Leave sunny imaginations hope: the fate of three women in Charlotte Bronte's Villette

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A Thesis

entitled

“Leave Sunny Imaginations Hope”:
The Fate of Three Women in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

by

Hayley Wynne

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Abstract

Scholars have attempted to decode Lucy Snowe’s motivations as the cryptic narrator of Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Villette* (1853) for decades; these concerns usually focus on Lucy Snowe’s fate as an unmarried woman. I feel they have left large gaps concerning other main female characters in the novel, and so I propose that rather than focusing exclusively on Lucy to deduce Brontë’s reasons for employing such a cagey narrator, it is important to keep Lucy’s fellow single women in mind when analyzing the novel’s depiction and perception of marriage. By closely examining passages which deal with both Paulina Home and Ginevra Fawnshawe, I argue that Brontë offers three models of middle-class femininity and then deconstructs them in order to better display their flaws. Central to all these discussions is a focus on Brontë’s repeated use of ambiguity to complicate and draw out her narrative. I propose that Lucy’s place as an outsider to the marriage plot is what affords her the ability to critique her peers, even as she herself refuses to act out the prescribed spinster narrative. This reading will hopefully add a new take on the subject of marriage in *Villette* particularly, and mid-Victorian literature more widely, particularly in novels written by female authors.
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Introduction

The conclusion of Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) is famously ambivalent: while the novel suggests an unhappy short-circuiting of the narrator’s domestic romance, it also builds in the possibility of a happier ending for those readers with “sunny imaginations.” Lucy Snowe, a frustrating and classically unreliable narrator who misdirects and withholds information from the reader throughout the novel, refuses to finish her story definitively, emphasizing instability rather than closure and evoking the possibility of an alternative ending to her own story rather than definitively settling the question of her fate. Scholarly debates over the novel’s narrative structure and the conclusion in particular have gone on for some time. As scholar David Sandner notes, when the novel was first published, Brontë received letters from two different women asking about the exact fate of M. Paul, and how that affected Lucy. She refused to give them a simple yes-or-no answer, proving that ambiguity is more important than the official outcome for the narrator and her suitor.

Critics interpret the ending of Brontë’s novel in a wide range of ways. Judith Mitchell, for instance, presents Lucy and M. Paul’s complicated relationship as a proto-feminist one which is surprisingly egalitarian for its time; she reads the ending as Brontë’s unconscious realization that such relationships were far too radical for the age, and as such they could not even exist in fiction. Emily Heady sees Brontë’s dissatisfaction with the marriage plot stemming not from social constraints, but the Gothic and Romantic conventions themselves. She presents the novel as an
alternative to its overly material predecessors, and reads the ending with the biblical parable of the Talents in mind; while she believes Lucy ends up without a husband, she argues this results in an overflow of spiritual contentment and wealth.

Central to these discussions of the novel’s conclusion is the narrator’s reliability. As many others have noted, throughout the novel, Lucy withholds pertinent information and deceives her readers, a narrative tactic that leads readers feeling both challenged, frustrated, and sometimes even betrayed. Beverly Forsythe represents that last reaction particularly well: in “The Two Faces of Lucy Snow: A Study in Deviant Behavior,” she accuses Lucy of taking her frustrations out on the reader, deriving a sadistic pleasure from their confusion, and tries to excuse Lucy’s repeated misdirections by depicting her as a victim of psychological oppression and bullying. Some scholars attempt to rehabilitate Lucy further, as when Elizabeth Preston argues that Lucy actually becomes more reliable as the novel progresses. Even Preston must admit, however, that what Lucy decides to tell readers is in a sort of code, and one must be very alert to catch her meaning.

For many scholars, including this one, the question of Lucy’s reliability leads directly to questions about the novel’s ending. Why does Brontë deprive her readers of a traditionally happy ending? Why does she create a narrator, Lucy, who refuses to tell her own plot clearly? Does the ambiguous ending of Brontë’s last novel suggest a conflicted view of the traditional heterosexual marriage plot, a plot which Brontë ultimately embraced in the ending of her most famous first novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847)? Does *Villette* affirm or challenge the domestic romance? In the investigation that follows, I will take up these and related questions. I am particularly interested in
how the narrative equivocations and ambiguity in Brontë’s novel—ambiguity which appears particular in relation to how Brontë’s narrator tells her own story—affects our interpretation of the marriage plot. I believe that Brontë invites us to question this plot as a positive outcome for women, yet, at the same time, I do not believe her novel can be read as a simplistic rejection of marriage. Indeed, Brontë offers a range of different kinds of marriages in this novel, and I believe that in order to decipher the novel’s attitude towards marriage, Lucy Snow is not the only character who requires exploration. In what follows, I will investigate not only Lucy Snowe as a narrator, but also the other female characters to whom Brontë invites us to compare her: her fellow single women, Paulina Home and Ginevra Fanshawe, both of whom follow more traditional marriage plots. I also compare her fate to those of her fellow women in order to argue that Brontë uses Paulina and Ginevra simultaneously to create and deconstruct three distinct models of middle-class Victorian femininity with their own distinct plots—and their own individual endings. Comparing the narratives of these women to each other leads me to offer my reading of Brontë’s ending. I believe that closely examining Lucy in comparison to the constructions and ultimate fates of Paulina Home, the fairy-like child who grows into a devoted wife, and Ginevra Fawnshawe, the unrepentant flirt and gossip, reveals a fuller picture of mid-Victorian marriage in the world of Villette. In that way, I bring together scholarship on the narrative of the novel with feminist scholarship on character.
Paulina as Angel in the House

