

DESPOTIC MIRTH:

**Laughter, Gender and Power in
the Novels of Charlotte Brontë**

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Abstract

This thesis contends that while Charlotte Brontë's novels are not typically associated with humour, they are nonetheless centrally concerned with the politics of laughter. I investigate Brontë's serious and sustained use of laughter imagery to challenge cultural constructions of femininity and subvert the gendering of rationality and emotion. In doing so I highlight how laughter's capacity to tyrannise or marginalise underpins her disquiet about men's abuse of power, and shapes her concern with the experience of the social outsider. Situating historical theories of humour and satire alongside those of physiognomy, physiology and mental health, my research revises current ideas both about the significance of laughter in the nineteenth-century imagination and about Brontë's methods of characterisation. While showing how laughter features as a source of oppression throughout her writing, I also argue that she makes radically apparent its expressive power, deploying laughing and smiling faces to dispute or destabilise constraining gender ideals. Chapter One attends to cultural context circa 1830-60, providing analysis of laughter in periodicals, in philosophy and in pseudo/scientific thought, and discussing Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray in particular detail, in order to position Brontë in relation to these influential writers. Chapter Two traces the transition from despotic to empowering laughter between Brontë's early writings and *Jane Eyre*, Chapter Three examines the psychology of facial expression in *The Professor*, and Chapter Four locates Brontë's ultimate rejection of contemporary norms and expectations in the changing face of laughter between *Shirley* and *Villette*. I conclude by considering the wider cultural significance of Brontë's marked ambivalence towards laughter at a time when, despite our conventional impression of the Victorian era as earnest and unamused, attitudes to laughter were emphatically celebratory rather than sceptical.

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Introduction

While gender and power have long been recognised as prominent concerns for Charlotte Brontë (1816-55), the importance of *laughter* in her novels may, at first, seem rather more unlikely. Yet not only is laughter present in these novels – recurring so constantly and so vividly that it is astonishing it has escaped critical notice – but it is absolutely central to her treatment of more familiar themes. This thesis investigates nineteenth-century representations of laughter and argues that they carried considerable ideological weight, providing Brontë with the imagery through which she confronts dominant assumptions about gender. Laughter’s capacity to tyrannise or marginalise underpins Brontë’s disquiet about men’s abuse of power, and shapes her concern with the experience of the social outsider. At the same time, through her depiction of laughter as strategic behaviour – as a form of power which her characters employ in the interests of self-defence or assertion – she dramatises their response to oppression and isolation while challenging conventional notions of normal and deviant femininity. As both an oppressive and an expressive force, emerging alternately as a method of social control and as defiant self-determination, laughter is far more than simply an overlooked motif; attention to its role demands revision of well-established Foucauldian readings of power, selfhood and the language of the body in Brontë’s writing. This thesis demonstrates that the gendered politics of looking and being looked at – an engrained concern of Brontë scholarship¹ – are intensified but also significantly disrupted by the no-less pervasive dynamics of laughing and being laughed at.

¹ This is particularly true of *Villette*, in which, as Jill L. Matus writes, ‘references to the gaze, glance, the exchange of looks, shafts of the eye, observations, and sight abound.’ See Matus, *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), p. 132. The most rigorous and important analysis of Brontë’s rendering of subjectivity, the body and the gaze has been undertaken by Sally Shuttleworth in *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), which I will turn to presently.

These underlying dynamics have gone unrecognised, I would suggest, because of the critical tendency to study laughter in close connection with comedy and comic writers, or to treat it as synonymous with humour. As Robin Jones remarks, ‘the association of laughter with Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* seems an incongruous endeavour at first. Readers do not respond with hilarity to the novel.’² However, while Brontë’s reputation for humourlessness is certainly unjustified (Regina Barreca has demonstrated that her writing is ‘laced with unsettling and powerful uses of humor’) this thesis is not concerned with her subversive witticisms, nor her ability to raise hilarity – instead, I attend to the thematic importance of the laughter and smiles that appear throughout her writing.³ The embittered observation of Lucy Snowe, watching from the sidelines towards the end of *Villette*, that the laughing Paul Emanuel is ‘a little despotic perhaps, determined to be chief in mirth ... proving indisputably his right of leadership,’ captures the ambivalence with which Brontë represents laughter – ‘joyous’

² Robin Jones, ‘The Goblin Ha-ha: Hidden Smiles and Open Laughter in *Jane Eyre*’, in *New Perspectives on Women and Comedy*, ed. by Regina Barreca (Philadelphia: Gordon and Breach, 1992), pp. 201-12. Jones’s essay is an exception to the lack of acknowledgement of laughter as a theme in Brontë’s fiction. It offers some useful insights, which I shall discuss in Chapter Two, but her approach to laughter is largely ahistorical. She loosely connects it with humour and describes its capacity to reveal or challenge patriarchal expectations in abstract terms, rather than crediting authorial intent.

³ Regina Barreca, *Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in British Literature* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994), p. 61. Brontë was judged humourless by Leslie Stephen, for instance, who opines that ‘Miss Brontë has as little sense of humour as Milton or Wordsworth’; she ‘is always in deadly earnest.’ [Stephen], ‘Hours in a Library’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 36 (1877) 723-39 (p. 730). Such claims have often been disputed, however. Apart from Barreca, critics to have commented on the humorous side of Brontë’s fiction include (to name just a few) Janis McLarren Caldwell, who discusses her comic deployment of phrenological language in *Literature and Medicine in Nineteenth-Century Britain: from Mary Shelley to George Eliot* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 108-10. Kate Millett describes *Villette* as ‘one of the wittier novels in English and one of the rare witty books in an age which specialized in sentimental comedy’, *Sexual Politics* (Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 1969; repr. 2000), p. 147. For Judith Williams, Brontë’s novels illustrate the power of humour to combat tyranny or to ‘defeat dangerous illusion.’ See *Perception and Expression in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1988), pp. 24-5, 117-8. And in ‘Charlotte Brontë’s “New” Gothic’ (1958), Robert B. Heilman analysed her ‘humorous modifications’ to the Gothic genre – her ‘introduction of comedy as a palliative to straight Gothic.’ See *The Nineteenth-Century Novel: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Stephen Regan (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 212-5 (pp. 12, 15).

behaviour typically has an aggressive edge, and produces feelings of pain or anxiety.⁴ Though her protagonists turn increasingly to laughter as a means of registering protest or articulating dissent, it more frequently figures as a source of fear and dread, or of distaste and annoyance. To make sense, however, of the uneasiness with which Brontë probes the psychology – and the physiognomy – of laughter, it must be read not in isolation but against a background of broad *enthusiasm* for mirth and merriment.

This may seem a surprising claim to make, since the perception of unsmiling Victorians is a persistent one (Merle Tönnies describes ‘an age that is popularly understood today as the quintessence of stiff upper-lip austerity’, while Jennifer Wagner-Lawlor evokes ‘the general image of the Victorian period as morbid and dour’).⁵ The history of attitudes to laughter is a deeply revealing one, bound up with the history of attitudes to the body and its relationship with the mind. Yet within the varied contested accounts of how social and philosophical ideas about laughter have changed through history, there remains scant acknowledgment of the celebration and moral endorsement of impulsive, full-bodied laughter which prevailed in the first half of the nineteenth century, in stark contrast to the more negative sentiments that emerged later. Thus, in contextualising Brontë’s objections to laughter this thesis will also fill a historiographical gap.⁶ In Chapter One, I argue that early Victorian discourse (over a

⁴ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 466.

⁵ Merle Tönnies, ‘Laughter in Nineteenth-Century British Theatre: From Genial Blending to Harsh Distinctions’, in *A History of English Laughter: Laughter from Beowulf to Beckett and Beyond*, ed. by Manfred Pfister (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 99-119 (p. 99). ‘Introduction’, *The Victorian Comic Spirit: New Perspectives*, ed. by Wagner-Lawlor (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000), pp. xiii-xx (p. xiii). Both critics evoke these stereotypes to dispute them – Wagner-Lawlor by way of introduction to a book about comedy in the period; Tönnies in a discussion of laughter at the theatre.

⁶ As Manfred Pfister writes: ‘The history of laughter is the history of [the] norms circumscribing, and giving a social shape to, the anthropological impulse of laughter in a particular society. And these norms change significantly from one period and one society to another.’ Pfister, ‘Introduction’, *A History of English Laughter*, pp. v-x (p. v). In Chapter One, then, I examine the norms circumscribing and shaping laughter in early nineteenth-century society.

period I have very approximately defined as 1830-60) idealizes bodily or ‘open’ laughter while demonising it in its subtler, restrained forms – in clear distinction to more characteristically ‘Victorian’ attempts later in the century to control and contain bodily excess. Common generalisations, such as Jure Gantar’s reference to ‘the highly moralistic Victorian era, when tactless laughter was frowned upon even more so than under the Puritans or during the Enlightenment’, fail to identify this dramatic shift from the advocacy of irrationality and self-abandonment to the advocacy of restraint.⁷ But this is not to say that there was nothing controlling or ‘moralistic’ about the championing of unrestrained laughter, which, I will argue, was conceptualised as morally pure, emotionally healthy and socially acceptable precisely *because* of its ‘openness’, and its roots in body rather than mind.

The bearing of this on the gender ideology of the age is profound, though not immediately apparent. Rather than making a case for an unexpectedly relaxed, funny or fun-loving era, I am concerned with the didactic undertones of the commonplaces that writers typically invoked, which in sanctifying the innocence and naturalness of laughter placed heavy stress on its communal, non-threatening, unthinking qualities while stigmatising laughter which suggested individualism, intelligence or discontent. In its valorisation of heart over head, such rhetoric served to elevate conventional ‘feminine’ characteristics, denigrating anti-social reserve and cynicism generally but more particularly damning these traits in women, whose ‘hearts’ were more emphatically expected to be in the right place, and to be demonstrable through spontaneous, natural laughter. Instead of women’s laughter being uniformly feared and forbidden (Nina Auerbach asserts that ‘a woman who laughed was a woman who went

⁷ Jure Gantar, *The Pleasure of Fools: Essays in the Ethics of Laughter* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2005), p. 60. For the fear and suspicion excited by bodily laughter later in the century, see Mackenzie Bartlett, ‘Laughing to Excess: Gothic Fiction and the Pathologisation of Laughter in Late Victorian Britain’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of London, Birkbeck, 2009).

too far'⁸), censorship took the form of insistence that women *did* laugh, but should laugh nicely – with the importance of uncomplaining cheerfulness being keenly stressed. The widespread assumption that a cheerful mind would keep the body in good health was an optimistic doctrine likely to frustrate anyone who, like Brontë, struggled with both low spirits and poor physical health. As Beth Torgerson explains, 'early Victorian concepts of medicine maintained a direct relation between the physiological and the psychological ... increased or diminished "animal spirits" could affect the whole bodily economy, as could excessive emotions or lack of emotions.' Torgerson notes that 'of the two extremes, the Victorians seemed much more concerned with controlling excessive emotions through their ideal of self-control.'⁹ But my findings suggest an exception to this rule; in respect to laughter there was, earlier in the period, a distinct lack of anxiety about excessive 'animal spirits', and a suspicion of those who *could* exercise self-control. For Brontë the privileging of bodily and emotional health is connected to oppressive constructions of the feminine character, playing into the wider rhetorical devaluation of women's powers of intellect and self-discipline. When her female characters self-identify as morbid or deviant (not through gloomy sobriety but through tabooed sneers and secretive smiles) they are positioning themselves in subversive opposition to an ideal of healthy sociability that exerted particular pressure on women.

Thus, I suggest, there are two senses in which laughter casts a 'despotic' shadow in Brontë's fiction: in its most obviously threatening form, it encapsulates masculine

⁸ Nina Auerbach, *Romantic Imprisonment: Women and Other Glorified Outcasts* (New York: Columbia, 1985), p. 278. Again, it is comedy rather than laughter per se that Auerbach is suggesting 'was more radically tabooed in Victorian women than sexuality was', it being 'too early' to 'laugh at powerful men', but the image of glum earnestness that she draws on (she gives both Brontë and Victoria herself as representative 'sternly serious' women) is misleading, given the disapproval of such rigidly unamused faces which held sway earlier in the era.

⁹ Beth E. Torgerson, *Reading the Brontë Body: Disease, Desire and the Constraints of Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 11, 141 (n.11).

self-control, knowledge and aggressive power; less obviously, laughter that is seemingly innocent and inclusive is associated with the pressure to conform – by displaying robust health and high spirits, or feminine feeling. (These twin evils may be loosely distinguished under the headings of mockery and mirth – terms I will have recourse to in illustrating the opposition between the two modes of laughter in Brontë’s novels.) In resisting the contemporary naturalisation of cheerfulness and good-hearted merriment, Brontë rejects conventional models of femininity but also raises doubts about the reality underlying representations of benign, non-threatening masculinity. The disapproving stances her characters take towards laughter are complex, inconsistent, and informed by their awareness of both the moral significance and the oppressive social functions of laughter: its role in perpetuating gender stereotypes (on the page) and the imbalance of power between the sexes (in life). Associating it alternately with crushing masculine power and with stifling sentimentality, Brontë does not simply ‘frown’ on laughter; the value she places on mental strength over bodily impulse stems not from transcendent earnestness or prudish decorum but from scepticism regarding the vaunted benignity of laughter, her perception of it as coercive or false.

The Foucauldian implications of my analysis should by now be apparent: on the one hand, the rhetoric of healthy laughter produces ‘docile bodies’, with thoughts and feelings safely checked and exposed to view through laughter.¹⁰ But on the other hand, laughter in Brontë’s fiction can itself perform the act of surveillance, penetrating into the interior states of others; Lucy’s sense that Graham Bretton’s smile brings ‘surging up into the mind all one’s foibles and weak points: all that could lay one open to a laugh’ suggests the power of ‘masculine’ laughter – in much the same way as the male

¹⁰ Michel Foucault’s term in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), trans. by Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 135. The particular aptness of this phrase (docile bodies) to women’s social condition has been explored by, amongst others, Sandra Lee Bartky in ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power’, in *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*, ed. by Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina, and Sarah Stanbury (New York: Columbia, 1997), pp. 129-54.

gaze – to enact exposure, to intimidate and mystify without any obvious show of authority.¹¹ As I will elucidate in Chapter Two, the fear of being ‘laid open to a laugh’ has a powerful effect on the psyche of Brontë’s female characters, whose wariness of laughter results in anxious self-policing. In her early writings, this amounts to diminished self-respect and subjection to male tyranny, but in a marked and fascinating development over the course of the novels Brontë increasingly has her heroines discard the vulnerability attendant on feminine laughter, instead subversively appropriating for themselves the potency of the knowing sneer – in the process moving from ‘healthy’ normality to anti-social deviance.

This reading is of course strongly influenced by Sally Shuttleworth’s authoritative work on Brontë, which draws on the ideas of Foucault and on nineteenth-century psychological thought to explain the power struggles in the novels, which centre ‘on the ability of each partner to read, unseen, the hidden secrets of the other.’ As she summarises:

The nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of a new economy of individual and social life, centred on the regulation of the forces of the body and controlled through surveillance. A new interiorized notion of selfhood arose and, concomitantly, new techniques of power designed to penetrate the inner secrets of this hidden domain. Psychiatry and phrenology emerged as sciences, dedicated to decoding the external signs of the body in order to reveal the concealed inner play of forces which constitute individual subjectivity.¹²

However, the workings of laughter as portrayed by Brontë cannot be neatly accommodated into this picture of ‘interiorized’ selfhood and the interpretive prowess it demanded. In its self-conscious performativity, I argue, laughter’s intervention in social

¹¹ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 96.

¹² Shuttleworth, p. 3.

exchanges disrupts the subject/object relationship, turning our attention from the process of reading the (passive) body to the act of expressive performance – or, in its pointed display or externalisation of ‘inner secrets’, from the importance of self-protection to the importance of self-*projection*. My thesis will demonstrate Brontë’s interest in the ways that laughter can be used to deliberately make visible and impress ‘individual subjectivity’ on others, thereby wreaking havoc with notions of stable, essential identities and collapsing the distinction between (male) despots and (female) victims. In Chapter Three I explore this via a paradigmatic shift: from physiognomy (the study of fixed features) to pathognomy (the study of expressions).¹³

Certainly, Brontë’s preoccupation with the appearances of laughter must be read in the context of the nineteenth-century craze for, as Shuttleworth puts it, ‘decoding the external signs of the body.’ As Thomas Carlyle exclaimed, ‘How much lies in Laughter: the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man!’¹⁴ As I have outlined, laughter in this period was held to be revealing of human character and moral worth, but Brontë’s close attention to laughing faces highlights that this was an interpretive endeavour which rested on the details of facial expression as well as on laughter’s broader connotations in the nineteenth-century literary imagination. Brontë’s deployment of phrenological and physiognomical ideas has been discussed in detail by Shuttleworth amongst others, but the related practice of ‘pathognomy’ has been largely neglected or subsumed beneath the umbrella of physiognomy, so that it is an obscure term not only as applied to Brontë but in literary criticism more widely. Yet, I suggest, it invites a focus on the depiction of mobile rather than static appearances which throws new light on the power dynamics in Brontë’s novels, revitalising the behaviour of her

¹³ Detailed explanations of these different terms, their historical background and their significance in nineteenth-century literature will be given in Chapter Three.

¹⁴ Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus* (originally serialised in *Fraser’s Magazine*, 1833-4), ed. by Kerry McSweeney and Peter Sabor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 26.

characters and the interactions between them. It is firmly established that for Brontë, as Janis McLarren Caldwell notes, ‘bodies ... are insistently significant, and her narrators and characters are often adept readers of bodily meaning’¹⁵ – but whether critics focus on her interest in phrenology or physiognomy, they are dwelling on the ways in which her characters are ‘adept readers’ (or adept hidings) of bodily meaning, instead of adept performers and manipulators.

However, while in some ways a turn to pathognomy seems to provide the necessary lens through which to ‘decipher’ laughter, a closer look at its aims in nineteenth-century practice soon reveals a crucial point of difference between Brontë’s rendering of expression, and the way in which it is understood by pathognomists. In Charles Bell’s influential *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* (1824), ‘the actions and expressions of the body betray the emotions of the heart’ – they enable man to ‘communicate with his fellow-creatures, by that natural language, which is read in the changes of his countenance.’¹⁶ While Brontë is certainly drawn to the communicative potential of laughter (its ability to convey superiority or defiance) it is not for her a ‘natural language’ expressing ‘the emotions of the heart’, so much as a social and self-conscious language, through which ‘emotions’ are suppressed rather than betrayed. Bell is interested in how ‘uncontrollable states of feeling’ might ‘produce’ a smile by their impact on the muscles, or bring about ‘the condition of a man convulsed with laughter [who] is incapable of a voluntary act.’¹⁷ Charles Darwin, too, was interested in the

¹⁵ Thus, for Caldwell, her interest in bodily appearances is ‘demonstrated by the frequent use of the language of phrenology, in which bumps and indentations of the skull were thought to mark qualities of character.’ See ‘Physical Health’, in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. by Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 335-43 (p. 341). See also Nicholas Dames’s chapter, ‘Amnesiac Bodies: Phrenology, Physiognomy and Memory in Charlotte Brontë’, in *Amnesiac Selves: Nostalgia, Forgetting, and British Fiction, 1810-1870* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 76-124.

¹⁶ Charles Bell, *The Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression as Connected with the Fine Arts* (London: George Bell, 1877), p. 181.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-5.

involuntary workings of laughter, dismissing that which is ‘employed in a forced manner’ to ‘show the offending person that he excites only amusement.’ ‘Real’ laughter for Darwin ‘primarily expresses mere happiness or joy.’¹⁸ For Bell, the language of the expressions is God-given, while for Darwin it had evolved and could be traced to natural instincts, but for both the expressive purpose of laughter is unconscious and unmediated by the mind. Their business is with what Brontë describes in *Villette* as ‘the smile of feeling, rather than of conscious power.’¹⁹ Thus, the art (or science) of pathognomy in nineteenth-century practice was understood ultimately as another means of reading inner states through their bodily manifestations – laughter is (to borrow Carlyle’s term) the ‘cipher-key’ which hands power over to the skilled interpreter while rendering the laugher passive, subject to scrutiny and to the uncontrollable (e)motions of the body.

Brontë’s alternative focus – not on the ways in which the feelings or ‘passions’ act on the body, but on the power of the will to control and direct appearances – is crucial to understanding her conception of mental strength as key not only to subverting power relations, but to subverting gender norms. When her women laugh ‘naturally’, the laugh is soon tainted or undercut – their joy renders them vulnerable to male sarcasm or scorn. But in *Villette*, Paul Emanuel’s ‘smile of pleasure’ transforms his countenance ‘from a mask to a face’, presenting an ‘illuminated sign of milder [and] warmer feeling.’²⁰ Such moments of ‘feminine’ subjection to milder and warmer feelings render Paul transparent, legible, and manageable, thus working to empower Lucy – who is herself prone to self-possessed sneering and sarcasm. Lucy frequently

¹⁸ Charles Darwin, *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton, 1872), p. 212.

¹⁹ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 370.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 321.

‘delegate[s] the trouble of commenting ... to my countenance’; ‘not that it behoved or beseemed me to *say* anything; but one can occasionally *look* the opinion it is forbidden to embody in words’ (by permitting a ‘slightly freer action than usual to the muscles about my eyes and mouth’).²¹ Similarly when Rochester accosts Jane with the demand: ‘It would please me now to draw you out: to learn more of you – therefore speak’, Jane is defiantly silent but not passive: ‘Instead of speaking, I smiled: and not a very complacent or submissive smile either.’²² Slyly subtle as these displays seem, they indicate not ladylike discretion but a controlled demonstration of mysterious knowledge that is usually coded masculine, with Brontë drawing persistent attention not only to the deliberateness with which laughter is used as a replacement for the voicing of subversive or aggressive thoughts, but to its superior effectiveness in conveying them. As I will suggest in Chapter Two, Brontë’s heroines (Jane particularly) are often associated with their passionate outbursts, spontaneous feelings and longing for human contact, but their laughter – in defiance of contemporary idealisations of impulsive, affective mirth – frequently signifies their detachment, their recourse to cool calculation, and their refusal to be ‘drawn out.’

This leaning to art over heart is, moreover, the reason why some of the most frequently cited theories of laughter are of limited usefulness to this study (except where they are historically significant). Theorists and philosophers have typically sought to explain the underlying psychological causes of laughter, approaching it (as Bell and Darwin do) as a natural human instinct or impulse. Freud, for instance, explains laughter in terms of abstract ‘psychical energy’, as a force which demands discharge or

²¹ Brontë, *Villette*, pp. 308, 330 (Brontë’s emphasis).

²² Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 132-3.

release ('Reason – critical judgement – suppression – these are the powers it fights').²³

It is an understanding of laughter which might at first glance seem particularly applicable to Brontë, who, according to Michael Kearns, is attentive to:

the springs of mysterious mental phenomena which are now usually associated with 'unconscious' mental processes ... the importance of sensations felt to be welling up from some subterranean source, the importance of sympathy with the external world, and the importance of feeling connected with other human beings.²⁴

Yet these observations do not hold true of Brontë's interest in laughter. Aside from her scepticism regarding its sympathetic, communal qualities ('the importance of feeling connected with other human beings'), laughter in Brontë's novels is for the most part socially motivated, materialising not from subconscious depths but through self-conscious performance. In this sense, I am concerned with how the psychology and meanings of laughter change when represented in fiction, rather than theory.²⁵

Similarly, since this thesis does not at any point take for granted laughter's anti-patriarchal (or anti-establishment) power, I am cautious of familiar formulations of laughter as an inherently radical force. For instance – as will be discussed in Chapters

²³ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), trans. by Joyce Crick (London: Penguin, 2002), pp. 144, 134. As I will discuss in Chapter One, Freud's Victorian predecessors, Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain, more explicitly rooted laughter in the body in their physiological versions of the 'relief' theory. David Heyd notes that for Spencer and also for Darwin, laughter is 'caused by strong feelings' but is ultimately 'a purposeless movement' – 'the convulsions of the body in the case of laughter have no object [beyond] the mere discharge of surplus energy.' See Heyd, 'The Place of Laughter in Hobbes's Theory of Emotions', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 43 (1982), 285-95 (p. 293).

²⁴ Michael S. Kearns, *Metaphors of Mind in Fiction and Psychology* (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1987), pp. 178, 180.

²⁵ According to Simon Bayly, 'most of the literature on laughter does not in fact deal with laughter at all, but with theories of comedy and humour.' Bayly, *A Pathognomy of Performance* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 180. Alternatively, theorists are often drawn to laughter as a physical phenomenon. Anca Parvulescu, for instance, 'leaves the old question of what makes us laugh behind. Instead, the focus here is the burst of laughter itself.' Parvulescu, *Laughter: Notes on a Passion* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT, 2010), p. 3. This thesis takes a middle way, keeping in view laughter's connections both with humour and with the impulsive 'burst', but without using either comic theory or psychodynamics as a critical framework.

One and Two – Bakhtin’s influential concept of the carnivalesque draws on the image of eruptive, irrational, bodily laughter; Cixous fixed on the mythical image of the laughing Medusa to envisage ‘volcanic’ femininity (‘Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth’).²⁶ Such understandings of laughter are largely inapplicable here because, like her characters, Brontë tends to employ laughter with purposeful intent. It figures in her novels not as an abstract sign of subversive triumph but as the primary means through which power continually changes hands (or rather, faces), being solidly located in the details of minutely dissected day-to-day behaviours. Besides, the celebration of physicality (as apparent in both Bakhtin and Cixous) is precisely what Brontë *resents* – in her valorisation of (in Rochester’s words) ‘that which the brain conceives’ over ‘that which the heart experiences’, she is reacting against a cultural climate which, contrary to what we might expect, was oppressive not in its gloomy severity but in the way it pushed the image of the laughing body to the centre of social life.²⁷

Of course, such an assessment is not unproblematic. The dualism between mind and body, intellect and emotion is obviously a false one, which sidesteps many of the complexities of nineteenth-century psychological thought.²⁸ While I am indebted to Judith Butler’s work on gender and performativity, I evoke ‘the Cartesian distinction between freedom and the body’ that Butler criticises, in my claims for Brontë’s conception of the body as, essentially, a medium or instrument that is subject to the

²⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, Mass.: M.I.T. Press, 1968). Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs*, 1 (1976) 875-93 (pp. 888, 880).

²⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 201.

²⁸ For the dubiousness of the distinction between thought and feeling – and the lack of precision in modern usage of the term ‘emotion’, see Thomas Dixon, *From Passions to Emotions: The Creation of a Psychological Category* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003). See also James R. Averill, ‘Intellectual Emotions’, in *The Emotions: Social, Cultural and Biological Dimensions*, ed. by Rom Harré and W. Gerrod Parrott (London: Sage, 2000), pp. 24-38 (pp. 24-5).

will.²⁹ I maintain these distinctions, and this model of the mind/body relationship, because the polarisation of heart and head in nineteenth-century descriptions of laughter is strongly marked and significant, and because – although her use of psychological language is in many respects sophisticated – Brontë’s writing generally is characterised both by its binary oppositions, and by its faith in willpower. Nonetheless I do, especially in Chapter Four, address the ways in which her novels work to break down the dichotomies that they otherwise uphold.

Furthermore, by locating Brontë’s subversive tendencies in her gestures towards the anti-social and the anti-emotional, this thesis in places runs contrary to the trends of the ‘affective turn’ in literary criticism – particularly, perhaps, in my identification of Dickens (in Chapter One) as central to the sentimentalising of hearty merriment that Brontë viewed with such scepticism. In explaining this scepticism, I position Brontë to an extent within the high Romantic realm of ‘internalized, intellectualized, and individualistic emotional response’, which, as Juliet John has argued, is opposed to the ‘principles of communality and cultural inclusivity’ that have traditionally been sidelined or devalued by critics.³⁰ And yet, the edgy, unsettling, even perverse smiles cultivated by Brontë’s unconventional protagonists cannot be simply dismissed as symptoms either of snobbery or of introspection. In situating these shows of ‘intellectualized’ feeling within their cultural context, I mean to demonstrate the ways in

²⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990), pp. 16, 12. Butler justly disputes theoretical understandings of the body as either ‘a passive medium on which cultural meanings are inscribed’, or as ‘the instrument through which an appropriative and interpretive will determines a cultural meaning for itself’ (p. 12). However, my analysis is influenced by Brontë’s fierce notions about the potency of the will – her characters’ treatment of the body as an ‘instrument’ precisely in this latter sense – and accordingly I follow her own use of mind/body language, at the risk of simplifications. I am concerned with the deliberate *use* of the body as, in Torgerson’s words (p. 5) a ‘bridge between the “self” and the “social world”... a battleground for ideological conflicts’, rather than following more typical understandings of the body as an implicitly passive carrier of signs, a site upon which ideological meanings are impressed.

³⁰ Juliet John, *Dickens’s Villains: Melodrama, Character, Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 14, 3.

which contemporary representations of laughter did largely rest on a head/heart dichotomy which crystallized the familiar demarcation between (masculine) transcendent rationality and (feminine) embodied emotion, giving strong symbolic shape to Brontë's perception of the literal, habitual means by which men asserted power over women. In other words, Brontë subverts on both a literal and a symbolic level the 'theories of gender division' identified by Shuttleworth which 'contrasted male self-control with female subjection to the forces of the body' – at stake in laughter is no less than the choice between 'mental control' and 'physiological instability.'³¹ Moreover, in tracing her concern with laughter's strategic power, I will be illustrating Brontë's conception of it as a manoeuvre which – rather than expressing private, Romantic depths – plays an active role in the processes of self-invention and social interaction.

*

Chapter One is in two parts, laying the contextual groundwork for my reading of Brontë's novels. The first gives an overview of theories and philosophies of laughter, highlighting the resounding firmness of early- to mid-nineteenth-century opinion on the side of positive rather than negative traditional views, then relating this pro-laughter consensus to the gender ideology and the literary mores of the age. In the second part I focus on Brontë's contemporaries Charles Dickens (1812-1870) and William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-1863), demonstrating that their (more obviously humorous) fiction both shaped and responded to debates about laughter, and clarifying Brontë's misgivings (implicit as regards Dickens, but explicitly applied to Thackeray) about the two poles of mirth and mockery that these writers represent. In Chapter Two I explore Brontë's attempts to subvert the politics of (female) mirth and (male) mockery in *Jane Eyre* (1847), through a series of role reversals that contrast with the more

³¹ Shuttleworth, p. 4.

convention-bound representations of laughter in her earlier writings. In doing so, I chart a transition in her writing from Romanticism to realism, and from male dominance to female defiance, via an elucidation of laughter's relationship with power. This will prepare the ground for my discussion in Chapter Three of *The Professor* (1857), Brontë's first-written but posthumously published novel. Though comedy is not the subject of this thesis, in this chapter I highlight how Brontë's humorous treatment of her Professor leads to a sophisticated analysis of his touchiness about being laughed at – and his resultant need to turn this mockery back on his tormenters. Overturning established analyses of this novel as being primarily about the protagonist's interpretive, physiognomical skills, I identify him instead as an active player whose masculine power is established through the expressive face, as well as the steely gaze.

In Chapter Four, I argue that *Shirley* (1849) reveals a crisis in Brontë's attempts to conform to the cultural endorsement of mirth (and its correspondent valorisation of conventional femininity), as the laughter of her heroines is gradually undermined by masculine mockery. However in *Villette* (1853), mocking laughter is the protagonist's most powerful tool, and the author's most profound critique of her society's norms and expectations. In this final chapter, then, I address the extent to which there is resolution of the conflict in Brontë's writing – between the moral impetus to purify and humanise laughter (an impetus which peaks in *Shirley*) and the deep suspicion of, and alienation from, moral laughter as it was conventionally upheld (as is crystallized in *Villette*). In my conclusion, I revisit the oppressive cultural climate detailed in Chapter One and reflect on the historical significance of the challenges that Brontë raises. But I also consider the wider value of an approach to laughter that takes it so very seriously, proposing that – insofar as it permeates everyday behaviour and conversation – laughter retains its underestimated potential both to oppress and to express, beyond its manifestation in the faces of nineteenth-century fiction.

Chapter One

‘Merry Hearts’ and ‘Soured Minds’: Laughter in Literary Culture, 1830-60

Introduction

In a recent book on ‘Dickensian laughter’, Malcolm Andrews asserts that ‘ringing laughter is an act of defiance to those ... whose puritanical or genteel habits have suppressed open enjoyment ... Laughter is an anarchic force, physiologically as well as culturally, [which] battles with the forces of repression.’¹ Such claims about laughter’s uplifting, rebellious qualities are widespread in modern times, alongside related ideas about the particular properties of women’s laughter, and its ability to take on the ‘forces of repression.’ Thus, the ‘unsolicited laughter of women spells trouble to those in power’, writes Regina Barreca; it is ‘anarchic and apocalyptic.’² Laughter may be buoyantly joyful or wildly bitter, but in either case it tends to be characterised as a force to be reckoned with, a grand, bold and affirmative act. Surely, then, it is all the more to be celebrated when it breaks loose from the confines of the Victorian period, with its strict ideas about propriety and order?³

In fact, despite the general enthusiasm for ringing, transcendent laughter, this thesis will not be in the typical celebratory strain – primarily because early Victorian writers (the men ‘in power’) were themselves keen *not* to repress laughter, but to

¹ Malcolm Andrews, *Dickensian Laughter: Essays on Dickens and Humour* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 139.

² Barreca, p. 22. Similarly, Rosi Braidotti describes ‘joy and laughter’ as ‘profound political emotions and statements. [Feminism] would do well to remember the subversive force of Dionysian laughter.’ See Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), p. 167.

³ I allude here to popular conceptions of the period – to (in the words of Howard Mumford Jones) the ‘Victorian stuffiness, Victorian decorum, Victorian prudery, Victorian solemnity!’ that remain familiar stereotypes. See Jones, ‘The Comic Spirit and Victorian Sanity’, in *The Reinterpretation of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Joseph E. Baker (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), pp. 20-32 (p. 21). According to Andrews (p. 129), ‘the Victorian reserve about giving way to hearty laughter ... has been attributed variously to the puritanical strain in the culture of its middle classes, to its concern with earnestness and emotional self-discipline ... and to the residue of eighteenth-century polite etiquette.’

encourage its free expression. While later intellectuals showed a suspicion of laughter more in keeping with stereotypical traits of earnestness and prudery, Brontë's novels fall into a period of nineteenth-century history (circa 1830-60) which, I argue in this chapter, resolutely trumpeted the merits of unsophisticated, eruptive, corporeal laughter; pre- and early-Victorian sentiments were far removed from the later ideal of the stiff upper lip. It is important to recognise that in this distinct cultural climate, the norms and ideals against which Brontë contends are not oppressive in the ways that might be expected – power, as perceived and resisted by Brontë, does not always take a stern, authoritarian form. Thus, while the laughter that takes shape in her novels can absolutely be defiant, challenging and subversive, it had no reason to be *affirmative*, spirited or even radical in the way that, in accordance with popular clichés about the nature of laughter, modern readers (and critics) might prefer.

More precisely, the laughter that Brontë eschews, but which was otherwise viewed in this period with complacency, is that which loudly proclaims its origins in the body – just the sort that is most often upheld as liberating or subversive. The connection Andrews makes between physiological and cultural anarchy derives from Bakhtin, who influentially divided medieval culture into two extremes: the ‘official’, ecclesiastic culture, which he characterised as rigid and repressive, thoroughly serious and unlaughing; and pitted against this the Carnival, or popular culture, ringing with boisterous laughter and all that the official culture sought to suppress.⁴ According to this model the body and its eruptions (notably the ‘belly laugh’) are synonymous with rebellion and revolt, and subject to control by the socially powerful. Manfred Pfister, for instance, claims that:

⁴ Bakhtin, pp. 6, 19, 20, 75.

Sex and laughter are, of course, related to each other ... They are both closely linked to our corporeal nature, in particular to the 'lower bodily stratum' [Bakhtin's phrase]. In the course of history, sex and laughter have frequently found themselves in direct opposition to, and therefore repressed by, dominant notions of what is pure, sublime and sacred.⁵

Claims like this, however, fail to take into account the ways in which bodily laughter has been sanctified, celebrated and recommended throughout history quite as much as it has been frowned upon – often to the point where it becomes meaningless to talk of its taboo-busting or revolutionary nature. The assumption that laughter has traditionally been forbidden is further apparent in the summary offered by Ingvild Saelid Gilhus:

In the philosophical discourse on laughter in the seventeenth to the nineteenth century, humour and laughter were repeatedly criticised for their hostility, irrationality, and irresponsibility ... Theories of laughter became generally critical and restrictive ... the eruptive sides of bodily life were not revealed in public, and uncontrolled outbursts of laughter were condemned as vulgar ... Because the body in Western culture was degraded in relation to the soul, laughter with its anchorage in the body was also devalued against superior reason ... In the twentieth century, however, there has been a fundamental reassessment of laughter ... theories of humour in the twentieth century are almost uniformly positive in their evaluation of laughter, regarding it as a means to make human beings whole and in harmony with their bodies and with society.⁶

But the 'positive' evaluation that Gilhus claims for the twentieth century describes exactly the consensus held at the time that Brontë was writing; 'uncontrolled outbursts'

⁵ Pfister, p. vi.

⁶ Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, *Laughing Gods, Weeping Virgins: Laughter in the History of Religion* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 3, 107. Similarly, John Morreall (whose outlook exemplifies positive modern attitudes towards laughter/humour) asserts that 'with all the ways in which laughter and humour involve the loss of self-control and the breaking of social rules, it's not surprising that most societies have been suspicious of them and have often rejected them.' See Morreall, *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), p. 4.

– laughter ‘with its anchorage in the body’ – was no more disapproved of than it is today, but rather was considered a guarantee of ‘wholeness’ and social harmony.

In order to make sense of Brontë’s resistance to the cheerfulness that predominated, it will be necessary to explore the brightly positive understandings of laughter that were in circulation, since they remain current and, appearing innocuous enough, may seem an unlikely source of provocation.⁷ While the following chapters focus on concrete (that is, physiognomically grounded) laughter and its psychological motivations, this chapter attends to the idea of laughter in a broader cultural and philosophical sense, examining its ties with humour, satire and wit, as well as with scientific and traditional theories, in order to demonstrate the ideological weight carried by literary representations of laughter. In tracing the development of popular ideas on the subject, I demonstrate how polarised ‘types’ of laughter were equated both with literary forms and with ‘types’ of personality, revealing much about an individual’s (or a writer’s) sociable or anti-social, healthy or morbid tendencies. In Part One I review how the construct of ‘hearty’ or bodily laughter came to be revered in the first half of the century (in sharp contrast to later Victorian views), arguing that it was discursively used to shame or shut down expressions of social discontent, which were pejoratively tied to non-hearty laughter. I conclude by suggesting how, unlikely as it may seem, this

⁷ The ‘fundamental reassessment’ in favour of laughter that Gilhus applauds has for a few critics been cause for cynicism. According to Indira Ghose, ‘We have moved from a [early modern] society where certain forms of laughter were proscribed to a society where laughter is proscribed.’ See Ghose, *Shakespeare and Laughter: A Cultural History* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008), p. 163. Although, as I will argue, ‘certain forms of laughter’ (those perceived as anti-social) *were* still proscribed by early Victorian writers, nonetheless there is a resemblance between their enthusiasm and that which would take hold again in the twentieth century. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno notoriously complained that laughter ‘echoes the inescapability of power. Fun is a medicinal bath which the entertainment industry never ceases to prescribe.’ See *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1947), trans. by Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), p. 112. A sceptical perspective on the importance afforded to laughter in modern culture has been put forward more recently by Michael Billig, in *Laughter and Ridicule: Towards a Social Critique of Humour* (London: Sage, 2005).

policing of laughter was effective at encouraging feminine docility, carrying moral messages that were particularly pertinent to women and the female body.

In Part Two I demonstrate just how firmly entrenched was the categorisation of laughter along lines of (healthy) body and (sick) mind by considering how it is played out in the novels, and careers, of the two great ‘humorists’ of the age, Dickens and Thackeray. Identifying these writers as key representatives of hearty and non-hearty modes of humour, I propose an interrelationship between theme and style by considering the effect of their fictional renderings of laughter on their literary reputations, while showing how their modes of satire coloured those representations. Firstly, I discuss the immense influence of Dickens and his early novels in consolidating the dominant ideal of jolly, non-intellectual, and morally sound laughter. I stress that (contrary to Andrews’s claims) he was the rule rather than the exception in his championing of ‘open enjoyment’, but he was also an important figure in spreading and sentimentalising pre-Victorian positive evaluations of the hearty laugh.⁸ I do not characterise Dickens as a ‘feminine’ writer, but rather highlight the ways in which his novels bridged full-bodied laughter and smiling sentimentality, epitomising the wider validation of heart over head, physical impulse over mental control, and animal over

⁸ The critical tendencies to characterise laughter either as heart-warming or as rebellious are succinctly combined by James R. Kincaid, who proposes that ‘one of the reasons laughter has always been identified [with] comedy is that their main impulses are similar ... Paradoxically, the movement towards order is paralleled by an impulse towards freedom ... Though we laugh always in chorus, [in] the desire to cleanse the existing order of absurdity and rigidity, laughter is always dangerously close to anarchy ... laughter both confirms and denies society and is, from a social viewpoint, implicitly subversive.’ See Kincaid, *Dickens and the Rhetoric of Laughter* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971), pp. 14-5. The point could be extended by associating laughter with both comedy and satire. Certainly, the reading of laughter in terms of community *and* anarchy, joy *and* dissent, is particularly suited to Dickens’s novels, with their combination of sentimental and carnivalesque elements. It is the same angle taken by Andrews. However, laughter in the readings of Kincaid and Andrews is bound up with humour, whereas I separate the subversive tendencies of Dickens’s humour from the socially unifying laughter (laughing ‘in chorus’) that he describes.

intellectual energies, that Brontë writes against.⁹ Thackeray's writing, in contrast, was perceived by many to be tainted by an unhealthy satirical tone – and this, likewise, is reflected in the imagery in his novels. But having explored how Thackeray's attention to the unpleasant side of laughter set him at odds with conventional preferences, I note that Brontë, too, had severe misgivings about the leaning towards 'head' over 'heart' that his satire displayed, due to its tendency to victimise women – its flaunting of masculine intellect over feminine feeling.

Thus, in this chapter I will be pinpointing two senses in which laughter casts its 'despotic' shadow. Firstly there is the pressure (both social and literary) to conform, to be cheerful and content – the sentimental weight attached to wholesome, 'feminine' (though not necessarily female) laughter, with its insistence on sociability and emotional openness. Secondly there is 'masculine' laughter: tyrannical, intimidating, intelligent, linked to the cruelty of satire, and represented for Brontë by Thackeray. The two modes of laughter are connected in that the targets of satirical laughter are precisely the emotionally 'open' (vulnerable), innocent subjects that are produced by laughter of the first category. Clearly, this assessment relies on what might be regarded as crude terms of opposition (those of mirth and mockery) yet in setting it up in this way I seek to highlight the patterns of conventional thought that inform and account for the conflicted loyalties – the fluctuations between adherence to and rejection of gender norms – that underwrite Brontë's use of laughter imagery. While she regularly raises

⁹ My analysis relates to Dickens's representations of laughter, but his writing more generally has been seen in these terms by critics. G. H. Lewes, for instance, employed the language of feminine and physical instincts: 'He spoke in the mother-tongue of the heart' and he 'set in motion the springs of sympathy by touching the domestic affections' – 'his was merely an *animal* intelligence.' As I will discuss, this kind of disparagement (Lewes speaks of the irritation felt by 'cultivated and critical readers') generally emerged in criticism from the 1850s onwards. The earlier reviews that I will consider in this chapter similarly read Dickens in terms of the heart, affections, sympathies and animal spirits (in opposition to intellectual powers) but they tended to celebrate these traits with less qualified praise – with the enthusiasm for emotional spontaneity that, I argue, was characteristic of this period (but which in particular shaped expectations of ideal female behaviour). Lewes's emphasis, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', *Fortnightly Review*, 11 (1872), 141-54 (pp. 147, 151, 148).

earnest objections to male contempt for or humiliation of women, her novels work not only to criticise or curtail it but, increasingly, to overturn sentimental expectations, by assigning sharp, knowing laughter of the ‘Thackerayan’ stamp to her heroines. In outlining historical and literary context, this chapter aims both to shed light on the significance (and the tyranny) of laughter in early to mid nineteenth-century thought, and to prepare the ground for an accurate reading of laughter in Brontë’s writing.

I

In her study of late Victorian Britain, Mackenzie Bartlett describes how laughter became a focus for social anxiety, due to its ‘overdetermined suggestions of violent primitivism, extreme emotionality, madness [and] sexuality.’ She describes an era which dwelt on ‘the “dark” side of laughter’, with laughter being increasingly pathologised and associated with ‘fear, malevolence, and insanity.’¹⁰ What Bartlett does not point out is that this was a reaction against an earlier discourse, which loudly celebrated laughter as a healthy and moral form of expression. This is not to say that there was no ‘dark side’; specifically what was promoted was non-intellectual laughter which demonstrated good nature and warmth of heart, while sneers, sniggers and smirks (tending to be expressive of discontent or detachment) were vilified. Interestingly, this is in stark contrast to Bartlett’s account of the alarm aroused by primitive and emotionally charged laughter; whereas in the *fin-de-siècle* climate that she depicts it is laughter’s affective, unintelligent and bodily connotations that were viewed as suspicious (in connection with fears about women and the ‘degenerate’ underclasses of society), earlier in the century it is indulgently full-bodied, full-feeling laughter that is endorsed, with ‘dark’, sinister or troubling laughter being characterised as dispassionate

¹⁰ Bartlett, pp. 9, 19.

and restrained. In other words, the nineteenth century saw a profound shift in the way that laughter was perceived and represented as a threat to social order and stability, and in the rhetorical tactics that were employed to control it. In the first part of this chapter I will explore how, throughout the first half of the century, the body's role in laughter was positively emphasised, as a means of censuring and discrediting laughter which seemed to emanate too alarmingly from the 'mind.'

