ancient Greece and popularized by Johann Caspar Lavater in eighteenth and nineteenth-century Europe,\(^{27}\)

\(^{27}\) It first spread to England in the late eighteenth century, with the first English translation of Johann Caspar Lavater's four-volume work, *Physiognomische Fragmente*, in English in the 1780s. Attesting to its popularity, it went through fifty-six translations by as early as 1810. In *The Faces of Physiognomy: Interdisciplinary Approaches to Johann Caspar Lavater* (Columbia: Camden, 1993), Ellis Shookman states:
was the art of reading character through the face; phrenology, developed by Franz Joseph Gall, was the science of divining latent potential by examining the contours of the skull. In a period of great anxiety about appearances, when rapid industrialization and urbanism radically altered traditional notions of public and private, both typologies strongly influenced cultural attitudes about the body’s visibility throughout the nineteenth century. These pseudo-sciences permeated everything from literature, art, and lectures to newspaper articles about identifying criminal “types” from their facial features.

Frequently writing about spectators and surfaces, Brontë’s attraction to physiognomy and phrenology is not surprising. Although her use of these pseudo-sciences generally becomes more sophisticated in the mature novels, the novelettes already include them, attesting to her early interest in coded surfaces. While not always specifically using the terms “physiognomy” or “phrenology,” Stancliffe’s Hotel, Caroline Vernon, and Captain Henry Hastings all allude to these typologies. She makes humorous references to phrenology, and more earnestly, she adopts the language of Lavaterian physiognomy by referring to national physiognomies, facial expressions, and beauty. Her “Physiognomische Fragmente had gone through no fewer than sixteen German, fifteen French, two American, two Russian, one Dutch, and twenty English editions” (2).

28 See Richard Sennett, The Fall of Public Man (New York: Norton, 1976). Sennett argues that, in the nineteenth century, the division between the personal and impersonal became blurred as the “modern code of private meaning” entered public interactions (4).

first mature novel, The Professor, illustrates how the overuse of these systems of signification could lead to overly particular and predictable character descriptions. William Crimsworth’s every virtue, and his foreign students’ and colleagues’ every vice, are directly traceable to specific facial features.30

Beginning as a culturally accepted science in the early nineteenth century, phrenology held that the brain was divided into thirty-seven regions, each manifested in a bump on the skull. These “organs” of the brain were classified under three main divisions: “propensities,” “moral sentiments,” and “intellectual faculties.” Phrenologists took into account the size and strength of the segmented faculties, allowing for internal contradictions. A patient’s head could reveal a large bump for “combativeness” and an equally large bump for “agreeableness,” and phrenology made room for such complexity, giving the subject the agency to cultivate his or her potential. Like a language, the elements of phrenology did not signify in and of themselves, but only within a meaningful combination.31

Brontë’s specific allusions to phrenology in the novelettes are very few and comical.32 In Stancliffe’s Hotel, William Percy quips that his “organ of veneration is so

30 Brontë’s use of physiognomy and phrenology becomes more nuanced in the other novels.


32 Throughout her writings, Brontë sometimes uses the term “physiognomy” to denote phrenology, especially when describing the forehead. At times, she also uses physiognomy as a synonym for the face, though according to the Oxford English
predominant in my cranium, it will be the death of me some day” (ch. 5). Brontë also makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to phrenology in Caroline Vernon; Caroline accidentally bumps her head and “a considerable organ” rises from her forehead (326).

Critics such as Sally Shuttleworth have addressed Brontë’s use of phrenology to represent inner character. Shuttleworth traces the influence of phrenology from the 1820s onward throughout the nineteenth century when “phrenology received constant attention in newspapers and the periodical press, both of a supportive and fiercely condemnatory nature” (63). Lecture tours, like the ones hosted near Haworth at Keighley Mechanics’ Institute, were accessible to the general public and served to disseminate the doctrines of phrenology to them. Shuttleworth also points out that phrenology had an ideological dimension that was particularly attractive to women and the working classes: a creed of self-improvement. Identifying the faculties of the brain, a phrenological reading could reveal latent potentialities that a person could cultivate in order to better herself. She writes that “[t]he motto adopted by the Phrenological Journal: ‘Know thyself’ encoded their assumption that the road to social advancement lay primarily within self-analysis and introspection” (64). Perhaps because of Brontë’s tenuous status as a middle-class, educated woman lacking money or social connections, she became attracted to the idea that one could improve oneself socially and mentally through the recognition of one’s latent potential (65).

Dictionary, even this denotation implies that the face is an index to character. See the third definition.
Brontë had her own head examined in June 1851. In an anonymous visit to the phrenologist Dr. T.P. Browne in London, she and her publisher, George Smith, posed as “Mr. and Miss Fraser” for their readings. In Browne’s report, “The Phrenological Estimate of the Talents and Dispositions of a Lady,” he notes a “very remarkable” intellectual power and “a fine organ of language.” Her response to the report was qualified amazement. Responding to Smith, she writes: “With the exception of that slight mistake between number and Music ‘and the small vein of error which flows thence through the character’—it is a sort of miracle—like—like—as the very life itself” (Letters 2: 656-57).

In the juvenilia, however, Brontë alludes to physiognomy more frequently than phrenology. As a child, she had absorbed the early nineteenth-century fascination with physiognomy. From the eighteenth-century onward, Lavater influenced novelists’ depictions of characters’ appearances. Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne, Walter Scott all introduce characters with composite portraits. Samuel Richardson, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, among many others, also provided facial descriptions that predict inner character. As a young person, Brontë read Scott and in her early character descriptions quite possibly emulated his use of physiognomy.

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33 Though she was thrilled to be “read” by Browne, she was not a completely earnest believer; the postscript of this letter reads: “I enclose ‘The Lady’s character—but if you laugh at Mr. Fraser’s you must laugh at that too” (657).

34 See Tytler for discussions of these novelists’ use of physiognomic character description.

35 For Walter Scott’s influence, see Charlotte Brontë 28-31.
Silver-fork literature also may have influenced her early interest in physiognomy. Bulwer-Lytton’s *Pelham* includes a humorous description of Brimstone Bess, whose “capacious physiognomy” is ruddy with evidence that “many a full bottle of ‘British compounds’ had contributed to the feeding of that burning and phosphoric illumination” (286). *Night and Morning* (1841) offers a more sentimental reference to physiognomy:\(^{36}\) “[. . .] especially when silent or thoughtful, the expression of her face was rather that of the elder boy; the cheek, once so rosy, was now pale, though clear, with something time had given, of pride and thought, in the curved lip and the high forehead” (26).

Benjamin Disraeli’s *Vivian Grey* also employs physiognomy in his character descriptions, where facial features almost always reference character traits. Disraeli relies on stereotypical national physiognomy, mentioning eyes that are vacant with “German listlessness” (40) and the “lofty forehead” and “arched eyebrow” of an “Aegean” face (186). At times, his descriptions verge on the grotesque because of the minuteness of detail. In one instance, Mrs. Lorraine’s face changes shape and size as she grows angry and actually bursts a blood vessel.\(^{37}\)

In the novelettes and in her mature writings, Brontë employs ethnic stereotypes based on appearances, which are also part of Lavater’s physiognomic system. He writes

\(^{36}\) Lavater includes a section, “Resemblance between parents and children,” in *Essays on Physiognomy*, where he contends that physical resemblance correlates with similarities in character. He writes: “When children, as they increase in years, visibly increase in the resemblance of form and features to their parents, we cannot doubt that there is an increasing resemblance of character” (302).

that it is possible to determine national characteristics from the faces of a country’s inhabitants: “Individual countenances discover more the characteristics of a whole nation, than a whole nation does that which is national in individuals” (339). In Brontë’s Captain Henry Hastings, although Mr. Wilson says he is Scottish, his face “had none of the Scotch physiognomical characteristics” (196).

Brontë’s mature writing also mixes ethnic stereotyping with physiognomy, her nationalistic bias evident in the interpretations of ethnic faces. Set in Belgium (or its fictional counterpart), both The Professor and Villette feature unflattering descriptions of the character and appearances of continental schoolgirls. In the former novel, she states that “the true Flamand physiognomy” is one where “intellectual inferiority is marked in lines none can mistake” (58). Chapter 12 is entirely devoted to Crimsworth’s “sketches from nature,” literary portraits that extrapolate negative personality traits from his pupils’ foreign faces. As “a half-breed between German and Russian,” Aurelia Koslow has a tellingly unintelligent face, evident in “a very low forehead, very diminutive and vindictive grey eyes, somewhat Tartar features [. . .]” (84). Lavater associates “narrow and contracted” foreheads with incapacity for deep thought (295). The Belgian Adele Dronsart appears “gorgon-like,” with “sullen ill-temper [. . .] on her forehead” (85-86).

Juanna Trista is perhaps the most astonishing example of Brontë’s ethnic prejudice. Alluding to phrenology, Brontë compares the shape of Juanna’s head to that of a corrupt Pope:

She had precisely the same shape of skull as Pope Alexander the Sixth; her organs of benevolence,
veneration, conscientiousness, adhesiveness, were
singly small, those of self-esteem, firmness,
destructiveness, combativeness, preposterously large; her
head sloped up in the penthouse shape, was contracted
about the forehead, and prominent behind; she had rather
good, though large and marked features; her temper was
fibrous and bilious, her complexion pale and dark, hair and
eyes black, form angular and rigid but proportionate, age
fifteen. (86) 38

The obvious nationalistic and anti-Catholic biases of these “sketches from nature”
stand in stark relief to depictions of the protagonist Crimsworth’s “British English”
students, whose nationality and inner dispositions are immediately recognizable from
their faces: “I could at a glance distinguish the daughter of Albion and nursling of
Protestantism from the foster-child of Rome” (88-89). So different from those of the
Belgian girls, the face of Frances Evans Henri, Crimsworth’s future wife, indicates her
superiority. Implied in her half-English and half-Swiss appearance are her assets of

38 In phrenology, “adhesiveness” is the propensity for friendship and love. A
“fibrous” temper is one prone to anger. Human temperament is broken down into four
categories, each manifesting itself in the appearance: lymphatic, sanguine, fibrous, and
nervous. In A Vindication of Phrenology (1894), Mattieu Williams writes, “The fibrous
(generally, but inappropriately, termed the bilious) temperament; is recognised by black
hair, dark skin, moderate fulness and much firmness of flesh, with harshly expressed
outline of the person. The functions partake of great energy of action, which extends to
the brain; and the countenance, in consequence, shews strong, marked, and decided
features.” See John van Wyhe, The History of Phrenology on the Web 11 December
2003 <http://pages.britishlibrary.net/phrenology/temperament.htm>. Wyhe also points
out that Lavater also categorized human temperament in physiognomy.
honesty and diligence as a student. Like the British pupils, Mademoiselle Henri is also described sparingly: conspicuously absent is the detailed list of physiognomic features present in the descriptions of continental students.

This anti-Catholic bias also recurs in Villette, where the faces of Pere Silas and Madame Walravens expose their slippery morality. Here the Belgian students fare little better than they do in The Professor. These “Labassecourriennes” are round-faced, plump creatures prone to “oily” glibness and deception. While evoking their ethnic appearances, Brontë also invokes the discourse of the temperaments also present in phrenology: she identifies the foreign girls as phlegmatic, or having an unemotional and sluggish temperament: their “quick French blood [is] mixed with their marsh-phlegm” (145).

Facial expression is also an essential component of physiognomy in Brontë’s novelettes. The illustrations in Essays on Physiognomy include sketches representing mental states such as “terror, abhorrence, and rage” (453). Isolating these visible emotional states, he creates a spectrum of character types ranging from phlegmatic to foolish, from the coward to the choleric genius. Similarly, Brontë renders characters

39 As Wyhe says, the doctrine of humours or temperaments also figured into Gall’s system of phrenology. Dating back to ancient Greece, this doctrine was founded on the belief that the body was made up of four substances: blood, phlegm, bile, and black bile. The dominance of any of these supposedly manifested itself in the physiology and physiognomy of the person.

40 Handbooks on acting, such as Henry Siddons’s Practical Illustrations of Rhetorical Gesture (London, 1822), borrow from Lavaterian rules about the face extend them to the entire body. Like Lavater’s Essays, Siddons’s handbook features illustrations of emotional states, which coupled with theatrical gestures, are intended to show actors how to depict “universal” states of feeling.
based on their facial expressions. In Stancliffe’s Hotel, a small crowd of commercial
collectors display their vices: “Characters indicative of these vices [lack of principle and
profligacy] were legibly written in the faces of half-dozen gentlemen gathered on this
stormy evening” (ch. 3). Louisa Dance’s “bland smile hovering round deceitful lips”
expresses her seductiveness, and an old gentleman’s sourness is affirmed in his “dark
dried vinegar physiognomy shaded with grizzly whiskers and overshaded with still more
grizzly hair” (ch. 1; ch. 5). In Caroline Vernon, the heroine’s features are actually
“stamped” with feeling, visibly attesting to her passionate nature (354). In Captain Henry
Hastings, “every line, every muscle” in a magistrate’s face indicates a “man of the world
physiognomy” (193). Elizabeth Hastings’s intelligence and capacity for passion are
embodied in her uncommonly “quick wandering eye” and “features capable of much
varied expression” (181).

Because the face is legible even in these early writings, the revelation and
concealment of faces carries special significance. In Caroline Vernon, Mr. Montmorency
tries to gauge Caroline’s attitude towards Zamorna, but to no avail since her head is
averted. “He looked into Miss Vernon’s face as narrowly as if her features had been the
Lord’s prayer written within the compass of a sixpence—there was nothing particular to
be seen except a smooth brunette complexion and dark eyes looking at the carpet” (322).
When Caroline appears in Zamorna’s home, disguised as “Miss Lucy Grenville,” she
hides her face with a large bonnet. Shading the face also obscures her barely suppressible
passion for Zamorna; when he adjusts the fire to better see her, it becomes exposed (350).
In Captain Henry Hastings, a shawl over her face also allows Elizabeth Hastings to study Townshend’s face without his immediate detection.

The presence of physiognomy and phrenology in Brontë’s juvenilia demonstrates that she was exploring techniques for visually evoking character through appearances in the novelettes. While she uses these pseudo-sciences in fairly conventional ways in her early writings—borrowing from Lavater, silver-fork novels, and other works of popular literature—she sets the stage for more original and more nuanced means of rendering characters in the mature fiction. When alluding to these pseudo-sciences in the juvenilia, her attention to watching others prefigures later concerns with visibility and subjectivity. The plain heroine of Jane Eyre and Villette, with her contradictory physiognomy, is rooted in this early awareness of the power of observation.

Emergence of Plainness as a Signifier of Interiority

The novelettes mark an important turning point for Brontë’s development as a writer since, while showing elements of silver-fork imitation, they also begin to complicate what the details of dress signify. Representing competing types of heroines, Caroline Vernon and Elizabeth Hastings have differing styles of dress that express their capacities for passion and self-control. Their contrasting style of dress also presages their distinct responses to moral dilemmas. Caroline’s enthusiastic immersion in Parisian fashion and French culture predicts her fall by the end of the novelette, while Elizabeth’s insistence on dressing plainly forecasts her ability to suppress her desire for William Percy and reject his proposition to become his mistress. Although Brontë explores the
inner lives of both characters, Elizabeth emerges as the prototype for later heroines, particularly Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, because her plainly-styled appearance signals her ability to observe and understand human behavior, forming the basis of her subjectivity.

Brontë’s use of plainness as a signifier participates in the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century discourse of the spiritual reformation of women. Reacting to the material excesses of the aristocracy, Evangelical reformer Hannah More urged women to dress modestly in order to cultivate their spirituality. In her novel, Coeleb’s In Search of a Wife (1809), she also implies that dressing plainly also can be advantageous in the marriage market because of the allure of tasteful, simple dress. Having both inward depth and outward simplicity, Lucilla Stanley captures the heart of the bachelor, Charles. He observes:

The dress of Lucilla is not neglected, and it is not studied. She is as neat as the strictest delicacy demands, and as fashionable as the strictest delicacy permits; and her nymph-like form does not appear to less advantage for being veiled with scrupulous modesty. Oh! if women in general knew what was their real interest! if they could guess with what a charm even the appearance of modesty invests its possessor, they would dress decorously from mere self-love, if not from principle. (65)

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Also, Lucilla is more elegant than beautiful, and her physiognomy proves that she is an interesting woman. “Her beauty is countenance: it is the stamp of mind intelligibly printed on the face” (64). Brontë also evokes the sexual and marital allure of simplicity in Captain Henry Hastings and Jane Eyre. William Percy is drawn to Elizabeth Hastings’s refined but understated appearance, and Rochester finds Jane Eyre’s neatness erotic. Where Brontë radically departs from More is her emphasis on Elizabeth’s skill and agency as an observer. Rather than developing inner and outer plainness for the sake of spirituality, she dresses with restraint in order to assess with virtual invisibility the character and motives of others.42

Brontë’s interest in plain women as heroines began in childhood. In The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell tells an anecdote about Charlotte as an adolescent, challenging her sisters’ assumption that a heroine must be beautiful in order to be interesting. Brontë stated: “I will prove to you that you are wrong; I will show you a heroine as plain and small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours” (308).43

42 Mary Wollstonecraft also addresses the issue of women and the disadvantages of self-adornment. In Vindication of the Rights of Woman (1792), she contends that women who focus all their energy on dressing themselves become bankrupt in character. She is particularly concerned with women who sew their own clothing since they are most likely to have dress uppermost in their thoughts. Of these women, she writes that this has a detrimental effect since: “it will be found that the employment of the thoughts shapes the character both generally and individually” (171). Brontë’s Caroline, whose sudden love of finery coincides with her fall, seems to accord with Wollstonecraft, though she also makes this character intelligent and interesting.

43 In Gaskell’s biography, Brontë offers up this anecdote to explain the genesis of Jane Eyre as a character, though it is also strongly possible that Elizabeth represents her first attempt.
Brontë’s development of the plain heroine, however, is not merely a response to a challenge but could be traced to her early experimentation with opposite types of women. Although beautiful women outnumber the plain, Brontë’s early drawings communicate her ever-present interest in unattractive women as potential subjects. In the catalogue of sketches, two doodles of plain women stand out, situated next to pretty women. The first is a drawing on the bottom half of an 1843 letter Charlotte wrote to Ellen Nussey, where Brontë teases her friend about an admirer. Labeled “C. Brontë,” a misshapen female figure on the left waves “Good Bye” to an attractive couple on the right, labeled “Ellen Nussey” and “The Chosen.” Unlike “C. Brontë,” “Ellen Nussey” wears an attractive curls and a long gown. This doodle clearly reveals Brontë’s sense of her personal appearance. An unfinished 1837 sketch of two women’s heads also features such a contrast. Interestingly, the accompanying text on the facing page is a draft of “Mementos,” a poem which appeared in Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (1846). The poem features a governess who recalls two sisters, Frances and Clara, under her care thirty years ago:

Clara had beauty from her birth
Always fine eyes and flowing hair
Her mother knew that beauty’s worth
And cultured it with constant care
It prospered—she became each day
More perfect in her symmetry [sic]

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44 See plate 159. Some of these labels are crossed out due to Ellen Nussey’s censorship of her letters from Brontë.
Her eyes acquired a brighter ray
Her face a sweeter harmony
She was at length her parents’ pride
And seldom left their fostering side [. . .] (Brontë qtd. in Alexander and Sellars 247)

According to the rest of the poem, the plainer sister Frances moved away from the influence of her family and achieved independence as an heiress. This poem and these illustrations show that Brontë explored the possibility of a plain female subject well before *Jane Eyre*.

More significantly, *Caroline Vernon* and *Captain Henry Hastings* also reveal Brontë’s concern with representing the subjectivity of plain and beautiful women. As mentioned earlier, Caroline’s appearance is modeled on the silver-fork beauty, whose eyes send “twenty poets raving,” while Elizabeth is comparatively plain. While dissimilar in looks, they both share imperfect facial features, signifying their unconventionality. For most of the nineteenth century, fashion plates depicted women with “oval faces, smooth, pink and rounded cheeks, fairly large eyes, small, straight noses, and little rosebud mouths.”45 Departing from this ideal, Caroline is exempt from the conventional social scripts followed by most young British women. In the nineteenth-century, a female heroine’s irregular features were assumed to directly correlate with atypical behavior. Jeanne Fahnestock writes:

When novelists create irregularly featured heroines who deviate from the standard of beauty [. . .] The characters are allowed imperfection, too. The face remains an accurate mirror of the character, for the heroine of irregular features is capable of irregular conduct. She can act, make mistakes, learn from them, and grow, exercising a privilege usually only the hero’s. (330-31)\footnote{46}

Predicting her frustrated desire for her guardian, Caroline’s imperfect features become the foundation of her subjectivity in the novelette.

Elizabeth’s face also lacks proportional beauty, but unlike Caroline, she is not exceedingly pretty. She “was almost as fair as he was dark—but she had little colour—her features could lay no claim to regularity—though they might to expression—yet she had handsome brown eyes—and a [lady-like] turn of figure” (202). Elizabeth’s features also predict a different kind of irregular behavior; where Caroline’s face reveals her predisposition for passion and excess, Elizabeth’s attests to her strong intellect, her confidence in expressing her political beliefs among men, and her willingness to risk arrest by hiding her brother from the law. It is also significant that Elizabeth's best feature is her eyes, representing her skill in reading others.

Brontë uses their opposite attitudes towards fashion to indicate their divergent approaches to moral dilemmas. In \textit{Caroline Vernon}, finery expresses the trajectory of her sexual awakening and its moral consequences. At the beginning of the novelette,\footnote{46 See Jeanne Fahnestock, “The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description,” \textit{Victorian Studies} 24.3 (1981): 325-350.}
Caroline’s desires are “as yet in chrysalis form”; her manner of dressing in little girl’s clothes signals their latency: "this young lady's dress by no means accorded with her years & stature, the short-sleeved frock, worked trousers & streaming sash would have better suited the age of nine or ten than that of fifteen" (305). A trip to France represents her symbolic exchange of childhood frocks for sophisticated Parisian gowns. Zamorna correctly predicts that the city would "strip her of her frock & sash and put on a gown & jewels" (296). In his warning to Caroline, he clearly associates such ornamentation with moral danger:

  don't copy the manners of the ladies you see at Paris or Fontainebleau. They are most of them not quite what they should be, they have very free obtrusive manners, & will often be talking to you about love & endeavoring to make you their confidante--you should not listen to their notions on the subject as they are all very vicious and immodest.

  (316)

Caroline not only ignores this advice but enthusiastically adopts the French fashions that facilitate the potential fulfillment of her adult desires. She muses: "There had also been much secret enjoyment in her mind from the idea of shewing herself to [Zamorna]--improved as she knew she was after her long sojourn to Paris" (327). However, her power over him is short-lived. While she successfully seduces him, becoming his mistress leads to unhappy isolation.
Caroline’s susceptibility to moral corruption by the French is an extreme illustration of Brontë’s own fascinations and reservations about French culture. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, dated August 20, 1840, Brontë displays a mixed but enthusiastic reaction to “a bale” of forty French novels she had borrowed from the family library of Mary Taylor, her childhood friend. “I have read about half—they are like the rest clever wicked sophistical and immoral—the best of it is, they give one a thorough idea of France and Paris [. . .]” (Letters 1: 226). Elaine Showalter stresses the symbolic importance of Frenchness in Brontë’s novels: “French literature [. . .] was regarded by respectable Englishmen as frivolous at best, and perverted at most.” Showalter writes that Brontë “alternated between complete rejection of French values and recognition of their correspondence to a repressed and passionate aspect of her own personality” (227). In Caroline Vernon, Paris represents both liberated sensuality and Caroline's "immolation to the Byronic fashion of the day" (Five Novelettes 275).

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48 Brontë’s ambivalence towards French fashion was typical for Englishwomen. Paris was the capital of fashion in the nineteenth century. In the 1820s, after the Napoleonic wars, Englishwomen found renewed pleasure in following the fashions from the city. C. Willett Cunnington writes: "the novelty, after the long years of war, of a trip to Paris was irresistible, and countless British matrons returned triumphant with their French spoils; their charm was not so much that they were becoming, as they proved that their wearers had really crossed the channel" (75). Although England and other Western countries enthusiastically imitated Parisian fashion, they often disapproved of impractical and sometimes revealing nature of the styles. What was perceived to be outré clothing easily connoted immorality in England. See Cunnington, English Women’s Clothing in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Dover, 1990) and Valerie Steele, Parisian Fashion: A
Caroline’s desire for fine clothes also coincides with nineteenth-century attitudes about the moral dangers of finery. In “The Love of Finery: Fashion and the Fallen Women in Nineteenth-Century Social Discourse,” Mariana Valverde points out that love of fashionable clothing was once considered a reason for women entering prostitution.49 Caroline becomes Zamorna’s “kept woman,” destined for a fate similar to her mother’s. Because of her illegitimacy, her moral status is uncertain from the beginning, and by the time she visits Paris, it is clear that she is fulfilling her hereditary destiny. Brontë reintroduces the stylish but precocious illegitimate child in Adele Varens from Jane Eyre. Like Caroline, Adele has inherits her mother’s passion for French dress and culture.

