

The lady doth protest  
too much: confession  
and villette's  
protestant lucy snowe



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Lucy Snowe, the narrator in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*, delivers a narrative that is very much the story that she wants the reader to hear. She explicitly details some facets of her life and leaves others drenched in opaque clouds of metaphor. Within her realm of inconsistent disclosure, one thing is explicitly clear: Lucy believes herself to be the embodiment of the Protestant ideal. She adamantly waves a banner of English Protestantism, in particular, and makes clear her dislike — bordering on contempt — of Catholicism. In scholarship of English literature, the novel has been understood as a Protestant form of narrative in which the individual's right to his own story is paramount. One must outwardly lead the life of a good English citizen; any secrets he harbors may remain between the individual and his maker. Marina MacKay argues that, in *Villette*, Lucy stays "true to both her national identity and her narrative destiny" (219). However, as the novel runs its course, Lucy is unable to maintain her wall of architected omission and semi-silence; that is, she is unable to maintain control of her own story. Her ultimate outpouring to M. Paul, when "fluent [she tells her] tale" (490) — faults and all — transcends her understanding of herself as existing on one side of a religious divide. Although ultimately outside the confines of a Catholic confessional, Lucy nonetheless makes herself public and betrays her own understanding of her role as an English Protestant.

It is not just in her eventual disclosure that Lucy strays outside the supposed boundaries of Brontë's chosen literary form. Fundamentally, the Protestant narrative prizes realism over the gothic or romance genres. *Villette* is rife with gothic elements such as the spectral nun and the setting of the majority of the book on mainland Europe. "Where evil occurs in the English novel, it

is located on the continent, in dirty old abroad, in the gothic novel” (MacKay 218). Even the narrative’s psychological complications, such as Lucy’s own omissions, deny the reader a realist account of her story. In initial scholarship of the English novel, a certain Protestant ideal was maintained in the best of English literature. “ The model of society [was] essentially conservative, whereby every subject [knew] his or her place and [remained] there in the interest of great literature” (MacKay 218). We see Lucy defy this expectation first by existing as an outsider at home and then with her journey to Belgium, a foreign Catholic land. In Victorian England, the nation “ firmed up its national identity by resisting the conversion plots of the Catholics on the continent” (Heady 357). Yet instead of staying safe on her home island, Lucy travels to the land of the Other and attempts to play out her Protestant role in the presence of the Catholics around her.

This journey is key to understanding Lucy’s tendency to construct her identity through circumstance as opposed to nature. Unremarkable while in England, Lucy’s decision to travel to the “ land of convents and confessionals” (Brontë 100) positions her as the foreigner and while no less alone, she is now afforded significance by the sheer nature of her national identity. “ Lucy escapes her insignificance within English society by fleeing to a setting where her adherence to the mores of the very culture she has fled sets her apart, in her own mind, as superior” (Clark Beattie 825). She admits a “ base habit of cowardice” and an inclination toward inadventurousness” (Brontë 76). So, by standing firm in her position as an outsider, nationally and religiously, Lucy can position herself as excused from the rituals peculiar to those domestic identities and, therein, find a sort of strength. The “

appropriation of the foreign as the domestic is precisely the structure of the colonial economy" (O'Malley 66) and just as Lucy admired the missionary in Paulina's childhood story, one she described as a "good, good Englishman" (30), she now adopts the position of one existing as a civilized example among the natives. She clings to identities defined by situational details, which is less a self-determined narrative tack and more a resignation, a relinquishing of responsibility.

Where the Protestant novel prizes realism and good English citizenry, it also emphasizes the prerogative of the narrator to remain reticent. Lucy, as a grey-haired old woman, relates what she calls "this heretic narrative" (163) which depicts episodes of her life from many years prior. The story of one's life is a revelation of one's own personhood as it coincides with circumstance. Rosemary Clark-Beattie calls *Villette* itself a sort of "subverted confession" (824). She argues that the novel calls specific attention to the relationship between the sacrament of confession and the non-religious rite of self-revelation (823). Through the course of her life, Lucy may have "gained more through suppressing her identity than she does through revealing it" (Haller 155). The question then becomes: will such ideology work in a reflective narrative? An audience who embarks upon this journey with the narrator is entitled to, if not truth, then at least, substance. "Brontë associates forced speech or mandatory confession with foreign compulsion, and thus Lucy's learned reticence reflects an ingrained understanding of the English constitution, which . . . [asserts] the right to remain silent" (Heady 357). I argue, however, that silence and narrative are incompatible; something in Lucy's design is destined to give.

