

# “Vive l’Angleterre”

*Exploring the Relationship between Britain and Europe  
in Charlotte Brontë’s Novels*

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# Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the complex relationship Charlotte Brontë's novels have with Europe. It will examine how religion, sexuality and morality, and language are used in order to create a British identity that is contrasted to a European one, but also how these binaries are broken down via the romantic unions of British and European characters and the appeal of certain aspects of Catholicism, European sexuality and the French language. The role of Europe has often been overlooked in favour of the British Empire in Brontë scholarship, and this thesis posits that Europe is integral to the establishment of a British national identity in Brontë's works. Furthermore, those who have studied the author's presentation of Europe have often limited themselves to the two novels that are set on the Continent, but I argue that much is lost in disregarding the remainder of Brontë's works. The findings of this thesis suggest that despite the rampant Europhobia found in Brontë's works, these novels stand out amongst their contemporaries in envisaging romantic unions between Britons and Europeans and that the British characters need something, or someone, European in order to be fulfilled. However, though the novels ask the question whether there is any room for Europe in the British national identity Brontë constructs, Britain is ultimately victorious in the battle between the two.



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# Abbreviations

*Jane Eyre* = *JE*

*Shirley* = *S*

*The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 2 vols. = *L I*, *L II*

*The Professor* = *TP*

*Villette* = *V*

# Introduction

In *Villette* (1853), the British protagonist Lucy Snowe, in a response to her French co-worker M. Paul's speech about the numerous faults of the British, exclaims: "Vive l'Angleterre" (*V* 379). There is something paradoxical about expressing one's love for Britain<sup>1</sup> in French, and this outcry aptly exemplifies the kind of duality Continental Europe inhabits and its importance in the establishment of a British identity in Charlotte Brontë's (1816-1855) novels. This paradox is central throughout Brontë's authorship, and when reading the novels it becomes apparent that despite this kind of fervent display of British nationalism, something European nevertheless sneaks into the equation. The issue of national identity is one that is explored in depth in her novels: what makes someone British, what makes someone European, and can, or should, the two identities coexist within the same person? These are some of the questions that Brontë's novels ask again and again, and that will be examined in this thesis. As Brontë is an established part of the British literary canon, there is a vast amount of criticism studying both her and her works. However, the way in which she engages with Europe has not been studied to a great extent, and the novels' engagement with the British Empire and the West Indies are often the only foreign relations to be scrutinised. Furthermore, *The Professor* (1857) and *Shirley* (1849) have largely been overlooked in favour of the much more famous *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette*. What I intend to do in this paper is to investigate the way in which all of Brontë's novels engage with Europe, and the relationship between British and European identities in her novels. I will contend that Brontë's novels harbour conflicted views of Europe, especially regarding religion, sexuality and morality, and language. Though these topics are used to differentiate British and European characters, they are also shown to have aspects that are appealing and that create the possibility for love in romantic Anglo-European relationships. Finally, though the country is not exempt from criticism as the novels in the end advocate a golden mean between two extremes, it is, however, Britain that ends up as the superior party.

In Brontë's novels, the issue of national identity is not as straightforward as one might assume from someone who grew up in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, a succession of wars between the French Empire and numerous European countries, including Britain, fought between 1803 and 1815. Derek Williams claims that the Continent Brontë presents differs from that of her contemporaries in that it is an intermediate between a

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 9-10 for an explanation on the use of the terms "British" and "English."

morally corrupt place and a place in pursuit of liberty and knowledge (1). Indeed, Europe holds a dual position in the books: though anti-Catholicism, Europhobia and Francophobia are rampant in the narrative voices themselves, the Continent nevertheless also offers a space in which British and European traits can influence each other and be conciliated. All the main characters in the novels – Jane Eyre, Lucy Snowe, William Crimsworth, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar – marry someone who in one way or another is connected to Europe, something which suggests that these British characters are in need of European influences in order to get their happy ending. I will identify what, to Brontë’s mind, constitutes Britishness and sets Britons apart from the rest of Europe, and which European traits might be desirable to her British characters. I have chosen to focus on three main aspects that I believe to be the most important factors in this construction: religion, sexuality and morality, and language. Though certain characteristics serve to exhibit the superiority of the British, and the linking of undesirable European traits to unsympathetic Britons leads to these characters simultaneously becoming less likeable and less British, I will argue that the novels harbour a certain fascination for Europe. I will furthermore pay particular attention to characters who are divided between the two identities, or do not seem to have a national identity at all, and I will endeavour to show the importance in the texts of having a sense of belonging. Torn between Britain and Continental Europe, the characters in Brontë’s novels play with different notions of Britishness and “Europeanness” in order to examine and explore their own allegiance, faith and sexuality.

The idea for this thesis originated while researching a paper on *Jane Eyre*, when I found that there was very little written about the novel’s interest in Europe, whereas there was a large amount of criticism regarding the British Empire and the West Indies. Anne Longmuir points to the rise of post-colonial criticism as one of the reasons why the relationship between Britain and its Empire has been favoured over the relationship between Britain and Europe in recent years (164). Arguing along the same lines, Susie O’Brien contends that the relative lack of attention Europe has been given in analyses of Brontë’s works can partly be explained by “[t]he political exigency of dismantling the master narratives of colonialist discourses,” and furthermore asserts that the relationship with Europe was as important for Britain’s identity as the colonies (54). In a review of Marjorie Morgan’s *National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain*, Roger Beck also points to the importance of Europe when he agrees with Morgan’s argument that “there was an English empire before a British one, anti-Catholicism predated Orientalism, and ‘much of what we are now terming “colonial” existed within Europe itself before there were any overseas colonies’” (n. pag.).

But whereas Longmuir and O'Brien largely limit themselves to one novel each, I am going one step further in exploring the importance of Europe as a whole in all four of Brontë's novels. As in Longmuir's case, the majority of critics concerned with Europe in Brontë's novels focus solely on the two novels that are set on the Continent. Though these works naturally engage with Anglo-European relations more explicitly than the two novels set in Britain, I believe much is lost in disregarding *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley*. By looking at all of the novels as a whole, a fuller and more comprehensive view of Europe is established – one that is not as demonised as it might appear when first reading the European novels. On a side-note, it is also worth considering that since we are currently in a time where Euroscepticism is on the rise in Britain, it may be relevant to go back and examine what some of the opinions were of what set Britons apart from Europeans at such a critical time in the making of a British national identity.

The way in which I will go about approaching this issue is first and foremost by paying particular attention to the novels themselves and look at how they both uphold and undermine the discrepancy between Britain and Europe. I will moreover look at their historical context by employing sources which look into Victorian opinions on Europe, religion, sexuality and language. Furthermore, I will cite contemporary reviews of Brontë's novels, as this can help to place them within the general public discourse on both Europe and on the chapter topics. On the subject of British national identity, I will build upon Linda Colley's seminal *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, as this book is the perhaps most comprehensive study of the forging of a British identity that exists to date. Turning to Brontë-specific writers, there are a few who stand out among the rest. Enid L. Duthie's *The Foreign Vision of Charlotte Brontë* explores in great detail the author's view of and stays on the Continent, and she offers valuable insight into Brontë's personal dealings with Europe. Nevertheless, she also insists that examining Brontë's biography is necessary in order to analyse her novels (xi) and therefore puts much stress on Brontë's own experience, something I will abstain from doing. The reason for this is that I want to let the novels speak for themselves and not let their meaning be guided into certain directions by the author's life. Though her stay in Belgium, which I will come back to, is an important event in Brontë's life and greatly influenced the direction of her work, it is still risky to use that as *the* key to the novels, because the relationship between Britain and Europe in her books is a richer field than might be surmised from her own life. That being said, however, I will use some biographical material as background information, and Duthie will be important in this regard. It is only some of Brontë's general views on Europe, and in particular on Catholics, that will

be addressed and employed where they might shed light on the background on which these novels were written.

Another critic who has contributed much to the conversation is Sally Shuttleworth with the book *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* and the article “The Dynamics of Cross-Culturalism in Charlotte Brontë’s Fiction.” In the latter, which is the one most geared toward my topic, she sets out to investigate cross-culturalism and the novels’ representations of “abroad,” and also points out the dual position the “foreign” has in the novels (“Dynamics” 175-184). She raises important questions about the two-sided relationship with Europe, and also points out the tendency in Brontë criticism to draw too heavily on the author’s own life (“Dynamics” 175). Due to space constraints, however, she only briefly addresses each novel and topic, and I intend to expand upon some of the arguments she raises. Lastly, one of the few who have offered a comprehensive study of Europe and Britain in Brontë’s novels is James Buzard in *Disorienting Fiction: The Autoethnographic Work of Nineteenth-Century British Novelists*. It is the sole source I have found that dedicates significant space to each novel, and I will employ and expand upon several of his claims. Whereas he comes at it from an ethnographic and anthropological point of view and discusses them as parts of a larger discourse on nineteenth-century novels, I am approaching the novels from a literary perspective and as one limited and unified entity. With the exception of Buzard, critics largely tend to focus on *Villette* and *The Professor*, the two novels that are set in Europe (e.g. Edgren-Bindas, Clark-Beattie and Longmuir), when looking at Brontë’s presentation of the Continent. Though the other two novels deal with Europe more subtly, they can nevertheless offer much in the way of exploring the relationship between Britain and Europe. For example, *Jane Eyre* deals with the different sides of British and European sexuality more elegantly than *The Professor*, and in *Shirley*, the use of language learning as a romantic bond is even more complex than in *Villette*. The most important difference between these two sets of novels is that in the European novels, British characters and their culture are placed in and “tested against” a foreign environment, whereas in the two British novels it is European characters and their culture that are contrasted to the place in which they live (Shuttleworth, “Dynamics” 174). While the main character is one of very few Britons in *Villette* and *The Professor*, in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* the odd European (or European descendant) character will appear. Furthermore, in the two latter novels, British characters have European traits attributed to them in order to alienate the reader from them or make them less likeable. The fact that I am using all four of Brontë’s novels is in itself contributing to the discourse, as few others than Buzard have done so substantially when

discussing Anglo-European relations. Doing this leads to a more cohesive reading of the relationship between Britain and Europe in Brontë's authorship.

Furthermore, what takes precedence in studies regarding Brontë's novels and Europe is usually religion (e.g. Armitage, Clark-Beattie, Clarke, Edgren-Bindas, Wong), and though that is a vital part of the equation, it is not the only factor employed in the novels to separate Britons and Europeans. The main reason for this focus on religion stems from *Villette*, which is described by D. G. Paz as "the most anti-Catholic of the fiction called 'great' by twentieth-century critics" (65). However, though it certainly is fundamentally anti-Catholic, *Villette* will paradoxically also show itself to be the one of Brontë's novels that actually is the most open-minded about Catholicism, as it explores the possible attractions of certain elements of the creed. Moreover, by adding sexuality and language into the discussion, a much more complex picture of Europe and Europeans appears that is not solely defined by anti-Catholicism. Additionally, though Brontë's engagements with religion (Thormählen) and sexuality (Maynard) have been the topics of larger studies, I want to discuss these themes within the context of the Anglo-European conflict. The subject of the last chapter, language, has been mostly disregarded, with the exceptions of Emily Eells, Elaine Showalter and Patricia S. Yaeger's articles. This is surprising, since – as I will explain in chapter three – Brontë's extensive use of French was uncommon for her time, and the subject represents the most conflicting notions of Europe. What I will do is offer a study of three distinct subjects – religion, sexuality and morality, and language – that I believe to be the most important aspects of the novels' national identity-building component. The reasoning behind choosing these exact issues is twofold: firstly, these are some of the most common denominators that have traditionally been used to separate Britain and Europe, and secondly, I believe these to be the key issues that are used to separate British from European identity in Brontë's novels. This will be explained in further detail in the respective chapters.

Although this separation between British and European identity is evident, the novels also engage with the battle between British and European values that can sometimes take place within a single character – and it is these instances that are the most intriguing subjects for examination. Whether it be Lucy's attraction towards Catholicism, William's attraction towards European sexuality or Caroline's attraction towards the French language, they all struggle with conflicting emotions regarding Europe: though they all stress the superiority of everything British, they nevertheless all fall in love with Europeans and become drawn to certain aspects of "Europeanness." Showalter asserts that it is in these instances, where French "represents a side of the internal conflict of the central character, as

well as an external circumstance” that French and France is at its most interesting (227). In *Shirley*, Buzard maintains, Brontë is “going so far, in fact, as to raise the question of whether one can be in some sense both English and ‘French’ – the most radical of questions, when posed in 1811-12 – and the further question of how much of French or Frenchness an ‘English book’ might safely contain” (223). However, I do not believe this to be limited to *Shirley*. All of Brontë’s novels do to varying extents explore this question, and they all have characters who are torn between the two identities.

Though this thesis for the most part will refrain from drawing on Brontë’s own life, as has been mentioned, it is nevertheless necessary to talk about a trip she made to Belgium. This is because these novels would not have been written had she not undertaken the journey, and it clearly feeds some of the feelings the novels express regarding Europe – though, importantly, not all of them. In February 1842, Charlotte and her sister Emily enrolled at a school run by Constantin Héger in Brussels in order to improve their French. However, due to the death of their aunt, they returned to Britain in November that same year (Barker 404). Early the following year, Charlotte decided to return to the school as a teacher, but this time without the company of Emily, and remained there for a year (Barker 410). Brontë’s experiences during these two visits would serve as inspiration for the first novel she wrote, *The Professor*, and later for *Villette*. Juliet Barker describes the time she spent in Brussels as “[p]ossibly the greatest single influence on Charlotte, both as a person and as a writer” (412). Part of this was no doubt due to her regard for Héger: ever since letters from their correspondence were discovered in the early twentieth century, academics have debated over the nature of the relationship between the two, as the letters suggested that Brontë harboured deep feelings for her teacher (Barker 419). Moreover, it is safe to say that life at the Belgian school proved to be somewhat of a culture shock for the two sisters, in particular because they were two of the only three only Protestants there (*L I* 284). Writing to her friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë says that “the difference in Country & religion makes a broad line of demarcation between us & all the rest we are completely isolated in the midst of numbers” (*L I* 284). It may be, argues Duthie, that had she had an inkling beforehand of how isolated they would be at the Catholic school, they would not have enrolled there (19), and as this thesis will show, the conflict between Protestantism and Catholicism is a theme that is recurrent in her novels.

Brontë set one of the novels, *The Professor*, in Belgium, and another, *Villette*, in a fictionalised version of the country, called Labassecour. Longmuir points out that other critics, among them Terry Eagleton and Shuttleworth, have tended to view the Belgian setting



as simply “not England,” and assuming that Brontë chose this country for the sole reason that she resided there for a few years (163-164). However, the novels’ historical context offers further answers and there are multiple reasons as to why Brontë would have set two of her novels in Belgium or Belgium-esque countries. One of these reasons, Buzard suggests, is that it was considered a “safe” space on the Continent – it was heavily influenced by France, a force that was threatening to British identity, but this Frenchness still had to coexist with Flemishness, and as such did not have full mastery of the country (162). Furthermore, Belgium did not strive for dominion over other Continental territories. In this way, the Frenchness of Belgium was “singularly useful for generating narratives of English self-recovery” (Buzard 162). Furthermore, towards the mid-century, Belgium became presented as a place with “potential for Anglicization” (Longmuir 167). This, Longmuir asserts, means that Belgium in Brontë’s novels can be considered a space in which French and British values can be battled out, but also somewhere where it is possible that they can be conciliated (167). Importantly, as Waterloo in Belgium was the place where the British forces defeated Napoleon, the country can also represent the battle between Britain and France, where Britain inevitably will exit victoriously.

Though it is important to understand this, it is not Belgium that will take centre-stage in this thesis, but rather what, I will argue, the country represents: Europe, and in particular Francophone Europe. Moreover, one should not straightforwardly equate the Labassecour of *Villette* with Belgium, even though it is clear which country it is based on. Evidence of this is the numerous similarities the novel shares with *The Professor*, something that will be addressed regularly in this thesis. According to Helen M. Cooper, renaming Belgium “Labassecour” and Brussels “Villette” meant that the places could be connected with France as well, therefore “fuelling the anti-French and anti-Catholic sentiments of many of [the readers]” (note 20, *V* 556). It is France that above all serves as the adversary to Britain in these novels, and the importance of Belgium is, ultimately, I believe, that it represents something that is not wholly French, but nevertheless distinctly European, and is therefore more susceptible to British influence. Furthermore, the different European nations are largely muddled together into one entity: the essential part is not a European character’s country of origin, but rather their non-Britishness and “Europeanness.”

The way in which these novels engage with Europe is complex, and the same can be said of Brontë’s view of the Continent – in particular with France. Duthie sums up the author’s feelings about France when she states that the country “still seems to stand, in Charlotte Brontë’s mind, as a synonym for both the best and the worst in continental culture”

(117). An occupation with the relationship between Britain and France can be found throughout all of Brontë's published novels, as well as in her juvenilia. In the part of her juvenilia that has tales set in the fictional country Angria and Glasstown, Brontë, together with her brother Branwell, reimagine the battle between the two countries as a battle between Northangerland/Alexander Percy, representing Napoleon, and Zamorna/the Marquis of Douro, the Duke of Wellington's son. Even in these early tales, Brontë was, Shuttleworth claims, exploring the "English feelings of simultaneous attraction and repulsion toward the seemingly 'foreign'" ("Dynamics" 174), something she would continue to do in her adult novels. This duality becomes apparent as the Duke is worshipped in much of her juvenilia (Barker 160), but at the same time, the young Brontë, along with her siblings, harboured a deep fascination for France and Napoleon (Barker 166), and like Branwell and her father Patrick, Charlotte was very interested in the Napoleonic Wars (Smith, note 3, *L II* 49). Longmuir writes extensively on this topic and argues that to Brontë, the fight between Wellington and Napoleon, the two opposing generals in the final battle of the Napoleonic Wars, is the embodiment of the fight between British and European values (166). The use of Wellington and Napoleon as personifications of Britain and France/Europe can be found in *Shirley*, where the battle continues in the shapes of Reverend Helstone and half-Belgian Robert Moore. Here the former is a fervent supporter of Wellington, "the fit representative of a powerful, a resolute, a sensible, and an honest nation," whereas the latter "[declares] his belief in the invincibility of Bonaparte" (*S* 33-34). However, it is by no means evident that the reader is supposed to be on Helstone's side in the ongoing argument between the two, something which illustrates the author's paradoxical fascination with both of the two military leaders, and by extension her dual view of both Britain and Europe.

As mentioned, the role of Europe in Brontë scholarship has not been as central as that of the Empire. However, there are important likenesses between the two, and that is the fact that they are both subjugated by Britain in the novels. The main characters in *Villette* and *The Professor* are, as I will discuss in chapter three, almost on a missionary quest to impart their superior British ways to their European students, and characters like Adèle in *Jane Eyre* are essentially subjected to British imperialism. Right after William has been complaining about the stupidity of his European pupils, he remarks that "[t]he boy is father to the Man," it is said, and so I often thought when I looked at my boys and remembered the political history of their ancestors: Pelet's school was merely an epitome of the Belgian Nation" (*TP* 57). Here he is referring to the fact that Belgium has long been ruled by other nations (Rosengarten and Smith, note 57, *TP* 248), and just as there now is a Briton ruling over these,

to his mind, stupid pupils, they will continue to be subordinated by others when they grow up. Furthermore, throughout the novels, and especially in *Villette* and *The Professor*, the kind of racist imagery that was commonly used when talking about people from the colonies is used when describing Europeans. Therefore, when William says of his students that “[t]heir intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong” (*TP* 56), he is linking them to the supposedly inferior races that inhabit the British Empire. By doing this, the novels could play on people’s already existing ideas about “uncivilised” peoples, and transfer this idea onto Europeans.

Brontë did not, of course, write her novels in a historical vacuum, and her historical context has a great deal to say about the way in which Europe is dealt with in her works. The latter half of the nineteenth century is often referred to as “the age of nationalism” in Europe (Powell 58), and Brontë’s novels join in in this nationalist conversation, not only to hail the superiority of the British over everything European, but also to explore the appeal of Europe and whether there is any room for “Europeanness” in a British national identity. At the time around when Brontë was writing, Britons considered themselves to be, according to Bernard Porter, “more distinct from foreigners than at any time in their history” (1). The foreigners in question were not just their subjects in the colonies, but also inhabitants of mainland Europe, and one of the most defining features of Anglo-European relations in the nineteenth century was the Napoleonic Wars. According to Stuart Semmel, Napoleon Bonaparte played an important role in the British nationalist feelings that evolved around this time, as the country’s defeat of him “demonstrated... a certain moral superiority over other Europeans” (4). Furthermore, Semmel argues that Britain was in need of someone to be opposed to in order to “maintain its moral compass,” and Napoleon and his France fulfilled that role (4). France holds a special position in the British view of Europe, something that will be expanded upon throughout this thesis. It was the second largest imperial power in the Victorian Age – only Britain was larger (Kumar 419), and the two countries were involved in a series of wars in the centuries leading up to Brontë’s time. However, as Colley points out that the consecutive wars between the two countries were perceived by both as religious wars (4), this is something I would like to cover in greater detail in the first chapter as this leaves more space to examine the nuances of this convoluted conflict.

The use of the term “British” should be given some clarification. For the most part, characters in Brontë’s novels use the word “English” to denote someone coming from the British Isles, and several of the critics I will refer to do the same. At the time these novels were written, “English” was often used to denote people from Scotland, Wales and Ireland as

well (Chadwick 1). In Brontë's novels, people of Scottish heritage call themselves "English" when they are on the Continent, as most Britons did in the Victorian age (Longmuir 164). Particularly in the two novels that take place abroad, nationality takes precedence over any local or regional allegiance (Buzard 167). It was just around Brontë's time that a common British national identity started to take form, as the wars with France brought people from all over the British Isles together against a common enemy (Colley 6). Britain had not been united for a long time at this point – the Acts of Union which inaugurated Scotland and Ireland into a union with England and Wales happened in 1707 and 1800 respectively – and the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution were the most important factors contributing to a common British nationalism (Clark 258). In short, Francophobia contributed to a unified Britain. Though the exploration of in particular Scottish and Irish characters in her novels would make an interesting study, that is not within the compass of this thesis, and I will consistently use the word "British" in this thesis regardless of where in the British Isles the characters originate from.

This thesis is divided into three chapters that each examine a different aspect of the Britain-Europe relationship in Brontë's novels. Each chapter will begin with discussing the link between the chapter topics and British national identity in order to underpin the significance of the themes that have been selected and to gain significant insight into the portrayal of Britain and Europe in these books. Furthermore, I will place the topics within Brontë's historical context and study some of the contemporary views of Europe's connection with the issues in question. The first chapter is dedicated to religion and the tension between British Protestantism and Continental Catholicism in the novels. I will examine how British and European religious institutions and practices are presented, and pay particular attention to the relationship between Lucy and M. Paul in *Villette*. Though numerous critics have discussed the subject of Catholicism in *Villette* and, to a lesser extent, *The Professor*, I will attempt to place this religious debate within a larger context of British and European oppositions, and also include *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* in the consideration. The question of sexuality and morality is one that is raised in this chapter, as these subjects are naturally linked quite intricately with religion, and will be examined in further detail in the second chapter. This chapter will investigate how Europe comes to be associated with licentiousness and immorality in Brontë's novels, while they at the same time dismiss a wholly restrained sexuality. The characters who are central in this chapter are William Crimsworth and Rochester, both of whom are British men whose time on the Continent results in being "infected" with European sexuality. I will furthermore examine the

oppositions between Rochester's European mistresses, who have been given little critical attention, and Jane. Just as Europe comes to be associated with "illicit" love, so does the French language become linked with passion. Language, the topic of the third chapter, is the subject that has been written the least about, which is surprising due to Brontë's extensive use of French in her novels. I will argue that the situations in which French is used are not random, but related to the aforementioned European characteristics. However, language learning taking place between an English-speaker and a French-speaker is what develops the most important romantic relationships in most of the novels, and French is linked to both sexual and companionate love.

I will, in short, argue that Brontë's novels harbour conflicted views of Europe, especially regarding religion, sexuality and language. Though these topics are used to differentiate British and European characters, Europe is also shown to have aspects that are appealing and that create the possibility for love in romantic Anglo-European relationships. The relationships between a Briton and a European are integral parts to the stories, and the dynamic between the two parts would be far less complex, and in some cases non-existent, had it not been for different nationalities. Finally, though the country is not exempt from criticism as the novels in the end advocate a golden mean between two extremes, it is Britain that ends up as the superior party – despite the European influence, there is little doubt as to which country Lucy's "[v]ive l'Angleterre" praises.