Throughout her life, Brontë had mixed feelings about fashion. Although she was fascinated with society beauties as an adolescent, she never attempted to emulate their fashion sense, even after becoming famous. Letters reveal her feelings of self-consciousness about her small stature, her perceived lack of beauty, and her provincial background, which all help explain her unease with fashion. The voluminous skirts and sleeves, plentiful ribbons, and cascading ruffles of the 1830s to 1850s would have been awkward adornment for a woman who, like her heroines, preferred to be unnoticed. This is not to say that Brontë was unconcerned with dress. In an 1848 letter to Mary Taylor,

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Brontë writes about an embarrassing episode during her visit to London with her sister Anne. Due to a misunderstanding, the sisters arrived underdressed for the opera. She also writes to her friends about visits to the dressmaker’s, where she mentions selecting black silk dresses, black lace mantles, and her wedding trousseau. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, dated November 26, 1849, she writes: “I insisted on the dresses [being] made quite plainly” (2: 298). Her taste for black or drab-colored clothing was markedly similar to the taste of her characters.

Where Caroline’s French gowns play an instrumental part in her fall, Elizabeth’s extremely plain style of dressing expresses her ability to resist temptation. In addition to her other peculiarities, she takes a decisive stance against fashion, setting her apart from other nineteen-year-olds of her class:

had [sic] she dressed herself stylishly & curled her hair, no one would have called her plain--but in a brown silk frock--a simple collar & hair parted on her forehead with smooth

50 She writes: “we had no fine, elegant dresses either with us or in the world [. . .] we attired ourselves in the plain—high-made, country garments we possessed—and went with them to their carriage—where we found Williams likewise in full dress. They must have found us queer, quizzical looking beings—especially me with my spectacles [. . .]” (Letters 2: 113).


52 Aside from personal taste, Brontë’s plain black dresses also show that she was in a continual state of mourning for the deaths of three siblings, Emily, Anne, and Branwell, within an eight-month period in 1848 and 1849. Although mourning helps contextualize Brontë’s personal and fictional references to plain black dresses, it does not explain how plainness becomes an aesthetic as early as Captain Henry Hastings, particularly as it contrasts with fashion.
braids--she was just an insignificant--unattractive young woman wholly without the bloom--majesty or fullness of beauty--She looked like a person of quick perceptions & dexterous address [...] (202)

Although she could probably afford to dress fashionably, Elizabeth deliberately does not. Townshend remarks: “there’s something studied about her dress—everything suits—white scarf—plain silver ribbon in her hair” (206). Her lack of ornament makes her more attractive to Percy, precipitating her moral quandary, yet it also signals her capacity to settle it with self-control. Although, like Lucilla Stanley, Elizabeth gains an admirer by dressing with restraint, her plain dress goes beyond merely making her desirable.

Elizabeth's cultivated plainness proves erotic to Sir William Percy, who favors her over her prettier and more charming friend, Jane Moore. Jane is a classic, regular-featured beauty, with a "nose like Alexander the Great's, & large blue imperial eyes" and a "profusion of [...] long silky ringlets bright as gold" (206). Percy notices Jane first, but he describes her in divine and inhuman terms—she is a Pagan idol and "superb animal" (206). Rita Freedman describes the dehumanizing effect of the beauty myth when she states: "Like Venus, a goddess of beauty but also a planet wrapped in steamy clouds, her core is hidden in a romantic mist. Beauty maintains the erotic mystery of a woman by concealing the human being underneath" (114). Brontë implies her awareness of beauty’s limited empowerment when Percy states that he prefers the "mortal" Elizabeth, saying that he desires a woman who is "young & elegant & had a mind above
the grade of an animal" (250). However, Percy’s admiration also extends to her feminine shape; her simple dress flatters her “elegant turn of figure” (202).

By reversing the conventional preference for beauty over plainness, Brontë founds the erotic attraction between these characters in their shared personality traits as well as their ability to correctly read each other. Unlike Townshend, who prefers the lovelier Jane, Percy perceives Elizabeth’s unique character, which he immediately interprets from her appearance. Lacking the ability to "read" her correctly, it is not surprising that Townshend does not become her lover. He incorrectly explains her plainness as a product of her solitude. "She looked like one who lived alone--for her dress shewed none of the studied arrangement & decorative taste by which women especially, endeavored to please those with whom they associate" (Five Novelettes 199). Percy proves to be the better match since he immediately recognizes her intelligence and identifies with her oddness and artistic ability.

Considering her express wish to appear plain, her refusal of Percy’s gift of a diamond cross has strong resonance. She wisely recognizes that the transaction would render her morally indebted to him: “it would hurt me to accept anything of value from you” (249). Elizabeth’s eschewing of adornment also informs the culminating scene in the narrative, where Percy asks her to become his mistress. Again, wishing to preserve her autonomy rather than satisfying her desires, she turns him down. Rather like Jane Eyre, Elizabeth states that she is willing to become his paid servant rather than his mistress.
Elizabeth and Caroline are also distinguished by the way in which they use clothing to obscure their motivations. While Caroline temporarily dresses in plain clothing in a moment of extreme abandon, Elizabeth’s plain gowns allow her to gain the advantage of observing others without inviting their scrutiny. In order to see Zamorna against her parents’ wishes, Caroline plans to run away, at first bribing a maid in order to purchase a boy's suit of clothes (338). Once she reads a seductive letter from Zamorna, she abandons these rash plans and immediately dons a "plain straw bonnet and a large shawl" (340), disguising herself on the four-mile journey from her mother's house to Wood-house Cliff. Once inside, she has trouble masking her intentions and quickly confesses her true identity to her hostess, Mrs. Warner. Introduced as "Miss Lucy Grenville," Caroline seems to have Zamorna fooled, but when he stokes the fire, the truth becomes apparent in her face. Caroline's ruse is fully exposed, as are her adult passions.\(^{53}\) Given the importance of reading faces in Brontë’s work, Caroline is at a disadvantage since she is not the reader but the read.

Elizabeth is much savvier, not only in correctly discerning Percy’s motives, but also because she uses plain clothing to facilitate watching others. Townshend hears Elizabeth before he sees her, putting him at an immediate disadvantage. While she

\(^{53}\) This scene resembles Rochester’s impersonation of a gypsy fortuneteller in *Jane Eyre*. The meeting between the disguised Caroline and Zamorna has a similar element of erotic tension, heightened by the ostensible power of the disguised over the undisguised. Both scenes also challenge characters to correctly read each other by appearances. Disguise ineffectively cloaks desire as much as physical appearance, always threatening to break through to the surface. In Caroline Vernon, desire reveals itself immediately, and Zamorna "lay[s] down the last garment of light & be[comes] himself entirely" (351-52). In *Jane Eyre*, Rochester’s disguise also fails, but desire must wait to be gratified. Brontë also speaks more directly of physiognomy, focusing more on the erotic competition of reading character through appearances.
confidently airs her opinions on local politics, her face is partly veiled, and his first concern is to determine whether or not she is pretty. After attempting two or three unsuccessful glances at her face, he almost gives up, but suddenly turns to find her beating him at his game:

she had taken the opportunity of my seeming abstraction to scrutinise my physiognomy most closely—consequently, when I made the unexpected movement of turning my head—I saw her veil thrown back & her eyes fixed full on me with a gaze of keen sharp observation [. . .] had she been very old & very ugly I would have said no more to her --had she been young & extremely handsome I would have commenced a series of petits soins & soft speeches [. . .]

(Brontë 181)

Elizabeth’s shawl is more than a disguise; it is an extension of her plain style of clothing, which exempts her from the gaze of men, allowing her to interact with them without condescension from men like Townshend. Laura Mulvey persuasively explains the relationship between the male gaze and its power to control meaning in the context of film. Brontë’s female observers challenge the perspective of the male gaze, which relegates women to a passive role. By being adept physiognomists, they are better equipped to interpret the world and control meaning by creating their own narratives.
Brontë takes this a step further with Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe, who, unlike Elizabeth, narrate their own tales.\(^{54}\)

As an empowered observer in control of her destiny, the plainer Elizabeth is a more promising template than Caroline for later heroines because her appearance is less connotative of the emergent pattern in Brontë’s juvenilia, where passionate beauties predictably succumb to Zamorna. Besides representing a conventional plot turn for Brontë, Caroline is also more bound than Elizabeth to her adolescent fascination with “high life,” which signals an impasse in Brontë’s creativity. Her overly particular description of Caroline’s beauty, so imitative of the annuals, also brands her as the helpless object of a controlling male gaze. Statements about her eyes, hair, and teeth offer excessively detailed proof of her attractiveness, just as Disraeli’s extra details overstate the conjuror’s peculiarity in *Vivian Grey*. Also, descriptions of beauty are in themselves limited indicators of character. As Barthes contends, descriptions of beauty are circular and self-referential: “Beauty (unlike ugliness) cannot really be explained: in each part of the body it stands out, repeats itself, but it does not describe itself. Like a god (and as empty), it can only say *I am what I am*” (33). This circularity can serve as a creative barrier to Brontë’s creation of a legible interior for Caroline.

Like the unfinished drawing on the manuscript fragment of “Mementos,” Elizabeth represents uncharted territory. Replacing conventional praises of beauty with descriptions that emphasize her lack of conspicuous attractions in features and clothing, she allowed Elizabeth’s character to become more legible in her appearance. Her literary

portrait also allows for more nuanced interpretation since it dispenses with silver-fork mannerisms, which opens up multiple meanings. Brontë’s description of Elizabeth creates what Umberto Eco would call an “open” text, while Caroline’s portrait evokes the “closed” text of the fashionable novel. A closed work of literature, often a genre work, offers a limited set of meanings; by its structure, it ultimately narrows meaning down to a single interpretation. In the case of Caroline Vernon, opportunities for multiple meanings are foreclosed by the predictability of the fate of a beautiful, reckless woman in the world of Angria. While her irregular features do make her cliched beauty more interesting, they serve as the primary clue to her eventual moral downfall. Elizabeth’s portrait, on the other hand, creates an open text. This is especially true since she is defined mostly through negation; she is not fashionably dressed, not a society beauty, and not a typical woman. This plain protagonist becomes a strategy for Brontë to develop a heroine who is unbound to genre.

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The landscape of Brontë’s novelettes show her increasing ability to resist the “lure of the fabulous,” associated with Angria, a kingdom inspired by silver-fork fiction and fashionable engravings. Revealed are her conflicting aims of imitating what she so admired about the high life and her simultaneous creative renunciation of it, particularly her experimentation with plainness as a signifier. In the novelettes, her growing interest

55 For a helpful explanation of Umberto Eco’s concepts of open and closed texts, see Paul Cobley and Litza Jansz, Introducing Semiotics (Cambridge: Icon, 1999) 157.
in rendering characters with legible personalities led her to another type of emulation: the use of physiognomy in literary portraits. Plainness, more conducive than beauty for both legibility and the ability to read others, becomes a starting point for both an alternative kind of heroine and a different type of eroticism. Her simply-styled appearance is, at least for Brontë, what makes self-definition and self-control more possible.
Chapter 2: Empowered Plainness: Jane’s Dress and Identity in Jane Eyre

“No woman—a lady friend, whom we are always happy to consult, assures us—makes mistakes in her own métier—no woman trusses game and garnishes dessert-dishes with the same hands, or talks of so doing in the same breath. Above all, no woman attires another in such fancy dresses as Jane's ladies assume—Miss Ingram coming down, irresistible, 'in a morning robe of sky-blue crape, a gauze azure scarf twisted in her hair!!' No lady, we understand, when suddenly roused in the night, would think of hurrying on 'a frock.' They have garments more convenient for such occasions, and more becoming too. This evidence seems incontrovertible. Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.”

–Elizabeth Rigby, Quarterly Review

In a preface to Shirley (which her publisher decided not to include) Charlotte Brontë offered a spirited response to Elizabeth Rigby’s adverse criticisms of Jane Eyre (1847), which, in the above passage, concludes that if “Currer Bell” were indeed a woman, she had “long forfeited the society of her own sex.” Although Brontë had not yet revealed that she was Currer Bell, the assault on her femininity touched a nerve, and she countered it with satire, pointing out that she has duly corrected her former fashion faux pas in Shirley. Although she does defend her choice of “frock” as a term for Jane’s dress, she ironically claims to have taken “the train down to Ingram Park to make

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1 [Rigby, Elizabeth.] "Vanity Fair--and Jane Eyre." Quarterly Review 84.167 (December 1848): 153-185. In this review, Rigby, also Lady Eastlake, also suggestively repeated rumors that Currer Bell was actually a governess in Thackeray’s household who had an affair with Thackeray and based Rochester on him, while Thackeray painted Becky Sharpe with “Currer Bell” in mind.

2 Critics did not unanimously dub Jane Eyre an unrefined novel. Harriet Martineau assured Brontë that she could not find a trace of coarseness in Jane Eyre, which became the basis for their acquaintance. Her review of Villette, however, ended the friendship for Brontë. Martineau criticized the latter novel for its heroine’s love of two men. See Gordon 284.
personal inquiry of Miss Blanche Ingram’s maid about the material of her lady’s morning-dress.”  

The fabric, she carefully points out, has “a light blue ground, barred across with faint stripes of a deeper colour, figured with a pattern of small leaves mixed with zigzags, finished with a narrow silk stripe straight down” (244). Brontë’s sarcastic preface makes it clear that she has no intention of representing clothing realistically, but instead, she implies that she will continue using fashion as her own signifier. Although Elizabeth Rigby’s sartorial comments were geared toward speculating on the real gender of Currer Bell, Rigby’s review also assumes that female novelists, at least those who are well socialized, necessarily need to include accurate representations of clothing in order to project their femininity. Uninterested in accurately depicting a lady’s “métier” and often criticized for her own lack of beauty or fashion sense, Brontë reveals her disdain for being criticized on domestic rather than on artistic grounds, a concern that later resurfaces in Villette. She also dissociates herself from the overwritten, silver-fork

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3 Brontë underscores Jane’s meager wardrobe and lack of pretension in her rebuttal: “For the rest my accuracy is no novelty. Recollect, ma’am, it was only the shabby little governess whom I represented as putting on her “frock” and shawl—and as she possessed but three “frocks” (that class of persons often use the word “frock” where a “lady” would say “dress”, if you observe, ma’am, as does the domestic servant; I like to put them on a level) in the world—a person of your sagacity will have no difficulty inferring that she was unlikely to boast any choice of garments more convenient and becoming [. . .]” (Letters 2: 243-244).

4 In various letters, Brontë described herself as dressed like a “country cousin” when meeting George Smith, Lucy Martineau says she is dressed like a Quaker, and Mrs. Brookfield (a friend of Thackeray) calls attention to her thin hair, obviously decorated by a false silk plait. See Volume Two of The Letters. Also see Gordon, Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life.

5 In Villette, Lucy Snowe says that the actress Vashti should be judged as an artist and not as a woman.
details of writers like Lady Blessington and what she perceived to be the overly controlled, elegant rendering of domestic details by Jane Austen, whose writing Brontë described as lacking passion and having “a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting” of genteel lives.⁶

In addition to eschewing Rigby’s criticisms of domestic inaccuracy, Brontë’s use of dress as a signifier is also different from Austen’s. Brontë foregrounds details of the face and clothing in order to highlight the subjectivity of her characters rather than using them as indicators of taste or morality.⁷ This chapter will illustrate how these signifiers not only establish Jane Eyre’s interiority, but, more importantly, how they emblematize the role of personal agency in defining the self. Facial and cranial features were believed to reveal propensities that were inherent in a person, obscuring (though not precluding) the idea of a malleable self. However, although phrenology assumed that the shape of the brain indicated a relatively stable set of potentialities, the creed of phrenology did accommodate self-improvement within pre-established strengths and weaknesses.⁸

⁶ In a letter to W.S. Williams, dated 12 April 1850, Brontë explains that while she admires Austen, her work does not inspire “warmth and enthusiasm” in her. She also remarks on Austen’s restrained style of depicting “genteel English people”: “there is a Chinese fidelity, a miniature delicacy in the painting: she ruffles readers by nothing vehement, disturbs him with nothing profound: the Passions are perfectly unknown to her; she rejects even a speaking acquaintance with that stormy Sisterhood; even to the Feelings she vouchsafes no more than an occasional graceful but distant recognition; too frequent converse with them would ruffle the smooth elegance of her progress” (Letters 2: 383).

⁷ Austen often uses dress in order to point out shortcomings in both. In Emma, Mrs. Elton’s lack of breeding is signaled in her absence of elegance and “under-bred finery” (226), and in Pride and Prejudice, Lydia Bennet’s weakness for bonnets implies her over-fondness for young officers.
Jane Eyre, while working from within the visual codes she borrows from these pseudo-sciences, Brontë pushes their boundaries by depicting a narrator-heroine who not only controls the presentation of her tale, but the very process of self-knowledge and self-definition that begins with the contradictory possibilities present in her irregular features. Jane’s plain style of dress, particularly the black and gray gowns she persists in wearing throughout the novel, visually represents her will to control and shape her character as well as her destiny.

Despite her differences from Austen and earlier writers, Brontë is not the first novelist to explore the relationship between dress and the self. Eighteenth-century novelists were also concerned with fashion’s power to transform character in the context of burgeoning capitalism. Deidre Lynch notes that Charlotte Brontë and Frances Burney both share an interest in the relationship between commodification and self-definition.\(^9\) Burney’s Evelina and Camilla feature heroines whose entrance into the fashionable world, the life of things, threatens overtake their subjectivity. Lynch writes that in Burney’s novels, “People for the most part assume the characteristics of objects of consumption: commodities’ hypervisibility, their abstract comparability through the

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\(^8\) By assuming that self-knowledge could be attained from understanding the makeup of the brain’s “organs,” the creed of phrenology made room for agency in self-development, which is why Brontë was attracted to it as a system of signification. She responds to her phrenological diagnosis in a July 8, 1851 letter to Smith by testifying to the pseudo-science’s ability to foster improvement: “Everybody appreciates social properties—and likes his neighbor for possessing them—but perhaps few dwell on a friend’s capacity for the intellectual or care how this might expand, if there were but facilities allowed for cultivation and space given for growth” (Letters 2: 663).

medium of money, and by extension, their asubjectivity” (165). Jane Eyre’s unease with choosing a new, fashionable wardrobe at Rochester’s expense participates in this preceding literary anxiety, but her resistance also shows that something very different is at stake. While eighteenth-century writers like Hannah More and Samuel Richardson considered plainness a virtue and excessive consumerism a vice, Brontë shows that Jane Eyre’s adherence to a plain style of dress is less out of concern for moral virtue and more motivated by a desire for agency in constructing the self.

In Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel (1987), Nancy Armstrong states that the Brontës had “more to do with formulating universal forms of subjectivity than any other novelists” (186). Noting that their novels influenced the tendency of Victorian narratives to “turn into pictures,” Armstrong writes that Charlotte Brontë participated in the “iconography of subjectivity” in Victorian popular culture. What helped to create this iconography were popular images from Victorian genre paintings, such as the drowned Ophelia or the careworn governess, which became familiar codes for a variety of emotional states. Rather than borrowing from these conventions, Brontë used their emblematic strategies in order to develop a metalanguage of images that, in Armstrong’s words, “control the very framework in which reading takes place.” By introducing emblems into the text, Brontë controlled readers’ self-perception by “making one an object of knowledge to oneself in startling new ways” (213).

In Jane Eyre, iconic images strongly indicate Jane’s internal state. Armstrong writes, “words summon up visual images which point to territories within the self that are
beyond the scope of verbal representation” (213). Christine Alexander notes that Brontë’s visual imagination renders Jane’s most significant experiences in terms of iconic imagery. She points out that “Jane’s response to Bewick’s pictures, her picturesque copies at Lowood school, her prescient images examined at Thornfield, and her final ‘view from nature, taken in the Vale of Morton,’ all chart Jane Eyre’s state of mind at crucial stages of her life” (Art of the Brontës 39). Although Brontë employs ekphrasis in Jane Eyre, literary portraits of characters generally transcend the realistic representation of pictorial details.

Young Jane peruses the woodcuts in Thomas Bewick’s History of British Birds and produces her own art—most notably, the surreal sketches she shows to Rochester. Jane also uses the “sketch” in her narrative in order to process her experiences. Comparing Jane to Lucy Snowe, Robert A. Colby writes:

> Where Lucy’s impulse is to take up the pen, Jane’s is to reach for the crayon. Jane feels that she has ‘pinned down’ a character when she has managed to sketch his lineaments at the drawing board. [. . .] Jane characteristically is interested in the features of the people she meets, to the extent that they reveal character. That is to say, Jane is an amateur phrenologist, as are other Brontë characters” (415).¹⁰

Because the study of character occupies much of Jane’s narrative, her character sketches also highlight the importance of skillfully reading surfaces, an act that engages narrator and reader.

Clothing is an important part of Brontë’s iconography in *Jane Eyre*. It represents her wishes to construct herself as a professional woman, to preserve a sense of her past, to manage conflicting aspects of her character, and to resist Rochester’s distorted vision of her. While Jane also becomes a wife, she enjoys a degree of agency since she acts as the blind Rochester’s “eyes.”

Continuing the exploration of opposite female types that began in her early artwork and juvenilia, Brontë’s plain narrator-heroine, Jane, negotiates her internal possibilities, a process that becomes externalized through her clothing.

**Jane’s Plainness and Subjectivity**

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë develops her fascination with opposite pairs of women, whose contrast is based on beauty and plainness. Jane Eyre, a more sophisticated version of Elizabeth Hastings, shares Elizabeth’s plain appearance and an interest in observing others, but where Elizabeth underplays her assets, Jane is downright unattractive. Her plainness and position as narrator empowers her with authority and interiority. Her “irregular features” index the contradictory internal potential that becomes the foundation of her subjectivity in the novel. Although she depicts other characters in the novel by referring to their physiognomies and phrenological “organs,” Brontë abstains from overly particularizing Jane’s facial features, virtually making her less “visible”; in so doing, she exempts Jane from the standard courtship plot, leaving her more open to observe

11 Armstrong discusses Jane’s power to transform meanings of words and things, particularly when she filters and interprets the visual world for Rochester. See *Desire and Domestic Fiction* 205.

others and develop her inner capabilities. Although it is true that, for other Victorian heroines, including Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar in Brontë’s *Shirley*, beauty and subjectivity are not mutually exclusive, Brontë’s plainer heroines show a greater capacity for self-development than her beautiful ones.

Brontë’s concern with plain heroines coincided with “the heroine with irregular features,” a character type in Victorian literature whose personality traits are suggested by imperfect facial features. The flawed face represented “a way of [ . . . ] imputing intelligence, caprice, and even sexuality to heroines without indecorous explicitness” (Fahnestock 326). This character began her rise in the 1830s and reached her peak in the 1860s, when “the reader is often given a virtual inventory of the heroine’s features” (328). In this category, Jane’s features also lack artistic proportion, emblematizing her unconventionality. Rochester finds it difficult to guess Jane's age at first because "the features and countenance are so much at variance" (129). Although *Jane Eyre* helped popularize the irregularly-featured heroine, Jane is distinguished from many others of this kind in two ways. First of all, Jane is unattractive, where many Victorian heroines with irregular features are still somewhat pretty. Second, Brontë does not allow readers to fully envision her appearance with vivid physiognomic clues.

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13 George Eliot’s heroines are always beautiful, with complex interior lives. Dorothea in *Middlemarch*, Maggie Tulliver in *The Mill on the Floss*, and Gwendolyn Harleth in *Daniel Deronda* are all good examples. Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Ruth*, *Mary Barton*, and *Wives and Daughters* also feature beautiful and psychologically complex characters. In *Vanity Fair*, even Thackeray’s Becky Sharpe has a measure of subjectivity.

14 Perhaps French novels contributed to Brontë’s interest in the plain heroine. Brontë read George Sand’s novel, *Consuelo*, which features a plain but ingenious young singer.
Having irregular features did not necessarily denote plainness; it signified deviation from the classical standard of beauty that had defined ideal feminine beauty from the early to mid-nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{15} Examples of such irregular-featured, pretty heroines range from Gaskell’s Margaret Hale and Eliot’s Maggie Tulliver to Trollope’s Lizzie Eustace. A minor character in \textit{Jane Eyre}, Louisa Eshton, is also described as \textit{minois chiffone}, or French for having “pretty but irregular features” (174). Jane is decidedly not \textit{minois chiffone}. According to the \textit{Oxford English Dictionary}, the word “plain” was “often used euphemistically for ill-favoured, ugly” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{16}

Other characters, mostly female, affirm Jane’s lack of attractions, and they generally pity or judge her for her it. Early in the novel, the Reeds’ servant Miss Abbott does both when she says, “if she were a nice, pretty child, one might compassionate her forlornness; but one really cannot care for such a little toad as that” (37). Later, when Jane meets Mrs. Reed’s servant Bessie before setting off to her governess post at Thornfield, Bessie says “you are genteel enough; you look like a lady, and it is as much as ever I expected of you; you were no beauty as a child” (99). Later in the novel, when


\textsuperscript{16} Brontë illustrates that the term is as subjective as “beauty” by portraying Jane as desirable to Rochester. Protesting St. John’s mission to change her, she refers to having “changeable green eyes.” After her engagement to Rochester, she perceives herself as “no longer plain” (255). Her perception of this physical variability is mirrored in the shifts that Jane experiences internally, alternations between passion and repression.
St. John Rivers first sees her, he says, “Ill or well, she would always be plain. The grace and harmony of beauty are quite wanting in those features” (333). Learning of Jane’s engagement to Rochester, Mrs. Fairfax looks at her in silent disbelief, finding “no charm powerful enough to solve the enigma” (263). At the end of the novel, a servant recognizes the relativity of attraction when she says, in her Northern English dialect: “[s]he’ll happen do better for him nor ony o’ t’ grand ladies [. . .] If she ben’t one o’ th’ handsomest, she’s noan faal [fool] and varry good-natured; and [in] his een she’s fair beautiful, onybody may see that” (438).