Overview: the rise and fall of the hearty laugh

In an enthused 1831 article in *Fraser's Magazine*, William Maginn declared we should be grateful 'to roaring, ranting, laughing, riotous Nature', listing the effects of laughter as '[s]haking sides, unheard of sounds, (rising from the chuckle to the giggle, from the giggle to the irrepressible roar,) sighs, sobs, (from over exertion,) twitches of the muscles, twinkling eyes, running over with tears.'¹¹ What he describes might appear to be a picture of anarchy, the human body out of control, yet his delight with the idea is characteristic. No credence is given to the Bakhtinian link between bodily and social disorder, according to which such boisterous excess should be regarded, from a conservative perspective, as highly undesirable or disconcerting. Likewise in a famous example from *Sartor Resartus* (serialised in *Fraser's*, 1833-4), Thomas Carlyle portrays the undignified bodily display of Teufelsdröckh in extravagant and idealised terms: 'he burst forth ... tears streaming down his cheeks, pipe held aloft, foot clutched into the air – loud, long-continuing, uncontrollable; a laugh not of the face and diaphragm only, but of the whole man from head to heel.' But, while 'no man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether irreclaimably bad', laughter less hearty and wholesome is derided – as in the case of those who 'are able to laugh, what can be called laughing, but only sniff and titter and snigger from the throat outwards; or at best,

¹¹ [Maginn], 'Ars Ridendi; or, Hook and Hood – On Laughter', *Fraser's Magazine*, 3 (1831), 154-62 (p. 155).

produce some whiffling husky cachinnation, as if they were laughing through wool.’ ‘Of none such comes good’, the Editor warns.¹² The inability of these sniffers and titterers to laugh ‘from head to heel’ is portrayed in terms of physical dysfunction, or obstruction (‘laughing through wool’), and these repressed utterances are a reflection of their personal and moral inadequacy.

This relish for the full-bodied, audible laugh can be traced to the eighteenth-century debates which raged over laughter’s compatibility with good morals and polite manners. Notoriously, in 1748, Lord Chesterfield warned his son that ‘frequent and loud laughter is the characteristic of folly and ill manners; it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things; and they call it being merry.’ According to Chesterfield, ‘there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter ... not to mention the disagreeable noise that it makes, and the shocking distortion of the face that it occasions.’¹³ That ‘shocking distortion’ which Maginn details with such approving gusto for *Fraser’s* is regarded by Chesterfield with horror: the insubordination of the body is akin to the insubordination of the mob – laughter must be suppressed in (and by) polite society. Opinions in this line were bolstered by a puritanical tradition of insistence on the religious impropriety of laughter,¹⁴ and by Thomas Hobbes’s oft-cited claim (1651) that we laugh out of a sense of superiority over the object of our laughter –

¹² Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, pp. 25-6. Other negative examples include men who ‘wear an everlasting barren simper’, while ‘in the smile of others lies a cold glitter as of ice.’

¹³ Lord Chesterfield to his son (1748) cited by Richard Boston in *An Anatomy of Laughter* (London: Collins, 1974), pp. 172-3. Gantar (p. 27) describes this view as ‘an intrusion of physiology into ethics’: ‘while a smile may actually be conceived of as a sign that one has successfully repressed the instinctive convulsions of the diaphragm, audible laughter [represents] the defeat of the rational.’

¹⁴ For religious disapproval of laughter, see for instance Gilhus (pp. 1-2), Morreall (p. 4), or Barry Sanders, *Sudden Glory: Laughter as Subversive History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), p. 197. For the seesaw between views of laughter as ‘coming from aggression’ and ‘as an expression of love’, see Boston, pp. 203-4. A nuanced historical summary of these shifts in perspective is also provided by Ghose, pp. 4, 8-20.

suggesting that the human sense of humour has its roots in malice, pride, or savage instincts which the civilized man should endeavour to control.¹⁵

Increasingly, however, and largely motivated by indignant opposition to such gloomy sentiments, more favourable interpretations of laughter came to dominate. In his 1960 study of the ‘amiable humorist’, Stuart Tave charted the transition from stern, disapproving views of laughter, through a process of lightening up, towards a happier emphasis on the virtues and benefits of wholesome humour and hearty laughter – the completion of this shift being marked by the arrival of Dickens.¹⁶ Tave records the emergence of the amiable or genial humorist, a type of either writer or fictional character, whose kindly, sympathetic and distinctly middle-class laughter could be variously distinguished from that of the ‘rakes and the wits’,¹⁷ from the polished smile of aristocratic etiquette, from the laughter of mob brutality or Hobbesian arrogance, and from the indecent ribaldry or mean-spirited lampooning of satire.¹⁸ This malleable figure retained celebrated status well into the nineteenth century and was constantly invoked in defence of laughter, although precisely what he signified – whether amiable humour is properly enjoyed through genial laughter or mild smiles – underwent adjustments. Thus, Robin Gilmour implies (briefly) that the preference for open laughter over polite smiles truly arrived with emergent Victorian ideals. Chesterfield, he

¹⁵ In Hobbes’s words, ‘*Sudden glory*, is the passion which maketh those *grimaces* called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves.’ Hobbes’s emphases, *Leviathan*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 38. I will return to Hobbes in Chapter Two.

¹⁶ Stuart M. Tave, *The Amiable Humorist: A Study in the Comic Theory and Criticism of the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-3.

¹⁸ Similarly, Harry Levin describes ‘the extraordinary softening that English humor underwent during the eighteenth century and the Romantic period’ – ‘a collective change from satirical raillery to cheerful benevolence’ which can be ‘correlated with the increasing pervasion of middle-class sentimentality.’ See ‘Introduction,’ *Veins of Humor*, ed. by Levin (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 1-16 (pp. 13-4).

explains, ‘was especially ridiculous to Dickens and Carlyle, who had encountered the same thing in the Regency dandies and responded to it with the cult of the hearty laugh, an essential feature of manliness.’¹⁹ But this ‘cult’ could alternatively be identified as a hangover from the Romantic privileging of nature over artifice, or, to present a rather different perspective, as emerging from Regency habits of rowdy excess.²⁰ Hearty laughter is thus best understood as achieving legitimisation through an accumulation of cultural developments, as a reactionary outburst which gained momentum from eighteenth-century sentimentalism and the rise of the middle-classes, then from a Romantic rejection of stiff formalities, and then again as an expression of a no-nonsense, middle-class manliness from the 1830s.²¹

The elevation of natural, spontaneous or bodily laughter over laughter that carried the suspicious whiff of intellect was closely related to debates which pitted

¹⁹ Robin Gilmour, *The Idea of the Gentleman in the Victorian Novel* (London and Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1981), p. 18. The shift identified by Gilmour reflects the rise of the middle-classes over the aristocracy, and the accompanying turn from manners to morals. This clash of values is explored in *Barnaby Rudge* (1841), set in the eighteenth century. Dickens satirized Chesterfield’s principles through the smoothly smiling villain John Chester, who is contrasted with that ‘rosiest, cosiest, merriest, heartiest, best-contented old buck’, Gabriel Varden. Varden is a model of geniality, pictured with ‘his shining face suffused with gladness, and his capacious waistcoat smiling in every wrinkle, and his jovial humour peeping from under the table in the very plumpness of his legs: a sight to turn the vinegar of misanthropy into purest milk of human kindness.’ Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, ed. by Clive Hurst (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 638.

²⁰ Hence, Robert Kiely notes that ‘the humorist, defined as a passionate and, especially, compassionate moralist [is] the descendent not so much of Swift and Pope as of Wordsworth and Keats’, while Boston affirms that ‘laughter was distrusted by the Augustans as being discordant with order, control and reason’ but was ‘embraced’ by the Romantics, who ‘[cultivated] their emotions rather than their intellects.’ See Kiely, ‘Victorian Harlequin: the Function of Humor in Thackeray’s Critical and Miscellaneous Prose’, in *Veins of Humor*, ed. by Levin, pp. 147-66 (p. 149), and Boston, pp. 203-4.

²¹ Ultimately the result was, as Levin writes (in a rare but brief acknowledgment of the fact): ‘Vocal laughter, which Lord Chesterfield had condemned for its democratic vulgarity, would ring out loud in the nineteenth century’ (p. 12). More recently (but no less briefly), Ghose comments that, following changes in eighteenth-century theory, ‘the pleasures of laughter could be wholeheartedly endorsed ... Laughter had its roots in sympathy, not malice. By the time of the Victorians this had become a truism. The flood-gates were opened for a cult of humour’ (p. 10). For Donald J. Gray, ‘the first point to be made about Victorian laughter is simply that there was so much of it.’ See ‘The Uses of Victorian Laughter’, *Victorian Studies*, 10 (1966), 145-76 (p. 145). Gray, however, is referring to the era’s comic literature – it is humour that he analyses in this article.

‘humour’ against ‘wit.’ This was a popular topic which, again, derived from the eighteenth-century movement to promote good humour and moral laughter by sentimentalising the figure of the humorist, and denigrating the clever wit or the aggressive satirist. According to the consensus that developed from this, ‘wit’ was deemed more intellectual but of a morally dubious and potentially misanthropic nature while, in Carlyle’s words, ‘true humour’ springs from the heart rather than the head, and ‘its essence is love.’²² As elaborated by Peter Bayne in an 1872 article (by which time the assessment is critically somewhat outdated, but still familiar enough):

The distinction between wit and humour may be said to consist in this, that the characteristic of the latter is nature, and of the former art. Wit is more allied to intellect, and humour to the imagination. Humour is a higher, finer, and more genial thing than wit. It is a combination of the laughable with tenderness, sympathy, and warmheartedness. Pure wit is often ill-natured, and has a sting; but wit, sweetened by a kind, loving expression, becomes humour.²³

Although it is the superiority of humour over wit that received the most formal attention, it is inseparable from the related preference for kindly humour over the bitter ‘sting’ of satire, and for genial over ill-natured laughter. Because of its roots (bodily and sentimental) in the ‘heart’, the hearty laughter of the humorist – for all its potential

²² [Carlyle], ‘Jean Paul Friedrich Richter’s Life’, *Edinburgh Review*, 46 (1827), 176-95 (p. 188). Carlyle goes on to say that true humour ‘issues not in laughter, but in smiles which lie far deeper’, but this association of laughter with frivolity and smiles with profundity is not typical of the time, and indeed is contradicted by the sentiments later expressed in *Sartor Resartus*. See Abigail Burnham Bloom, ‘Transcendence through Incongruity: the Background of Humor in Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*’ for an account of Carlyle’s attempts to produce ‘sportful, sympathetic humor’, rejecting the ‘style of mockery’ favoured by *Blackwood’s* and *Fraser’s* magazines and ‘[fighting] his own tendency towards wit, sarcasm, irony, and satire.’ Bloom, in *The Victorian Comic Spirit*, ed. by Wagner-Lawlor, pp. 153-72 (p. 165).

²³ [Peter Bayne], ‘Wit and Humour’, *British Quarterly Review*, 56 (1872), 41-66 (p. 45).

boisterousness – was ‘sweetened’, tame and non-threatening, where the artificial smiles of the thinking wit, or politically-minded satirist, signalled trouble.²⁴

As Part Two will explore in more detail, critics favourably compared Dickens with Thackeray, in whose writings (notably *Vanity Fair*, serialised 1847-8) many detected a sharp, cynical tone which they felt to be in contrast to Dickens’s abundance of genial feeling – Dickens displayed that ‘tenderness, sympathy, and warmheartedness’ which was the necessary justification of laughter. But Thackeray gave proof of having mellowed when he delivered his 1851 lectures on the ‘English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century’, which praised the benign characters of Goldsmith, Fielding and others, contrasting these amiable humourists with what Thackeray denounced as the angry, cynical wit of Swift. Similarly, in his 1845 *Wit and Humour*, Leigh Hunt describes Swift as a great wit, but morbid – ‘not a healthy man’, ‘the victim of diseased blood and angry passions.’²⁵ The inference here (which I will expand on presently) is that the true humourist’s blood is healthy and free from disease, the ‘humours’ of mankind being, as one *Blackwood’s* reviewer explains, ‘inseparably blended with their affections ... and their whole moral as well as natural being.’²⁶ Moral laughter was assumed to spring naturally and spontaneously from the heart or the ‘humours’ of the

²⁴ As Malcolm Andrews summarises (p. 19), ‘Victorians were fond of distinguishing between humour and wit, and generally felt more comfortable with humour; wit was likely to be abrasive and contemptuous. The spirit of liberal humanism was inconsistent with the Hobbesian belief that laughter is stimulated by our sudden perception of our superiority to the misfortunes of others and with forms of satirical comedy or caustic wit that humiliated the infirmity of others ... Wit segregates; humour harmonizes.’ John Bowen explains that Carlyle and Dickens ‘saw humour as having a higher calling [than satire] because of the essentially ethical nature of the pleasure that it gives, its necessary link to human sympathy and thus to forms of insight both beyond and superior to those of mere reason.’ See Bowen, ‘Comic and Satirical’, in the *Cambridge History of Victorian Literature*, ed. by Kate Flint (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 265-87 (p. 270).

²⁵ Leigh Hunt, *Wit and Humour* (1846), 2nd edition (London: Smith, Elder, 1848), pp. 308-9.

²⁶ ‘On Wit and Humour’, *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, 6 (1820), 638-42 (p. 639). It can be seen here that, while ‘humour’ was by now much closer to our modern understanding of the word, it still suggestively carried the meaning inherited from medieval physiology, where ‘humours’ were fluids within the body. For more on the origins of the term, see for instance Billig (p. 62) or Ghose (p. 11).

healthy body; cold, ill-natured wit, in contrast, was associated with the subtlety and polite artifice of the smile, often concealing bitterness and corruption ('diseased blood and angry passions'). Accordingly these images of smiles and laughter were attached to abstract ideas of humour, wit and satire, as a way of vividly personifying literary styles.

As documented by Robert Bernard Martin, there was a gradual shift in critical taste in the Victorian era, whereby the earlier preference for 'amiable, sentimental humour' gave way (from around the 1850s-60s) to 'an acceptance of intellect as the basis of comedy', a movement Martin labels the 'triumph of wit.'²⁷ Correspondingly, expressions of distaste for the full-bodied laugh, and preference for the dignified smile, become more frequent. In 1856, George Eliot agreed that 'wit is apt to be cold, and thin-lipped, and Mephistophelian in men who have no relish for humour', but countered that 'broad-faced, rollicking humour needs the refining influence of wit.' Eliot's disapproval of the kind of humour that would 'shake the diaphragm of a coal-heaver' makes it clear that the stylistic compromise she calls for here is tied up with a class-based suspicion of humour in its embodied form – the physical display of laughter is in need of 'refining.' The beginnings of a transition from 'broad-faced' geniality to 'thin-lipped' restraint is thus apparent.²⁸ For George Meredith, lecturing on comedy in 1877, many of the old truths about laughter as a sign of healthy vitality and warm feelings remained current: he compared 'agelasts' (non-laughers) with 'dead bodies, which, if you prick them, do not bleed', and coined 'misogelast' for the laughter-hater, who 'soon learns to dignify his dislike as an objection in morality.' He also reaffirmed that the satirist is 'often a social scavenger, working on a storage of bile.' But Meredith perceived wit and the intellect to play an essential part in good comedy, and he confirms the imaginative

²⁷ Robert Bernard Martin, *The Triumph of Wit: A Study of Victorian Comic Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), p. vii.

²⁸ [George Eliot], 'German Wit: Heinrich Heine', *Westminster Review*, 65 (1856), 1-33 (pp. 1, 4).

move away from unthinking bodily excess by declaring that laughter, ideally, should be ‘of the order of the smile, finely-tempered, showing sunlight of the mind, mental richness rather than noisy enormity.’²⁹

Amongst such calls for balance and moderation, the misogynists alluded to by Meredith were becoming more vocal – one George Vasey, for instance, described (in a book dedicated to the problem) how laughter had become ‘a habit which is extremely prevalent, and which ... is regarded with unanimous complacency and approbation.’ He notes that comedians have made ‘ princely incomes by their successful efforts in stimulating the pectoral muscles and shaking the diaphragms of their numerous readers’, and laments that ‘laughter is generally thought to be *so* natural, *so* convivial, *so* exhilarating, nay, even *so* healthy, that the monitorial proverb of “laugh and grow fat” has become as familiar in our mouths as household words!’³⁰ Such disapproval would become increasingly common (if not always so extreme) towards the end of the century. At the same time, Vasey’s hysterical insistence on the ‘complacency and approbation’ with which laughter was regarded seems to suggest that the ‘cult of the hearty laugh’ continued to hold considerable popular (if not critical) sway, and thus that

²⁹ George Meredith, ‘An Essay on Comedy’, in *Comedy*, ed. by Wylie Sypher (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), pp. 1-57 (pp. 4, 44 and 47-8).

³⁰ George Vasey, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Smiling*, (London: J. Burns, 1875), pp. 21, 23, 25, 27 (Vasey’s emphases). The book’s contents are helpfully indicated in chapter titles such as the following (p. xviii): ‘Is it a fact (as is generally affirmed) that those who are accustomed to laugh are good-tempered, generous, and philanthropic? And, on the contrary, that those who seldom or never laugh are gloomy, repulsive, and misanthropic characters who ought to be suspected and shunned?’ Boston notes that, while ‘Vasey saw his opposition to laughter as being an isolated case amongst the all but universal admiration for it’, James Sully’s pro-laughter *Essay on Laughter* (1902) was ‘swimming against the current of the time. The general trend was a return to Hobbesian notions ... The carefree laugh of a Rabelais or a Falstaff (or even a Teufelsdröckh) was gone ... After Darwin and Freud, the age of innocence was over’ (p. 227). Boston is, however, referring more to the rise of black humour in the twentieth century than to a change in attitudes to laughter in the nineteenth. Andrews (p. 174) cites Vasey as evidence of ‘the prejudices of the age towards laughter ... Vasey’s fierce book cast a further shadow over an age darkened by the brooding presence of Dombeyism, Murdstonism (the disciplined repression of feeling), Gradgrindism [and] the Tite Baranacles ... Dickens crusaded to lighten this popular dark age.’ Andrews does also (p. 131) cite the ‘unashamed robustness’ of Teufelsdröckh’s laughter as ‘the antidote to Vasey’s grim misogynelasty’, but he does not suggest that the contrast may have to do with chronology.

enthusiasm for unrestrained merriment had to some extent proved after all, like Teufelsdröckh's outburst, 'loud, long-continuing, uncontrollable.'

Health and spirits

In order to investigate the social purposes served by the championing of hearty laughter, it is important to address Vasey's complaint about its vaunted healthiness, which is a consistent feature of articles on the subject. The tone is set by the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1822, on the healthy benefits of the 'hilarious roar':

As to performing this operation in one's sleeve, it is a base compromise; no more comparable to the original than is a teeth-displaying simper to that hilarious roar which shakes the wrinkles out of the heart, and frightens old Time from advancing towards us. [Laughter's] delicious alchemy ... converts a tear into the quintessence of merriment, and makes wrinkles themselves expressive of youth and frolic.³¹

According to the *Mirror* (1834), 'the healthiness of laughter has never been disputed, even by the most snarling cynic',³² while for *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* (1848), 'Laughter is good for the health; it is provocative to the appetite, and a friend to digestion.'³³ 'Laugh and grow fat', as well as 'laugh and grow old' are indeed frequently quoted maxims, while 'Laughter is a healthy exercise', elaborates Maginn for *Fraser's*:

It shakes the system, disperses the morbid humours, extinguishes envy, annihilates the spleen, puts the blue devils to flight, and spreads summer and sunshine, and

³¹ 'The Wisdom of Laughter', *New Monthly Magazine*, 5 (1822), 457-60 (p. 459). Also printed in the *Mirror*, 1 (1822), 22-4 (pp. 23-4).

³² 'Thoughts on Laughter', *Mirror*, 23 (1834), 50-2 (p. 51).

³³ 'Laughter', *Chambers'*, 218 (1848), 160.

cordiality, wherever it appears. [Therefore] to all who do not wish they were ‘a little thinner,’ we recommend a loud, a hearty, a continuous roar.³⁴

Maginn’s deployment of old-fashioned physiological concepts to reinforce his point is both characteristic and illuminating – it is a reminder that pro-laughter discourse on medicinal grounds had a long history, which was commonly drawn on by nineteenth-century writers to give their assertions the weight of both historical and pseudo-scientific authority.³⁵ It also highlights the blend of moral and physical improvements being advocated: laughter ‘shakes the system, disperses the morbid humours, extinguishes envy, annihilates the spleen.’

Another enthused advocate of healthy laughter was Thomas Hood, whose preface to his *Hood’s Own: Or, Laughter from Year to Year* (1838) details ‘a system of Practical Cheerful Philosophy’ which equates laughter with good health (despite Hood’s illness at the time of writing). He employs all the standard medical tropes, claims to have ‘converted a serious illness into a comic wellness’, and advises his readers to laugh, even when too ill to eat or drink. ‘Gentle reader, how do you like this Laughing Philosophy?’ he asks, adding the familiar wisdom: laughter ‘expands the chest, enlarges the heart [and] quickens the circulation ... A fico [fig] then for the Chesterfieldian canon, that laughter is an ungentle emotion ... a laugh is but the full-blown flower of which a smile is the bud.’ Persisting with the medical theme Hood concludes by introducing his book, ‘like certain practitioners, who not only prescribe but dispense

³⁴ [Maginn], ‘Ars Ridendi’, p. 161.

³⁵ Alison Williams explains that in ‘Renaissance medical research, laughter was a sign of health as it depended on the abundance and purity of the blood.’ See Williams, ‘Sick Humour, Healthy Laughter: the Use of Medicine in Rabelais’s Jokes’, *Modern Language Review*, 101 (2006), 671-681 (p. 680). Bakhtin stresses that ‘for the Renaissance (as for the antique [sources]) the characteristic trait of laughter was precisely the recognition of its positive, regenerating, creative meaning. This clearly distinguishes it from the later theories of the philosophy of laughter ... which bring out mostly its negative functions’ (p. 71). See Bakhtin (p. 67) for the influence of Hippocrates’s theories of healthy laughter on Rabelais and others. See also Barry Sanders (pp. 62-80) for Democritus ‘the laughing philosopher’ (who features regularly in nineteenth-century articles), and the association of laughter and health in Ancient Greek culture.

their own medicines.’³⁶ As well as reaching back to ancient truths, the insistence of such tracts on the inherent healthiness of a good laugh closely resembles modern commonplaces – advice in this upbeat vein, supported by new scientific theories, experiments and anecdotes, is today ubiquitous.³⁷

Healthy laughter is expressive of moral character: it is an expansive, side-splitting opening up of the self, in contrast to the buttoned-up, tight-lipped restraint of the ‘agelasts’ who when you ‘prick them, do not bleed’ or worse, the smiling cynic who keeps himself, and his thoughts, to himself. It is not hard to see how the latter manifestation could be construed as more undermining to social unity than laughter which, however rollicking and unseemly, renders the self transparent and connected to those around him. Laughter characterised as ‘inward’ is suggestive of morbid introspection as opposed to healthy expression. Maginn, arguing in the *Tory Fraser’s* that laughter is ‘a healthy exercise’, demonstrates the essentially conservative drive behind rhetoric which celebrates the warm-heartedness of humour and laughter, bringing implicit, and often explicit discredit on the alternative cool-headedness that engendered more bitter satire and wit, less complacently jolly laughter. He draws on this in the anti-Byron backlash, pitting sensible, cheerful laughter against the perceived morbid Romantic temperament, with its spirit of moody restlessness:

Democritus, the laughing philosopher ... lived laughing for a hundred years, and then died unlamenting. What misanthrope or Megrim of modern times can do as much?