# 1 Religion

The role that religion has in the construction of a British identity can hardly be overrated. Its large presence in the public discourse in the Victorian era (Gilmour 63) meant that when faced with an opposing force, Britain's religion – Protestantism – would be one of the key factors separating the country from its foes. The central role it plays in establishing a British identity is apparent throughout the works of Charlotte Brontë. As I have previously mentioned, Brontë had experimented with the relationship between Britain and Continental Europe in her writings about Angria and Glasstown. But religion was one key aspect of that relationship in her novels that was not prominent in her juvenilia. This, according to Duthie, suggests that Brontë did not anticipate that having a different religion than her peers would have such a major effect on her stay in Belgium (19). She furthermore argues that “[Brontë] was quite unprepared for the strength of the reactions which the difference of religion in a foreign country would provoke in her” (19). Her subsequent writings about Europe would therefore include religion as one of the major factors separating the British and the Continental European characters. According to the prospectus of Pensionnat Héger, the school Brontë and her younger sister Emily attended in Brussels, the education was “based on Religion” (Barker 380), which in this case was Roman Catholicism. Duthie believes religious differences and prejudices to have been the largest obstacles keeping Brontë from fully understanding the place in which she lived (115). The extent of these prejudices can be found in a letter to Ellen Nussey, written in 1842 in Brussels, in which Brontë writes:

People talk of the danger which protestants [sic] expose themselves to in going to reside in Catholic countries – and thereby running the chance of changing their faith – my advice to all protestants who are tempted to do anything so besotted as turn Catholic – is to walk over the sea on to the continent – to attend mass sedulously for a time – to note well the mum[m]eries thereof – also the idiotic, mercenary, aspect of all the priests – & then if they are still disposed to consider Papistry in any other light than a most feeble childish piece of humbug let them turn papists at once that's all – I consider Methodism, <Dissentism,> Quakerism & the extremes of high & low Churchism foolish but Roman Catholicism beats them all. (*L I* 289-290)

This excerpt speaks volumes on Brontë's views regarding Catholicism, and I will return to these ideas throughout this chapter as these views are also common in her novels. The followers of this “childish piece of humbug” are often victims of negative stereotypes in her

works, and it is the purpose of this chapter to examine these and their British opposites in order to establish some key characteristics that make up Britishness in Brontë's works; a Protestant Britishness that employs a contrary Catholic "Europeanness" in order to establish its own identity. Her novels, all of them written after her stay at Héger's school, contribute to paint a picture of a Roman Catholic Continent at odds with what she perceived to be the correct virtues and values of Christianity. The first chapter of this thesis is thus dedicated to the role that religion has in Brontë's construction of a British identity as contrasted with a Continental European one in her novels. I will argue that throughout her works, certain tendencies can be located that forge the binary of the sympathetic British Protestant and the unsympathetic European Catholic. As products of their time, these novels serve as examples of the extent of anti-Catholicism in Victorian Britain.

At the same time, Brontë's paradoxical fascination with all things French and the many national hybrid characters complicates this relationship. It has already been noted that all of the Brontë children were captivated by France, and especially by everything that was linked to Napoleon. According to Duthie, it was Charlotte, not her parents or her sister, who voiced the idea of going abroad, and "anticipation and prejudice were curiously blended... In her eyes the foreign milieu stood for culture, for the breadth of interests and depth of experience she envied in writers like Madame de Staël and George Sand" (18). It therefore becomes harder to argue that the author had some kind of vendetta against everything European. Nevertheless, it is the novels, not the author, that will be examined here, though the odd reference to Brontë's letters can sometime help to shed light on them. Though the opposition between British Protestantism and Continental Catholicism is a useful, and necessary, tool when examining religion in Brontë's novels, matters are nonetheless not always so straightforward. It is when nation and religion do not necessarily intersect that the complexity of the novels becomes most apparent.

The link between British identity and Protestantism is firmly established throughout Brontë's works. Protestantism thus becomes an expression of patriotism. Moreover, patriotism also turns out to be linked to criticism of Catholicism and the foreign powers it represents. Anti-Catholicism had been a prevalent presence in England since the Reformation in the sixteenth century, and it was "especially marked" in the Victorian era (Paz 2). As the Anglican Church had been made with the sole intention of being opposed to the Roman Catholic Church, "to be Protestant had become an essential element of Britishness" (Melnik quoted in Clarke 973-947). Shortly before Brontë started writing *Villette*, her most anti-Catholic work, Britain became flooded with anti-Catholic sentiments; this came as a result of

the “Papal Aggression” in 1850, a common term for the Pope re-establishing the Catholic hierarchy in England (Wong 7). Not since the reign of Mary Tudor had Britain had Catholic bishops, sees and dioceses like Continental Catholic countries, but with the increased immigration from Ireland this was now reintroduced (Wohl). Furthermore, because of the close ties between church and state, the matter of religion would almost always also be a matter of politics. In this context, therefore, the numerous wars between Britain and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries strengthened British hostility towards the largely Roman Catholic France and its French-speaking neighbouring countries. As Colley points out in *Britons*, Britain was at war with France, “the prime Catholic power in Continental Europe,” for the majority of the years between 1689 and 1815 (xx). These wars greatly helped to contribute to a sense of a common British identity, as people from all parts of the kingdom were united against a mutual foe. When this foe in addition was the ultimate symbol of a foreign religion, the opposition was only the greater. “They defined themselves as Protestants struggling for survival against the world’s foremost Catholic power,” writes Colley (6), and with that she identifies the core of the Anglo-French relationship in the nineteenth century. Moreover, the Catholic population of Britain was growing, in part due to Irish immigrants, and these people were seen as having their allegiance not with Britain, but with an alien ruler (Thormählen 27).

Knowledge about this aspect of the political context of Brontë’s works is vital in order to examine their portrayal of Europe – as is knowledge about their religious context. When discussing religion in Victorian Britain, it is important to note that it is not synonymous with the Anglican Church of England. The religious lives of Britons were very complex and diverse, something which makes it hard to investigate in hindsight and can lead to information which may seem contradictory (Thormählen 2). The Brontës are no exceptions to this, and as part of a family headed by a Northern Irish minister married to a Methodist Englishwoman, it is safe to say that Charlotte was exposed to a variety of religious currents and ideas. The different Protestant denominations which were spread throughout Britain will not be examined in great detail here, because when faced with the Roman Catholic Church, the differences between the various creeds diminished. Despite rivalries within the Protestant community, the rift between Protestantism and Catholicism was “the most striking feature in the religious landscape” (Colley 19). Kate Lawson makes the claim that each of Brontë’s novels deals with different Christian denominations: *Jane Eyre* with the Evangelicalism of her childhood, *Villette* and *The Professor* with the Roman Catholicism she met in Belgium and *Shirley* with Protestant dissenters (“Dissenting” 729). Though this certainly corresponds



to the main plot of the novels, this is perhaps a simplification of the finer religious nuances spread throughout Brontë's works – nuances which this chapter will scrutinise in detail. While Lawson's article deals largely with *Shirley* and its critique of Christianity, she does not offer any comments on Catholicism. Since *Shirley* is a novel in which two of the main characters are half-Belgian and half-Catholic, I believe it is important to address the Catholic Continent they represent.

When comparing the image of the British Protestant with the Continental Catholic in Brontë's works, *Villette* stands out among the rest. Since its publication in 1853, it has come to stand in the forefront of the literary examples of the anti-Catholic sentiment which was rampant in Britain at the time. Nevertheless, one should not consider the eponymous town simply as the incarnation of Continental Catholicism, because *Villette* is not purely Catholic. Lucy mentions going to three different Protestant churches – Lutheran, Presbyterian and Episcopalian (*V* 463) – which serves to show that the country and the village are more than simply symbolic representations of Rome. Moreover, the town differs from the British settings in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* in that it is cosmopolitan: British, Belgian, French, Italian and German nationals are all represented, and Lucy states that “in this school were girls of almost every European nation” (*V* 90). Thus, one might come to consider *Villette* and *Labassecour* as a microcosm of Europe. This is something which furthermore underlines the unique position of Britain in the novels: the country is the only one with a distinct identity, contrary to the Continental European nations who are more or less interchangeable. The cosmopolitan nature of *Villette* is something that Daniel Wong has also made note of, and, contrary to Rosemary Clark-Beattie among others, he argues that one should be careful with simply aligning Protestantism with Britain and Catholicism with Belgium in *Villette*: *Labassecour* is a myriad of religious diversity and “the novel complicates the easy conflation of nation and religion, even as it acknowledges the considerable overlap between the two” (8-9).

Critics have not given much attention to the parallels between *Villette* and Brontë's other novels regarding their complex and convoluted relationship to Catholicism. Anti-Catholicism is not limited to *Villette*; though it is certainly Brontë's most anti-Catholic work, anti-Catholicism can be traced throughout her entire writing career, from her juvenilia and *devoirs* to each of her four finished novels. However, it is important to mention that notions of religion do not limit themselves to explicit mentions of professed faith or sacramental customs, but can be more subtly portrayed. This is explored in the second subsection, entitled “Reason, Honesty and Spiritual Independence,” which I will identify as

recurring traits that separate Protestants from Catholics in Brontë's novels. Moral codes and sexuality can also be closely linked to this, and I will be going into more detail on that in the next chapter. This chapter is divided into three sections, each examining a different aspect of the link between religion and Britishness as contrasted to the religion of Continental Europe. Nonetheless, I will also attempt to show that the binary between Britain and Europe, Protestantism and Catholicism, is not always so straightforward.

## 1.1 The Cloistered Life: Nuns

A natural starting point when delving into the topic of religion in Brontë's works is religious institutions. The descriptions of Catholic rituals and priests serve as important parts in establishing a clear image of the attitudes towards Catholicism that are presented in the novels. However, there is one aspect that stands out among the others, and that is the role of nuns. Nuns are featured in all of the author's novels, and their existence adds to the strong Catholic presence in the novels. Before delving into the books, however, it is necessary to give some background information regarding nuns and monasteries in Britain. During the English reformation, a law made by Queen Elizabeth I stated that monasteries did not adhere to "the law of Christ," though they were not outlawed (Chadwick 505). The situation a few centuries later, at the time Brontë wrote her novels, was that a few sisterhoods springing out of Tractarianism were just being started in Britain, but the general population regarded these communities as "popish" (Chadwick 506-507). Tractarianism is another word for the Oxford Movement, an Anglican High Church movement which sought to separate church and state, and to adapt "Romish" practices (Thormählen 26). In other words, there were a few Protestant nuns in Britain, but these nuns were in people's minds linked to Catholicism. Nuns will therefore in this thesis be treated as a purely Catholic phenomenon, as they were largely regarded as such by Victorians. I will argue that through these portrayals of nuns, or nun-like characters, Brontë portrays a religion which is deprived of heart, sense and life.

First, I would like to start with Brontë's first published novel, *Jane Eyre*, and the character Eliza Reed. The author's treatment of this character marks one of the few instances in *Jane Eyre* where Catholicism is explicitly criticised, and thus deserves attention. This portrayal can offer great insight into the kind of people the novels associate with Catholic religious orders. Eliza is British, but through her association with the Catholic Church, she comes to take on a European identity, as she moves to France and is showed to be at odds with the Anglican Church. From the very beginning of the story, Jane's cousin is described as

“headstrong and selfish” (*JE* 12) and greedy: “Eliza would have sold the hair off her head if she could have made a handsome profit thereby” (*JE* 24). Together with her mother and siblings, she bullies Jane. Marianne Thormählen, the author of *The Brontës and Religion*, goes as far as saying that Eliza is devoid “of any human feeling at all,” and furthermore states that it is “[n]o wonder she did not feel at ease in a church whose first requirement of its members was that they love God with all their hearts” (37). This argument not only accentuates Eliza’s heartlessness, but firmly establishes her as a person not belonging to the Church of England. Nina Auerbach is another critic who has remarked on Eliza’s heartlessness, and according to her, Eliza is defined as the “anti-human personification of ‘judgement without feeling’” (102). What these critics argue is in short that Eliza is from her childhood represented as having an emotionless nature. I contend that these are characteristics which one can find in other nun-like characters in Brontë’s writings, and that Eliza therefore becomes associated with the callous Catholic characters in the novels.

When Jane meets her cousin again after almost a decade apart, at Mrs Reed’s deathbed, Eliza has already taken the appearance of a nun: she is thin and sallow-faced, her look is “ascetic” and one of “extreme plainness,” and she carries “a nun-like ornament of a string of ebony beads and a crucifix” (*JE* 194). These descriptions signal to the reader that her way of life is life-denying and unhealthy, and ascribes this to what her rosary represents. Jane furthermore recounts how Eliza divides her day into different sections, in a similar fashion to nuns’ practices (*JE* 200). Upon Eliza announcing that she intends to become a nun near Lisle (Lille) in France, Jane tells her: “You are not without sense, cousin Eliza; but what you have I suppose in another year will be walled up alive in a French convent” (*JE* 206). Put differently, Jane presents Catholicism as a force which deprives its followers of reason – a topic which I will return to shortly. Furthermore, the previous mention of Eliza being greedy – a vice which is categorised as a cardinal sin by the Catholic Church – demonstrates the bigotry and hypocrisy Catholicism is connected with in Brontë’s novels.

When she divulges her plan to join a monastery, Eliza does not mention a desire for practicing religious piety, but rather the wish for a place “where punctual habits would be permanently secured from disturbance” and with “safe barriers between herself and a frivolous world” (*JE* 200). She is, in other words, looking for what the monastery can do for her, instead of the other way around. She is not shown to have any regard for a god, as can be demonstrated by the passage in which Jane asks her what fascinates her by the Common Prayer-book (*JE* 200). Eliza simply answers “the Rubric,” meaning “[t]he rules for religious services” (Dunn, note 3, *JE* 200). This can be linked to an earlier passage, in which Mr

Brocklehurst questions Jane about her favourite part of the Bible, and asks: “And the Psalms? I hope you like them?” (*JE* 27). When Jane replies that she does not, Mr Brocklehurst is astounded and says: “that proves you have a wicked heart” (*JE* 27). The Psalms of the Bible are of particular importance to the Catholic Church, as the recital of its Latin translation *Psalter* is key in the rite of Divine Office, prayers that are recited by the clergy at specific parts of the day (Cabrol; Thurston). By denouncing Jane for not liking the Psalms, it may be that Mr Brocklehurst unwittingly associates himself with Catholicism and at the same time distances Jane from it.

These serve as examples of the preoccupation with religious form and the mass that recurs in the novels’ characterisation of Catholics, and they are testaments to how Catholics are perceived as only being concerned with appearances and liturgy, instead of personal virtues. The following statement given by Eliza can support this:

I shall devote myself for a time to the examination of the Roman Catholic dogmas, and to a careful study of the workings of their system; if I find it to be, as I half suspect it is, *the one best calculated to ensure the doing of all things decently and in order*, I shall embrace the tenets of Rome and probably take the veil. (*JE* 206, my emphasis)

Here one once again finds Eliza’s fixation with form and order. Her converting solely hinges on whether or not the Catholic Church beats the Anglican Church in matters of structure, not on its principles regarding the authority of scripture, the Pope or *sola fide*, which are some of the most important differences between the two denominations. Her approach seems almost irreligious, as what she is concerned with is not matters of doctrine or belief, but form. However, the word “decently” can also suggest that she believes Catholicism to be morally superior to Protestantism. Nevertheless, that does not undermine the fact that there are no feelings involved and that Eliza seems to attempt to rationally contemplate which denomination is the better fit for her way of living. This seems strange considering that religion by definition is based on faith and sentiments rather than rationality. A completely rational approach to religion is self-contradictory.

Eliza’s heartlessness has already been commented on, and is an infringement of the Christian commandment: “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (*KJV* Mark 12.31). Her vigorous denouncement of her sister moreover underlines her not adhering to the Christian practice of turning the other cheek. When her sister has a breakdown, she merely sits “cold, impassible, and assiduously industrious” (*JE* 201). There is a stark contrast between Eliza’s

taciturn, impassive treatment of her sister and Jane completely forgiving her aunt – loving her neighbour – despite having been treated horrendously by her. Jane is a kind of intermediate between Eliza and Georgiana – between the ascetic, cold and emotionless and the spoiled, superficial and emotional. Neither extreme is shown to be desirable. Conclusively, it is telling that the author chooses to place Eliza in a French Catholic convent – her lack of emotions and life-denying way of life is thus firmly placed outside the realm of Britain and Protestantism, and becomes another example of the vices of Continental Catholicism. Auerbach notes that Jane refuses to use Eliza’s proper title once she has become the head of the convent, namely “Mother Superior,” and merely refers to her as “superior” (102). I believe that this might signify that Jane does not think of her cousin as worthy of the title, despite it belonging to a denomination she does not like; or, as an orphan, Jane might consider “Mother” to be an epithet reserved for those who fulfil her idea of maternal nature, something Eliza undoubtedly does not. What all of this shows in the end is that, contrary to the other British characters who choose to leave for Europe, like Lucy Snowe and William Crimsworth, Eliza is shown to not belong in Britain.

Eliza is not the only prospective nun Brontë writes about: one can find another in *The Professor*, namely the pupil Sylvie at Mdlle. Reuter’s school. First of all one should note that there are a great many contrasts between Eliza and Sylvie. Whereas the former is a British Protestant whose heartless and rigid nature is shown to make her the perfect mother superior of a convent, the latter is presented as a product of religious indoctrination; and contrary to the narrator Jane, who in no way has any great regard for her cousin, the narrator William shows a great deal of sympathy for “poor little Sylvie” (TP 85). In other words, the depraved character of Eliza is shown as not belonging either to Britain or Protestantism, whereas the meek and intelligent Sylvie is an example of how Catholicism, according to Brontë’s novels, chokes the life, reason and spirit out of innocent sufferers. This reading can be underlined by the following passage, in which the narrator describes Sylvie:

destined as she was for the cloister, her whole soul was warped to a conventual bias, and, in the tame, trained subjection of her manner, one read that she had already prepared herself for her future course of life by giving up her independence of thought and action into the hands of some despotic confessor. She permitted herself no original opinion... in everything she was guided by another. With a pale, passive automaton-air she went about all day long doing what she was bid, never what she liked or what, from innate conviction, she thought it right to do; the poor little future religieuse had been early taught to make the dictates of her own reason and conscience quite subordinate to the will of her spiritual Director. She was the model

pupil of Middle. Reuter's establishment; pale, blighted image where life lingered feebly but whence the soul had been conjured by Romish wizard-craft! (TP 85)

This passage is the one which, all throughout Brontë's fiction, best exemplifies the supposed dangers of Catholicism, and there is much to comment on. What perhaps stands out the most is the narrator comparing her to a machine: deprived of soul, thought and action. Lucy casts no doubt as to what she believes is to blame for this: "Romish wizard-craft." The use of such a term paradoxically links the Catholic Church to a practice which it denounced and famously hunted for centuries, and it furthermore suggests that the narrator holds Catholicism to be similar to witchcraft – something occult, dark and unnatural. Another thing worth noting in the passage is the "despotic confessor" and "spiritual Director." Whereas one might be tempted to believe that the "Director" of a future nun is God, these phrases most likely refer to a priest. This suggests that what corrupts Catholics is not necessarily the religion itself, but its institution. What the passage implies is an enormous amount of influence placed in the hands of priests, and Sylvie is essentially a slave to their wills and thoughts. Moreover, the fact that she is described as "the model pupil" of the school, speaks volumes regarding the nature of Catholic schools. The bottom line is that she is deprived of her own thoughts and independence, and this fact is clearly blamed on her religion. In a later passage Sylvie is also referred to as "corpse-like" (TP 101), which links the cloistral life to something dead and rotten.

So far I have covered two prospective nuns, but there is a third and more eerie nun figure that emerged from Brontë's pen: namely the Gothic, ghost-like nun in *Villette*. Much like Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, this nun appears at key points in the narrative and adds a Gothic element to the story. Cooper also remarks on the similarities between Bertha and the nun and how they both function as a kind of "other" – a mirror image – to the protagonist. She argues that whereas the former serves as a warning to Jane about passion, the latter, as a nun, is "the very image of repressed passion" (xxxix-xxxii). Furthermore, she writes that the nun operates "as a warning against concealing passion" (xxxii), a statement which corresponds to that of Tonya Edgren-Bindas, who points out that the nun always appears in correlation to moments where Lucy has suppressed her feelings and desires (255). What these critics argue is in short that the appearance of the nun might signal what lies in wait for Lucy if she denies her own desires, and I believe them to be right. Religion and sexuality are closely linked, and nowhere is this better epitomised than in the nun. The ghost is said to be that of a previous inhabitant of the school when it was a convent, and was allegedly "buried

alive, for some sin against her vow” (*V* 117-118). The vow in question is presumably the vow of chastity (Clarke 978). The contradictory nature of the nun on the one hand warning Lucy against concealing feelings, and on the other having seemingly been killed for not doing exactly that, complicates matters. One possible explanation is that despite being separated by death from her lover, the time they did have together was meaningful and worthwhile, and in this way she mirrors the fate that is to fall upon Lucy and M. Paul.

There are many things that link Lucy to the nun in *Villette*. Firstly, Lucy lives a cloistered life in a school which used to be a convent. The dormitories are old nuns’ cells, and it is not hard to draw a parallel between these cells and those of a prison. The connection between Lucy and cells can also be found in the scene where M. Paul locks her in an attic, in which the nun is said to have been seen previously (*V* 149). Conversely, this is also the first time Lucy and M. Paul are alone together. It might even be the first time Lucy has ever been alone with a man – at least there have been no recounts of any prior tête-à-têtes. This scene has therefore both sexual and religious undertones, two themes which are closely connected when it comes to nuns. Furthermore, Lucy describes the attic as “solitary,” another key word both in relation to nuns’ lives and in relation to her own future (*V* 148). When M. Paul locks her inside the attic, it symbolises how he essentially seals her faith as a virgin – or a nun – forever. Lucy is moreover frequently seen in plain, grey dresses and is described as “revêche comme une religieuse [as crabbed as a nun (Cooper, note 11, *V* 564)]” by Count de Hamal in the billet-doux she finds (*V* 123). In her article “The Cloistering of Lucy Snowe: An Element of Catholicism in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” Edgren-Bindas asserts that “[Lucy] is metaphorically a nun and grows to view M. Paul as a near Christ-like figure” (253). I find this argument to be credible, as it can be supported by Lucy’s nun-like appearance, lifelong celibacy and residence in a monastery. The latter part of the argument furthermore points to the complete devotion Lucy comes to give her prospective fiancé, but this is something which will be addressed later. Nevertheless, it should still not be overlooked that Lucy comes to love M. Paul romantically, not in the ways that nuns love Christ, and that is undoubtedly a large part of the devotion she shows him.

The figure of the nun is, it turns out later, ironically merely Count de Hamal dressing up so he can meet his lover Ginevra Fanshawe. By dressing up a lover in a nun’s habit, the novel is once again drawing a parallel to the perceived moral deficiency of Catholicism, a topic which will be covered in the next chapter. Moments before finding this out in a note that has been left along with the nun’s habit spread out on her bed, Lucy rips the clothes apart. At this point, Lucy believes M. Paul is to marry Justine Marie, his niece who is named

after his late fiancée. It is, in other words, the moment she believes herself to be unable to marry M. Paul and might spend the rest of her days unmarried, that she destroys the nun. The fact that the clothes are laid on her bed is a signal that she will remain a “nun,” i.e. a virgin, for the rest of her life. Now, “nun” and “virgin” are of course not synonymous, but as the vow of chastity is one of the key vows nuns have to make, virginity is one of the main associations the word “nun” evokes. When Lucy first enters her bedchamber, she believes she is seeing the nun herself, not merely her clothes: “I saw stretched on my bed the old phantom – the NUN... I tore her up – the incubus! I held her on high – the goblin! I shook her loose – the mystery! And down she fell – down all around me – down in shreds and fragments – and I trode upon her” (*V* 519). This symbolic act of destroying the habit signals that Lucy is finally giving in to her passions, and it is not until this is done that she and M. Paul can become affianced; but as the nun is also a symbolic representation of Catholicism, it can also mean that she once and for all destroys the possibility of her ever fully embracing Catholic thought.

