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**A Knowledge of Her Own:
Unlocking the Forbidden Room in *Villette***

An honors thesis for the Department of English

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Table of Contents

Introduction: The “Doors of Knowledge”	4
1. The “Chamber of Torture”	10
2. Finding the Key	17
3. Entering the Room	25
4. Bluebeard	37
Conclusion: The Way In	46

Introduction:

The “Doors of Knowledge”

*[M]any doors of knowledge which are open for you, are for ever shut for me—
[...] I must guess, and calculate, and grope my way in the dark and come to
uncertain conclusions unaided and alone.*

—Charlotte Brontë in a letter to W.S. Williams

In her correspondence to W.S. Williams, reader for the publishing firm Smith, Elder & Co., Charlotte Brontë expresses a strong desire for knowledge. She despairs of ever equaling the work of Dickens or Thackeray because she cannot access “the shrine and image of Truth” as they do (*Letters* 102). Brontë perceives that the ability she longs for comes to Dickens and Thackeray with relative ease: “[They] have only to go into the temple, lift the veil a moment and come out and say what they have seen” (102). This process of unveiling the truth and articulating what is seen is one to which she consistently aspires. Her futile attempts to “guess,” “calculate,” and “grobe” at answers demonstrate a keen awareness of the boundaries between her and the knowledge she seeks (102). Christine Alexander writes that as a schoolteacher at Roe Head, Brontë was “starved, mentally and emotionally, and her mind fed on itself” (396). Throughout her life, Brontë sought escape from the confinement of her position. She writes, “Must I from day to day sit chained to this chair prisoned within these four bare walls?” (*Dream* 404). As a schoolteacher, she had little time for her writing and was surrounded by people she vehemently disliked, creating an impression of intellectual imprisonment. As Brontë makes clear in her letters, she moves through the dark “unaided and alone” without hope of enlightenment (*Letters* 102). Brontë’s desperate fumbling for “uncertain conclusions” suggests her hopeless endeavors

to access a knowledge she cannot really ever know, and highlights her keen sense of imprisonment (102).

This desire for knowledge and awareness of knowledge withheld surfaces in all of Brontë's novels. Her final work, *Villette* (1853), deals most heavily with the pursuit of knowledge, building on elements she establishes earlier in *Jane Eyre* (1847). However, scholars have diverged on whether or not *Villette* actually achieves the knowledge that it seeks. Earlier criticism argues that while knowledge resides within the novel, it remains inaccessible to the reader. For instance, Nancy Rabinowitz claims that *Villette* is remarkable in three ways: "the first-person narrator does not tell us all she knows, the text is open, and the 'hero' is sacrificed to enable the growth of the heroine" (244). Similarly, Athena Vrettos asserts that the ending to *Villette* is "open-ended," leaving the reader to speculate on the narrative's resolution (576). This concept of an "open" text suggests that the novel leaves many questions unanswered, or only answers them unsatisfactorily. Also, because the novel's narrator, Lucy Snowe, "does not tell [the reader] all she knows" she proves herself unreliable, leaving even the things that the reader does know rather questionable.

More recent critics find the text to be more definitive. Robert Newsom argues that the end of the novel leaves no doubt as to how it resolves itself: "Readers of any discernment at all will not fail to recognize that M. Paul perishes" (58). Insisting on an inflexible reading of the ending, Newsom's remark goes against Rabinowitz's statement that *Villette* is an "open" text, and indicates that some things actually can be known. Unable to accept a conclusive interpretation, even more recent critics, such as Borislav Knezevic, revert back to the theory of the novel's incapacity to know. Adding on to the concept of the "open" text, Knezevic argues that the novel struggles with its limitations, rather than simply withholding knowledge. He

states, “the novel is ultimately about an effort of coping with the impossibility of the knowledge of the real” (Knezevic 67). From this perspective, there are many points within the text that resist knowledge, and the characters must accept their ignorance.

Critics have differed in their interpretations of knowledge in *Villette* primarily because the difference between what Lucy does not know, and what she chooses not to know or refuses to share is difficult to determine. As the narrator, she is responsible for much of the knowledge that is either kept secret or distorted. At times, she even admits her capricious narration—as in the case of withholding Dr. John’s identity from the reader for a good part of the novel. She confesses, “To *say* anything on the subject, to *hint* at my discovery, had not suited my habits of thought [...] I had preferred to keep the matter to myself” (*Villette* 175). Furthermore, Lucy suffers from hysteria, which greatly influences her narration. She consistently experiences symptoms of her disorder: she creates the “illusion” for herself of Ginevra as a heroine, she sees “death’s head” in the empty dormitory over the long vacation, and she identifies with Vashti on stage who she perceives as possessing a “devil” in each eye (159; 160; 257). Traditionally, these delusions are taken to be false forms of knowledge. As Elaine Showalter writes, hysterical narrative had a “negative meaning [...] associated with effeminacy and deceitfulness” for *fin-de-siècle* readers (25). In the nineteenth century, at least, readers were concerned that narrators speaking through a deluded lens would not be able to render a truthful representation. Even today Lucy’s narration comes off as dishonest. Her narration defines itself through its visions, and oftentimes it is unclear how much of what she is telling the reader is sincere. The reader is always subject to the whims of the narrator, and as a decidedly hysterical one, Lucy establishes herself as one especially difficult to trust.

Recent criticism has overturned the negative readings of hysterical narratives and found that in *Villette* the disorder actually works to inform Lucy's narration. For instance, while at the concert with the Brettons, Lucy discovers a strange affinity with the King of Labassecour. Without knowing him, she intuits that he too is a "silent sufferer—a nervous, melancholy man" (*Villette* 213). She cannot explain how she reaches this knowledge of his character—she only says that, "if I did not *know*, at least I *felt*" (213). This ability to "feel" is what allows her to perceive the secrets contained inside others. Vrettos reasons that at the concert Lucy is able to recognize the King of Labassecour's illness "precisely because [her] nerves are sensitized, *because she too is a silent sufferer*" (567). When looking at the King, Lucy identifies with him and so is able to read deeply into the source of his afflictions. Lucy is confident in her diagnosis: "Those eyes had looked on the visits of a certain ghost—had long waited the comings and goings of that strangest spectre, Hypochondria" (*Villette* 213). She, too, is familiar with that ghostly disorder "Hypochondria" and so feels qualified in detecting this familiarity in others.

Lucy's hysteria that Dr. John finds himself unable to diagnose, or *know*, is in fact Lucy's own way of knowing. Past criticism has argued that hysteria is productive in *Villette*, but I would argue that through hysteria Lucy has only limited access to knowledge, and that by transitioning into a paranoid state Lucy commences an active investigation. Consequently, Lucy's process of accessing knowledge evolves over the course of the novel. While she is able to feel knowledge inside her from early on, she admits that she does not actually *know* it. This limitation results from the different functions of her two disorders—that is, that hysteria *contains* knowledge and that paranoia *attains* knowledge. Lucy's disorders do not work concurrently—where hysteria encounters its limits and leaves off, paranoia takes over. Lucy's paranoia becomes effective in that her sense of knowing induces her to pursue a confirmation of

knowledge that is ultimately correct or revealing. In the process, Lucy unearths both knowledge and unknowledge. I apply the term “unknowledge” in two senses: as a *lack* of knowledge from the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of “absence or want of knowledge,” and also as a *repressed* knowledge from Sigmund Freud’s statement that “the negative prefix *un-* is the indicator of repression” (151).