In order to more fully understand Lucy Snowe’s motivations who withholds even her own ending from the reader, I must first examine the other, more traditional models of femininity which Brontë offers the reader. Reviewing these differing models, each with their own story and plotline, is crucial to gaining a clearer picture of the options facing Lucy—and the options facing Brontë as a Victorian novelist. To simply focus on the narrator and her choices ignores much critical material, and leaves gaps in both the scholarship and the understanding of character. For these reasons, I begin with Paulina Home, the most outwardly conventional of the three most important women in Brontë’s novel. I propose that Brontë includes Paulina’s story as an example of the most conventional kind of marriage plot, offering it to the reader as an extreme instance of a particular kind of narrative that emphasizes marriage and family as the end goal for women. Paulina embodies all of the virtues that accompany Victorian domestic ideology, and Brontë depicts her journey from girlhood to womanhood as a story of domestic fulfillment. Hers is the plot assigned to so many female characters in the Victorian novel, a story of innocent girlhood followed by courtship and culminating in marriage—the very kind of story Brontë retells in *Jane Eyre* (albeit in a Gothic context that permits her to explore its more troubling possible outcomes).

From the moment she is introduced as a small child, Paulina is posited as a take on the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House, a view of middle-class femininity that expressed itself through caring exclusively about others, particularly one’s husband. Even
her name, Paulina Home, keeps her grounded in a place that conjures images of warm fires, tidy rooms, and pleasant company. It is interesting to note, however, that the home we see her in is never hers. First at the Bretton’s, then the overseas dwelling of La Terrasse, Paulina cultivates domestic tranquility wherever she goes. She is described in otherworldly terms: rooms she is in are “haunted,” as opposed to “inhabited” (11), and often dressed in white, dancing from room to room. In doing so, Brontë complicates, and possibly undermines, the meaning of “angel.” Instead of painting an image of a heavenly servant, she draws up images of someone dead, or at least not entirely alive -- an association which suggests that this model of feminine virtue saps women of their vitality and potential. By assigning the angel of the house a more Gothic context, Brontë plays out the troubling implications of this feminine figure to its logical conclusion, since angels themselves are not alive, but rather shades of people who used to be.

Brontë’s depiction of Paulina as the ultimate Angel in the House begins when Paulina is only a child, and the novel’s portrayal of her devotion to the patriarch of her family as weirdly exaggerated and single-minded suggests a deep discomfort with the angel ideology that runs throughout Villette. The novel establishes Paulina’s devotion to the rules of domesticity early on and with particular force in the scene where Paulina’s father returns from Europe, where he has been taking care of business matters. Having been left in a house full of women, Paulina has had no patriarch to serve, and, when he returns, she ceases moping in an instant “startling transfiguration” (12), runs into the street to greet him, and is contented wholly with a single kiss. He orders her to fetch his handkerchief, and she does so in a definitively angelic manner:
She obeyed; went and returned deftly and nimbly. . . . It was a picture, in its way, to see her, with her tiny stature, and trim, neat shape, standing at his knee. . . . She took his hand, opened the unresisting fingers, insinuated into them the handkerchief, and closed them upon it one by one. He still seemed not to see or feel her. . . (14)

Paulina here exists to fill her father’s needs, and to do so in a way that causes the least disruption to what he engages in. Rather than interrupt his conversation with Mrs. Bretton, Paulina takes it upon herself to quietly and unobtrusively get the requested item from her hands to his. She is the helper he was unaware he needed, or indeed, even registers as a person. That her own father is seemingly oblivious to her presence, just moments after she leaves the room, is unsettling. The man has not seen his daughter for weeks, and yet dismisses her and ignores her pointed attempts to secure his attentions. Something, Brontë hints, is not right here.

The scene only intensifies from this point, moving to the epitome of Victorian sensibilities: afternoon tea. Paulina snaps into full-on angel mode here, ordering the servants to place her next to her father because “[she] must hand his tea,” then insisting that her father join her “as if [they] were at home,” and taking full responsibility for his every need and desire because, as she carefully explains, “nobody could do it as well, not even your own self” (14). She trusts no one else to do this most important of jobs, and is rewarded only with a few words from her father. Her obsessive devotion, described from Lucy’s point of view, comes across as almost comical, what with “sugar tongs [that are] too wide for one of her hands” and “the weight of . . . the very cup and saucer [that] tasked her insufficient strength and dexterity” (15). She triumphs over these obstacles and
serves her father his tea, but when Lucy admits she “thought her a little busy-body” (15),
the reader is invited to see Paulina’s actions as unusual and unnerving. Hemming a
handkerchief for her father in the scene immediately following, the child pricks her
fingers to the point of bleeding and “marking the cambric with a track of minute red dots”
(15), but she barely makes any noise to express her discomfort. The pain is not enough to
sway her from the ever important task of making her father happy. Indeed, Lucy
describes this macabre scene as “silent, diligent, absorbed, womanly,” as though the last
is the logical outgrowth of that chain. To be an angel is to suffer for others, and to do that
quietly.

Brontë also sets an important precedent with the aforementioned tea scene:
whoever is on the receiving end of Paulina’s generosity is the most important man in her
life at that moment. Her father’s visit ends and he departs for Europe, leaving Paulina
alone among relative strangers once again. Graham, however, is there to fill the void.
Within three days of her father’s departure, Paulina brings Graham his breakfast and
dotes on him with the same ferocity previously reserved for her father. Certainly there is
an element of foreshadowing at play here, as the two end up marrying in the latter third of
the novel, but I also believe it illustrates another potential issue within the framework of
tradition angel in the house stereotypes, and specifically with Paulina’s characterization.