³⁶ Thomas Hood, *Hood’s Own: Or, Laughter from Year to Year: Being Former Runnings of his Comic Vein, with an Infusion of New Blood for General Circulation* (London: Edward Moxon, 1855), pp. 1-6.

³⁷ As Williams notes (p. 671), ‘a topic of debate by both Hippocrates and Galen, the use of laughter as therapy continues to figure prominently in contemporary research into the delivery of healthcare.’ See also Andrews, p. 141. For a more scathing account of contemporary faith in laughter as therapy or medicine, see Billig pp. 16-21.

Are all the grim affectations of *Childe Harold* worth an ounce of laughter? Not a grain! They do good to no one ... They make us lean, stupid, ungrateful.³⁸

Essentially, healthy laughter is happy laughter, proof not only of moral goodness but of contentment with one's lot. Both the leanness and the ingratitude of the misanthrope can be linked to his lack of good cheer; the 'enlarging of the heart' brought about by laughter is both physical and metaphorical – a cure for sickness, for ill-nature and, by extension, for grumbling discontent.

Often, these panegyrics on laughter seem to have little to do with humour, and everything to do with the healthy expression of morals and the authentic self; the result is a peculiarly earnest insistence on frivolity.³⁹ Although 'Victorian intellectuals insisted on the reality of a spiritual life higher than that of the body', Bruce Haley notes, 'in one way or another they all thought physiologically: they adopted the well-knit body as their model for the well-formed mind, and the mind-body harmony as their model for spiritual health.'⁴⁰ In *Bentley's Miscellany* (not insignificantly under the editorship of Dickens), 'Laughter – good, hearty, cheerful-hearted laughter – is the echo of a happy spirit,'⁴¹ while an 1845 piece in the *Mirror* affirmed that 'Laughter is a social act. It is joy that loves to show itself, and that would kindle joy and mirth in another':

[Laughter] leads us to the whole man, and to that mysterious union of soul and body, which we know, and yet do not understand ... for what is laughter, but either the

³⁸ [Maginn], 'Ars Ridendi', p. 161.

³⁹ Seen in this light, the approval of robust laughter begins to seem in keeping with certain Victorian ideals of manliness after all – if not with the 'stiff upper lip.' As John Tosh explains, in the nineteenth century masculinity came to be understood as 'an expression of the self.' Authenticity was prized over 'politeness', in contrast to the previous century (Chesterfield's) when 'the most authoritative forms of manliness ... demanded the repression of the self.' Tosh's emphasis, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain: Essays on Gender, Family and Empire* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005), pp. 83, 87.

⁴⁰ As Haley makes clear, the healthy body had 'a special conceptual prominence in nineteenth-century thought ... the health of the body and that of the mind were interdependent.' See Haley, *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1978), p. 4.

⁴¹ 'A Chapter on Laughing', *Bentley's Miscellany*, 2 (1837), 163-5 (p. 163).

mind or the heart speaking by the excited muscles and changed appearance of the face, the feeling of the heart excited by some thought of the mind, the proof and the expression of the mutual sympathy of soul and body.⁴²

This argument is unusual in the detail of its attempt to bridge the mind-body divide, looking at the impact of ‘some thought of the mind’ on the muscles and face, but it is ultimately typical in its final equation of mind with its older meaning of ‘soul.’ As with Maginn’s understanding that the shaking of the system puts the blue devils to flight, or *Bentley’s* description of laughter as ‘the echo of a happy spirit’, bodily laughter was perceived to express a spiritual vitality, rendering it not just endearingly wholesome and sociable, but sacred or sublime. Morally sound laughter was an unthinking impulse, originating in the heart (and diaphragm) but one which demonstrated the health of the soul, and the harmony or ‘sympathy of soul and body’, as well as creating social sympathies (‘kindling joy and mirth in others’). It is when the intellect comes into play that a less harmonious dualism emerges – laughter is generally characterised in terms of body *or* mind, rarely in a state of balance or complementarity, and its healthiness is likely to be questionable when it originates too conspicuously from conscious mental activity.

In some ways, secular scientific advances at mid-century gave new validation to the belief in laughter’s benefits. While the ‘Relief Theory’ of laughter (referring to the idea that laughter can be explained as the release of pent-up internal energy, operating as a safety valve of sorts) is usually attributed to Freud, much of the groundwork had

⁴² Dr. Edwards, ‘Causes of Laughter’, *Mirror*, 1 (1845), 182-5 (p. 183). The terms of this article echo those of Charles Bell’s influential *Anatomy and Philosophy of Expression* (1824), which – as I touched on in the Introduction – similarly reads ‘the excited muscles and changed appearance of the face’ as clues to spiritual truths, including through the study of laughter. The article also recalls Carlyle (p. 26): ‘How much lies in Laughter: the cipher-key, wherewith we decipher the whole man!’ I will revisit Bell and the pathognomy of laughter in Chapter Three.

been laid earlier by Herbert Spencer and Alexander Bain.⁴³ Unlike Freud's, their ideas were predominantly physiological, foregrounding the physical body (and thereby de-emphasising the significance of the thought process involved), so again, there is no very thorough attempt to bridge the mind-body divide. What Spencer's and Bain's theories addressed was not so much the healthiness of laughter as its inevitability, as a bodily reaction. Though not concerned with value judgments – with sentimentalising or discouraging laughter – they validated popular belief in its essential naturalness; as a necessary eruption of the body, caused by rechannelled nervous energy, laughter was uncontrollable, and not something which ought to be suppressed.⁴⁴

An early article by Bain in the *Westminster Review* (1847) presents the case thus:

The outburst of laughter is nature's provision for relieving an incompatibility of mental and bodily states, that would otherwise be painful in the extreme. There are attitudes and movements of the system that, if occurring simultaneously, pull the same organ opposite ways, and produce the most terrible agony.⁴⁵

In Bain's description, the indignity and inconvenience of laughter are fully recognised: 'the chest is violently collapsed by convulsive expirations, that shake the whole frame', while the 'features of the face [suddenly] shake and vibrate ... The entire moving system

⁴³ See Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), Bain, *The Emotions and the Will* (1859), and Spencer, 'On the Physiology of Laughter' (1860). Freud (p. 143) argued that in joking and laughing we harmlessly discharge aggressive and frustrated emotions, and acknowledged his debt to Spencer. 'Victorian Relief Theory' is insightfully discussed by Billig, pp. 86-103. See also Morreall (pp. 16-7), who notes the early origins of these theories in eighteenth-century physiology – with Lord Shaftesbury, who theorised laughter in terms of the misdirection, build-up and release of bodily 'spirits' within the nerves.

⁴⁴ Bartlett (p. 12) implies that this was an effort to justify laughter in the context of emerging concerns about its inappropriateness or dangerousness: 'By explaining laughter as a natural response to the pleasure created by the sudden release of psychic and nervous tension, the relief theory attempted to reconcile laughter's primitive qualities with its social value as a behavioural corrective.'

⁴⁵ [Bain], 'Wit and Humour', *Westminster Review*, 48 (1847), 24-59 (p. 34).

of the body is under strong agitation.’ But, more worryingly, there are people ‘that want the laughing nature, from some physical or mental singularity.’⁴⁶ Non-laughing people are in this way singled out as unnatural. The impulse to laugh is normalized, the emphasis on its natural spontaneity takes on a decidedly literal import, and (while George Vasey’s book is full of sobering anecdotes about people who laughed themselves to death) it is here restraint rather than indulgence that would be inadvisable, perhaps dangerous.

The concept was not restricted to scientific discourse, but can be found echoed in more informal articles, too. In 1865 in the *Saturday Review* for instance, the physical origins of laughter are cited as an excuse for laughter which erupts in inappropriate circumstances. This is laughter which comes,

simply because the system requires it. There is much that starts from the diaphragm, and thence [ascends to the brain]. Things not ludicrous in our normal state are made ludicrous to supply a need ... physical rebellion against gloom and depression which watches, in spite of the man’s self, for relief to the overwrought nerves. There are times when the body craves for laughter as it does for food.⁴⁷

Of course, ideas about laughter as relief – ‘in spite of the man’s self’ – had been in circulation (and the phrase is fitting) before they received elaborate psychological endorsement. Theories of nervous tension correlate with established confidence in laughter’s role relieving pressure on the heart, keeping the blood flowing; the formulation of laughter as necessary expression was already central to its reputation for promoting health, while laughter that was ‘inward’, repressed or obstructed was associated with corruption and either pent-up or frozen emotions. Laughter’s

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 37.

⁴⁷ ‘Laughter’, *Saturday Review*, 20 (1865), 446-7 (p. 446).

relationship to the ‘system’ is neatly played on by Dickens in the *Pickwick Papers* (1836-7), where he hints at the wider implications of diseased laughter for social health:

[He] laughed again – not a noisy boisterous laugh, but a silent, internal chuckle, which Mr. Pickwick disliked to hear. When a man bleeds inwardly, it is a dangerous thing for himself; but when he laughs inwardly, it bodes no good to other people.⁴⁸

‘Rosy cheeks and laughing eyes’: hearty femininity

As should by now have become obvious, laughter in the above accounts is assigned almost exclusively to men and the male body. The consistent emphasis on the male experience is particularly apparent in an 1852 article in *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, which describes ‘Genuine laughter’ as ‘a spontaneous effort of nature’:

a regular guffaw; that explosion of high spirits, and the feeling of joyous excitement, which is commonly written ha! ha! ha! This is altogether unknown in babyhood; in boyhood, it exists only in its rudiments; and it does not reach its full development till adolescence ripens into manhood.⁴⁹

Again, the writer analyses laughter in terms of physical necessity, putting forward a sympathetic diagnosis of non-laughing people:

There are some people who cannot laugh, but these are not necessarily either morose or stupid. They may laugh in their heart, and with their eyes, although by some unlucky fatality, they have not the gift of oral cachinnation. Such persons are to be pitied; for laughter in grown people is a substitute devised by nature for the screams

⁴⁸ Dickens, *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, ed. by Mark Wormald (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 411.

⁴⁹ ‘Philosophy of Laughter’, *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, 438 (1852), 321-2 (p. 322).

and shouts of boyhood, by which the lungs are strengthened and the health preserved.⁵⁰

Given the impossibility of imagining ‘a regular guffaw’ outside the context of ripened ‘manhood’, this rather begs the question: how were women, and more particularly ladies, supposed to laugh? And if corset-bursting ‘explosions’ of high spirits were unthinkable, how were they expected to preserve their health?

The writer does go on to add that the ‘sweet laugh of a woman’ is ‘bewitching’: it is ‘like the sound of flutes on the water. It leaps from her heart in a clear, sparkling rill; and the heart that hears it feels as if bathed in the cool, exhilarating spring.’ It is also ‘like a silver bell, with power to scare away the ill spirits of the mind.’⁵¹ Laughter is figured here in distinctly spiritual rather than physiological terms: it ‘leaps from her heart’ instead of starting in the diaphragm, strengthening the lungs, or producing ‘strong agitation of the body’s moving system.’ And it is implied that its benefits act on the (male) hearer, rather than the laugher herself. Nonetheless, laughter is still perceived to act as a potent, purifying or cleansing force – if not boisterous then certainly open and audible, in contrast to the simpers, smirks and ‘inward’ laughter that are common cause for concern. Using Hood’s terms, it is the ‘full-blown flower’ and not the ‘bud’ that is desirable.⁵²

Indeed, the rules determining healthy laughter are far more closely applicable to women than my survey so far has implied: for all the male-centred examples employed,

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Significant in this respect is Jeanne Fahnestock’s observation, in ‘The Heroine of Irregular Features: Physiognomy and Conventions of Heroine Description’, concerning nineteenth-century novels’ descriptions of their heroines’ mouths. She notes that, with the spread of physiognomical ideas over the first half of the century, the fashion changed from the conventional, perfect little ‘rosebud’ mouth to large, sensual, full-lipped mouths which signified imperfect but full-feeling heroines. See *Victorian Studies*, 24 (1981), pp. 325-50 (p. 342).

the preaching that underlies the insistence on hearty laughter is particularly pertinent to, and even aimed at, the women it seems to sideline. This fact is obscured largely because extremity and excess are the most celebrated features of the hearty laugh, and larger-than-life examples are naturally masculine – it is generally fat old gentlemen, whether specific literary legends or generic humorists, who may be safely pictured in convulsions, and who are the chosen emblems of good cheer. The amiability of these gouty characters renders the lusty laugh notably harmless and endearing – though accompanied by enough eating and drinking to hint at male camaraderie and good living, and conveying healthy disdain for prudery or affectation (an indulgence which appears to enhance rather than jeopardise the good health of these figures).⁵³ Clearly, while ladies may laugh ‘in their heart, and with their eyes’, it would be inappropriate for them to laugh ‘from head to heel.’ Nonetheless, laughter need not be ‘full’-bodied to adhere to the fundamental requirements of desirably good-humoured, bodily laughter. If middle-class women were not encouraged to be rowdy in their merriment, they *were* expected to laugh with spontaneity, not reserve; for all its explosiveness at the extreme end of the scale, this is never inconsistent with the qualities of gentleness, softness, warmth and amiable innocence that were attached to the humorist and his laughter. In the case of women, the nurturing mildness of these qualities are likely to be stressed – the heart rather than the lungs will be evoked, and often a warm smile will replace an ‘oral cachinnation’ – but crucially this smile must be a demonstration of feeling; ‘open’, expressive and unselfconscious. Ideal feminine laughter in this sense produces the same

⁵³ A telling example comes from William Hazlitt, who lectured in 1819 that ‘there is nothing more ridiculous than laughter without a cause ... An excess of levity is as impertinent as an excess of gravity.’ Despite this note of moderation, Hazlitt is drawn (as Bakhtin would be in the twentieth century) to the figure of Rabelais, who he paints in grotesque yet sentimental terms, ‘sitting in his easy chair, with an eye languid with excess of mirth ... wiping his beard after a well-seasoned jest, [with] his wine-flagons, and his books ... whence he drew endless stores of absurdity; [laughing and] making the world laugh with him ... Even to those who have never read his works, the name of Rabelais is a cordial to the spirits, and the mention of it cannot exist with gravity or spleen!’ Hazlitt, *Lectures on the English Poets and the English Comic Writers* (London: Bell & Daldy, 1869), pp. 32, 35.

transparency, the same opening-up of the self, as its more graphically physical masculine variants. Provided decorum is preserved, the healthy female laugh must be of the heart (and thus, the body) not the head – it is rendered non-threatening not principally because of its non-violence, but on account of its lack of an independent thought process.

The implications of this, the persuasive rhetoric that was used to enforce feminine cheerfulness at the expense of female intelligence, and the extent to which the ideal of innocent good humour amongst men was itself a myth which cloaked and facilitated the reality of patriarchal power, I will demonstrate further in subsequent chapters. For now, it should be evident that the language used to sanction healthy laughter, and to censure its corrupt alternatives, was peculiarly suited to the familiar myth of women's spiritual-yet-bodily nature, through which they were discursively contained and subjected.⁵⁴ The very terms of the humour/wit debate are implicitly gendered along traditional lines: associated with culture, intellect, and (often) aggression, 'wit' is troped masculine, where, while embodied humour may be male (the humorist), in the abstract it is unmistakably feminine. The elevation of humour, it must be remembered, is on the grounds of its naturalness, unpretentiousness and harmless, tender appeal. Spencer advised that intellect is of little value in a woman, '[but] rosy cheeks and laughing eyes are great attractions. A finely rounded figure draws admiring glances. The liveliness and good humour that overflowing health produces, go a great way towards establishing attachments.'⁵⁵ As this reminds us, the roundedness, rosiness and flowing spirits of the jolly gentleman are also the prized features, and qualifications for maternity, of the desirable woman (who has not been unnaturally restrained by

⁵⁴ In Shuttleworth's description, 'woman is assigned to the two contrary poles of spirituality and bodily subjection' (p. 76).

⁵⁵ Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical* (London: G. Manwaring, 1861), p. 187.

intellectual studies). As Sally Shuttleworth emphasises, unobstructed circulation of the menstrual cycle was considered key to healthy female physiology in nineteenth-century medical discourse.⁵⁶ The regulation and policing of female bodies that she records was, I propose, carried over into literary insistence on the healthiness of female laughter, which in a similar way was expected to display ‘overflowing’ good humour, easy fluidity of spirits – and to be free from symptoms of repression or obstruction.

Seen in this way, the encouragement of lively female laughter appears less a sign that social strictures at this time were more lenient or light-hearted than they have been given credit for, and more a means of superficially resolving contradictory nineteenth-century beliefs about the female condition. Jane Wood has pointed to ‘the dilemma at the centre of [middle-class] women’s lives; namely the obligation to suppress or conceal emotion whilst recognizing restraint itself as the cause of ill health.’ That is, habits of ‘inwardness’ were construed simultaneously as pathological and as a hallmark of virtue, leading to a fundamental contradiction ‘rooted in the matter of the dividing line between required and morbid behaviour.’⁵⁷ The symbolic openness of laughter and smiles, I propose, offered a partial resolution to the ideological contradiction that Wood identifies, insofar as feminine merriment was conceptualised as socially acceptable, but also as healthy expression. In reality, the expectation that women should put a bright face on their sufferings must have led to further forms of repression (‘I was used to wearing a placid smiling countenance when my heart was bitter within me,’ records Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*.)⁵⁸ But since feminine cheerfulness was supposed to be *natural*, not forced – spontaneous, not an effort – in

⁵⁶ Shuttleworth, pp. 76-8, 88-91.

⁵⁷ Jane Wood, *Passion and Pathology in Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 15, 53.

⁵⁸ Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey* (1847), ed. by Robert Inglesfield and Hilda Marsden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 127.

theory it functioned as a vent for feelings; as necessary emotional release. Figured as defeating rather than simply suppressing or concealing bitterness and discontent, idealisation of the ‘smiling countenance’ enabled feminine virtue to be imagined in conjunction with a seemingly uninhibited healthy body – in symbolic opposition to the morbid dangers of repression and ‘inwardness.’

Thus, the observation of physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater, that ‘Woman laughs, man smiles; woman weeps, man remains silent’ appears logical – despite those celebrations of immoderate laughter which imply that it is a masculine activity – following assumptions about women’s lack of control over their bodies.⁵⁹ The silent smile requires masculine restraint, where laughter and tears are affective impulses that women cannot (and should not) resist. Gesa Stedman sheds further light on what at first glance seems incongruous – the (early) Victorian encouragement of laughter – by describing nineteenth-century policies of expression and repression in terms of balance: ‘being too open-hearted and willing to express one’s emotions without any restraint whatsoever’ was unacceptable, Stedman summarises, but ‘the absence of all emotional expression not only implied the unhealthy absence of all feeling, but also rendered it impossible to judge what kind of class an individual belonged to, and what type of character he or she represented.’⁶⁰ As we have seen, in early nineteenth-century

⁵⁹ J. C. Lavater, *Physiognomy; or, the Corresponding Analogy Between the Conformation of the Features and the Ruling Passions of the Mind* [trans. by Samuel Shaw, c. 1790], (London: Cowie, Low & Co., 1826), p. 220. Lavater’s ideas will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. The contradiction between ideals of masculine restraint and immoderate laughter will be addressed at the conclusion of Chapter Two.

⁶⁰ Gesa Stedman, *Stemming the Torrent: Expression and Control in the Victorian Discourses on Emotions, 1830-1872* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), p. 55. Stedman further observes that, for middle-class writers on the subject of emotion, ‘What they deem to be correct and authentic emotional behaviour is contrasted with aristocratic pride and lack of true feeling on the one hand. On the other hand it is lower class immorality and the dangers of the impassioned “mob”’ (p. 123). It is significant, then, that writing on laughter in the first half of the century turns regularly to Chesterfield (as its example of ‘aristocratic pride and lack of true feeling’) whereas later writers dwelt more on lower class laughter as an uncivilized or unpleasant spectacle.

discourse it is the latter set of concerns that inform the ideal laugh; ‘being too open-hearted’ is not an issue. The ‘dangers of emotional expression’ were balanced (and in the case of laughter outweighed) by the factors that made emotional expression important and desirable: ‘it serves as relief, it is a medium of human sympathy, it is expressive of the beautiful and therefore pleasing [and] it enables the reading of another person’s mind.’⁶¹ These reasons are obviously pertinent to the accounts of laughter considered above, which stress the value of laughter as relief and as a medium of sympathy – and they take on further applicability to *women’s* laughter in highlighting the perceived benefits of somatic expression for the display of the beautiful and pleasing. But also relevant is the issue of legibility – the importance of women’s free and spontaneous laughter in enabling her to be read, judged and controlled.

The evocation of laughter towards disciplinary ends may be glimpsed in Harriet Martineau’s *Deerbrook* (1839), a serious novel in which the moral worth and strength of the central characters is consistently demonstrated by their cheerful and contented laughter. It is their untiring readiness to laugh merrily at all opportunities, and especially in the face of adversity, or in response to the sourness or cynicism of others, which illustrates their essential soundness of disposition, and their ability to rise above the petty follies and bitter feelings of their social circle. The moral development of the secondary heroine, Hester, is highlighted through her increasing willingness to give over grumbling and instead laugh at her misfortunes; significantly, she learns from her husband (Hope) who is emphatically jovial – often to a somewhat strained pitch – in direct proportion to the direness of his circumstances.⁶² As the second part of this chapter will suggest, the novels of Dickens perfectly capture the amenability of such

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶² Harriet Martineau, *Deerbrook*, ed. by Valerie Sanders (London: Penguin, 2004). See for instance pp. 370, 372, 408, 421, 428, 555-7.

wholesome, positive mirth to the conveying of conservative messages, and to the upholding of the feminine ideal.⁶³ Dickens's biggest laughers – his Tony Wellers, John Browdies and Lawrence Boythornes – laugh uproariously and corporeally, but his women *do* join in, if not with such vividly described gusto. He championed what might be described as fire-side mirth; laughter of the heart *and* of the hearth. Preserving the 'manly' spirit of boisterous good fun in the Fielding and Smollett tradition, he replaced risqué raucousness with family-friendly humour, resulting in a domestication and sentimentalizing of hearty laughter, and of the figure of the humorist, more thorough and influential than had yet been effected. In doing so, Dickens established not just a jolly mood or an appetite for humour, but an ideal *way of laughing*, through images which – in their rendering of lightheartedness as at once compulsive and compulsory – epitomise the oppressive optimism that is represented as so problematic in Brontë's novels.

II

Laughing faces: Dickens and the 'right sort of merriment'

George Orwell, in illustration of his claim that 'when one reads any strongly individual piece of writing, one has the impression of seeing a face somewhere behind the page', came up with a revealing mental picture of Dickens:

He is laughing, with a touch of anger in his laughter, but no triumph, no malignity. It is the face of a man who is always fighting against something, but who fights in the open and is not frightened, the face of a man who is *generously angry*.⁶⁴

⁶³ Laughter in Dickens's novels is inclusive and levelling, even, in the sense that it reaches across class (as well as gender) boundaries; by 'conservative' I mean to suggest that – insofar as it promotes social unity *instead* of protest – the tendencies of the laughter discussed in the next section are towards cheerful content (and thus, the status quo) rather than dissatisfaction and unrest.

