"an uneasy fusion:” navigating genre in charlotte bronte’s villette

Critics have long puzzled over what Emily Heady terms an " uneasy fusion" of genres in Charlotte Brontë's final novel, Villette (341). Toeing the line between two dominant—and, in many regards, opposing—literary modes of the era, realism and Gothic romance, Villette resists generic categorization just as its shadowy first-person narrator infamously resists being known. While scholarship has long entertained the question posed by Villette's generic ambivalence, asking to which genre the novel should appropriately be assigned, more recent criticism has sought a different approach. Rather than viewing the novel's generic balancing act as a source of tension, this more recent scholarship attempts to reveal the once-competing genres as working in conjunction to produce a decidedly less uneasy fusion. Instead of writing off the novel's generic inconsistency as a failure of the text to subscribe to any one set of genre expectations, modern critics figure the novel's split between the real and the Gothic as part of a carefully orchestrated narrative strategy. Often, critics interested in navigating Villette's generic landscape use the novel's dual allegiance to both Gothic romance and literary realism as a framework through which to position and interrogate parallel systems of binary subversion at work in the novel, before broadening the argument to suggest that Brontë's strategies offer some kind of critique or commentary on Victorian culture or authorship.

Robyn Warhol's response to the traditionally-perceived tension between the Gothic and realist modes of the novel figures the two genres as " not so much in competition as in continuous oscillation with each other" (858). Taking a narratological approach to the text, Warhol seeks to explain the novel's generic inconsistency by aligning it with one of the text's other most

infamous sources of bewilderment: Lucy's narration. According to Warhol, there are in fact no fewer Lucys than there are genres at work in Villette. Calling on Dorrit Cohn, Warhol explains that in Villette, as is not uncommon in first-person texts, Lucy's " experiencing self" is distinguishable from her " narrating self" (860). A self-aware and often dissonant narrator who remarks on her past self's ignorance from a now-lucid perspective, Lucy-the-narrator is distinct from Lucy-the-character. Warhol parallels this " textualized splitting of the fictional self" against the novel's splitting of genre, ultimately arguing that " in Villette—as in Jane Eyre—the heroine and the narrator, though they are the same ' person,' are inhabiting two separate genres of fiction. The heroines are living a Gothic romance, and the narrators are telling a realist tale" (860, 863-864). Having established a parallel between the novel's generic and narratological splitting, Warhol argues that the autodiegetic narrator's duality within both the Gothic and the real dismantles the generic binary: " Binary oppositions between genres (the assumption that either a novel is realistic or not, and that its value resides in its generic consistency) cannot hold, even in any given moment of a particular narrative" (864). For Warhol, this generic binary is intimately related to a gender binary also under scrutiny in Villette. Ultimately, according to Warhol, Brontë " destabilizes the fixity of Victorian genres" in order to issue a challenge to other problematic binaries dominant in Victorian society (869).

Like Warhol, Toni Wein's analysis of Gothic desire in Villette figures " Brontë's structural Gothicizing…as evidence that she consciously engaged in rewriting gender codes" (Wein 735). In Villette's Gothic elements, " carved emphatically onto what had been principally a double bildungsroman,"

Wein's analysis traces a new model of structural desire that thwarts both male and female modes of desire inherent in traditional and serialized plot structures, respectively (734). Just as Villette thwarts categorization into any one genre, neither will it submit to any one structural model of desire. With its series of abortive plotlines and deferred climaxes, Villette appeals to neither the male structure of desire, " inviting sustained arousal of attention until the narrative climax is reached," nor the female model of multiple climaxes represented in serialization: " Instead, in true Gothic tradition [Brontë] hybridizes: she encloses her structurally deferred climaxes in a three-volume tomb, at the same time that she thwarts the serial's construction of intimacy between readers and characters through her (and Lucy's) refusal to provide closure" (735). Once again, Brontë's use of the Gothic is shown to " hybridize" gender just as it hybridizes genre in Villette. For Wein, Brontë's Gothic restructuring of desire challenges dominant modes of desire permitted in Victorian literature by " free[ing] the hallmark of the pornographic, the desire for desire, into the space of literary contingency" (743).