The reader receives different impressions of Villette's narrator, in terms of the degree to which she is self-determined. She certainly aims to give the impression that she can clear her own path. For example, at the Rue Fossette, she "lived in a house of robust life and [she] chose solitude" (Brontë 126). In addition, she would rather have "made shirts and starved" (Brontë 298) than be a paid companion to Paulina. On the other hand, there are points at which she claims she is not determining her path, but that others or the Fates are doing it for her. After the death of Miss Marchmont, she states, "There remained no possibility of dependence on others; to myself alone could I look." (Brontë 36). It seems less that she is willing control of her own life and more that she is resigned to it. She is "split between the functions of unarticulated faculties that refuse to collaborate in the production of an amendable world" (Hughes 717). Perhaps most to the point, it is difficult to credit a narrator with self-determination when she is willing to allow her reader to imagine events that did not occur:

It will be conjectured that I was of course glad to return to the bosom of my kindred. Well! The amiable conjecture does no harm, and may therefore be safely left uncontradicted. Far from saying nay, indeed, I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years as a bark slumbering through halcyon waters . . . Brontë 35

Though the Protestant novel is supposed to afford an individual the right to tell his own story, Lucy waffles between articulate claims that this is exactly what she is doing and indications that she wants nothing more than to conceal as much about herself as possible. Lucy "follows bewildering, perverse, or obscure anti-narrative principles that raise the shock and <https://assignbuster.com/the-lady-doth-protest-too-much-confession-and-villettes-protestant-lucy-snowe/>

intensity of narrative alienation or disappointment to a new level” (Hughes 716). To the reader, she does not reveal details about the traumas in her past; from other characters, she remains removed.

Her relationship with Ginevra, a fellow Englishwoman, is perhaps the most interactive for much of the novel, but even Ginevra ends up questioning, “Who is Lucy Snowe?” Lucy masks herself through situational detail, almost as though she chooses to be acted upon as opposed to taking action herself. “[S]he takes on a persona that befits what is required by a given circumstance . . . she suppresses her true identity through concealment that is both literal and figurative” (Haller 149). When she appears in the dramatic production with Ginevra, “it was not the crowd she feared, but [her] own voice” (Brontë 140). A narrator who fears her own voice is problematic not only for the engaged reader, but also for the tradition of Protestant narrative.

Lucy overcompensates for her lack of personal divulgence by stressing hard and fast the key points of cliché English identity with which she wishes to be associated. To that end, Catholicism, the ominous foreign institution with its fanaticism, ritual, and misplaced priorities, serves as an easy Other off of which Lucy can project her self-importance. When Isabelle tells her that it is a pity she is a Protestant, Lucy coaxes the reasoning out of her pupil with condescending patronage. “I laughed as, indeed, it was impossible to do otherwise” (Brontë 84). By having others speak while she remains reticent, Lucy almost delights in making them seem foolish. She claims to want control, as with her costume during the play. It “must be arranged in my own way,” she says, “nobody must meddle; the things must not be forced upon me” (Brontë 139). Such self-awareness is desirable, were the cast off <https://assignbuster.com/the-lady-doth-protest-too-much-confession-and-villettes-protestant-lucy-snowe/>

clothing of others replaced with something of her own making. Instead, it may be argued that Lucy presents only a protestation, not an alternative. She retains her grey frock and places bits of male attire over it. A strange layering that is neither wholly Lucy nor wholly other; a confused mask from behind which Lucy is most comfortable, but the reader which leaves the reader slightly confused.

Lucy's eventual disclosure to M. Paul is foreshadowed by her experience in the Catholic confessional. Despite her contempt for "popish superstition" (Brontë 163), despite her dismissal of saints' lives as "no more than monkish extravagances, over which one laughed inwardly" (Brontë 117), despite her view of her charges as "little Catholics" who say "little prayers," it is to a Catholic church that she flees when experiencing a fevered episode of solitary suffering. She makes it a point to state, "I was not delirious: I was in my sane mind" (Brontë 160). When the Benediction ends, Lucy watches those that remain go one-by-one into the confessional. When the woman next to her invites Lucy to take her turn, she proceeds, considering the fact that "it might soothe [her]" (Brontë 161). The arena in which the faith she loathes solicits complete disclosure from its flock is the last place one would expect to find Lucy Snowe. Yet, she goes in. She begins the exchange with her familiar announcement, "Mon pere, je suis Protestante." She is "a practicing Protestant, who would be assumed to keep her sins between herself and God" (Heady 351). However, she ends up "[pouring] her heart out" (Brontë 162), divulging much more about herself than is her habit. Though she is adamant to let the priest know that it is no sin that has brought her to his confessional, the mere fact that she is "perishing for a