⁶⁴ George Orwell, 'Charles Dickens' (1940), in the *Penguin Essays of George Orwell* (London: Penguin, 1984), pp. 41-84 (pp. 83-4). Orwell's emphasis.

Orwell here balances Dickens's 'anger' (at social injustice) with the open generosity of his character; the 'fighting' spirit of his satire is made noble by the earnestness of his feelings, his lack of concealment – a transparency which enables Orwell to visualise his writings in terms of a particular kind of face. This is a characteristically laughing face because Dickens's novels are comedic, but the laughter is without any trace of Hobbesian 'triumph' or 'malignity', as Dickens's style of comedy is essentially good-natured, free from egotistical aggression or bitterness.

Right from the beginning of his career, Dickens was equated with laughter in much the same way that Orwell would seize on this laughing image as a representative one. As one early critic observed, this was laughter that caught on fast:

Our readers cannot fail to have observed the sudden turn for the comic, which has recently discovered itself in the literary public ... The appetite for the jocose, the farcical, the extravagant, is immoderate. It is no longer 'Laughter holding both its sides,' but 'Laughter literally unable to hold its sides.' Accordingly, the magazines have become as funny as it was in their power to become; and, although it is very hard to be funny to order, and fun of that sort is generally very hard, there never was such a quality of obstreperous mirth brought into the market before ... There is no doubt that this sudden taste for crowding upon the sunny side of the road, was originally generated by a facetious gentleman who, for some months, escaped detection under the name of 'Boz'.⁶⁵

Despite the reviewer's seeming disapproval here, the review is on the whole an admiring one which embraces the 'immoderate' new appetite for humour which, 'there

⁶⁵ 'Some Thoughts on Arch-Waggery, and in especial, on the Genius of "Boz",' *Court Magazine*, 10 (1837), 185-7 (p. 186). (The allusion to 'Laughter holding both [his] sides' is a common one, from Milton's *L'Allegro*, and 'Boz' was Dickens's pen name at this time.) As E. B. Hamley would recall, Dickens 'dawned ... like a revelation. Before *Pickwick* there seems to us to have been but a serious world of it, with plenty of pathos, poetry, romance, and character, but (except here and there occasional glimpses of humour exciting a smile or a chuckle, seldom a laugh) a decided draught of this last-mentioned element, till it then burst forth in a genial irresistible flood, sweeping down all restraints of primness and puritanism.' 'Remonstrance with Dickens', *Blackwood's*, 81 (1857), 490-503 (p. 491).

is no doubt' had been inspired by a single figure – Dickens was early recognised to have been influential in bringing 'the jocose, the farcical, the extravagant' to the centre of literary life.⁶⁶ As Malcolm Andrews recognises, 'Dickens's genius as a humorist was the result of his skilful and strenuous cultivation of a community of readers who would laugh with him, and who would come to relish his particular idiosyncratic humour' – his 'principal mission in the mid 1830s was to convert his audience to "Dickensian" humour.'⁶⁷

Aside from its distinct formal features, the humour that Dickens so successfully generated and made popular was most often acclaimed – from the 30s until after his death – for its warmth and innocence (the latter judgement implying both good nature and respectability). Although some would come to find this warmth and innocence tedious, while others felt on the contrary that it was disappointingly lacking in the later novels, still he remained the nation's most cherished humorist, remarkable for having 'such a store of laughter – legitimate, open-hearted, good-natured laughter', as Ruskin wrote.⁶⁸ He was 'never attracted for a moment towards any prurient or unhealthy field of laughter', and he 'stirred the sympathy of masses ... and always stirred healthy, generous emotions, [modifying] the Literature of his age, in its spirit no less than in form.'⁶⁹ Dickens's rejection of any 'prurient or unhealthy field of laughter' was inseparable from his 'open-heartedness' – he stirred 'healthy, generous' sympathies and emotions instead of embittered ones, avoiding an unhealthy satirical tone as carefully as he avoided impropriety.

⁶⁶ And, indeed, to the marketplace – recall George Vasey's rant about the 'princely incomes' generated by 'comedians' able to 'stimulate their readers' pectoral muscles.'

⁶⁷ Andrews, p. 1.

⁶⁸ John Ruskin, letter of January 1863, in *Dickens: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Philip Collins (New York: Barnes & Noble, 1971), p. 443.

⁶⁹ [R. H. Hutton], 'Mr Dickens's Moral Services to Literature', in the *Spectator*, 17 April 1869 (pp. 474-5), p. 475, and G. H. Lewes, 'Dickens in Relation to Criticism', p. 143.

Before considering the conflict between Dickens's good-natured laughter and his politics, it must first be pointed out that, in praising his style of humour through reference to the spirit of his 'laughter', the critics (as Orwell would do in the twentieth century) were implicitly responding not just to the tenor of his jokes but to the treatment and presentation of laughter itself in the novels. Dickens consolidated his reputation and influence through images of precisely the kind of laughter that his novels were renowned for generating. This was laughter that crossed gender and class boundaries, the charismatic characteristics of the amiable humorist (usually a portly gentleman) being extended to lower-class figures such as Tony Weller, and scenes of male camaraderie giving way to domestic, mixed-gender circles like the following from the *Pickwick Papers*:

Meanwhile the round game proceeded right merrily ... the whole table was in a perpetual roar of merriment and laughter. There was one old lady who always had about half a dozen cards to pay for, at which everybody laughed, regularly every round; and when the old lady looked cross at having to pay, they laughed louder than ever; on which the old lady's face gradually brightened up, till at last she laughed louder than any of them. [Then] the young ladies laughed afresh, and the spinster aunt seemed disposed to be pettish; till, feeling Mr Tupman squeezing her hand under the table, *she* brightened up too ... whereupon everybody laughed again ... And Mr. Winkle came out with jokes [and] everybody laughed at them very heartily ... And the benevolent clergyman looked pleasantly on; for the happy faces which surrounded the table made the good old man feel happy too; and though the merriment was rather boisterous, still it came from the heart and not from the lips: and this is the right sort of merriment, after all.⁷⁰

It is surely through such descriptive scenes (in which Mr. Winkle's jokes remain unspecified) that Dickens established his reputation as champion of 'the right sort of

⁷⁰ Dickens, *Pickwick*, pp. 83-4.

merriment.’ Bitter feelings and discord are swallowed up by this all-encompassing ‘perpetual roar of merriment and laughter’; everybody laughs at the old lady who looks cross until she is laughing with them, with the mere increase in volume enough to overcome dissent, as if by force of persistence. It is repeatedly stressed that ‘the whole table’ or ‘everybody’ is included; any sense of competitiveness is banished from the game, while the boisterousness of the laughter is sanctioned by the ‘benevolent clergyman’, to whom the merriment inevitably spreads.⁷¹

Such laughter – heart-warming, highly contagious, and often independent of any humorous cause – recurs with an emphasis in Dickens’s early novels. The hearty laughter of Kit Nubbles in the *Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1) makes his little brother laugh, ‘and then his mother laughed, and then the baby crowed and kicked with great glee, and then they all laughed in concert, partly because of Kit’s triumph, and partly because they were very fond of each other.’⁷² Kit’s ‘triumph’ is quickly dissolved into the broader laughter of familial love and good feeling, emptied of smugness. The laughter is oddly emphatic in its very inoffensiveness, but it does serve its purposes – when Mrs. Nubbles falls prey to the Methodists, Kit recalls her to reason by commanding her to be cheerful:

‘Just hear this! Ha, ha, ha! An’t that as nat’ral as walking, and as good for the health?

Ha, ha, ha! An’t that as nat’ral as a sheep’s bleating, or a pig’s grunting, or a horse’s

⁷¹ John Kucich, in a summary suggestive of the crossover between sentimental and carnivalesque that Dickens’s works achieve, argues that the ‘spirit of conviviality [which] infuses his familial society, represents an important affective shift, replacing paternalistic decorum and ritual with an implicitly levelling festivity.’ See Kucich, ‘Modernization and the Organic Society’, in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820-1880*, ed. by Kucich and Taylor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 343-60 (p. 353). It is just this combination of the ‘convivial’ with the ‘levelling’ (or alternatively, the sentimental with the carnivalesque) that is apparent in Dickens’s laughing scenes. John Bowen describes Dickens as ‘characteristically Victorian in his eschewing of the comedy of the lower bodily stratum [but] still fascinated by bodily processes, particularly eating and drinking.’ Bowen, ‘Comic and Satirical’, p. 274. I would add laughter – which exemplifies the unlikely alliance of grotesque physicality and moral wholesomeness – to the bodily processes that fascinate Dickens.

⁷² Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, ed. by Norman Page (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 113.

neighing, or a bird's singing?' [...] There was something contagious in Kit's laugh, for his mother, who had looked grave before, first subsided into a smile, and then fell to joining in it heartily ... Kit and his mother, laughing together in a pretty loud key, woke the baby, who, finding that there was something very jovial and agreeable in progress, [began] to kick and laugh most vigorously... After recovering twice or thrice, and as often relapsing, [Kit] wiped his eyes and said grace; and a very cheerful meal their scanty supper was.⁷³

Despite it being 'nat'ral as a sheep's bleating', Kit sustains this hilarity on the basis of quite literally nothing, launching into his laughter on the pronouncement of 'Just hear this!' His authoritative rescue of the family through good example is underscored by his smooth transition from joviality to (reasonable) religious gravity, taking charge to say grace. Just as the pettishness of the spinster aunt in *Pickwick* is resolved by the amiable pressure of Tupman's hand, and just as Martineau's Hester learns to laugh from her husband, so Kit is able to guide and persuade his adult mother through his brightening influence.⁷⁴ Moreover, he ensures that their 'scanty supper' is a cheerful one – being an upbeat rather than grumbling family, the Nubbles are easily made content, being sustained by wholesome laughter.

As Dickens's novels became less benignly humorous, so his descriptions of laughter became less insistent, less vivid – a fact which is as relevant to his increased commitment to serious social themes as the perceived comedic decline that accompanied it. As Philip Collins suggests, part of the reason why Dickens began receiving an 'onslaught' of 'sustained critical rejection' from the 1850s was that 'the sense of social "purpose" was increasingly insistent in the novels from *Bleak House*

⁷³ Ibid., pp. 173-4.

⁷⁴ Kit's influence extends also to Little Nell, who '[bursts] into a hearty laugh' in his presence, 'childlike and full of hilarity' (p. 15). But it is Kit who has the ability to bring this laughter out, and its essentially sympathetic, womanly nature is stressed: 'when her laugh was over, the child's bright eyes were dimmed with tears, called forth [by] fulness of heart'; soon afterwards those eyes are 'lighting up with merriment and kindness' (pp. 16-7).

onwards, while the humour was less abundant and genial, and many critics resented the loss of the latter and found the new “darkness” gloomy and the political implications pernicious.⁷⁵ The darkness of tone reflected the author’s increased indignation, but along with the lighter touches disappeared (or rather faded) the ‘happy faces’ that had been so prominent in the earlier novels – depictions of well-contented merriment (cheerful enjoyment of scanty suppers) proved incompatible with social protest, and with the fiercer satirical tone that this demanded.⁷⁶ In a ‘Remonstrance with Dickens’ (1857), E. B. Hamley lamented the days when Dickens was a humorist, instead of a social reformer:

Formerly, his impulses came from within ... A booby who aims at being thought a thinker [assures him] that his greatest strength lies in [addressing social problems] and straightway Dickens, the genial Dickens, overflowing by nature with the most rampant hearty fun, addresses himself to the melancholy task. [Thus] the old natural, easy, unconscious Pickwickian style has given place to one to which all those epithets are totally inapplicable; and the characteristics of which, always to us unpleasant, are growing more prominent in every successive work.⁷⁷

Writing for the Tory *Blackwood’s*, Hamley captures the insinuations of Dickens criticism at its most condescending, characterising the author as non-intellectual, naturally and unconsciously ‘overflowing’ with genius, but easily misguided.

⁷⁵ Collins, Introduction to the *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Collins, pp. 1-26 (p. 13). According to Tave (p. 243), ‘the majority of nineteenth-century readers wanted to stay with *Pickwick* and were unwilling to be led out of the cheerful confines of amiable humor to a ground less familiar and comforting.’

⁷⁶ I should qualify this by pointing out that I agree with James Kincaid (pp. 4-5), that critics have made ‘an over-facile and generally false distinction between the dark and the funny Dickens, and between the early and the late novels.’ Kincaid rightly disputes ‘the notion that the humour is somehow detached from major concerns or that it functions mainly as a holiday or relief and the notion that it is genial, soft, or humanitarian.’ However, in characterising the *laughter* described in the early novels as genial, soft and humanitarian, I do not mean to make a corresponding point about the tendencies of Dickens’s humour. Rather than making any overarching statement about the lightness or innocence of the early novels, I am concerned with the shift in Dickens’s general self-presentation and his representations of laughter, and with the shift in critical perceptions.

⁷⁷ [Hamley], ‘Remonstrance with Dickens’, pp. 495-6.

Essentially Hamley feminizes Dickens, and in doing so underscores the ‘feminine’ qualities of the genial humour that he was supposed to represent.⁷⁸ The epithets ‘natural, easy, unconscious’ and the notion of coming ‘from within’ apply equally to the ‘Pickwickian style’ and to the hearty laughter that the early novels are at such pains to portray. And the article’s conservative position is not hard to detect: Dickens’s move from feeling to thinking, from fun to melancholy, results in an ‘unpleasant’ tendency towards seditious grumbling.

While the early novels are certainly not lacking in radical satire, there is an incompatibility between the ‘open-hearted, good-natured’ laughter with which they caught the literary imagination, and their drive to correct social wrongs. As I suggested in the introduction to this chapter, it is popularly assumed that there is a natural equation between laughter (especially of the boisterous, spirited sort) and insurrection or subversion, yet this does not always hold up to scrutiny. Sally Ledger has pointed to the ‘political power of laughter’ in Dickens’s novels, specifically in his courtroom scenes, drawing on Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque. She notes that ‘the disruption of official, authoritative discourse by the laughter of the lower orders has a long history in radical culture, a history that would echo down the years in several of Dickens’s novels’, and cites instances where ‘festive laughter erupts in the official sphere, breaking down strictly erected boundaries between official and unofficial discourse, [so]

⁷⁸ For the critical habit of identifying Dickens with the feminine, through praise of the instinctive (rather than rational or intellectual) qualities of his writing, see for instance Jean Ferguson Carr, ‘Writing as a Woman: Dickens, *Hard Times* and Feminine Discourses’, in *Charles Dickens*, ed. by Steven Connor (London: Longman, 1996) pp. 159-77. But as Andrew Sanders notes, the perception of this kind of genius could also call forth less qualified praise, in the form of comparisons with Shakespeare, from critics for whom ‘Dickens’s appeal to the heart rather than to the head allows us to see the world as informed by harmony and universal values’ – ‘Dickens’s comedy was ... accepted by many of his original readers as expressive of a benign world-view in which human nature was interwoven with the nature of Nature itself.’ See Sanders, ‘Dickens and the Idea of the Comic Novel’, *Yearbook of English Studies*, 36 (2006) 51-64 (p. 56).

that a radical effect is produced.⁷⁹ Certainly, Dickens does evoke laughter in such a context – notably the witticisms of Sam Weller and Jack Dawkins cause disruptive eruptions of anti-establishment laughter – but these instances are not the most frequent nor the most characteristic; it is not the ‘innocent’ laughter with which Dickens, especially at this stage in his career, was so strongly identified.

The case of urchin Charley Bates in *Oliver Twist* (1837-9) provides an indication that Dickens’s favoured species of laughter is essentially inoffensive and non-political, and that ‘belly laughter’ for Dickens is more suggestive of well-rounded bellies than of hungry ones. Whereas the more artful Dodger, for all his mischievous ability to raise laughter, is himself ‘of a rather saturnine disposition, and seldom gave way to merriment when it interfered with business’, Charley frequently bursts into uncontrollable fits of boisterous laughter on the slightest or no provocation.⁸⁰ Not so clever as the Dodger, his ‘irrepressible ebullitions of mirth’ and ‘violent roars’ are suggestive of his tender feelings and easygoing temperament, for which he is ultimately rewarded, where Dawkins is punished.⁸¹ Repelled by the murder of Nancy, Charley is converted to ‘an honest life’, turning his back on the leering faces of the criminal underworld: ‘He struggled hard [but] having a contented disposition and a good purpose, succeeded in the end; and, from being a farmer’s drudge ... is now the merriest young grazier in all Northamptonshire.’⁸² Charley rises up (and settles down) in the

⁷⁹ Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 48-9, 46. See also Joseph M. Butwin, ‘Seditious Laughter’, *Radical History Review*, 18 (1978), 17-34.

⁸⁰ Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. by Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 128.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 128, 201.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 452-3. The other prominent laughter in the novel is the ‘kind and hearty’ Mr. Losberne, who ‘had grown fat’ from ‘good humour’ (p. 237). Oliver has considerably more fun in such jolly middle-class company than he experiences with Fagan’s crew, Losberne causing Oliver ‘to laugh proportionately, to the evident satisfaction of the doctor, who laughed immoderately ... and made Harry laugh almost as heartily by the very force of sympathy’ (p. 279). This laughter is very different from the ‘hysterical’ laughter of Nancy (p. 132). Unlike Charley’s outbursts, the violence with which Nancy ‘[bursts] out

world without having to be sobered or subdued, as might be expected from such a narrative. On the contrary, his eruptions of mirth, far from serving as grotesque symptoms of lower-class depravity or imbecility (or as proofs of canny political consciousness) are meant as evidence of his innate good nature and healthy lungs, paving the way for our final view of him as a respectable member of society, prosperous and merry in a wholesome rural setting. Healthy body, healthy morals and social contentment are once again inseparably exhibited in hearty laughter.

Deviant faces: the wrong sort of merriment

If hearty laughter as depicted by Dickens is not politically charged in any satisfyingly subversive way, still, who could possibly take objection to Mr. Pickwick, who laughs ‘so heartily that it would have been quite delightful to any man of well-constituted mind to have watched the smiles which expanded his amiable features as they shone forth from beneath the night-cap’?⁸³ The answer lies in that appeal to the reader – the man of presumed ‘well-constituted mind.’ Before coming specifically to Brontë’s likely reasons for hostility towards merriment as represented by Dickens, this section will address the ways in which laughter in Dickens’s novels might be read not just as tame and non-incendiary but as actively oppressive and coercive – putting a darker slant on the point made by Andrews, that ‘not to be in on Boz’s jokes implied exclusion from the circle he was so successfully drawing round him ... Those who could somehow withstand the

laughing’ (pp. 125, 374), though it similarly lacks composure (p. 132), is clearly indicative neither of health nor good cheer. She laughs loudly but ‘without merriment’ (p. 371), with a ‘deadly white face’ (p. 127). However, Nancy’s laughter serves the same purpose as Charley’s in that it endears her to the reader, affirming her essential goodness and innocence in the midst of criminal depravity. More particularly, it is offered to the reader as proof of her essential *femininity*, despite her degraded position as a prostitute. As evidence of her ‘strong passions’, that is (p. 131), Nancy’s laughter reminds us that she is a vulnerable, feeling woman, subject to the body: if her hysterical impulses are a product of her unhealthy surroundings, they also emanate (spontaneously) from the heart, not the head (her sympathies being awakened, and her reason being deranged). When her laughter is ‘forced’ it is a poor disguise for her innate ‘woman’s tenderness’ and ‘sweetness of tone’, and, as with Nell, her laughter is not easily separable from tears (pp. 318, 329).

⁸³ Dickens, *Pickwick*, p. 300.

humorous onslaught were to be pitied: indeed as the years rolled on and Dickens changed the culture of humour, were such people desirable as one's companions?'⁸⁴ Certainly, I contest, there is an aggressive element to Dickens's moral crusade, not so much in its 'humorous onslaught' but in the terms it sets for social inclusion and normalcy.

'Amiable' and 'delightful' Dickensian laughter has its dark opposite. Indeed, laughter is evoked almost as frequently to illustrate evil as it is to emphasise goodness: it is the defining habit of corrupt characters such as Daniel Quilp and James Carker, whose threatening grins routinely come into play when their evil thoughts are at work.⁸⁵ Dickens's characters must be incorporated into the united groups, the laughing circles that he assembles, or else they fall into the wrong camp – either stiffly serious, or a malicious villain, and either way in need of being taken down a peg. Vilifying or ridiculing those who do not fall in with 'the right kind of merriment', Dickens's language of laughter essentially works to marginalise misfits, demonising anti-social feeling in such a way as to allow for no middle ground. In simplifying and polarising extremes of feeling (good and ill) Dickens bluntly consolidates the taboo around anti-social personalities and tendencies towards satire or bitterness: 'In short, the poor Nicklebys were social and happy; while the rich Nickleby was alone and miserable.'⁸⁶ As I argued in Part One, the positive formulation of (morally) healthy laughter was effective at damning any 'unhealthy' variant, and this is nowhere more rigorously

⁸⁴ Andrews, p. 9. As suggested by the pressure put on Thackeray to soften the tone of his satire (which I will discuss in the next section), this kind of 'onslaught' impacts on literary standards as well as readers and characters. As Tave acknowledges, 'all-inclusive humor is, certainly, exclusive in its own way. It depreciates other comic values, and it rejects authors and whole ages that do not live by its standards' (p. 240).

⁸⁵ Graeme Tytler notes (but does not explore at length) Dickens's 'special use of smiles and laughter by way of suggesting character.' See Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 224.

⁸⁶ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, ed. by Mark Ford (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 437.

accomplished than in Dickens's works. As he festively pronounces in *A Christmas Carol* (1843), 'there is nothing in the world so irresistibly contagious as laughter and good-humour.'⁸⁷ This healthy contagion is portrayed as relentlessly inclusive and expansive, but it necessarily has its outsiders.

Juliet John observes that 'the inwardly focussed individual in Dickens's work ... is almost always deviant or at the least morally conflicted. To Dickens, mental and social health depended on directing one's energies away from the self.'⁸⁸ The language of 'inward' and 'outward' energies runs through nineteenth-century descriptions of laughter, with 'open' laughter being directed outward not only in its bodily force and the sound it carries as an *expression* of feeling, but also in its sociable nature – it reaches out and spreads to others. Suppressed or understated laughter and smiles suggest a morbidly introspective, and therefore anti-social personality, or at least unhealthy habits of broody over-thinking. And the inability to laugh naturally and spontaneously is not just criticised but pathologised by Dickens: while inward laughter in *Pickwick* is ominously compared to inward bleeding, David Copperfield is horrified to observe that the crafty Uriah Heep 'had not such a thing as a smile about him, and that he could only widen his mouth and make two hard creases down his cheeks, one on each side, to stand for one.' Uriah, who later laughs 'as heartily as it was in his nature to laugh' is condemned as a thoroughly unnatural being, whose artificial performance cannot hide

⁸⁷ As in *Nickleby*, this conviction is illustrated through the contrast between an uncle and nephew: Scrooge's nephew laughs 'holding his sides, rolling his head, and twisting his face into the most extravagant contortions.' Note, again, that this morally educating spectacle of immoderate laughter spreads to women and the wider company: 'Scrooge's niece, by marriage, laughed as heartily as he. And their assembled friends being not a bit behindhand, roared out, lustily [...] his example was unanimously followed.' It is clear again in this scene that the laughter has little to do with humour, and everything to do with peaceable conviviality: 'being thoroughly good-natured, and not much caring what they laughed at, so that they laughed at any rate, [Scrooge's nephew] encouraged them in their merriment, and passed the bottle, joyously.' Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, in *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Writings*, ed. by Michael Slater (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 27-118 (pp. 87-9).