Brontë repeatedly describes Paulina as drawing her energy from others,
specifically the man to whom she is closest. Lucy describes the arrangement thus: “One
would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live,
move, and have her being in another: now that her father was taken from her, she nestled
to Graham, and seemed to feel by his feelings and exist in his existence” (26). This
immense feeling on Paulina’s part develops in the span of three days, throwing a shadow of doubt on the idea that this angelic devotion springs from a place of pure and wholesome character. If Paulina can only take direction, and indeed live, through some other person, what happens to her when that person leaves? Her reassignment to Graham, when viewed with this in mind, seems less of an awareness of previously unacknowledged tender feelings and more a desperate bid for self-preservation. While no one would frown upon taking responsibility for one’s well-being in such a way, the act itself seems less noble when it is motivated by sheer instinct instead of selfless charity.

Obeying that instinct is possibly Paulina’s best bet for survival, however, since neither of the men she clings to seem to care or notice her unceasing devotion and the meaning it has for her. After her father sends her for the handkerchief in the previously quoted scene, he immediately strikes up a conversation with Mrs. Bretton. For Paulina, getting hold of that handkerchief and handing it proudly to her father is all that matters, but he does not seem to care about it either way. His blasé attitude toward her constant attention is off-putting, mainly because he gives her so little in return. Indeed, the entire caretaker-dependent dynamic is out of balance. Mr. Home is the child’s father and should by all rights be spoiling Paulina with excessive displays of affection. Yet it is Paulina who scurries to and fro, getting him things and making sure he is comfortable in every way.

Graham too, once he becomes the object of her attentions, mistreats her in ways that are subtle but distinctly damaging. The most obvious of these is his rebuke when she asks to join the gathering of his friends: “As if I would be troubled with you! Away to mama and Mistress Snowe, and tell them to put you to bed” (27). This, to the girl who
brings him breakfast and cares for him with the sort of overwhelming devotion she reserves for no one else. For all her outward charity to others, she receives very little in return. Lucy takes a less-than-favorable view of this devotion, branding her with “a one-idea nature,” which she believes “[betrays] that monomaniac tendency [she has] ever though the most unfortunate with which man or woman can be cursed” (12). Her constant devotion to the men in her life, when seen through Lucy’s point of view, goes far beyond a naturally generous nature and settles somewhere between obsessive fussing and a cult-like brainwashing.

Although Lucy is not a narrator whose thoughts and actions are necessarily supposed to invite reader identification, her outsider’s perspective invites the reader to view Paulina’s actions and ideology in a different light. In any other Victorian novel, and indeed some contemporary works, a female character who is unceasingly focused on the men in her life is par for the course, and understood as a sort of “given”: the tiny child who pays the most attention to her father, and then grows into a devoted wife is an accepted and seemingly natural progression. It is Lucy’s point of view as a spinster, someone outside the confines of the traditional marriage plot, that allows readers to doubt the positive outcome of Paulina’s actions. Without Lucy’s realization that “happy, devoted child” does not always lead to “happy, devoted wife,” Paulina’s story is just another everyday fairytale, affirming the patriarchal ideology to which she so closely adheres. She is a self-fulfilling prophecy that can only be realized if she spends her every waking moment focused entirely outside herself and her desires.

Brontë gives Paulina her happy ending, but by placing the story in Lucy’s hands, she encourages the reader to see how unsettling it is. After a series of coincidences that
happen only in Victorian fiction, Lucy meets up with Paulina Home again, who is now an heiress known as Paulina Mary de Bassompierre, and is insinuated into her and Graham’s marriage plot. The latter two have been secretly exchanging letters, waiting for the right moment to alert the girl’s father; letters, which Lucy notes, “had not been written to show her talents; still less, I think, to express her love” (494). Even though she is deeply in love with Graham, Paulina can not bring herself to betray any feeling or admit any desire on her own part. The letters are for placating him, for his use only. (Compare these to the letters Lucy writes to Dr. John, into which she pours her loneliness and desperate calls for acknowledgement.) The situation only becomes more unsettling when Paulina finally reveals their intentions. Her father refuses to see his eighteen-year-old daughter as the object of anyone else’s affection, even as she begs him to allow the engagement to become official. No matter how much she wants the marriage to Graham, she is unable to get past her paralyzing need for her father’s permission; when he seems on the verge of forbidding further communication, she declares that “[he] can do as he please, [his] power is despotic; [he] can shut [her] up in a convent, and break Graham’s heart tomorrow, if [he chooses] to be so cruel” (501). Overblown and an exaggerated as her language is, the truth is that her father could end everything if he wanted to. Paulina is bound not only by the patriarchal conventions of her time, but more by her unceasing belief and obedience to those conventions. Luckily for her, her father gives his permission, notably in a way that affirms the angel ideology: “Cease to be a daughter; go and be a wife!” (501). Those are the two options she is allowed, and she is fortunate enough to be content with a smooth transition from one to the other. Lucy, the orphan and
later unmarried woman, shows the reader how constricting these choices are for women who either do not want to or who can not fit so neatly into the narrative.