The text redeems paranoia by operating within the framework of the Bluebeard taletype. As a novel with a vested interest in knowledge—and one that seeks it through the figure of a paranoid woman—*Villette* establishes itself as part of the Bluebeard tale cycle. In Charles Perrault’s 17th century version of the classic fairy tale, Bluebeard marries a young woman and takes her to live with him at his estate. Soon after, Bluebeard leaves her for a trip, but before he goes he gives her the keys to every room in the mansion, forbidding her to enter one. Unable to suppress her curiosity—or intuitive knowledge—the young wife enters the room and discovers the bodies of Bluebeard’s former wives. This framework of a hyper-masculinized tyrant, paranoid female, and process of discovery offers a new way of reading and interpreting *Villette*. For Lucy, the bloody chamber takes form in her hysteria. She senses its presence through an intuitive knowledge, and eventually unlocks the chamber to discover its secrets. Like Lucy, the reader must find the key to enter into the novel’s bloody chamber—and encounter what lies inside.

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Part One:

The “Chamber of Torture”

Early on in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* (1853) a box drops at the feet of the narrator, Lucy Snowe, while she is walking in the garden. Inside this mysterious missile, which Lucy describes as “a small box of white and coloured ivory,” she finds a love letter addressed, “Pour la robe grise” (Brontë 110). Though it becomes clear from the contents of the letter that the package was not intended for her, Lucy nonetheless draws a parallel to herself, finding the box and its contents to be revealing of her own repressed desires. When she received the box, Lucy was wearing a gray dress and thinking of her own romantic “longing,” which she found “necessary to knock on the head,” or repress (109; 110). Because the contents of the box were not intended for Lucy (and because, as we learn later, the letter is indicative of an illicit romance), what she learns may be called “forbidden knowledge.” And because the box contains a love letter, the box may be called a “vessel of desire”—a desire that has been shut away. In this way, the novel establishes containers as vessels of desire and sites of forbidden knowledge, not unlike the forbidden chamber in the Bluebeard taletype.

The text of *Villette* is laden with containers of all sorts—boxes, chests, rooms, etc.—that hold different types of knowledge that are forbidden to or grudgingly shared with others. Many of the characters in the text possess a secret that they wish to keep private, attempting to hide cherished objects from the constant surveillance that pervades the novel. Lucy is unimpressed by one of her colleagues, who, as a mark of special favor, shows Lucy her “secret drawer” full of her life savings (Brontë 126). Lucy reads the contents of the drawer as if she were reading her colleague’s heart and mind to discover her worst vices. In her colleague’s eyes, Lucy detects a singular “green glisten” at the sight of her gold, exposing her greedy nature (126). Ultimately,

the gold is not as revealing as the colleague's reaction to it—the disclosure of her true character is the real secret that Lucy learns.

Lucy, too, stows away her valuables, attempting to keep them from the ever-present eyes of others. When Lucy receives letters from Dr. John, for instance, she hides them in a drawer: “I possessed in that case, box, drawer up-stairs, casketed with that first letter, four companions like it” (Brontë 253). The letters, too precious to be left out, are carefully enclosed within containers of many types. Additionally, the fact that they are “casketed” presages their later fate. To further protect her beloved letters after discovering that they have been tampered with for a second time, Lucy goes out and purchases a glass jar that she seals up with the letters inside. She then buries the sealed bottle in the “allée défendue,” or the “forbidden walk” (296). Lucy mourns the letters in their “grave,” emphasizing the significance of the knowledge that is sealed-up and stashed away in places that are inaccessible to her (296). Despite her grief, Lucy earlier admits to herself that they are “mere friendly letters,” which only her famished spirit causes her to interpret as “godlike,” although she never shares any specifics of the contents with her reader (294; 244). Like the colleague's gold in the “secret drawer,” the contents of Lucy's letters are not as meaningful as what the hidden treasures reveal about her.

When M. Paul locks Lucy in the attic before the *fête*, Lucy finds herself inside a forbidden chamber. M. Paul explicitly draws the line between the attic and the forbidden chamber by referencing the Bluebeard folktale. As he later tells Lucy, “You will set me down as a species of tyrant and Bluebeard, starving women in a garret; whereas, after all, I am no such thing” (Brontë 137). Of course, M. Paul has acted just like the figures with whom he denies association, and in doing so further stresses the importance of the attic as a container functioning as a bloody chamber. Taking the keys with him, M. Paul leaves Lucy inside the hot, close room,

abandoning her without food or water to reside with the rats and beetles. In this prison-like environment, Lucy engages with her sexual fears and longings. While standing on a pedestal and rehearsing her lines for M. Paul's play, Lucy expresses an apprehension that suggests a deflowering: "the beetles were fading from my sight; I trembled lest they should steal on me a march, mount my throne unseen, and, unsuspected, invade my skirts" (136). That the beetles should "invade" Lucy's skirts while she passively stands by "trembling" disturbingly sexualizes the scene. Lucy's fear of the violation of her skirts reflects her repressed sexual desire and her fear of fulfilling that same desire, creating a split self that is indicative of hysteria.

Etymological analysis suggests that Lucy's hysteria may also be viewed as a container. The term "hysteria" originates from *hystera*, the Greek word for "uterus," linking the disorder and the womb, which may itself be viewed as a container, like the others in *Villette* (Baur 25). Therefore, hysteria, by virtue of its connection to the womb, may be seen as a container like any other and a locus of forbidden knowledge. Dr. John emphasizes the idea that Lucy's hysteria is a container of forbidden knowledge by linking it to Bluebeard's bloody chamber. During an earlier conversation with Lucy after she collapses in the streets of Villette, Dr. John alludes to Lucy's hysteria as a "chamber of torture" (Brontë 183). This "chamber" at which Dr. John must halt echoes the bloody chamber of Bluebeard's mansion from Charles Perrault's 17th century version of the oral folktale, "Bluebeard." In Perrault's retelling, a young woman suffers from her excessive desire for knowledge. Refusing to obey her husband's instructions after he leaves her home alone with his keys, she opens every single door—including the "little room" that was explicitly forbidden to her (Perrault 145). Lucy's hysteria is a "chamber" locked inside her that she can sense without opening or even fully understanding.

Dr. John perceives the chamber, but cannot know of its contents. Like Dr. John, M. Paul finds himself unable to understand Lucy's nervous disorder. During an interrogation from M. Paul in which he accuses her of secretly knowing Greek and Latin, Lucy denies the false charges but refuses to be put down as an "ignoramus" (Brontë 355). She claims, "I *sometimes*, not *always*, feel a knowledge of my own" (355). While Lucy can "feel" this knowledge, she does not know it. When M. Paul asks her what she means, she is unable to explain and evades the question. This unexplainable "knowledge of [her] own" is Lucy's hysteria, a disorder that she feels without knowing. Lucy attempts to articulate to M. Paul the knowledge inherent in her disorder and also to explain the limitations of that knowledge—she is not an "ignoramus," but neither can she really know the knowledge that she possesses. Therefore, Lucy and those around her have only limited access to what is contained inside her hysteria, paralleled in the other containers in the text.

As a manifestation of Lucy's hysteria, the attic, too, possesses forbidden knowledge in the form of the Nun figure that supposedly issues from there. That the story of the Nun is associated with the attic similarly establishes the attic as a "vault" or 'chamber' (Brontë 106). As Lucy's grave for her letters from Dr. John indicate, things that are buried in *Villette* contain a repressed, forbidden knowledge. Christina Crosby argues that Lucy identifies with the Nun, who furthermore acts as a symbol of Lucy's neurotic inner self and as "a symbol of the repression and burial of women and their sexual desire" (704). The term "Burial" is a significant link between Lucy and the Nun, as both have been forced into a metaphorical casket. According to the "ghost story" of Madame Beck's establishment, the Nun was "buried alive" in a vault at the foot of the ancient pear tree in the garden (Brontë 106). The Nun's tale, in which she is punished for "some sin," implies a deliberate censorship, further burying her beneath the text (106). The attempt to

“bury” her indicates that she knows something, or that her story and identity are prohibited forms of knowledge. Lucy is similarly metaphorically “buried alive” in her claustrophobic existence at the *pensionnat*, and once Dr. John even takes her for a “ghost” when he encounters her on the “forbidden walk” in the garden (113). Like the Nun apparition, Lucy takes to haunting the garden of the *pensionnat*—most especially the “l’allée défendue”—stressing the strange sympathy between them (107). Before Lucy even physically encounters the Nun, the novel links them together by a shared repression and, consequently, a felt but unknowable knowledge.