These observations are not readings of her character, but more accurately reflect the cultural expectation for women to appear attractive. Valerie Steele claims that in the Victorian period, “[t]he Victorian woman was constantly exhorted to cultivate her personal appearance. She was assured that it was her ‘first duty to society to be beautiful’” (Fashion and Eroticism 102). Jane’s liminal class position as a governess strengthens this imperative since her social rank is not high enough to compensate for her lack of physical assets in the marriage market, and, given Jane’s social position, it is not surprising that several of these comments on Jane’s plainness come from servants. While Jane does not appear to conform to the Victorian ideal of beauty, however, she does take pains with her appearance, but not with the intent of enhancing her beauty.

Annette Federico makes the compelling argument that, although Jane Eyre created a “new artistic standard, one that portrays heroines on the basis of interiority,” the novel also deals with “the ways in which a woman’s body limits, inhibits, or subverts her
ability to create herself fully.”¹⁷ Federico explains that throughout the novel, Jane’s personal growth depends on her outsider status as a plain woman. While comparing herself to “other beautiful, potential heroines,” Jane both realizes that she also has the right to desire and to be desirable. Federico states that “Jane’s effort to resist a compromised sexual autonomy based upon molding herself into an object of male desire parallels Brontë’s commitment to create a plain heroine without compromising her own moral aesthetic” (29).

Federico recognizes Jane’s body image as an important factor in her growth as a character. Jane’s plain, small body—which, as Federico illustrates, runs in opposition to the feminine ideal of the early 1800’s when body was emphasized over clothing—allows Jane a necessary degree of alienation from conventional notions about women’s social worth. From this distance, she measures her own body against those of other women. However, much of Federico’s argument focuses on how Jane is left lacking in these comparisons. She states that Jane’s “perceived femaleness is limited to her small stature, her plain features, her simple black frock. Clearly the heroine’s psychological self is undermined by her impression that she is somehow less feminine than the world desires” (31). Although it is true that Jane is concerned about her appearance, saying “I wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit” (106), she rejects the opportunity to “improve” her looks with fashionable, bright-colored silk dresses when she has the opportunity. This refusal affirms Federico’s argument that Jane’s development stems from her outsider status. However, while

Federico makes a compelling case for the role of plainness in the bildungsroman narrative, she emphasizes Jane’s feelings of physical inadequacy more than her process of growth. While it is true that Jane feels inadequate when compared with conventionally beautiful women of a higher social class, she is also proud, feeling that it is beneath her to envy the more beautiful Blanche Ingram.

Readers learn Jane’s character traits primarily from other characters’ attempts to be physiognomists, though it is ultimately Jane the “author” who recounts this dialogue and controls the narrative. Armstrong describes Jane as having the “power to determine the meanings of words and things, a power capable in certain instances of changing the nature of words and things themselves” (205). The study of character, essential to the narrative, is part of Jane’s process of creative transformation in telling her story. Jane’s omission of a detailed physiognomic description of herself is compelling in light of the detailed literary portraits of those around her. By withholding specific details about the narrator’s facial features from readers, Brontë controls their responses to Jane, preventing them from arriving at their own conclusions from well-known physiognomic or phrenological codes.

As the most accurate reader of Jane’s character, Rochester identifies the contradictory traits that match up with her imperfect features, but his references to her features are, significantly, general and difficult to visualize. Disguised as a gypsy, he peers at her face and reads her “fortune”:

As to the mouth, it delights at times in laughter; it is disposed to impart all that the brain conceives; though I
dare say it would be silent on much the heart experiences. Mobile and flexible, it was never intended to be compressed in eternal silence and solitude; it is a mouth which should speak much and smile often, and have human affection for its interlocutor. That feature is too propitious. I see no enemy to a fortunate issue but in the brow; and that brow professes to say, ---'I can live alone, if self-respect and circumstances require me so to do. I need not sell my soul to buy bliss. I have an inward treasure, born with me, which can keep me alive if all extraneous delights should be withheld; or offered only at a price I cannot afford to give.' The forehead declares, ‘Reason sits firm and holds the reins, and she will not let the feelings burst away and hurry her to wild chasms. The passions may rage furiously, like true heathens, as they are; and desires may imagine all sorts of vain things: but judgment shall still have the last word in every argument, and the casting vote in every decision. Strong wind, earthquake-shock, and fire may pass by: but I shall follow the guiding of that still small voice which interprets the dictates of conscience. (202-03)

Jane’s oscillation between passion and reason is reflected in Rochester’s reading of her mouth. While her mouth “is mobile and flexible,” predisposed to laughter and the
expression of her thoughts, it is also “silent on much the heart experiences.” Her forehead is less favorable to good fortune, yet indicates her capability for living without the “bliss” of personal happiness if it means compromising her principles.\(^\text{18}\) Jane’s “propitious” mouth, “favourable” eyes, and proudly reasonable forehead are all features that point to specific aspects of Jane’s character, although their physical appearance is not concretely described.

Helen and the Rivers’ sisters are also accurate readers of exteriors. Early in the novel, Helen says to Jane, “I read a sincere nature in your ardent eyes and on your clear front” (78). When Mary and Diana Rivers read Jane’s physiognomy and dress, they display particular skill at reading appearances since they know nothing of her when she arrives at their doorstep. They deduce Jane’s good nature from her face, but, notably, no clear “picture” of her facial features emerges from their observations: “She has a peculiar face; fleshless and haggard as it is, I rather like it; and when in good health and animated, I can fancy her physiognomy would be agreeable” (333).

Rather than undermining the authority of physiognomy or phrenology in the novel, inaccurate readings of Jane’s face only emphasize incompetence or selfish motives

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\(^\text{18}\) In *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1977), Elaine Showalter describes how Jane’s internal divisions are emblematized in other characters: Brontë’s most profound innovation […] is the division of the Victorian female psyche into its extreme components of mind and body, which she externalizes as two characters, Helen Burns and Bertha Mason […] Brontë gives us not one but three faces of Jane, and she resolves her heroine’s psychic dilemma by literally and metaphorically destroying the two polar personalities to make way for the full strength and development of the central consciousness, for the integration of the spirit and the body. (113)
of the misreaders. When Lady Ingram remarks, “I noticed her; I am a judge of physiognomy, and in hers I see all the faults of her class” (180), she reveals her small-minded pretensions as well as her prejudiced conflation of class and physiognomy. Earlier, the Reeds and their servants misunderstand Jane’s withdrawn nature as “underhandedness” because, unlike her cousin Georgiana, she lacks a charming, childish appearance, a misinterpretation that only emphasizes their bias and lack of perception.

Contrasting with Jane’s sparsely described physiognomic features are the more visually-evoked characters. Brontë renders Rochester’s face with a great deal of physiognomic and phrenological detail:

My master’s colourless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm, grim mouth,--all energy, decision, will,--were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me: they were full of interest [. . .] He made me love him without looking at me. (177-78)

19 Sally Shuttleworth goes as far as suggesting that the writings of phrenologist George Combe influenced the structure of Brontë’s novels. See Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 63.

20 Anne McClintock discusses the stereotyped physiognomies of working-class women in the nineteenth century in Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (New York: Routledge, 1995). She discusses how working-class women are often “racialized” in Victorian popular culture. See chapter 2, “‘Massa’ and Maids: Power and Desire in the Imperial Metropolis.”

21 In this description, Brontë also emphasizes the accuracy of passionate vision in the world of this novel. Driven by her desire, Jane unconsciously falls to sketching “a broad, prominent forehead, and a square lower outline of visage,” and as she says in her
Earlier, Jane references physiognomy when she says that he has “full nostrils, denoting, I thought, choler” (126), and alludes to phrenology when she notices his “solid mass of intellectual organs” and “abrupt deficiency where the suave sign of benevolence should have risen” (137). Rochester points out the presence of “prominences” on his head that indicate the presence of conscience (138).

Other characters are also attentively described in reference to phrenology or physiognomy. In St. John Rivers’s regular-featured face, there is "something about his nostril, his mouth, his brow, which to my perceptions, indicated elements within either restless, or hard, or eager" (339). This is again confirmed in his obsessive desire to aid others while he lacks personal warmth. Miss Temple has a large “organ of veneration” (57), and the Reeds’ cruelty to Jane is indexed in their low foreheads and sallow skin. Blanche Ingram shares “the same low brow, the same high features, the same pride” with her haughty mother (175).

In contrast, Brontë under-draws Jane’s features, emphasizing her status as the chief observer in the novel. The unspecific details about Jane’s face imply Brontë’s mature understanding that overparticularization, especially an overabundance of

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22 Rochester’s behavior generally corresponds to these features, though the last example is conspicuously wrong, as his conscience would have precluded his treatment of Bertha. It is significant that Rochester points his feature, not Jane.

physiognomic and phrenological details, could objectify characters as “specimens” of study, as is proven by the de-humanized foreign students in *The Professor*. In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë’s more explicitly-rendered characters tend to be minor ones, like the Reeds or Blanche Ingram.\(^{24}\) Her refusal to have the second edition of *Jane Eyre* illustrated further proves her desire to preserve Jane’s authority as narrator by literally leaving “something to the imagination” about her protagonist’s face.

Jane’s plainness helps facilitate her subjectivity because it is more conducive to particular description than is beauty. In *S/Z*, Roland Barthes states how the concept of beauty is syntactically limited because it is impossible to describe beauty specifically, involving an endless string of elliptical comparisons. In the context of language, then, Jane and Rochester escape the endless repetition of beauty’s referents because they are not beautiful. In a novelistic world where exteriors are all subject to reading, Jane’s physical imperfections pave the way for her interiority. Jane discovers the constricting nature of beauty and regularity when she recognizes St. John Rivers’s intention to shape her to become more like him. She states: “The thing was impossible as to mould my irregular features to his correct and classic pattern, to give my changeable green eyes the sea-blue tint and solemn luster of his own” (389). By creating protagonists with irregular features, Brontë eludes the restrictive and repetitious semiotic code of beauty while still evoking the subjective nature of desire in the interplay between Jane and Rochester.

\(^{24}\) In fact, Jane only perceives Blanche to be a threat before she sees her, when she makes an imaginary sketch of her prior to Blanche’s visit, a sketch which she compares with her own plain self-portrait as a form of self-discipline (164-65). When Jane finally sees Blanche, she concludes that “Miss Ingram was a mark beneath jealousy; she was too inferior to excite the feeling” (188).
In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë develops and complicates her early assumptions about beauty and plainness in women, explored in her juvenilia. In the early poem, “Mementos,” she had depicted the plain sister as self-sufficient and prosperous and the pretty sister as childish and dependent, but Brontë’s beautiful characters are not always coddled. She ascribes negative character traits to those who use artifice, such as ornament and fashion to enhance their attractiveness. Those who are “naturally” beautiful tend to be more progressive women, though it is significant that these characters are also limited by their entry into marriages. On the other hand, fashion and artifice signal Blanche Ingram and Georgiana Reed’s active participation in the marriage market and lack of interiority. Ironically, Blanche and Georgiana both fail to find husbands, despite their fashionable appearances, yet their selfishness and pride overshadow their probable suffering, which would lend them greater dimension as characters. Bertha Mason is an extreme version of the artificial woman. Her splendid attire and impressive accomplishments effectively bait Rochester, but, serving as a cloak for her insanity, they become a false substitute for her identity. At the other extreme are Brontë’s “natural” beauties who are simply attired and occupy themselves with teaching or studying, though some do end up as wives and disappear from the narrative, such as Miss Temple, Rosamond Oliver, and the Rivers sisters.

In *Jane Eyre*, Brontë also implies that natural beauty, a signifier of sexuality, is both irrepressible and potentially transgressive, recalling heroines in the juvenilia such as Caroline Vernon. At Lowood, Brocklehurst identifies a young student, Julia Severn, whose red curls attract the disapprobation of Brocklehurst, who contends that even if her
curls are natural they are incompatible with the values of the evangelical institution. He demands that her hair be “cut off entirely” as well as ordering that all the topknots of Lowood students to be cut. In stark irony, his wife and daughters look on wearing artificial “fronts” of curled hair. When he urges “we are not to conform to nature,” his daughters ironically obey their father’s teachings, ridiculously implying that artifice is more respectable than genuine beauty. At least in his hypocritical world, natural beauty is more threatening than artifice since he aligns natural charms with the “baser” instincts ideally managed by piety, particularly in the cultivation of a plain appearance. Adele is a different type of natural beauty who is drawn to fashion as if it is in her blood. Like Julia and her prototype Caroline Vernon, she has abundant, curling hair, and true to national stereotype, she has a natural propensity for ornament, a dangerous inheritance from her actress mother. Rosamond Oliver is another example of a natural beauty who represents sexuality. Rosamond’s beauty disturbs St. John Rivers’ cold, metaphysical outlook, forcing him to contend with his sexual desire, which he overmasters. In these examples, Brontë links beauty with nature and passion and illustrates the ineffectiveness of repressing or ignoring it. It is significant that Jane views the irregularly featured

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25 Here Brontë makes it clear that she does not view plainness in an evangelical light, as if it were inherently virtuous.

26 For a fascinating discussion on what hair imagery represents in Jane Eyre, see Joanne E. Rea, “Hair Imagery in Jane Eyre,” Victorians Institute Journal 16 (1988) 18-26. Rea argues that “curling hair” directly signals sexuality in the novel because of its association with pubic hair. Although hair’s link with sexuality is compelling, Rea’s reading of pubic hair for curly coiffures seems rather extreme and tends to downplay cultural context, such as hair’s association with fashion and femininity in Victorian culture.
Rochester as beautiful, while seeing the Greek faced St. John Rivers as coldly perfect yet unappealing.

In Brontë’s next novel, *Shirley*, she continues exploring the relationships among women’s external appearances, their characters, and their positions as observers, except that, unlike in *Jane Eyre*, she addresses the ideals and personal frustrations of pretty heroines, whose beauty (instead of plainness) makes them susceptible to being misread by others. Like Elizabeth Hastings from the juvenilia, Caroline Helstone is a lonely, withdrawn observer in a gray dress. In her introduction to the Oxford edition of *Shirley*, Margaret Smith posits that Caroline is a direct outgrowth of Elizabeth, noting that the manuscript of *Shirley* shows that “Charlotte twice began to write the name ‘Elizabeth’ instead of Caroline.”

As an observer, she is keenly aware of her surroundings, namely the social unrest in Briarfield, whose cloth mill becomes the site of a Luddite rebellion. However, because she has a sensitive-looking, beautiful face, her character is often misconstrued by others. Although the Reverend Helstone, her uncle and guardian, correctly discerns that an introduction to the outgoing Shirley Keeldar would help remedy her depression, he also deeply misunderstands his niece’s desire for productive work, assuming that because of her youth and beauty, a new frock would effectively change her state of mind. Later in

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27 Her concern with contrasting plain and beautiful characters still exists, though it is transmuted onto male characters, most notably the striking cloth mill-owner Robert Moore and his homelier brother, tutor Louis Moore.

the novel, the brusque, practical Mrs. Yorke misreads Caroline’s pretty but pale face as the sign of a weak, sentimental nature prone to excessive novel-reading. In a rare outburst, Caroline admonishes her, saying that “My face is a pale one, but it is not sentimental, and most milkmaids, however red and robust they may be, are more stupid and less practically fitted to make their way in the world than I am” (402). Perhaps the most unfortunate misapprehension of her character based on her beauty happens with Mrs. Pryor, who turns out to be her mother. She explains why she abandoned Caroline as a child: “I let you go as a babe, because you were pretty, and I feared your loveliness; deeming it the stamp of perversity” (437). Caroline’s father, from whom she inherited her looks, had been a very handsome but irresponsible man, and, because of the family resemblance, Mrs. Pryor worried that her daughter would take after him. Furthermore, some literary critics have also participated in Caroline’s misreading; many have discounted her psychological complexity, misjudging her to be an angel-in-the-house figure because of her sweet nature and willingness to help others.  

Although Brontë renders Caroline’s interior life more richly than she develops Shirley’s, she makes the point that Shirley is also an observer with her own private understanding of those around her. Although she is not as susceptible as Caroline to being misread, Shirley is also subject to being seen superficially because of her gender. The narrator draws attention to her significant, “queer smile” after presenting a charitable

29 He gives her “two guineas to buy a new frock,” telling her, “put all crochets out of your head and run away and amuse yourself,” to which Caroline inwardly responds, “What with? My doll?” (190).

30 An example of such a contention appears in Robert Bernard Martin’s Accents of Persuasion: Charlotte Brontë’s Novels (New York: Norton, 1966).
plan for the approval of local clergymen, illustrating that she perceives more about these men than they might assume:

Men rarely like such of their fellows as read their inward nature too clearly and truly. It is good for women, especially, to be endowed with a soft blindness: to have mild, dim eyes, that never penetrate below the surface of things—that take all for what it seems: thousands, knowing this, keep their eyelids drooped, on system; the most downcast glance has its loophole, through which it can, on occasion, take its sentinel survey of life. (273)

Here the narrator makes no distinction between plain or attractive women; all have subjectivity, though some are socially compelled to mask it behind bland facial expressions. By asserting that there may be inner intelligence behind the “loophole” of a dim glance, Brontë contests patriarchal conceptions of femininity that falsely view women as naturally meek and lacking in penetration. In so doing, she not only exposes femininity as a social performance, but points out the irony of men’s blindness in a text that values accuracy in reading character from surfaces.

Shirley differs from Jane Eyre in its perspective on faces and their legibility. In Jane Eyre, Brontë privileges the irregularly-featured face as an apt signifier of inner potential, which only a discerning lover can decipher and understand. In Shirley, she raises some doubt about the readability of appearances by illustrating how beauty, and even gender itself, can obscure subjectivity, thus making it more difficult to be
immediately “understood” without gradual self-revelation. Brontë’s concern with realistic representation in Shirley calls for a more tempered view of the face as a manifestation of inner character. The friendship between Shirley and Caroline grows, not out of immediate recognition that they are “kindred spirits,” but out of getting to know each other. Shirley misunderstands Caroline’s character at first because “Miss Helstone, she fancied, had too pretty a face, manners and voice too soft, to be anything out of the common way in mind and attainments” (224). Brontë also complicates the relationship of appearance and character with the Yorke family, leaving room for hidden qualities in character sketches. Mr. Yorke is described by the absence of phrenological characteristics, such as the organs of veneration and comparison; the narrator notes that it is more difficult to indicate Mr. Yorke’s mind than to sketch him. Brontë further explores the imperfection of the face as a signifier for interiority in Villette, where M. Paul both correctly discerns and wildly misunderstands Lucy’s capabilities from her physiognomy.

Although Brontë gives her beautiful characters an interior life in Shirley, their lack of irregular features signal that the novel is not primarily about the testing and managing of inner potential, a process that is the focus in Jane Eyre and Villette. While Caroline’s self-development remains a concern in the novel, Shirley is more of a social novel than bildungsroman with its focus on labor conflict and other historical issues. The heroines’ pleasing looks are also more suited to Brontë’s aim of writing a realistic novel

31 Brontë also challenges the idea that physiognomy is hereditary with the Yorke children. Although they resemble their parents, they each have distinct physiognomies. See Shirley (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1981).
about courtship and provincial society. The plain protagonists of Jane Eyre and Villette signal Brontë’s greater psychological focus. Together with her initial lack of financial support, Jane’s unattractive appearance is a significant catalyst for her process of self-discovery and self-definition. Because the path of marriage is not immediately available to her, Jane must explore alternative, less familiar ways to define herself that diverge from the usual social scripts for young women. Understanding, controlling, and shaping her inner self becomes essential in this process.

Jane’s Plain Dress as an Emblem of Self-Control

When Jane wanders aimless, hungry, and penniless through Whitcross after running from Rochester, she experiences a complete breakdown of her identity that is expressed in her suddenly irrelevant black silk dress and gloved hands, misleading signifiers of her former life as a governess. After briefly experiencing the joy of Rochester’s recognition and appreciation of her character, she is soon forced to abandon him, thrusting herself into an environment where others consider her a “well-dressed beggar” (323). This incident illustrates the important role that Jane’s dress plays as an emblem, as well as a stabilizing force, of her identity. When Jane is removed from her

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32 The repetition of dressing within the novel argues for clothing’s emblematic, rather than domestically realistic, function in the novel. Jane brings three dresses to Thornfield: a black stuff frock, one of black silk, and another of a light gray silk that she thinks “too fine to be worn, except on first-rate occasions” (126). From Jane’s arrival to her invitation to participate in Rochester’s party (a period spanning seven chapters), Jane herself changes clothing four times and mentions that she does not change her dress twice. In that interim, Adele changes dresses three times, and Mrs. Fairfax changes at least once, adding up to at least eight “costume changes” in seven chapters. These changes resemble those that take place between scenes in a play, and after each costume
context, her dress and the other external signifiers of her status as governess are like a foreign language to the strangers around her. Bereft of their meaning, her irrelevant clothing also exposes her temporarily hysterical state, which expresses the chaos of Jane’s conflicting emotions, so antithetical to the controlled image she wishes to project. Her plain dress becomes an emblem of her ideal self, which she uses in order to better manage conflicting emotions and internal ambivalence. As John Harvey states, “Our outer dress does inner work for us, and if clothes ‘mean,’ it is in the first place to ourselves, telling us we are or may be something we have meant to be [. . .] it resolves an uncertainty as to who or what we are” (14; my emphasis). If clothing is a language, then Jane uses it to control how others read her as well as how she constructs her self.

Jane’s concern with being correctly read participates in the Victorian anxiety about public appearances. In The Fall of Public Man (1974), Richard Sennett writes that, in the nineteenth-century, appearances in public became a significant focal point in the city. Victorians were concerned with what their appearances revealed about personality traits. He attributes this in part to the new relationship between clothing and mass change, a significant revelation or action takes place. For example, the first two times that Jane changes precedes her first moments of ascertaining Rochester’s character, and the third time, when she “hurried on [her] frock and shawl” (153), she becomes privy to Bertha’s attempt to burn Rochester in his bed.

The fourth time that Jane changes (into her best gray dress) takes place directly before she first observes Blanche Ingram. One chapter later, she is invited to play charades with Rochester’s company and watches the climax of all play-acting in the novel: Rochester’s disguise as a gypsy. Conscious of the play-acting metaphor for the developing drama at Thornfield, Jane says self-reflexively: “A new chapter in a novel is something like a new scene in a play” (101).
production. He writes that in the 1840s, “People took each other’s appearances in the street immensely seriously; they believed they could fathom the character of those they saw, but what they saw were people dressed in clothes increasingly more homogeneous and monochromatic” (161).

He explains that the increased mechanization of clothing manufacture led to a certain paradox in the Victorian streets: city dwellers wished to be seen as urbane by wearing drab garments. While people flocked to the cities, they strove to appear anonymous. They cultivated understated appearances, but at the same time, they “use[d] clothes more than their provincial opposites as psychological symbols” (164). As anxieties about sexuality and class status became located in such symbols, subtle details of workmanship, such as buttons on a coat or quality of fabric, were invested with telltale importance (164-65). In general, he argues that Victorians had “a desire to control [their public] appearances through increasing one’s consciousness of oneself” (168). They sought to blend into the crowd of the city with uniform-looking clothing, believing that telltale details resided in the visible body as well as in the workmanship of their clothes.34

Sennett attributes a set of complex trends to the importance of superficial appearances in the streets of the Victorian city, where an important shift occurred in the nature of social and business transactions in the city between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Sennett argues that public and private roles in the city were more clearly delineated in the eighteenth century, when impersonal, public civility was balanced with a realization of one’s “natural” private devotions to deep friendships and family (18-19).

Sennett cites phrenology as an additional way personality entered the public space (169), and he points out that even Darwin was concerned with face reading. Although Darwin was careful to disassociate his project from physiognomy, he theorized about the body’s expression of emotional states in The Expression of Emotion in Man and Animals (1872).
While *Jane Eyre* is not an urban novel, its obvious concerns with visible personality fit into this phenomenon, particularly because of Jane’s anxiety about being seen.