⁸⁸ John, 'Melodrama', *Charles Dickens in Context*, ed. by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 133-9 (p. 136). See also Andrews, p. 133.

his lack of a smile (and so, of human sympathy). Instead of being passively doubled up by the natural force of laughter, he ‘double[s] himself up with laughter. With perfectly silent laughter. Not a sound escaped him.’⁸⁹ His essential deviancy is conveyed through laughter that is falsely demonstrative but also curiously obstructed, alternately reflecting dried up human impulses, and frustrated, pent-up bitterness.⁹⁰

Nicholas Nickleby (1838-9) is particularly emphatic in its establishment of a laughing community, outside of which is Ralph Nickleby, possessor of ‘a smile, which, in common with all other tokens of emotion, seemed to skulk under his face, rather than play boldly over it.’⁹¹ He is infuriated by the honesty and warmth of Nicholas and his genial employers the Cheeryble brothers, from whom emotions are positively exuded, illuminating and playing boldly over the face. On first encountering one of the brothers, Nicholas is struck by his ‘clear, twinkling, honest, merry, happy eye’, the ‘pleasant smile playing about his mouth’, and the ‘simplicity, kind-heartedness, and good-humour lighting up his jolly old face’, so much so that he ‘would have been content to have stood there and looked at him until evening, and to have forgotten meanwhile that there was such a thing as a soured mind or a crabbed countenance to be

⁸⁹ Dickens, *David Copperfield* (1849-50), ed. by Nina Burgis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 228, 592, 593.

⁹⁰ In other words, laughter for Uriah is not ‘nat’ral as a sheep’s bleating’. Quilp in the *Old Curiosity Shop*, on the other hand, is a fascinating exception to the clear-cut way that Dickens generally divides the hearty and emotional from the cold and cunning – his calculated malice is monstrously blended with whole-hearted enjoyment of others’ suffering. For instance, he displays this contradictoriness ‘by a suppressed cackling in his throat, and a motion of his shoulders, like one who laughs heartily but at the same time slyly and by stealth’ (p. 45), or he laughs ‘slyly and noiselessly, until every vein [was] swollen almost to bursting ... moved by some secret impulse’ (p. 384). With Quilp, Dickens uses positive and sinister language in combination, as though in ironic imitation of the good characters’ laughter – thus the idea of his wife’s distress is ‘so congenial to the dwarf’s humour, and so exquisitely amusing to him, that he laughed as he went along until the tears ran down his cheeks’ while the terror of passersby ‘increased his mirth, and made him remarkably cheerful and light-hearted’ (pp. 368).

⁹¹ Dickens, *Nicholas Nickleby*, p. 226. Another time we are told that (in a gesture resembling Uriah’s forced heartiness) ‘Ralph never laughed, but on this occasion he produced the nearest approach to it that he could’, p. 417.

met with in the whole wide world.⁹² This is the ideal against which the villainous Ralph's 'soured mind' and 'crabbed countenance' are measured, and his unfitness for the wide world is resolved by his suicide – not before he resentfully reflects on his alienated nature, recalling 'with a bitter smile' the comparisons people used to draw between his brother and himself: '*He* was open, liberal, gallant, gay; *I* a crafty hunk of cold and stagnant blood.'⁹³

Dickens's villains usually remain villains, their behaviour dictated by the 'cold and stagnant blood' running through their veins, but he does allow for changes of heart – Scrooge, notably, finds the contagion of good humour 'irresistibly' catching, providing proof that 'soured minds' may be redeemed and absorbed by the warm moral embrace of laughter. But they are won over wholeheartedly or not at all – Dickens's lack of an emotional middle ground means that his insistence on 'the right sort of merriment', in all its gushing sentimentality, carries a kind of imperative force, while anything that savours of the bitter, the crafty, the 'skulking' is necessarily perverse. And while Dickens is the best representative of this idealizing strategy, his language reflects and exaggerates the wider tendencies of early to mid nineteenth-century discourse, as summarised in the first part of this chapter.

Given this coercive and pervasive emphasis on sociable laughter, Brontë's uses of language and imagery must be understood in terms of the stubborn resistance that they evince. Firstly, where Dickens draws a line between his bad and good men, with the good ones mild, merry and non-threatening, Brontë consistently represents the threatening signs of villainy as they could surface in ordinary male countenances – as I will discuss in the next chapter, the sneering physiognomy of her sinister Angrian

⁹² Ibid., p. 428.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 421 (Dickens's emphasis).

tyrants reappears throughout the later novels in the faces of her ‘good’ men. These men are imbued with a combination of admirable *and* unsettling traits, always with a disturbing emphasis placed on the cruelty or malice lurking in their laughter, so as to convey scepticism regarding the reality of good-natured masculinity. Secondly, Brontë more broadly rejects the prescriptions and usual vocabulary of healthy laughter, especially as they pertain to women, leaning to coolness over warmth, and cunning over artlessness, in depicting the laughter of her heroines. It is not merely that she avoids images of Dickensian excess, preferring the understated – her avoidance extends to the mild, soft, pleasantly cheerful smiles that hearty laughter is related to. Having said this, Brontë’s novels have long been recognised as a conflicted blend of conformist and subversive leanings and, sure enough, they do contain plenty of instances of adherence to comfortable norms. With the exception of Lucy Snowe, her heroines laugh warmly and openly, or learn to do so, by way of displaying their sociable and feminine qualities; hearty laughter when it emerges (most prominently in the case of Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar) is a signal of their, and their author’s, concession to popular taste. But Brontë diverges frequently and unnervingly from this model, introducing the satirical sneer to faces where it is definitely not supposed to appear, and these divergences are conspicuous and significant.

Brontë’s recorded opinions of Dickens’s writing, compared with the many comments she made in letters about Thackeray, are few – we know that she read his work, we know that she had reservations about it.⁹⁴ Without trying to fill the gaps with

⁹⁴ An accusation of sentimentality may be implied in a letter to Hartley Coleridge (December 1840), in which Brontë includes Dickens amongst authors who write ‘like boarding-school misses.’ *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 3 vols, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2005-7), I, p. 241. To George Smith (in March 1852), she wrote that she ‘liked the Chancery part’ of *Bleak House* (1852-3), but not Esther Summerson (‘the young woman who announces that she is not “bright”’): ‘it seems to me too often weak and twaddling – an amiable nature is caricatured’ (*Letters* III, p. 27). As well as this implied preference for intelligent heroines over amiable caricatures (the head before the heart), Brontë’s reticence about Dickens was, it seems, based on wariness of his energetic and spirited character: to George Smith (in September 1851) she characterised Dickens in terms of his ‘animal spirits’, with which she could not

precise speculation about those misgivings, which were probably mixed with more positive responses, it can be fairly stated that highly suggestive contrasts arise in any comparison of the outlook of these two writers, and these are nowhere more clearly apparent than in the differing perspectives with which they portray laughter. The laughter Dickens promotes is *energetic* – it encapsulates the popularity, the sociable impulses, and the vibrant good health which were associated both with the man and his writings as a whole. Brontë's own writings struggle against much of what Dickens stood for, and by extension against much of what her culture valued, and this perverseness can be located in the ambivalence with which she depicts, or avoids, hearty laughter. Biographical reasons immediately suggest themselves – Brontë's constant poor health and lack of physical energy, and related to this her feelings of social awkwardness and inadequacy, no doubt contributed to her sceptical take on joyful high spirits as a natural human resource.⁹⁵ But the views expressed in her fiction offer clues enough: as the ensuing chapters will explore, Brontë's novels are strongly

compete (*Letters II*, p. 687). And according to her acquaintance John Stores Smith, Brontë had met Dickens, 'and admired his genius, but did not like him. [She] shrunk from him, from an idea she had acquired of ostentatious extravagance on his part' (see Margaret Smith's notes, *Letters II*, p. 642).

⁹⁵ For instance she complained on one occasion, as a governess, of being thrown 'into the midst of a large family ... at a time when they were particularly gay', and 'soon found that the constant demand on my stock of animal spirits reduced them to the lowest state of exhaustion.' Her sense of being at odds with the world around her is conveyed in the contrasting picture of her employer, who was harshly intolerant of her depressed spirits, yet who 'is generally considered an agreeable woman ... her health is sound – her animal spirits are good – consequently she is cheerful in company' (*Letters I*, pp. 193-4). Another time she writes that 'headache, sickliness, and flatness of spirits made me a poor companion, a sad drag on the vivacious and loquacious gaiety of [others]. I begin to perceive that I have too little life in me, nowadays, to be fit company for any except very quiet people' (*Letters I*, p. 382). The 'tyranny of Hypochondria' Brontë recalls as 'healthy nerves buried [in] a subterranean dungeon ... I could have been no better company [than] a stalking ghost' (*Letters I*, p. 505). In other letters she associates pain and sickness with 'cruelly depressed' spirits, or complains that her 'wretched liver ... hinders me in working – depresses both power and tone of feeling' (*Letters III*, pp. 57, 68). The ongoing experience of ill health impacted not only on her capacity for cheerfulness and on the 'tone' of her writing, but, it seems, on her sensitivity to the laughter of others – to 'ridicule which owing to my miserable and wretched touchiness of character used formerly to make me wince as if I had been touched with a hot iron: things that nobody else cares for enter into my mind and rankle there like venom. I know these feelings are absurd [but] they only sting the deeper for concealment' (*Letters I*, p. 152). Her friend Ellen described her displeasure at the 'lively & noisy ... mirth' of some young people (*Letters I*, p. 404). At home, however, Brontë records being able to laugh with a stranger because there she is 'at ease' and 'never weighed down & oppressed by that miserable mauvaise honte which torments & constrains me elsewhere' (*Letters I*, p. 198).

insistent on individual willpower, and implicitly privilege frail physicality over more fleshy, healthy bodies, which she associates with mental and moral inferiority. Laughter which represents the succumbing of the intellect to bodily indulgence is thus cause for contempt, while the kind of laughter associated with guzzling consumption and jolly company is even less likely to be viewed with complacency. Moreover, despite staging a balanced contest between head and heart, the treatment of feeling in Brontë's novels is largely stripped of the sentimentality which plays such a big part in Dickens's writing.

Such an assessment hardly complements recent efforts to critically rescue sentimentality, and Dickensian sentimentality in particular, from modern distaste – nor is it aligned with readings of the sophisticated, and often radical purposes to which Dickens puts his affective energies.⁹⁶ However my intention is neither to dispute the value of sentiment indiscriminately, nor to subscribe to simplifications to the effect that, for instance, he ‘writes to the hearts, not to the heads, of his readers’,⁹⁷ but rather to show the ways in which Dickens himself pointedly figured laughter in terms of heart over head, in such a way as to idealise comfortable domesticity and discourage transgressive behaviour. Thus, Brontë's objection to affect as manifested in sentimental cheerfulness is not rooted in the kind of class-based suspicion that led Trollope, for instance, to contemptuously label Dickens ‘Mr. Popular Sentiment.’⁹⁸ Indeed, this strain of critical hostility towards Dickens (along with increased disapproval of full-bodied

⁹⁶ For an overview, see Bethan Carney's introduction to *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 14: *Dickens and Feeling* (2012). In the same issue, Ben Winyard provides an interesting discussion of the divisive effects of supposedly unifying festivity, comparing hostile reactions to Dickensian sentimentality and to his bicentennial celebrations, on the grounds that both ‘convey a sensation of compulsoriness, a mandated and naturalized obligation to feel in a particular, limited way.’ The ‘imperative to be happy and celebratory governs our responses to the Dickens bicentenary.’ See Winyard, “‘Should I feel a moment with you?’: Queering Dickensian Feeling’, *19*, 14 (2012), <www.19.bbk.ac.uk> [last accessed 22 April 2015] (paras 4 and 9 of 9).

⁹⁷ Review in *Bentley's Miscellany* (1853), cited in *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Collins, pp. 287-9 (p. 289).

⁹⁸ In his novel *The Warden* (1855). For more on the rise in such attitudes, see Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens* (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2003), pp. 100-1.

laughter) arose from the 1850s onwards; enthusiasm for him remained largely unshaken in Brontë's lifetime. Though certainly she is prone to intellectual snobbery, the rigidity and unease towards open laughter that we will find in Brontë's novels does not make her a sniffy exponent of what Bakhtin calls the 'official culture', as challenged by the big-hearted, universal and uplifting laughter of Dickens. Aside from her sceptical focus on the marginalising and damaging effects of supposedly all-inclusive laughter, we find resistance to the 'feminine' qualities it insists on, which she links to the suppression of women's intellect and their dissatisfactions. In other words, if Dickens's healthy, good-natured laughter generally sits comfortably with mainstream values, Brontë's favouring of darker, anti-social smiles must be recognised as a subversive rather than snobbish streak in her writing, and a rejection of cloying, suffocating expectations.

Thackeray: 'a humorist in the other category'

The weight of Dickens's influence, the general enthusiasm for sentimental laughter, and the pressure to conform that this created, is best illustrated by turning now to Brontë's favourite contemporary writer Thackeray, whose *Vanity Fair* (1847-8) launched him to the centre of the literary scene, where he was routinely compared with Dickens. Never matching Dickens's popularity, Thackeray did gain favour with the critics – however, praise (especially in early reviews, from both sides of the Atlantic) was balanced with a measure of disapproval, a feeling that too bleak and cynical a picture of human nature was painted. This was frequently expressed through unfavourable comparisons with Dickens. For instance, Thackeray is 'inferior' to Dickens; 'his geniality is [not] genuine ... Instead of welling up with perennial jollity, like our most good-humored of humorous authors, he is evidently a little *blasé*, and somewhat disposed to be cynical.'⁹⁹ Or, as the

⁹⁹ [Charles Astor Bristed], 'Vanity Fair', *American Review* (1848), in *William Thackeray: the Critical Heritage*, ed. by Geoffrey Tillotson and Donald Hawes (London and New York: Routledge, 1968) pp. 68-76 (p. 70.)

North British Review asked, ‘Why is Mr. Dickens, on the whole, genial, kindly, and romantic, and Mr. Thackeray, on the whole, caustic, shrewd, and satirical in his fictions?’¹⁰⁰ Reviewers would increasingly compare Thackeray’s ‘gentlemanly’ style favourably with Dickens’s appeal to the masses (a development closely linked to the turn to conservatism in Thackeray’s novels, and to social protest in Dickens’s), but it can be seen that, initially at least, Thackeray’s leanings to ‘shrewd’ intelligence over spontaneous and expansive emotion (‘welling up with perennial jollity’) were judged with suspicion.

The essential assessment would prove a long-lasting one. As the *Dublin Review* would recap in 1871, Dickens:

may have intended sometimes to be savagely satirical, but could not keep from caricature, and with exaggeration savageness, even severity, is done away. He was infinitely droll and various in his mirthful moods, and the animal spirits which overflow through all his earlier writings abounded up to the latest of them ... Mr Thackeray was a humorist in the other category. There is a profound intellectual satisfaction in our helpless involuntary recognition of the truth of his delineations of the smallnesses, the weaknesses, the follies, and the absurdities of ourselves and our fellows, – but especially ourselves – it is so sad, with all its good humour; so depressing, with all its sparkle and finish; so savagely satirical, with all its contemptuous admission that no one is much less of a fool, or a snob, or a swindler, pretender, ass, or coquette ... than his neighbour; it has, for all its power and extent, such a monotonous *refrain*, that it does not rest or refresh.

Thackeray, in conclusion, ‘taxes the mind’ instead of ‘cheering one’s spirits.’¹⁰¹ What is bemoaned is the unhealthiness of Thackeray’s ‘intellectual’ savagery: the corollary to

¹⁰⁰ [David Masson], ‘*Pendennis and Copperfield: Thackeray and Dickens*’, *North British Review*, 15 (1851), 57-89 (p. 81).

¹⁰¹ [Frances Hoey (?)], ‘Two English Novelists: Dickens and Thackeray’, *Dublin Review*, 17 (1871), 315-50 (p. 325).

his mental powers is a lack of overflowing ‘animal spirits’; the satire taxes the intelligence without offering wholesome ‘refreshment.’¹⁰² Thus for Robert Bell the ‘obvious defect’ of *Vanity Fair* is the excess of ‘sneers and cynicism’ when ‘more light and air would have rendered it more agreeable and healthy’ – ‘he cannot call up a tear without dashing it off with a sarcasm’, Bell protests.¹⁰³ This perceived refusal to indulge uncritically in the sentimental (or to let his readers indulge in it) is echoed by John Forster, who complained that ‘we are seldom permitted to enjoy the appreciation of all gentle and kind things ... without some neighbouring quip or sneer.’¹⁰⁴

Just as the broad genial humour attributed to Dickens is borne out by the joyful faces depicted in his fiction, so Thackeray’s reputation can be found embodied in his fictional representations of ‘sneering’ laughter. There is no lack of hearty laughter – Karen Gindele notes the ‘violence that attaches to laughter in *Vanity Fair* ... the burst, explosion, volley, and roar’, its roots in the physical body – but such laughter is consistently undercut or rendered unpleasant, instead of being complacently celebrated. As Gindele further observes, ‘one character usually takes pleasure at the expense of

¹⁰² Such reviews perfectly illustrate Haley’s claim that ‘nineteenth-century moral physiology was reflected not only in the specialized language of science but in the more common vocabulary of the literary critic ... The Victorian critic believed that he should diagnose a work, looking for signs of disease or soundness.’ ‘Health’ and ‘wholesomeness’, Haley asserts, were emotive terms, ‘vague positive ideals demanding a general, uncritical assent about what is right and proper’ (pp. 46, 68).

¹⁰³ [Robert Bell], ‘Vanity Fair’, *Fraser’s*, 38 (1848), 320-33 (p. 322). Theodore Martin characterised the different tendencies of their satire in terms of readerly response: ‘When [Dickens] moves us to laughter, the laughter is broad and joyous ... The mirth which Thackeray moves rarely passes beyond a smile.’ [Martin], ‘Thackeray’s Works’, *Westminster Review*, 59 (1853), 363-88 (pp. 370-1).

¹⁰⁴ [John Forster], ‘The Literary Examiner’, *Examiner*, 22 July 1848 (pp. 468-70). A warning is offered in still plainer terms by a reviewer of Thackeray’s earlier writing: ‘The author is a humourist, but, unhappily, his humour lies on the ill-natured side of things, and he can hardly ever say a funny thing without blending it with a sarcasm.’ This ‘original defect of taste ... lowers the tone of his pleasantry, changes the sparkling relish to a bitter flavour [and] deprives it not only of the applause to which the writer’s merits [would otherwise] entitle him, but of all chance of being generally read.’ Unsigned review of *Comic Tales and Sketches in the Atlas* (June 1841), cited in the *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Tillotson and Hawes, pp. 18-9 (p. 19).

another's humiliation, if not downright pain.'¹⁰⁵ Sneers underlie guffaws in accordance with the novel's central image of Becky Sharp as man-eating mermaid: 'I defy any one to say that our Becky, who has certainly some vices, has not been presented to the public in a perfectly genteel and inoffensive manner', says the narrator. 'Has [the author] once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water?'¹⁰⁶ The metaphor neatly summarises Thackeray's satirical style, whereby unpleasant truths about human nature are implied but not crudely paraded before the reader. Like Ralph Nickleby's smile, which 'seemed to skulk under his face, rather than play boldly over it', Thackeray's cynicism was perceived to lurk menacingly beneath a polite surface, like the faint threat of misanthropy. 'He dissects his victims with a smile', wrote Bell, 'and performs the cruellest of operations on their self-love with a pleasantry which looks very like good nature.'¹⁰⁷ Thackeray made his readers uncomfortable – as G. H. Lewes put it, he 'arrests the complacent chuckle, and turns the laugh against the laugher.'¹⁰⁸

This discomfoting effect, then, is anticipated in the actual laughter of the novel's characters. Becky, whose 'sense of ridicule [is] far stronger than her gratitude' can laugh with 'a horrid sarcastic demoniacal laughter', but though 'sharp' she is also charismatic, able to mask feelings of hatred and rage with 'a comical, good-humoured

¹⁰⁵ Karen C. Gindele, 'When Women Laugh Wildly and (Gentle)Men Roar: Victorian Embodiments of Laughter', in *Look Who's Laughing: Studies in Humor and Gender*, ed. by Gail Finney (Langhorne: Gordon and Breach, 1994), pp. 139-60 (pp. 145-8, 145). As Richard Keller Simon sees it, while the narrator of *Vanity Fair* aims at good-natured mockery, 'the story he has been given by Thackeray to tell is primarily about Hobbesian laughers.' See Simon, *The Labyrinth of the Comic: Theory and Practice from Fielding to Freud* (Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1985), p. 131.

¹⁰⁶ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, ed. by John Carey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2001), p. 747.

¹⁰⁷ [Robert Bell], 'Vanity Fair', p. 320.

¹⁰⁸ [Lewes], Untitled article in the *Morning Chronicle*, 6 March 1848 (p. 3). In Andrew Sanders's words, 'Thackeray disconcerts, whereas Dickens reassures.' Sanders, 'Dickens and the Idea of the Comic Novel', p. 56.

air.’¹⁰⁹ Instead of betraying bitterness in the face of humiliation, she puts a bright face on it, leaving the suggestion that anyone may be duped by the appearance of cheerful good humour. Furthermore, the large-bodied, loud-laughing Jos Sedley is not correspondingly large-hearted, good-natured or charming, but an embarrassment, described with contempt as that ‘fat *gourmand*’, who on drinking up a bowl of punch, laughs with a liveliness that is ‘painful.’¹¹⁰ This rather undermines the kind of readerly expectations that might be raised by Dickens, for whom the combination of punch and plump gentlemen is inevitably a happy combination (the ‘constant succession of glasses ... produced considerable effect upon Mr. Pickwick; his countenance beamed with the most sunny smiles, laughter played around his lips, and good-humoured merriment twinkled in his eye’¹¹¹). There are few genuinely ‘sunny smiles’ in *Vanity Fair*, and ‘good-humoured merriment’ rarely goes uncriticised or unchecked. As Lewes would feel that ‘the complacent chuckle’ of the reader is ‘arrested’ by Thackeray’s sly, sharp cynicism, so Jos is made to ‘burst out into a wild fit of laughter; in which, encountering the eye of Miss Sharp, he stopped all of a sudden, as if he had been shot.’¹¹²

As John Bowen summarises, Thackeray is ‘the major satiric counter-example to Dickens’:

¹⁰⁹ *Vanity Fair*, pp. 19-21, 31. Becky’s ability to persuasively blur the line between villainy and good nature – her expressive flexibility – stands in contrast to Dickens’s often Manichean world, where good and evil are instantly discernible in the face. Describing Thackeray’s ‘worldly-wise, amused, delicately cynical narrators’, Sanders observes that ‘there is little of the clear distinction between good and bad, the admirable and the loathsome, the light and the dark, which pervades much of Dickens’s work and which often seems to present readers with defined villains and earnest would-be heroes.’ See Sanders, *Charles Dickens*, p. 99.