Unsettling as Paulina becomes, single-minded and repressed and taken for granted, her marriage to Graham serves as important affirmation of everything she and the rest of mainstream Victorian society believes. Lucy comments that the two are “matched like carefully-chosen pearls” (492), a remark that I think encapsulates everything about their characters. Pearls are created by a bit of dirt getting caught inside the shell of a mollusk, with the characteristic gleaming layers being the result of the shellfish’s natural defense against a foreign particle. In the same way, Paulina’s entire character is formed around her unceasing devotion to an ideology with the potential to hurt and repress her. These gems are also not generally used for anything other than ostentatious presentation; while Paulina and Dr. John certainly look good together, they do not do much in the way of productive, physical work which better any specific avenue. They are jewelry, basically, and the beauty of their marriage, these two perfect specimens of archetypes within a patriarchal system, comes only after turmoil and warping of the self.
Ginevra as Ingénue

There are really two ingénues in the world of *Villette*: Ginevra Fawnshawe, and her aforementioned cousin Paulina. The most striking difference between these two characters is their interpretation of this singular role. Ginevra merely adopts this persona in her quest to find a suitable match, while Paulina is truly the innocent young girl in search of a husband. Ginevra’s performance is clearly an affectation, simultaneously masking and highlighting her calculated romantic maneuvers, whereas Paulina’s actions are an external expression of her innermost beliefs about how the world works. By giving her the role of the calculating ingénue, Brontë sets Ginevra on what I will call the romance plot, as opposed to the marriage plot. They are similar, in that the end of both is marriage to an acceptable husband, but they differ in how this end is achieved. As Paulina’s story demonstrates, the marriage plot is concerned with domestic pursuits and saintly purity. Ginevra’s plot teams with intrigue and adventure; she is all about having fun and hunting down the best match she can find.

Though Ginevra and Paulina enact the same type of plot, Brontë uses their attitudes and performances of the little scenes set out for them to draw parallels and contradictions in the ways they achieve their ends. Both young women are focused almost single-mindedly on finding and securing a husband, an activity which Lucy looks upon with no small amount of scorn. She finds their one-track minds distasteful, and allows the reader to question the notion that this is what every woman needs. Ginevra differs from Paulina in her awareness of the theatrical nature of courtship. Whereas
Paulina’s obsessive performance of domestic ideology seems like a natural extension of her being, Ginevra’s performance is just that. She adopts the role of innocent young ingénue because it will get her what she wants, not because she believes in any of the ideals it espouses. Her self-awareness sets her apart from Paulina because she recognizes the traditional courtship rules can be exploited, and that it is not necessary to believe in all the moral imperatives attached to them in order to reap the rewards. Compared to Lucy, however, her self-awareness is limited. Ginevra bends the rules, certainly, but still plays the same game as Paulina. She uses her trickery to secure a husband, and does not stop to think about how limiting this will be for her. Because Lucy occupies a role outside the marriage narrative, she is freer to question the devotion to domestic ideology both her peers share. Seen from her perspective, Brontë gives the reader two other paths that lead to the same place, and then – as I shall discuss momentarily- offers a third which veers in the opposite direction.

Lucy first meets Ginevra on the ship that takes them across the channel to Villette, and they later reconnect at Mme. Beck’s pensionnat, where the girl is a less-than-astute student. She concerns herself almost entirely with her appearance, and the only subjects she applies herself to at school are “music, singing and dancing” (98). The rest of everything is of little concern to her. Lucy also makes a point to emphasize the one trait which truly shines in the young girl: “selfishness” (96). Ginevra is out in the world for herself and herself alone, and disregards the feelings and wants of others to an extensive degree. From the moment we meet her, her every move is calculated to attract a suitable husband; suitable here means wealthy, handsome, and with a social station high enough to brag about. Like her cousin Paulina, Ginevra’s behaviors are a carefully
constructed performance, but unlike her cousin, she is acutely aware of this. They are opposing sides of the same coin, with Paulina slavishly devoted to finding a husband by being a perfect wife, and Ginevra out to snag a husband entirely on her own charms, wit, and skillful navigation of courtship rituals.

Though Brontë portrays Ginevra as superficial, selfish, and generally uneducated, it quickly becomes clear that Ginevra cannot be discarded as a weak or passive character. Her act consists of deploying her considerable charm to get others to buy her favors and take care of her, and her moments with Lucy show the concentrated effort she exerts to live this life of ease. Confronting her about the numerous new gowns and baubles she has received, Lucy demands that Ginevra tell her who has been giving her such expensive gifts. Ginevra tells her that she asked her benefactor for them, an act Lucy interprets as begging “boldly, I say: not with an air of reluctant shame” (99). Some might agree with the narrator, but the fact remains that by manipulating others, Ginevra now has the things she desires. Other women, Lucy included, do not achieve this so readily.

Ginevra is also not above flat-out deception as a means to get what she wants. Once her benefactor, Mrs. Cholmondeley, resists giving in to the girl’s persistent requests, Ginevra turns to another source: Dr. John Bretton, whom she nicknames Isidore. Lucy finds this arrangement even more distasteful: “I suppose I am to understand that M. Isidore is the benefactor . . . that he supplies your bouquets and your gloves?” While this is exactly what happened, Ginevra reframes the encounter in her own terms: “I occasionally allow Isidore the pleasure and honor of expressing his homage, by the offer of a trifle” (102). The situation is essentially the same, but Ginevra shows a keen sense of how to navigate and use the stereotypes surrounding courtships to her advantage. Far
from being a naive young girl who is overwhelmed by the sheer amount of attention she receives for being pretty and on the marriage market, she is a calculating and exacting woman out to get her own needs fulfilled before looking out for others.