In *Fiction in the Age of Photography* (1999), Nancy Armstrong articulates the anxiety that Victorian women had about their visible bodies, using D.A. Miller’s phrase, “the open secret,” to describe the Victorian woman’s relationship to her body. She cites Brontë’s heroines as examples of such self-consciousness:

To grasp the extent to which this open secret shaped Victorian fiction, one need only recall how any one of Charlotte Brontë’s heroines shrinks into corners and niches or fades into the background behind her more flamboyant rivals and companions. Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, and Carolyn [sic] Helstone will do anything to avoid the limelight, and Brontë consequently allows us to see them only as they watch men watching other women make spectacles of themselves. (264)

Although Jane’s skill in observation does empower her, it is important to remember Victorian women’s desire to escape the restrictive nature of the male gaze. The primary focus in *The Fall of Public Man* is literally the public “man,” but Sennett briefly addresses the anxieties of women in the city, particularly their fear of unconsciously revealing their sexuality in public.\(^{35}\) He suggests that this was why

\(^{35}\) Sennett generally does not focus on women’s appearances in the city, though more recent studies by Judith Walkowitz, Elizabeth Wilson, and Deborah Nord all address this topic. See Walkowitz’s *The City of Dreadful Delight: Narratives of Sexual
Victorian women’s clothing covered most parts of their body—even their faces were partly hidden behind veils and bonnets. He also describes how even smallest details, “like the slight discoloration of the teeth or the shape of fingernails” became codes of sexuality (166-67). Rochester’s gaze is particularly penetrating, as it finds evidence of sensuality even in Jane’s “rule-restricted garb.”

The meanings of dress, much like words, are ultimately beyond the control of the wearer, illustrating the similarities between clothing and language as systems of signification. Barthes describes how semiological signs, or symbols that signify meaning but are not language, often include everyday objects, such as clothing:

Many semiological systems (objects, gestures, pictorial images) have a substance of expression whose essence is not to signify; often, they are objects of everyday use, used by society in a derivative way, to signify something: clothes are used for protection and food for nourishment even if they are also used as signs. We propose to call them semiological signs, whose origin is utilitarian and functional, sign-functions. (Elements of Semiology 41)


36 Although the cultural history of dress has until recently been long neglected as a serious topic of study, Philippe Perrot compellingly argues the necessity for scholarship on costume since clothing is comparable to language and, as such, it speaks volumes about culture. See Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth Century (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994) 5.
Barthes also directly compares clothing to language. In what he terms “the garment system,” or the system of meanings attached to clothing in a culture, clothing is analogous to language since it is also comprised of elements such as opposition among pieces and rules that dictate how the meaning signified by each component of clothing associates with another (27). However, what distinguishes the garment system that Barthes addresses from descriptions of clothing in novels is that novels necessarily represent clothing in words. Brontë’s literary representations of clothing are not technically sign-functions since they are imaginary. However, like actual clothing, literary representations of dress can still function as emblems, in a manner analogous to language. Jane’s process of self-knowledge and self-control depends on her ability to transform her experiences into a narrative. If like language, dress helps to construct a point of view in this novel, then Jane’s manner of dress represents a version of reality that Jane wishes to project to others as well as to herself. In this sense, clothing is an external “story” Jane wishes to tell about herself.

37 In The Fashion System, Barthes compares written literary description with fashion description:

Fashion and literature in fact utilize a common technique whose end is seemingly to transform an object into language: it is description. This technique, however, is used quite differently in each case. In literature, description is brought to bear upon a hidden object (whether real or imaginary): it must make that object exist. In fashion the described object is actualized, given separately in its plastic form [. . .] it need not render the object itself [. . .]. (12)

Here Barthes distinguishes the ekphrastic relationship between written fashion description and the clothing described as opposed to the purpose of literary description to evoke the object with no real referent.
In *Men in Black* (1995), John Harvey addresses how clothing influences behavior, describing dress's function for identity in terms that suggest method-acting: “if clothes 'mean', it is in the first place to ourselves, telling us we may be something we have meant to be” (14). Harvey also cites what nineteenth-century commentators thought was the "sinister aspect" of men dressing in black, "as if, by adopting certain externals, one can interfere with one's soul" (14). This was especially the case with “power-dressing,” where black clothing symbolized a political and financial world that sometimes demanded “putting on other people’s clothes” (15). It is evident here that Victorians regarded personal appearances with a mixture of sanctity and distrust. They also suspected its power to make one’s identity malleable. This anxiety about the power to disturb the nature of one’s “soul” through one’s appearance made an impression on the Victorian imagination. Later in the century, this anxiety is epitomized in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, where Jekyll’s identity experiment goes deeper than mere fabric—the body itself becomes a kind of clothing that makes Hyde’s evil nature possible.

Jane’s dress serves as an emblem of her personal history, her professional status, and her valuation of plainness over artifice. At first, dress signifies Jane’s dependency. John Reed scolds her: “you are a dependent, mama says; you have no money; your father left you none; you ought to beg, and not to live here with gentlemen’s children like us, and eat the same meals as we do, and wear clothes at mama’s expense” (23). When Jane enters Lowood, where she is also a dependent, she wears her hair combed away from her face and the requisite uniform of brown stuff gowns and pinafores with “little pockets of holland (shaped something like a Highlander’s purse) tied in front of their frocks, and
destined to serve the purpose of a work bag” (57). These uniforms were part of Brocklehurst’s plan to bring Lowood students up as “hardy, patient, self-denying” (72), and, as the work-bag suggests, industrious.

However self-interested Brocklehurst is in dressing Lowood students, Jane internalizes many of the values that the plain clothing was intended to teach. Reflecting on the eight years she spent at Lowood, she characterizes her experience as “uniform: but not unhappy, because it was not inactive” (92). The homonym “uniform” affirms the strong connection between the visible and external and the internal in the novel. Jane’s restricted childhood clothing is a metaphor for her learning the value of self-discipline. The uniform also signifies Jane’s routine at Lowood. It reflects the regimented smallness of that world: “school rules, school-duties, school habits and notions, and voices, and faces, and phrases, and costumes, and preferences and antipathies: such was what I knew of existence” (93).

By the time Jane seeks out her “new servitude,” she adopts the simple black dress that she wears throughout most of the novel as an emblem of her class and professional status. Despite the typicality of Jane’s black or gray costume for a governess, dressing represents her willed self-control. This relationship between dress and self-discipline emerges early in her appointment at Thornfield when Jane grooms herself neatly at her toilette table:38

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38 It is interesting to note that in Shirley, Brontë writes that neat dressing is essential to Englishwomen’s sense of self-respect. See 296. Of course, this association is also true for Jane.
I rose; I dressed myself with care: obliged to be plain—for
I had no article of attire that was not made with extreme
simplicity—I was still by nature solicitous to be neat. It
was not my habit to be disregardful of appearance, or
careless of the impression I made: on the contrary, I ever
wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as
my want of beauty would permit [. . .]. However, when I
brushed my hair very smooth, and put on my black frock—
which, Quaker-like as it was, at least had the merit of
fitting to a nicety—and adjusted my clean white tucker, I
thought I should do respectfully enough to appear before
Mrs. Fairfax; and that my new pupil would not at least
recoil from me with antipathy. (106)

Governesses typically wore plain, drably colored dresses.39 They were expected to
dress as well as they could afford to, even while living on a small salary. How to Dress
on £5 a Year as a Lady advised them to make dresses of “black washing silk, made with
various bodices and over-skirts, so that a dress could be worn for ‘garden parties,’ for
dinner, and even for evening wear, with only minor adjustments” (Fashion and Eroticism
79). Phillis Cunnington also notes that governesses in the nineteenth century dressed
differently from household servants: “This gentlewoman would avoid any functional kind
of dress, but she could not, as a rule, afford good clothes and did not receive any cast-offs

39 See Costume of Household Servants, from the Middle Ages to 1900 (New
York: Barnes & Noble, 1974) 123.
of her mistress. Thus her chief distinguishing mark was an air that combined the ladylike with the drab and unassuming” (123). The dual nature of the desirable dress for a governess illustrates the inherently ambiguous status of this role. While being expected to appear as “ladies,” governesses held tenuous status in the household, which translated into uncertain professional boundaries. Plain governesses were preferable to pretty ones because of the anxiety about possible moral transgressions between employees and employers.40

Jane’s neatly constructed image not only represents her desire to impress Mrs. Fairfax and Adele with her neatness, but, more importantly, she identifies it with professionalism and self-control, which Rochester continually challenges by viewing her restraint as erotic. In The Victorian Governess (1993), Kathryn Hughes addresses the historically ambivalent attitudes toward plain governesses. She writes that, in the Victorian era, a plain face was associated with moral worth, but prior to this time, ugliness was also linked with sexual aggressiveness: “ugly women were obliged to become governesses because they were unable to find a husband; and, because they were sexually frustrated, they developed a manic appetite which ran wild in a house full of men” (126). Jane, neither “safely” plain nor amorously ugly, finds it difficult to demand a professional relationship with her employer because of his attraction to her autonomy.

40 See Kathryn Hughes, The Victorian Governess (London: Hambledon Press, 1993), for an extensive discussion of the importance of a plain, carefully restrained appearance for governesses, whose morality was always under scrutiny. In Vanity Fair, Miss Pinkerton worries about Becky Sharpe’s attractiveness: “as she is only eighteen years of age, and of exceedingly pleasing personal appearance, perhaps this young lady may be objectionable.”
Jane’s attempts to draw boundaries between herself and Rochester are represented by her tenacity in dressing like a governess in the household. Jane’s refusal to dress more formally for Rochester reveals her pride and her willed self-control. The first incident occurs shortly before Rochester asks her to share her drawing portfolio with him.\(^4\) She makes Adele neat for her guardian’s presence, but does not feel the need to “retouch” herself (135). The second incident takes place just before Rochester’s party of “fluttering veils and waving plumes” arrives at Thornfield, and Jane is only one in the household who does not change into finer clothing. While the elderly Mrs. Fairfax “assumed her best satin gown” and young Adele is appareled in “one of her short muslin frocks,” it is significant that Jane “had no need to make any change” (168-69). What both of Jane’s moments of inaction share is their response to social invitations. When Jane is invited to cross over the boundary of professional duty into the one of social activity, she refuses by inaction, signaled by wearing the same dress. In this context, Jane’s plain dress not only becomes a uniform that insists on her symbolic separation from the rest of the household, but communicates her unwillingness to confuse her already ambiguous status in the household.

Announcing her employee status appears to exempt her from Rochester’s gaze among the plumed society women, though it has the opposite effect. As he will later admit to Jane, he is attracted to her “strange contrasts”: “You entered the room with a

\(^4\) See Richard C. Sha, The Visual and the Verbal Sketch in British Romanticism (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1998). Sha reads this scene as a display of Rochester’s disregard for Jane’s boundaries. He invades her privacy by demanding to view her sketches in order to enter and control the traditionally “female sphere” of sketching (155).
look and air at once shy and independent; you were quaintly dressed—much as you are now. I made you talk: ere long I found you full of strange contrasts. Your garb and manner were restricted by rule [. . .]” (309). He claims to be interested in Jane for cerebral reasons, telling her that he was an “intellectual epicure,” but it is clear that Rochester is also physically attracted to Jane. Even as it tries to deflect Rochester’s gaze, her Quakerish dress seduces him.42

Philippe Perrot states: “Clothing is ambivalent. It reveals as it veils, and showcases the sexually charged body parts it conceals. Thus it becomes a crucial tool in seduction and yet constitutes the ultimate obstacle to desire. The very modesty for which it vouches suggests the fascination of what it covers” (12). Thus, Rochester’s observation that Jane’s clothing was “restricted by rule” can be understood as an admission that he is attracted to the modesty and self-discipline of her appearance. With what is perhaps tacit knowledge of his attraction to her, Jane appears before him with tightly braided hair and plain but well-fitting black garments.

Adding to the erotic subtext of Jane’s plain dress is the Parisian character type of the grisette in French novels and the popular press, who first appeared in the 1820s and 1830s. In 1840, during the leisure time Brontë found between governess posts, biographer Lyndall Gordon states that Brontë “had devoured numerous (unidentified)

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volumes in French [. . .] which she found ‘clever wicked sophistical and immoral—the best of it is they give one a thorough idea of France and Paris [. . .]’” (91). Although these French volumes are unidentified, it is likely that Brontë encountered the figure of the *grisette*, a working Parisian woman from about sixteen to thirty whose trademark garb was a gray wool dress and a little pink hat.\textsuperscript{43} Often she worked as a glove-maker, milliner, or seamstress. Most importantly, she was known for her easy virtue (Steele, *Paris Fashion* 70-71). Poor and uninterested in social climbing, she “worked-- and then gave her sexual favors to young men of a ‘better’ and more ‘elegant’ class” (75).

Although Jane is ostensibly the antithesis of Parisian *grisette*, her trademark gray or black gown, her status as a working woman, and the erotic attraction she feels for her social superior, are all qualities Jane shares with the French character.\textsuperscript{44} In the context of *Jane Eyre*’s erotic plot, the resemblance is an uneasy one. It suggests that, because of the tenuous way a woman’s morality was perceived if she worked, Jane has a high stake in maintaining her professionalism while involved in a romance with her employer. If she does not, the line between governess and grisette becomes blurred.

The multivalence of Jane’s “rule-restricted garb” proves that the perceived meaning of dress, like language, is difficult to control. Fred Davis states: “In the symbolic realm of dress and appearance, [. . .] ‘meanings’ in a certain sense tend to be simultaneously both more ambiguous and more differentiated than in other expressive

\textsuperscript{43} *Gris* means “gray” in French.

\textsuperscript{44} As mentioned in chapter 1 of this dissertation, French culture held a lifelong fascination for Brontë, who oscillated from intensely appreciating and rejected what she considered its values. See Elaine Showalter, “Charlotte Brontë’s Use of French.” *Research Studies* 42.4 (1974): 225-34.
realms . . . in semiotic terminology, the clothing sign’s signifier-signified relationship is quite unstable” (9). However, despite the instability of its perceived meanings, and because she is hardly a reluctant recipient of Rochester’s advances, she is also motivated to project a symbolically-controlled appearance to herself. Helpful to understanding the relationship between clothing and identity in *Jane Eyre* is Davis’s “ambivalence management” theory of fashion change. He argues that fashion changes are driven by how the culture at large responds to what he terms the “cultural fault lines” of social identities, such as class, gender, and sexuality (26). On an individual basis, he argues that people negotiate these points of ambivalence, defining themselves through the cultural codes signified by various styles of clothing. He states:

> It can be said that in very large part our identities—our sense of who and what we are—take shape in terms of how we balance and attempt to resolve the ambivalences to which our natures, our times, and our culture make us heir. [. . .] Clothing comes to share in the work of ambivalence management as much as does any other self-communicative device at our disposal: our voices, body postures, and facial expressions and the material objects we surround ourselves with. [. . .] Dress, then, comes easily to serve as a kind of visual metaphor for identity and, as it pertains in particular to the open societies of the West, for
registering the culturally anchored ambivalences that resonate within and among identities. (24-25)

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane shows agency in creating this visual metaphor. Her most significant point of personal ambivalence is her struggle to balance her strong contradictory propensities, passion and self-control. As an emblem, her black dress serves to stabilize, project, and set into motion Jane’s valuations of professionalism and independence, precisely when they are most threatened by her passion for Rochester. He is Jane’s most accurate reader, recognizing her “strange contrasts” and desiring her for these traits, yet he also takes advantage of her pleasure in being seen correctly by trying to define her. Shortly after their engagement, Rochester’s vision of his prospective bride is strangely clouded. He sees her as a rosy-faced fairy with hazel eyes, although Jane says, “I had green eyes, reader; but you must excuse the mistake: for him they were newly-dyed, I suppose” (256). He also associates her with the fairy world. Although his playful descriptions of Jane appear to be innocent lover’s talk, they increasingly become distortions that encroach on her vision of herself. Brontë emblematizes this contest for Jane’s self-definition in chapter 24, when Rochester attempts to buy her new clothes.

After they become engaged, Rochester takes Jane to the nearby town of Millcote to purchase her wedding trousseau. To Jane’s dismay, Rochester orders Jane to select six fashionable dresses from a silk warehouse. When she protests that she will only select two, Rochester vows to choose them himself, insisting on flamboyant colors. She feels as though he views her as “a slave his gold and gems had enriched.” Jane recognizes that accepting his material generosity would make her indebted to him and counters: “You
need not look at me that way [. . .] if you do, I’ll wear nothing but my old Lowood frocks to the end of the chapter” (267).

Jane’s plain dresses represent her authenticity, even if those clothes are associated with a different kind of “slavery,” her governess post. She fears that accepting diamonds and fine fabrics from him would transform her into an “English Celine Varens” (268).

His spending spree also marks Rochester’s desire to project an image of his prosperity through Jane’s appearance.

Rochester’s wildly inappropriate suggestions also mock Jane’s customarily plain appearance, which signifies her independent status as a working woman and represents a threat to his dominance. It is an emblem of her class identity, which is also inherently ambivalent because of the ambiguity of the governess role, falling tenuously between the ranks of domestic and “lady.” Her cross-class romance with Rochester further heightens this ambiguity.

Rochester’s wish to transform her into a conventional, landowner’s

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45 The term “chapter” is significant here, underscoring Jane’s view that she and Rochester are texts to be read.

46 Brontë repeats her early concern with female indebtedness in her early writing, where Elizabeth Hastings and Caroline Vernon face similar propositions from their admirers. Their acceptance or rejection of these offers determines their subsequent fates. Prototypes for Celine Varens also can be found in abundance in Brontë’s juvenilia, where beautiful, fashionable “French” women vie for the attentions of Zamorna in her Angrian tales.

47 See chapter 4 in Thorstein Veblen’s Theory of the Leisure Class (New York: Dover, 1994), where Veblen argues that expeditures on wives, daughters, and even servants all constitute “vicarious consumption,” intended to make the benefactor appear more prosperous to his peers. Jane confirms Veblen’s theory, viewing Rochester’s generosity in similar terms: “besides the delicacy and richness of the fabric, I found nothing save Fairfax Rochester’s pride; and that did not scare me, because I am used to the sight of the demon” (279).
braid is also a means of distancing her from her past. The image of Jane in simple black or gray dress evokes memories of the hardships of her Lowood education, her self-sufficiency as a governess, and her mourning her parents’ deaths.\(^49\) She views Rochester’s desire to dress her in fine wedding apparel as a masking of her social rank; she resolves to scold him for his “efforts to mask [his] plebian bride in the attributes of a peeress” (278).

Jane’s tenacity in preserving her style also symbolizes her desire to retain her working status even after they become engaged. Black suits her position as a professional since it is the same color that growing numbers of professional men wore into the city in the nineteenth century. Black aligns her with the male workforce, although she is distinctly not a member of it as such. Sennett describes the style of men’s dress, stating that by 1840, “broadcloth of a black color became the basic material for the streetwear of middle- and upper-class men and the ‘Sunday clothes’ of the working class when they went to church” (163). Rochester’s flamboyant choices for Jane actually are examples of what typical women of his class wore. As men wore black, women wore

\(^{48}\) Given the importance that Brontë places on visibility in this novel, the tensions inherent in Jane’s social standing are expressed in her manner of clothing. Walter Benjamin writes that within any commodity, there lies an expression of ambivalence: “Ambiguity is the pictorial image of dialectics, the law of dialectics seen at a standstill. This standstill is utopia and the dialectic image therefore a dream image. Such an image is presented by the pure commodity: as fetish” (157). Considering the emblematic role that clothing plays in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë projects Jane’s ambiguous class status onto her well-cut but plain dress, so that she appears as both unobtrusive governess and elegant lady.

\(^{49}\) Harvey rightly observes that Jane’s black clothing can be “construed as mourning for the parents she has lost some years before” (199). He compares Jane to the governess in an 1844 oil painting, *The Governess*, by Richard Redgrave. The governess in the painting is dressed in black and clearly in mourning.
contrastingly bright or pastel hues: “In so far as dark menswear signifies work, the world of work and professional dignity, the brightness of women’s clothes is not hard to understand: the professions, and most jobs, were closed to women” (Harvey 195). From appearances alone, one could discern the separate spheres of men and women from the highly contrasting silhouettes and colors of their dress, a fact that, as Harvey also claims, was unprecedented before the nineteenth century.  

As a woman in black, Jane wears the hue and “cloth” of professional men. Dressing as she does, she symbolically aligns herself with the world of work, rejecting traditional female gender roles signified by bright fashions. But this allegiance is not uncomplicated, since her work as a governess takes her not into the city, but into the home. The line between work and home, already blurred because of the nature of governess work, threatens to disappear when Rochester assumes she will take on a more conventional role after she marries him. She expresses her need to redraw this line, to remain a working woman, when she tells Rochester that she will continue teaching Adele and receiving pay for her services, even after marriage (268).

Jane’s black dress also projects a paradox of power and deference represented in the near interchangeability of their clothing. Jane says, “I’ll be married in this lilac gingham—you may make a dressing-gown for yourself out of the pearl-grey silk, and an infinite series of waistcoats out of the black satin” (267). Earlier in the novel, when Rochester wears woman’s clothing to impersonate a fortune-teller, the equality of Jane and Rochester is symbolized through clothing. The alternate color to black in her

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50 In the eighteenth century, fashionable men and women appeared comparatively more androgynous, both wearing similar light colors, luxurious fabrics, and lace.
wardrobe, gray, is a midway point between masculine black and feminine white, and gray functions as a metaphor for Jane’s gender identity, one that she negotiates for herself in a field of extreme cultural possibilities.\textsuperscript{51}

Jane fears that changing her mode of dress could disturb her ability to maintain control over her passions. It also threatens her independence and her very selfhood. At the beginning of chapter 24, Rochester calls Jane “Jane Rochester,” presaging Jane’s struggle against his alienating attempts to remake her. When he wishes to pour jewels in her lap, she protests, “Oh sir! –never mind jewels! I don’t like to hear them spoken of. Jewels for Jane Eyre sounds unnatural and strange: I would rather not have them.” When he says “I will clasp the bracelets on these fine wrists, and load these fairy-fingers with rings,” she responds: “Don’t address me as if I were a beauty; I am your plain, Quakerish governess.” When he says “I will make the world acknowledge you a beauty, too [. . .] I will attire my Jane in satin and lace, and she shall have roses in her hair; and I will cover the head I love best with a priceless veil,” Jane answers:

“And then you won’t know me, sir; and I shall not be your Jane Eyre any longer, but an ape in a harlequin’s jacket, --a jay in borrowed plumes. I would as soon see you, Mr. Rochester, tricked out in stage-trappings, as myself clad in court-lady’s robe; and I don’t call you handsome, sir,

\textsuperscript{51} For a compelling discussion on the gendering of black and white in the nineteenth century, see chapter 6 in Harvey, entitled “Men in Black and Women in White.”
though I love you most dearly: far too dearly to flatter you.

Don’t flatter me.” (257-58)

Ignoring Jane’s pleas that Rochester see her as the plain governess that she is, he continues to view Jane through distorted lenses. This distortion is an assertion of power, not only over her personal appearance but also over her will. When he at first refuses to let Adele accompany them to Millcote, he nearly wears down Jane’s resolve, though Adele does go with them. She says: “I half lost my sense of power over him. I was about to mechanically obey him, without further remonstrance” (264). Rochester’s wish to re-fashion Jane, beginning with his desire to address her as a beauty, threatens to overwhelm her will.

A month after their struggle over clothes and jewels, Jane’s traveling trunks are packed and her wedding garment and veil hang in her closet, seeming to belong to “one Jane Rochester, a person whom yet I knew not.” In the closet, which she closes to “conceal the strange, wraith-like apparel it contained,” Jane’s wedding attire is foreign and “supernatural.” Her language reflects her disassociation from this apparel: “garments said to be hers had already displaced my black stuff Lowood frock and straw bonnet: for not to me appertained that suit of wedding raiment; the pearl-coloured robe, the vapoury veil, pendent from the usurped portmanteau” (273). Together with her future last name, the foreignness of Jane’s wedding apparel presages a future that would obliterate her past. Its “wraith-like” character alludes to the superstition that the appearance of the ghost of a living person portends the death of that person. The wedding garment is an emblem of a
future Jane, and the portent comes true since she never occupies the role of this kind of wife.

The wraith-like quality of Jane’s wedding clothes also predicts the appearance of Bertha, who in a sense, is a wraith of Jane because she is her double: an apparition wearing a “white and straight” garment, Bertha places Jane’s bridal veil on her head, and then tears it in two. On the morning of her marriage, Jane very self appears to split. Her image in the mirror echoes Bertha’s white clad visitation: “I saw a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger” (284). The disjunction between Jane and her wedding clothes is so great that her identity splits. When Rochester’s secret marriage becomes revealed and the wedding is called off, Jane returns to her closet, taking off the wedding dress and replacing it with “the stuff gown I had worn yesterday” (291-92). Donning the clothing she is accustomed to wearing, the illusion is broken and, however disappointed, Jane is once again “herself.”

While changing back into her black stuff frock, the antithesis of pearlescent silk, Jane symbolically casts off the illusion of a happy marriage to Rochester that has obscured her vision of what he concealed from her. Jane’s Quaker-like dress is Jane’s bargaining chip in her negotiation of power with Rochester. By insisting on choosing her own clothing and refusing lavish gifts of jewelry, Jane draws two kinds of boundaries. First, she refuses to be transformed into a love object by Rochester, which causes her “a sense of annoyance and degradation” (267). Second, her refusal to wear purple silk is a feminist insistence on remaining plain in order to preserve her sense of self. The trip to
Milocote becomes a moment of crisis for Jane, prompting her to hold onto her external identity in order to preserve her inner integrity.