What the previous paragraphs have shown are aspects which link Lucy to a nun, and by extension to Catholicism itself. Nevertheless, there is something which can alienate the ghostly nun from Catholicism: she broke a vow. She is in other words a “faulty” Catholic, and it is therefore possible that she may be distanced from the creed’s faithful believers. In her rebellious nature, she is far removed from Eliza and Sylvie. It may be that in her giving in to her passions and breaking her vow, she becomes less Catholic and therefore more relatable to Lucy. Regarding the other characters, both Eliza and Sylvie have previously been linked to the Continent, and the same is true of Lucy – to an extent. Her likeness to a nun is one of multiple factors which contribute to make Lucy’s identity, both national and religious, more complex. Despite her vehement arguments with M. Paul, where she advocates the superiority of both Britain and Protestantism, her character is torn between the two poles. Lucy’s paradoxical relationship to Catholicism is the topic of a later section in this chapter, so for now let it suffice to say that to her, the nun figure, a frequent recurrence in Gothic fiction which was intended to frighten readers, is particularly frightening because it demonstrates her closeness to a religion she professes to dislike so much.



## 1.2 Honesty, Reason and Spiritual Independence: Protestant and Catholic Principles

Whereas the first section of this chapter sought to outline some of the aspects connected with Catholic nuns, this second section takes a step back in order to identify some of the features which characterise the British Protestant population and the Continental Catholic population in Brontë's novels. I have identified three recurring traits which above everything else seem to be of vital importance: honesty, reason and spiritual independence. All of these are closely tied to religion, as will be demonstrated. In relation to the third quality, the role of priests is particularly important, as it deals with the authority of the individual versus the authority of the clergy. Therefore I will provide a short overview over the two denominations' attitudes towards this here. There are numerous points that separate the beliefs of the two denominations, and several of these will be addressed as the argument turns towards the differentiating points in question. The quintessential difference between the Roman Catholic Church and Protestant churches is that the Church itself is granted greater authority than the Bible and "private judgement" (Wolffe, *God* 30). Furthermore, salvation in Catholic belief is believed to depend on partaking in the Church's rites, rather than on personal change (Wolffe, *God* 30). This is in contrast to the Protestant practice of *sola fide* ("faith alone"), which means that faith is all one needs to be saved. Yet another vital difference is the Catholic belief that priests can forgive sin, something many British Victorians looked upon with revulsion (Clarke 974). All of these factors can be found in Brontë's novels, and they are used in a way that is supposed to elevate Protestantism and criticise Catholicism, something I will go on to demonstrate.

Both Lucy and William often refer to dishonesty as one of the main characteristics of European girls. At Middle Reuter's school, William teaches "French, English, Belgians, Austrians and Prussians... Most of them could lie with audacity when it appeared advantageous to do so" (*TP* 81). He furthermore laments the fate of the British girls at the school, because they have not been given an "honest protestant [sic] education" (*TP* 86). Similarly, the narrator in *Villette* depicts the habitual lying at the school:

Not a soul in Madame Beck's house, from the scullion to the directress herself, but was above being ashamed of a lie... 'J'ai menti plusieurs fois [I have lied many times (Cooper, note 4, 560)]' formed an item of every girl's and woman's monthly confession: the priests heard unshocked, and absolved unreluctant. If they had

missed going to mass, or read a chapter of a novel, that was another thing: these were crimes whereof rebuke and penance were the unfailing meed. (*V* 90-91)

This passage not only describes the habit and the acceptance of lying in the school, but it also directs criticism towards the Catholic Sacrament of Penance, something which will be expanded on shortly. Lying, which is prohibited by one of the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20.16), is presented as a mere trivial occurrence for Catholics, and the shamelessness they express in performing it is used to further underline how little importance the Bible and its laws has to them, compared to the importance of a priest's orders. Additionally, the mention of missing mass being a far worse crime than lying highlights the notion of Catholicism being overly concerned with appearances instead of inner qualities, as previously mentioned.

This attitude towards lying is greatly contrasted to the attitude of the Protestant characters, to whom honesty is a praised virtue. Ginevra, the only British pupil at Mme. Beck's school, is despite all her faults praised by Lucy for being honest: "There must be good in you, Ginevra, to speak so honestly; that snake Zéline St Pierre, could not utter what you have uttered" (*V* 161). The French teacher St Pierre is accordingly not capable of the honesty which Ginevra, being a Brit, has just shown. Even the bullying Mrs Reed in *Jane Eyre* calls Jane's supposed "tendency to deceit" her worst and most dangerous fault (*JE* 28).

Interestingly, when Jane is called a liar in front of the entire school by Mr Brocklehurst, she is simultaneously referred to as "an interloper and an alien" (*JE* 56). In other words, the habit of lying is considered to be something foreign and not belonging to Britain. Of course, Lowood is not a Catholic school, nor is Jane a liar, and the school's treatment and false accusation of Jane is condemned. However, what this example shows is that lying is denounced at Protestant Lowood, which is a stark contrast to the two Catholic European schools. One can also find denunciation of lying in *Shirley*, in which the labourer William Farren says that "there is dishonest men plenty to guide [honest men] to the devil" (*S* 275). Put differently, being deceitful is perceived as un-Christian. What all of these examples demonstrate is that lying is a feature which is perceived as something inherently un-British, and thus un-Protestant.

Sylvie in *The Professor* has already been mentioned in regard to her being a prospective nun. Nonetheless, her characterisation can also contribute to shed light upon the deceitfulness of Catholics in Brontë's works. The narrator remarks that Sylvie "was even sincere, as far as her religion would permit her to be so" (*TP* 85). This line does several things: firstly, it expresses surprise at her ability to be honest. Secondly, it refers to a limit of

honesty forced onto her by her religion. As previously mentioned, the Bible clearly states that lying is a sin – thus, the narrator implies that her religion must not be the word of God, but the word of priests or other ecclesiastical persons. This strikes at the very core of the Protestant-Catholic conflict: the authority of the Bible versus the authority of the Church. Another character in *The Professor* who remarks on the British being an honest people is Frances, William's future wife. She confesses to him:

I long to live once more among Protestants, they are more honest than Catholics: a Romish school is a building with porous walls, a hollow floor, a false ceiling; every room in this house, Monsieur, has eye-holes and ear-holes, and what the house is, the inhabitants are, very treacherous; they all think it lawful to tell lies, they all call it politeness to profess friendship where they feel hatred. (*TP* 121)

Once again, the connection between Protestantism and honesty, and Catholicism and lying, is referenced. The use of "treacherous" implies hidden dangers lying within the school's walls, and the close link between education and religion is furthermore established. Moreover, the almost Benthamite feeling the descriptions of surveillance in this passage evokes can also be found in *Villette*. The practice of surveillance and spying is a recurring one in Brontë's European novels, something that Micael M. Clarke denotes as "instruments of social control in Roman Catholic society, necessary in the absence of the internal self-discipline that characterizes the English Protestant" (977). This social control is used frequently by Mdlle. Reuter, Mme. Beck and M. Paul, and like Clarke, Lucy herself connects this to their "educational and theological system" (*V* 59). As just another form of deception and dishonesty, spying and Catholics are consequently consistently paired with each other.

On the day of Mme. Beck's fête in *Villette*, the hairdresser sets himself up in the school's oratory, and "in presence of *bénitier*, candle, and crucifix, solemnized the mysteries of his art" (*V* 144). By conjoining the vanity of hairdressing with the Roman oratory, the novel is once again mocking the shallowness of Catholicism. Additionally, as the hairdresser's job is to change the appearance of the actors in the play, his very purpose is to deceive and lure people into believing the girls to be someone they are not. Not only is the faith compared to vanity, but as the person usually present in the oratory is a priest, the hairdresser can be read as a mocking image of Catholic clergymen: like him, they are also out to deceive.

Interestingly, M. Paul is the only Catholic character who is shown to despise lying: "where his questioning eyes met dishonest denial – where his ruthlessness researched found

deceitful concealment – oh, then, he could be cruel, and I thought wicked!” (*V* 374). The epithet “honest” is among the best a character can receive, and the fact that this is given to M. Paul is an expression of the complexity that this character is given. His devotion towards honesty might, like Lucy likewise showing certain traits connected with Catholicism, be a device to make him closer to Lucy and the Protestantism she represents. Moreover, as I have identified honesty to be one of the most important mannerisms which separate Protestants from Catholics, it might also be part of the reason why Lucy comes to accept him. His devotion towards honesty makes him stand out among his peers, and contributes to making him different from every other Continental person in *Villette*.

On a final note, it is ironic that Lucy stresses the despicability of lying and how “these foreigners will often lie” (*V* 249), when she keeps Dr John’s true identity a secret for the reader. After she finally admits that Dr John is Graham Bretton, she says that “[t]he discovery was not of to-day, its dawn had penetrated my perceptions long since... I had preferred to keep the matter to myself” (*V* 195-196). She never mentions the word “lying,” perhaps from fear that it would link her to the religion she so often criticises. To complicate matters even more, it is immediately following her excursion into the village’s Catholic church that she lets the reader in on the secret. With this confession, Lucy reveals herself to be an unreliable narrator, and though this is most likely intended to simply add suspense and shock, Lucy in this way complicates her own notion that lying is something characteristic of non-Britons. This unreliable narrator might even cast doubt over the array of portrayals of the European characters, as her accounts by definition suddenly become untrustworthy.

Just as honesty and lying respectively are linked to Protestantism and Catholicism, so are reason and irrationality. As previously mentioned, the authority of the Bible is one of the main issues differentiating Catholicism and Protestantism. Whereas Catholics place more importance on the clergy and the Pope, Protestants rely on the Bible itself and the personal reading of it. The role of personal interpretation and deduction is one which stresses the importance of reason, and as such reason becomes an important tool in Brontë’s novels to distinguish the two different creeds. Briefly put, British Protestants are often presented as rational, whereas Continental Catholics are not. Like with honesty, different notions of reason appear most often in the description of the pupils at the schools in *Villette* and *The Professor*. William recounts how his European pupils “recoiled with repugnance from any occupation that demanded close study or deep thought” (*TP* 56). Lucy likewise ponders over “foreign girls, who hardly ever will think and study for themselves” (*V* 336) and explicitly blames the Catholic Church which “strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat,

ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning” (*V* 141). In other words, Lucy accuses the Church of actually *wanting* its subjects to be unthinking. She goes on lamenting the minds of her European pupils in another passage as well:

Severe or continuous mental application they could not, or would not bear: heavy demand on the memory, the reason, the attention, they rejected point-blank. Where an English girl of not more than average capacity and docility would quietly take a theme and bind herself to the task of comprehension and mastery, a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you with the phrase, – “Dieu, que c’est difficile! Je n’en veux pas. Cela m’ennuie trop [Goodness, this is difficult! I don’t want to do it. This really bores me (Cooper, note 8, *V* 560)].” (*V* 91-92)

As one can see, Lucy here explicitly compares the mental abilities of British and European girls, and ties it to their ability to use their reason in order to comprehend something. From what is shown in all of these excerpts, it is not difficult to draw a parallel between students who want something easily or already digested, to believers who take their priest’s word for truth, instead of going directly to the source. This association of the European students with little or no ability to reason, and the praise of British girls for the opposite, leads to a strengthened attitude in the novels that the British are not only superior, but also implies that their religion is more logical.

The British characters are furthermore frequently seen reading, not just the Bible, but books in general, which adds to the perception of Britons being more inquisitive and logical. Jane in particular is often found with a book in her hand (*JE* 6, 17, 31, 298), as is Lucy (*V* 146, 272, 297). That is not to say that European characters are never seen reading, but the number of times where it is explicitly mentioned that Britons are reading vastly outnumbers them. I have already mentioned that the role of personal reading of the Bible is essential in Protestant thought; and though they may not be reading the Bible in all of these instances, the mere fact that they are reading suggests that they are inquisitive and analytical. It speaks volumes that whereas Lucy declares that “the guide to which I looked, and the teacher which I owned, must always be the Bible itself, rather than any sect, of whatever name or nation” (*V* 464), Père Silas and M. Paul use pamphlets in order to try and persuade her to convert. These pamphlets, Lucy notes, do not appeal to reason, but to feelings (*V* 457) – hence, they cannot ever make her change her mind.

However, Clarke maintains that Lucy’s Protestant reason is not enough to help her through her difficulties which culminate with the confession scene: “Lucy conceals a

passionate nature beneath her rational, disciplined, British exterior” (980). In other words, she is in need of the passion that Catholicism represents, which is why she seeks the help of a Catholic priest. I believe Clarke’s argument is valid, as no one is a purely rational being. Though she may be guided by reason in most matters, that does not mean there is no room for feeling. Clarke furthermore points out that when Lucy shortly after finds herself in the house of the Brettons, she “‘entreated Reason’ in order to contain her overflowing feelings” (981). This personification of reason underlines its importance to Lucy, and she consults it like one would expect someone to consult a deity. Though she may not rely solely upon it, as Clarke suggests, it is nevertheless clear that it takes precedence over emotions. It has already been argued that Eliza in *Jane Eyre* is purely rational and stripped of all emotions, something which in no way is advocated in the novels. Her rationalism is in fact irrational, as she attempts to choose a religion solely based on rationality. Despite the fact that reason and rationality are features connected to Protestants in Brontë’s novels, this is clearly not the case when taken to the utmost extreme, as in Eliza’s case. Though Lucy is the British character who above all flirts with Rome, as numerous examples have shown, when all is said and done, it is Reason she entreats – and by extension the creed it represents.

The last topic that I wish to address in this section is spiritual independence. The importance of the Bible in Protestantism has already been mentioned, and it is contrasted to the importance of the Church and its clergy in Catholicism. When writing about Brontë’s time at Pensionnat Héger, Sue Lonoff makes the observation that “[t]he Bible was her bulwark and her weapon. It also gave her a perceptible advantage over the other students and teachers, since Catholics did not study it as she had” (lxii). Though being a minister’s daughter undoubtedly influenced her Biblical knowledge, her Protestant upbringing did in other words give her a better understanding of the Bible than her Catholic peers. This can also be said of the British characters on the Continent in her novels. Lucy’s use of the Bible has been discussed above, and according to Thormählen, this use in order to withstand Père Silas’ efforts to convert her, parallels the figures of anti-Catholic writings “who cling to their Bibles as tenaciously as their ‘Papist’ counterparts clutch their crucifixes” (31).

Nowhere does this reliance on the individual and their personal relationship with God and the Bible, contrasted to the Catholic dogma, make itself clearer than in the case of the confession. Whereas Catholics confess their sins to a priest, who thus absolves them of their sins in the name of God, Protestants confess directly to God. “For Protestants, private auricular confession represents an unwarranted, even unholy, intrusion into the individual conscience and the soul’s relationship to God,” writes Clarke (980). It has already been stated

that the large role the clergy has in Catholicism was one of the main differences to Protestantism, and according to Clarke the role the Catholic priests played in confession would thus be considered unholy. This point of contest could not be made clearer than Lucy declaring: “Man, your equal, weak as you, and not fit to be your judge” (*V* 200). This statement is made shortly after her visit to the Catholic church, and though, as we will later see, she is drawn towards Catholicism, this point is perhaps the one which best epitomises her scepticism towards it. When Lucy is in the church, she is at first “[m]echanically obedient” (*V* 178). This is not one of her usual character traits, and might accordingly be indebted to her whereabouts – that is, the Catholic atmosphere might be infectious. This phrase furthermore echoes that of Sylvie in *The Professor*, whose “automaton-air” and obedience is stressed (*TP* 85). However, Lucy refuses to confess, despite being in a confessional – but she is tempted. Firstly, she repeatedly stresses that she was sane on that evening: “I was not delirious: I was in my sane mind... I could not be delirious” (*V* 177). Secondly, she reflects that “[t]o take this step [into the confessional] could not make me more wretched than I was; it might soothe me” (*V* 178). However, when she has entered the confessional it seems to be the company of the priest, rather than the sacrament, that she craves: “the mere relief of communication in an ear which was human and sentient... had done me good” (*V* 179). She is still adhering to the belief that priests do not have the right to judge or absolve one of sins, as they are no more than mortal men; judgement can be given by God alone. Clark-Beattie writes extensively about Lucy’s “confession,” and asserts that by refusing to confess, she is proving to be “a worthy member of the English community from which she has fled” (824). Though she is tempted, her managing to refuse to perform the Catholic sacrament, in other words means that she is – notwithstanding being there in the first place – reaffirming her Protestant British identity.

The image of the confessional can also be found in *Jane Eyre*, though it is not nearly as explicit as the scene in *Villette*. In the first chapter of the novel, Jane is reading in a window nook while hiding behind a curtain. The description of the enclosed corner evokes images of the booth used for the Catholic sacrament, as one side is covered with a curtain, and the other a window – not with a priest on the other side, but with the world. It is the omnipresence of her God that takes the place of the priest, mirroring how Protestants are meant to confess directly to God. The curtain furthermore separates Jane from her family, who, as has been argued, are linked with both European and, especially in the case of Eliza, Catholic qualities. Jane is of course not performing a religious confession in this scene, but as

this confessional is the first image in the opening chapter of a supposed autobiography, it is possible to think of the story that she is about to narrate as her confession.

In an article written by George Henry Lewes in 1850, the concept of the individual's spiritual freedom is expressively advocated: "The master-principle of Protestantism... is the liberty of private judgement. It is the protest of the free soul against the authority of man... [M]en must declare themselves either for the Pope or for Free Thought" (quoted in Clarke 981). Brontë was evidently familiar with this and agreed with its message (Clarke 981). This article addresses one of the central conflicts between Protestants and Catholics in the Victorian era, and in the phrase "the protest of the free soul against the authority of man," it is clearly implied that it is the Catholic Church which stands for the authority of man. That is, Protestantism is viewed as the advocate for freedom of thought. Such a message complies with the aforementioned findings in Brontë's novels, and shows that she was not alone in her views regarding spiritual freedom. Furthermore, Lewes' alignment of the role of free thought in Protestantism with the Pope in Catholicism addresses the perceived absurdity of influence and power tied up in one individual, at the expense of millions of others. The power of the clergy and their influence over their flock is thus something that is presented as a feature of Catholicism in Brontë's novels.

As will have become apparent to the reader by now, *Shirley* has not played a large part in this chapter. The main reason for this is that it deals with the tension between Catholics and Protestants to a lesser extent than the other three novels. Nevertheless, there are certain elements of the story that can be associated with this conflict, and these relate to the role of the clergy. First of all, Caroline Helstone, one of the main characters, reflects that "[t]he Romish religion especially teaches renunciation of self, submission to others, and nowhere are found so many grasping tyrants as in the ranks of the Romish priesthood" (S 149). This remark comments upon many of the previous statements regarding the view of the Catholic clergy in Brontë's works. The "submission to others" is undoubtedly referring to submission to priests, and the role of the individual that is so important in Protestantism is heavily downgraded.

Caroline is not the only tool that is employed in *Shirley* to comment on the role of Catholic priests – it can also be found in the portrayal of Miss Ainley. First introduced in the chapter "Old Maids," Miss Ainley is described as a good person doing her utmost to improve the conditions of the poor, despite having few means herself. Notwithstanding her charitable actions, she is seldom thanked or praised (S 156-157). At first glance this character might not seem to have any connection to Catholicism. Nevertheless, her life resembles that of a nun,



she is referred to as a saint (*S* 156), and J. Russell Perkin links her way of living to the life advocated by Tractarianism (399), the aforementioned Anglo-Catholic movement which sought to reinstate certain Catholic beliefs and practices into the Church of England. Additionally, *Shirley*'s narrator likens Miss Ainley to "a Sister of Charity" (*S* 156), a charitable organisation which, though it arrived in London in the 1830s, stemmed from France (Rosengarten and Smith, note 156, *S* 156). In other words, it is an organisation with Catholic roots. Furthermore, the following passage illustrates the extreme devotion she has towards the ministry, something which, as previously argued, is a trait given to Catholics:

The clergy were sacred beings in Miss Ainley's eyes: no matter what might be the insignificance of the individual, his station made him holy. The very curates – who, in their trivial arrogance, were hardly worthy to tie her patten-strings, or carry her cotton umbrella, or check woollen-shawl – she, in her pure, sincere enthusiasm, looked upon as sucking saints. No matter how clearly their little vices and enormous absurdities were pointed out to her, she could not see them: she was blind to ecclesiastical defects: the white surplice covered a multitude of sins. (*S* 227)

In this excerpt one can clearly see that features connected to Catholicism are employed, and the effect this has is to expose the supposed ludicrousness it is to put the clergy on a pedestal. When the narrator goes as far as saying that she perceives the clergy as holy, Miss Ainley is not merely linked to Catholicism and the elevated role of priests, but to the ultimate symbol of the denomination: namely the "Holy Father" the Pope. Moreover, her viewing the curates as saints-to-be, despite the narrator's denunciation of them, exemplifies the moral blindness such elevation can lead to. This sanctification of the clergy echoes an episode that is described by Brontë in a letter to her father, where she writes about her experience at a meeting for the Roman Catholic Society of St. Vincent de Paul, in which a cardinal was present. She was one of only two Protestants there, and she notes how "[t]he audience seemed to look up to [the cardinal] as a god" (*L II* 641). What this illustrates, along with all the examples from *Shirley*, is that the elevated status of the clergy borders on sacrilege in the novels. Not only are they supposedly determining judgement, beliefs and morals, but they are also presented as borderline deities to their subjects.

Finally, to let there be no doubt of how the spiritual freedom of Protestantism differs from Catholicism in the novels, the latter denomination is connected to slavery. The narrator of *Villette* goes as far as saying that "[e]ach mind was being reared in slavery" when describing the pupils at Mme. Beck's school (*V* 141). It is furthermore noted that "great pains were taken to hide chains with flowers: a subtle essence of Romanism pervaded every

arrangement” (*V* 140). The remark about hiding chains with flowers in particular emphasises a belief that Catholicism is luring people in under false pretences, denying its followers of the freedom Protestants have. Clark-Beattie has labelled the Catholic Church as presented in *Villette* as “institutional tyranny” (823), a term that not only aptly illustrates the cruel and oppressive powers the Church comes to represent, but locates the faults to lie with the institution itself, rather than its specific beliefs. Slavery of the soul is essentially what Catholicism stands for in the novels. As has been noted, M. Paul is the only Continental character that deviates from his Catholic peers, and this can also be seen in Lucy characterising him as being “a freeman, and not a slave” (*V* 545). These words show that contrary to being a property of the church, he has the freedom to choose what to believe – and that might be the kind of Catholicism that could be endorsed in Brontë’s novels.

### **1.3 Approaching a Truce: Exploring the Paradox in *Villette***

The battle between British Protestantism and Continental Catholicism is nowhere better epitomised than in the numerous arguments between Lucy and M. Paul in *Villette*. For this reason, it is this aspect that has been examined the most among scholars who have looked at anti-Catholicism in Brontë’s works. There seems of late to be a general agreement among scholars that *Villette* is not simply the anti-Catholic novel it was thought to be (e.g. Armitage 209, Clark-Beattie 821). Besides from Lucy finding certain elements of Catholicism appealing, something which will be discussed shortly, these critics tend to base this interpretation on the (at least intended) intermarriage between a Protestant and a Catholic. There are some, among them Michael E. Schiefelbein, that explain the union of Lucy, whose anti-Catholic sentiments permeate the novel, and M. Paul, as Brontë’s wish fulfilment because of her unrequited love towards Héger (quoted in Clarke 968). Others, like Edgren-Bindas, on the other hand claim that it is due to Brontë being drawn towards the Catholic Church (253). Both of these readings are biographical, so there is of course no way to accurately pinpoint the reason – and first and foremost perhaps not a great need to. For the purposes of this thesis, the main reason it is important to understand these two characters is not that they may or may not be reflections of Brontë herself and Héger. Rather, it is important to understand them because it in their conversations that the link between being British and Protestant, and European and Catholic is most explicitly addressed in all of Brontë’s works, at the same time as both characters challenge this binary. It can be argued that the core of their arguments is not only about their religion, but their national identities, as

Lucy and M. Paul function as two poles: one doing her utmost to showcase the superiority of British women, the other doing his utmost to showcase their inferiority.