This skillful navigation and exploitation of courtship rituals she deploys in order to preserve her self-worth also reappear later in the scene, when Lucy tries to shame her into admitting that she owes Dr. John her hand in marriage for accepting his gifts: “It stands to reason that by accepting his presents you give him to understand he will one day receive an equivalent, in your regard” (103). This treads dangerously close to, if not directly over, the belief that the gift-givers, in this case and many others a man, are owed quick and inherently sexual responses for their charity. It plays to the trope that the only thing motivating men to do or give things to women is their insatiable need for some kind of sexual equivalent, which women will of course be expected to provide on demand. Lucy, by basically telling Ginevra she owes Dr. John an affirmative answer to any marriage proposal in return for costly jewelry and new gowns, tries to force her back into the traditional, acceptable kind of young woman. Ginevra, however, will have none of it. She refuses to be locked into an agreement simply because it is the commonly accepted practice, or because other people say that she should be. Her greatest strength comes from her self-knowledge, and unwillingness to accept what others would lay out for her.

By giving the reader a character like Ginevra, Brontë wants the reader to question the idea that Victorian patriarchal ideology protected its young women, and that it was automatically a just and moral framework. Throughout the novel, Ginevra consistently bends the rules and moves through the world of courtship in a manner that is anything but saintly, and seems to escape the ire of most of her peers. The same rules that seek to keep
her pure and unharmed enable her to bribe suitors, receive expensive presents she never intends to reciprocate, and manipulate other people’s emotions for her own amusement. If a scheming woman can do all these things, and still end up rewarded with a comfortable marriage and future, what does this say about the morality of this ideology? Brontë purposely places two extremes of the same role, angelic Paulina and coquettish Ginevra, on similar paths in order to more fully critique the society which offered plenty of opportunities to end up unhappily married, and virtually no opportunities to remain contentedly single. While she never condemns this framework outright, Brontë nevertheless illustrates quite clearly that a system which sets young girls up with ridiculous notions of how they should spend their lives, either entirely devoted to their primary male figure or on the hunt for one, is probably not the best system in which to live.

Through Lucy, Brontë tries to paint Ginevra as a lazy and incompetent student, and a generally unlikable person, but Lucy is unsuccessful because of her refusal to accept the woman’s astute self-assessment. The narrator often claims that she lacks the ability to meaningfully reflect on her life and actions. Closer reading proves this is not the case. Ginevra has considered her character, weighed her flaws, and as such gained a full understanding of how she functions and what she expects. In the same previous scene, Lucy orders Ginevra to think about why she treats Dr. John the way she does. After a few moments thought, the woman returns an unashamed and self-aware answer:

He expects something more of me than I find it convenient to be. He thinks I am perfect: furnished with all sorts of sterling qualities and solid virtues, such as I never had, nor intend to have. . . . I am far more at ease
with you. . . . who know me to be coquettish, and ignorant, and flirting, and fickle, and silly, and selfish, and all the other sweet things you and I have agreed are a part of my character. (103)

Far from shying away from her faults, Ginevra very freely acknowledges that she has flaws. This sets her apart from Paulina, who never seems to realize the harm she does to herself by forcing herself into society’s idealized mold. To say that Ginevra is entirely self-aware and reflective would be overstating the claim, but she does offer an alternative to Paulina’s unquestioning conformity. Content to play by society’s rules for a little while, especially if it means she can gain a few favors, Ginevra has already decided that she and Dr. John will not make a good and lasting match.

Perhaps what Lucy despises in Ginevra is what she herself lacks. From the girl who informs the reader she “plead[s] guiltless of that curse, an overheated and discursive imagination” (11), we nevertheless receive an intricately detailed three-volume novel. (I am playing along with Lucy here, ignoring the fact that Charlotte Brontë gets credit for the book.) This harshness concerning Ginevra can also be chalked up to jealousy. The girl has Dr. John at her beck and call, buying her expensive trinkets, and furnishing her ball gowns, while Lucy can barely manage to procure from him a second glance. That crushing rejection certainly spurs much of her criticism.

For all her unrecognized strengths, Ginevra’s ending is a less enjoyable one, at least in Lucy’s eyes. She elopes with her beau the Count de Hamal, mostly to avoid the pressures of both their families and in part to get the better of her cousin Paulina, who must settle for being Mrs. John Graham Bretton and not the Countess de Hamal. What the rest of her social circle comes to interpret as a happy ending, complete with infant
son, Lucy sees as a trap. Ginevra’s letters to Lucy concern domestic duties and petty complaints; her son finds himself near death five separate times. To Lucy’s independent mind, being fenced in by a child, and the husband’s increasing debts of various kinds, would be unbearable. Her description of Ginevra “fighting the battle of life by proxy, and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever know” (553) hints that the woman is boxed in, unable to feel anything beyond a fraction of an emotional wavelength. The worst part, for the reader, is that Ginevra is not capable of acknowledging how limited she is. She has achieved everything she wanted, but to Lucy and the reader, everything she wanted is a place in a strictly tiered social hierarchy that offers no room for growth or personal fulfillment. This makes Lucy’s view of her, on the night of her elopement, as “a shooting star swallowed up by darkness,” unfortunately appropriate.