¹¹⁰ Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, p. 64.

¹¹¹ Dickens, *Pickwick*, pp. 253-4.

¹¹² Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, p. 26. Lord Steyne, too, conveys the lurking presence of menacing danger: ‘when he laughed, two white buck-teeth protruded themselves and glistened savagely in the midst of the grin’ (p. 438).

In contrast to Dickens's broadly affirmative comic vision, Thackeray's is marked by a characteristically negative irony ... Thackeray's work, at its strongest in *Vanity Fair*, allies a brilliantly inventive wit to a deeply discomfiting and disillusioned satiric vision that in its closeness to nihilism often seems deeply at odds with the society in which he wrote.¹¹³

However, Thackeray's efforts after *Vanity Fair* to be more in tune with the society in which he wrote, purging his writings of the cynicism that critics objected to – or at least obscuring it beneath layers of sentimental sugar-coating – are readily discernible, and suggestive of the persuasiveness with which popular (Dickensian) ideals were enforced. His response to the critics is most obvious in his 1851 lectures on the 'English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century' (published in 1853), a set of character studies in which Fielding's vices are justified by his 'joyful humour' and 'gentle heart', and Steele is 'one of the most generous, good-for-nothing, amiable little creatures'; he is 'by no means the most brilliant of wits nor the deepest of thinkers: but he is our friend: we love him ... because he is amiable.'¹¹⁴ In contrast, Swift is painted as a savage misanthrope whose writings are unsuitable for soft-hearted ladies, and whose satirical cleverness means nothing besides his lack of tenderness – he is 'an immense genius' but 'would we have liked to live with him?'¹¹⁵ As Martin points out, 'repeatedly the same formula crops up in the lectures. The writer is credited with wit, but almost immediately Thackeray rushes on to what is important, the warmth of his heart.'¹¹⁶ Martin identifies these lectures as one of the last but most emphatic manifestations of the Victorian weakness for 'humour' before 'wit' came back into play, and as examples of 'how

¹¹³ Bowen, 'Comic and Satirical', p. 277.

¹¹⁴ Thackeray, *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century*, in *The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century and Charity and Humour*, ed. by Edgar F. Harden (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), pp. 1-193 (pp. 83, 88, 43, 52).

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹¹⁶ Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, pp. 79-81.

enthralled Thackeray could be by popular cliché.¹¹⁷ Certainly it is significant that, amongst his tributes to writers of the previous century, Thackeray makes reference to his own times: if Goldsmith is ‘the most beloved of English writers’, it is with a tribute to ‘the innocent laughter and the sweet and unsullied page which the author of “David Copperfield” gives to my children’ that Thackeray introduces him.¹¹⁸

Thackeray’s aspirations to raise ‘innocent laughter’ instead of intelligent smirks are reflected in his earlier move from *Fraser’s* to the team of *Punch*. While the former (despite its loud approval of hearty laughter) retained the wicked spirit of aggressive satire typical of early nineteenth-century partisan periodicals, *Punch* would come to epitomise harmless, genial, family-friendly humour.¹¹⁹ Thackeray’s mingled regret for and distance from past times are explored in *Pendennis* (serialised 1848-50), which dramatises the corruption and redemption of its hero, Arthur Pendennis, through the motif of laughter. Reversing Thackeray’s own trajectory, Pen begins as a model of amiable health: at sixteen his face is ‘round, rosy [and] good-humoured’, and he has

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ *English Humourists*, p. 97. In ‘Charity and Humour’ (lecture delivered in New York, 1852) he elaborated: ‘A literary man of the humoristic turn [will] have a great sensibility, [and be able] to sympathise in [other people’s] laughter, love, amusement, tears.’ Humour is the combination of ‘wit and love’, and Dickens – in contrast to the ‘dreary misanthrope’ who wrote *Vanity Fair* (as Thackeray alludes to himself) – is the ‘kind friend’ who has ‘brought pleasure and sweet laughter to so many homes.’ ‘The atmosphere in which [Dickens’s characters] live is wholesome to breathe in ... your hands seem cleaner from having the privilege of shaking theirs’ – ‘What a humour! and what a good-humour!’ Thackeray exclaims. He characterises Dickens in terms of ‘soft sympathies, hearty enjoyments’ – a phrase which captures that combination of the gentle and the lively that defines ideal Dickensian laughter. See ‘Charity and Humour’, in *The English Humourists and Charity and Humour*, ed. by Harden (pp. 195-205), pp. 196, 203-5. Despite such pointed encomiums, Thackeray was accused of hypocrisy by a *Blackwood’s* reviewer, who confirms contemporary scruples respecting Thackeray’s tone by declaring, in defence of Swift, that ‘we were not prepared for his so strongly expressed dislike and condemnation of other people’s misanthropy.’ See ‘Thackeray’s Lectures – Swift’, *Blackwood’s*, 74 (1853), 494-518 (p. 494).

¹¹⁹ For *Punch* as a point of transition between earlier periodical culture and the new, ‘cleaner’ face of satire, see Patrick Leary, *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (London: British Library, 2010), pp. 11, 14. For Thackeray’s attempts from the 1850s to renounce ‘bitter, satiric works’ in favour of ‘kinder, more loving characters’, see Frank Palmeri, ‘Cruikshank, Thackeray, and the Victorian Eclipse of Satire’, *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 44 (2004), 753-777 (p. 770).

‘such a frank, good-natured kind face, and laughed so merrily at you out of his honest blue eyes, that no wonder Mrs Pendennis thought him the pride of the whole country.’¹²⁰ The athletic and vivacious Pen is set in contrast to his feeble tutor Mr Smirke, who – being intellectually inclined and unable to ride properly – it is ‘impossible for any lad endowed with a sense of humour to respect.’ Smirke does not actually smirk but he does have ‘a faint laugh’ which well reflects his personal inadequacies – boisterously riding past him Pen sends Smirke flying into some stinging-nettles, and laughs.¹²¹ Yet Pen’s mirth is meant to be understood not as unkind but as essentially innocent and endearing – the natural, spontaneous expression of a young lad’s high spirits.

His proud mother and foster sister are appalled, however, to find him smoking a cigar at the entrance of a pub, ‘in the face of the congregation as it issued from St Mary’s’;

[Helen and Laura] felt that their boy was changed. He was no longer the artless Pen of old days, so brave, so artless, so impetuous, and tender. His face looked careworn and haggard, his voice had a deeper sound, and tones more sarcastic. Cares seemed to be pursuing him; but he only laughed when his mother questioned him, and parried her anxious queries with some scornful jest.¹²²

Pen’s moral decline is mirrored in his impaired health, his ‘haggard’ appearance – and in his turn from artless merriment to sarcasm and scorn. Moreover, this transition is consolidated by his time spent as a journalist, his first article ‘making some bitter fun of a book recently published.’ There ‘was not a word in the article which was not polite and gentlemanlike’, we are told (echoing the frustrated reviews that Thackeray himself

¹²⁰ Thackeray, *Pendennis*, ed. by Donald Hawes (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 56-7.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 90, 76.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 208.

received), yet ‘the unfortunate subject of the criticism was scarified and laughed at during the operation’, and the reader’s ‘bilious countenance was puckered up with malign pleasure as he read the critique.’ Pen’s fall into masculine intellectual circles is bemoaned by his mother, who fears that these ‘literary occupations’ may ‘undermine the poor boy’s health’.¹²³

Indeed, Pen’s corrupt manners lead him to a near-fatal illness and are represented as a particular assault on the gentleness of the women in his life. On his sickbed ‘his laughter shot shafts of poison into [Laura’s] heart’, while it ‘struck like a dagger into the wounded and tender heart’ of his mother.¹²⁴ As the hero laughs increasingly ‘bitterly’, writing ‘witty and sarcastic’ letters home, he is reprimanded by the narrator: ‘It was not an honest laugh, Arthur Pendennis.’¹²⁵ However, Pen’s descent into malignity is slowed by the benevolent influence of his friend Warrington, whom ‘luckily he had [to] laugh at him and to keep down his impertinence by a constant and wholesome ridicule.’ Warrington’s refreshing, ‘wholesome ridicule’ is in contrast to Pen’s witty mockeries – he has ‘simplicity, humour, and that freshness of mind [which] contrasted so much with Pen’s dandy indifference of manner and faded sneer ... In his energy [and] hearty laughter ... what a difference.’¹²⁶ Moreover, while an essentially manly foil to the dandified Pen, Warrington’s gruff geniality is shown to harmonise with and appeal to the feminine softness of Helen and Laura. Thus, in tracing Pen’s restoration to moral and physical health, Thackeray reminds his readers of the superiority of simple, generous laughter to dishonest smirks and sneers – and in doing

¹²³ Ibid. (Cf. the dissection metaphors employed by Brontë, below, and by Robert Bell, above.)

¹²⁴ Ibid., pp. 539, 590-1.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 511.

¹²⁶ Ibid., pp. 377, 552.

so places an emphasis on the very qualities that many had found to be lacking in his writing.

‘Deadly brilliancy’: Thackeray and Brontë

As is well known, Brontë dedicated the 1848 second edition of *Jane Eyre* to Thackeray, praising ‘the satirist of “Vanity Fair”’ for his penetrative, prophet-like commitment to truth:

They say he is like Fielding: they talk of his wit, humour, comic powers. He resembles Fielding as an eagle does a vulture: Fielding could stoop on carrion, but Thackeray never does. His wit is bright, his humour attractive, but both bear the same relation to his serious genius, that the mere lambent sheet-lightning playing under the edge of the summer-cloud, does to the electric death-spark hid in its womb.¹²⁷

The unqualified admiration Brontë here expresses is misleading, however, as from the first she declared more mixed feelings in her private letters. She was highly critical, as well as enthusiastic, about Thackeray’s works, sharing the ambivalence and uneasiness of reviewers at the time. As suggested by the above, it was the earnest quality of Thackeray’s satire that she valued – the sense that he cared about addressing wrongs (he is ‘the first social regenerator of the day’¹²⁸), and not his bright wit or attractive humour. Indeed, she does not seem to have found his humour very attractive at all, frequently expressing disappointment at Thackeray’s readiness to stoop from eagle-like nobility to vulture-like meanness.

¹²⁷ Brontë, Preface to *Jane Eyre* (pp. 3-5), pp. 4-5. The preface is dated December 1847, when *Vanity Fair* was still appearing in monthly parts.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

At the time she was composing her tribute to Thackeray (and beginning work on *Shirley*), Brontë was explaining her reservations about the nature of his satire, its cynical undertones:

Mr. Thackeray is a keen, ruthless satirist – I had never perused his writings but with blended feelings of admiration and indignation – Critics, it appears to me, do not know what an intellectual boa-constrictor he is – they call him ‘humorous’, ‘brilliant’ – his is a most scalping humour, a most deadly brilliancy – he does not play with his prey – he coils round it and crushes it in his rings ... I should think the faults of such a man would be, distrust of anything good in human Nature – galling suspicion of bad motives lurking behind good actions – are these his failings? They are at any rate the failings of his written sentiments, for he cannot find in his heart to represent either Man or woman as at once good and wise. Does he not too much confound benevolence with weakness and wisdom with mere craft?¹²⁹

Chiefly in need of investigating here is why Brontë should have felt so suffocated by this ‘intellectual boa-constrictor’, whose caustic irony and distrustful attitude should surely have offered a refreshing contrast to the buoyant naivety, and faith in the heart before the head, that everywhere else resounded. Why should she have objected so strongly to the confounding of benevolence with weakness?

The answer, I suggest, again has to do with gender. Brontë became increasingly adamant in her indignation, taking issue with his ‘scalping’ sarcasm most particularly as it related to female characters. Of *Rebecca and Rowena* (1849) she complained: ‘it is like himself, and all he says and writes; harsh and kindly, wayward and wise, benignant and bitter; its pages are overshadowed with cynicism ... As to his abuse of Rowena and of women in general [he deserves] to be arrested, to be kept in prison for a month.’

¹²⁹ Brontë to W. S. Williams (December 1847), *Letters* I, pp. 571-2. Cf. Lewes in the *Morning Chronicle* (p. 3): ‘As satirist, it is his business to tear away the mask from life, but ... he grievously errs when he shows us *everywhere* corruption under the mask. His scepticism is pushed too far. While trampling on cant, while exposing what is base and mean ... he is not attentive enough to honour, and to paint what is high, and generous, and noble in human nature’ (Lewes’s emphasis).

Thackeray is to be chastised for his habit of mockingly rooting out the worst in everyone, and especially in women – ‘I have come to the conclusion that whenever he writes ... the Great Doubter and Sneerer usually guides the pen’, is the verdict in another letter, and later, ‘why should his mocking tongue so perversely deny the better feelings of his better moods?’¹³⁰ However gentlemanly his satire might be on the surface, Brontë detected and was perturbed by sly, underhand mocking touches. This conviction is firmly repeated in her response to *Henry Esmond* (1852), a novel in which others generally perceived Thackeray to have mellowed:

But what bitter satire – what relentless dissection of diseased subjects! [...]

Thackeray likes to discover an ulcer or an aneurism; he has pleasure in putting his cruel knife or probe into quivering, living flesh. Thackeray would not like all the world to be good; no great satirist would like Society to be perfect.

And she adds: ‘As usual – he is unjust to women.’¹³¹

¹³⁰ Brontë to Williams (January 1850), *Letters* II, p. 328, and to Elizabeth Gaskell (January 1851) II, p. 561. The difficult relationship between Brontë and Thackeray – which I will return to in my conclusion – seems to have been strained by precisely this annoyance on her part at his refusal to be serious, and his annoyance at her attempts to reprimand him. Smith would recall that Thackeray ‘was not fond of the society of what are called “clever” women; women, that is, whom he felt to be critical, and with whom talk involved any mental strain. For that reason he did not like Charlotte Bronte [sic], and the two of them did not get on well together. She was vexed because he, in his talk with her, would never be serious about his literature. He would talk in a bantering and burlesque way, as though he were ashamed of it. But this was only by way of defence against Charlotte Brontë’s earnest and heroic views of the “sacredness” and “dignity” of literature’ (see Margaret Smith’s notes, *Letters* II, p. 416). In other words, Brontë’s admiration for the ‘intellectual boa constrictor’ was frustrated by his ‘bantering and burlesque’ attitude, but exacerbated by his particular evasiveness with and about ‘clever women’ – his preference, when it came to the feminine character, for the heart over the head. In an interesting comparison of Thackeray with Ruskin, Brontë wrote (to Smith, in May 1851): ‘Thackeray has no love for his Art or his Work: he neglects it; he mocks at it; he trifles with it. [Ruskin] has a deep serious passion. We smile sometimes at Ruskin’s intense earnestness of feeling ... Over Thackeray’s criminal carelessness of great faculties [we] are oftener disposed to weep’ (*Letters* II, p. 615). Thus, while Brontë’s own ‘deep serious passion’ regarding Thackeray is a source of amusement – she is helplessly aggravated by the ‘great Doubter and Sneerer’ – she is enabled in her turn to (rhetorically) smile collectedly and condescendingly in response to what she perceives as Ruskin’s excessive earnestness of feeling. As we will see, the power dynamics in her novels typically rest on precisely this clash of mocking restraint and passionate earnestness – with the latter carrying the disadvantage.

¹³¹ Brontë to George Smith (February 1852), *Letters* III, pp. 17-18.

The language of penetration she employs aptly suggests the sense of unjust assault on female vulnerability that guides Brontë's outrage. Key to Thackeray's offensiveness is the fact that he plies his 'cruel knife' in the very midst of his sentimental, protective avowals of love and respect for conventional femininity. In a casual opposition of malignity with merry innocence, he declares in *Vanity Fair* that, since novels 'abound in villains of the most sombre sort', the reader is lucky to have Amelia Sedley, 'so guileless and good-natured a person.' Amelia's cheeks are 'a great deal too round and red ... but her face blushed with rosy health, and her lips with the freshest of smiles, and she had a pair of eyes which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears.'¹³² Critics were not slow to identify the sly contempt that underlies the narrator's affectionate panegyrics on Amelia, whose appeal is defined by her transparent subjection to the body and its affects – her susceptibility to smiles and tears.¹³³ Thackeray's recognition of the acute vulnerability of gentle female hearts to the sting of satire and sarcasm – Helen and Laura's sensations of being struck in the heart by poisoned shafts and daggers at the sound of Pen's cruelly cold laughter – is perversely accompanied by a tendency to enact that assault in his writing, to mockingly 'probe into living, quivering flesh.'

Brontë's ambivalence about Thackeray and these tendencies of his satirical style is expressed not only in her letters but in her fiction, and particularly in *Shirley*, where

¹³² Thackeray, *Vanity Fair*, p. 11.

¹³³ Bell, for instance, comments that 'poor Amelia goes but a short way to purify the foul atmosphere. The author has given her a heart, but no understanding. If he has made her patient and good ... he has also made her a fool. Her meekness [excites] our pity; but the helpless weakness of her character forces the sentiment to the verge of that feeling to which pity is said to be akin.' [Robert Bell], 'Vanity Fair', p. 321. Indeed, critics besides Brontë complained of the subtle cynicism with which Thackeray portrayed his good female characters. The *Athenaeum*, for example, felt that Helen is 'often sadly silly' while Laura's 'womanly pettiness towards poor little Fanny Bolton is exposed with a gratuitous ungraciousness of manner not to be excused,' Unsigned review (December 1850), in the *Critical Heritage*, ed. by Tillotson and Hawes, pp. 90-3 (p. 91). See also Margaret Oliphant's objections to Thackeray's female characters – who are either artful and heartless or insipidly sentimental – in 'Mr Thackeray and his Novels', *Blackwood's*, 77 (1855), 86-96.

the ‘sneering’ tone that so irked her is embodied by the character of Robert Moore (amongst others). The mill-owner Moore is portrayed as an upright, admirable and essentially good man who could address social problems if he would (and who does end by ‘regenerating’ the community in some respects), but who is let down by a cruel streak, a cynical attitude and a tendency to target women. Like Thackeray’s gentlemanly satire, Moore’s is represented as discreet and hidden but lurking nonetheless, as in the image of him ‘chuckling drily ... his cap brim over his eyes, shading in some measure their deep dancing ray of scorn.’¹³⁴ Though their manners are polite rather than rough or boisterous, the good qualities of such men are, just as Brontë felt Thackeray’s writing to be, ‘blent through with sarcasm calculated to vex one to the heart.’¹³⁵ At the same time, as I will show in Chapter Four, *Shirley* also casts a stern eye on habits of laughing excess: the trio of curates Malone, Donne and Sweeting are assembled in such a way as to morally demolish more bluntly aggressive modes of masculine satire, while tying their satirical impulses to images of immoderate, corporeal laughter. Unsavory male attitudes are thus contrasted and criticised in *Shirley*, Brontë’s most austere novel, via their materialization in the faces of her characters.

Brontë’s novels are full of undeclared hostility towards the sentiments underlying cheerful, hearty laughter. But more explicitly, they evince a seemingly contradictory hostility towards laughter of the unfriendly or devious kind, when this involves men’s antagonism, disciplining or domination of women. The sardonic masculine type that is so prominent throughout her fiction – evolving from Angria’s Duke of Zamorna to Graham Bretton of *Villette* – foregrounds not only Brontë’s

¹³⁴ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 114. Indeed, personal appearance and satirical tone were, it seems, imaginatively entwined for Brontë, whose mixed feelings respecting Thackeray’s literature are reflected in her impression of his ‘peculiar face’, which she describes (in a letter to the Revd Patrick Brontë, December 1849), as ‘generally somewhat satirical and stern in expression, but capable also of a kind look.’ See *Letters II*, p. 301.

¹³⁵ Brontë to George Smith (May 1851), *Letters II*, p. 615.

implied suspicions about what men were ‘really’ like, but also her perception (as voiced so pointedly in her response to Thackeray’s novels) of a certain sneering, overshadowing tone to be encountered in juxtaposition with protestations of amiable good humour and sociable good will. Nonetheless, the subversive laughter that I will be identifying in Brontë’s novels is of a curiously similar character. As I explained in the introduction to this chapter, laughter for Brontë rarely emerges as an innately seditious or gloriously liberating defiance of order and regularity. Instead, it takes often uncomfortable shapes: it is stubbornly pessimistic rather than enjoyably feisty; it is restrained, instead of constituting a form of (physiological) release, a bringing of things into the open. It is socially performed but also *anti*-social, an individualistic act of removal from or contempt for the social unification that laughter is traditionally supposed to enable; and it is morbid (in ways that I will elucidate) instead of signalling vitality and liberation from unhealthy restraint. Finally, instead of symbolising the destabilising force of powerful female energies, it is of a kind that is typically, in literature, the preserve of quietly powerful men. In the next chapter I will explore why exactly the sneer of lurking malice (or less dramatically, of lurking intelligence) should wield such power, and describe the movement in Brontë’s writing from conventional attributions of such laughter to shadowy male despots, to its subversive adoption by her female characters. This laughter does not burst forth in the mode of victorious self-expression, but it does pose an awkward challenge to stereotypes about feminine nature. As I will demonstrate, Brontë’s detection of tyranny in ostensibly benign laughter is absolutely compatible with her detection of more obvious tyranny in threatening laughter, since the qualities so pressing demanded by adherents to the former are precisely those qualities that are naturally vulnerable to humiliation, mockery and contempt.

Chapter Two

‘A Freezing Spell’: Subverting Superiority in *Jane Eyre* and the Early Writings

Introduction

This chapter examines the power commanded by despotic, ‘masculine’ laughter in Brontë’s fiction, turning from the early Victorian literary scene to the Romantic influences on her imagination.¹ More tangible and more threatening than the dispersed, loosely pervasive notion of warm-hearted cheerfulness, the piercing and forceful face of mockery is an image that materialises throughout Brontë’s novels. Whereas in the previous chapter I linked this mocking face to Thackerayan satire, here I consider it in connection with the dark, sinister laughter of Romantic tradition, exploring Brontë’s efforts to dig beneath literary clichés for insights into everyday human behaviour and power relations. Bridging the Gothic laughter of Bertha Rochester, *Jane Eyre*’s ‘madwoman in the attic’,² with the Gothic laughter of Brontë’s stories set in the fantasy territory of Angria, I establish the close connections between this disturbing laughter and the less dramatic smiles of *Jane Eyre*’s main characters, exploring the slippage between haunting and taunting effects. And I identify a crucial shift in Brontë’s representations of laughter: from the dramatisation of male tyranny over women to the

¹ Brontë’s early writings in particular draw variously on Romantic and Gothic sources (both of which feature the archetypal sinister smile), borrowing heavily from Scott, Byron and *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. As will be seen in Part Two of this chapter, her engagement with this literature is alternately enthusiastic and satirical (as, indeed, is much of Byron’s poetry and the contents of *Blackwood’s*). For Brontë’s Romantic inheritance and her youthful identification with ‘the high Romantic conception of the man of genius’, see Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002), pp. 5-6. For her playful uses of parody and debunking, ‘anti-Gothic’ humour, see Christine Alexander, ‘“That Kingdom of Gloom”: Charlotte Brontë, the Annuals, and the Gothic’, *Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 47 (1993), 409-36. (See also Heilman, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s “New Gothic”.’) For laughter’s prominence ‘in Romantic and Gothic texts’, including Byron’s poetry, see Ute Berns, ‘The Romantic Crisis of Expression: Laughter in Maturin’s *Melmoth the Wanderer* and Beyond’, in *A History of English Laughter*, ed. by Pfister, pp. 83-98 (pp. 83, 94).