word of advice or an accent of comfort” (Brontë 161) is such an intimate divulgence, such an emotional profession, its significance can not be understated. “ Lucy’s confession is . . . the next step in a long line of narrative maneuvers that require her to move interior matters outside, to tell her secrets, and to project her hidden self into visible spaces” (Heady 351). She has refrained from disclosing details to the reader. She has remained on the emotional periphery of those in her daily life. Yet it is here, in the Catholic confessional, that she admits weakness, admits loneliness, and it is here that, in so doing, she finds comfort.

This sacrifice of thoughts and feelings, usually kept contained, is decidedly unProtestant and unEnglish; it frightens her. She returns to safely English arms – the Bretton home – where she is welcomed and almost encouraged to remain distant and unknown. As the novel continues, as her relations with the Brettons diminish and her intimacy with M. Paul intensifies, she is hard pressed to keep her inner world contained. M. Paul becomes a more significant part of her life; his role as a friend and companion grows. “ It is only through M. Paul’s companionship that Lucy ceases suppression of her identity” (Haller 158). She is confused by her attraction to him and perhaps to his faith and thus overstates her own religious convictions. This attraction makes her vulnerable, however, and it is before him, to whom she eventually refers as “ my king,” that she is unable to sustain her guarded posture. After he reveals to her the school he has procured on her behalf, she tells the reader, “ It was the assurance of his sleepless interest which broke on me like a light from heaven” (Brontë 487). To her Little Jesuit, she says, ““ I want to tell you all.”” Though she will insist to the end that it is M. Paul who is



relenting in his allegiance to his faith, Lucy is actually the one faltering in her duty to her ' narrative destiny.' " I spoke. All leaped from my lips. I lacked not words now; fast I narrated; fluent I told my tale; it streamed on my tongue" (Brontë 490-1). She feels no call for restraint this time. He encourages her narrative, coaxes her on. Ultimately, she admits, " I was full of faults; he took them and me all home" (Brontë 491). M. Paul has heard her secrets, forgiven her sins, given her relief, brought her home.

Lucy maintains her Protestant mantra until the end, but her appreciation that M. Paul accepts her despite the fact that she is " full of faults" is an appreciation of an absolution, though she recognizes it only as kindness. " I deserved severity," she writes, " he looked indulgence" (Brontë 491). To a Catholic, the sacrament of reconciliation is intended to bring one closer to God; it should serve as a comfort to unburden one's self of those details which cause anxiety, those bits of our past from which we turn away. Lucy cannot see confession in this way; she understands it to be a sacrifice of one's self, an abandonment of one's individual comportment. " As to what lies below," she believes, " leave that with God. Man, your equal, weak as you, and not fit to be your judge, may be shut out thence: take it to your Maker" (Brontë 179). Nonetheless, her relief in telling M. Paul about herself, the comfort she takes in relaying to him her story, must be read as a parallel to the divulgence of a confessional, particularly coming from one so guarded as Lucy Snowe. Her attraction to M. Paul is an " acknowledgement that his religious faith, though seemingly other at first, is not" (Klein 110). Both she and Paul are prepared to accept each other and their respective religions as cornerstones to their identities (Lenta 425).

Charlotte Brontë has chosen a Protestant narrative form to depict an admission of guilt and a forgiveness of sins. M. Paul, through, his love has provided Lucy an opportunity for reconciliation with her past, with her own character, and he has provided absolution in the form of a tolerant, generous love that does not condemn or entice, but tolerates. She uses Protestantism as a screen behind which she can hide her personal character. However, her eventual self-revelation undermines the nature of her narrative and confuses her position as one self-regulated and self-possessed. “ Lucy believes M. Paul to be pure and honest in his religious belief, which sets him apart from the other members of his faith” (Edgren-Bindas 257-258). It is this acceptance, along with M. Paul’s blessing of her Protestantism, his approval of its “ severe charm,” his statement that it is the “ sole creed for Lucy Snowe,” (Brontë 494) that combine to set Lucy about “ the happiest years of her life” (Brontë 493). When Catholicism is no longer entirely evil, when Protestantism is no longer partially a pretense, then Lucy’s story becomes her own.

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