Brontë refuses to give Ginevra the fairytale-esque ending she, and some readers, desires. The grand romance Ginevra conjured for herself, full of balls and gowns and handsome men, deteriorates into a dreary life full of babies and money problems. By offering glimpses of her new domestic life, Brontë forces the reader to acknowledge that very few women end up like Paulina, the “carefully-chosen [pearl]” (492). Pearls, by their very nature, are rare. Not every little girl is a princess, and not all of them can grow up into the sparkling archetype of patriarchal conformity. While Ginevra deployed her considerable charm and skill to secure a suitable life, and seems to have had an enjoyable time doing so, she falls short of the ideal. The romance plot, while admittedly more exciting for those acting it out, still ends in marriage, and as far as Brontë is concerned, that is cause for discomfort and uncertainty. Ginevra achieves what she and her peers
desire, but by setting the reader apart from both the marriage and romance plots, we are forced to determine if this ending is really worth it, or even desirable at all.
Lucy, Spinster

The two plots discussed before, the marriage and romance, are basically variations on a theme: courtship and eventual marriage. They both involve movement, and change; the girl grows into a wife and leaves her father’s house. Brontë creates characters to act out these plots, as well as to demonstrate their weakness. Even as these options are held up as the best possible path to female satisfaction, the author invites us to question the far-reaching notion that women must marry, must have a family, and must be domestic angels bent towards everyone else’s needs. She places the narrative in the mind of someone outside this particular framework: a spinster.

Conventional and popular as marriage plots, and their cousin the romance plot, were in Brontë’s lifetime, there is another plot which involves a single woman at the outset: the spinster plot. Radically different from these previous two, the spinster plot entailed stasis and a lack of momentum. The woman in question remains unmarried at the end of the story. While this option was posited as a rare but unfortunate circumstance, Anne Longmuir explains that historically, mid-nineteenth century England was dealing with a major discrepancy between the sexes. Women outnumbered men by a considerable amount, and the leading social powers of the time were at a loss with what to do to remedy the situation in a way that kept the prevailing domestic ideology intact. Brontë would have been keenly aware of this conflict, being a member of the outcast demographic herself until the final months of her life, and by giving Lucy a chance to tell her story, she gives a voice to what would have been a significant portion of the female
population at the time. Brontë uses this perspective, no doubt culling examples from her own lived experience, to contextualize the other’s women’s narratives. Lucy, in other words, is given control of the story so that the traditional marriage plot can be held up for critique in ways that are not possible when the central characters are enmeshed in the very drama they seek to question.

Brontë deconstructs the spinster stereotype by seeking to redefine what a spinster is and can do. Of the three women, Lucy is the only one who remains unmarried, and is also the only one who must struggle to earn her living throughout the novel. At various times, Brontë tries to cast her as a romantic rival to the other two women, especially with regards to Dr. John. Could an older, poorer woman be viable competition for a girl like Paulina Home? Ultimately, the novel says no, but the question would not have even been raised if told from a more conventional fictional perspective, such as a marriage plot that happened to feature a spinster as a side character.

Spinsters in most literature of the time were resigned to their fate, maybe harboring a secret love of their own, but definitely existing on the margins of narrative importance. Lucy is aware of her status as the unmarried woman, but refuses to accept the spinster designation throughout her retelling. Though aware of her outsider status, she still wants to play along with the other women and imagine a traditionally happy ending for herself as long as she can. A prime example is her infamous delayed revelation of Dr. John Graham Bretton’s identity. Lucy refuses to tell the reader she knows him immediately upon figuring it out, casting him instead as a stranger and thus, potential suitor. Lucy knows that Dr. John is destined for Paulina; the foreshadowing in their childhood scenes together could not be any clearer. If he is a newcomer, though, there is
still a chance at marriage to the clever doctor and thus, a traditional happy ending. It is only when Lucy accepts that this will never happen, that she reveals his identity. She knows she can not play the courtship-and-marriage game like the other women, even though she is the one telling the story; misdirection only goes so far. In doing so, Brontë forces the reader to come to terms with the fact that her narrator is unsuited to the conventional narrative, and to question their unconscious bias towards such rosy stories. How plausible is it that there is a Dr. John waiting around for every woman of marriageable age? Not very, and to force oneself into a plot that was never designed for characters such as Lucy is to waste time, potential, and indeed the entirety of one’s life.

In fact, Brontë shows Lucy’s self-awareness most clearly when her narrator has to deal with Dr. John, in particular his engagement and marriage to Paulina. While recovering from her depressive episode during the solitary summer months at the pensionnat, Lucy is reacquainted with her godmother Mrs. Bretton. Dr. John also recognizes her for who she is, even though she, and the reader, has known who he is for many chapters previous. After spending a pleasant evening recalling their time at the former Bretton homestead, Lucy retires and reflects on her situation:

. . . I felt that I still had friends. Friends, not professing vehement attachment. . . . on whom, therefore, but moderate demand of affection was to be made, of whom but moderate expectation formed; but towards whom my heart softened instinctively and yearned with an importunate gratitude. . . .
‘Do not let me think of them too often, too much, too fondly,’ I implored; ‘let me be content with a temperate draught of this living stream. . . .’

While some would treat the rediscovery of old friends as a joyous occasion and expect renewed communication and convivial contact, Lucy’s first impulse is to pull back. She does not want to either depend on anyone or be a burden, as a spinster would be. Rather than become an old woman who must rely on the charity of others, she refuses and goes in a different direction. Running her own school at the end of the novel affords Lucy a sense of control over her life that she would not have had otherwise, even though the option of joining the bright Bretton household is the more socially acceptable, and conventional, choice.