In her navigation of Villette's " uneasy fusion" of the Gothic and realist modes, Heady also positions Brontë's Gothic maneuvers in the broader context of the conventions and limitations of the Victorian literary landscape. " For Brontë," Heady argues, " Victorian England's literary tastes reflect and reproduce its damaging blindness to abstract, non-material modes of meaning…and she uses the whole of Villetteto propose a narrative alternative to this perspectival error" (342). For Heady, this narrative alternative ultimately takes the form of what she calls a " narrative

conversion" (357). Heady's reading first dissolves the oft-perceived tension between the realist and Gothic modes in the novel by accusing both genres of " undo[ing] the authority of the inner life by making interior matter, such as emotion, desire, or identity, publically visible" (341). Her argument proceeds to trace Lucy's rise to narrative authority, first through her initial failures in both the realist and Gothic modes of the novel, both materialist modes that force Lucy into public exposure. Heady then presents Lucy's narrative conversion, " a movement away from the erroneous publicity inherent in the Gothic and in realism and toward the privacy permitted by the typological concept of account rendering," as the ultimate signal of Lucy's claim to narrative authority (357). This narrative conversion authorizes non-material modes of meaning, a shift that, according to Heady, Brontë uses Villetteto prescribe to Victorian society as a whole.

In conversation with Heady is Elizabeth Preston, who likewise tracks Lucy's narrative progression as she navigates the split generic tracks of her story. However, while Heady sees Lucy finding authority through a narrative conversion that allows her to escape the compulsive speech and outward expression mandated in both the Gothic and realism, Preston sees Lucy stake her claim to narrative authority not through her " right to silence and secrecy," but rather when she finds her voice and abandons her withholding tendencies (Heady 357). Heady's Lucy finds authority when she thwarts compulsory speech, while Preston's thwarts compulsory silence. Ultimately, however, both critics settle somewhere within the popular discourse, positioning Brontë in opposition to Victorian gender codes. While Preston's suggestion that there is ever a point at which Lucy " withholds nothing," or

constitutes a " reliable spokesperson" remains dubious, her conclusion that Brontë's Gothic maneuvers ultimately serve to " contest the Victorian codes that arrest female development, both professionally and personally," is in keeping with the dominant discourse (Preston 397).

However, while Preston holds that Brontë's challenge to Victorian gender codes successfully " acknowledges women as desiring, speaking subjects," Laura Ciolkowski's reading exposes the flaws in feminist criticism that seeks to claim Villette as a " powerful literary assertion of female identity" (Preston 397, Ciolkowski218). As Ciolkowski points out, " The task of assimilating Villette smoothly and unproblematically into a single critical framework" is accomplished with no more ease than any attempt to fit the novel into one set of generic constraints (218). According to Ciolkowski's reading, Brontë recognizes Victorian womanhood as " both invented and counterfeited," and, in Villette, establishes a narrative that thwarts both literary and gender conventions. Instead of weaving a domestic tale that satisfies the conventions of the Victorian novel with an image of matrimonial closure, Brontë presents a novel that resists the demands of the era and " frustrates attempts to assimilate Lucy's fictional autobiography in the romantic conventions of Victorian fiction" (230). Villette" slips into and out of the Gothic register," resulting in " a narrative in which all such plots and the subjects they authorize come apart at their ideological seams" (231). Here, Ciolkowski succinctly summarizes the views of her fellow critics in their shared endeavor to rewrite the narrative surrounding Villette's generic ambivalence not as one of failure, but as a deliberate deconstruction

designed to dismantle dominant structures of Victorian thought at their "

ideological seams."

While these readings provide a framework through which to navigate Villette's generic landscape by defusing the tension between the novel's mixed uses of the Gothic and realist modes, I propose that they ignore certain instances in which the tension between these two genres is not only present, but provides meaningful commentary on the novel's feminist treatment of mental health. While various critics cited here point to Villette's nun as the novel's key Gothic element, they fail to address what I read as an increasing sense of unease when realism intervenes to provide a logical explanation. While Warhol aligns Brontë's use of the Gothic in Villette with that in Jane Eyre, I instead figure the former's stunted Gothicism as a feminist response to the latter's uncurbed flights of fancy. While Jane Eyre's principle Gothic figure, the madwoman in the attic, remains untempered, the realist undercutting of Villette's Gothic specter of choice ultimately absolves Lucy of the accusations of madness leveled against her. A dissolution of the tension between the Gothic and realist modes in Villette ignores crucial ways in which Brontë's jarring undercutting of her own Gothic maneuvers seeks to carve space for a feminist reconsideration of mental health. I suggest that incorporating Jane Eyre's treatment of the Gothic into our thinking about Villette's generic landscape enables us to understand the Gothic and realist tensions at work in the novel as a critique of gendered Victorian attitudes toward mental health.

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