While Lucy identifies with the Nun, she does not “know” the strange apparition. The second time she sees the black and white figure, she asks, “Who are you? and why do you come to me?” (Brontë 297). One of the pupils at Madame Beck’s establishment, Ginevra Fanshawe, later asks the same question of Lucy, “Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?” (307). While Lucy possesses a “buried” knowledge, she cannot or will not uncover it. Unable to give Ginevra a satisfactory response, she takes comfort in the thought that “I was known where it imported that known I should be,” without dwelling on the fact that she may not actually be included among the ‘knowers’ (309). Lucy similarly finds herself barred from knowing the Nun, even though she identifies with the ghostly figure. As Crosby points out, the Nun is an embodiment of Lucy’s “mental instability and fragmentation,” and so an embodiment of her hysteria (701). The Nun contains knowledge that Lucy desires, but in her initial interactions with the Nun she never moves further towards it than a felt affinity.

As a container, hysteria is inherently limited. In *Villette*, hysteria acts as a passive receptacle. Hysteria resides within Lucy’s person, and within her narration, as a box-like inanimate object. The novel then characterizes Lucy, too, as passive, placing her in a position where she is dependent upon the help and treatment of others. Consequently, Lucy is incapable

of accessing the contents of her own container, and remains aware of its existence inside her without being fully knowledgeable of its significance. As the Bluebeard tale forebodes and Dr. John detects, hysteria is a container that becomes a “chamber of torture” for Lucy, but one that also holds some form of forbidden knowledge within it. The young wife from Perrault’s tale takes it upon herself to enter the prohibited room, pointing to the active position that Lucy requires to enter into her own “chamber of torture.” The novel holds many rooms, and Lucy must find a means to seek them out and unlock them.

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Part Two:

Finding the Key

If hysteria is a chamber that is locked to Lucy, then she must find a “key” in order to open it. For Lucy, the process of “finding the key” is moving away from her passive interaction and observation within the *pensionnat*. An outside gaze stimulates this transition in Lucy, forcing her to evolve beyond her limited state of hysteria. This oppressive gaze permeates the atmosphere of the *pensionnat*—and the novel as a whole—arousing the nervous disorder of paranoia in Lucy. Freudian theory links knowledge and the feeling of being watched to paranoia—as Mary Ann Doane notes, “Freud refers to the conviction of being watched or delusions of observation as the most striking symptom of paranoia” (126). Lucy not only suspects, but also confirms that she is the object of the gaze from several different sources. Furthermore, the gaze’s active role within the text genders it masculine in contrast to Lucy’s feminine passive observation. The oppressive male gaze that characterizes Madame Beck’s establishment creates a constant feeling of being watched, inducing Lucy to find the “key” in order to open her chamber.

A merciless gaze pervades *Villette*. Consequently, the acts of looking and seeing—and the difference between the two—persistently trouble the novel and the characters within it. When Lucy first arrives at Madame Beck’s establishment and meets M. Paul, the gaze is immediately set up as an invasive and condemnatory way of seeing. He gazes at her “steadily” to read her character, and after much scrutiny he finally passes “judgment” (Brontë 67). Driven by this determination to know and to judge, the gaze assumes an active role—it is not a passive way of looking. However, passive looking also takes place throughout *Villette* in the form of observation. One definition of “observe” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* points to its

association with the passive: “To obey, abide by, or adhere to (a law, command, custom, covenant, promise, etc.).” According to Laura Mulvey, the bearer of the look is necessarily masculinized: “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female” (4). Building on Mulvey’s active/male passive/female distinction between viewer and subject, there is also a gendered difference between *types* of looking. The gaze is inherently masculine in character while passive looking—or observation—is gendered feminine. Both active and passive ways of looking engage with *Villette* and its characters, with the observer giving way to the penetrating gaze.

This dominating gaze creates a culture of surveillance in *Villette* that oppresses Lucy Snowe, most notably within Madame Beck’s establishment. Watchful eyes are everywhere, and Lucy, who deeply values her privacy, observes that it is constantly invaded. The penetrating gaze enters into her rooms, her personal compartments, and at times even into her mind. Madame Beck, who maintains her rule by means of “Surveillance” and “espionage,” is responsible for establishing this culture of surveillance within the school (Brontë 72). Using these as her dictums, Madame Beck then glides “ghost-like through the house, watching and spying everywhere, peering through every key-hole, listening behind every door” (73). Madame Beck assumes the active role of the looker forcing Lucy into the passive role of the person being watched or the passive observer. Assuming the gaze imbues Madame Beck’s person with an authority that exceeds her position. From first entering the school, Lucy is immersed in Madame Beck’s critical gaze and the oppressive culture that Madame Beck creates.

M. Paul, too, takes “surveillance” and “espionage” as his watchwords. He openly admits to Lucy that he feels compelled to survey her actions for her own good: “You need watching, and watching over [...] I watch you and the others pretty closely, pretty constantly, nearer and

oftener than you or they think” (Brontë 363). M. Paul fancies Madame Beck—and himself as well—as a “guardian angel” that watches over the teachers and students of the establishment (365). M. Paul’s secret supervision creates a prisoner out of Lucy and the other inhabitants of the *pensionnat* as he plays the role of voyeur as well as self-appointed protector. Even if he is watching over them to ensure their wellbeing, his watching establishes a feeling of claustrophobia within the establishment that the women cannot escape. Studying the enclosed *pensionnat* from above, M. Paul’s gaze forces the women into another container like those that already weigh down the text. Lucy tells him disapprovingly after his admission: “It is not right, monsieur [...] Discoveries made by stealth seem to me dishonourable discoveries” (363-4). Lucy feels that the intrusion of the gaze is immoral, and also shocking enough to raise her censure. As someone who cherishes hidden places and escapes, Lucy is horrified by how “*Thoroughly*” M. Paul is able to know her and the other women at the school through his “dishonourable” means (364).

Beneath his overtures of benevolence, however, M. Paul’s spying carries a latent hostility. M. Paul’s professedly protective measure is more for his benefit than for the women whom he watches—he watches in order to *catch* the women at something. As he tells Lucy, one of the other teachers at the establishment, Zélie St. Pierre, desired to marry him and he would have fallen for her flattery if he had not watched her from the lattice of a neighboring college boardinghouse. He gleefully informs Lucy of his narrow escape: “Ah, magic lattice! what miracles of discovery hast thou wrought! [...] I have seen [Zélie St. Pierre’s] rancours, her vanities, her levities—not only here, but elsewhere: I have witnessed what bucklers me against all her arts: I am safe from poor Zélie” (Brontë 365). He reveals that his primary interest is protecting himself—his discoveries have kept him “safe” from female deceit. M. Paul’s distrust

actually suggests that he suspects the women of a knowledge that they choose to withhold from him, or of which they may not even be aware.

Suspecting the malice of M. Paul's gaze, Lucy breaks M. Paul's spectacles and attempts to block the constant surveillance that surrounds her. M. Paul's glasses represent his ubiquitous gaze and infuse him with a terrible power over the women of the *pensionnat*. The portress, Rosine, too terrified to confront them, sends Lucy in her stead to inform M. Paul that a commissionaire has arrived with a message for him. When Lucy enters the classroom, she is "transfixed" by his spectacles: "Rosine was right; these utensils had in them a blank and immutable terror, beyond the mobile wrath of the wearer's own unglazed eyes" (Brontë 325). As Lucy approaches M. Paul, he removes his glasses, realizing that they are "useless for the inspection of a criminal under [his] nose" (325). The glasses set up an immediate hierarchy between the wearer and the one under the wearer's scrutiny, so that the teachers and pupils feel that they are "criminals" whenever they fall prey to his gaze. Lucy reacts to the paralyzing horror by refusing to allow the gaze to continue observing her. Ignoring M. Paul's evasions, Lucy pushes the "bonnet" onto his desk, knocking his treasured, tyrannical "lunettes" onto the floor where they shatter to pieces (326). The accident renders the glasses "cracked and worthless," removing M. Paul's terrifyingly blank gaze (326).