In addition to showing how Jane projects a plain image in order to stabilize internal ambivalence, Brontë also illustrates how Jane negotiates a midway position between passion and reason by defining herself against Eliza and Georgiana Reed, whose manner of dress emblematize their extremely opposite natures. The difference between the sisters’ appearances also represents a split between mind and body, but instead of signifying a spiritual antithesis, as Helen and Bertha do, their relationship to materialism helps define them. Eliza’s asceticism might appear to ally her with Helen, but Eliza’s self-definition completely lacks Helen’s spirituality. Thriving on routine, she allots time for religion just as she does for tending her garden or regulating her accounts, and “nothing annoyed her so much as the occurrence of any incident which forced her to vary its clock-work regularity” (235). Eliza’s appearance reflects her desire for control: “There was something ascetic in her look, which was augmented by the extreme plainness of a straight-skirted, black, stuff dress, a starched linen collar, hair combed away from the temples, and the nun-like ornament of a string of ebony beads and a crucifix” (228). Although Jane, too, dresses plainly, and often in black, Eliza’s ensemble mimics a nun’s habit, and her plainness strikes Jane as extreme. Jane also cannot identify with Eliza’s lack of feeling after hearing her tell Georgiana that she wants nothing to do with her sister after their mother’s death (236). While Jane also desires control, she still wishes to experience passion.

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52 Brontë’s attention to the clothing of Eliza, a minor character, attests to the importance of clothing in the narrative.
Georgiana, as buxom and handsome as her sister is thin and sallow, is also trapped, but by the limitations of her conventionality and materialism. Relishing the “titled conquests” she made two seasons ago in London, she grows plump as she stays at home, yearning for the fashionable life that her brother’s dissipation has made impossible now. Once the child whose golden curls “purchase[d] indemnity for every fault,” Georgiana as an adult is essentially powerless, and her pursuit of fashion, in dress and in lifestyle, is driven by fantasy. Jane notes how she never speaks of her mother or brother, and appears consumed with her memories of having lived “a novel of fashionable life”:\footnote{53 This remark resonates ironically here. It reveals the extent to which Brontë has consciously distanced herself from the genre she once loved and emulated.} “Her mind seemed wholly taken up with reminiscences of past gaiety, and aspirations after dissipations to come” (234). Her fantasies of a former “fashionable life” enable Georgiana to deny unpleasant realities.

Observing her cousins, Jane concludes that “[f]eeling without judgment is a washy draught indeed; but judgment untempered by feeling is too bitter and husky a morsel for human deglutition” (236). Here she articulates a position between these extremes, and Brontë’s description of Jane’s appearance affirms her desire to balance feeling and judgment. Even as she is dressed for the visit to her Aunt Reed’s in a “drab merino pelisse” and “cottage bonnet,” Jane is neither nun nor coquette. The plain gray dress that she wears represents her desire to feel with intensity while preserving her capacity for rationality.

In addition to being an emblem of Jane’s personal history and professionalism, dress also expresses Jane’s idiosyncratic personal taste, which leads her to desire a
similarly peculiar person. In the world of this novel, fashionable dress is an ineffective expression of Jane’s character because it fails to capture the unconventional nature of her narrative. Although she regrets not being beautiful, she does not try to enhance her appearance, which goes against the grain of cultural imperatives for women to be beautiful.

Victorian commentators on fashion and beauty recognized the fact that the majority of women did not conform to the classical standard of feminine beauty, so they urged women to overcome their physical “flaws” and to accentuate their more attractive attributes through their manner of dress.\(^{54}\) Valerie Steele states, “As ‘A Lady’ wrote in 1873, ‘Dress has much to do with personal loveliness. It can enhance and set off beauties and conceal personal defects.’ Although Victorian writers emphasized both functions of dress, the greater part of their advice on improving the personal appearance concerned the concealment of physical ‘flaws’” (Fashion and Eroticism 121). Later in the century, Mrs. C. E. Humphrey wrote How to Be Pretty Yet Plain (1899). Popular advice extended not only to disadvantages of the body, but also to the limitations of income. Books such as How to Dress on £5 a Year as a Lady (1873) advised governesses how to dress frugally yet in a lady-like manner (138). The Victorians tended to believe that it was not only compulsory, but natural, for a woman to care deeply about her appearance. In 1847, the same year Jane Eyre was published, an anonymous male writer for The Quarterly Review

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\(^{54}\) While Victorian women were expected to enhance their natural beauty with fashionable clothing, to improve one’s appearance artificially, through cosmetics and excessive under-padding, was considered deceptive when carried to the extreme. Thus, to be overly artificial was to be morally suspect and “artificially ugly.” See Steele 123-28.
wrote “We should doubt [. . .] whether the woman who is indifferent to her appearance be a woman at all” (qtd. in Fashion and Eroticism 102). Although Jane is hardly indifferent to her grooming, she resists taking measures to artificially “beautify” herself, subverting conventional expectations of women.

Jane’s resistance to being “made over” by Rochester stands in interesting relation to several of Brontë’s female characters in Shirley, who frequently advise one another how to dress. In “Housework, Mill Work, Women’s Work: The Functions of Cloth in Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley,” Maura Ives shows how such advice represents both an attempt to gain power over others and an expression of intimacy among women. Hortense Moore and Mrs. Yorke, who display their status in their households in their “outrageous and deliberately unfashionable dress,” try to dominate the younger women by encouraging them to emulate their unattractive, practical style of attire. Caroline refuses to wear Hortense’s trademark Belgian scarf and apron, resulting in their “only serious quarrel [. . .] which still left a soreness in the elder cousin’s soul” (80). Mrs. Yorke criticizes the dress of her servants and disapproves of “elegant taste in attire” in young women, yet clearly has no influence over their sartorial choices. Ives explains the older women’s ideas about clothing as a demonstration of their commitment to “a culture in which femininity is devalued, and in which female sexuality is seen both as an occasion of (male) sin and as proof of women’s frivolity” (282). Their failure to coerce
others to share their style only affirms the narrator’s implication that their views of their own sex are overly restrictive and outmoded.\textsuperscript{55}

On the other hand, Caroline successfully influences others to dress differently. She wishes to improve or change the appearances of Hortense, Mrs. Pryor, and Shirley. Although she is only partially successful in making over Hortense, Caroline updates her mother’s deliberately old-fashioned look and regularly helps Shirley get dressed. Ives argues that Caroline’s influence on dress, unlike her elders’ urge to dominate others, stems from her desire to establish emotional intimacy with other women.\textsuperscript{56} However, considering dress’s strong connection with identity in \textit{Shirley}, Caroline’s affectionate improvements can sometimes be an imposition of her own values. She reveals her English bias when she tries to remove obvious signs of Hortense’s foreignness, the “fichu” and apron. In general, however, Ives persuasively contends that Caroline’s makeovers are part of a larger, more evenly balanced exchange of influence among female friends and relatives, fostering a spirit of community.

In both \textit{Shirley} and \textit{Jane Eyre}, characters’ acceptance or resistance to suggested “improvements” in personal style shed light on Brontë’s view of the self as constructed through individual agency. Rochester’s attempt to remake Jane is similar to Mrs. Yorke and Hortense’s domineering impulses because in both situations, their suggestions do not

\textsuperscript{55} Ives contends that, in contrast to Mrs. Yorke and Hortense’s criticisms of their servants’ clothing, Brontë’s narrator “praises the attire of Fanny, Eliza, and the other working-class women.” See “Housework, Mill Work, Women’s Work: The Functions of Cloth in Charlotte Brontë’s Shirley” in \textit{Keeping the Victorian House: A Collection of Essays} eds. Vanessa D. Dickerson and Maura Ives (New York: Garland, 1995) 279.

\textsuperscript{56} See Ives 282.
respect the autonomy of the advisees. Brontë suggests that individuals such as Jane and Caroline are open to the influence of others, though their sense of self is too strong to allow them to cede without question to a set of values that are foreign to them, whether those values are represented in the symbolic attire of a bourgeois wife or the scarf and apron of a domestic matriarch. When Mrs. Pryor and Shirley accept Caroline’s advice on dress, they demonstrate that they have voluntarily assimilated what the change of attire imparts. Newly reunited with her daughter, Mrs. Pryor’s softer, more flattering style of clothing aptly expresses her inner willingness to take on a more nurturing role. Shirley accepts Caroline’s gesture of smoothing Shirley’s gown in order to create “a less artistic and more domestic grace” (469) because she is prepared to do her social duty. In Shirley, Brontë illustrates that the community plays an important role contribution to the individual self, though she also implies that personal agency is still at the heart of self-definition. In both novels, personal taste in dress is a metaphor for this selective process. Even Jane is not immune from outside influence in style of dress or character; she admires and emulates the tasteful elegance and serene intelligence of Miss Temple and the Rivers sisters.

In the nineteenth century, a woman’s choice of clothing was more conducive than it had been previously to reflecting individual taste. In The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism (1987), Colin Campbell writes that the concept of taste as relative to the individual emerged only after the eighteenth century. By the early nineteenth century, rather than trying to achieve consensus on a single standard, it was generally accepted that tastes varied according to the person, a change, which as
Campbell argues, had much to do with the rise of the middle classes and their ethical commitment to keeping up with fashion (154-56).\textsuperscript{57} As an extension of this belief, in the nineteenth century, one’s tastes in clothing and other material possessions were assumed to reflect the personalities of their owners. The celebration of the middle-class compulsion to consume according to their tastes reached its symbolic height at the Great Exhibition in 1851, an event that Brontë herself attended.

Instead of improving her looks with fashion, Jane values her personal taste for plainness. Her manner of dress contrasts with that of most other female characters in the novel, emphasizing deeper differences among them. These fashionable female characters represent alternative models of womanhood, positions that are emblematized in their clothing. Several examples of Jane’s opposites in style include Mrs. Reed, who “dressed well, and had a presence and port calculated to set off handsome attire” (46); Mrs. Brocklehurst and her daughters who walk in on Brocklehurst’s lecture on dress, “splendidly attired in velvet, silk, and furs” (74); and Georgiana Reed, whose mourning is fashionable and “looked as stylish as [her sister’s] looked puritanical” (228). Blanche Ingram makes a dashing entrance to Thornfield on horseback, her “purple riding-habit almost swept the ground, her veil streamed long on the breeze” (169). Even Adele is marked by her precocious attention to fashion: “there was something painful in the little Parisienne’s earnest and innate devotion to matters of dress” (174).

\textsuperscript{57} Campbell argues that taste in the nineteenth century had moral underpinnings. Because it was considered ethical to be a consumer, the middle classes followed fashion with a compulsory attitude, one that Campbell attributes to a Protestant heritage. See Campbell 153-54.
Most of the fashionable characters have an income which enables them to indulge in finery. According to Federico, Jane associates fashion and money with sexual attractiveness and, lacking both, feels inferior. Federico argues that the “propaganda of fashion, and the implicit mental associations with female attractiveness and social power, have made Jane self-conscious and reserved, for as a female she knows there is something at stake in the physical image she projects” (31). Although Federico offers a compelling reason for Jane’s self-consciousness, the sense that she is alienated from other women who can afford to be in fashion, Federico is less attentive to Jane’s resistance to becoming fashionable when she has the opportunity. To argue that Jane is an outsider when compared to women of wealth, fashion, and beauty implies that Jane envies them. Although it is true that Jane wishes to be more beautiful, she resolutely does not attempt to “improve” herself to this end, even when she has the opportunity to enter this closed circle with new financial means. Instead of aspiring towards fashion, revealed in either envy or emulation, Jane creates her own version of it; her Quaker-like gowns represent a statement of “anti-fashion,” a designation of her unconventionality.\(^{58}\) However, although anti-fashion signals a deviation from conventional femininity, it nonetheless represents a fashion statement.\(^{59}\) As Georg Simmel argues in his essay “Fashion” (1904), ignoring

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\(^{58}\) Although they had limited means, working-class women still strove to appear in fashion. By the mid-century, there was a very wide market for the fashionable crinoline, which correspondingly varied in price. Henry Mayhew commented that “[e]very woman now from the Empress on her Imperial throne down to the slavey in the scullery, wears crinoline, the very three-year-olds wear them.” See Christopher Breward’s *The Culture of Fashion* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995) 160.

\(^{59}\) Technically the term “anti-fashion” is used to denote the dress reform movements in the Victorian period that decried the wearing of corsets and clothing that
fashion can be construed as following it (549). Suzanne Keen writes of how the Quaker dress was styled in opposition to fashion, and by adopting a Quakerish dress, Jane emulates this Quaker rejection. Rather than ignoring fashion altogether, Jane constructs a parallel, if inverse, standard of taste, which in its rejection of convention necessarily models itself on it.

Besides their mostly similar social rank, the fashionable female characters in *Jane Eyre* are more or less conventional examples of dependent women. The status of Mrs. Reed, Georgiana, Brocklehurst’s daughters, and Blanche derives from their connection with men, on whom they depend for financial security. In the world of *Jane Eyre*, an interest in dressing fashionably signals this reliance. Jane views self-sufficient women as beautiful. She admires Miss Temple’s elegant beauty and the becoming way that Diana and Mary wore their mourning, their “sombre garb singularly set[ting] off very fair necks and faces” (326). In *Shirley*, Brontë relieves this rather strong opposition between fashionable and plainly dressed young women and their corresponding levels of dependence. Caroline and Shirley wear clothes that reflect the current fashions, demonstrating that this novel lacks the correlation between fashion and dependence that

restricting freedom of movement for women. Although Jane is hardly a radical dress reformer, her self-fashioning in opposition to fashion marks her subversive.

60 Middle-class men often had “dress allowances” for their wives and daughters. Erika Rappaport writes about this phenomenon of the latter half of the nineteenth century the essay, “‘A Husband and His Wife’s Dresses’: Consumer Credit and the Debtor Family in England, 1864-1914.” See chapter 5 in *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996).
exists in *Jane Eyre*, perhaps because plainness is such a prominent signifier of Jane’s will for self-control.

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In *Jane Eyre*, Jane’s self-development depends on her knowledge of her inner potential, which Brontë renders as legible in her face and style of dress.\(^{61}\) The legibility of her character plays an important role in fostering her understanding of herself as well as her relationship with others. From the time she first looks into the mirror at Thornfield, she recognizes the capacities for great passion and self-restraint that are written in her irregular features, which Rochester aptly reads as “contradictory.” Rochester’s seduction of Jane begins with his immediate recognition of her character in her face, a sympathy that soon dangerously veers into manipulation when he tries to control her by changing her external appearance. Jane’s significant psychological investment in her plain style represents her desire to maintain a sense of personal agency by projecting the outward image of a coherent self. As Elizabeth Wilson states, clothing is “the frontier between the self and the non-self” that exposes the potential instability of identity while simultaneously attempting to resolve it.\(^{62}\) Given the importance of

\(^{61}\) In *Physiognomy and Expression* (1904), Paolo Mantegazza views clothing as a necessary extension of face reading, a means of furthering the physiognomic enterprise by emphasizing less obvious personality traits. See Joanne Finkelstein, *The Fashioned Self* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1991) 42.

\(^{62}\) See *Adorned in Dreams: Fashion and Modernity* (Berkeley: U of California P,
surfaces in such a highly visual text as *Jane Eyre*, it is no wonder that Brontë so strongly implicates style of dress as an integral part of Jane’s self-definition.
Chapter 3: Lucy’s Pink Dress: Costuming Inner Potential in *Villette*

In 1925, nearly 75 years after the publication of *Villette* (1853), Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) features a woman who wishes to change her body, and in so doing, to escape her identity. Walking towards Bond Street, Clarissa Dalloway wonders to herself: “Oh if she could have had her life over again! she thought, stepping on to the pavement, *could have looked even differently!*” (my emphasis). As if a transformation in her physical features could bring about a change in her personality and tastes, she momentarily wishes to look and act like Lady Bexborough, a masculine, confident acquaintance. Yearning for her “skin of crumpled leather and beautiful eyes” Clarissa wishes “to be interested in politics like a man” and to be “very dignified, very sincere.” The source of Clarissa’s frustration grows from her sense that her body, like an ill-fitting dress, delimits and negates her: “this body she wore [. . .] with all its capacities, seemed nothing—nothing at all” (10). She is dissatisfied with the unitary self that her face implies:

How many million times she had seen her face, and always with the same imperceptible contraction! She pursed her lips when she looked in the glass. It was to give her face point. That was her self—pointed; dart-like; definite. That was her self when some effort, some call on her to be herself, drew the parts together, she alone knew how different, how incompatible and composed so for the world only into one centre, one diamond, one woman who sat in her drawing-room and made a meeting point [. . .]. (37)
Clarissa is conscious that the unified self requires effort, and this effort finds its point of concentration in the face, a traditional symbol for identity. This drawing together of disparate desires reveals the constructed nature of the self. Appearing to signify the sum of her self, it is also an unsatisfactory cloak for it. Over time, its monotony serves to distance her from herself as simply “the delicate pink face of the woman who was that very night to give a party” (37). The body’s status as an incomplete signifier for the fragmented identity signals a typical modernist concern in Mrs. Dalloway. Well before its time, Charlotte Brontë’s Villette (1853) similarly questions the Victorian notion that the body is a self-contained referent for the readable self. Like Woolf, Brontë also interrogates the notion of a unified identity housed in a culturally inscribed body. She uses clothing to dismantle any neat connections between the body and identity.

Brontë’s treatment of the body and clothing as signifiers underwent a significant change from 1847 to 1853, the period between the publications of Jane Eyre and Villette. In Jane Eyre, Brontë gives more prominence to the idea that appearance can index a legible, essential self.¹ Jane’s physiognomy, her irregularly featured face, is a trustworthy indicator of her inner character, encompassing in its signification her contradictory capacities for passion and self-control. Her head can also be read phrenologically since it reveals potentialities that she has the power to develop or suppress, though Jane mostly does the latter, marshaling her conflicting tendencies in

¹ This is not to suggest that appearance is the only way Brontë depicts inner character; certainly, Jane’s actions and speech also contribute to her characterization.
order to project a single, authentic identity. As an emblem of self-restraint, her gray, “Quakerish” dress represents the successful management of her internal ambivalence. In Shirley (1849), however, Brontë begins to challenge the notion that one’s face or dress can significantly manifest identity by featuring characters whose appearances only partially reveal their inner natures.

In Villette, she dispenses with physiognomy’s deterministic predictions of character and instead turns to phrenology’s more flexible concept of the self, which identified potentialities rather than fixed characteristics. She explores a more open-ended view of identity that is expressed in theatricality and tests the limits of phrenology’s creed of self-development. As a kind of theatrical costume, Lucy Snowe’s clothing helps precipitate self-discovery in ways that transcend even phrenology’s broad predictions of inner capacities. Villette challenges Brontë’s earlier notion in Jane Eyre that the self is contained in a legible body by destabilizing faces and garments as signifiers of identity, a technique that reveals personality to be more performative than essential. While Jane’s gray dress, a visual emblem of her self-reliance, neatness, and eroticism, gathers up into its folds a unified identity, Lucy’s clothing often exposes the chaos of contradictory impulses and potentialities that her irregular features can only generally signify.

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2 Sally Shuttleworth makes the following distinction between phrenology and physiognomy: “Physiognomy and phrenology thus offered two contrasting forms of semiosis. Physiognomy was essentialist, idealist, and open of access; phrenology was relational, materialist, and closed of access to the uninitiated.” See Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996) 61.

3 Possible reasons for Brontë’s changing view of identity and its visibility could be her emergence as a literary celebrity and the death of most of her family. Brontë was
Brontë continues to regard the surfaces of faces and dress as telling signs of inner character in *Villette*; however, by using strategies of theatricality and alienation, she reveals the limitations of such typologies to fully illuminate personality. First, this chapter will address Brontë’s changed attitude towards physiognomy and phrenology. When rendering characters’ faces, she uses humor and the mediation of masks and mirrors as techniques for keeping her readers from immediately discerning character from a face. By introducing theatricality into face reading, she complicates the notion of an essential identity. My second section will illustrate how dress participates in the novel’s theatrical treatment of Lucy’s personality. Clothing is both a catalyst for self-discovery and a metaphor for the over-consumption of material goods that threaten to overwhelm the spiritual self. These dual roles are represented in Lucy Snowe and Ginevra Fanshawe, contrasting characters who act as doubles in the narrative. The final section of this chapter will explore Brontë’s destabilization of clothing as a signifier of identity, demonstrating how Brontë’s treatment of clothing as uncanny and abject represents her view that the self is performative rather than essential.

Narrative and theatrical performances both offer outlets for the non-unitary self. Acting extends the boundaries of identity since actors can depict a range of fictional

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often mistakenly introduced as “Jane” because of the public’s eagerness to view the novel as autobiography. Perhaps she questioned her earlier assumptions about appearances and interiority when she dealt with this role of celebrity, which necessarily subjected her to such scrutiny. Also, by 1853, Brontë had lost all of her siblings, deeply unsettling her sense of self. Drew Lamonica writes, “In the aftermath of family death, Charlotte was forced into a process of self-regeneration, both as an author and a woman deprived of those ‘who understood me, and whom I understood’” (179). Lamonica contends that Brontë’s losses alienated her from Victorian conceptions of womanhood that strongly emphasized family relationships. See “We Are Three Sisters”: Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontës (Columbia: U of Missouri P, 2003).
characters. Cast both as narrator and actor in Villette, Lucy Snowe is also capable of playing multiple roles. Her contradictory, plain features signal latent capacities, which she seeks to explore through performance. Although Lucy’s appearance is plain, in Villette, Brontë accentuates the multiplicity of roles available to her heroine, roles that Lucy “tries on” with varying degrees of comfort.

The novel is punctuated with moments where Lucy takes on roles or attitudes that are out of step with her “natural habits.” She sets out for London from a provincial town and boards a ship named “Vivid” without a plan. She finds an unlikely friend in the extremely fashionable Ginevra Fanshawe. She accepts employment from a stranger, acts in a play, teaches students in a foreign country, confesses to a priest, tries her hand at art criticism, falls in love with a Catholic, spies on others, takes a drugged journey through Villette, and wears a pink dress. It is no wonder that Ginevra turns to her and says with real curiosity, “Who are you, Lucy Snowe?” (392).

**Masks and Mirrors: Brontë’s Refracted Physiognomies**

In The Life of Charlotte Brontë, Gaskell tells an anecdote about a mask and its potential to expose latent personality traits. Charlotte’s father Patrick Brontë, surprised by the precocity of his young children, tested their capabilities by placing a mask over the faces of each of them and questioning their beliefs on key subjects. He explains:

> When my children were very young, when, as far as I can remember, the oldest was about ten years of age, and the youngest about four, thinking they knew more than I had yet discovered, in order to make them speak with less
timidity, I deemed that if they were put under a sort of
cover I might gain my end; and happening to have a mask
in the house, I told them all to stand and speak boldly from
under cover of the mask. (49)

When Charlotte’s turn arrived, he asked her, “What is the best book in the world?” After
first providing her clergyman father with the expected answer, “the Bible,” the mask
allows her to precociously add that the “Book of Nature” is second-best.

Brontë represents faces as revelatory masks or filters them to readers through
mirror reflections. Such mediations in the narrative effectively distance readers from the
appearances of characters, challenging readers’ skills as physiognomists and raising
doubts about the pseudo-science’s ability to render legible a unitary identity. Described
as masks, the physiognomies of faces take on a theatrical artificiality which, while
offering a reliable window into the psychologies of characters, also reveals Brontë’s
awareness of the typology as a potentially flawed construct. While masks facilitate
performance, mirrors, in their literal and figurative manifestations, become opportunities
for characters to seek affirmation of their identities from others, or, as Lucy says, quoting
Robert Burns, to have “the ‘giftie’ of seeing myself as others see me” (286). These
revelations about the self from others not only reveal the impossibility of having such a
perspective, but also expose the fragility of personality which underlies a seemingly
unified image of the self.

Although Brontë shows comparative faith in the revelatory potential of
phrenology, she also treats this typology with some humor, suggesting that she is not a
wholehearted believer. Madame Beck, the headmistress of the girl’s school where Lucy
is seeking employment, calls in her cousin, M. Paul, to read Lucy’s face in place of a reference. M. Paul’s phrenological reading is as general as it is decisive; he simply indicates that she is capable of lots of things, both good and evil:  

‘I read it,’ he pronounced.

‘Et qu’en dites vous?’

‘Mais—bien de choses,’ was the oracular answer.

‘Bad or good?’

‘Of each kind, without doubt,’ pursued the diviner.

[. . .] ‘Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward: if evil—eh bien! Ma cousine, ce sera toujours une bonne oeuvre.’ (129)

Although Brontë depicts face reading with some irony, this scene remains important in the novel. The vagueness of M. Paul’s pronouncement serves to underscore Lucy’s large range of untapped capabilities. It sets the stage for subsequent tests of her potential and establishes M. Paul as a key figure in her self-development.

While her humorous treatment of phrenology implies qualified belief in it, Brontë similarly distances herself from physiognomy by portraying faces as masks. By making

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4 Here Brontë confuses the terms “physiognomy” and “phrenology.” Although M. Paul is described as an expert in “physiognomy,” his reading of Lucy more closely resembles a phrenological one because he touches her head.

5 “‘I read it,’ he pronounced. ‘What do you read in it?’ ‘Well—Many things.’ ‘Bad or good?’ ‘Of each kind, without doubt,’ pursued the diviner. [. . .] ‘Engage her. If good predominates in that nature, the action will bring its own reward: if evil—oh well! At least it would be a good deed.’”
faces appear artificial and theatrical, she challenges the notion that faces are indicators of an essential inner character.\(^6\) Such masks contribute to the overall theatrical sensibility of the novel;\(^7\) some are worn for “cover,” and others accentuate more than they hide.