Furthermore, it should be noted that the vast majority of writings about the relationship between Protestantism and Catholicism in Brontë's novels focus solely on *Villette*. This is problematic, as the other three novels add to, rather than diminish, the anti-Catholic sentiments of *Villette*. By keeping the sole focus on *Villette* and the ambiguous relationship between Lucy and M. Paul, much is overlooked in the treatment of Catholicism in her other works. I have therefore allowed her other novels much room in this chapter. Nevertheless, the large role *Villette* plays in Brontë's establishment of the Protestant-Catholic conflict cannot be overlooked, and this section is therefore dedicated to examining the crucial bond between Lucy and M. Paul, in addition to the influences of the latter's tutor Père Silas.

M. Paul's first substantial appearance is in the chapter "The Fête," and it is here that the battle between Britain and France is first addressed. He tells Lucy and the French teacher she quarrels with that "we will settle the dispute according to form: it will only be the old quarrel of France and England" (*V* 154). It is not until he utters these words that the conflict in reality is addressed, though it is he that comes to stand for France and the Continent. This quarrel is also a matter of religion, and the battleground of Labassecour (or Belgium) calls to mind not only that final battle between Napoleon Bonaparte and the Duke of Wellington, but also a country torn between different religions. According to Longmuir, Belgium came to represent "a peculiarly domesticated or Anglicized French space on the continent, providing an unthreatening taste of French culture" in Victorian Britain, and she goes on to argue that the country also became a symbol of reconciliation between British and European values (170-177). That is, the setting of Belgium means that *Villette* can both be interpreted as a battleground in which French (or European) and British values and beliefs fight each other, but also as a place in which they can coexist. It is precisely this ambiguity which makes *Villette* so interesting, and the key relationship between Lucy and M. Paul so complex.

The numerous discussions and arguments between Lucy and M. Paul are not only between a British Protestant and a French Catholic, but also between two prospective partners. There are sexually charged undercurrents running throughout the novel, and there is a sense that some of their exchanges may not simply be outright disputes, but also playful banter. That being said, their vocal disagreements over the vices and virtues of each other's religion and nationality cannot be disregarded as mere flirtation. These arguments constitute some of the key criticism both of Catholicism and Protestantism in the novel, and tightly tie this to their prospective countries. M. Paul talks of Protestants and Englishwomen in the

same breath, letting there be no doubt that the two are synonymous in his eyes (*V* 228), and he later points to Lucy's "country and sect" as one (*V* 463). As to Lucy talking about her adversaries, little is done to separate the French, Labassecouriennes (Belgians) and any other European people, both when it comes to religion and national identity, which in a way further demonstrates the uniqueness of her own country.

I want to accentuate the role of Père Silas, as I will argue that M. Paul's bad sides are attributed to his old tutor. He functions as a metonym for the Roman Catholic Church, and thus comes to represent its supposed corruption. He is first described as a kind and thoughtful minister, assisting Lucy in her darkest hour. However, when he senses that his former pupil is falling in love with her, he turns into an enemy. M. Paul says that "Père Silas dropped dark hints" about her creed, hints that Lucy call "crafty Jesuit-slander" (*V* 463). After having "talked seriously and closely" about their denominations, Lucy says that "[M. Paul] was made thoroughly to feel that Protestants were not necessarily the irreverent Pagans his director has insinuated... I found that Père Silas... had darkly stigmatized Protestants in general" (*V* 463). Time and time again, it is Père Silas that is said to have filled M. Paul's head with ideas about the vices of Protestantism. According to Duthie, M. Paul grows, under the influence of Silas, to view Lucy as almost pagan (171). Indeed, Lucy remarks at one point that "[h]e could see in me nothing Christian: like many other Protestants, I revelled in the pride and self-will of paganism" (*V* 355). Accusing Lucy and her fellow Protestants of being pagan is a very serious accusation, and implies that her beliefs not only belong to a different creed, but that they do not belong in Christianity at all. Conversely, this parallels the view many Victorian Protestants had on Catholicism: it was often dubbed "pagan" by various Protestant denominations, among them Wesleyans (Paz 163) and Evangelicals (Murdoch 47). By turning this criticism on its head, *Villette* is – consciously or not – showing the irrationality of treating what is essentially the same religion, though it may be a different denomination, as being pagan. Nonetheless, whereas Père Silas' attitudes about Lucy being a heretic seem to offer an excuse for the narrator's denunciation of Catholics, and M. Paul's stigmatisation of Protestants is attributed to the influences of Père Silas, Lucy's stigmatisation of Catholics is not further examined. This is despite the fact that Lucy actually goes as far as aligning the Catholic Church with the devil: "[The Catholic Church says:] 'Look after your bodies; leave your souls to me. I hold their cure – guide their course: I guarantee their final fate.' A bargain, in which every true Catholic deems himself a gainer. Lucifer just offers the same terms" (*V* 141). M. Paul is employing similar language, and says that at one point when he looks at Lucy, "I thought Lucifer smiled" (*V* 462). In other words,

both sides are employing the same analogies and showing similar prejudices and animosity, but only one side is given an explanation for their attitudes. The consequence is that M. Paul's critique of Protestantism comes off as something indebted to "Jesuit-slander," whereas Lucy's critique of Catholicism is presented as natural.

M. Paul and Père Silas are both connected to Jesuitism. This is of particular importance, as Jesuits were the most disliked kind of Catholics and were given fewer liberties by the Catholic Relief Act of 1847 than other Catholics (Peschier 284). Diana Peschier writes that British Protestants in the Victorian era "spread rumour, suspicion and fear, postulating a grand conspiracy by the Church of Rome to gain dominion over the British people by the infiltration of their homes and their schools by Jesuits" (283). This means that by making Silas – and especially M. Paul – a Jesuit, Brontë dips into these feelings. The consequence of this would naturally be that Victorian readers would have an even more malevolent attitude towards the characters. Accordingly, the fact that in the end the protagonist's fiancé turns out not only to be a Catholic, but a Jesuit, is a strong signal that the novel is attempting a kind of reconciliation between the two creeds. However, towards the end of the novel, Lucy says that "the Propaganda itself [could not] make [M. Paul] a real Jesuit" (V 545). Rather than her heavily stereotypical notions of what constitutes a Jesuit having been challenged and Lucy reconsidering her views, this statement merely signifies the strength of her love towards him. Presumably, to her mind, a "real" Jesuit would be someone who complies with her contemporaries' notion of what Jesuits were: "natural villains" (Wolffe, "Jesuit" 310). When she finds that M. Paul does not adhere to her ideas of a Jesuit, she does not consider re-evaluating her prejudices about Jesuits, but rather comes to the conclusion that he cannot be a "proper" Jesuit, as he is too good. Instead of challenging stereotypes, the novel merely exempts M. Paul from them. It is precisely this way of thinking which can undermine the argument that *Villette* is advocating religious tolerance to some degree, and further strengthens the novel's place in the anti-Catholic category.

Edgren-Binas has labelled M. Paul the "most Catholic character in *Villette*" (253), a statement I strongly disagree with. He might be the Catholic character who is described in the most detail, but that is because he is the most fleshed-out character in the novel apart from the protagonist. Far from being the most Catholic character, there are actually several signs in the text that separate him from the Catholic Church. As already argued, he is shown to detest lying, one of the qualities that frequently recur among Catholic characters, and Lucy praises "his frank fashion, which knew not secretiveness" (V 463). Moreover, through he is shown to be spying, he openly admits it, instead of attempting to hide it, which is a great contrast to the

other Catholic teachers, both in *Villette* and *The Professor*. Furthermore, Lucy says: “He was born honest, and not false – artless, and not cunning – a freeman, and not a slave” (*V* 545). Once again M. Paul is linked to honesty, a trait that is usually reserved for Protestants in Brontë’s novels. Additionally, the mention of him not being a slave also distances him from Catholicism, as I have argued that the Catholic Church is linked to images of slavery. As the previous paragraph argued, he is also in the end detached from Jesuitism. All of these features differ greatly from those that the mass of European students and teachers are given.

Just like there are factors separating M. Paul from Catholicism, there are factors that link Lucy to the same creed, and it becomes clear that Lucy is drawn to certain aspects of Catholicism. I have previously argued that Lucy shares many similarities with a nun. Despite having already mentioned that there were three Protestant chapels in *Villette*, Lucy nevertheless takes refuge in a Catholic church when she is in need of help. Moreover, when she finds a Catholic pamphlet in her desk, she notes, though she ridicules its message, that “I lent to it my ear very willingly... it possessed its own spell, and bound my attention at once” (*V* 457). When talking about the three different Protestant churches she has attended, Lucy says something which is vital in this regard: “I respected them all, though I thought that in each there were faults of form; incumbrances, and trivialities” (*V* 464). One of the churches in question is the Anglican church, so she is not merely talking about dissenting creeds. This is one of the strongest proofs in *Villette* that the novel is not fully endorsing the Church of England and other Protestant denominations. It echoes something said by the narrator in *Shirley*: “Britain would miss her church, if that church fell. God save it! God also reform it!” (*S* 254). Though these statements of course cannot be compared to the multitude of Catholic criticism, they nevertheless open up the possibility for criticism of the Anglican Church as well, and show that the British characters are not wholly uncritical of their own denomination.

As previously contended, Lucy displays many nun-like characteristics. In relation to this, it is worth noting the role M. Paul comes to have for her. Edgren-Bindas and Kathryn Bond Stockton are among those who have noted that M. Paul becomes a Christ figure to Lucy (Edgren-Bindas 253; Stockton 99). Lisa Wang furthermore links the storm in which M. Paul is assumed to drown to the apocalypse and the return of Christ (353). M. Paul’s name can support these arguments. He shares his first name with Paul the Apostle, one of the most important Christian preachers in the first century, and his last name Emanuel is according to the Gospel of Matthew another name for Jesus: “Behold, a virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is,

God with us” (Matt 1.23). M. Paul is thus irrevocably linked to Jesus, and Lucy to a nun. Père Silas tells Lucy that M. Paul “has rendered it impossible to himself to ever marry: he has given himself to God and to his angel-bride as much as if he were a priest, like me” (*V* 436). Though this may be the priest’s attempt to dissuade Lucy from pursuing M. Paul’s affections, it can also be seen as M. Paul, like Lucy being a metaphorical nun for the rest of life, being a metaphorical priest. It is impossible for either to marry. This is a clear foreshadowing that the marriage between Lucy and M. Paul could never be more than a prospective one. Additionally, upon learning of M. Paul’s tragic love story, Lucy professes him to be “my Christian hero” (*V* 441). This might foreshadow the fate that is to be bestowed upon him at the very end, the same fate that befell upon Jesus and countless martyrs thereafter: death. Nevertheless, it is too simple to attribute Lucy’s devotion towards him as only that of a devotee – one should not forget that she is passionately in love with him. The bond between the two lovers is so strong that though they are years and continents apart, they remain devoted until the very end.

However, when all aspects are taken into account, *Villette* does not simply claim that Protestantism is perfect and that Catholicism is the root of all evil. If it did, it would be hard to explain Lucy’s union with a Catholic man and a largely sympathetic description of a Jesuit priest. *Villette* is actually unique amongst its contemporary anti-Catholic novels in imagining a union between a Catholic and a Protestant (Clarke 973). According to Thormählen, the novel’s “comfortable contemplation of a mixed marriage” is a sign that it was ahead of its time and did not strictly adhere to the prevailing attitudes of the Victorian Era (35). Likewise, Clarke argues that *Villette* in the end advocates tolerance and understanding between Protestantism and Catholicism (969), and Wong suggests that the novel can be seen to challenge the conventional borders between countries, cultures and religions (2). These critics may be partially right, as there is a resolution approaching at the end of the novel. Not a resolution in the sense as one denomination coming out as victorious, but rather the two coming to a mutual understanding that they are after all believing in the same god. “[Y]ou believe in God and Christ and the Bible, and so do I,” Lucy admits (*V* 462), and M. Paul acknowledges that “I see we worship the same God, in the same spirit, though by different rites” (*V* 424). The latter’s final words in the novel are: “There is something in its ritual I cannot receive myself, but it is the sole creed for ‘Lucy’” (*V* 545). It can be perceived as a paradox that the novel so unashamedly criticises Catholicism from the very beginning, while at the same time uniting Protestant Lucy and Catholic M. Paul. Nonetheless, despite this reconciliatory end, it is very telling that they do not end up together, as M. Paul is

presumably killed in a storm. Though it certainly is true that the relationship between Lucy and M. Paul complicates the image of Brontë being fiercely anti-Catholic, one does not need to look further than to her other novels to see that the portrayal of Catholics as depraved and immoral is a regular occurrence. Nevertheless, as *Villette* was the last novel Brontë wrote, it is also possible to see it as growth on the author's part.

Contrary to the majority of critics, Nicholas Armitage is careful about using the word anti-Catholic about Brontë's novels. Instead, he contends, her novels criticise "religious 'fanaticism,'" which is just as much aimed at Evangelicals as Catholics (211). While the criticism towards Evangelical characters is clear, especially in *Shirley* and in the character Mr Brocklehurst in *Jane Eyre*, I believe it is wrong to equate this critique with that of Catholicism. Throughout this chapter I have presented a multitude of evidence that exemplifies the superiority of Britain over Europe and Protestantism over Catholicism. Though I have presented examples that complicate this binary, the overwhelming denouncement of Catholicism is hard to ignore. However, in one regard I do agree with Armitage: namely that Lucy was Brontë's "way of exploring the paradox" between the two creeds (211). She is the character that more than anyone exemplifies the appeal that Catholicism can have in the novels; and as she never returns to Britain, she shows that it is possible to be happy in Europe, which necessarily must mean that it is not simply the complete opposite of a virtuous and glorious Britain. In the end, what is shown to be able to transgress national and religious differences is love. Ultimately, it is this virtue that above all is advocated for all Christians: "Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these" (Mark 12.31). This can be seen in the fact that, with the exception of *Jane Eyre*, all of the protagonists marry or become engaged to a foreigner. However, as I move on to chapter two and *Jane Eyre* takes centre stage, I will argue that Jane *does* in a sense marry a foreigner: because even more than Lucy in this chapter explores the paradox between Catholicism and Protestantism, Rochester will in the next chapter explore the paradox between British and European sexuality.



## 2 Sexuality and Morality

Whereas the first chapter of this thesis presented a multitude of sources establishing the importance of religion to British identity, matters become more complicated in this chapter. Compared to religion, sexuality is a less obvious part of a national identity. As explained previously, Protestantism was the key factor separating Britain from the Catholic Continent – the relationship between Britain’s national identity and sexuality is not as tangible. Nevertheless, I believe the issue of sexuality and morality to be so central to the construction of a Britishness separate from a European identity in Brontë’s novels that it deserves a chapter of its own. Though the criticism is more subtly executed than with religion, it is still very much present in her works.

This chapter can be considered as a natural expansion of the first chapter, as the churches, be they Anglican or Catholic, had long defined correct moral behaviour. Moreover, as pointed out by multiple critics, nationalism and sexuality have always gone hand in hand. One of these critics is the sociologist Sam Pryke, who asserts that this connection has largely been overlooked in favour of other factors, and argues that sexuality is so often part of a national stereotype because sex is frequently viewed as something “humorous and intriguing” and therefore “lends itself to the very nature and use of the construct” (530-534). In other words, employing stereotypes associated with sex opens up for ridicule and criticism of the “other” nationality. This, as will be shown, is something that can be traced throughout Brontë’s works. Other critics who write on the importance sexuality has for national identity include Miguel Angel Gonzalez-Torres and Aranzazu Fernandez-Rivas, who have called sexuality “a cornerstone of [national] identity” (136). Therefore, since this thesis sets out to examine the tools used in Brontë’s novels to construct a British identity separate from a European one, sexuality quickly became a natural part of the equation.

It was long a common misconception that Victorians did not talk about sexuality at all; this, however, John Maynard insists, changed with the publication of the work *The Other Victorians* by Steven Marcus in 1966 (vii), in which Marcus explores what he calls “the sexual subculture... of Victorian Britain” (Marcus xvi). Therefore, when Walter E. Houghton wrote in the 1950s that “sex [in the Victorian age] was a secret... No one mentioned it,” it is wholly inaccurate (353). Chiara Beccalossi and Ivan Crozier also discredit this myth, arguing that “[n]o longer are the Victorians sexless moral beasts haunting the obscure pages of history,” but rather that they were concerned with desire and its surrounding problems (1-2).

These issues form an important aspect in all of Brontë's novels, and – as will be shown shortly – the author did not shy away from exploring them in detail.

Before delving into the analyses of the books, I would like to point out some of the connections between religion and sexuality. Obviously, churches were the institutions that above all laid out the rules of accepted sexual behaviour, and they therefore played a crucial role in establishing sexual norms. However, that did not stop Britons from connecting the Catholic Church with sexual behaviour. One of Brontë's contemporaries, Henry Spencer Ashbee, who published erotic literature, described the Catholic Church as “ascetically denying us the gratification of our impulses and hypocritically wallowing in a wholly sexualized existence, making love over the nasty sty” (quoted in Marcus 63). Furthermore, the British media in general often depicted Catholics as “deluded dupes of men who lusted for sex, money, and power” in the Victorian era (Paz 1-2). What these examples show is that, despite the vows of chastity made by both nuns and the clergy, many nineteenth-century Britons believed Catholics were highly sexual beings. Not only does this contribute to the taunting of Catholic Europeans, but it also mocks and ridicules its ecclesiastic figures as being hypocrites.

Keeping all this in mind, a pattern emerges in Brontë's novels in which Continental licentiousness is contrasted to British virtuousness. Especially in *Villette* and *The Professor*, which take place on the Continent, the main characters frequently meet both European men and women who are sexually outgoing. Maynard contends that “there is a strong criticism of the element of mere licentiousness presumed to be deeply embedded in Gallic culture” in Brontë's novels (79). Many of the British characters in the novels consider sexual restraint and alleged correct moral behaviour as an important part of what sets them apart from Europeans, and assume a sense of moral superiority over the people of the Continent. Additionally, as with religion, British characters who are less than virtuous are often connected to Europe, in order to accentuate that “bad” behaviour is something European. However, the British man stands as a sort of middle ground between the two extremes, as he is protected by the Victorian double standard and thus granted a much greater sexual freedom than his female counterpart. Examples of this include Edward Rochester in *Jane Eyre* and William Crimsworth in *The Professor*, both of whom will be discussed in greater detail in this chapter.

Brontë was subject to much criticism by her contemporaries because of how freely sex was addressed in her works (Houghton 357). In particular, the conversations between Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre* in which they talk openly were perceived as “coarse” and

“immoral,” and when some members of the press guessed that the author might be female, the supposed indecency of the novels became even worse to some (Xiaojie 66-67). Some contemporary critics were particularly aggravated by Rochester’s actions. An unsigned review of *Jane Eyre* in *Spectator* from 1847 talks of the “hardly ‘proper’ conduct between a single man and a maiden in her teens,” and in one of the most famous early reviews of the novel, Elizabeth Rigby writes that “Mr Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws both of God and man” (*Spectator* quoted in Allott 75; Rigby quoted in Allott 107). Though it favours the novel, a review by *Church of England Quarterly Review* also condemns the union between Jane, “the heroine of... *only* morality,” and Rochester, “the hero of... none” (*Church of England Quarterly Review* quoted in Smith, note 1, *L I* 46). I will argue that part of this reception is because of Rochester’s Europeanised – and therefore undesired – sexuality.

A freer sexual moral is often connected with France in particular, both in Brontë’s society at the time and in her novels. This is in contrast to religion, which is mostly concerned with Europe as a whole. Colley points out that by associating what were considered unsuitable ways of acting for women with the French, British moralistic writers could present such actions as “alien and unwelcome” (257). In other words, by relating undesirable traits with France, the novels could dip into the aforementioned centuries-long tension and hatred toward the country, and thereby discourage any kind of behaviour associated with the country. British eighteenth century-writers who wrote on “proper female conduct” often used French women’s alleged lecherous nature as an example of something that should be avoided in their own country (Colley 256). Even the women’s rights champion Mary Wollstonecraft was not above deeming her French sisters as “too vain, too frivolous, too self-indulgent, too prone to sensuality to be the model for rational and modest womankind” (Colley 256). This great dislike of France carried into the following century, in which, according to some of Pryke’s findings, matters went as far as some Britons partly blaming the French Revolution on the “dangerously sexualised” French (538). Brontë’s contemporary, poet and social critic Matthew Arnold, blamed French sexuality for losing the Franco-Prussian War, and went on to say that the “mischief lay in the sensuality itself and in the French not recognising it as a danger to them” (quoted in Varouxakis 163). Even in the twenty-first century, Britons repeatedly think of the French as being “skirt-chasing” (Winterman) and having a “sexual penchant” (Longhi and Larrivée 14), which demonstrates how ingrained these stereotypes have become in the British national consciousness. What all of these examples of French stereotypes have in common is that they transfer undesirable

traits onto “the other.” By continuously deeming supposed improper sexual behaviour as something French, they play on people’s opposition toward the country in order to dissuade them from behaving in a similar manner.

However, though France will play a key role in this chapter, I will also include the remainder of the European Continent when looking at sexuality in Brontë’s novels. This is chiefly because the novels do not actively distinguish between different European characters. Be they French, Belgian or Flemish, the multitudes of Continental identities do not seem to matter much to the British characters. Though some of the European characters explicitly take pride in their particular national identity – for example, Robert Moore is outraged at Joe Scott when Joe in turns believes him to be French, Dutch and Flemish, rather than Anversois (*S* 50) – it is not the foreign characters’ specific national identities that are key, but rather their non-Britishness.

Nonetheless, there is also another side to the argument that alleged improper sexual behaviour is transferred to Europe, and that is the fact that the desirable and exciting aspects of sexuality are also projected onto the French and other Europeans. As pointed out in the previous chapter, all of Brontë’s main characters end up with a European or Europeanised partner, and this is such a regular pattern that it is hard to explain it away as a mere coincidence. What is vital is that none of these characters – Robert and Louis in *Shirley*, M. Paul in *Villette*, Frances in *The Professor* and Rochester in *Jane Eyre* – are complete stereotypes of the nations they represent. They are all given redeeming qualities that make them stand out from their stereotyped countrymen and make them closer to their British partners, some of which have been addressed in the previous chapter and some that will be addressed in this or the next chapters. Language learning is also an important component of most of these relationships, but will be covered in the final chapter of the thesis.

Sexuality in Brontë’s novels is often linked to images of the British Empire and its colonial subjects, which may be another factor contributing to the fact that the role of Europe and European figures have been given little critical attention. The most common study object regarding foreign sexuality in these works is Bertha Mason in *Jane Eyre*, but as she is not European, she falls outside the interests of this thesis. There is something distinctly different between the images of the sexual racial “other,” like Bertha, and the sexual white European: whereas the latter in large parts is connected to Catholicism and the stereotype of especially French unfaithfulness, the former is connected to animalistic imagery and plays on the idea of people from the colonies being savages. Moreover, the Empire was something that the British had a political and cultural hold over, which was not the case with Continental Europe.

Therefore the power relations are also very different. That being said, however, the novels do sometimes evoke images of common nineteenth-century stereotypes of colonised people when talking about Europeans, for example when Lucy calls her pupils “a stiff-necked tribe” and when Dr John calls M. Paul “savage-looking” (*V* 91, 247). Susan L. Meyer contends that William’s conduct at the girls’ school echoes an “act of colonization” because of the use of “black” imagery (248), an argument which speaks to the links between the inferior Europe and Empire, and is made stronger by the fact that one Briton is enough to dominate dozens of “others.” Excessive sexuality is perhaps the most important of these colonial stereotypes that are transferred to European characters. It is not hard to see connection between the “giant propensities” of Bertha (*JE* 261) and the rampant sexual desire the British characters in Brontë’s novels ascribe to Europeans. Additionally, Britons considered themselves to belong to a “masculine” culture, and the French to belong to an “effeminate” one (Colley 257), and by feminising the other culture, the Britons essentially found a way to belittle them, not unlike what they did with the Empire. This feminisation of Europe can be found frequently in Brontë’s novels, and is something I will get back to later in this chapter.