The removal of the glasses signifies a shift in the balance of power between M. Paul and Lucy. For a brief exchange, Lucy finds herself in a position of power—something that M. Paul relishes more than she does, and which forms a momentary good humor between them. There is something about the role-reversal that moves M. Paul to treat her kindly and at that moment he gives her full pardon. His exclamation even reveals a certain enjoyment at being subject to Lucy's control: "Ah, traitress! traitress! You are resolved to have me quite blind and helpless in

your hands!” (Brontë 326). M. Paul admits that to be blind is to be “helpless” and restricted to the role of an invalid, and that to be the one who sees is to have power over the people and events around him. Lucy’s refusal to be watched also suggests the beginning of a change in her character from the pressure of the culture of surveillance. Her destructive action is the first tremor of her breaking under the gaze, moving away from her former passivity. Like the temporary truce between Lucy and M. Paul, however, Lucy’s movement to take action is also short-term. As she later admits, “I was quarrelling with M. Paul again before night” (327). The return to quarreling signifies a return to the standard dynamics of the gaze in the text.

While Lucy may confront the gaze that observes her, she stops short of adopting it herself. During her disagreement with M. Paul over the ethics of his supervision of the *pensionnat*, Lucy insists that she has never seen M. Paul embarrassed in her life. When M. Paul responds that he also possesses a “fund of modesty and diffidence in [his] nature,” Lucy cuts him off (Brontë 364). She protests, “Monsieur, I never saw it” (364). M. Paul then chides her for her inability to adopt the invasive male gaze and perceive hidden aspects of his nature:

“Mademoiselle, it is there. You ought to have seen it” (364). Certain aspects of people’s interiority are barred from Lucy’s eyes—and so, her narration as well—as a result of her passive observation, which until this point has failed to develop into the same perceptive state as M. Paul and Madame Beck’s surveillance. This constant emphasis on *seeing* as a way of understanding in *Villette* underlines the importance of surveillance and the gaze as an impetus for Lucy’s own discoveries.

M. Paul does not escape the gaze completely, even though Lucy fails to know him. Those who watch are themselves the subject of what Borislav Knezevic terms the “object-gaze” (67). During the same conversation with Lucy in the garden, M. Paul takes his still-lit cigar and

throws it into the bushes. Turning to Lucy, he says, “Look at it, [...] is not that spark like an eye watching over you and me?” (Brontë 366). The red “eye” coming from the end of the cigar-butt signifies an all-consuming and inescapable gaze, producing an awareness in M. Paul and Lucy that they can always be seen. The red “eye” also echoes the “blank,” indescribable terror of M. Paul’s glasses (325). These ever-present eyes serve as the source of Lucy’s paranoia, and subsequently her pursuit of knowledge. Mary Ann Doane sees the fear of being watched as the drive that develops Lucy’s paranoid state. Doane argues, “The ever-present sense of being on display for the gaze of a judgmental other is symptomatic of another condition within our culture as well—that of femininity. There is a sense then in which paranoia is only a hyperbolization of the ‘normal’ female function of exhibitionism and its attachment to the affect of fear” (126). Lucy is continuously subjected to the male gaze—Madame Beck’s character is gendered masculine by her powerful gaze and the cigar-butt is undeniably masculine. Even Lucy’s “reader” is male, since, as Joseph Litvak points out, “reading is itself a kind of spying” in *Villette*, and so the “reader” assumes the invasive male gaze (Brontë 245; Litvak 474). Lucy’s “exhibitionism” in response to constantly being watched is, as Doane indicates, typically female, and its excess is what leads Lucy to her justified state of paranoia.

Lucy’s paranoia, then, is the result of the intrusive male gaze that is constantly trying to see inside her “chamber of torture” (Brontë 183). From the first night that Lucy steps over the threshold of Madame Beck’s establishment, it is clear to her that her secret compartments will be easily entered into. As Lucy feigns sleep, Madame Beck approaches Lucy’s bed and studies her features for a good fifteen minutes before beginning her search through Lucy’s things. Lucy finds her curiosity aroused by Madame Beck’s “research”: “The end was not bad, but the means were hardly fair or justifiable. In my dress was a pocket; she fairly turned it inside out: she

counted the money in my purse; she opened a little memorandum-book, coolly perused its contents, and took from between the leaves a small plaited lock of Miss Marchmont's grey hair" (69). Madame Beck's thorough investigation of Lucy's belongings and containers sets her apart from Lucy who, while she passively observes the action that is taking place in the room where she lies, stops short of protesting or interfering in any way. Madame Beck's search ends with her taking Lucy's keys to her personal belongings and making a wax imprint of them before returning them. At this moment, *Villette* sets up active investigation as the "key" to unlocking closed off containers.

Villette, then, absolves the pervasive society of spying because it is what forces Lucy out of her passive state. A "pupil" herself, Lucy is capable of observation and all of the characters come under her scrutiny in the course of her narration. However, her initial passive observation is very different from the active investigations that both M. Paul and Madame Beck take upon themselves to perform. Madame Beck and M. Paul are always attempting to see inside Lucy's "chamber" in order to fully know her, and take pleasure in knowing and seeing everything. This invasive male gaze induces Lucy's paranoia—and rightly so, as her space and privacy are consistently trespassed upon. Taking M. Paul's advice, Lucy is persuaded to know herself "thoroughly" rather than just "partially" (Brontë 364). The novel forces Lucy into an active investigation of her own.

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Part Three:

Entering the Room

Once Lucy has “found the key” she has reached a fully developed state of paranoia. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, “paranoia” can be defined as a “mental illness characterized by a persistent delusional system, usually on the theme of persecution, exaggerated personal importance, or sexual fantasy or jealousy.” During the novel’s climax—Lucy’s drugged night tour of the park—Lucy exhibits all of these symptoms in some form, finally allowing herself to delve into her own psyche. Once she transitions to paranoia, she actively examines herself and everything around her. As Mary Jacobus points out, Lucy becomes a “*metteur en scène* in a drama of her own making” (53). Jacobus’s concept of Lucy as a director strengthens the argument that Lucy investigates and directs her surroundings as a paranoid woman. Lucy’s former passive observation develops into the gaze, and she is finally able to *know* the desires and characters of both herself and others—up to a certain point. Through a process of construction and deconstruction, Lucy uses her paranoia to enter her “chamber of torture,” revealing knowledge of her desires as well as the necessary limits of that knowledge.

Once her transition from hysteria to paranoia is complete, Lucy is completely paranoid. Her previous fear of being known increases to extreme levels, and she refuses to trust anyone else at the *pensionnat*. For instance, after Madame Beck advises Lucy to take a sedative, Lucy returns to the other women of the school, and thinks, “I knew they all looked at me—my heart seemed discovered to them; I believed myself self-betrayed” (Brontë 448). Her fear of being discovered—and of everyone’s keenness to uncover her heart’s secrets—drives her into a delirious state. Her paranoia leads her to suspect everyone in the household, even the youngest: “Hideously certain did it seem that the very youngest of the school must guess why and for

whom I despaired” (448). The intensity of Lucy’s despair and the importance that she places on her privacy drives her to consider outside recognition of her pain as “hideous” and repulsive to her. While Lucy wishes to seek out and finally *know* those around her, her paranoia preserves her desire to remain unknown herself. Later on while in the park, she only feels “safe” while “masked”—she is more aware of the eyes of others with her enhanced perception (454). Gathered amongst the throng of spectators, Lucy is horrified when Dr. John turns his gaze upon her: “[T]here were thousands to meet his eye and divide its scrutiny—why then did he concentrate all on me—oppressing me with the whole force of that full, blue, steadfast orb?” (457). Lucy underlines the “oppression” associated with the gaze, and also the intensity that cuts through her with its relentless “force.” Lucy quickly avoids his gaze, insisting, “I *would* not be known” (457). She refuses to be known for no discernible reason other than that she cannot hold up to the merciless gaze. Paranoid about his intentions and what he might find out, she flees.