Interestingly, Paulina also reigns in her feelings with Dr. John, but whereas her control stems from a sense of what is proper and right in a pre-engagement relationship, Lucy’s repression comes from a place of self-defense. If she gives him very little of herself, then there is less for him to hurt. So determined is she to avoid these kinds of slights that Lucy does not only pack herself away from Dr. John and Paulina, but M. Paul as well. It is difficult to miss her glee at finally being able to mask her emotions, and pain, from him when he attempts to make amends for a previous slight:

‘Is it?’ I said, with a tone and manner whose consummate chariness and frostiness I could not but applaud. It was so seldom I could properly act out my own resolution to be reserved and cool where I had been grieved or hurt, that I felt almost proud of this one successful effort. That ‘Is it?’ sounded just like the manner of other people. (370)
This careful monitoring of her emotions stems from Lucy’s awareness that she does not fit in, and that the other characters do not understand her. Paulina and Ginevra both wonder aloud at her cold, mysterious nature more than once throughout the novel, and try to put her into a category more easily apprehended. Paulina offers her a place in her and Dr. John’s future home, but Lucy rejects it because she “[has her] own sort of life apart from [theirs]” (494). Where other characters try to pigeonhole her into the spinster role, Lucy resists and makes her own way. She would rather be by herself, lonely and sad, than live a vicariously beautiful lie.

Brontë casts Dr. John Graham Bretton is the most grievous offender of this type of well-intentioned misunderstanding. It is with a “now welcome force” that Lucy comes to realize “his entire misapprehension of [her] character and nature” (367). For him, Lucy is the typical spinster, a quiet, unobtrusive woman who would love nothing more than to be a go-between for him and his future wife. He believes that she really does enjoy turning over the memories of the Bretton homestead, and that it is not at all painful for her to listen to him prattle on about the woman he loves when she herself has been denied the same acknowledgement of her intrinsic worth as a person. To put it plainly, she floats somewhere at the edges of his mind, between “occasional confidante” and “just friends.” Her feelings for him are either unnoticed or disregarded, and the anguish he has caused her does not even register in his assessment of her.

Freeing herself from desiring him is Lucy’s first step to setting out on her own path. Dr. John is the object of affection for all three women: as different as their needs and actions are, at some point they all actively want Dr. John for a husband. Ginevra quickly moves on to someone who will not place her on such a high pedestal, but mostly
someone who can provide her with a steady flow of cash and a station to match. Lucy realizes that they are incompatible, even as friends. What she takes to be sincere and heartfelt attentions is just Dr. John making small talk, and the relationship they have is exponentially more important to Lucy than it is to him. She knows he can not provide her with the deep connection and steady attention she craves, and so, she severs ties. As always, it is better for her to be alone and doing things for herself than to be a misplaced burden.

Brontë gives her narrative to a spinster, but then refuses to follow the traditional spinster narrative. Rather than center the story around the conventionally attractive lovers, while the narrator retires to a distant fireside to reminisce about a past long forgotten, Brontë puts that unmarried woman right in the middle of the other lovers’ plots. Lucy tries on the different roles, with varying degree of success, as the reader is invited to question what, exactly, a romance is made up of. In the end, Lucy keeps to the only narrative she has consistently followed: one that is ambiguous and uncertain, refusing to give the reader a neat little ending with all the loose ends neatly tied off simply because that is what is expected.
The Shipwreck

Bearing Lucy’s rejection of the spinster label in mind, as well as her demonstrated willingness to thwart the traditional marriage plot, the ending of the novel becomes, if not entirely clear, much more sensible in terms of how it relates to the rest of the narrative. The long awaited marriage to the prickly M. Paul Emanuel after his return from the West Indies is never achieved, just as Dr. John was previously abandoned as a marriage candidate. The last chapter of the novel focuses on Lucy’s quiet expectation and hopeful preparations for his homecoming. A storm rises up at sea the week of his expected arrival, and at the last possible moment, the unthinkable happens. This crucial passage is worth quoting in full:

Peace, be still! Oh! a thousand weepers, praying in agony on waiting shores, listened for that voice, but it was not uttered—not uttered till, when the hush came, some could not feel it: till, when the sun returned, his light was night to some!

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture a union and a happy succeeding life.
Madame Beck prospered all the days of her life; so did Père Silas; Madame Walravens fulfilled her ninetieth year before she died. Farewell.

(573)

While this may seem like a deus ex machina for some, I believe it is one of the very few endings that would suffice for this novel. When it comes to romantic matters, Brontë spends most of the novel making Lucy trick the reader into following a haphazard marriage plot. It makes no sense that she would stop doing so just to provide the audience with a sense of comforting familiarity that the wedding would no doubt provide.

Part of the reason Lucy’s trickery works is because many readers are conditioned to expect perfectly wrapped-up marriage plots. It is still rare to find novels in mainstream fiction that end with the (female) protagonist unmarried, or unattached to a man, at the end. Brontë certainly knew this, and even followed convention in her previous novel, *Jane Eyre*, leading to an ending where the suddenly-wealthy orphan marries the blind and disabled Mr. Rochester, only to have his sight magically restored. The ending is a stretch, basically, and for her final novel, Brontë seems to dispense with the “everyone must get married” nonsense and writes a novel for the very real group of women who never get married, who must work, and who are rarely spoken about with any authenticity in the wider literary scheme. By rerouting Lucy’s marriage plot twice, first with Dr. John and then with M. Paul, she forces her readers to acknowledge that marriage plots are just that: carefully planned and executed schemes involving preset characters, and usually fulfilled to uphold a clearly defined standard. Dr. John and Paulina are an excellent example of this, but her narrator Lucy? Not so much. Brontë, by writing this unconventional and wandering narrative, demands that her readers acknowledge their bias towards
convention, even as she offers them glimpses of the very same in her delayed reveal of Dr. John’s identity, and at the very last appeal to “leave sunny imaginations hope” (573).