Lastly, when talking about morals in the nineteenth century, one aspect that should not be overlooked is the role of the novel. French novels in particular play a significant role in Brontë’s fiction, and given France’s particular prominence in this chapter, this is something that should be addressed here. Prior to her excursion to the Continent, Brontë had become familiar with French novelists, whose writings – despite having a certain admiration for them – she considered to have “immoral tendencies” (Duthie 18). If a literary character from the Victorian period enjoyed French novels, it was a clear indication of “moral alarm” (*Dames* 629). However, there is no indication in Brontë’s novels that the act of reading in itself makes the reader immoral. It was pointed out in the first chapter of this thesis that reading is something that distinguishes the British characters from the European in Brontë’s novels, as it harks back to the Protestant importance of relying on one’s own interpretation of the Bible – therefore, it would be contradictory to say that reading makes the reader immoral. It is rather the content of, especially the French, novels that may be immoral. This can for example be seen in *The Professor*, during a section in which William ponders over the likeliness that he can have an affair with Mdlle. Reuter, a topic that will be explored in detail shortly. Here William confesses that “modern French novels are not to my taste either practically or theoretically” (*TP* 157). This suggests that he considers the moral elements of the novel, mostly likely regarding infidelity, to be at odds with his British notions of morality. Moreover, in *Shirley*, the eponymous main character is told off by her uncle

Sympson, who exclaims: “You read French. Your mind is poisoned with French novels. You have imbibed French principles” (*S* 460). Though Shirley in no way has “imbibed French principles,” this serves to illustrate the moral danger with which some connected French novels. However, it is in relation to this important to note, as Barker does, that the Brontë sisters’ novels had, according to “polite Victorians,” “a complete lack of that satisfying morality which doled out rewards to the innocent and good and punished those who had done wrong” (90). In other words, Brontë’s notion of morality was at odds with some of her contemporaries.

## 2.1 Tempted by European Sexuality: William Crimsworth

To some of Brontë’s characters, European sexuality represents both fear and appeal, and William Crimsworth in *The Professor* is the most evident example of this. One aspect that sets *The Professor* apart from Brontë’s other published novels is the fact that it has a male protagonist and narrator. This novel is, according to William A. Cohen, one of the few nineteenth-century novels written by a woman that has a male narrator, and to Cohen, this narrator is the novel’s “most remarkable feature” (444). By narrating the story through the male gaze, Brontë can explore sexuality more openly than she could through a female character. For this reason it becomes vital in the examination of the relationship between gender, nationality and sexuality in her works. The fact that *The Professor* is narrated by a man and written under a male pseudonym undoubtedly also meant that Brontë was freer to write about sexuality, as the topic would most likely be deemed unsuitable for a female (Case 85; Kauer 169). However, it should still be noted that she wrote her other novels under the same male pseudonym.

When William Crimsworth first arrives in Belgium, he soon discovers that his colleague M. Pelet’s opinions about sexual moral are quite different from his own, British views: “He was not married and I soon perceived he had all a Frenchman’s, all a Parisian’s notions about matrimony and women; I suspected a degree of laxity in his code of morals” (*TP* 58-59). As can be seen, this code of morals is first and foremost characterised as French, something that is bound to reverberate with the British contemporary reader; the French ways are the wrong ways. Furthermore, William does not have to explicitly state what these French “notions about matrimony and women” are, as the reader is supposed to know that this is synonymous with illicit sex. M. Pelet in turn describes William as “cold” and “frigid,” words that, as will be discussed later, are often used by Europeans to describe Britons in Brontë’s

novels (*TP* 80). Duthie asserts that William is “most repelled by [M. Pelet’s] libertinism” (121), but I believe that though he may find M. Pelet’s sexual morals alarming at first, William himself comes to adapt some of his characteristics. As the story progresses, William comes to be increasingly influenced by this European attitude, and he will before long be tempted by these French “notions.”

The subplot regarding the romance between William and the directress at his school, Zoraïde Reuter, is central in this regard. Apart from Rochester, William is the character who most explicitly references sex in Brontë’s novels, as can be seen in the following excerpt, a passage which Patsy Stoneman identifies as an example of Brontë giving William “a brush with the ‘lax sexuality’ of the continental male” (121):

Pelet’s bachelor’s life had been passed in proper French style with due disregard to moral restraint, and I thought his married life promised to be very French also. He often boasted to me what a terror he had been to certain husbands of his acquaintance; I perceived it would not now be difficult to pay him back in his own coin... [Mdlle. Reuter’s] present demeanour towards me was deficient neither in dignity nor propriety – but I knew her former feeling was unchanged. Decorum now repressed, and Policy masked it, but Opportunity would be too strong for either of these – Temptation would shiver their restraints.

I was no pope – I could not boast infallibility – in short – if I stayed, the probability was that in three months’ time, a practical Modern French novel would be in full process of concoction under the roof of unsuspecting Pelet. (*TP* 156-157)

In this excerpt, William is contemplating the likeliness of him being able to carry out an affair with Mdlle. Reuter, who at this point has married M. Pelet. However, marital vows are not the only things on the line here, but also a part of his British identity. This can be supported by Carl Plasa, who argues that William “consistently associates sexuality with forms of foreignness, whether these be continental or Oriental, thus constituting it as something that threatens to infect and undo his sense of himself as an Englishman” (3). That is, in indulging in a sexual affair, he would be letting the lenient European sexuality take over his British restraint. In other words, were he to go through with it, he would not just be like a character taken from a “modern French novel,” but a Frenchman or European himself. To him, sexual restraint is part of what it is to be British, and – though he is infatuated with Mdlle. Reuter for a long time – his desire for her cannot outweigh his desire to hold on to his national identity. The characterisation of adultery and non-marital sex as being of “proper French style” and M. Pelet’s boasting of it furthermore conveys the idea that, to the mind of

the British, the French are proud of it and consider it correct behaviour. Therefore, if William were to take Mdlle. Reuter as his mistress, he would not only undo a key part of his identity, but he would be “proper French” – a trait that borders on sacrilege to a Briton in the Victorian era.

Furthermore, the fact that M. Pelet openly boasts to William about his previous infidelities is perhaps the single greatest factor separating the Frenchman from Brontë’s British men who travel to Europe and start to adapt part of the European way of life. In the excerpt above, William is clearly worried, not happy, about what might happen if he were to have an affair with Mdlle. Reuter. He admits that “[t]here was at once a sort of low gratification in receiving this luscious incense from an attractive and still young worshipper and an irritating sense of degradation in the very experience of the pleasure” (*TP* 154). That is, William is ashamed that he enjoys the thought of Mdlle. Reuter wanting him, much like Rochester in *Jane Eyre* is clearly regretful about his former liaisons. M. Pelet relishes it unashamedly, whereas William and Rochester do not, and therein lies an important difference.

One phrase in the abovementioned excerpt is worth taking special note of: “I was no pope.” As argued in the first chapter, *The Professor*, like Brontë’s other works, heavily criticises the Catholic Church and its representatives and followers. Furthermore, as mentioned previously in this chapter, they are also linked to a looser sexual moral. Therefore, the fact that William here invokes the comparison between being a pope and being chaste seems contradictory. Though the use of the word “pope” to describe someone who assumes infallibility far predates Brontë’s use of it (“Pope,” *OED*), this should not be disregarded as a mere matter of speech. It can, on the other hand, be interpreted as the following: if he *were* a pope, he would have jumped on the opportunity to have an affair. This becomes even more possible when considering the consequent phrase “I could not boast infallibility,” something the novel clearly does not present any Catholics as having, but rather the opposite. It could also suggest that a pope would use the idea of himself being infallible as an excuse to legitimise his actions – that is, carry out the affair. Contrary to this, William admits that he is fallible, but chooses to restrain himself. Moreover, by stating that he is not a pope, he is also distancing himself from both the Catholic creed and Continent. That being said, one can also regard this statement as William trying to assure himself that he is not turning European, as he is clearly tempted to conduct an affair with M. Pelet’s wife.

Another concept it is worth exploring in relation to William is the idea that he becomes “infected” with European sexuality. We are introduced to several British characters



who have lived so long in Europe that it seems they have indeed become “infected” with its morals. William explicitly mentions this contagious nature of sinful people when talking about “the infectious influence of the vice-polluted soul” (TP 157). There are other features than his feelings toward Mdlle. Reuter that suggest he has been “infected” with European sexuality. The first thing William does after having been shown a boarded up window that overlooks the school garden by M. Pelet, is trying to find a crack through which he can spy on the girls at his school (TP 54). He is “longing to tear it away” (TP 55), which is exactly what M. Paul does with a similar window in *Villette*, and is a sentiment that speaks to his sexual curiosity. In a later passage, William furthermore remarks that “a pretty doll, a fair fool might do well enough for the honey-moon” (TP 90), which echoes Rochester’s numerous “honeymoons” with European women.

However, William – and Rochester, who I will get back to shortly – are not the only characters in Brontë’s novels that seem to have been “contaminated” with European sexuality and morals. Hunsden in *The Professor* also falls within this category, as he is a frequent traveller to the Continent, and is a very unusual British character. When Hunsden is first introduced, William describes his appearance as being “the opposite to common-place,” which can suggest both an unusual appearance for a man and for a Briton (TP 21). William later declares that “he might be pronounced English,” where the word “might” once again casts doubt, and goes on saying that he “caught a dash of something Gallic” in his appearance (TP 24). In short, William sees in Hunsden “the idea of a foreigner” (TP 24). William remarks that he “had no English shyness” (TP 24), something that is similar to both his and Lucy’s descriptions of Europeans being too audacious and lewd, which will be examined in detail in the section regarding European women. Furthermore, it has previously been argued that the British saw themselves as masculine, and the French as feminine. Therefore, it is interesting to note that William believes Hunsden has “feminine... lineaments” (TP 29). His odd blend of various national characteristics leads, according to Shuttleworth, to William calling Hunsden’s gender identity into question (“Dynamics” 178). To the twenty-first century reader, it could even appear that Hunsden is gay. William remarks that there are “incompatibilities” between Hunsden’s “physique” and “morale” (TP 29), an observation that might suggest that part of his mind-set – his sexuality – is at odds with his body – a man. This would fall in line with the notion that the Continent, to the British Victorian, is sexually deviant. Shuttleworth furthermore argues that Hunsden’s “sexual indecipherability... is transposed into a whole series of further oppositions: angel/devil, English/French, sexual repression/licentiousness. Hunsden seems to unite the extremes of masculine dominance and

control with those of looser female sexuality” (*Psychology* 129). Though Shuttleworth’s starting point is Hunsden’s sexuality, I believe it is better to start with his nationality; that is, by not being confined to either camp – Britain or France – he is also denied confinement into the categories of masculinity or femininity, good or bad, sexually restrictive or sexually aggressive. When his national identity is drawn into question, so are all other parts of his identity. Hunsden, who seems to be in-between in every identity category, exemplifies the dangers of letting one’s national identity and allegiance stray, and the difficulty of placing him in either gender category mirrors the difficulty of pinpointing his national allegiance.

Labelled by Maynard as the story of “a Protestant saint following the narrow ways of rectitude among the deceitful, sensual, scheming Papists” (73), *The Professor* certainly highlights religious and sexual differences between the British protagonist and his European colleagues and pupils. One such instance has already been laid out, but that is not the only one. Maynard employs Biblical imagery and says that there is “a temptation of Eve (the narrator) by a wily snake of a woman” in the novel (73). That is, William is imagined as an Eve in the Garden of Eden, who is tempted by Zoraïde Reuter, the snake. What is most intriguing with this analogy to me, though Maynard himself does not explicitly point this out, is the fact that it swaps the genders: Eve is a man and the snake is a woman. This opens up the discussion of William’s masculinity – or lack thereof. As the idea of masculinity traditionally, and certainly in the nineteenth century, has been associated with sexual potency much more than femininity, thinking of William as a kind of feminine male Eve can also suggest a sexual purity that is contrasted to Mdlle. Reuter’s masculine advances. However, as with Hunsden, it can also be a sign that the masculine Britishness has been contaminated by the European femininity.

Contrary to his first infatuation with this “snake,” the epitome of the sexually aggressive European woman, William soon enough finds a better candidate for his affections in the half-Swiss, half-British Frances. She thinks of Britain as her “Promised Land” (*TP* 208), and often attacks Hunsden’s lack of love for the (or any) country. Her longing for Britain is a mark of her purity, but also part of what makes William fall in love with her. Her proficiency in English certainly excites William, and will be addressed in chapter three. It is telling that at the end of the novel, William moves back to Britain. As if to assure both himself and the reader that he has rid himself of the touch of “Europeanness” at the end of the novel, William explicitly mentions that he was a “faithful husband” to Frances when they have returned to his homeland (*TP* 213). Part of his reason for returning to Britain can be that he is afraid of relapsing into the European sexuality if he stayed – the controlled, British part

of his sexuality would bow down to the voracious European part. He is frightened that if he does not leave, he will “go native” – that is, act like a Frenchman (Buzard 186). Towards the end of the novel, William admits, in a key sentence that summarises his struggle between British and European sexualities: “It appeared then, that I too was a sensualist, in my temperate and fastidious way” (*TP* 190). He is admitting to himself that, like M. Pelet and other European men, he might be tempted to indulge in sensual pleasures – but importantly, he still maintains his British restraint. With a wife who is half British and half European, he himself in the end exhibits traits from both sides of the channel, with a kind of British Continental sexuality.

## 2.2 The European Woman

Nowhere is the contrast between British and European sexuality as clear as when examining the differences between the British and European women in Brontë’s works. The two different types seem to epitomise the virtuous domestic angel and the prostitute. This is of course a gross simplification, but it serves to show the dichotomy which often comes across in these novels. The most prominent examples of this are Rochester’s mistresses and Jane, who will be discussed in detail shortly. Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that both British and European women were subject to laws and norms vastly different than those that applied to men, and both Protestantism and Catholicism placed strong constraints on the correct behaviour for women (Clark-Beattie 829-830).

When talking about the female body in the Victorian era, Shuttleworth distinguishes between two binaries: the “spiritual and asexual, the shrine of imagination” and the “dark, dirty and sexually rapacious” (*Psychology* 126). In Brontë’s novels, these categories are very clearly connected to Britain and Europe respectively. Elements, like those mentioned by Shuttleworth, that are seen as threatening to Britain are attributed to the influence of something foreign. Thus, someone acting in a supposed unwanted way can be described as being “un-British.” Furthermore, much like many of the European men in Brontë’s novels are presented as either effeminate or hypermasculine, the European women are often presented as either very sexually attractive or very ugly. The attractiveness of the European women will be talked about more in this section of the chapter, because it is so closely tied to licentiousness in the novels. Examples of European women’s appearances being almost disgusting to the British narrators include Jane’s French teacher at Lowood who is “harsh and grotesque” (*JE* 39) and Madame Pelet in *The Professor* who, to William, is “ugly, as only continental old

women can be” (*TP* 59). These descriptions of European women can first and foremost be found in *Villette* and *The Professor*, so these novels will take precedence in this section of the thesis.

The previous chapter presented several examples of the supposed foulness the Catholic Church imposed on the schoolgirls in *Villette* and *The Professor*. Similarly, Lucy and William also depict a sexualisation of these girls and lay the blame on their schools’ religion. Since large parts of the action in *Villette* and *The Professor* take place at girls’ schools, it is also worth to examine these institutions in greater detail, as they have a great importance when it comes to sexuality. It is paramount that so many of their descriptions of European women are of young girls, as this increases the outrageousness the novels feel about their sexuality. Moreover, one can also find examples of Brontë employing images which were often used to disparagingly describe people of colour when talking about the sexual nature of Europeans. For example, Lucy refers to the girls at the school as a “wild herd” (*V* 88), and William claims that his students have “animal propensities” (*TP* 56). This latter description in particular harks back to racial stereotypes and specifically to Jane’s description of Bertha Mason. By invoking this imagery, the novels present the European sexuality as inhuman and – most importantly – something alien to Britain.

The European schoolgirls are first and foremost described as flirty, “dark-minded” and overly concerned about their appearance. From Lucy, we hear that “[m]any of the girls... were not pure-minded at all, very much otherwise,” and she singles out “[m]esdemoiselles Blanche, Virginie, and Angélique” who are the first students to disrupt her class and try to expel her from the school (*V* 157, 88). Lucy later adds that Blanche is “proud and handsome” and that Angélique is “vain” and “flirting,” and it is also implied that these two fake having migraine in order to be around the handsome Dr John (*V* 110-111). The discrepancy between the names of the girls, meaning “white,” “virginal” and “angelic” (Cooper, note 33, *V* 560), and these descriptions pokes fun at the hypocrisy imbedded in the school: it may purport to completely shield its students from vice, but the students nevertheless epitomise excessive sexuality. There are similar descriptions of the European pupils in *The Professor*, where William notes how a pupil “launches at me all sorts of looks, languishing, provoking, leering, laughing,” how another had “vicious propensities in her eye,” and that a third girl is “vulgar” (*TP* 83-84). After one of these tirades about the vices of his female students, William says:

Doubtless it will be thought that I ought now, by way of contrast, to shew something charming; some gentle virgin head, circled with a halo, some sweet personification

of Innocence, clasping the dove of peace to her bosom. No – I saw nothing of the sort and therefore cannot portray it. (*TP* 85)

If there had been any doubts previous to this, this account clearly states that the European girls at this school are the antithesis of innocence. That is not to say that all British girls are innocence personified, but rather that they are far superior to their European peers in this regard. Moreover, William mentions “virgin” and “halo,” words that recall Virgin Mary and the halo with which saints are often adorned with in ecclesiastical art, things that have a much larger presence in the Catholic faith than in the Protestant. Therefore, the fact that William uses these particular words to illustrate feminine innocence takes a stab at the girls’ religion, as the school is devoid of these virtues its religion celebrates. Even the British girls at the school are “losing every notion even of the first elements of religion as morals,” because they live in a Catholic, Belgian school (*TP* 86).

Lucy describes her first days as a teacher in Labassecour as seeming to be “on the edge of a moral volcano, that rumbled under my feet and sent sparks and hot fumes into my eyes” (*V* 91). The image of a volcano is particularly fitting here as it presents what Lucy believes to be immoral behaviour as something, when fully exposed, is deadly. The fact that excessive sexuality can be lethal is also appropriately demonstrated in the nun who used to live in the school building, and, as mentioned in chapter one, was presumably killed for breaking her vow of chastity. Indeed, the building themselves play a significant role in both *Villette* and *The Professor*. This is an idea that can be traced back to Michel Foucault’s first chapter of *The History of Sexuality*, in which he claims that “the architectural layout [of schools], the rules of discipline, and their whole internal organization: the question of sex was a constant preoccupation” (27). The question arises whether the schools breed passion by suppressing it. “A prison, as Foucault would say, defines or even creates the crime it encloses,” Maynard says about the separation between the sexes in the school in *Villette* (175). And it seems as if the novels take the same stance on this subject: by insisting on repressing every notion of sexuality, the schools are actually making their students more sexualised. Maynard goes as far as stating that the school in *Villette* “reeks of sex in its elaborate and prominent precautions of it” (80). Moreover, as it is a former monastery, the sexual nature of the school adds to the criticism of the supposed hypocrisy of the Catholic Church.

The link between religion and sexuality is also evident in *The Professor*. The clearest example of this is in the following reflection made by William, in which he describes the ways in which the girls in his school have been raised:

They were each and all supposed to have been reared in utter unconsciousness of vice – the precautions used to keep them ignorant, if not innocent, were innumerable; how was it then that scarcely one of those girls having attained the age of fourteen could look a man in the face with modesty and propriety? An air of bold, impudent flirtation or a loose, silly leer was sure to answer the most ordinary glance from a masculine eye. I know nothing of the arcana of the Roman-Catholic religion and I am not a bigot in matters of theology, but *I suspect the root of this precocious impurity, so obvious, so general in popish Countries, is to be found in the discipline, if not the doctrines of the Church of Rome.* (TP 82, my emphasis)

A stronger suggestion that the Church of Rome is to be blamed for the supposed sexual “impurity” of the Continent can hardly be made. Though he hesitates towards the end, William nevertheless suspects the reason for this “impurity” to be the disciplines of Rome. What is of a particular interest in this excerpt is the fact that he believes the young girls’ sexualisation to be blamed on a Catholic discipline in which they are supposed to know nothing about sex. It is hard to find a stronger argument in the novels that argues the link between complete sexual ignorance and oversexualisation. Moreover, this excerpt addresses an important part of European sexuality, as Brontë sees it: that it is completely sheltering children from any notions of sex. This is an important part of the novels’ denouncement of the European and Catholic way of approaching sexuality. Though it may seem paradoxical at first, by being left in the dark when it comes to matters of sex, the pupils will not have been encouraged or enabled to develop their sexual control, and this may be the reason for Lucy and William’s pupils being constantly described as sexualised. Furthermore, one can here clearly see that, at least according to William, it is a widespread belief that this is common practice in all Catholic countries. Besides, the fact that the people William describes are young girls furthermore adds to his outrage, hence the “precocious” impurity. As children, they are supposed to be the epitome of innocence, but this is something their religion has deprived them of. Briefly put, the alleged improper sexual nature of Catholic Europeans is blamed on their religion.

The headmistress of one of these schools, Zoraïde Reuter, serves as the incarnation of the sexually aggressive European woman. Buzard argues along the same line when he says that Mdlle. Reuter’s “character and establishment furnish the handiest of *échantillons*

[samples (my translation)] of ‘French’ femininity and Catholicism” (185). Whereas she is cold towards William when he has feelings for her, she becomes more attracted to him after he has given up on her and she has announced her engagement to M. Pelet. This fact alone, that she becomes interested in him after she has started planning her wedding, illustrates her lecherous nature. William believes that Mdlle. Reuter has admitted that she has “inclinations” towards him to M. Pelet, choosing that word in particular because “affection is a word at once too warm and too pure for the subject,” which suggests that her feelings toward him are “impure” – that is, sexual (*TP* 153). At one point she takes William to “l’allée défendue [the forbidden path (Cooper, note 4, *V* 564)],” a place in her garden that is forbidden for the students because it lies right next to the boys’ school. It is “the most sheltered nook in the enclosure,” and she is clearly attempting to seduce him (*TP* 90). Her own fiancé accuses her of having “a fit of lewd caprice” when she pursues William (*TP* 153). The narrator goes as far as saying that “[m]oral and physical Degradation... she regarded with indulgence” (*TP* 108), which suggests, as with M. Pelet, that she enjoys what she knows to be immoral. Importantly, the fact that she is the directress of the school insinuates that her sexual moral has influenced her pupils.

There is one character in these European novels that stands out among the crowd and seems to embody the best of both worlds – the perfect mix between British and European – and that is Frances. She appears to be the perfect symbiosis: the attractiveness of a European and the morality of a Briton. It is not until William has been given proof of her proficiency in English, a topic I will come back to in the next chapter, that he begins to see her as an object of sexual desire. Moreover, and most importantly, Frances does not exhibit the kind of sexuality associated with Mdlle. Reuter. When he first lays his eyes on her, William at once notices that she is “as fair as a fair Englishwoman” (*TP* 66), something which at once sets her apart from all the other girls at the school. According to Plasa, Frances is the “living embodiment of the conflict between the sexual restraint and sexual excess associated, in this text, with English and French/continental identities, respectively” (20). The same can be said of William to some extent, as I argue above, and it is perhaps for this reason that they are such a great match. Additionally, Frances’s passion, like William’s, is controlled by reason (Maynard 86). I argued in the first chapter that reason was one of the factors separating British Protestants from European Catholics, so the fact that reason is superior to passion suggest that their Protestantism – for Frances is a Protestant – protects them from the dangers of Continental passion.