Despite causing her to suspect those around her (both with and without good reason), Lucy’s paranoia also makes her aware of how unfounded some of her suspicions are. Assuming the gaze, Lucy takes the active position upon herself, and the rest of the household falls under her newly acquired power. Consequently, she is able to finally “know” herself and others in the establishment. To Lucy’s relief and amazement, she discovers that everyone else is oblivious of her thoughts and desires: “before the day was over, I gathered cause of gratitude towards the whole blind household [...] my whole inner life for the last six months, was still mine only. It was not known—it had not been noted” (Brontë 448). Lucy’s love for M. Paul, which she has attempted to keep a secret—at times even from herself—is still undiscovered by all of the other women except Madame Beck. Lucy’s eyes are also opened at this moment to the fact that her chamber remains intact—no one else has penetrated beyond her exterior. Rather than dispel her

illusions entirely, however, the discovery is simply forgotten as Lucy's paranoia gradually builds. She continues to act on her fears, seeking out the source to one suspicion, finding out the fear is unfounded, and then continuing on to the next.

Lucy first becomes aware of her changed state when she perceives the power shift in her relationship with Madame Beck. As Lucy becomes active, a role reversal occurs and Madame Beck assumes the passive position. After Madame Beck prevents Lucy from seeing M. Paul the day that he is scheduled to set sail for the West Indies, Lucy grieves in silence until Madame Beck seeks her out. Lucy notes, "Instead of at once addressing me, [Madame Beck] went to her desk, took her keys and seemed to seek something; she loitered over this feigned search long, too long" (Brontë 446). Madame Beck's process of investigation has become "feigned"—she no longer actively discovers anything. As Lucy describes it, Madame Beck still holds the keys, but she no longer gains access to knowledge through them. Moreover, the presence of Madame Beck's keys once again points to Lucy's transition from passive to active. Once Lucy has found the "key" of her paranoia, she no longer willingly allows Madame Beck to enter her private spaces and so one "key" negates the other. As a result, she has also lost her own active authority to Lucy.

At this moment, Lucy assumes the role of the examiner and enters into a position of control. Her paranoia and suspicion of Madame Beck's maneuverings lead her to take action in her own life—Lucy usurps the active gaze, and she is now able to enter any "room" that she would like. While Madame Beck pretends searching, Lucy uncovers knowledge formerly concealed. Her paranoia moves her sense of perception to the level she previously failed to reach before: "in some stimulated states of perception like that of this instant—[Madame Beck's] habitual disguise, her mask and her domino, were to me a mere network reticulated with holes"

(Brontë 447). Lucy's paranoia allows her to perceive significant differences between truths and fictions in Madame Beck's character, defining the heightened perception that she holds for the rest of the night. She sees through Madame Beck's "disguise," noting that Madame Beck attempts to hide herself behind a "mask" and "domino." Previously, Lucy had experienced limited, but keen insight into particular characters. Only now, however, is she able to move about these "secret rooms" with relative freedom to access the truth inside. Lucy is finally able to see through the "holes" to Madame Beck's "heartless, self-indulgent, and ignoble" being in its entirety (447).

Once reaching this fully active state of paranoia, Lucy realizes that her disorder is productive. Consequently, she expresses horror at the thought of returning to her former passivity. As she continues to confront Madame Beck, her strongest accusations are against Madame Beck's attempts to pacify her: "Oh Madame! in *your* hand there is both chill and poison. You envenom and you paralyze" (Brontë 447). Lucy comes to associate the lack of movement with death. She rejects Madame Beck's suggested treatment for her outburst, realizing its ineffectiveness: "seek your own palliatives, in your own chosen resources. Leave me, however. *Leave me*, I say" (447). To be sedated, or remain passive, serves as a "palliative," relieving the symptoms while leaving the underlying cause of the condition. Lucy realizes that losing her symptoms would also cause her to lose the means of *accessing* this underlying cause—of obtaining and understanding the knowledge that resides there.

Now that Lucy is in her paranoid state, knowledge suddenly flows and she sees Madame Beck clearly for the first time. Lucy states, "Deep into some of Madame's secrets I had entered—I know not how; by an intuition or an inspiration which came to me—I know not whence [...] She was *my* rival, heart and soul, though secretly, under the smoothest bearing, and utterly unknown

to all save her and myself” (Brontë 447). Lucy realizes that she has passed the threshold into Madame Beck’s mind, beyond her unreadable exterior. Conscious that she has “entered” a room previously locked to her, Lucy claims that she “knows not how” she has done so. However, at the same time she admits that she has achieved her heightened perception through “an intuition or inspiration” which has come to her—that is, through her paranoia. Both women are able to know each other, brought closer by the fact that they share a common desire to marry M. Paul, if for purportedly different reasons. Lucy is able to *know* Madame Beck and understand her “*Thoroughly*,” finally assuming the active gaze of surveillance that M. Paul urged upon Lucy earlier in the text (364).

Already in a perceptive paranoid state, Lucy catalyzes her disorder by unknowingly taking an opium dose and in doing so reaches a uniquely acute awareness. Madame Beck gives Lucy the opium hoping that it will act as a sedative, but it instead stimulates her. “Imagination” rouses her, insisting that she “look forth and view the night!” (Brontë 450). Continuing to suspect Madame Beck’s intentions, Lucy’s mind moves her to leave her bed and “look.” Her senses are also further enhanced: “I became alive to new thought—to reverie peculiar in colouring. A gathering call ran among the faculties, their bugles sang, their trumpets rang an untimely summons” (449-50). “Summoned” in this way from her bed to explore the streets of Villette at night, Lucy abandons a state as passive and death-like as sleep. Instead, she embraces being “alive” and engaging in “new thought.” Robert Newsom points out that the opium heightens the “extremity of [Lucy’s] psychological state” (58). The drug accelerates Lucy’s paranoia, pushing her into an “extreme” state—and, consequently, an especially perceptive one.

Lucy’s nocturnal vision of Villette is consciously one of her own construction. She clearly states that she follows “Imagination,” abandoning her normal obedience to “Reason”

(Brontë 450; 254). As Jacobus suggests, during Lucy's opium-induced wandering, "[Her] consciousness at once distorts, and, in doing so, creates a truth that is essentially a fiction" (52). Lucy describes many of the revelations she has in the park as "truths" that she then later reveals as "fictions." She believes that something she suspects is true, only to investigate it and find out that the fear is unfounded. The way her narration sets up the quest for knowledge emphasizes that there is a kernel of truth in Lucy's paranoia. Since the entire novel is Lucy's construction, this moment is also where Lucy honestly tells her reader that she has allowed for creative interpretation. Earlier in the novel, Lucy unflatteringly accuses the reader of skepticism when she relates her first Nun-sighting: "Say what you will, reader—tell me I was nervous, or mad; affirm that I was unsettled by the excitement of that letter; declare that I dreamed: this I vow—I saw there—in that room—on that night—an image like—a NUN" (245). Lucy insists on taking a "vow" of her honesty, but because she so strongly suspects that others won't believe her, her claims become doubtful. Admitting that she now follows "Imagination," Lucy is for once truthfully admitting to relating a possible fiction—as well as owning up to her mental disorders—instead of adamantly insisting upon her credibility as a narrator. In constructing fantasies, and confessing that they are fantasies, she is then able to deconstruct them to seek out the source of her delirious illusions.