Lucy’s physiognomic portrait of Madame Beck reveals that, like Lucy, she has contradictory features, which presage her ability to play multiple roles:

I know not what of harmony pervaded her whole person; and yet her face offered contrast too: its features were by no means such as are usually seen in conjunction with a complexion of such blended freshness and repose: their outline was stern; her forehead was high but narrow; it expressed capacity and some benevolence, but no expanse; nor did her peaceful yet watchful eye ever know the fire which is kindled in the heart or the softness which flows thence. Her mouth was hard: it could be a little grim; her lips were thin. For sensibility and genius, with all their tenderness and temerity, I felt somehow that madame would be the right sort of Minos in petticoats. (134)

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The sternness of her features contrasts with her hale complexion, showing a hardened yet fresh appearance. The narrator signals Madame’s self-interested intelligence and benevolence in her narrow forehead “without expanse.” Her thin lips and hard mouth reveal her lack of sensuality or sensibility. Madame Beck’s behavior throughout the novel can be traced to these complex character traits signified in her face.⁸

Madame Beck’s face is emblematic of three distinct attitudes, which can be viewed as theatrical roles. These include the maternal directress of the pensionnat, the expressionless watcher, and the well-dressed bourgeois matron. Upon their first meeting, Madame appears to be “merely a motherly, dumpy little woman, in a large shawl, a wrapping gown, and a clean, trim night cap” (127). Alternately, she wears an expressionless “face of stone” before dismissing the drunken Irish nurse Mrs. Sweeny, a face she continues to wear for much of the novel (132). Madame can also metamorphose into a comely widow. Lucy remarks that Madame was “not quite a plain woman [. . .] Without beauty of feature or elegance of form, she pleased” (167).

Madame Beck often appears to switch masks as she changes personae. After Graham Bretton leaves the school early in the novel, Lucy observes Madame Beck sitting in front of the mirror. She notices that “all that was animated and amiable vanished from her face: she looked stony and stern, almost mortified and morose [. . .] Never had I pitied Madame before, but my heart softened towards her [. . .]. That hag disappointment

⁸ Both physiognomy and phrenology acknowledge contradictory traits within their systems. Wilfred Senseman writes, “If physiognomy and phrenology did nothing else, they did underscore the complexity of human nature, for they emphasized the notion that within one and the same individual lie elements of firmness and plasticity, altruism and selfishness, constructiveness and destructiveness, and so on” (485). See “Charlotte Brontë’s Use of Physiognomy and Phrenology,” Papers of the Michigan Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters 38 (1953): 457-83.
was greeting her with a grisly ‘all hail!’ and her soul rejected the intimacy” (170). This dynamic shift from Madame’s public to private face heightens the disjunction between contradictory personae. In another scene, Madame Beck’s facial transformation transcends gender. She compels Lucy to be an English teacher by staring her down, her physiognomy changing from a “woman’s aspect” to that of “a man’s” (141).

M. Paul shares Madame Beck’s ability to play a wide range of roles as well as her mask-like face. Lucy studies his character, stressing dramatic characteristics such as a “most flexible mouth” and “fire” in his movements:

[. . .] I could not, while watching, avoid perceiving a certain not disagreeable naïveté in all he did and said; nor could I be blind to certain vigorous characteristics of his physiognomy, rendered conspicuous now by the contrast with a throng of tamer faces: the deep, intent keenness of his eye, the power of his forehead—pale, broad, and full—the mobility of his most flexible mouth. He lacked the calm of force, but its movement and its fire he signally possessed. (297)

Some familiar sites for physiognomic interpretation emerge in this description, particularly the forehead and the mouth. Where Madame Beck’s self-interested, highly-restrained nature is signified in a high and narrow forehead and thin lips, M. Paul’s generous disposition emanates from his broad forehead and flexible mouth. His theatrical voice and mobility become chief characteristics of his presence. More often than not, it is felt through his loud footsteps or commanding voice rather than by his face.
Lucy characterizes him as a “harsh apparition” (198); like her, he is more spiritual than material.\(^9\) Considering Brontë’s visual generality when depicting the faces of her heroines, M. Paul’s alignment with them illustrates Brontë’s reluctance to over-render those characters that have the greatest subjectivity.

Like Madame Beck’s physiognomy, M. Paul’s face is also mask-like, heightening the theatricality of his presence. While M. Paul’s “mask of an intelligent tiger” (212) covers his insecurities, it also heightens his sometimes frightening presence as teacher in the classroom. As the totemic exaggeration of his physiognomy, his face amplifies his personality in an expressionistic manner. Lucy implies that even his sincerest self-expression is a performance as she witnesses his face dramatically transforming: “It changed from a mask to a face: the deep lines left his features; the very complexion seemed clearer and fresher; that swart, sallow, southern darkness which spoke his Spanish blood, became displaced by a lighter hue” (407). The face we are left with is not so much a real face but the manifestation of another persona.

Like Madame Beck’s expressionless mask, Lucy’s face also shelters her from scrutiny while she observes others. Unlike Madame Beck and M. Paul, however, Lucy has no specifically rendered physiognomy, other than her plain, imperfect features, in contrast to Brontë’s careful descriptions of other, often female, characters. She is literally “all eyes.” Readers can only catch glimpses of her in mirrors or through often incorrect “reflections” mediated by other characters. The few hints that Lucy reveals about her appearance only confirm that, like Jane, she is plain, with contradictory features. Her

face can function both as a revealing mask and as a cipher, depending on the person who observes her.

M. Paul is the person who reads Lucy’s character most correctly. Although his observations are almost always over-exaggerated and warped by his emotions, they are often correct in spirit. Lucy, who finds herself continually misunderstood or ignored by others because she is plain, is amused by M. Paul’s outrageous accusations about her character. She often uses them as starting points for pushing the boundaries of her sense of self. M. Paul’s pronouncements about her theatrical ability challenges her to act on stage, and his wild accusations about her vanity and flirtatiousness for wearing pink encourages her to dress more flatteringly. Nicholas Dames has described this exchange of readings and counter-readings by Lucy and M. Paul as “reading-as-flirtation” (379). In this situation, the repressed can be read on visible signs on the face through what he terms “an erotics of reading”: “pleasure is created not by the success or failure of the reading but merely by the act of being read” (380). For Dames, this game of reading and counter-reading has nothing to do with interiority: “interiority is a snare, a barely concealed admission of defeat in the game of erotics” (376).

Although Dames compellingly illustrates that the gazing and counter-gazing in *Villette* becomes an enjoyable flirtation for Lucy and M. Paul, he does not discuss the erotics of sameness between them. By asserting that their faces, or “masks,” are the same, M. Paul implies that their interiors are compatible emotionally. M. Paul asks, “Do you see it, mademoiselle, when you look in the glass? Do you observe that your forehead is shaped like mine—your eyes are cut like mine? Do you hear that you have some of my
tones of voice? Do you know that you have many of my looks?” (457). He seductively places his “mask” on her, superimposing his own face on her imaginary mirror image.

While the figure of the mask suggests the spectacle of performance, the mirror is a trope that stands for the interpretation of these performances. Mirrors serve as either a point of self-affirmation or alienation for Lucy. During her time as Mrs. Marchmont’s caretaker after the presumed loss of her loved ones, Lucy confronts her image in the mirror to summon inner strength: “I saw myself in the glass, in my mourning-dress, a faded, hollow-eyed vision. Yet I thought little of the wan spectacle. The blight, I believed, was chiefly external: I still felt life at life’s sources” (96). This early self-inspection before the mirror resembles Jane Eyre’s inward preparation for her first day as governess at Thornfield. Like Jane, Lucy feels affirmed by her image, which signifies resourcefulness. Towards the end of the novel, Lucy’s confrontation with the mirror has quite a different character. It fulfills a desperate need to affirm her bodily presence after she has experienced unwillingly the mind-altering effects of Madame Beck’s drugs: “Entering by the care, a piece of mirror-glass, set in an oaken cabinet, repeated my image. It said I was changed; my cheeks and lips were sodden-white, my eyes were glassy, and my eye-lids swollen and purple” (545).

Mirrors also become a trope for perception, correct or otherwise. They are the most intimate and most seemingly-objective reflector of surfaces. Lucy uses them for indirect surveillance when she catches Madame’s private “hag disappointment” or Graham’s face as he attends to Madame’s children. They offer up faces to be studied

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10 Litvak notes that Lucy “master[s] the art [. . .] of transforming theatrical spectatorship into a technology of surveillance” (35).
unobtrusively for what Richard Sennett calls the telltale signs of personality, which Victorians believed were inherent in public appearance. In Villette, mirrors offer the illusion of privacy and intimacy, the conditions necessary for exposing recalcitrant details in dress or facial expression that the person in the reflection tries to hide from the gaze of the public.

Lucy, an expert reader of these details, becomes a mirror in her own right. Twice in the novel, Graham asks Lucy for her perceptions as if she is an objective reflector of truth. In chapter 20, at the concert Lucy attends with Graham and his mother, Mrs. Bretton, Graham is angry with Ginevra for appearing to make fun of his mother. He turns to Lucy and implores her to “look well at my mother, and say, without fear or favour, in what light she now appears to you” (Villette 295). Similarly, in chapter 27, he goes as far as asking Lucy who he is. Lucy declares to Graham that he has remained the same since childhood. She proves her point by citing his boyhood portrait at La Terrasse, seeming to reinforce the power of the appearance to index character in the novel. She tells Graham that “[i]n manner, you were almost the same yesterday as to-day.” He responds that “such an oracle whets [his] curiosity” and asks, “What am I today? What was I the yesterday of ten years back?” (402).

In turning to Lucy as if she were a mirror, Graham implicitly believes in objective, unmediated truth, a worldview that runs strongly at odds with Lucy’s highly subjective narrative perspective, and he emerges as the inferior judge of character. This empirical model underpins his profession as a doctor, which necessarily requires him to

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11 See Sennett, Fall of Public Man (New York: Knopf, 1977) 167-68.
diagnose patients from surface examination. However, Brontë illustrates the inaccuracy of this belief when Graham confuses Ginevra’s beauty with angelic goodness. Around Graham, Lucy cannot help but feel that she is a shadow self: “He wanted always to give me a role not mine” (404). Since he lacks M. Paul’s penetration as a reader of faces, he erroneously pigeonholes Lucy. The mirror that Lucy represents to him reveals a somewhat naïve blindness to the “signs” of human nature on the face. By portraying Lucy as an accurate, subjective physiognomist, Brontë privileges subjectivity over objectivity. In M.H. Abrams’s terms, if Graham believes in the mirror, then Lucy represents “the lamp,” or the Romantic view of perception.

Critics have characterized Lucy’s surveillance as the “female gaze,” a proto-feminist counterpart to Graham’s male gaze, illustrated in her art criticism of the Cleopatra painting at the museum and her response to Vashti’s performance. Qualifying the subversive nature of Lucy’s perspective, Anita Levy argues that because Lucy occupies a feminine middle-class space as narrator, she inhabits “a middle space between seeing and being seen, which both objectifies and dramatizes her ability to see” (407). In other words, while Lucy spends a good deal of time surveilling, she lacks the social and political power implicit in the male gaze. Hers is mastery without control.

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Mirrors also accentuate Lucy’s alienation from her image. Suspended self-recognition recurs throughout the text, introducing a narrative pattern of defamiliarization and recognition. Lucy does not recognize her mirror image when a coiffeur arrives to braid the students’ and teachers’ hair before the fete for Madame Beck. Describing the process in holy, mystical terms (he “solemnized the mystery of his art” in the oratory), Lucy says:

> Each girl was summoned in turn to pass through his hands; emerging from them with head as smooth as a shell, intersected by faultless white lines, and wreathed about with Grecian plaits that shone as if lacquered. I took my turn with the rest, and could hardly believe what the glass said when I applied to it for information afterwards; the lavish garlandry of woven brown hair amazed me—I feared it was not all my own, and it required several convincing pulls to give assurance to the contrary. (Villette 199)

When her plain brown hair becomes transformed into shiny Grecian plaits, Lucy cannot believe what she sees and thinks her hair is false. The hairstyle precipitates Lucy’s reaction, not only because it is more fashionable and elaborate than what she is accustomed to, but because it literally conforms to the hairstyles of all the others created by the hands of the coiffeur, who has worked magic on all his subjects in systematic fashion. She has become part of a larger group of women who identify themselves with fashion. By passively participating in fashion, a territory more appropriate for Ginevra, Lucy becomes alienated from her mirror image, which she habitually uses to ground
herself in her identity. Dress also plays an important role in her development, which will be discussed in the next part of the chapter.

Lucy also uses this narrative technique of alienation and recognition to play a trick on readers, becoming, in a sense, an unreliable “mirror” of the novel’s visual imagery. Lucy introduces Dr. John and Paulina without revealing that they are the same young Graham Bretton and little Polly at the beginning of the novel. At the concert in chapter 20, she also uses this technique to describe an “acquaintance” soon revealed to be Ginevra:

She (i.e., my acquaintance) had a slight, pliant figure, not at all like the forms of the foreign damsels; her hair, too, was not close-braided, like a shell or a skull-cap of satin; it looked like hair, and waved from her head, long, curled, and flowing. She chatted volubly, and seemed full of a light-hearted sort of satisfaction with herself and her position. I did not look at Dr. Bretton; but I knew that he, too, saw Ginevra Fanshawe [...]. (292)

Lucy also acts the part of mirror within another crowd, in the midst of the carnival that she attends drugged and in disguise. While she is seated

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14 Although Villette is considered partly autobiographical, Brontë herself would not have minded wearing false hair, a common practice among Victorian women. In an 1850 letter to her childhood friend, Ellen Nussey, Brontë thanks her for sending her a plait of false hair and promises to pay her for it. She evidently wore the plait when meeting Thackeray’s friend, Mrs. Brookfield, for the first time. Mrs. Brookfield writes that Brontë was “a timid little woman with a firm mouth” who “did not possess a large enough quantity of hair to enable her to form a plait, so therefore wore a very obvious crown of brown silk” (395). See The Letters of Charlotte Brontë, ed. Margaret Smith, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995) 394-95.
behind the Bretton party, she is able to watch them undetected as if she were looking through a one-way mirror.

In the world of *Villette* there are no such things as objective mirrors or transparent faces. Lucy instructs readers on how to perceive surfaces and in so doing, compels readers to “accept the trajectory of her desires” (Dames 370). Readers learn to trust her canny insights and come to ignore the unreliability of her perceptions. However, accuracy and reliability become secondary concerns as Lucy’s psychological state, with all of its errors and desires, takes center stage. While featuring very skilled readers such as Lucy and M. Paul, their errors complicate Brontë’s earlier assumption in *Jane Eyre* that faces can be accurately read by the “right” readers. Characterizing faces as theatrical masks, Brontë further challenges the notion that the physiognomy can completely project a person’s essence.

**Lucy’s Trunk of Costumes: How Dress Expands and Threatens Lucy’s Sense of Self**

Lucy identifies herself with peculiarity. Surprised that her odd habit of walking down an alley has gone unnoticed by the others, she muses that her singularity is “engrained in my nature [. . .] born in and with me, and no more to be parted with than my identity” (174; my emphasis). Although it is true that Lucy is singular, her sense of a coherent self is complicated by her odd predisposition to acting. Her capacity for the theater is not like Ginevra’s. Ginevra relishes self-display and spectacle, yet her repertoire of roles is limited to playing the coquette (i.e., herself). Despite Lucy’s avowal never to act again after appearing on stage only once as the fop to Ginevra’s coquette, Lucy demonstrates the superior range of the two, and indeed, cannot help her talent. M.
Paul identifies it in her face: “I have read your skull, that night you came; I see your moyens: play you can, play you must” (202). She cannot deny that “nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion” (143). Although Lucy abandons the stage after her first and only theatrical performance, she continues to use her talent for acting, sublimating it in the classroom.

Lucy reflects that, “I was going beyond myself—venturing out of what I looked on as my natural habits” (222). Throughout the novel, she constantly pushes the boundaries of what she considers to be herself, challenging her accustomed self-perception. After the deaths of her family and Miss Marchmont, she makes the radical step of leaving England for the Continent without a specific destination. Only after a chance meeting on the ship with a fellow Englishwoman, Ginevra Fanshawe, does she decide to find work in Brussels, at the girls’ school where Ginevra is a student. There she begins as a nanny and ends up as teaching English. She is as enterprising psychologically as she is vocationally. She desires M. Paul and Graham and possibly, Ginevra, all at the same time. As if fulfilling M. Paul’s phrenological prediction about her vast range of possibilities, she also experiments with different roles that she would not ordinarily identify with, such as being an actor, a “flirt,” and a Parisian grisette, the French stereotype of a working woman dressed in gray. Brontë uses costume to designate these atypical roles for Lucy. Wearing unlikely clothes provides Lucy with the chance to step outside herself. Although dress temporarily alienates her from her outward image, it allows her to “try on” roles for herself, expanding her range of possibilities. Unlike in Jane Eyre, where Jane’s plain dress served to psychologically stabilize and unify her identity, in Villette, Lucy’s garments often function like actor’s costumes: to dramatically
extend and fragment her notion of self. While dress plays an important part of Lucy’s self-discovery, its materiality also threatens her subjectivity. The example of Ginevra serves to caution Lucy about the over-consumption of material goods, which seemingly have the power to eclipse her subjectivity.

Costume’s relationship to personality in *Villette* is similar to twentieth-century method acting because it emphasizes an actor’s dependence on an external environment that he or she constructs to elicit feelings that a character would experience. This principle of acting, developed by Constantin Stanislavski in the 1930s, approached acting psychologically. Performers were “required […] to draw on his or her own self, on experiences, memories, and emotions that could inform a characterization and shape how a character might speak or move” (“The Actor’s Studio”). One of Stanislavski’s techniques for personally identifying with a character is for the actor to concentrate on objects or recreate physical conditions that the dramatic figure experiences in order to trigger empathetic emotions.15 The theory that external objects can trigger memories of emotions sheds light on the theatrical use of costume, which enables an actor to “get into character” by wearing the costume of a character.16 As in the world of a play, clothing in *Villette* sometimes functions as a theatrical costume when it can extend the psychological boundaries of identity. Lucy, Madame Beck, M. Paul, Graham, Ginevra Fanshawe, and

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16 Ann Hollander notes that historical accuracy became an important feature in theatrical costume for most of the nineteenth century. She writes that nineteenth-century audiences were intrigued by the supposed correctness of stage scenery and costume and felt “it was being given a glimpse of the past brought to life” (291). See *Seeing through Clothes* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1993).
Alfred de Hamal all comprise a cast of characters who play at least dual roles in the novel, roles that are often marked by the visible signs of their clothing. In the manner of Stanislavski’s method, the characters in the novel often become what they enact through clothing and “masks,” highlighting the performative aspect of identity.

The theatrical setting of Villette is an appropriate backdrop for Lucy’s role playing. Madame Beck’s pensionnat resembles a theater sheltered within the larger theater of the city. From the beginnings of Western culture, the metaphor of theater has been applied to the city. Sennett points out that this idea survived into the mid-eighteenth century when Henry Fielding “spoke of London as having become a society in which stage and street were ‘literally’ intermixed; the world as theater, he said, was no longer ‘only a metaphor’ as it had been in the Restoration” (64). The nineteenth-century city, according to Sennett, saw a less pronounced “intermixing” of stage and street when personality entered public life, and “human nature” was no longer considered as universal as it was in the eighteenth century (38; 176). Sennett notes that the metaphor of the city as theater accommodated the aims of nineteenth-century writers, such as Balzac, to depict society as actors who employ “various necessary masks” in public (35).

In Jane Eyre, theater materializes in parts of the narrative; Rochester’s party performs charades, and the host also disguises himself as a gypsy fortune teller in order to better test Jane’s feelings toward him. In Villette, Brontë heightens the presence of theater in this fictitious foreign city. Villette is the theatrum mundi of the novel, its deceptive surfaces copied in miniature in the enclosed girls’ school. Before Lucy embarks on her drugged journey through Villette, she remarks on the stage-like quality of the city: “I see even scores of masks” (549). Brontë also describes characters as actors.
Madame Beck surveils her students and employees beneath the deceptive cloak of a maternal looking shawl. M. Paul’s “mask of an intelligent tiger” (212) and his declamatory style attest to his love of theater. Alfred de Hamal disguises himself as a nun to fool Lucy, and together he and Ginevra embody the quintessential Parisian stock characters, the coquette and the rake.

Brontë’s inclusion of a renowned stage actress also underscores Lucy’s actor-like transformations. Lucy witnesses a moving performance by Vashti, based on the famous nineteenth-century tragedienne, Rachel Felix. Lisa Surridge and John Stokes attribute Lucy’s ambivalence towards Vashti’s acting to her identification with the actress, an externalization of her desires. Lucy is Vashti’s double.¹⁷ Rachel Brownstein explains why Vashti threatens Lucy: “Experiencing Vashti is frightening because it seems to dissolve personal boundaries” (13). The actress Vashti represents the threat of raw, publicly displayed emotion to Lucy, a disembodied emotion with fiendish power. She is Brontë’s representation of female artist as genius. Lucy says of her: “I found upon her something neither of woman or of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil” (339). The marble-skinned Vashti appears consumed by the tragic characters she performs; her figure “wasted like wax in flame.” Just as M. Paul finds evil in part of Lucy’s physiognomy, Lucy says that Vashti is “not good” and does not “look good” (340).

It is interesting to note that in the summer of 1851, Brontë paid a month-long trip to London, where she made five visits to the Crystal Palace, visited a phrenologist with

George Smith, and saw Rachel Felix on stage twice. Later that same year, she began writing *Villette* (Letters 2: xxxix-xl). As many critics point out, Brontë’s awestruck but ambivalent reaction to Rachel is almost identical to Lucy’s response to Vashti. Both describe the actress in diabolical terms. Brontë’s letter to Ellen Nussey on 24 June 1854 reads: “She is not a woman—she is a snake—she is the—” (648). On 15 November 1851, the month she also began writing *Villette*, Brontë says to James Taylor:

Rachel’s acting transfixed me with wonder, enchained me with interest and thrilled me with horror [. . .] It is scarcely human nature that she shews you; it is something wilder and worse; the feelings and fury of a fiend. The great gift of Genius she undoubtably has—but—I fear—she rather abuses than turns it to good account. (717)

Lucy describes Vashti’s performance in similar terms: “I found upon her something neither of woman nor of man: in each of her eyes sat a devil. [. . .] It was a marvellous sight: a mighty revelation. [. . .] It was a spectacle low, horrible, immoral” (*Villette* 339). Brontë’s “fear” here seems to stem from Rachel’s exposure of “the wilder and worse” parts of human nature that threaten to disturb comfortably-held notions of the self, or more sinisterly, to redefine what is human.

Lucy’s unstable identity predisposes her to acting in unfamiliar roles. She perceives the elusiveness of her identity at key moments in the text when she remembers extreme emotions from an outside perspective. After she secretly catches Madame Beck 18 Brontë watched Rachel act in two plays: *Adrienne Lecouvreur* and *Les Horaces.*
in her room, rifling though her belongings, she beats a quick path to the schoolroom, where she first laughs, then fills up with overwhelming rage, then bitterness: “a kind of wrath smote me, and then bitterness followed: it was the rock struck, and Meribah’s waters gushing out. [. . .] Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: the next day I was again Lucy Snowe” (187).

Volume Two opens with her awakening from the fainting spell that ended her period of depression during her “long vacation” at the school. She awakens in uncannily familiar surroundings thinking:

Where my soul went during that swoon I cannot tell.
Whatever she saw, or wherever she travelled in her trance on that strange night, she kept her own secret; never whispering a word to Memory, and baffling Imagination by an indissoluble silence. [. . .] The divorced mates, Spirit and Substance, were hard to re-unite: they greeted each other, not in an embrace, but a racking sort of struggle.

(237)

Lucy’s self-conscious recognition that “Spirit” has wandered from “Substance” marks a moment where Lucy’s identity actually leaves her body. If “Substance” signifies Lucy’s materiality, or her body, her “Spirit” is the metaphysical embodiment of her plural potentialities for identity. At key moments in the text, she recognizes the insufficiency of her body to stand for her identity, a paradox since her face, coded by physiognomy, is part of her body. This extreme separation of mind and body also occurs when she temporarily does not recognize her image in a large mirror at a concert hall, where she
and the Bretton family attend a recital. In this scene, it is Lucy’s atypical style of dress, a pink dress given to her by Mrs. Bretton, which causes her to momentarily dissociate herself from her image.

Although, at first, she wears the bright pink dress as if it were an actor’s costume, it becomes the catalyst for expanding her inner potential. At first, like Jane Eyre, she is averse to dressing in clothing that does not reflect her personal taste. She states: “I would almost as soon clothe myself in the costume of a Chinese lady of rank” (283). Its bright pink hue causes her discomfort. She says, “no human force should avail to put me into it. A pink dress! I knew it not. It knew not me. I had not proved it.” In the context of gender, the pink dress signifies Lucy’s unease with performing a conventional version of femininity. Like Jane, she is accustomed to wearing drab grays. Just as Jane’s gray dress represents a middle ground between masculinity and femininity, so does Lucy’s habitual choice of unobtrusive garments. However, her inward potential to playact motivates her to relent. “Prove” the dress, she soon would; she is whisked away and dressed with comic passivity: “Without any force at all, I found myself led and influenced by another’s will, unconsulted, unpersuaded, quietly over-ruled” (283). Her passivity in Mrs. Bretton’s capable hands speaks of her willingness to “try on” a new role. It is an opportunity for her to “test out” the dress. Unlike Jane Eyre, Lucy is not as concerned with projecting a consistent image of herself.