Just as the British characters offer descriptions of European women as sexually unrestrictive, so the European characters describe British women as restrictive. During M. Paul's tirade in *Villette* about British women, he mentions "morals," "manners" and "their pretentious virtue" as some of their flaws (*V* 378). Furthermore, he refers to Lucy as morally frigid: "Toute Anglaise, et par conséquent, toute bégueule qu'elle soit [she is totally English, and consequently totally straitlaced (Dunn, note 14, *V* 567)]" (*V* 147). As can be seen, being British is, in M. Paul's mind, synonymous with having too strict morals. This indicates that he, and most likely the other Europeans as well, know that their moral codes are freer than those of Britons. However, M. Paul also compares Lucy to a wild animal, which may seem contradictory: "You remind me, then, of a young she wild creature, new caught, untamed..." (*V* 259). Nonetheless, Lucy interprets this as his way of trying to provoke her: "Unwarrantable accost! – rash and rude if addressed to a pupil; to a teacher inadmissible. He thought to provoke a warm reply; I had seen him vex the passionate to explosion before now. In me his malice should find no gratification; I sat silent" (*V* 259). Lucy expresses outrage at being compared to a wild animal, the simile she has used to describe her pupils, which suggests that she is afraid of being put into the same category as European women. Her response of remaining calm and doing nothing aptly illustrates the control she has over her emotions. However, that is not to say that the British women are completely sexually repressed. When Lucy admits that "I was vaguely threatened with, I know not what doom, if I ever trespassed the limits proper to my sex, and conceived a contraband appetite for unfeminine knowledge. Alas! I had no such appetite," the "unfeminine knowledge" she refers to might be sexual – but she also expresses a curiosity towards the subject (*V* 390). Additionally, when M. Paul tries to shield Lucy from the sensual picture of Cleopatra by showing her a series of "flat, dead, pale and formal" portraits of four women, she expresses just as much dislike of them as of the picture of Cleopatra (*V* 223-225), which suggests that she is equally weary of complete primness as sensuality. Nevertheless, Lucy's story and her engagement with sexuality cannot be as explicit as William's – and certainly not as Rochester's – because she is a woman.

### **2.3 European Passions: Rochester and His Women**

The second of Brontë's male leads who travels to Europe for an extended amount of time is Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, and like William this character plays with British and European notions of sexuality. The most apparent reason that separates him from William is the fact



that he resides in Britain for the entirety of the novel's time span. However, an unspecified amount of time spent on the Continent prior to his meeting with Jane has certainly left its mark upon his character. In the words of William, Rochester has lived a life in "proper French style" prior to his meeting with Jane. However, his European influences do not end the moment he is introduced to his prospective wife – but rather, they last until the death of his first wife and his own maiming.

Critics who have examined foreign relations in *Jane Eyre* have almost exclusively focused on the British Empire, and the West Indies in particular. This is in no small part due to Rochester's wife Bertha, and the narrator's numerous oriental allusions. Nonetheless, I want to contend that Europe also plays a crucial role in the novel, in particular in the construction of Rochester's sexuality. The Continental and Catholic criticisms in *Jane Eyre* are not limited to merely the French characters; there are several characters that are attributed Continental or Catholic stereotypes, which thus link them to said area and religion, and one of these is Rochester. Contrary to William, who merely contemplates taking a mistress, Rochester confesses to having had three. Furthermore, he might have impregnated one of them. Much has been written about Rochester's link to Oriental despots, and he has also been linked to Irish stereotypes (Michie 129). However, I assert that Rochester can also be linked to Continental European stereotypes.

As stated by Gonzalez-Torres and Fernandez-Rivas, one of the most common features to attribute to one's enemy nation is hypermasculinity (135). This is a characteristic that is clearly given to Rochester, and it might therefore open up a discussion of his connection with the enemy nation – namely France and its European cohorts. The most obvious example of this hypermasculinity is his explicit mention of having had three different mistresses. Furthermore, when compared to the only other British male that has a significant role in the novel, St. John Rivers, who is a minister and becomes a missionary, the contrast between the Europeanised, sexual Rochester and the British, pious St. John becomes very clear. And whereas Jane repeatedly comments upon St. John's beauty, she answers no when Rochester asks her if she finds him handsome and admits that "I am sure most people would have thought him an ugly man" (*JE* 112-113). However, Rochester's appearance links him to Jane, and is undoubtedly part of her attraction towards him.

In the reader's first introduction to Rochester, he is riding on "a tall steed" (*JE* 96). However, his horse tumbles and he falls off, and he needs Jane's help in order to walk, which at once weakens his power over her and knocks some of the masculinity out of him. Jane's first description of him also suggests something very masculine and foreign: "The new face,

too, was like a new picture introduced to the gallery of memory; and it was dissimilar to all the others hanging there: firstly, it was masculine; and, secondly, because it was dark, strong, and stern” (*JE* 98-99). This scene, the very start of their relationship, foreshadows what is to come, and implies that Rochester’s hypermasculine entrance needs to be toned down in order for him to walk side by side with Jane. In appearance, Rochester has more in common with European men in Brontë’s novels than with British. He is explicitly described as bad-looking, whereas Dr John is connected to words like “pleasant” and “perfect” (*V* 105), and the same goes for St. John. On the other hand, when describing M. Pelet, William talks of “the degree of harshness inseparable from Gallic lineaments” (*TP* 52). Ginevra believes M. Paul to be “hideously plain,” and even Lucy has to admit that “the dark little man” was “pungent and austere” and that “he seemed a harsh apparition” (*V* 142). Maynard has also drawn parallels between Rochester and M. Paul, and argues that “[l]ike Rochester, M. Paul is positively associated with sexual, as opposed to merely civilized, male qualities... Like Rochester, he is dark (he is said to have Spanish blood)... like him, his attractiveness is in the energy of his character, not in his looks” (197). In thus linking Rochester with the most fleshed-out European character in all of Brontë’s novels, the character is irrevocably associated with the Continent. Maynard goes on arguing that M. Paul shares a likeness with Rochester up until the latter’s failed marriage ceremony in that they are both “a sexually mature male who tries to elicit a response in a uninitiated female” (199). But whereas the exposé of Rochester’s first marriage leads him to beg Jane to live with him in France and to Jane running away, Lucy’s admiration for M. Paul only grows after she learns of his first love; and whereas Rochester has slept with at least three women outside of marriage, M. Paul has had one fiancée who is almost described as a saint by some of the other characters. In other words, Rochester’s sexuality is far more contentious than M. Paul’s.

Another factor that helps to establish a link between Rochester and Europe is the contrast to St. John Rivers. The minister, who takes Jane into his household in the latter part of the novel, before it is revealed that he is her cousin, is a stark contrast to Rochester and represents British sexuality taken to an extreme. Jane calls him “cold as an iceberg” and likens him to a statue (*JE* 378, 294), which echoes M. Paul’s sentiments about British women. Not unlike another of Jane’s cousins, the nun Elizabeth, he is ascetic, and he makes both himself and the woman he loves, Rosamund Oliver, miserable by refusing to act on his own desires. If more proof were needed of St. John’s piety, he even puts on a timer when looking at Jane’s picture of Rosamund. Moreover, when talking to Rochester about St. John’s love for Rosamund, Jane adds “as he *can* love, and that is not as you love” (*JE* 378). That is

not to mention that his name in itself suggests a saint-like – and thereby virtually non-existing – sexuality. The St. John at the end of *Jane Eyre* is the direct opposite of the Rochester of a decade previously, travelling through Europe. Whereas the former leaves Britain in order to be a missionary, the latter leaves Britain in order to have sex. The closing paragraph of *Jane Eyre* is dedicated to St. John, and given that Jane thinks that “if I were his wife, this good man... could soon kill me” (*JE* 350), it is significant that St. John dies in the end – because he “[h]e entered on the path he had marked for himself” (*JE* 385). If she had joined him on this path, she would have died as well, as she would be “always restrained... forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital – *this* would be unendurable” (*JE* 347). In other words, she needs the passion Rochester represents – but importantly, this passion needs to be restrained. This is something that can also be found in *Shirley*: when Caroline tries to forget about Robert and live a life similar to the pious Miss Ainley, she ends up on the brink of death. Perkin contends that Caroline’s “romantic and erotic yearnings cannot be satisfied by Christian faith alone” (395), and the same is true for Jane. While a life as a missionary’s wife might serve her god, it would also annihilate her.

Nonetheless, there is one important factor separating Rochester from the likes of M. Pelet, and that is the fact that he finds no pleasure in having illicit sex. This is an argument that also came up during the discussion of William, but it is just as important when talking about Rochester. He tells Jane that “I tried dissipation – never debauchery” (*JE* 265), and according to Shuttleworth, the difference between these two words may not seem significant to people now, but to Rochester the difference is about “the notion of enjoyment” (*Psychology* 169). Whereas M. Pelet boasts that he has slept with other men’s wives and clearly does not regret doing so (*TP* 156), Rochester exhibits no such *schadenfreude*. In a letter to W. S. Williams, Brontë herself also singles out his lack of enjoyment as something which significantly sets him apart from others: “he lives for a time as too many other men live – but being radically better than most men he does not like that degraded life, and is never happy in it” (*L I* 99). By admitting that he never enjoyed what he was doing, Rochester is partly redeeming himself. Though he has been “tainted” with European sexuality, the British part of him still holds sway.

The crux of Rochester’s European sexuality is his mistresses. Whereas many publications have been dedicated to Rochester’s wife, not much has been written about his lovers. After having locked up Bertha in the attic at Thornfield, he “sought the Continent, and went devious through all its lands” (*JE* 264). He confesses to Jane that “I tried the

companionship of mistresses... [French Céline Varens] had two successors: an Italian, Giacinta, and a German, Clara” (*JE* 265). This subject matter was undoubtedly part of why some critics, as cited above, reacted strongly to the supposed immoral nature of *Jane Eyre* – but the question arises whether the reactions would have been stronger had the mistresses been British and had the relationships taken place in Britain. Because what is, of course, vital in this matter is the fact that his mistresses were all European and his liaisons all happened when he was abroad. Thus, his alleged excessive sexuality is firmly placed outside the purity of Britain. This fact is made clearer than ever when he proposes that Jane should join him to live in France. Foucault’s landmark study *The History of Sexuality* begins with an examination of sexuality in the Victorian era, and he states: “If it was truly necessary to make room for illegitimate sexualities, it was reasoned, let them take their infernal mischief elsewhere... The brothel and the mental hospital would be those places of tolerance” (4). That is, unwanted sexual liaisons should take place “somewhere else,” and that is precisely what happens in *Jane Eyre* – though here the brothel and mental hospital is substituted with the European Continent. As if to further drag the Continent and the Catholic Church through the mud, the meanings of the names of Rochester’s mistresses mock the religion they belong to: Giacinta, Clara and Céline are all saints’ names (Mershman; Robinson; “St. Celine,” *Catholic Online*), and Céline also means “heaven.” The juxtaposition between these women’s roles in the novels and their names mocks Continental Catholicism and the supposed lack of sexual restraints it advocates. It should also be noted that two of Rochester’s mistresses are not from Francophone cultures and that the criticism explicitly extends itself to Italy and Germany.

One of Rochester’s mistresses stands out among the rest, and that is Céline Varens. Importantly, Céline has, in the words of her daughter, “gone to the Holy Virgin” (*JE* 87). Given that all the reader knows about Céline is the fact that she had an affair with Rochester, it is telling that she died. Once again, the dangers of excessive sexuality come forth in the novels. After her death, Rochester takes care of Adèle, though he is not sure he is her biological father. Nevertheless, Adèle functions as a constant reminder of his wrongdoings, a symbol of the consequences of infidelity and overindulgence. Even young Adèle, who, as a child, should be too young for such matters, falls object to the French sexual stereotypes. In this way she greatly resembles the over-sexualised schoolgirls in *Villette* and *The Professor*. However, Adèle is an extreme and is given a much larger prominence in the novel. Moreover, her sexuality is not so much connected with a sexual desire, but a desire for presents and food – that is, it is commodified. She likes Rochester because he “gave me

pretty dresses and toys” (*JE* 88). She becomes a miniature version of her mother and exemplifies the European fixation with appearance. One of the first things she does after meeting Jane is performing a song about a woman whose lover has abandoned her, a topic Jane considers to be “in very bad taste” (*JE* 87). When Adèle is in ecstasy because Rochester’s presents for her have arrived, he calls her “you genuine daughter of Paris,” which is hardly meant as a compliment (*JE* 100). Later the same evening, after having watched Adèle enjoying the sight of her new “little pink silk frock,” Rochester tells Jane that “coquetry runs in her blood, blends with her brains, and seasons the marrow of her bones... [After she has tried on the dress] I know what I shall see, – a miniature of Céline Varens” (*JE* 119). He could hardly have made it any clearer that he faults the girl for her mother’s errors and that, despite her age, he believes that her entire being is thoroughly flirtatious. Though Jane shows compassion towards Adèle as she explains to Rochester that “Adèle is not answerable for either her mother’s faults or yours,” she nevertheless expresses the same kind of prejudice towards anything French when she believes that she can see in Adèle a “superficiality of character, inherited probably from her mother, hardly congenial to an English mind” (*JE* 124). In the novel’s final chapter, Jane explains that “a sound English education corrected in a great measure her French defects,” and when she has finished school she has become “docile, good-tempered, and well-principled” (*JE* 383). This suggests that British sexuality and morality can in turn “infect” Europeans as well. When Jane and Rochester marry, Adèle is sent away to boarding school – there is no longer room for any Frenchness in their house, and the fire of Thornfield purifies Rochester of everything foreign.

After Rochester has proposed to Jane, he takes her to Millcote in order to buy dresses for her, something which makes Jane feel like a paid mistress: “the more he bought me, the more my cheek burned with a sense of annoyance and degradation... I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (*JE* 229). By showering Jane with gifts, he is treating her the same way he treated Céline, who he “gave... a complete establishment of servants, a carriage, cashmeres, diamonds, dentelles, &c.” (*JE* 120). While going through this, to her, dreadful ordeal, Jane is reminded of her uncle John in Madeira who has previously expressed a wish to adopt her and make her his heir, and thinks that “[i]t would be a relief... if I had ever so small an independency; I never can bear being dressed like a doll by Mr. Rochester” (*JE* 229). Importantly, it is the inheritance she gets from her uncle that makes her return to Rochester, because it makes her an independent woman. When they are reunited in the end, she announces that “I am my own mistress” (*JE* 370), a statement which according to Kate

Washington loudly declares that “[i]f Jane is her own mistress, she will not be Rochester’s” (63).

Rochester mentions taking Jane to the Continent twice, in two very different scenarios. The first instance is regarding their honeymoon, in which Rochester says:

You shall sojourn at Paris, Rome, and Naples: at Florence, Venice, and Vienna: all the ground I have wandered over shall be re-trodden by you: wherever I stamped my hoof, your sylph’s foot shall step also. Ten years since, I flew through Europe half mad; with disgust, hate, and rage, as my companions; now I shall revisit it healed and cleansed, with a very angel as my comforter. (*JE* 221)

Not only does the fact that their honeymoon is to take place in Europe immediately associate said cities with sex, but what can easily be forgotten is that, since Rochester already has a wife, there would be little difference between Rochester’s actions ten years ago and his actions now. Either relationship would be illicit. The second instance of Rochester suggesting they go to Europe is after the failed marriage ceremony. “You shall go to a place I have in the south of France: a white-washed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean,” Rochester proposes (*JE* 259). That is, though he claims she would be like his wife, they would live together as lovers. First of all, it is very telling that he wants them to go abroad in order to live together. Whereas living together in Britain would contaminate the country, France is already tainted. In other words, they cannot live together in Britain. Moreover, the term “white-washed” has multiple meanings. Firstly, white is connected to innocence and purity. Secondly, the word can also refer to the cover-up of something tainted. In Rochester’s case, that is his dark past in Europe. In taking Jane to Europe, he would be attempting to “white-wash” his previous crimes by being accompanied by the epitome of innocence herself. However, whereas Rochester at this point wants a European way of life, Jane wants a British: “If I lived with you as you desire, I should then be your mistress” (*JE* 259). The implication is, of course, that that is not what Jane desires. She refuses to be put in the same category as Céline, Clara and Giacinta. In the end, contrary to Rochester’s first suggestion of roaming through the capitals of Europe, “our honeymoon will shine our life-long: its beams will only fade over your grave or mine,” which suggests that their honeymoon takes place right where they are – in Britain, because that is the only place where Rochester’s redemption can be executed (*JE* 383).

Interestingly, when Jane settles as a schoolmistress in Norton, she lives in cottage with “a little room with white-washed walls” (*JE* 305). While there, she ponders:

Whether is it better, I ask, to be a slave in a fool's paradise at Marseilles – fevered with delusive bliss one hour – suffocating with the bitterest tears of remorse and shame the next – or to be a village schoolmistress, free and honest, in a breezy mountain nook in the healthy heart of England? (*JE* 306)

This quotation brings up many comparisons between France and Britain. The “healthy heart of England” is contrasted with the infected Continent, and the disparity between Marseilles, an industrial port, and the English “breezy mountain nook” furthermore underlines Jane’s view of her homeland as more natural. Though she may be tempted for a second by the “fool’s paradise” she could have had with Rochester, she would undoubtedly have quickly come to regret it, much like Rochester himself did. Moreover, as industrial port and a hub for the French navy, Marseilles would undoubtedly be flooded with prostitutes. That is a far cry from Jane being surrounded by innocent British schoolchildren. Her choosing Britain over France, and Rochester eventually doing the same, is paramount in order for their relationship to be a reality.

Buzard contends that this “unassimilable, purely destructive foreignness” that is exhibited in *Jane Eyre* makes the novel’s engagement with Frenchness much less complex than *Villette* and *The Professor* (163). While it is true that the European novels offer more in the ways of explicit criticism of the Continent, he nevertheless seems to disregard Rochester’s European influences and limits his attention to Céline Varens and her offspring. In my opinion, Rochester’s dalliance with Europe makes him as complex in this regard as William. Another critic that weighs in on the topic of foreignness is Shuttleworth, who asserts that Jane’s story is contrasted with “two foreign archetypes of female development,” namely the French epitomised by Rochester’s European mistresses and his ward Adèle, and the “sexual voracity” that the dark, Creole Bertha represents (“Dynamics” 179). However, Shuttleworth claims that the former does not pose a threat to Jane, as it “can easily be surmounted by Protestant earnestness” (“Dynamics” 179). This, I believe, is not true. Jane does not effortlessly overcome the French female and what she represents: she runs away and is separated from Rochester for over a year because of fear of being turned into a British Céline Varens.

In the end, it is important to point out that the British characters are not non-sexual, but rather sexually restrictive. Contrary to M. Paul’s description of British women, Jane declares that “I am not cool and dispassionate” (*JE* 259). She is an example of someone with

great passion, but she is also able to counter it with intense control. Contrary to St. John and the Rochester of the first part of the book, Jane represents a golden mean – the British ideal. She does not act on her desire when it feels wrong, unlike Rochester. When Rochester tries to tempt her, she declares that “I will not be your English Céline Varens,” and with that she loudly proclaims that she refuses to give in to Rochester’s European tendencies (*JE* 230). At the end of the novel, the hypermasculine Rochester has been severely maimed and is in need of constant care, and many Freudian critics have argued that that his maimed hand is a “symbolic castration” (Sadoff 145). He is thus feminised and made less threateningly masculine, something that is necessary if he should be able to have a life with Jane. The result is that he has rid himself of the tarnished, foreign aspects of his identity – however, that does not mean that he is made wholly British again. Rather, the alluring and attractive aspect of the European sexuality remains, but now it is also joined by British restraint. John Kucich talks of “a particular Brontëan formulation of desire that is articulated partly through repression itself” (38), which seems like an apt description of Brontë’s view on sexuality. In the end, neither extreme – excessive sexuality or complete restraint – are advocated. Rather, it is the balancing of the two forces that is key.



### 3 Language

In this final chapter, the topic turns towards that which is perhaps the most evident marker of cultural difference between nations in Brontë's novels, a topic that can be easy to overlook simply because it is so ubiquitous. Language is often the crucial factor separating one culture or nation from another and is, Sandra Bermann contends, "a defining feature of national identity" (3). However, this has not always been the case. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, a so-called "philological revolution" took place, which made the language of a nation or a people "the index of its cultural identity" (Buzard 189-190). In other words, language became *the* identity marker separating one's nation from another mere decades before Brontë was born, and the use of language constitutes an important identity-building factor in all of her novels. What sets the French language apart from the previously discussed European sexual moral and Continental Catholicism in the Victorian age is the fact that it had long been a mark of prestige and a key part of a woman's "accomplishments," and the use of French cannot therefore simply be categorised as "bad." Anne O'Neil-Henry points out that being interested in French is not nearly as threatening to British identity as "behaving French" is in Brontë's novels (115-116). Employing French language is a far less controversial thing than endorsing Catholicism or European sexuality, and in the case of these novels it quickly becomes clear that both the characters and the author have a certain admiration for the language.

There is an inherent paradox in the role of French in Brontë's novels, as in the cases of religion and sexuality. Although the superiority of the English language is repeatedly asserted, being proficient in French is what enables Jane, William and Lucy to rise in the ranks. Moreover, language lessons between an English-speaker and a French-speaker form a key part in most of the main romantic relationships in each novel. This chapter will examine the ways in which different languages serve different purposes and how language learning influences the key romantic relationships in Brontë's novels. As French is the only European language which is employed substantially in the novels and as it has a very special role, it is that language that will take prominence in this chapter. I contend that the way in which Brontë's novels employ French is an expression of her novels' intricate relationship with Europe, and though English is usually given the upper hand, the novels' use of French nevertheless symbolises the symbiosis between Britain and Europe that is a prerequisite for the characters' happy endings.

When talking about *Jane Eyre*, O’Neil-Henry asserts that the battle between British and French principles in the novel, which has been discussed at length in this thesis, “is slightly complicated by Jane (and Brontë’s) fascination with the French language” (114). This argument is not only true for *Jane Eyre*, but for all of Brontë’s novels. The extensive use of French words and phrases inserted because the French version is “an exquisite word” (*S* 489) or the lamenting of the necessity to translate French because the meaning “loses sadly by being translated into English” (*TP* 129) occurs intermittently in all four books. O’Neil-Henry points out that it may seem odd that *Jane Eyre*, a novel that is so fervently anti-French, was written by an author who was so taken with the French language and culture (115). However, though there certainly is truth in what she argues, one should be careful about aligning the use of the French language with everything its country stood for in Victorian Britain. The inclusion of French does not unequivocally suggest that Brontë embraced French culture and had no qualms about the language. After all, France was the language of the aristocracy for centuries in England, and at the time Brontë was writing her novels it had long been the European lingua franca (Wright 36). In order to properly examine French in Brontë’s novels, then, it is necessary to understand this position that French had in Victorian Britain.

Brontë was writing her novels in a time when the position of French was drastically changing. Although learning French had been key for men in the upper classes in the eighteenth century, this changed in the nineteenth. Two Royal Commissions on education in the 1860s found that the subject was not even part of the curriculum at Eton, and at other public schools it was disliked (M. Cohen 88). The French teachers gained little respect in schools and their accent was often made fun of – they were “ridiculed for their Frenchness” (M. Cohen 90). As late as in the Regency era one still had to learn French in order to enter “high society or high office” (Colley 167), but this was clearly changing mere decades later. Michèle Cohen points out that the usual reply to the question of why the general opinion of French changed so radically in such short amount of time was the Napoleonic Wars and the French Revolution (98). Nonetheless, though French did fall out of fashion for men, that was not the case for women. In fact, M. Cohen writes, while French was increasingly looked down on at boys’ schools, it held a very different position at girls’ schools and it was used as a measurement of girls’ “educational standard” (90-91). Alongside music and drawing, French was part of what was considered “Accomplishments” (Duthie 5) – that is, subjects which middle-class women were expected to master. Lesa Scholl points to the importance of British women learning foreign languages in the nineteenth century by arguing that it gave

them the opportunity to personally explore ideas from other cultures (11), something that is certainly true in Brontë's works and will be explored further in this chapter. In other words, by the mid-nineteenth century, French had simultaneously become gendered and less prestigious (M. Cohen 99). This might also be connected to what was discussed in the previous chapter – namely that the French were seen as inherently feminine. Interestingly, this gendering of French is something that persists, as M. Cohen writes in 1996 that British boys still think of French as a “girls’ subject” and a “‘female’ language” (x).

There are many ways in which French is employed in Brontë's novels. Certain French words may be added, either by the narrator or a character, because they prefer it to its English equivalent; it is used to signal that a character is Francophone European; or, what I particularly want to stress in this chapter, it is used for a particular narrative or symbolic purpose. Showalter stresses that the language's symbolic purpose is much more essential than its linguistic purpose in these works (227). This symbolic purpose, I contend, is in particular connected to notions of European sexuality, which was discussed in the previous chapter. Nevertheless, these connotations are not exclusively bad, but rather, as a later section will examine, connected to both “legitimate” and “illegitimate” sides of love and sexuality. “English and French are more than different languages in Brontë's work; they are different moral systems,” writes Longmuir (181), an argument that it may be easy to assume applies consistently to Brontë's novels. However, though French to a large extent is connected to that which is inappropriate and immoral, and English assumes the moral high ground, to equate all of Brontë's use of French language with the said European sexuality is to oversimplify the complex role French possesses. I will, however, agree with Longmuir that the two languages operate as different moral systems in one case, and that is regarding Ginevra Fanshawe, a character I will get back to shortly.