Lucy engages in this process of constructing and deconstructing illusions to figure out the "truth" of her surroundings. After taking the opium dose, Lucy sees everything with an unprecedented clarity. When she first enters the park and encounters the magic of the nighttime fête, she quickly determines that the fantasy is a constructed illusion:

[W]here were they, and where was I?
 In a land of enchantment, a garden most gorgeous [...] of altar and of temple,
 of pyramid, obelisk, and sphynx; incredible to say, the wonder and symbols of
 Egypt teemed throughout the park of Vilette.

No matter that in five minutes the secret was mine—the key of the mystery picked up, and its illusion unveiled—no matter that I quickly recognized the material of these solemn fragments—the timber, the paint, and the paste-board [...]. (Brontë 453)

Unable to determine her whereabouts, Lucy is at first further confused by the “land of enchantment” before her. This festive façade provides food for her imagination, leading her to declare she is in a “garden most gorgeous.” However, she quickly breaks down the illusion, seeing the “altar,” “temple,” “pyramid,” “obelisk,” and “sphinx” for what they really are: “timber,” “paint,” and “pasteboard.” This illusion “unveiled” sets the tone for Lucy’s discoveries—she possesses the “key” to the “mystery” of the mirage before her. Lucy’s distrust and mental disassembling of the false impression in front of her suggests that she will continue to do the same to the misperceptions she has of the other characters and relationships around her.

Lucy’s imaginings come to a head when she encounters the figure of M. Paul. Assuming that M. Paul has already departed for the West Indies, she is amazed to see him standing before her in the park. From a hidden vantage point Lucy watches M. Paul with his ward, Justine Marie (who bears the same name as M. Paul’s long-dead former love), and reads the interaction before her as a confirmation of a romantic alliance. Without evidence of any sort, she accepts her interpretation, comforting herself in knowing that at least she has discovered the “TRUTH,” even if it is very painful for her to confront (Brontë 467). According to Jacobus, Lucy’s insistence on uncovering the “TRUTH” suggests greater truths about the novel itself: “Is this Lucy’s final and most outrageous lie? or, as the text insists in the face of its heavily alliterative irony, the novel’s central ‘truth’?—that the imagination usurps the real to create its own fictions [...].” (54).

According to Jacobus, the “truth” that Lucy reveals is not the one that she proposes; that is, that M. Paul is engaged to his ward. The “truth” of the novel is that the real has been replaced by Lucy’s imagination, which in turn creates more “fictions.” Lucy’s narration embraces her

imagination as reality, and in so doing, reveals her repressed desires. This uncovering of her desires is what ultimately makes Imagination truthful—she may not know, or choose to accurately recreate, the truth of the scene, but she does render the truth of her psychology.

Lucy's vivid reading of the scene reflects her analysis of her relationship with M. Paul through the lens of her paranoia. While the relationship that Lucy constructs between M. Paul and his ward is completely a product of her imagination, she *does* achieve knowledge otherwise withheld; namely, she discovers that M. Paul has not departed and is actually still in Villette. Her interpretation unveils certain psychological truths as well. Most noticeably, her jealousy of Justine Marie discloses the depth of her attachment to M. Paul. However, she also constructs an imaginary obstacle between herself and M. Paul, implying that she would prefer to continue desiring him rather than find herself free to marry him. As she describes it, she “abhor[s] while embrac[ing]” the fiction she creates (Brontë 467). Her “embrace” suggests that, on some level at least, she enjoys the pain that comes with barring herself from M. Paul. Later, when M. Paul has finally left for the West Indies, Lucy describes his three years of absence as “the three happiest years of [her] life” (493). Lucy's moment in the garden explains this later self-proclaimed “paradox” in her feelings (493). As Mary Ann Doane suggests, “the female protagonist's phobia must, therefore, involve a fear of assuming the place of the preceding female” (144). This fear explains Lucy's reading of M. Paul's ward, Justine Marie, who herself takes the place of M. Paul's first love by bearing the same name. When Lucy reads the ward as M. Paul's lover, she expresses her own “phobia” of becoming the replacement woman and at the same time becomes aware of this phobia. Consequently, Lucy consciously constructs obstacles towards the fulfillment of her desires to preserve the strong emotions that she feels as well as to avoid assuming a position that she sees as inherently dangerous.

The most revealing discovery of the night is the final unveiling of the Nun who has haunted Lucy throughout the text. All told, Lucy sees the Nun three times: once while reading her first letter from Dr. John, again at a key point while with M. Paul, and the last time occurs after Lucy returns from the nighttime *fête* in the park. When she returns to her room and finds the abandoned costume on her bed, she realizes that the Nun has only ever been what Cristina Crosby calls a “ghostly signifier,” signifying nothing (709). In this moment of realization, Lucy rushes to destroy the “mystery” that has plagued her (Brontë 470). When Lucy previously identified with the Nun as an embodiment of her hysteria and consequently as a site of knowledge, she was actually identifying with Ginevra’s suitor, the Count de Hamal, dressed as the cloistered black and white figure. As Crosby writes, the Nun is the “hinge which allows unimpeded oscillation between male and female” (708). The final unveiling of the Nun blurs Lucy’s sense of sexual identity. Lucy’s discovery of the costume (fittingly left on her bed, which, as Crosby points out, is a “pre-eminently sexualized site”) leads her to realize that she has harbored a sexual indeterminacy all along (708).

At the same time, however, she is confronted with the “none” or “no person” of the nun, who all the time was merely a placeholder. While she realizes that she too is a “placeholder,” marking a lack that cannot be known, at the same time she finds she is also the *key* that can unlock the “chamber” within her own disorder. As Karen Lawrence argues, it is possible for the nun—and for Lucy—to serve multiple functions, made explicit when Lucy refers to herself as a “cipher,” which has various meanings: a “nonentity,” a “code,” or a “key” (449). Lucy vacillates between all three of these definitions, showing that she can at once be her own key as well as a blank, or empty box. While the Nun’s unveiling discloses a fluid sexual identity to Lucy in which she finds that her identity is unstable, it also exposes the impossibility of knowing certain

aspects of her sexuality and identity completely in *Villette*. Lucy's close association with the collapsed Nun apparition establishes her as a *nunentity*, and her first person narration serves as the "code" that only she, as the writer, can fully "decode." Paranoia is productive because it brings Lucy to a crucial self-knowledge, but at the same time it reinforces the unknown within the text.

Among things that cannot be known are also things that should not be known. Dr. John's attempt to see Lucy when she encounters him in the park during the nighttime festival, and her desperation to prevent him sparks a revelation in Lucy. Like her perception of Madame Beck's interior, Lucy sees into the "mansion" of Dr. John's heart and finds a little closet labeled "Lucy's Room" (Brontë 457). Aware that her "Room" is relatively small compared to the other compartments of Dr. John's heart, she nevertheless takes pleasure in knowing that there is one chamber reserved for her. This discovery prompts her to realize for the first time the space that she still reserves for Dr. John even in her great affection for M. Paul. Lucy fears that her feelings for Dr. John are like the "tent of Peri-Banou," and if given the chance for release would expand to great size, so she must keep it tightly constricted (457). Lucy comes to terms with the fact that some boxes may never be opened, for if they were they would overwhelm her with the force and size of what was contained inside. In some cases, knowledge should remain limited.

With knowledge also comes the discovery of an incomplete knowledge. Given the means to access her chamber, Lucy still refuses to examine some parts of herself thoroughly—she leaves the space she reserves in her heart for Dr. John unexplored. At the same time, she discovers the richness of her passions and sexuality, as exemplified in her revealing construction of the scene with M. Paul and his ward. The Nun figure is most telling, and her deflation is directly tied to Lucy's nocturnal prowling—by leaving the gate unlocked she made Ginevra's elopement with the

Count possible, and along with it the abandonment of the Nun costume. Lucy finds that the Nun's veil is only "artifice," very much like the mask and domino behind which Madame Beck hides (Brontë 470). She also realizes that her identity is not immutable and that her sexual nature and feelings can be found acted out or upon by others. This instability is in itself another limit to knowledge—her identity cannot be pinned down or known for sure. Lucy's paranoia urges her to leave her bed and seek out others who have always been the ones looking at her. Her discovery of an ambiguous—or absent—self is horrifying, leading her to tear the discovered Nun costume into "shreds and fragments" (470). She cannot face the unknowable, and the Nun as a blank emphasizes the impossibility of knowing some things—but at the same time she now knows what she doesn't want to know.