Although she agrees to explore a new state of mind in her new costume, Lucy briefly does not recognize herself and her companions in the mirror, momentarily becoming alienated from her image:
I just now see that group, as it flashed upon me for one moment. A handsome middle-aged lady in dark velvet; a gentleman who might be her son—the best face, the finest figure, I thought, I had ever seen; a third person in a pink dress and black lace mantle. [. . .] I noted them all—the third person as well as the other two—and for the fraction of the moment, believed them all strangers, thus receiving an impartial impression of their appearance. But the impression was hardly felt and not fixed, before the consciousness that I faced a great mirror, filling a compartment between two pillars, dispelled it: the party was our own party. Thus for the first, and perhaps only time in my life, I enjoyed the ‘giftie’ of seeing myself as others see me. No need to dwell on the result. It brought a jar of discord, a pang of regret; it was not flattering, yet after all, I ought to be thankful: it might have been worse.

(286)

Costuming herself out of character also becomes a source of pleasure for her since it provides a fitting occasion for “objective” self-reading, a real accomplishment for one whom is so confidently able to read the appearances of others. It also serves as a disguise, camouflaging Lucy in a sea of other female concert attendees and facilitating close observation.
This scene becomes compelling when viewed from a Lacanian perspective. The misrecognition signals a brief regression to the moment before entering the world of the symbolic, when one still felt in harmony with what Freud termed as “polymorphous perversion.” Jacques Lacan has famously argued that in the “mirror stage” of one’s infancy, one experiences a dual recognition that fuels one’s entrance into the realm of language, or the Symbolic. First, when a male child is able to identify with his mirror reflection, it marks his realization that he is an entity separate from his mother. This process requires the child to repress what Judith Butler terms as “the pre-individuated incestuous pleasures associated with the [. . .] maternal body” (45). Second, because the subject realizes that his mother is a forbidden object of desire and represses these “incestuous pleasures,” he replaces the loss of these pleasures with language.

Lucy’s brief estrangement from her mirror image also coincides with the convergence of multiple desires. It is not that she has no sense of self, but that she is struck dumb when confronted with the sheer multiplicity of her desires. At the concert, Lucy’s attention is split. While relishing Graham’s company, Lucy is piqued by M. Paul’s jealous attention to her. In addition, her almost voyeuristic observation of

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19 I use the pronoun “he” in this context because Lacan’s theory centers on the male child. The female child enters into the mother/child relationship differently.

20 Lacan’s theory becomes more problematic when a female subject undergoes this process. The Symbolic order of language and signification, according to Lacan, depends upon sexual difference and the ownership of the Phallus. Because female subjects cannot “have” the phallus, they are condemned to “be” it, condemning them to “masquerade.” In other words, they attempt to mask this fact by identifying through men in what Judith Butler terms “a heterosexual comedy” (47). In Gender Trouble, Butler disputes Lacan’s theory that language is founded on the Phallus as well as his implication that this process is natural and universal. See Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990); and Lacan, Ecrits, trans. Bruce Fink et al (New York: Norton, 2002).
Ginevra, including close description of her charms, has homoerotic undertones. However, her presence as narrator complicates a Lacanian reading of this incident since she is literally never at a loss for words when telling her story. Tanner claims that Lucy’s desire to speak on her own terms becomes a fundamental act of self-assertion. He writes, “To be wordless is to be powerless for Lucy” (42). In light of this seeming contradiction, to call Lucy’s momentary lack of self-recognition a regression would be to seriously misunderstand her deliberate attempt to develop hidden potential.

Perhaps a more helpful means of discovering this event’s relationship to identity would be to view it through a feminist lens. If, as Butler has argued, gender comes down to the performance of socially constructed expectations, then Lucy’s lack of self-recognition may reveal a telling emptiness underneath Lucy’s pink dress, which suggests the unstable nature of gender. It is significant that Lucy wears a bright pink gown. Bright colors became dramatic markers of femininity during the nineteenth century, in stark contrast to men’s drab, nearly all-black garb.21 While Lucy’s pink dress connotes femininity, they playfully reverse genders when Graham wins the prize of a “lady’s headdress” and Lucy wins a “cigar-case” at the concert (300). Lucy refuses to exchange prizes with Graham, preferring to keep it as a souvenir. With these apparently mismatched emblems, Brontë highlights the instability of gender.

The pink dress not only marks a deep fissure that separates Lucy’s disembodied narration from her visible self, but it also opens up new possibilities for being, inspired by M. Paul’s wild misconstructions. Her costume aligns her, however distantly, with the coquette par excellence, Ginevra. It incites M. Paul to lecture and hiss at her, “petite

21 See Harvey 195.
chante, doucerette, coquette!” (404), 22 M. Paul’s humorous allegations of vanity subject her to the same criticisms that she gives Ginevra. Lucy interprets Ginevra’s “part” on her own terms, tapping into her latent flirtatiousness. When M. Paul subjects Lucy to his extreme judgments, she delights in his angry disapprobation. M. Paul is not the only person who misconstrues Lucy’s character from her appearance, and these mistaken or incomplete readings of her character become the source of pleasure and anxiety for Lucy:

There is a perverse mood of the mind which is rather soothed than irritated by misconstruction; and in quarters where we can never be rightly known, we take pleasure, I think, in being consummately ignored. What honest man on being casually taken for a housebreaker, does not feel rather tickled than vexed at the mistake?” (164).

Lucy enjoys being misconstrued, but misconstruction also precipitates crisis for her. While allowing her to observe without detection, it renders her unknowable to Graham, the man she originally desires. However, M. Paul’s exaggerations represent liberating possibilities for Lucy, who is more accustomed to being viewed as “furniture” by men such as Graham. After the concert, she says, “I took off my pink dress and lace mantle with happier feelings than I had experienced in putting them on” (304).

Although Lucy continues to dress in gray most of the time, pink works its way into her wardrobe. Later in the novel, when Lucy goes out to the countryside with M. Paul and her pupils, she wears a pink dress once more; this time it is plain, cotton print. M. Paul notices it immediately, but instead of angrily criticizing her vanity, it becomes

22 “You alluring little coquette!”
the occasion for a comical flirtation. M. Paul compares her to Parisian ladies, saying “Mademoiselle Lucie est coquette comme dix Parisiennes” (471). This time he compliments the dress and tells her that he appreciates her effort to make herself pretty for his fete. When Lucy counters that her dress is not pretty, but only neat, he replies that he likes neatness (471). This comment reveals that the eroticism of plainness in Jane Eyre is also at work in Villette. M. Paul prefers Lucy to her rivals Madame Beck and Zélie St. Pierre, whose smart bourgeois costume and Parisian fashions do not suit his taste. Lucy also remarks that Ginevra looks far more beautiful in the plain costume she wore when Lucy first met her than in her “borrowed plumes,” further illustrating how Brontë also values plainness in this novel. In Villette, the austerity of a plain style is tempered somewhat by the introduction of pink, which represents Lucy’s openness to experimentation. By the latter part of the novel, when Lucy wears pink once again, she has already extended the boundaries of her personal style to reflect the foreign influence of her environment.

Despite her experimentation with the pink dress, it is important to note that Lucy wants to project an anonymous appearance. It is significant that she and her rival for M. Paul, Madame Beck, opt for similar pearl gray gowns during Beck’s fete when other teachers dress like their pupils in more youthful, blue-sashed white dresses. This allegiance to gray speaks to their common desire to observe others while being unobserved, strengthening the implication that they are doubles. In Madwoman in the Attic, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar make the case that Madame Beck and the other

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23 “Miss Lucy is as coquettish as ten Parisian women!”
female characters in the novel represent warring parts of Lucy’s psyche. Lucy and Madame Beck’s common desire to see without being seen corresponds to Richard Sennett’s argument about cosmopolitan Victorians’ anxieties about appearance:

Cosmopolitans, more drab in appearance, tended to use clothes more than their provincial opposites as psychological symbols. The contradiction of their lives in public was that they wanted to shield themselves from individual attention, and the machines [that mass produced cloth and clothing] provided them the means to do so, yet they scrutinized the appearances of others so shielded for revealing clues about states of personal feeling. How does a black broadcloth suit come to seem a “social hieroglyphic,” to use Marx’s phrase? The answer lies in seeing the new ideas of immanent personality mesh with the mass production of appearances in public. (164)

City dwellers, Lucy and Madame Beck, wear gray dresses, the female approximation to the male “black broadcloth suit,” and their garments also serve as “social hieroglyphics” in the text that turn their wearers into ciphers. When Lucy arrives in London, she is struck by the abilities of chambermaids and waiters to proportion “the

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24 They write, “Both Polly and Lucy, both Ginevra and Madame Beck, Lucy is the nun who is immobilized by this internal conflict. [. . .] In the conflict within the house of Lucy’s self, her antagonistic representatives testify to the fragmentation within that will eventually lead to her complete mental breakdown.” See Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Imagination (New Haven: Yale UP, 1984) 412.
accommodation to the guest. How could inn-servants and ship-stewardesses everywhere
tell at a glance that I, for instance, was an individual of no social significance and little
burdened by cash?” (*Villette* 120). Similarly, when urbane Ginevra compares herself to
Lucy in front of the mirror, at a glance she judges Lucy to be lacking in all of her own
perceived advantages. In the city of Villette, Lucy becomes quickly educated in the
urban habit of reading social and psychological meaning in clothing, a skill that she
herself hones along with her aptitude for reading faces.

Perhaps the most provocative dress-related scene in *Villette* is the one where Lucy
plays the role of fop in a play staged for Madame Beck’s fete. This scene marks a pivotal
point where Lucy’s potential is put to the test, the moment when she proves M. Paul’s
prediction about her face. This event illustrates one of several points in the text when
Lucy self-consciously ventures outside herself, and in so doing, extends the boundary of
what she considers to be in her “nature.” Her ease and enjoyment in performing this
role becomes a converging point for multiple desires—those of the other key “players”:
Ginevra, the audience member Graham, and Lucy. While Lucy plays the male admirer to
Ginevra’s coquette, her performance is fueled by a triangular interchange of significant
glances among Lucy, Ginevra, and Graham.

What personalizes Lucy’s performance as a fop is her self-designed stage
costume, her contribution to the part. During her private “rehearsal” in the garret, Lucy
does not take her role seriously: she repeats her lines “merely to kill time” (205). Only
when she dresses for her part on her own terms, and when she finds her “natural tone” of

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25 Surridge states that in *Villette*, Brontë expands her heroine’s connection to
acting and uses “theatricality to suggest latent traits in female character” (4).
voice (209), she can play her character with real gusto. Lucy’s costume—gendered partially male, partially female—becomes a key factor in helping her find her “natural” voice and allows her to play the part with authenticity—i.e., with faith in her inner potential.

One sign of her commitment to play the part on her own terms is her resistance to being dressed as a man by Zélie St. Pierre. She protests, “To be dressed like a man did not please, and would not suit me. I had consented to take a man’s name and part; as to his dress—halte la! No. I would keep my own dress [. . .]” (208). Although she accedes to temporarily take on the identity of a man by taking a part and a name, she stops short of completely cross-dressing. She can accept the fantasy component of acting until a total change of clothing imposes itself on her identity. She not only responds to the cultural taboo against cross-dressing, but reveals the fragility of her identity. Lucy’s coordinated self-image breaks down in the face of a drastic, cross-gender costume change.

However compromised, her self-designed costume also illustrates a decision to venture forth into a new territory of identity on her own terms, leading to discoveries that thrill and frighten her beyond the boundaries of accustomed experience. Her adapted male costume conveys the authentic terms with which she enters her role as a man:

Once alone, I grew calm, and collectedly went to work.

Retaining my women’s garb without the slightest retrenchment, I merely assumed in addition, a little vest, a collar, and cravat, and a paletot of small dimensions; the whole being the costume of a brother of one of the pupils.
Having loosened my hair out of its braids, made up the long back hair close, and brushed the front hair to one side, I took my hat and gloves in my hand and came out. (209)

For Lucy to play the role authentically, she must interpret the gender of her character *in addition* rather than as a *replacement*. She wears the paletot,\(^{26}\) vest, collar and cravat on top of her woman’s gown, and pins up her long hair. While enough to evoke the opposite gender, Lucy’s transvestitism stops at the waist and the layers of clothing closest to her skin. She fears that she will not be able to identify herself as a woman when donning trousers. Complete transvestitism, though it serves the illusion of theatrical performance, represents a disruption of her current “illusion of identity” more threatening than the pink dress.

Critics have recognized the liberating influence of Lucy’s onstage role, especially as it is illustrated through her costume. Lisa Surridge writes, “The vaudeville in *Villette* […] lifts social constraints, subverts gender identity, and disrupts conventional romance plotting. Lucy’s transvestite costume functions as a key symbol of this sexual and social ‘play’” (6).\(^{27}\) Butler argues that transvestitism exemplifies the performative nature of gender identity since, even in its bodily enactment (through gesture, voice, and expression), it exposes the disjunction between the body and the interior that it purports to represent. Cross-dressing takes the body’s mimicry of gender, a role with no original “blueprint,” a step further, but unlike the body’s enactment of gender, its removable

\(^{26}\) A *paletot* is a small jacket.

\(^{27}\) Surridge explains Lucy’s aversion to wearing men’s breeches as modesty since pants would expose her legs, which were highly fetishized during this period (6).
nature better reveals what Butler terms as the “political and discursive origin of gender identity,” which is embedded in the body’s natural-seeming gestures (136). While Lucy’s performance temporarily subverts gender identity, the partially “male” part of her costume underscores the “female” layers closest to her body. The “dun-coloured” dress that forms the base for the male costume becomes an extension of her body. Lucy’s gray dress is like an undergarment because it preserves her modesty, hiding the contours of her body from the audience. As a sort of undergarment, the dress almost melds with her body, and, “naturalized” as such, obscures the social component of gender, becoming an emblem of her integrated identity.

When she revises the role through a new costume design, she re-writes the role in the midst of her performance: “Retaining the letter, I recklessly altered the spirit of the role. Without heart, without interest, I could not play it at all” (210). Lucy’s self-styled costume coincides with her subsequent creative freedom in the fop role. Her androgynous dress enables her to sublimate her multiple, latent desires. However, whatever Lucy discovers about her potential for acting becomes information that she quite willingly decides never again to use, at least onstage. This reflexive decision reveals that while she does not mind temporarily venturing beyond the boundaries of personal experience, she is unwilling to identify herself as a performer because she enjoys the role of spectator too much. Although her quick resolve never again to act can be read clearly as repression, it also marks Lucy’s contentment with a role she prefers to actor.

I took a firm resolution never to be drawn into a similar affair. A keen relish for dramatic expression had revealed itself as a part of my nature; to cherish and exercise this
new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight,
but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life; the strength
and longing must be put by; and I put them by, and
fastened them in with the lock of resolution which neither
Time nor Temptation has since picked. (211)

Lucy’s decision does not stem from repression, at least not in the Freudian sense, for it involves conscious choice. When she calls herself a mere looker-on of life, she implicitly acknowledges that her fantasy of fulfillment is an impossible risk. Lucy’s decision to never act again is too deliberate to signal the fear that precedes repression. Having tried acting with some success, she recognizes that nurturing this talent would interfere with observation, a propensity that she quite recognizes is larger than her acting talent. Lucy’s rejection of acting resembles Brontë’s early decision to put to rest her ambitions to become an artist. Lucy adds that neither “Time nor Temptation” has picked the lock of her resolution since she has made it, signaling that she has laid her talent to rest with contentment. There is not a “return of the repressed,” at least in the case of performing on stage, after she has vaulted her talent for theatrical acting. Lucy is her own agent when she decides never again to act.

While Lucy shows agency when she dons the fop costume or the pink dress, Brontë toys with placing her in the role of the *grisette*, the Parisian good-natured yet morally suspect girl who wears a simple gray dress, pink hat, and cheap trinkets. Valerie Steele describes this popular nineteenth-century character as “the predecessor of the more mercenary *lorette* of the July Monarchy [sic] and the notoriously extravagant *grande cocotte* of the Second Empire. Unlike her successors, the *grisette* was not a kept woman
or a courtesan, but a working woman. This was a crucial element in the stereotype” (Paris Fashion 71).

First appearing in seventeenth-century France, the term grisette derived from the coarse gray cloth worn by women of the popular classes. Despite changing fashions over time, the term came to identify young working women who exchanged sexual favors with upper-class males for gifts, particularly luxury goods. In Tableau de Paris, Louis-Sebastien Mercier mentions the independence of such women. They left home at eighteen, rented a room in Paris, and lived “according to their whims.” She typically worked in luxury oriented trades, such as dressmaking or millinery. It was believed that these young women surrendered to the temptations of the luxury goods she helped produce and used her sexuality in order to gratify her material desires. Unlike prostitutes, however, grisettes did not “turn tricks” for a living; they kept their day jobs.28

Where Brontë playfully suggests this character through “working woman” Jane’s eroticized gray dress in Jane Eyre, she overtly refers to her in Villette. Chapter 11, “The Portresse’s Cabinet,” introduces Rosine Matou, the attractive young doorwoman for the pensionnat. Lucy spies on Graham as he converses with Rosine in order to discover whether she is the reason for his overly frequent visits to the school. Lucy describes her as “an unprincipled though pretty little French grisette, airy, fickle, dressy, vain, and mercenary.” She wears a “smart dress of ‘jaconas rose,’ trimming a tiny blond cap” (169), and Lucy passes her cabinet five times in order to study her appearance to “find

the secret of their influence” (170). Ostensibly Lucy spies on them because of Rosine’s unscrupulousness.

A small irony about Rosine is that she is both grisette and portress. The job of a portress, or female doorkeeper, is associated with nuns who perform this duty in a convent. Long ago, the school had been a convent, where a young novitiate allegedly had been buried alive for “some sin against her vow” (172). Morally suspect, Rosine serves as the opposite of this legendary nun, but she also shares similarities with her. Rosine is figuratively buried in the girls’ school, self-contained and isolated from the rest of the city. The grisette is also like this nun because of her assumed moral transgressions. Like the figure of the nun, she also haunts the plot, heightening the tension between asceticism and sexual desire in the novel.

In chapter 13, “A Sneeze Out of Season,” Rosine makes a second appearance when Lucy catches an exchange between her and Graham. She finds out that he is more concerned about the author of the billet doux than Rosine. Wearing a “gay grisette apron,” Rosine acts the part perfectly, astonishing Lucy with her ease in conversing with Graham. He does not return the familiarity--“he seemed quite to understand the Rosine or grisette character”--and offers her no new information. Understanding Rosine’s type, he does offer her what she seems to expect in payment for her cooperation, a gold coin.

Although Rosine is incidental to the plot, the grisette role implicates both Ginevra and Lucy to some degree. As a fun-loving coquette, however, Ginevra is not really a grisette. While these women are poor, hard-working girls who only want a “little love” (Parisian Fashion 72), Ginevra is more mercenary. She is quite willing to accept “donations” and gifts from wealthy friends and admirers without any effort to earn them
through work. As Steele notes, this figure “was not supposed to use clothing to appear to be ‘better’ than she was, nor was she to turn to prostitution. She worked—and then gave her sexual favors to young men of a ‘better’ and ‘more elegant’ class” (75). Ginevra wears “borrowed plumes” from her benefactors in order to appear more fashionable than she can afford, and she is probably still a virgin. When Graham insinuates that Ginevra’s glances are not innocent, Lucy says, “Ginevra, I was certain, was honest enough, with all her giddiness” (302).

Even though Ginevra’s actions imply that she neither works, dresses with poor simplicity, nor has “easy virtue,” Graham ultimately lumps her with Rosine. He says, “no grisette has a more facile faculty of acceptance” (301). When Ginevra seems to be making fun of his mother at the concert, Graham abruptly shifts from over-idealizing her to questioning her “honesty.” He blames his change of heart on her flirtatious glance: “No woman, were she as beautiful as Aphrodite, who could give or receive such a glance, shall ever be sought in marriage by me: I would rather wed a paysanne in a short petticoat and high cap—and be sure that she was honest” (302). Graham reveals his essential conservatism about women, shown when he criticizes Vashti as a woman, not as an artist. Also, his preference for a paysanne in a “short petticoat and high cap” shows that he is a faulty judge of character because he assumes that simple dress necessarily clothes a simple, naïve soul. Graham’s fixation on Ginevra’s glance is typical of its Victorian context. Women in public were particularly susceptible to judgment because the appearances of respectable women often blended with those of the less scrupulous. Because it was easy for a “loose” woman to dress respectably, women were often scrutinized for very small signs of sexuality so they had to restrain themselves from
showing any sign that could possibly cast their reputation into doubt. For Graham, Ginevra’s flirtatious glance is enough to tip the scales of respectability against her, and he now perceives lasciviousness in her appearance. She tumbles from angel to grisette in his eyes, though truly she is just a flirt.

Like Ginevra, Lucy is also mistaken for a grisette, but this time, the implication is accidental. In chapter 12, “The Casket,” a small casket drops at Lucy’s feet containing a love letter addressed, “Pour the robe grise,” or for the one in the gray dress. Lucy indeed wears a dress of French gray, but so do many of the teachers and students at the pensionnat. She points out that “Madame Beck herself ordinarily wore a gray dress just now; another teacher, and three of the pensionnaires, had had gray dresses purchased of the same shade and fabric as mine: it was a sort of every day wear which happened at the time to be in vogue” (179). When Lucy mistakenly receives the love letter, intended for another in a gray dress and straw hat (Ginevra), a new role, like the love letter, falls at her feet: the grisette role. Rosine, the grisette par excellence, also wears a gray dress; while Lucy converses with Graham about the letter, she can discern her between two trees, spying on them: “her dress was gray, like mine” (180). Their vestiary resemblance not only has the effect of momentarily likening Rosine and Lucy, but like a refracting mirror, triples and quadruples the gray-clad images of Rosine, Madame Beck, and Ginevra. In a comic spirit, Brontë colors them all grisettes of some shade, which lends them all the erotic aura of this Parisian stereotype. Lucy’s inclusion by “costume” is especially provocative considering her enjoyment of being misread.

29 See Sennett 166.
Lucy is misconstrued as a *grisette* not only by her costume, but by her confident gaze and indebtedness to M. Paul at the end of the novel. Lucy’s gray dress affords her with another possibility for identity even though she only partially meets the conditions of being this figure: she is a “working girl” who is in love with her social superior, Graham. She enjoys being mistaken for a *grisette*, and once the mistake is clarified, she delights in becoming part of a secret plot. At the end of the chapter, she lies awake in bed, smiling, contemplating Madame Beck’s suspicions of her involvement in a plan she has yet to discover. The closest Lucy comes to being *grisette*-like in her behavior is her comfort with gazing. Graham associates female boldness and comfort in speech with the type. When Lucy critiques the Cleopatra painting at the museum, she is at ease, despite M. Paul’s anxiety about its moral influence. Self-possession is defined as male, and for a woman to have it in the presence of men would make them *grisette*-like in a patriarchal context.

Lucy’s indebtedness to M. Paul’s last gift to her also has the potential to affect the balance of power between them. M. Paul surprises Lucy by showing her a fully furnished house and adjoining schoolroom, intended as a place for her to live and start her own girls’ school, an offer that precedes their engagement. Although she is to pay rent herself, retaining her independence, M. Paul’s gift represents a problem as well as a promise for their future. Would their future marriage be on equal footing? Would M. Paul’s patriarchal leanings affect their relationship? Brontë leaves these questions unanswered when M. Paul drowns at sea before they could marry.

Brontë’s obvious concern with the plight of professional women lends her use of the *grisette* more significance than a clever nod to a French stereotype. It is easy to see
why the *grisette* character would have fascinated her. She represented the paradox of a
self-supporting yet emotionally dependent woman who was financially indebted to her
lovers. Writers such as Balzac, Flaubert, George Sand, and Victor Hugo all wrote about
this figure, which represented both stock character and commentary on working women
in the city. Brontë, who read numerous French novels and had what Elaine Showalter
calls a “lifelong fascination with the nuances of her second language,” oscillated between
intensely appreciating and rejecting the uninhibited passion she associated with the
French (227-28). Although it is impossible to determine exactly which novels she read,
her letters reveal that she read Balzac, Sand, Bernadin Saint-Pierre, Jean-Jacques
Rousseau, and Eugene Sue—all writers who include this figure in their fiction.

While most of her female characters are not *grisettes*, at least not in the French
sense, this type not only connotes the moral perils of being a single, working woman, but
also suggests the repressed eroticism of the girls’ school. Most compellingly, Lucy’s
temporary occupation of the *grisette* role also underscores the malleability of her
character, shown in her repeated willingness to venture outside herself. As one of
Brontë’s desiring women, even plain Lucy can evoke all that is “clever wicked
sophistical and immoral” about France.