Though this thesis will chiefly concern itself with matters in the narratives themselves, it is worth mentioning the linguistic issues surrounding Brontë's use of French. Her novels are somewhat peculiar for their time in their frequent use of not only French terminology, but of whole dialogues taking place in French. A contemporary article in *Edinburgh Review* used *Villette* as an example of a work that pollutes English because of its use of French (Showalter 225). However, the novel that received the most criticism was *Shirley*. Though Brontë had included French in *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*, both of which were written prior to *Shirley*, the novel in question stands out both because the author seemed concerned about the level of French in the narrative and because some readers scowled at it. In a letter to her friend and literary editor W. S. Williams, Brontë writes: “You observed that

the French in ‘Shirley’ might be cavilled at – there is a long paragraph written in the French language in that chapter entitled ‘Le Cheval dompté’ [The tamed horse (Smith, note 1, *L II* 257)]... I fear it will have a pretentious air” (*L II* 257). In another letter to the same person, the author worries about the typography of the foreign language: “Will they print all the French phrases in Italics? I hope not; It makes them look somehow obtrusively conspicuous” (*L II* 255). What these excerpts show is that Brontë was aware that the inclusion of long passages written entirely in French might appear snobbish, but that she at the same time wanted French to seamlessly integrate with her English text. This former worry was certainly warranted, as many Britons, among them Jane Austen, mocked those who insisted on using French phrases, or “pretentious Gallicisms” as they called them (Hitchings 280-281). Brontë, however, remained assertive that native French speakers should talk French “whenever an English translation was inexact in its feeling or connotation” (Rosengarten and Smith x).

Nevertheless, despite her intentions, many had problems with the large quantity of French in *Shirley*. Though many of her contemporary readers could read French, both her publisher and some early critics were disconcerted by the language’s presence in the text (Duthie 179). “The first volume will be unintelligible to most people, for it is half in French and half in broad Yorkshire,” writes one of these critics, an anonymous reviewer for *Fraser’s Magazine* (*Fraser’s Magazine* quoted in Allott 153-154). Another critic, G. H. Lewes, writing for *Edinburgh Review*, says:

we might also venture a word of quiet remonstrance against a most inappropriate obtrusion of French phrases. When Gérard Moore and his sister talk in French, *which the author translates*, it surely is not allowable to leave scraps of French in the translation. A French word or two may be introduced now and then on account of some peculiar fitness, but Currer Bell’s use of the language is little better than that of the ‘fashionable’ novelists. To speak of a grandmother as *une grand’ mère*, and of treacle as *mélasse*, or of a young lady being angry as *courroucée*, gives an air of affectation to the style strangely at variance with the frankness of its general tone. (quoted in McNees 468)

In short, Brontë’s worries that some might find that the quantity of French in the novel gives “a pretentious air” were completely accurate, though not only for the reason she feared – the long, untranslated passages – but also for the insertion of French phrases in passages that have already been translated from French to English. In her Angrian tales, Duthie tells us, French was often used “to give an impression of sophistication” (10), and if G. H. Lewes’ review is to be believed, it seems like some held this view of her adult novels as well.

However, Duthie also points out that the authenticity of the foreign settings of *Villette* and *The Professor* is in no small part due to Brontë's "skilful use of French terms," and that the use of French phrases in dialogue is equally important in order to establish a believable European environment (180-181).

Despite these contemporary reviews Brontë received, French does hold a key position in her novels. The language has an important function in both *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*, because Jane and William are required to know French in order to get their jobs – in other words, it is a prerequisite for their start towards independence. Eells remarks that the first verb Jane learns in the foreign language is "être," which means "to be," and contends that it is "as if the foreign language were endowing her with new life" (n. pag. paragraph 7). Had they not been proficient in French, William might still have lived in the shadow of his tyrannical brother, and Jane might be stuck as a teacher at Lowood. This fact alone means that it is hard to dismiss French in the novels as merely ornamental. Yet, French is not only serving as a gateway to freedom; when Lucy seeks out Mme. Beck's school, she tells the reader that

I believe if I had spoken French she would not have admitted me; but, as I spoke English, she concluded I was a foreign teacher come on business connected with the Pensionnat, and, even at that late hour, she let me in, without a word of reluctance or a moment of hesitation. (V 71)

In other words, where French was the gateway for Jane and William getting jobs, it might have ruined Lucy's chances. Why, one might ask, is French the liberator for some, whereas it might have been the destruction of others? It may be that Lucy's journey of self-discovery is more closely tied to "Europeanness" than that of the other characters. Her growing fascination with Catholicism has already been explored, and in addition to that it is as she becomes increasingly proficient in French that her relationship with M. Paul develops. Had she arrived in Villette speaking French flawlessly, M. Paul would have no reason to teach her the language, and they might never have grown close. Moreover, her isolation that eventually grows into a depression would not have been as evident had she been able to communicate with everyone in Labassecour from the very first. Nevertheless, it is not long until French *will* prove to be of importance for Lucy's career. Her promotion from nanny to English teacher is, Shuttleworth contends, largely because she learns French so quickly ("Dynamics" 177). What this example illustrates is the inherent duality French has in the books as a sign of liberty and

restraint, and of marital love and illicit lust. But before delving into the various roles of French, I will first explore the position the English language holds in these novels.

### 3.1 The Superiority of English

Just as British religion and British sexuality is time and time again presented as superior to its European counterpart, so is the English language often regarded as superior to French and other European languages in Brontë's works. That being said, however, there are fewer evident examples of this in the novels than regarding the other two topics I have covered, which understandably is tied to the fact that the French language did enjoy a vastly better position in British culture than European religion or sexuality. Additionally, the fact that some characters applaud the virtues of the English language, does not necessarily mean that they abstain from using French. Several of the most fervent defenders of either the English language or British morals express an admiration for French from the very beginning. When Jane is at Lowood, being allowed to learn French is seen as a reward (*JE* 58) and she dreams of sometime "being able to translate... a certain little French story-book which Madame Pierrot had that day shown me" (*JE* 63). On his first day in Belgium, William says: "I wished to God that I could speak French as well [as him]" (*TP* 49). Despite this, however, Brontë's British characters later leave no doubt as to which language is the better of the two.

The novels that are set in Europe naturally offer more than the others in ways of elevating the English language, as the protagonists are both English teachers teaching European, and mostly French-speaking, students. However, and most importantly, I assert that William and Lucy's chief goal is not to teach their students the language in itself, but rather to exert British influence. In this way, they are almost missionaries, resolved to impart not only the superiority of the English language, but the superiority of everything British – be it religion, morality or any other matter. As the gateway to the culture, learning the language would – just like learning French did for them – open up the possibility for their students of exploring a new set of ideas and morals. When she is still in England at the beginning of the story, Polly shows Lucy a book about an Englishman travelling to the colonies, "a good, good Englishman, – a missionary, who is preaching to [wild men] under a palm-tree" (*V* 34), a scene that Cooper draws a parallel to Lucy later teaching the "wild Roman Catholic Labassecouriennes" (note 9, *V* 553). Longmuir also sees a connection between colonisation and teaching in Brontë's novels (181). In short, the teaching of English to French-speaking

students in *Villette* and *The Professor* is not merely an attempt to teach what to the teachers' minds is a superior language, but an attempt to anglicise their whole nature.

Nowhere is it clearer than in *The Professor* that the British, here represented by William, perceive themselves as superior to Continental Europeans because of their language. When one of his students is reciting an English text, William thinks: "My God! how he did snuffle, snort and wheeze! All he said was said in his throat and nose, for it is thus the Flamands speak" (*TP* 53). I have claimed previously in this thesis that some of Brontë's characters draw upon racist stereotypes when describing Europeans – in particular, using animal imagery – and this is also the case here. William's description is not far off from that which is used to describe Bertha Mason, who according to Jane "growled like some strange wild animal" (*JE* 250). When he is to demonstrate proper English for his students, William "endeavoured to throw into my accents the compassionate tone of a superior being" (*TP* 54). His message could not have been clearer: he is by default a "superior being" because he speaks perfect English, and there is little trace of him showing compassion for his students in this scene.

Contrary to William, who speaks French fluently when he goes abroad, Lucy is unique amongst Brontë's protagonists in that she does not speak French at all – at least not until well into the story. Upon her arrival in Labassecour, she "could say nothing whatever; not possessing a phrase of *speaking* French: and it was French, and French only, the whole world seemed now gabbling around me. *What* should I do?" (*V* 68). However, before long she is rescued by Dr John who masters the language, and Lucy rejoices at hearing "the Fatherland accents" (*V* 68). Though it is later revealed that he is her childhood friend, neither of them recognises the other at this point. Therefore, the fact that he speaks "the Fatherland accents" is all the evidence that Lucy needs in order to ascertain his goodness is astonishing and speaks volumes about her view of the English language. She confesses that "as to distrusting him, or his advice, or his address, I should almost as soon have thought of distrusting the Bible" (*V* 69). This sentiment aptly summarises the role the English language possesses to Lucy: it is virtually the language of God.

M. Paul seems also to be of the opinion that the British considers their language to be sent from God. When he holds a French lesson in the presence of Lucy, she says: "For his misfortune he had chosen a French translation of what he called 'un drame de Williams Shackspire; le faux dieu,' he further announced, 'de ces sots païens, les Anglais' [a play by William Shakespeare; the false god... of these foolish heathens, the English (Cooper, note 24, *V* 587)]" (*V* 366). Lucy does not "make any particular effort to conceal the contempt"

which the translation awakes in her (*V* 366). As Shakespeare is considered to be one of the greatest influencers on the English language and the national bard, when M. Paul claims that the British devotion to Shakespeare is sacrilege, he is, inadvertently or not, criticising their aggrandisement of English. Besides, Lucy's anger over hearing Shakespeare in French suggests that she feels the language is not good enough to do the playwright justice, and is yet another example of her believing French to be inferior to her own language.

It is also worth commenting on the way in which non-English speakers use English in Brontë's novels. Firstly, the use of imperfect English in novels can stress the fact that the novel takes place abroad (Chapman 35). In relation to this, Duthie compares Charlotte's use of French with her sister Emily's use of dialect in *Wuthering Heights*: "without it the painting of character and milieu would lack an essential element" (179). Secondly, and more importantly, foreign speakers in Victorian novels were often a manifest of the view some Britons had that "imperfect speaking of English shows inferiority of character" (Chapman 34). This, once again, links the English language with moral superiority, and the examples of such characters include nearly every non-Briton in *Villette* and *The Professor*. When Dr John comes to examine one of Mme. Beck's daughters who is sick, the girl exclaims: "'Let alone!' she cried passionately, in her broken English (for she spoke English as did the other children). 'I will not you: I will Dr Pillule!'" (*V* 104). As one can see, not only is her grammar erroneous, but the narrator also notes that this is the way every other child talks here. This generalisation falls in line with Lucy's previously discussed mentions of her European pupils having impure minds and being dishonest Catholics. However, Raymond Chapman also points out that more fully developed foreign characters usually do not speak with a very broken English (35). An example of this is M. Paul, whose mention of "Williams Shackspire" is one of the few instances where his speech is flawed. However, there is an important reason why his English is not often represented as broken: he does not speak it. Elsewhere he either speaks French, or his speech is reported in English, and by doing this, the novel cleverly avoids making him a caricature. Had the pages of the novel been littered with M. Paul calling Lucy "Meess," as the vast majority of the other foreign characters in *Villette* do, and other gallicisations, it is likely that the character would have met much more resistance with the Victorian readers. After all, imperfect English would be much harder to swallow than perfect French.

While imperfect English is frowned upon, imperfect French is much more forgivable. When Lucy all of a sudden is made an English teacher by Mme. Beck, she worries that "though I have studied French hard since I came here, yet I still speak it with far



too much hesitation – too little accuracy to be able to command their respect” (V 86). In her first English lesson, she is interrupted and has problems keeping her pupils in line:

Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Virginie, and Angélique opened the campaign by a series of titterings and whisperings; these soon swelled into murmurs and short laughs, which the remoter benches caught up and echoed more loudly. This growing revolt of sixty against one, soon became oppressive enough; my command of French being so limited, and exercised under such cruel restraint.

Could I but have spoken in my own tongue, I felt as if I might have gained a hearing... nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion... All I could do now was to walk up to Blanche... the eldest, tallest, handsomest, and most vicious – stand before her desk, take from under her hand her exercise-book, remount the estrade, deliberately read the composition, which I found very stupid, and as deliberately, and in the face of the whole school, tear the blotted page in two. (V 88)

This excerpt not only demonstrates, as suggested by Scholl, the intimate connection between language and power (40), but also of the power a single English-speaker can wield over scores of French-speakers. Though she does not master French, she does master English, and that is what saves her in the face of French adversity. Although Lucy does not speak with words of her own in this scene, the reading out loud of and the consequent destruction of her student’s English work intimates that Blanche’s faulty English is worse than Lucy’s complete lack of French-skills. Moreover, the character Blanche has been previously addressed, as she and her cohorts are representations of the destructive European sexual moral. Lucy calls her the “handsomest” and “most vicious,” which it is not hard to translate into “most French” – therefore, it is no coincidence that she chooses her as her target. Another thing worth noting in this extract is Lucy mentioning that “nature had given me a voice that could make itself heard, if lifted in excitement or deepened by emotion.” I have argued that it is exactly in moments of excitement and emotion that Lucy uses French. Therefore, one might draw the conclusion that Lucy’s voice could make itself heard *if it spoke in French*, which, of course, is exactly what it does in the scene where she responds to M. Paul’s mockery of Britain and speaks so the entire school hears her. It may well then be that Lucy cannot make herself heard until she has mastered French.

Another factor worth noting when talking about the superiority of English in Brontë’s novels is the superiority of English names. French and English sometimes quite literally split the identity of a person when multinational characters – always half-British, half-European – that include Frances in *The Professor*, M. de Bassompierre in *Villette* and

the Moore brothers in *Shirley*, are given both English and French names. As the ultimate identity marker, the names suggest not only a dual national identity, but *which* name is being used in a particular situation can say something about what traits are connected with which language. In *Shirley*, Robert is alternately called Robert Moore and Gérard Moore. When introducing Robert, the narrator says: “In the parish of Briarfield, with which we have at present to do, Hollow’s-mill was the place held most abominable; Gérard Moore, in his double character of semi-foreigner and thoroughgoing progressist, the man most abominated” (S 27). That is, the narrator uses Gérard when talking about Robert being a hated man and an alien. In a later passage, the same name is used when talking about Robert’s dislike: whereas the curate Malone believes that Caroline will inherit her uncle’s money, “Gérard Moore was better instructed on this point: he had seen the neat church that owed its origin to the Rector’s zeal and cash, and more than once, in his inmost soul, had cursed an expensive caprice which crossed his wishes” (S 103). This lack of money is the reason he decides to pursue Shirley instead of Caroline, so though his reasons are good, one can see in this passage that his Belgian side is linked to emotions of anger, jealousy and upset. Additionally, it is significant that he curses a British church, as that moreover contributes to link “Gérard” with Catholic Europe. Lastly, in his own words, Robert tells Caroline that “I find in myself, Lina, two natures; one for the world and business, and one for home and leisure. Gérard Moore is a hard dog, brought up to mill and market: the person you call your cousin Robert is sometimes a dreamer, who lives elsewhere than in Cloth-hall and counting-house” (S 215). He is, in other words, connecting his hard business side with his Belgian side, and – most importantly – the side that is close to Caroline as his British. Now, this is of particular interest, because in identifying his British side as the one that is in love with and is loved by Caroline, he is immediately setting himself apart from all of the other romantic relationships between Brontë’s main characters. However, Robert *is* different from other European characters in that he is the only one that is a focaliser (his brother Louis “had been sent to England when a mere boy, and had received his education at an English school” (S 55), and is therefore much more British than his brother, and does not enter the story properly until the last volume). It is perhaps, then, right to separate Robert from the other European characters, because as the reader is allowed access to his mind, his British side is played up much more than in others in order to ingratiate him with us.

Another character that is of dual nationalities is M. de Bassompierre, who also possesses two last names: one French and one English, Mr Home. Of his character, Lucy notes that “there was still quite as much about him of plain Mr Home as of proud Count de

Bassompierre” (*V* 312). The European side of him is thus connected to the aristocratic and pretentious side of character, whereas the English accounts for the humble and good. Lastly, Frances Evans Henri has perhaps the most symbolic name of all since her first name has the word “France” in it. Ironically enough, William points out that Frances is an English name (*TP* 115). In other words, her first name alone exemplifies her dual identity. Buzard suggests that this name is an expression of the author’s resolve to explore a British identity that unites with, instead of opposing, French traits (180). Therefore, contrary to Robert and M. de Bassompierre, Frances does not have one name for her British side and one for her European, but rather a single name that incorporates the best of both worlds. Importantly, her first name is most likely the only one of her names she keeps after marrying William: she has to give up the wholly French and the wholly British names, but she keeps the core of her identity which is her first name and hybrid nature.

### **3.2 French: The Language of Passion**

Sidestepping the use of the language when spoken by native speakers and the insertion of the occasional French word in the middle of a sentence, it is possible to discern a pattern of when French is used in Brontë’s novels: in moments of great passion. This can be related to anger, affection or matters that are considered unsuitable. Where a character is able to speak both French and English, he or she will often, unwittingly or not, use French when they experience intense emotions or when talking about something that is too rude to say in English.

Elizabeth Russell weighs in on this subject and claims that “England and the English language become the site of conservative uprightness” in Brontë’s novels (15), and thus French becomes connected to the opposite. Though she certainly is right in saying that English is presented as being upright, something that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter, French is not merely connected to the licentious side of relationships, but also to companionate love. This is in particular made evident in the passages where one partner teaches the other French, and is a topic which I will explore shortly.

If one looks closer at the use of French in *Villette*, it becomes clear that Lucy often uses it when her emotions are overflowing. Though she cannot speak French at the start of the story, she is the British character who speaks the most key phrases in French in all of Brontë’s novels, and two of the most important phrases regarding national identity in *Villette* are spoken in French. The first of these is “Mon père, je suis Protestante [Father, I am a Protestant (Cooper, note 13, *V* 570)]” (*V* 178), which is spoken in a very central scene that

was addressed in the first chapter. Suffering from what would now be called depression, Lucy makes this statement to Père Silas in his Catholic chapel at the very end of the first volume. Remarkably, this sentence is the only part of the conversation with Père Silas that is, if not spoken, then at least reported in French. Though the literal meaning of what she says is that she is Protestant, and by extension British, the way in which she says it problematises it. Lucy identifies her creed in a language that is associated with Catholicism and the Continent, and by doing that she calls her statement into question. This scene does not just mark Lucy's theological struggle and her fascination with Catholicism, but it could also be Lucy making a declaration more to remind or persuade herself of her own beliefs; and by having her utter this in French, when she did not speak a word of it upon her arrival in Villette, the novel might be signalling that Lucy's speedy learning of French is part of what has made her seek out the chapel in the first place: she has been gallicised.

The other example of Lucy using French in central, emotional moments occurs at M. Paul's fête, where she exclaims: "Vive l'Angleterre, l'Histoire et les Héros! A bas la France, la Fiction et les Faquins! [Long live England, History and Heroes! Down with France, Fiction and Fops! (Cooper, note 8, *V* 588)]" (*V* 379). Here, what is possibly the most patriotic outburst across all of Brontë's fiction is expressed in the language belonging to the culture it denounces. Even more so than the scene in the church, it is ironic that this most nationalist outburst in Brontë's novels is uttered in French. However, by speaking this line in French, Lucy can make sure that every single teacher and student present will understand it (Williams 59-60). By having learnt their language, she is now able to impart her views about, to her mind, the superior Britain to her pupils. Moreover, what might be easy to miss is the fact that Lucy calls out France, not Europe or Labassecour, the country in which she currently resides. This is as clear a sign as any that Labassecour is the epitome of French influence. Lastly, she does not stop at praising Britain, but she also degrades France, and with that she sums up a vital part of the question of national identity: must the allegiance to one country necessarily come at the expense of the other? The balancing of the two forces is not an easy thing, as can be seen throughout this entire thesis, and Lucy's outburst suggests that though her heart lies with Britain, she also needs, if not France, then at least French. Recalling the previously discussed scene where she tears up one of her students' English paper, I argued that it might be that Lucy could only make herself heard if she spoke in French – here, she has finally learnt French and makes the entire school listen to what she has to say.

Two more examples of French being used in states of anger can be found in *Shirley*. Though French is Robert's native language, he uses it relatively sparingly. The first time he

speaks French is after Yorke has used Robert's own mother tongue to mock him: "Go back to Antwerp, where you were born and bred, mauvaise tête! [pig-headed boy! (Rosengarten and Smith, note 39, *S* 548)]" (*S* 39). Robert then rushes into an angry argument with York, the entirety of which is conducted in French. In other words, passionate anger is what makes him switch language. His sister, Hortense, screams in French whenever she is annoyed at her maid (e.g. *S* 345). Contrary to her brothers, she is a caricature of foreign stereotypes: dressing in traditional Belgian clothes, making traditional Belgian food and constantly jabbering – angrily – in French. After having had a row with her maid, Hortense has an "explosion of wrath... the long declamation about the 'conduite indigne de cette méchante créature [the shameful conduct of that bad creature (Rosengarten and Smith, note 47, *S* 551)],' sounded in [Caroline's] ear as confusedly as the agitated rattling of the china" (*S* 74). She moreover speaks French when "pour[ing] out a flood of amazement and horror" when she is talking about the incident at her brother's mill (*S* 55). In short, her speech is consistently conducted (or reported by the narrator) in French whenever emotions take over, something which furthermore underlines the position French has in Brontë's novels of being the language of passion.

Passion can mean a great many things: not simply intense emotions, but also sexual feelings, and French is often linked to the "improper" European sexuality in Brontë's novels. In *The Professor*, William recounts: "[A]s I strode down the passage [M. Pelet] followed me with one of his laughs – a very French, rakish, mocking sound" (*TP* 68). To William, then, French is associated with that which is derisive, though in making this description it is in fact William and his own language that mocks French. Most interestingly, the word "rakish" suggests behaving in an immoral manner, like someone who has "dissolute or promiscuous habits" ("Rake," *OED*). In other words, William is linking the French language with the European promiscuity that was discussed in chapter two. Much as was the case in the previous chapter, William, Showalter contends, dislikes that about the French language which he tries to repress in himself: "dangerous nuances of scepticism, sophistication, and passion" (227). In trying to link these things with French, he is attempting to distance himself from it.

William is not the only one of Brontë's characters who links the French language with European sexuality. In *Shirley*, both Caroline and Shirley's uncles denounce their nieces' study of French on the basis of the language being "immoral." After having had a quarrel with Robert, Caroline's uncle, the Reverend Helstone, tells her that she should stop taking French lessons:

The language, he observed, was a bad and frivolous one at the best, and most of the works it boasted were bad and frivolous, highly injurious in their tendency to weak [sic] female minds. He wondered (he remarked parenthetically) what noodle first made it the fashion to teach women French: nothing was more improper for them; it was like feeding a rickety child on chalk and water-gruel: Caroline must give it up, and give up her cousins too: they were dangerous people. (*S* 144)

The reader is not meant to sympathise with Helstone in this argument, but his opinions are nevertheless important as they illustrate the extreme of the view that the English language is not only superior, but also somehow morally superior to French by relating the language to stereotypical notions of European sexuality. It is not the language in itself that is sinful, but its connotations. Moreover, as mentioned in the second chapter, novels, and in particular French novels, were perceived by some as immoral, and this is a view that is clearly held by Helstone. However, he is correct in some regard: French has been an important part of Caroline and Robert's relationship, and it does enable her to explore spheres that might have previously been inaccessible to her. If she had not taken French lessons with his sister, she might not have fallen in love with Robert. Lastly, Helstone's tirade is similar to a conversation Shirley has with her uncle, which was reported in the previous chapter, in which he yells at her: "You read French. Your mind is poisoned with French novels. You have imbibed French principles" (*S* 460). Summed up, to these British characters' minds there is a direct correlation between learning French and acting stereotypically French.