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Part Four:

Bluebeard

Villette's quest for knowledge through the female figure strongly draws from Charles Perrault's rendition of the Bluebeard fairy tale. Lucy Snowe, like the young wife in Bluebeard, perceives the "chamber of torture," finds the key, and confronts the forbidden knowledge stored inside. However, *Villette* is not Charlotte Brontë's first Bluebeard tale—the novel's interest in forbidden knowledge builds on the Bluebeard tradition established earlier in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Brontë even includes a direct reference to the fairy tale in both texts, emphasizing the recurring theme. Soon after arriving as a governess at Mr. Rochester's estate, Thornfield, Jane refers to the mansion as "Bluebeard's castle" (*JE* 91). This reference is later echoed in *Villette* when M. Paul accuses Lucy of writing him off as a "species of tyrant and Bluebeard" (*V* 137). As Heta Pyrhönen points out, Brontë establishes what she terms the "Bluebeard Gothic à la Brontë" with *Jane Eyre*, but Pyrhönen fails to explore the development of this trope in *Villette* (19). *Villette* rejects *Jane Eyre*'s conventional ending, offering a different interpretation of the paranoid woman's quest for forbidden knowledge. Unlike the conclusion of *Jane Eyre*, in which Mr. Rochester's mad wife, Bertha is erased from the narrative, the end of *Villette* forces the reader to confront the unknowable and unrepresentable through Lucy's self-narration.

Jane Eyre sets the tone for Brontë's contribution to the Bluebeard tale cycle. Told through the first person narration of a self-proclaimed "strange little figure," the novel follows Jane through her entrance into many rooms and her wonder at the mysteries inside (*JE* 11). From the beginning of the novel, Jane encounters elements of the Bluebeard tale. While reflecting on her cousin, John Reed, Jane thinks, "I really saw in him a tyrant: a murderer" (9). As a "tyrant" and a "murderer," John Reed is the first person in the novel to take on the

Bluebeard persona. When John catches the young Jane reading in the window-seat, he accuses her of a transgressive curiosity: “You have no business to take our books [...] Now, I’ll teach you to rummage my book-shelves: for they *are* mine” (9). He assumes the position of master of the house, and as such, feels justified in “teach[ing]” her not to rummage through *his* book-shelves. In doing so, he also defines the act of reading—and so, the act of acquiring knowledge—as forbidden endeavors for Jane. When John attacks her, her wild act of self-defense wins her the label of “mad cat” and the punishment of being locked up in the red-room (9). The red-room recalls Bluebeard’s bloody chamber, and the novel further emphasizes the association by establishing the red-room as the chamber where the “mad cat” is kept after an intellectual transgression. In the red-room, Jane confides that Mrs. Reed keeps a “certain secret drawer” there where she stores a miniature of Jane’s uncle, the deceased Mr. Reed, whose death Jane reveals as the “secret of the red-room” (11). Pyrhönen argues that the red-room serves as “an elucidation of the genealogy of Bluebeard’s chamber,” stressing that this opening scene is only the beginning of the Bluebeard motif that continues to develop over the course of the novel (29). John and the red-room establish the Bluebeard framework, including the presence of the Bluebeard figure, the bloody chamber, and the deathly presence within it.

Even the novel itself serves as a chamber, and as such, contains a secret within it. This secret takes form as a kernel of unknowledge—that is, as Bertha, Mr. Rochester’s mad wife whom he keeps locked up in the attic. When Mr. Rochester finally brings Jane to the attic, she is unable to describe the madwoman:

In the deep shade, at the further end of the room, a figure ran backwards and forwards. What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell [...] a quantity of dark, grizzled hair, wild as a mane, hid its head and face. (*JE* 250)

Jane finds that she cannot see, and therefore know, the madwoman in the attic. Bertha's face is concealed, and the atmosphere is one of obscurity with the emphasis on the "deep shade" and Bertha's "dark" hair. Jane robs Bertha of her humanity—she claims that the "figure" before her might be either "beast" or "human," but she consistently refers to Bertha as "it," suggesting the former. As Jane continues to watch Bertha's animal behavior of "grovel[ing]," "snatch[ing]," and "growl[ing]," she refrains from giving any further commentary on Bertha's appearance (250). Jane meets with nothing when she looks at Bertha—she is beyond language. Jane admits, "I recognised well that purple face—those bloated features," but still lacks the ability to give the reader any other additional details (250). This "bloated" face emphasizes Bertha as an embodiment of excess, but she remains an excess of nothingness. In withholding information from the reader—and making the reader conscious of this withholding—Jane underlines her refusal to know Bertha. This refusal to describe Bertha manifests itself in the 1944 film version of *Jane Eyre*. According to Mary Ann Doane, the film demonstrates that "the place where meaning collapses is the space assigned to the madwoman [...] The madwoman is never shown—she is unrepresentable [...] So when the woman in filmic narrative confronts the nonobject of her own fear, what she confronts is herself" (141). The film reduces Bertha to a black screen—there is nothing in the text to base a visual representation on.

Jane also refuses to know herself as a mirror image of Bertha. As the current wife of Mr. Rochester, Bertha holds the place that Jane Eyre aspires to hold, and as such embodies Jane's secret desires. Jane, as the former "mad cat" locked up in the red-room, also acts as an earlier version of Bertha (*JE* 9). Using these parallels, the novel sets up the two women as doubles of each other. Before Jane and Mr. Rochester's first attempted marriage, Bertha comes into Jane's room, puts on Jane's wedding veil, and "turn[s] to the mirror" (242). At that moment, Jane

identifies with Bertha through seeing Bertha's reflection in the mirror. In recounting the event, Jane can only describe her reaction to Bertha's face, not the distinct features. She relates to Mr. Rochester that Bertha's face was "[f]earful," "ghastly," and "savage," but in identifying with Bertha, these words also describe the emotions she feels in seeing an unrecognized part of herself (242). After gazing at her reflection in the mirror, Bertha violently tears the veil "in two parts, and flinging both on the floor, trample[s] on them" (242). The doubling creates a violent tension between the two women, in which both desire to destroy the other. As they both wish to wear the veil as Mr. Rochester's bride—a place that according to the law of society can only be possessed by one of them—the novel suggests that the two cannot continue to exist together. As Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar point out, Bertha is Jane's "secret self" (348). In passing up the opportunity to find out the "secret," however, Jane also refuses to acknowledge her "self" in Bertha.

Instead of ever really knowing, Jane pushes the knowledge she accesses (or fails to access) further beneath her narration. The novel seeks to cover up what Jane doesn't know through marriage. Jane joins her body with that of Mr. Rochester, effectively silencing the words and actions of her body and mind. Jane's marriage to Mr. Rochester subdues her and she unreservedly blends the boundaries of her body with her husband's: "No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am; ever more absolutely bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh" (*JE* 384). In this way, Mr. Rochester uses marriage to add her to the bloody chamber—he subsumes her body. He violently takes Jane's very "flesh" and "bone" for his own. Acquiring forbidden knowledge, then, fails to prevent Jane from entering into the dangerous sphere of marriage. Despite already knowing the contents of the room—the mad Bertha stowed away in the attic—Jane chooses to marry "Bluebeard," radically changing the end of the original tale.