Lucy’s pink dress, fop, and *grisette* costumes have a liberating effect on Lucy’s
identity. The roles these costumes signify are decidedly unlikely for her, which makes
them all the more thrilling for her to playact. By giving her an occasion to step outside
her “natural habits,” these costumes radically precipitate the contradictory inner changes
only vaguely predicted in M. Paul’s phrenological reading. Brontë invests Lucy’s
clothing with the power of transforming the internal; however, the possibilities for self-
development are not without perimeters. Counterbalancing Lucy’s moments of freedom from the limitations of personality, clothing also represents the excessive consumption of material goods, which Lucy fears has the capacity to replace a meaningful interior life. Dress functions differently for the fashionable and beautiful Ginevra Fanshawe than it does for the plain Lucy Snowe. It develops her vanity at the expense of all other abilities, limiting, rather than opening up, inner possibilities.

In Howard’s End, E.M. Forster writes that his protagonist, Margaret Schlegel, is “passing from words to things” (187). The replacement of language with “things,” or fetishized objects, also occurs in Villette, though the effect is not the personal growth Margaret experiences. As already noted, Ginevra Fanshawe, fashionably dressed and adoring of pretty gifts, is unconcerned with articulating ideas. She is rendered in the tradition of an eighteenth-century coquette. Like Alexander Pope’s Belinda in Rape of the Lock, she wears fashionable clothes and surrounds herself with pretty gifts from admirers, “[lies] fuming in the vapours” when her ego is bruised (353), attires herself in fashionable dress, bejewels herself with pretty gifts from male admirers, and enjoys flirting. Like a character in a Restoration comedy, she falls in love with a fop, Alfred de Hamal, whom Lucy describes as “pretty and smooth, and as trim as a doll” (216).

In the eighteenth century, the figure of the commodity-consuming coquette was lampooned and denigrated by social critics such as Joseph Addison and Richard Steele. In Market a la Mode: Fashion, Commodity, and Gender in The Tatler and The Spectator (1997), Erin Mackie argues that the figures of Lady Credit and the promiscuous female consumer embodied eighteenth-century anxieties about gender and capitalism in the popular press. In much of this writing, coquettes were characterized as empty creatures
whose bodily interiors were literally cluttered with objects. A January 22, 1712 letter from *Spectator* is on the “Dissection of a Coquet’s Heart,” where Addison purportedly finds “innumerable sorts of Trifles” (qtd. in Mackie, *Commerce* 534). Among these trifles is an item of clothing “a Flame-coloured Hood.” Belinda, Pope’s protagonist in *Rape of the Lock*, has a “moving Toyshop” for a heart, which is managed by busy sylphs:

> With varying Vanities, from ev’ry Part,
> They shift the moving Toyshop of their Heart;
> Where Wigs with Wigs, with Sword-knots Sword-knots strive,
> Beaus banish Beaus, and Coaches Coaches drive. (1.99-102)

Like Belinda, Ginevra’s chief concerns are dresses and beaus. Lucy calls her “a vain coquette,” noting that Ginevra focused most of her mental energy on procuring dresses from her wealthy connections. She “was obliged to be well dressed, and she had not money to buy variety of dresses. All her thoughts turned on this difficulty; her whole soul was occupied with expedients for effecting its solution” (Villette 151). Tanner writes that while Ginevra exemplifies materiality and substance in the novel, she lacks the capacity for language, and while Lucy lacks a material presence in the novel, she constructs herself through her narrative (17-24). Lucy’s frustration with Ginevra’s inability to describe earns her the same disdain that Jane feels for Mrs. Fairfax’s poor descriptive abilities: “She could not describe. She had neither words, nor the power of

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30 Ginevra’s excessive love of fashion also reveals Brontë’s recurrent bias against the French. Although Ginevra is British, Brontë juxtaposes her with Zélie St. Pierre, who exemplifies the stereotype of a dishonest, fashion-hungry Parisian woman. Ginevra is also dishonest and preoccupied with clothes, but her Englishness makes her more mischievous than devious. Here Brontë reveals obvious nationalism, also evident in her anti-Catholic sentiments and unflattering portraits of continental students.
putting them together so as to make graphic phrases” (Villette 150). When she cannot find a word for what she means, she substitutes the French word, chose, meaning thing.\textsuperscript{31} In this sense, a character like Ginevra threatens narrative itself. Together with her carelessness for language and disproportionate concern with commodities, Ginevra is Brontë’s updated, Victorian coquette.

The idea that things, or materiality, can replace words, or interiority, relates to Lacan’s concept of object petit a. The object petit a is an object of desire. According to Malcom Bowie, it “can be anything at all [. . .] that desire touches, and cannot exist where desire is not” (166). Although the objet petit a is unrestricted to literal material objects, it is possible for a subject to transfer his or her desires onto them. The subject desires this object, always outside the body, yet the object can never completely fill the void of the subject’s desire because, by nature, the object petit a resists being “swallowed” by the subject. Clothing is the “object a par excellence” because it accentuates the liminal boundary defining where the body ends and clothing begins. As Warwick and Cavallaro argue, clothing is not only inhabited with meaning, but overtakes and kills the “real” body with its “language.”\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{31} See Villette 115.

\textsuperscript{32} See Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and Body (Oxford: Berg, 1998) 27-29. Cavallaro and Warwick point to Renaissance portraiture as a prime example of how clothing overtakes the body. In the “Ditchley” portrait of Queen Elizabeth I (c. 1592), they read Elizabeth’s rich dress in Lacanian terms. The stiff, jeweled fabric of her garment covers her body almost entirely, lending it a fragmented appearance: “the body is not depicted: through the signifiers of the clothing it is caused to vanish, the ‘real’ body murdered by the language of the clothing” (29).
This idea sheds light on Ginevra’s relationship to things. If she covers herself with clothing, she obliterates her bodily presence with commodities. Lucy’s response to the portrait of Cleopatra is analogous to her attitude toward her friend’s love of finery. Lucy identifies Cleopatra with commodities and empty materiality; she is the imaginary counterpart of Ginevra, who is marked by “the weight of her arm and the physicality of her appearance” (Tanner 21). Lucy describes Cleopatra’s extreme material presence, an appearance that Lucy deems fragmented and empty:

I calculated that this lady, put into a scale of magnitude suitable for the reception of a commodity of bulk, would infallibly turn from fourteen to sixteen stone. She was, indeed extremely well fed: very much butcher’s meat—to say nothing of bread, vegetables, and liquids—must she have consumed to attain that breadth and height, that wealth of muscle, that affluence of flesh [. . .] She ought likewise to have worn decent garments; a gown covering her properly, which was not the case: out of an abundance of material—seven-and-twenty yards, I should say, of drapery—she managed to make insufficient raiment [. . .] on referring to the catalogue, I found that this notable production bore the name Cleopatra. (275-76)

While the “catalogue” in question refers to Lucy’s guidebook to the museum’s collection, in the context of Cleopatra’s hedonistic waste, the term takes on a second
meaning—as in a catalogue of things. Cleopatra is a fragmented assemblage of objects—
drapery, food, drink, and waste. Her body is the void that that is ineffectually replaced
with *objets petits a*. Depicted among fragments of consumed commodities, she “is also a
parody of the bourgeois obsession with clothes” (Tanner 22). She is not like a coquette
because she is codified as a prostitute. If Pope’s Belinda is the model of the eighteenth-
century coquette, a coquette can be flirtatious and garner the attentions of many men, yet
her status as an attractive love object depends on her chastity. The Cleopatra painting
depicts a grotesque example of Belinda at her toilette table: she has no table and, instead
of surrounding herself with objects to perfume and groom her, she lies recumbent in the
waste of her consumption. Jill Matus claims that Lucy’s interaction with the painting is
an act of projection where she transfers “her own anxieties about laxity and displac[es]
her own struggle with a sexual identity onto it” (358-59). A similar point can be argued
regarding Lucy’s interaction with Ginevra. Perhaps Lucy’s grumpy, “Diogenes”-like
interactions with Ginevra mask a problematic identification with her, which she seeks to
resolve by defining herself against her.

As doubles, Ginevra and Lucy represent two extremes of female desire—one
rewarded and the other thwarted—both limited by the social roles available to them.
Gilbert and Gubar write, “Charlotte Brontë’s fiction clarifies the relationship between
imagery of enclosure and the use of doubles in women’s literature: as we have seen in her

33 Matus compares the Cleopatra in *Villette* to actual nineteenth-century paintings
and engravings of this figure. Addressing their controversial nature, she contends that
artists sometimes modeled Cleopatra’s face on the phrenological profile of a prostitute:
“the iconography of the prostitute in nineteenth-century representations invoked the
shape of the head and bone structure, clues to a pathological and atavistic sexuality”
(354).
work, both are complementary signs of female victimization” (443). Ginevra is a site of anxiety in the novel. Lucy’s material substance, as represented in flesh and dress, is displaced onto Ginevra, while Lucy appears to be all shadow and no physicality. As a beautiful woman, she wields power over men. Lucy wonders aloud to her, “Who gave you that power? Where is it? Does it lie all in your beauty—your pink and white complexion and your yellow hair?” Ginevra’s sexual attractiveness awes Lucy, though she fears the consequences of becoming like her. She views her friend’s “borrowed plumes” as suspect because they not only bind her to rich friends, but also trap her into a morally risky indebtedness to men.34

Ginevra’s fetishistic attraction to clothing, coupled with her desire for de Hamal, who is also defined by his love of clothes, reveals Brontë’s ambivalence towards materiality in the novel. Ginevra’s status as an eighteenth-century-style coquette is as threatening as it is comical. Far from being vilified for her materialism, she is perhaps the happiest, most successful character in the novel. Ginevra gets exactly what she wants: she is desired by many men, runs away with de Hamal, and wins fortune and a title through their marriage. Rather than being a cautionary tale, Brontë’s depiction of Ginevra responds to the materialism of Victorian culture—the fascination and fetishism behind the love for material things. Brontë’s mixed reaction to the Crystal Palace in 1851 captures this contradiction. Clothing also heightens the anxiety about materiality overtaking spirituality in the novel. Madame Walravens, Lucy’s shriveled and bejeweled nemesis, might as well be made of costume, and her sinister presence speaks to her lack

34 Throughout her writing, Brontë addresses the problem of women’s indebtedness to men. In Jane Eyre and Captain Henry Hastings, both heroines are careful to refuse extravagant gifts from men, in fear of morally indebting themselves to them.
of religious spirituality. She is described as an aggregation of her clothing, colored with the bright jewel tones. Her ears and hands are covered with jewelry that sparkles in fierce contrast with her shriveled skin and “skeleton hands” (481). This example reveals Brontë’s preoccupation with the material, particularly in the manner that it evokes character independently of its wearers. The sometimes ghostly presence of clothing paradoxically obliterates their wearers while also emblematizing who they are.

Lucy’s ambivalence towards Ginevra and Cleopatra’s commodified appearances bears some resemblance to Brontë’s impression of the Great Exhibition. On 31 May 1851, Brontë wrote the following to her father:

Yesterday we went to the Crystal Palace—the exterior has a strange and elegant but somewhat unsubstantial effect—The interior is like a mighty Vanity Fair—the brightest colours blaze on all sides—and ware of all kinds—from diamonds to spinning jennies and Printing Presses are there to be seen—It was very fine—gorgeous—animated—bewildering—but I liked Thackeray’s lecture better. (625)

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35 In Shirley, Brontë playfully fetishizes objects belonging to Shirley. Louis Moore wanders throughout the empty house at Fieldhead seeking her but instead finds her belongings:

He makes discoveries. A bag, a small satin bag, hangs on the chair-back. The desk is open, the keys are in the lock; a pretty seal, a silver pen, a crimson berry or two of ripe fruit on a green leaf, a small, clean, delicate glove—these trifles at once decorate and disarrange the stand they strewn. Order forbids details in a picture: she puts them tidily away; but details give charm. (520)
Brontë visited the Crystal Palace five times over a one-month period, underscoring the ambiguity of her statement, a response also echoed in her treatment of clothing *Villette*. Ginevra asks Lucy to stand in front of the mirror and compare herself to her, saying: “I would not be you for a kingdom [. . .] what would you give to be me?” Lucy responds, “Not a bad sixpence—strange as it may sound [. . .] You are but a poor creature” (215). This scene resonates with Brontë’s impression of the Crystal Palace, where the awe-inspiring array of material goods comes secondary, at least on the surface, to the life of the mind embodied in Thackeray’s lectures.

Because Brontë also recognizes clothing’s potential to dramatically expand Lucy’s sense of self, the latter judgment offers an incomplete statement on the author’s attitude toward dress. While, on one hand, Brontë appears to stay in line with Hannah More’s view that a preoccupation with fashion potentially crowds out interiority, she is also keenly aware of the power of dress to shape self-perception.\(^{37}\) Although it may seem that this paradoxical attitude can simply be explained as a distrust of fashion, Brontë’s treatment of dress is far from Puritanical. Instead, dress participates in the theatrical world of *Villette*, where the material is both expressive and illusory.

\(^{36}\) In her letters, Brontë implies that the Crystal Palace was not among her favorite sites in London. To Amelia Taylor (7 June 1851), she writes that it exhausted her on her second visit: “[. . .] after some three or four hours’ peregrination—you come out very sufficiently bleached and broken in bits [. . .]” (633). After her fifth time, she writes Margaret Wooler (14 July 1851), “Do not press me much on the subject of the ‘Crystal Palace.’ I went there five times—and certainly saw some interesting things—and the coup d’œil’ is striking and bewildering enough—but I never was able to get up any raptures <about what I saw> ‘on the subject’ and each renewed visit was made under coercion rather than of my own free will” (666).

\(^{37}\) See the discussion of Hannah More on plainness, eroticism, and interiority in chapter 1 of this dissertation.
Brontë represents Lucy’s identity as fluid; although her nature is still signified by her appearance, changes in her mode of dress outwardly express her great internal range. Lucy ventures to develop her personality beyond what her plain face would suggest to others, namely by refusing to be a “bright lady’s shadow.” In this sense, Brontë challenges physiognomy, whose assumptions about character tend to be fixed and deterministic. Phrenology serves as a better typology for visibly rendering Lucy’s identity since it identifies her multiple possibilities, yet has greater room for agency and flexibility. However, because Brontë gently satirizes the potential generality of such a typology and depicts faces as masks, even phrenology does not escape Brontë’s challenge to the idea that character is immanent in the appearance. While the theatricality of clothing accounts for the complexity of Lucy’s psychology better than these pseudo-sciences, it is still does not fully capture her identity. Brontë reveals the instability of dress and the body as emblems of personality. Freud’s theory of the uncanny and Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject shed light on how Brontë destabilizes these signifiers. For Lucy, dress can be a site of the uncanny, when the repressed suddenly springs to life. Or, alternately, it can represent the abject.

One of the ways in which clothing captures Lucy’s contradictory nature is through the uncanny, which Freud contends is the simultaneous, conflicting feelings of familiarity and unfamiliarity when confronted with the repressed. Lucy’s suspended recognition in the mirror has such an effect. According to Paul Wotipka, the uncanny is produced when Lucy places herself in the position of outsider when observing an incident that triggers
repressed feelings. In the moment in front of the opera mirror, Lucy’s mental picture of herself jars with her actual mirror reflection. The catalyst of Lucy’s detachment, the pink dress, plays an integral part in evoking the repressed. Confirmed by M. Paul’s extreme reaction to it, the pink dress represents sexuality that subconsciously thrills and repulses her. At the concert her desire for Graham splits into another layer of desire for M. Paul, the last person to whom she would admit an attraction at that time. The pink dress, then, precipitates the uncanny because she is both unaccustomed to and inspired by it. The fop costume also becomes uncanny for Lucy since it exposes what she wishes to repress. Her decision to invent her own stage costume, while it alleviates her anxiety about looking too “male,” also emphasizes her active repression and sublimation of her homoerotic desire for Ginevra as she plays her lover in the play.

Costume can also represent the abject, which further destabilizes dress as a signifier in Villette. Unlike the experience of the uncanny, which depends on a simultaneous motion of repression and recognition, Julia Kristeva defines abjection as “elaborated through a failure to recognize its kin; nothing is familiar, not even the shadow of a memory” (5). It is whatever one rejects as not a part of oneself, a gesture that shoves out fears with greater force than repression. Examples include what disgusts us or threatens our bodies with harm or death, a reminder that rules or laws are inadequate, or a superego that incorporates the other and castigates the self for having abject qualities. What defines it in any form is that it exposes where the breakdown of

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38 See Wotipka, “Ocularity and Irony: Pictorialism in Villette,” Word and Image 8.2 (1992): 103. Although he persuasively illustrates Brontë’s narrative technique of ironic revision, Wotipka does not clearly explain how this demonstrates the uncanny.
meaning. While it can be a target of horror and disgust, it can also be a territory that promises pleasure and epiphany:

The abject shatters the wall of repression and its judgments.

It takes the ego back to its source on the abominable limits from which, in order to be, the ego has broken away—it assigns it a source in the non-ego, drive, and death.

Abjection is a resurrection that has gone through death (of the ego). It is an alchemy that transforms death drive into a start of life, of new signifiance [sic]. (15)

How does clothing relate to the idea of abjection? As Cavallaro and Warwick argue, although dress appears to draw together disparate elements of personality and represents a whole and unified self, the unity it represents is illusory because it is a “seductively co-ordinated self-image” that temporarily eclipses the body’s fragmentation (41). In addition to framing the body in the fantasy of the unified self-image, dress also exposes the very falseness of this unity. Dress resembles Kristeva’s abject because it forces the subject to choose his or her self-image, necessarily rejecting the blank slate of the body and the potentially chaotic possibilities therein. They write, “Dress [. . .] operates as an incarnation of the abject, in its ability to remind the subject of the precariousness of its boundaries. Yet, at the same time, it may open up prospects of constant self-reinvention by traversing and pluralizing the symbolic’s rigid [. . .] structures with fluid drives reminiscent of pre-symbolic carnality” (43). Just as clothing

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would appear to shut off possibilities, it also opens them up because it is an abstract system of codes that could easily be re-arranged to express another equally valid set of potentialities. Dress teases out various combinations of personas for Lucy. Exposing the abject for her, it enables her to discover new roles for herself.

The abject also occurs in Villette in instances where clothing lacks wearers. Paulina’s lack of materiality while dressing is almost ghostly, heightening the abject quality of her clothing:

[. . .] before the glass, appeared something dressing itself—an airy, fairy thing—small, slight, white—a winter spirit [. . .] With distrustful eye I noted the details of this new vision. It wore white, sprinkled slightly with drops of scarlet; its girdle was red; it had something in its hair leafy, yet shining—a little wreath with an evergreen gloss [. . .]

‘Miss de Bassomspierre,’ I pronounced. (357-58)

The image of clothing without a human wearer, whether it be ghosts or fairies, reveals an anxiety in the novel about the material taking over the spiritual. This fear is analogous to what Kristeva articulates as the abjection of one’s corpse while one is living. She writes, “My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border [of the bodily fluids and other wastes that signify death]. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit—cadere, cadaver” (Kristeva 3). Paulina’s red and white clothing takes a primary role in her appearance while her body is secondary. Her costume subsumes her body and seems to float suspended in the air. As part of the material world, dress remains as the
body dies and seems to linger in spirit. It signifies the abject because it underscores the mortality of the body. Paulina’s ghostly image also embodies the Victorian feminine ideal of the angel in the house, a role she clearly occupies and Lucy rejects.

In *Villette*, the abject aspect of clothing becomes dramatized through Lucy’s repeated sightings of nuns, so clearly marked by the distinctive black and white habit. The nun figure haunts her almost as frequently as the desires that bear her away from herself. As Lucy’s “double,” the ghostly nun symbolizes her sexual repression. The legend of the nun, a young novitiate who becomes buried alive for “some sin against her vow” (172), runs parallel to Lucy’s figurative living burial. Faced with her erotic attractions to Graham, M. Paul, and arguably, Ginevra Fanshawe, Lucy has trouble expressing her desires to them. The figure of the nun’s habit embodies her rejection of two conflicting self-perceptions: herself as “nun” and potential transgressor. The disembodiment of the habit heightens its abject status. Finally revealed as a hoax when it is propped up empty in her bed, mere clothing with no wearer, it signifies death through the absence of the body, and for Kristeva, the corpse is the most horrifying embodiment of abjection. She calls it “something rejected from which one does not part” (3-4).

Brontë’s figure of the empty garment aligns her with Dickens, who writes a comical sketch centered on disembodied clothing in “Meditations in Monmouth Street,” a chapter in *Sketches by Boz* (1836). Dickens describes the clothing stalls along Monmouth Street as “the burial place of the fashions” (77). He elaborates on the metaphor of the graveyard throughout the sketch:

> We love to walk among these extensive groves of the illustrious dead, and to indulge in the speculations to which
they give rise; now fitting a deceased coat, then a dead pair of trousers, and anon the mortal remains of a gaudy waistcoat, upon some being of our own conjuring up, and endeavoring, from the shape and fashion of the garment itself, to bring its former owner before its mind’s eye. (77-78)

Dickens ruminates on the garments’ absent wearers, who are present only in the creases and folds of their castoff clothing. His disembodied clothing evokes both the abject and the uncanny. A “graveyard” of unwanted clothes, it epitomizes the abject—rejected and “dead.” Strolling through this graveyard, one can discern three kinds of deaths. The first is the quick death of fashion, the second is the essential deadness of the material object, and the third is the implied mortality of their human wearers. Together the second and third types of death cause the experience of the uncanny as Freud describes it—the simultaneous feelings of being “at home” “not at home” expressed in the German term, unheimlich.\textsuperscript{40} It is the realization that something repressed has been brought to light, the sense that something is both familiar and unfamiliar, particularly when it is inanimate and outside the self. Here the uncanny and the abject merge because clothing without a wearer brings the repressed thought of one’s death, or the image of the corpse, to the surface. The clothing is inanimate, but because it bears the signs of animation and can “outlive” multiple wearers, it has an uncanny effect. From the

perspective of a visitor at a museum of costume, another repository for bodiless clothing, Elizabeth Wilson writes:

There is something uncanny about a museum of costume. [. . .] We experience a sense of the uncanny when we gaze at garments that had an intimate relationship with human beings long since gone to their graves [. . .] Clothes without a wearer, whether on a second-hand stall, in a glass case, or merely a lover’s garments strewn on the floor, can affect us unpleasantly, as if a snake had shed its skin. (Adorned in Dreams 1-2)

An eerie reminder of mortality, clothing’s “life” as a commodity becomes a concern that threads its way through Dickens’s novels. It becomes most prominent in the cynical comedy in his last completed novel, Our Mutual Friend (1865), where money and its conspicuous consumption are darkly satirized. Though their works have very different themes, Dickens’s concern with materiality and death roughly parallels Brontë’s in Villette. While Dickens’ evocation of the uncanny among the garments in “Monmouth Street” satirizes their short but fetishistic life as fashionable things, Brontë’s uncanny in Villette is more anxious about the “life” of inanimate clothing. Furthermore, Villette addresses the frightening possibility of one’s spirit being taken over by materiality, which seems to be the case with Ginevra Fanshawe. Whether clothing has wearers or not in Villette, it exposes the tenuousness of dress and the body as emblems of identity. Recalling Simone de Beauvoir’s statement that “the body is a situation,” Cavallaro and
Warwick characterize the image of the clothed body as a fantasy that cloaks and reveals the body’s fragmentation:\(^{41}\)

The image of the body is a threshold [which is] is unfixed, a marginal condition, and as such the site of the ongoing processes of subjectivity [. . .] far from clothing’s providing a boundary for the body, thereby ensuring the presentation of a completed and contained self, it in fact works in the reverse, serving to emphasize, or indeed to enact, violence and dismemberment on that body, and to threaten the precarious sense of self by its insistent marginality. (25)

This perverse desire to re-fragment the imaginary anatomy, to enact an “insistent marginality” through the wearing of clothes, resists the same unity of self that dressing in one’s own unique style would seem to accomplish. While Jane Eyre wears her gray dress to manage her internal ambivalences, to consolidate her disparate selves and to project a unified image of inner strength and authenticity, Lucy’s manner of dress, as a theatrical costume, exposes her disunity, emphasizing that her identity is not essential and fixed. Expressing the breadth of her potential, it provides a material means of accessing the disparate selves suggested by telltale signs on the face.

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\(^{41}\) Butler also views the self as an artificial consolidation. She views the binary categories of internal and external as an artificial means of consolidating a coherent self. See *Gender Trouble* 135.
Dress layers the physiognomy with a new surface that fashions and frames the body, which in the nineteenth century, was assumed to be an expression of identity. As mentioned earlier, clothing was thought to be an extension of the physiognomy, and like physiognomy, its details were assumed to contain and reveal a stable, unified identity. Brontë’s use of dress in *Villette* is twofold. On one hand, it illustrates the flexible nature of identity which phrenology can only suggest. It also proves the ineffectuality of physiognomy as a system of signification since it fails to account for the fluidity of identity. Dress not only expresses Lucy’s perception of her identity, but it becomes a catalyst for experimentation, extending the boundaries of the self in the same manner that an actor uses costume to access another self. On the other hand, dress also threatens the self when it becomes a fetishized substitute for language, as is the case with Ginevra. If as Forster says in *Howard’s End*, ideas are capable of turning into things, then Ginevra has made the transition into materiality complete. In both cases, dress in *Villette* is more effective than the body as a means of visually expressing subjectivity.
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