In her article "Honey-Mad Women: Charlotte Brontë's Bilingual Heroines," Yaeger asserts that French is Rochester's "language of seduction" (15). This would fall in line with the previously made argument that Rochester adapts a European sexuality – at least when in Europe. When he recounts his time on the Continent, Rochester frequently uses French words, as if the tarnished tale calls for tarnished words. But the instances where he speaks the most French is whenever he is talking to Adèle. If French is his "language of seduction," it seems fitting that what might possibly be the fruit of one of his illicit liaisons speaks that language and serves as a constant reminder of what the consequences of such seduction might be. Of Adèle, Eells writes that "her effervescent use of the language contrasts with the austerity of Victorian England and functions as a constant reminder of Paris, stigmatized as a hotbed of loose morals. Adèle's French laces the text, embellishing it with frivolity" (n. pag. paragraph 1). As in both *Shirley* and *The Professor* then, the French language evokes ideas about European sexuality. However, it should also be noted that as she is so young it might

be natural that she should be frivolous. After all, Jane notes that as she grows older, Adèle becomes “docile, good-tempered, and well-principled” (*JE* 383).

In many ways, it is possible to compare Adèle with Ginevra Fanshawe: both are young girls who are presented as naïve, silly and frivolous. The difference between them lies in Ginevra’s mixed heritage and upbringing, and her consequent unscrupulous mixing of the two languages and cultures. Much like Hunsden who has no particular allegiance to either country, so does Ginevra, who has “crossed the Channel ten times, alone” (*V* 59-60), appear uninterested in professing loyalty to any country; but whereas this conflict in Hunsden is particularly connected with sexuality, it is connected with language and religion in Ginevra. In relation to this latter category, her utter indifference towards her creed can be demonstrated in a statement she makes to Lucy:

I have quite forgotten my religion; they call me a Protestant, you know, but really I am not sure whether I am one or not: I don’t well know the difference between Romanism and Protestantism. However, I don’t in the least care for that. I was a Lutheran once at Bonn. (*V* 60)

In admitting that she does not know the difference between the two religions and to which of them she belongs, she is inadvertently saying that she does not know whether she is the most French or the most English. Contrary to other characters with both British and European heritage, like Frances and Robert, she does not seem to care about the issue at all – and this is mirrored in the way in which she uses language. When travelling on the boat to Villette, Ginevra tells Lucy that that “French and German of course I know, to speak; but I can’t read or write them very well... and I write English so badly – such spelling and grammar, they tell me” (*V* 60). In admitting that she cannot write any of the languages properly, she is also saying that she does not belong to any of the cultures the languages represent. Though she is one of the few characters who speak more than two languages fluently, this inability to write any of them demonstrates apathy and indifference, and as she does not know any language properly, she does not properly belong to any national group either. The consequence of this is that she seems to fluctuate between different personas and different national identities.

Yaeger, who contends that French in *Villette* is “the language of transgression, of anger, and of gaiety,” connects this in particular to Ginevra (21). Throughout the novel, she constantly switches to French when talking about something that falls within these categories. At one point she talks about “send[ing] lessons *au diable* [to the devil (Cooper, note 21, *V* 556)],” to which she adds in parentheses “one daren’t say that in English, you know, but it

sounds quite right in French” (V 61). That is, whereas she would never dare to speak such profanities in English, they seem to fit perfectly with the French language. What this tells us is that to Ginevra, certain things are unsuitable to say in English, whereas French to her has no such moral restrictions. Had she had a problem with the meaning of the phrase “au diable” in itself, she would have avoided it in either tongue – but no, the fact remains that English is simply “too pure” for such words, whereas French is not. This can be further supported by the narrator’s later remark that Ginevra “always had to recourse to French, when about to say something specially heartless and perverse” (V 99-100). The fact that Ginevra deliberately switches to French in these situations indicates that she lets languages guide different sides of her personality. Erika Kvistad contends that Ginevra’s practice of alternating between different languages opens up “a range of moral and identity-related possibilities” to her (82). That is, it may appear that she takes on French/European morals when speaking French and British morals when speaking English: she does not simply swap languages, but also moral systems. Though I previously argued that to call the English and French languages different moral systems is an oversimplification, in the specific case of Ginevra, that seems to be the case.

### 3.3 Language Learning

An important aspect of language in Brontë’s novels is language learning, which can in many ways be considered an extension of the topics this thesis dealt with in the second chapter, as, like Scholl writes, the relationships between masters and pupils in these novels “are always sexually charged” (30). It is through their French studies that many of Brontë’s women convey their feelings towards their loved ones (Showalter 231). The majority of these relationships are between an English-speaker and a French-speaker, a pattern that is so regular that it is hard to regard it as accidental. In *The Professor*, William is Frances’ English teacher; in *Shirley*, Louis is Shirley’s former French teacher and Caroline learns French from Robert’s sister; and in *Villette*, M. Paul takes it upon himself to correct Lucy’s French. The only novel missing is *Jane Eyre*. She is herself both a teacher and a governess and masters French when she meets Rochester. However, the sexual component of language learning is also present in this novel, though it differs from the rest in that Jane is taught a non-European language and as such will not be covered in this thesis. In the other novels, however, language learning becomes a way of breaking boundaries between French and British, and the lessons create an intimacy between the characters. That being said, however, there is



usually a strong master-pupil dynamic where the man educates the uninitiated woman and attempts to make his language hers. As mentioned earlier, colonisation is part of the equation when talking about language learning, but so is “sexual play” (Kvistad 167), and it is this sexual component that will in particular be explored in this section.

Shuttleworth contends that ascertaining male dominance is the prime motive for language learning between two romantic partners in Brontë’s novels (“Dynamics” 177). She moreover maintains that the relationship between Lucy and M. Paul is similar to that between William and Frances, and Louis and Shirley, in that a master teaches his pupil his own language and “us[es] its discipline as a way of governing and dominating her behaviour” (“Dynamics” 176). Though I believe this to be true in some cases, particularly with William and Frances, matters are more complicated than that in others. In *Villette* Lucy is not taught French by M. Paul; her acquisition of French happens through immersion, not through being taught by a teacher. Though he later corrects pieces she writes in French, the language learning aspect of their relationship does not happen until well into the story and their growing relationship. Contrary to the other novels, *Villette* explores the relationship between two language teachers, not simply one teacher and one student, and M. Paul is never strictly speaking Lucy’s French teacher. Besides, when their conversations are recorded in the novel, it is most likely that they are in reality speaking French. In relation to this, it is interesting that M. Paul’s English skills remain poor throughout the novel, and he never seems to have a desire to improve them; and whereas Lucy is intent on teaching English to her pupils in order to better their morals, she never considers doing the same to M. Paul. It may be that just as Lucy does not wish to be taught by him, she does not want to teach him: she falls for him partly because of his Frenchness, and if she attempted to teach him English and impart British morals, she would be changing something that is a vital part of the one she loves. In learning French, Lucy is not submitting to M. Paul, but is rather taking control of her own situation in order to settle in in Labassecour and to gain more respect from her students. Lucy masters both French and English in the end, whereas M. Paul only knows French: this is not an expression of her submission to him, but a signal that she has managed to educate herself without the help of others and that she may actually be superior to him.

Notwithstanding that, the teaching component in this central relationship in *Villette* deserves some attention. Though he professes to despise learned women, M. Paul does at one point set out to teach Lucy arithmetic. Lucy tells the reader that “the harder I worked, the less he seemed content,” so she expresses her views to her teacher: “I never asked to be made learned, and you compel me to feel very profoundly that learning is not happiness” (*V* 390).

This is what signals more than anything that Lucy refrains from the situation in which for example Frances and Shirley find themselves in: contrary to them, she does not enjoy being taught, though the subject is admittedly arithmetic instead of French. Regardless of the topic, this tells us that when it comes to the teacher-pupil dynamic, Lucy much prefers to be on an equal footing with the man she loves.

The first scene in which something that resembles language learning takes place in *Villette* is when M. Paul helps Lucy to rehearse her lines for a play last-minute when one of the actresses falls ill. Though it might be easy to categorise this as an example of M. Paul trying to assert his dominance as he corrects her pronunciation, the way in which the scene starts suggests otherwise. M. Paul implores Lucy that “[t]he whole matter is going to fail... I apply to an Englishwoman to rescue me. What is her answer – Yes, or No?” (*V* 147-148). Lucy is inclined to say no, but changes her mind as she sees in M. Paul’s “vexed, fiery, and searching eye, a sort of appeal behind all its menace – my lips dropped the word ‘oui’” (*V* 148). In other words, it is Lucy who has the power in this situation, not the other way around. Furthermore, one should note that M. Paul’s question is reported in English and Lucy’s response is reported in French, though it in reality is all spoken in French. In having them phrase the question and response in each other’s languages, the novel indicates that a mutual respect has been established which sets the ground for their relationship. This is also the first mention of Lucy expressing some kind of attraction towards M. Paul, but contrary to other relationships that will be discussed, hers and M. Paul’s is from the beginning established to be of a more equal nature.

In *The Professor*, however, language learning constitutes the majority of the relationship between William and Frances: it is through it they meet and develop feelings for one another. What awakens William’s interest for Frances in the first place is her “good [English] accent” (*TP* 115). The intention behind William’s first proper conversation with her is to understand why she has two English names, and when she starts to reply to him in French, she is quickly cut off by William’s “[s]peak English, if you please” (*TP* 116). He becomes increasingly agitated as Frances continues to use French, and he angrily tells her: “And you do homage to [your mother’s] memory by forgetting her language? Have the goodness to put French out of your mind so long as I converse with you – keep to English” (*TP* 116), a command that comes over as particularly strict because the action takes place in a Francophone country. However, whereas this final imperative suggests that William is intent on Frances being as British as possible, as it was that which woke his interest in her, it may also be, like I discussed in chapter two, that he is afraid that *he* is becoming increasingly

more European. In demanding that Frances “keep to English,” he is also reminding himself of the importance that he stays British.

This first conversation between them is very similar to an exchange later in the novel, in which William proposes to Frances. Just as their first talk is bilingual, so Frances speaks French and William speaks English in this conversation. At its culmination, William asks: “Will my pupil consent to pass her life with me? Speak English now, Frances” (*TP* 187). This scene is highlighted when Buzard talks of the “radical de-gallicization” that he argues must be a part of the “English cultural recovery” that Frances is going through (190). That is, in order for Frances to be William’s wife, she must surrender to English. Plasa describes these passages as Frances “translat[ing] herself across the fragile border between sexual self-control and sexual excess” as she switches between the two languages (23), and with that the link between Britain and sexual restraint, and Europe and sexual rapaciousness is made once more. Lastly, in the very last chapter, William talks of “[Frances’] native French, in which language she always attacked me” and “whether she teased me in French or entreated me in English” (*TP* 211-212). That is to say, French appears to be the language of discord and English the language of reconciliation. That being said, however, the “teasing” is clearly meant as playful and flirtatious – if Frances would stop speaking French altogether, some of the sexual playfulness would disappear from their relationship. Additionally, one can also look at this as French being Frances’ only way of besting her husband – it remains a language in which he cannot attack her, and she remains the superior. And in that way, French is in the end for Frances, like it was for William in the beginning, a kind of liberator.

Though Buzard claims that “the way to their true union seems blocked so long as French remains the language of Frances’s heart” (189), Frances continues to use French until the end. Her European side is part of the reason why William is attracted to her, and if she had abandoned her native language she would no longer be the person he fell for. *The Professor* is not the story of how a British man manages to de-gallicise his intended and return to Britain with a wholly British wife, but the story of two people who find common ground despite national and linguistic differences. W. Cohen suggests that language learning in *The Professor* is twofold as he argues that “[t]eaching morphologically approximates lovemaking, as the master ‘must instil’ knowledge ‘into [the student’s] mind’ and thereby supply an antidote to external vulgarity and coarseness” (471). That is, the act of teaching is eroticised, at the same time as teaching English to a French-speaker is intended to make the student morally better. Once the student has abandoned French in favour of English, a conflict arises as the teaching is seen as something erotic that should be continued, but the

teaching has also fulfilled its moral purpose. In the case of William and Lucy, a kind of middle ground is reached: though Frances improves her English, she never abandons French altogether, and thus both the erotic and moral purpose of William's teaching can continue into their marriage.

The relationship between Louis and Shirley in *Shirley* is another example of how language learning makes the base of a romantic union. After the two are reunited after years apart, Louis asks his former pupil to read French to him: "The language had become strange to her tongue; it faltered: the lecture flowed unevenly, impeded by hurried breath, broken by Anglicised tones" (S 404). One can read this as a symbol of how Shirley's affection towards Louis has faltered and is in need of training. It also implies that there is a lot of teaching potential – in other words, there is much potential for amatory development between the two. Thereafter, Louis goes on to recite an old essay Shirley wrote for him years back, word for word. The fact that he remembers his pupil's essay so perfectly convinces the reader more than anything else that he harbours a deep love for her as it becomes clear that he has turned to her written words for remembrance in the years they have been separated. Shirley starting to use French again coincides with her falling in love with Louis, which once again demonstrates how the language is what links them together. She "found lively excitement in the pleasure of making his language her own" (S 413), an admission that furthermore proves the erotic power of language learning: as she makes his language her own, she is making him her own.

There is one scene in *Shirley* that deviates from the norm of a male teacher and female student: here the woman teaches the man. In a scene early in the novel, Robert and Caroline decide to play a game, and Robert asks: "Who shall be the speaker? What language shall he utter? French?" Caroline immediately replies that "[y]our French forefathers don't speak so sweetly, not so solemnly, nor so impressive as your English ancestors, Robert. Tonight you shall be entirely English: you shall read an English book" (S 76). Once again, the superiority of the English language is insisted upon. Caroline demands that he shall read a passage by Shakespeare and that he "must take some of his soul into yours" (S 77), a sentiment that harks back to W. Cohen's aforementioned argument that "the master 'must instil' knowledge 'into [the student's] mind.'" "With a view to making me better; is it to operate like a sermon?" Robert replies (S 77), and this seems to be exactly what it will do. Like Lucy and William on their pseudo-missionary quests on the Continent, Caroline sets out to convert her lover into Britishness. Additionally, it is not just any British author Caroline makes Robert read, but Shakespeare, whose great importance for the English language has

already been mentioned; Caroline is not joking when she says that “[t]o-night you shall be entirely English” (S 76). Furthermore, this reading is supposed to be “making [Robert] better,” which suggests the morality that is supposedly inherent in the English language.

However, no sooner has the lesson concluded, before the roles are reversed back to normal. As Robert watches Caroline recite French poetry, he finds her more beautiful than ever:

At the present moment – animated, interested, touched – she might be called beautiful. Such a face was calculated to awaken not only the calm sentiment of esteem, the distant one of admiration; but some feeling more tender, genial, intimate: friendship, perhaps – affection, interest. (S 81)

In other words, as French words spill out from Caroline’s lips, she becomes more attractive in the eyes of Robert. This can be contrasted to how Caroline perceives him when he recites Shakespeare. He then learns “languages and ethics” (S 80). This serves to underline the aforesaid argument that the French and other Europeans are connected with sexual attractiveness and a supposedly loose sexual moral, whereas the British are perceived as morally superior and restrained. Nevertheless, it is also possible to interpret this passage as French mediating love, as not long after this passage, Caroline admits that “[n]ow I love Robert, and I feel sure that Robert loves me... to-day I *felt* it. When I looked up at him after repeating Chénier’s poem, his eyes... sent the truth through my heart” (S 84-85).

It has already been mentioned that learning a second language could allow women to explore new cultural spheres. However, Shuttleworth contends that language learning for women in Brontë’s novels is a double-edged sword:

Language and writing, the only weapons open to women socially to express their dissent, act finally as the vehicles of their own defeat. As in *The Professor*, the taming of the women [in *Shirley*] is enacted through their acquisition of their master’s language. Both Caroline and Shirley are reduced to the state of a ‘docile child’ as they recite their French lessons at their lover’s command. (*Psychology* 214-215)

Although I agree with Shuttleworth up to a point, I do not believe that these female characters are “defeated” by French. In *The Professor*, Frances continues to use French when she teases her husband and in *Shirley*, Caroline demands that Robert reads to her in English – both examples have been examined above and both demonstrate that the women do not simply

bow down to their masters. Their acquisition of a foreign language enables several of them to elevate their station and is a prerequisite for falling in love with the people they do.

In the end, the way in which French is used in Brontë's novels illustrates the vast complexities of national identity and the relationship between Britain and Europe. Had the intricacies of the French and English languages been removed from the novels, a significant part of the intrigue would be missing and the convoluted relationships between Britons and Europeans would suddenly diminish. The way in which Brontë uses French in her novels explores just "how much French, and how strong a commitment to the emotional energies accessible *through* French, an English book can accommodate," Buzard maintains (171). At the end of their respective novels, all of Brontë's protagonists are proficient in French, which is as clear a sign as any that to the author, French constitutes an integral part of a fulfilled life. Nonetheless, just like with Catholicism and European sexuality, the French language may have its appeal, but it nevertheless always takes second place behind its eternal superior: English.

# Conclusion

When William and Frances return to Britain, we are told of the birth of their son Victor – the only child born of the union between a Briton and a European that is mentioned by name or given any presence in the stories. Though born on the Continent, his parents bring him to Britain before long, and the reader is left to assume that they do not return to Europe. Victor’s name suggests that he might symbolise the victor of the battle between Britain and the Continent: someone with a touch of “Europeanness” (he is  $\frac{1}{4}$  Swiss), but that resides and is brought up in Britain, and will presumably therefore, under the guidance of his father, grow up to be British. Victor literally gets the final word of the story – “Papa – come!” (*TP* 223) – which furthermore illustrates that the final message the novel sends is one of reconciliation between Britain and Europe, but where Britain nevertheless is the party that has the upper hand.

Finally, if there were any doubts as to which part emerges as the superior in these novels, Britain is frequently called the Promised Land and linked with Israel. John Wolffe writes how Britain’s prosperity, defeat over Napoleon and exemption from the revolutions that spread throughout Europe in the mid-century, lead some to believe that it had taken the old role of Israel as God’s chosen country (*God* 120), and this thought is also present in Brontë’s novels. Frances “said ‘England’ as you might suppose an Israelite of Moses’ days would have said Canaan” (*TP* 119) and Hunsden, in a far less sympathetic way, writes in a letter to William that “I have no doubt in the world that you are doing well in that greasy Flanders... sitting like a black-haired, tawny-skinned, long-nosed Israelite by the flesh-pots of Egypt” (*TP* 161). However, it is intriguing that none of these two, who are the ones who most frequently evoke the comparison between Britain and the Promised Land, are wholly British. As Frances is half-Swiss and Hunsden is a cosmopolite – someone with allegiances to multiple countries and cultures – Britain does not hold the sole claim of their national sympathies. The consequence of this is that the novels present the idea of Britons being God’s chosen people as something universal, not just something that the country’s inhabitants hold to be true.

Related to this, Wang argues that, like the Israelites who left Egypt and kept searching for a country of their own, Lucy is at home neither in Britain nor in Labassecour (347). Similarly, Lawson and Lynn Shakinovsky claim that *Villette*’s “most compelling phobia is that of not belonging, of having *no* place, of the state of being ‘placeless’”

("Fantasies" 932). "[T]o be home-sick, one must have a home; which I have not," Lucy admits (*V* 402). I believe this argument can be transferred to William as well, as he confesses that "[i]f I had a home in England, I believe I would recall it" (*TP* 145). That is, Lucy and William, whose accounts of Labassecour and Belgium are filled to the brim with anti-Catholic and Europhobic opinions, and contrasting elevating descriptions of their countrymen, are nevertheless not comfortable calling Britain their home. It may be that these descriptions are a way of attempting to form a bond to the country they have left, something that the aforementioned confessions suggest fails in the end. The final chapter in *Villette* insinuates that Lucy in the end finds a home in her new school that M. Paul has granted her and she does not return to Britain in the end. William returns to Britain, not because it is his home, but because it is his wife's, who has always dreamed of going there. In short, it is their European lovers who provide them with a new sense of belonging – that, in the end, is no small feat for Europe to accomplish.

The primary purpose of this thesis has been to explore the complex relationship between Britain and Europe in Brontë's novels, and how, by the paradoxical denunciation and appeal of certain European traits, the Continent comes to be somewhere where British identity can be re-examined. The novels frequently evoke stereotypes about Europeans, and in particular about the French, that were common in Victorian Britain, but Brontë goes against the grain of her contemporaries in embracing some of the Continental characteristics and exploring the alluring aspects of Europe. This thesis has furthermore shown that all four of Brontë's novels have something significant to add to the conversation about Europe and national identity. I have tried to show that though Europhobia dominates in these novels, matters are nevertheless not always as simple as "good" Britain and "bad" Europe. However, the Europeans that are given a particular presence in the novels and have these appealing qualities are distinct from the vast majority of European characters in the novel. Apart from these main characters, Europeans are relegated to simple stereotypes to be mocked and ridiculed, and part of what redeems people like M. Paul and Frances is the fact that they act more British than their countrymen. Though it is love that transgresses national borders, the novels nevertheless make sure to not give their protagonists' partners too many of the European traits they denounce. I have demonstrated that religion, sexuality and morality, and language are some of the most important elements that are used to separate Britishness from "Europeanness." However, it also seems like the British characters *need* a touch of something European, something that is significant when considering the general Francophobia and anti-Catholicism that predominated the Victorian discourse on Europe: be it Lucy's flirt with



Catholicism and a Catholic, the excitement of European sexuality Rochester represents and that Jane chooses over the cold, British St. John, or the love that blossoms due to, and via, the French language in *Shirley*.

In chapter one, I found that religion is the most frequently employed factor that distinguishes Britons from Continental Europeans in Brontë's novels, and that there is a constant vigorous denouncement of Catholicism and Continental Catholics. Through the presentations of life-denying nuns, depraved clergymen and supposed immoral Catholic principles, the religion is contrasted to the honesty, reason and spiritual independence of Protestantism. Nevertheless, the most anti-Catholic novel of them all, *Villette*, depicts a romantic relationship between a Protestant and a Catholic, a union that was singular in Victorian fiction. Lucy finds solace in her "confession" to a Catholic priest and is at times tempted by her lover's creed. However, M. Paul's implied death does in the end signify that though they have grown to love each other, the unification between their two religions is not possible.

In the second chapter, which in many ways is a continuation of the first, I demonstrated that Europe is associated with supposed immoral behaviour, and in particular with supposed excessive sexual behaviour. This is particularly clear in the differentiation between British and European women. I found that both William and Rochester become "infected" with this European sexuality when they are in Europe, and the latter in particular takes on a European sexual identity. However, Europe also represents the alluring and attractive aspect of sexuality, and the British restraint taken to extreme, which is symbolised by St. John, is not endorsed. It is the conjoining of British restraint and European allure that is advocated.

In the final chapter, I strived to show that Brontë's novels do not employ the French language simply to make the settings believable and to stress that someone is a non-native English speaker; rather, it is used to signify passion, be it illicit or not. Furthermore, there is an erotic aspect in the language learning situation, in which a French-speaker and an English-speaker develop their relationship when teaching each other or learning the other's language. Nevertheless, the superiority of the English language is frequently claimed, and William and Lucy resemble missionaries in that in teaching their European students English, their chief goal is to impart a British set of morals.

This thesis has limited itself to these three chapter topics, but that is not to say that these are the only ways through which Anglo-European relations in Brontë's novels can be studied. There are also other aspects of the relationship between Britain and Europe that

would reward exploration. For example, the frequent evocations of the battle between Wellington and Napoleon in *Shirley* and the strange likenesses between European or Europeanised characters and Napoleon that are scattered throughout the novels are certainly worth delving into. Moreover, though it was addressed occasionally, there is much more to be said about the imperialist and colonial aspects of Britain and Europe that are not related to the Empire, and the imperialist and colonial aspects *between* Britain and Europe. Examples of this include the French colonisation of Belgium, the internal conflicts within Britain and likenesses between how Europeans and British colonial subjects are treated.

This thesis has explored the opposition between Britain and Continental Europe, but has also demonstrated that numerous factors can contribute to – if not dismantle, then at least complicate and challenge – this binary opposition. In the battle between the two identities in Brontë’s novels, it seems that Europe always draws the shortest straw and Britain emerges victorious. In the words of Jane, the Continent might sometimes represent paradise, but a “fool’s paradise” nonetheless; and despite the temptations it offers, it can never quite rival the “healthy heart of England.”

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