The novel redeems the Bluebeard figure, Mr. Rochester, even though he remains guilty of earlier crimes. After viewing the ruins of Thornfield, Jane goes to an inn where the host informs her of Mr. Rochester's fate, and of how Mr. Rochester's "own courage" and "kindness" led to personal injury (*JE* 365). The novel absolves Mr. Rochester of his past transgressions for his attempt to rescue Bertha from the burning ruin of Thornfield—an act that blinds and maims him. As Pyrhönen points out, the Bluebeard Gothic traditionally ends "either by ascribing evilness to the master of the house (a decent man then rescues the girl), or by proving the master's innocence and assigning guilt elsewhere (the girl then marries the master)" (47). Mr. Rochester conflictingly remains guilty—he attempted to step outside the restrictions of the law and betray Jane into a bigamous marriage—but Jane marries him anyway once there no longer exists an obstacle to entering into a lawful marriage.

The Bluebeard folk tale functions as a hinge between *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*, setting up many similarities between the two novels. As shown in earlier sections, secret drawers and chambers appear throughout the novel, many of them containing knowledge in the same way that the red-room or the attic does in *Jane Eyre*. As two Bluebeard texts, *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* fittingly reflect each other, serving as the bookends of Brontë's four published novels (*Jane Eyre* being the first published in her lifetime and *Villette* the last). In both novels, a strange, small woman pursuing a pedagogical career serves as the first-person narrator. Jane and Lucy parallel each other in their orphaned statuses, and as such they both find themselves living alone in the homes of others, continually seeking a place to call their own. They also share a similar narrative voice—one characterized by passionate outbursts. Lucy for instance describes to Dr. John the flood of emotion she experienced before collapsing in the street: "a cruel sense of desolation pained my mind: a feeling that would make its way, rush out, or kill me—like [...] the

current which passes through the heart, and which, if aneurism or any other morbid cause obstructs its natural channels, impetuously seeks abnormal outlet” (*V* 185). Jane, too, experiences strong feelings beyond her control, and both women feel some things so powerfully that it could “kill” them. These “abnormal” emotions find their outlet in Lucy and Jane’s narrative voices.

Villette, however, offers a different interpretation of the Bluebeard tale. The later novel refuses to allow the Bluebeard character to get off so easily—even though he is guilty of much less. M. Paul’s first fiancée, Justine Marie, also died while locked up in a cell, but in a cell of her choosing. Justine Marie’s grandmother forbade her to marry the impoverished M. Paul, and unable to denounce him in favor of a wealthier suitor, Justine Marie joined a convent and died there in her noviciate. After her death, her family fell into ruin, and years afterwards M. Paul continues to support the sole surviving member—the “strange, loveless, misanthrope grandmother” (*V* 393). M. Paul, then, falls into the category of the innocent Bluebeard, although it remains unclear to where or to whom guilt should be relocated. Even more paradoxically, the unfortunate end that justifiably should have been reserved for Mr. Rochester falls to M. Paul instead. Gilbert and Gubar describe M. Paul’s fate in the end of *Villette* as “ambiguous,” but Lucy strongly implies that M. Paul perishes in a shipwreck (438). Ultimately, however, the reader cannot know M. Paul’s fate:

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 them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (*V* 496)

Lucy gives her reader a choice in what to believe, but she also makes it clear that while the reader can reside in “sunny imaginations” undisturbed, she will be left in “agony” waiting for a

hopeless return. She claims to cut off her narration so that the reader will never know the truth of M. Paul's fate, but at the same time suggests the ultimate unknowability of his end.

Lucy noticeably escapes Jane's fate, and it is M. Paul who joins the lot of Bluebeard's wives. As *Villette* acknowledges, marriage is another form of the "palliatives" Lucy despises that would effectively stifle her mind and body (*V* 447). Instead of fusing her body with M. Paul's through marriage, Lucy's body remains unequivocally her own while the novel spells out M. Paul's doom with a "bloody" sky, signifying the tempest that suggests M. Paul's destruction (*V* 495). The novel adds M. Paul to its own "bloody" chamber of secrets, and his fate remains among those things that Lucy does not want to know, but which she also does not attempt to erase. Like with the Nun, who turns out to be a void, Lucy does not attempt to fill in the unknowable, but allows it to remain. In this way, *Villette* finds that there are certain limits to knowledge, but unlike *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* makes room for the unknowable rather than attempting to expunge it.

While the two novels mirror each other, this reflection is a distorted one. Where *Jane Eyre* conforms, *Villette* refuses to do so, producing a reluctant doubling of the earlier novel. Some aspects of the novels are even glaringly opposed, marking Brontë's evolution as an author from her earlier to later work. Pyrhönen paraphrases Angela Carter's introduction to the Virago Modern Classics edition of *Jane Eyre* by saying that "Carter thinks that the author was unable to sustain her passionate vision" (19). *Villette* "sustains" where *Jane Eyre* does not—Lucy retains her individual voice and body at the end of the novel. Both novels encapsulate an encounter with the limits of knowledge and then deal with this event in different ways—*Jane Eyre* attempts to displace the unrepresentable within it, while *Villette*'s ending comes to terms with the unknowable. Jane's narration effaces Bertha's presence, allowing her to take Bertha's place.

Lucy, however, does not fill the blank space left by the unveiling of the Nun figure and M. Paul's fate—her narration embraces it.

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Conclusion:

The Way In

When Lucy meets Ginevra Fanshawe for the first time, the beautiful young woman proudly declares to Lucy that she is “an ignoramus” (V 54). Ginevra continues, “I know nothing—nothing in the world—I assure you (54). Despite “star[ing]” hard at Lucy, Ginevra is unable to penetrate Lucy’s exterior, and instead prattles on about herself (54). Lucy, however, does not claim nor value ignorance—unlike Ginevra, she takes offence at the thought of being written off as an “ignoramus” by M. Paul (355). She does not pretend to know things completely, but she does claim to possess “a knowledge of [her] own” (355). Lucy’s paranoia allows her to go deeper than Ginevra’s proudly limited perception—Lucy senses forbidden knowledge in her hysteria, and then transitions into a paranoid state to *know* it. In this way, paranoia becomes a form of sight for Lucy, in which she is finally able to see completely and know things previously withheld from her. The novel therefore sets the highly feminized, exhibitionist Ginevra against the more androgynous or masculine characters such as Lucy, Madame Beck, and M. Paul who all at some time possess the gaze. Mary Ann Doane affirms that the figure of the paranoid woman is conventionally viewed as “impotent in terms of the actual ability to uncover the secret or attain the knowledge which she desires,” yet in *Villette* this is not the case (135). The novel asserts paranoia as the means to obtaining the power of the gaze, and in doing so vindicates the typically negative and feminine disorder by making it a way *into* the masculine gaze.

Like Ginevra, however, Lucy too must come to accept her ignorance in some cases as *Villette* eventually makes room for unknowledge in the text. Most notably, this unknowledge manifests itself in the Nun figure, which continues to reside as a blank placeholder in *Villette*. The ending of *Villette* is a radical evolution from that of *Jane Eyre*, in which the Nun’s

unknowable twin, Bertha, is evacuated from the text. Both the Nun and Bertha emerge from the bloody chambers—the wombs—of their respective texts. Since, in contrast to *Jane Eyre*, *Villette* chooses not to efface the womb and the contents of the womb, the novel etymologically links itself to the nervous disorder hysteria. In doing so, *Villette* establishes itself as an indisputably hysterical novel that contains forbidden knowledge within its “chamber of torture” (V 183).

Unlike Bluebeard’s young wife, who, once finding her way into the bloody chamber immediately seeks a way out, Lucy realizes that staying inside the chamber is the best means of continuing to obtain forbidden knowledge. By actively investigating the contents of the chamber—that is, by assuming a paranoid state—Lucy chooses to know or come to terms with the things that Jane would rather wipe out. The reader, too, must find a way into the novel’s “chamber of torture” to discover the knowledge, or unknowledge, within—and the figure of the paranoid woman provides the key.

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