Given that Lucy does not get her happily-ever-after with M. Paul, it is important to examine what, exactly, she does get and how she values it. Heady has made a very convincing case for Lucy’s end to read as an allusion to the Biblical parable of the talents: the master leaves, giving two of his servants a small amount of money to do with what they will in his absence. The one who uses this money to his master’s advantage by reinvesting and profiting is the one who is rewarded upon the master’s return, and Heady sees Lucy fulfilling the role of the good servant while M. Paul is the master.

While I agree with Heady’s argument in many respects, it does have some unnerving implications. Lucy has repeatedly condemned Paulina for her single-mindedness, and made it very clear that she dislikes the religious fervor with which the girl fulfills her wifely duties. But, this allusion places her in the exact same position, that of the hopelessly devoted servant. It is difficult to reconcile those two beliefs, and perhaps because M. Paul is the master, who is in turn a stand-in for God himself, it is acceptable for her to be so focused. It is God, after all; a little religiosity is to be expected. Also, in the parable of the talents, the master does return after his journey. M. Paul, however, will not. Lucy is working for a master who will never return to count her among his favorites or reward her for her service. Even if her master can be understood as God, that still puts the matter of her reward off until her death; she will not be alive to reap the rewards of her faithful service. As comforting as it is to think of herself as the good servant, the knowledge that any praise she gets will be useless to her is a distinct blow to those who read Heady’s interpretation as a happy one.
The overarching theme of the novel, brought home in the final paragraphs, is ambiguity and uncertainty. Lucy Snowe has never been one for simple, clear-cut distinctions or easy fixes. While it would content some to read a novel where she and either Dr. John or M. Paul settle into that “happy succeeding life” (573), that is not the story Brontë is out to tell. Her narrator’s repeated refusal to confine herself into one narrative or the other, married or spinster, is a thread that runs throughout the whole novel. The ability to craft her own narrative, and define herself by her own rules instead of the commonly proscribed ones, is liberating. Lucy’s journey is not an easy one, however, and to say that Brontë is letting all the women know about what a great time being single in a world of married couples is would be significantly overstating the point. What she does do is offer an alternative to the traditional, another life that doesn’t fall into the categories of Angel in the House or coquettish ingénue. It doesn’t have to be that way, she seems to say; there is another path. Whether she recommends that path is less clear. Lucy is given many opportunities to fall into a more socially acceptable role, but each time she refuses. The option to be single and self-supporting is there, certainly, but even after the whole novel, it seems Brontë can not bring herself to endorse it totally. Perhaps she knows that is not an option many people will choose because it is difficult, shunned, and lonely, or perhaps she herself harbors a bit of unconscious bias towards the same marriage plots she has worked so hard to circumvent.
Conclusion

In writing *Villette*, Brontë presents several models of middle-class femininity and the plots which usually accompany them. It seems to be the hallmark of this novel that rather than laying out simple narratives with tidy endings, she opts for complications and ambiguity whenever possible, especially with regards to her narrator. While I have discussed three women in particular, I recognize that there are a few others I could have chosen that would have yielded a similarly fruitful analysis of marriage in the world of *Villette*. Madame Beck springs readily to mind, as an example of a married woman who nevertheless retains much of her autonomy and independence. The three women I have focused on, however, seemed most relevant to Lucy’s own situation as a woman who begins her journey unmarried, and as such they were the most apt for comparison.

In shaping and then complicating the tropes of the angel in the house, the ingénue, and the spinster, Brontë seeks to upset the traditional, simplistic view of each character. Coming from an outsider, the retelling of Paulina and Ginevra’s generally rosy tale takes on a sort of greenish twinge, a jealousy and deeper longing which is absent from most other versions of that sort of tale. Without the perspective, there would be no possibility for examination or critique of the ideal. Brontë purposely seeks to disrupt and upset the conventional marriage plot by way of her unmarried narrator because without her, the only story being told is a carefully crafted archetype meant to carve some women into unsettling Angels with no will of their own, and to erase the other women who for whatever reason do not or can not fit the model. The ambiguity of *Villette*, which Brontë
herself upheld outside the confines of the novel, is an attempt to recognize unconscious bias that prefers fairytale endings to the harsh reality of the world she inhabited.

Lucy’s own tale, her story of discovery, loss, and growth, resonates even as parts of it disturb the reader. Brontë, when asked to explain her narrator’s excessive morbidity, replied that someone in her situation must naturally take on such a view. To blame only Lucy for her melancholy, it appears, is to miss the mark. *Villette* is an attempt to capture and reflect back a world that warps its inhabitants, especially the ones who must live at the edges of the social map. As closer examination of the traditionally acceptable characters, the ones who “got it right” by society, reveals that they too bear the marks and dents of trying to force themselves into molds that were never meant to hold actual human beings, but rather ideas of how humans should be. By giving the narrative to someone relatively removed from these pressures, Brontë lets readers examine just how much this obsessive devotion can damage a person, even if that person does not acknowledge it themselves. Lucy’s path, consistently choosing to remain poor, solitary and unmarried, is given as another choice in a game that seems rigged to favor the rich and beautiful. Whether or not Brontë explicitly endorses her narrator’s choices or outcome is irrelevant. The fact that she brings Lucy and her struggles into existence, and then places them center stage, speaks volumes about her dissatisfaction with a genre, and indeed a world, that had no place for women such as herself.
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