² I take this phrase from Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar’s classic, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979).

dramatisation of female self-empowerment. That shift, I suggest, can be clearly illustrated in the contrast between her early writings and her first published novel. This chapter will thus throw light on the precise psychological effects, and motivations, of *troubling* laughter – moving from that which is unsettlingly spooky, to that which is socially unsettling or challenging to established hierarchies and norms.

There is more than one face to malevolent, Gothic or ‘Byronic’ laughter. The manifold forms that grim laughter may take is illustrated by Byron himself (1788-1824) who became representative of bitter, irony-laden laughter, while finding multiple ways to represent this laughter in all its darker shades.³ In the satiric *Don Juan* (1819-24), these range from the ‘kind of wild and horrid glee,/ Half epileptical, and half hysterical’ of the drunk or the deranged, to the laughter of scornful Death, whose ‘lipless mouth grins without breath.’ There is further the ‘peculiar smile, which ... boded no good, whatever it express’d’, and the melancholy laughter of despair (‘if I laugh at any mortal thing,/ ‘Tis that I may not weep’).⁴ Brontë’s early writings echo all these formulations but lean more heavily to the understated: it is ‘peculiar’, not ‘hysterical’ laughter that she focuses on. As Juliet John points out, ‘there is more than one model of melodramatic villainy ... absolute villainy tends to be either passionate or passionless.’⁵

In her study of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic fiction, Bartlett contrasts ‘the laugh of the

³ For Byron’s reputation (which was based collectively on his personal celebrity, his poetic persona, and the heroes of his poetry) see for instance Maginn’s comments in the last chapter on Byron as the ‘misanthrope of modern times.’ Juliet John explains that ‘the Byronic hero appears to symbolize the kind of Romantic individualism Dickens despised. [His] pale, aristocratic features mask a mysterious inner life. His energy is largely internalized ... It is not surprising that this symbol of the involuted, antisocial, often aristocratic individual was demonized in melodrama. It is also unsurprising that the few direct comments made by Dickens on Byron and his poetry were disapproving or moralistic in tone’ (*Dickens’s Villains*, p. 171). Thus (in the tradition of melodrama) this is the same type vilified in Dickens’s novels: repressed, withdrawn, and morally dubious. Although heavily influenced by both the legend and the poetry of Byron, Brontë’s enthusiasm was mixed (as was her enthusiasm for Thackeray) by ‘moralistic’ scruples – scruples which, I argue, emerge in the uneasiness with which she depicts Byronic laughter.

⁴ Lord Byron, *Don Juan*, Cantos II (ll. 398-9), IX (l. 88), III (ll. 331-2), and IV (ll. 25-6). Taken from *Lord Byron: The Major Works*, ed. by Jerome J. McGann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

⁵ John, *Dickens’s Villains*, p. 9.

passionate hysteric’ with laughter as a ‘monstrously calculated expression of triumph.’⁶ But the overstated, melodramatic mode – laughter overspilling into madness – is not that which principally concerns Brontë. For reasons that will be explored in this chapter, her villains and Byronic heroes (and the distinction is by no means clear-cut) are assigned mystery-cloaked, self-possessed and sardonic laughter, and it is this, crucially, which evolves into the subversive laughter of her heroines. As Brontë makes clear, the nefarious smirk which makes a show of concealment is infinitely more powerful (and therefore, ultimately, more useful) than the emotional outburst that throws aside all pretence of discretion.

As established in the last chapter, early Victorian anxieties focused on cool, dispassionate laughter, not the emotionally expressive. The case of the hysteric is undoubtedly where uncontrolled laughter would be least likely to be regarded in a positive light – yet, despite her madness, Bertha’s laughter does *not* furnish us with an example of hysterical excess. In the first part of this chapter I demonstrate that her laughter is not the bodily, impulsive or melodramatic utterance that critics have assumed to emanate from her, but is instead coded rational and masculine. A ‘monstrously calculated expression of triumph’ (to borrow Bartlett’s words), it strikingly echoes the laughter of powerful men in Brontë’s early writings, suggesting masculine self-restraint rather than female subjection to the body. In identifying the tones of ‘triumph’ I draw on the Hobbesian understanding of laughter as the expression of superiority, but with a twist: I argue that Brontë portrays such laughter as the self-conscious display and consolidation (rather than simple expression) of superiority, highlighting its potential to perform contempt in the interests of self-assertion. Thus, I

⁶ Bartlett, p. 106. Similarly Berns (p. 88) differentiates between “‘true’ satanic laughter’, which ‘displays an absolute bodily disengagement and revels in god-like superiority and self-possession’, and ‘sardonic laughter [which] foregrounds the behaviour of the body to such an extent that it infringes on volition and self-possession.’

take Bertha as an emblematic case: insofar as she crosses the line between victim and villain through an emphasis on intelligence over emotion (as conveyed through laughter), she exemplifies a process which recurs throughout Brontë's novels.

Part Two examines further the roots of the despotic laugh in Brontë's early writings (concentrating on the character of Zamorna in the story 'The Spell'), revising Shuttleworth's Foucauldian reading of power and how it operates in Brontë's fiction. I argue that laughter is a more antagonistic and humiliating enactment of the male gaze, symbolically penetrating and expressive of knowing power, while the uncertainty that preys on Angria's emotionally dependent, infantilised female characters – their intense dread of ridicule, and their internalisation of the scorn directed at them – perpetuates their vulnerability and transparent legibility. However in the third and final part of the chapter I return to *Jane Eyre* to assess the ways in which, beyond Bertha, Brontë experiments with these gender roles. I argue that she departs from the Byronic or Gothic model by curbing the power of Rochester's laughter, through a 'feminising' process that is set off against Jane's will to power. In stressing Jane's demand not to be laughed at, and her need to be able to mock the men in her life, Brontë images a levelling of power whereby Jane secures for herself the self-respect that is out of reach for the earlier heroines. However, I also consider the limits of this subversion, showing how Jane's laughter, as well as Rochester's, is softened over the course of the novel as Brontë seeks to conventionalise her heroine in line with the idealisation of 'natural' laughter explored in Chapter One. The laughter of pleasantry and cheerfulness is thus presented for the most part in good faith, but in significant ways is undercut or challenged by Brontë. Through modifying traditional images of laughter (both sardonic and sentimental), she moves from the clear-cut gender identities and fixed power relations of Angria, to the gender bending and shifting balance of power in *Jane Eyre*.

I

Brontë may not be a novelist readily associated with laughter, but she did produce one of the most haunting instances of it in fiction. The moment when Jane, exploring Thornfield, first hears the chilling laugh that alerts her to the place's lurking secret, is a well-known one:

While I paced softly on, the last sound I expected to hear in so still a region, a laugh, struck my ear. It was a curious laugh; distinct, formal, mirthless ... It passed off in a clamorous peal that seemed to wake an echo in every lonely chamber, though it originated but in one, and I could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued.⁷

Where does this laugh come from? Despite the eerie, echoing quality of the noise, the question is easily answered; Jane 'could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued.' And just as she is able to thus precisely locate a source, it is possible to answer this question in a different sense: by identifying these 'accents' as a peculiarly inflected 'echo' of other fictional laughs, particularly those found in Brontë's own earlier writing. In tracing the origins of Bertha's laughter, we find surprising and suggestive connotations – located within the right context, it takes on a subversive significance and carries implications which reverberate beyond Thornfield's third story corridor, reappearing throughout Brontë's other novels. Accordingly, this chapter begins by defamiliarising and re-thinking Bertha's laugh, making the connections which serve to bring out its inherent meanings. Rather than offering a re-evaluation of Bertha herself, I will build on existing interpretations via a specific examination of the way in which Brontë presents her laughter – my object is not to get closer to the 'real' Bertha, but to

⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 107. Subsequent references to *Jane Eyre* in this chapter will be given in parentheses after quotations.

use her as a starting point for reconsidering literary laughter of the sinister or melodramatic variety.

The madwoman in the attic

The wife that Rochester keeps hidden away is, we learn, a ‘clothed hyena’ with a ‘purple face’ and ‘bloated features’, the very image of hideous, bestial madness (p. 293). Brontë’s portrayal confirms negative stereotypes (and much contemporary medical opinion) about madness – its links to moral and mental defects, to the female condition, and to female sexuality specifically.⁸ Bertha’s descent into insanity is presented as the result of characteristically female weakness (inherited from her mother) even while it strips her of all femininity. Rochester’s account of the prior characteristics that ‘developed the germs of [already hereditary] insanity’ is a damning one: Bertha from the beginning had ‘neither modesty ... nor refinement in her mind or manners.’ Her conversation was ‘coarse and trite, perverse and imbecile’, she was ‘intemperate and unchaste’, and her nature ‘gross, impure, depraved’ (pp. 305-6).

Given the nature of this portrait, it might seem logical to attribute her mysterious laugh to her condition as a depraved, instinct-guided ‘hyena.’ This, after all, reaffirms laughter’s oft-cited symbolic significance as the rebellion of nature over culture, and its links with the body. (Recall, for example, Pfister’s summary that laughter and sex ‘are both closely linked to our corporeal nature, in particular to the “lower bodily stratum” ... The charge of obscenity often brackets them together.’⁹) And Bertha is emblematic of that which is taboo, carnal, ‘impure’ – a destructive force which must not be unleashed

⁸ See Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980* (London: Virago, 1987; repr. 2011), pp. 66-8, for Bertha’s ‘regression to an inhuman condition’, and the links between her madness and her female body, specifically her sexual desires and menstrual cycle. See also Shuttleworth, pp. 166-7.

⁹ Pfister, p. vi.

upon civilized society, just like the laugh which must be contained within the body.

According to Karen Chase,

Bertha presents the danger of feral passions shattering restraint, breaking outward in a destructive and unconscious licence. The threat which her emotion poses is that containment has become impossible; Bertha will escape her room, and lawless passion will overwhelm all outer barriers.¹⁰

In contrast to small, neat Jane, who takes pride in her self-control, personal decency and moral principles, Bertha is obscene, repulsive and robustly built. What Bartlett describes as laughter's 'overdetermined suggestions of violent primitivism, extreme emotionality, madness [and] sexuality' would seem entirely applicable here.¹¹

Indeed, this is a view of laughter which perfectly captures Victorian fears concerning the eruptive threat posed by the female. Shuttleworth, discussing the connection between woman and the city in contemporary usage of metaphors, describes how both 'were figured as bodies containing within them dark hidden recesses harbouring disease or crime, liable to burst out at any moment in excesses of passion or social discontent.'¹² It can be seen how Bertha's laughter might easily be equated with her bursts of violence and wild excess; indeed, this is the approach taken by Robin Jones, who identifies it as a powerful affirmation of self in the midst of neglect and identity erosion. For Jones this is because – along the usual critical lines – her laughter 'calls attention to her physicality'; in its anger it is 'evocative of her body and her

¹⁰ Karen Chase, *Eros and Psyche: The Representation of Personality in Charlotte Brontë, Charles Dickens, and George Eliot* (New York and London: Methuen, 1984), p. 171.

¹¹ Bartlett, p. 19.

¹² Shuttleworth moreover notes Bertha's conformity to 'contemporary images of the most violent form of maniac', claiming that her 'laughter, and propensity to destruction ... form part of the contemporary repertoire of images', pp. 73, 166.

materiality as a sexual being.’¹³ In this reading, along with her acts of violence, Bertha’s famous laugh signifies subversiveness (whether to be celebrated or deplored) because of the explosively *physical* threat to law, order, and patriarchal constraint that it represents.¹⁴

However, the straightforward equation between laughter and the impulsive (female) body is problematised when we pay closer attention to the ‘curious laugh’ in question. As Janis McLarren Caldwell confirms, ‘Bertha is often taken to be a fictional example of that Victorian diagnostic category, the hysteric’; Caldwell further notes that the ‘cause of hysteria was supposedly an excess of passion overcoming weak female reason.’¹⁵ The pathological laugh of the insane Victorian female in medical literature, or of the traditional deranged madwoman in literary representation, is supposed to emphasise her lack of control, alienation from reality, and loss of wits; it is a wild, shrieking cackle, or a symptom of hysterics.¹⁶ Brontë, however, presents us neither with imbecilic giggling nor the outpouring of despair; Bertha’s laughter is ‘distinct’ and ‘formal’ rather than incoherent or impulsive – it is drily ‘mirthless’, not (as in Caldwell’s description) ‘an excess of passion.’ At all times when it surfaces in the text, what we hear is not wild and uncontrolled but the private laughter of morbid introspection. It is a low sinister utterance, borrowing more from the convention of the composed, haughty smile than it does from manic, deranged laughter.

¹³ Jones, ‘The Goblin Ha-ha’, pp. 207, 210.

¹⁴ As mentioned in my introduction, Hélène Cixous celebrates laughter as an innately female, subversive bodily force in ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, an essay which, according to Parvulescu, ‘brought laughter to the main stage of feminist theory’ (p. 102).

¹⁵ Caldwell, ‘Mental Health’, in *The Brontës in Context*, ed. by Thormählen, pp. 344-51 (p. 347). Caldwell also notes the etymological roots of the word ‘hysteria’ in the Greek for ‘womb’ – reflecting its supposed origin in the female reproductive system.

¹⁶ The entry on ‘Hysterics’ in the Brontë family’s religiously consulted *Modern Domestic Medicine* (by Thomas John Graham) characterizes the disease as one of ‘wild and irregular actions ... alternate fits of laughter, crying, and screaming, incoherent expressions.’ Graham also affirms that it is more prevalent in women, and links it to their sexuality and menstrual cycle (London: Simpkin and Marshall, 1826), p. 347.

This can be more clearly illustrated by a glimpse at the wider body of references to laughter in Brontë's fiction, and the manner in which, prior to *Jane Eyre*, she had tended to describe it. In the fantasy world of Angria – which for several years throughout and beyond adolescence had occupied Brontë's imagination and formed the terrain on which her creative efforts were concentrated – laughter is assigned almost solely to powerful, aristocratic male characters. In Angria there is no escape from the 'low & meaning laugh', the 'dark, sinister smile', the laugh with 'more of sarcasm than mirth in it' or the 'low, inward', 'low, malignant', and 'ironical' laughs which abound.¹⁷ These emanate principally from the central hero-villain the Duke of Zamorna, and the yet more villainous Northangerland, but the examples given are typical of the kingdom's entire dark, brooding, sardonic male population. The genre is clearly that of the Gothic, the cliché that of malevolent, devilish laughter. Zamorna, for instance, is 'a fiend', 'a true indisputable Lucifer ... Something exceedingly sly, dark, secret & imperturbable lurked in the glance of his eye, the curl of his lip, & the whole cast of his grand countenance.'¹⁸ And when Bertha comes to prey on the terrified Jane, she utters at the keyhole 'a demoniac laugh – low, suppressed, and deep' – entirely characteristic of these villainous types (p. 147). This 'goblin-laughter' strikes Jane as an 'unnatural sound', and she wonders if the instigator is 'possessed with a devil?' (p. 148). While Bertha's insanity obviously erodes her femininity, the particular circumstances here point to a tangible instance of gender-bending: Bertha does not feature as the imprisoned, tormented victim of the Gothic plot but as the predatory, fiendish villain who plays with the heroine's fears and instigates haunting incidents. Thus while in many respects Brontë modelled her 'madwoman' accurately, based on contemporary

¹⁷ My examples are, respectively, from Charlotte Brontë's stories 'The Spell' (pp. 66-150), p. 133, 'Mina Laury' (pp. 175-220), p. 194, 'Caroline Vernon' (pp. 221-313), p. 224, and 'The Spell' again (pp. 74, 75, 100), all taken from *Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal*, ed. by Christine Alexander (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2010).

¹⁸ 'The Spell', p. 133.

attitudes to and theories of insanity, in other ways she deviated from this adherence to realism. Bertha's laughter actually points us in a different direction than we might think: it points towards powerful, masculine, Romantic stereotypes, evoking the Byronic scoffer, the Mephistophelian villain, and the haughty Gothic aristocrat.

The haunting quality of Bertha's 'demoniac laugh' reminds us that dehumanization (or deviancy) can take different forms; the depravedly inhuman can imply the bestial but also the sophisticated supernatural. Brontë gives us two faces, or two voices, of madness (both monstrous): one wild and animalistic, the other more refined and sinister. Thus Bertha occupies both 'a wild beast's den' and 'a goblin's cell' (p. 309). Jane is perplexed by a mysterious being that 'uttered the voice, now of a mocking demon, and anon of a carrion-seeking bird of prey' (p. 210). And while to 'cachinnate' is to laugh out loud, Bertha's is a 'curious cachination' – thus the suggestion of immoderation is tempered by an (Angrian) air of mystery and peculiarity (p. 107). In a letter, Brontë explained that Bertha is a case of what 'may be called moral madness' – a condition popularly perceived at the time in which, as she puts it, 'all that is good or even human seems to disappear from the mind and a fiend-nature replaces it.'¹⁹ In Rochester's explanation, 'the lunatic is both cunning and malignant' (p. 309). Thus as well as degrading her to a savage state, Bertha's insanity brings out the evil and artful in her; this is the Bertha who patiently waits for the opportunity to steal keys and a knife from her guard. It is also the Bertha who laughs.

There is, then, not correspondence but incongruity between the debased 'corpulent' figure that Jane finally encounters, and the disembodied laugh that initially alarms her – the tone of Bertha's laughter, and the strange mutterings that accompany it, are at odds with the other noises she makes: animalistic grunts and shrieks. We never

¹⁹ Brontë to W. S. Williams (January 1848), *Letters II* (p. 3). 'Moral madness' is discussed in more detail by Shuttleworth, pp. 14, 49. See also Caldwell, 'Mental Health', p. 346.

see her laugh; it remains unconnected to the imprisoned, undignified ‘wild animal’ grovelling ‘on all fours’ that eventually appears in the text, and who manages nothing more articulate than ‘growling’ and ‘bellowing’ (p. 293). Brontë employs Bertha’s laughter to *counter* the picture of her brutishness, in accordance with the conventional assumption that laughter is unique to humans.²⁰ Jane explains that she thought Rochester’s dog might have been growling outside her door, ‘but Pilot cannot laugh; and I am certain I heard a laugh, and a strange one’ (p. 154). In this instance, Bertha’s strange laugh – instead of being ‘hyena’-like – serves to confirm her human (or at least non-animal) status.

It is her state of mind that is at stake, as well as her human status. The common emphasis on laughter’s symbolic relationship with the body can obscure its mediating role – the fact that it occupies, as Bartlett points out, an ‘indeterminate position between the body and the mind.’²¹ Certainly, the truism that laughter is uniquely human rests on the definition of it as an intellectual, not a bodily reaction; laughter can be evoked as a signifier of rationality no less than over-excitability. As I have suggested, Bertha’s laugh, that ‘low, slow ha! ha!’ (p. 110) tends to align her more with a detached, ironic, masculine tradition than with the high pitches of hysterical emotionality. Pursuing this, we can see that the ‘fiend-nature’ diagnosed by Brontë, in which intelligence remains but moral sentiment is absent (and we might be inclined to doubt that this constitutes ‘madness’ at all) is at work in the ‘curious cachination’ of Brontë’s monster, whose laughter is that of the evil genius, not the idiot – laughter serves as a reminder of surviving intellect, rather than proof of its absence. This is further implied by the fact that, on first hearing the ‘mocking’ sound Jane stops, and observes that it ‘ceased, only

²⁰ Aristotle, notably, asserted that ‘no animal but man ever laughs.’ *On the Parts of Animals* (c. 350 B.C.E.) ed. and trans. by William Ogle (London: Kegan Paul, French, 1882), p. 84.

²¹ Bartlett, p. 24.

for an instant; it began again, louder: for at first, though distinct, it was very low' (p. 107). The indication is that Bertha pauses in recognition of Jane's movements, and recommences with emphasis, as a means of attracting attention to her presence. Later, Jane notes that a 'shout of laughter greeted [Rochester's] entrance; noisy at first, and terminating in Grace Poole's own goblin ha! ha!' (p. 208). Here the change suggests a shift from excitement to a more private, menacing utterance; it implies that 'Grace' curbs her laughter, brings it under control. This is the reverse of the earlier laugh, where she steadily becomes louder, but it reveals a similarly controlling intent. Contrary to assumptions we might reasonably make based on other evidence, the 'goblin' nature of the laughter does not imply incoherent gibberish (since it is 'formal' and 'distinct'), while the exclamation 'ha! ha!' does not indicate excitability (since it is low, slow, and 'suppressed'). Bertha's laughter is disturbing because it is knowing; it is uncanny because it hints at an alert mind that is supposed to be vacant; it is troubling, in short, because it questions rather than foregrounds her insanity.²²

In light of this, it is worth looking at Shuttleworth's account (informed by Foucault) of the nineteenth-century shift in the categorisation of and assumptions about insanity, which was increasingly viewed in terms of 'an internal, psychological divide':

The border to be policed was not so much between self and other, as between the conscious and unconscious self. If all individuals were liable to eruptions of insanity,

²² A telling comparison is with one of the more obvious inspirations for Bertha: the wronged Ulrika, prisoner of the Norman tyrant Front-de-Boeuf, in Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1820) – Scott being another major Romantic influence on Brontë's imagination. Ulrika sets fire to Front-de-Boeuf's castle and makes a melodramatic final appearance atop the flaming battlements before coming down with the wreckage. Yet, though clearly a precedent for Brontë's insane arsonist, Ulrika indulges no more than Bertha does in loud, deranged laughter; instead she exacts her revenge 'with frightful composure' and with 'a smile of grisly mockery', in ironic contrast to the 'mad frenzy of despair' suffered by Front-de-Boeuf. Indeed, calmly turning up to taunt/haunt him from the shadows, her disembodied voice, like Bertha's coolly contemptuous laughter, produces a hysterical loss of control ('Ha, ha, ha!') from the dying baron, who is tortured by the 'echoes of his own mad laughter.' Sir Walter Scott, *Ivanhoe*, ed. by Ian Duncan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 323-7.

the only visible sign that one could cling to that one was not insane would be one's capacity to exert self-control.²³

Writing at a time when the 'test of sanity', for women in particular, was seen to rest 'in the realm of emotional restraint', and when the 'internal self-policing of emotional energy' was ceaselessly advised,²⁴ the clear emphasis placed by Brontë on the restrained, deliberate nature of Bertha's laughter pointedly complicates her cautionary portrayal of a lunatic ruled by violent bodily impulses. Her laughter stands in *opposition* to her 'eruptions of insanity', marking instead a registration of the 'conscious self.' Far from being a classic indication of mindless physical compulsion overcoming the capacity to exert self-control, Bertha's low, slow laughter represents willed control of the body by the mind, demonstrating a degree of mental integrity and agency.

As I stressed before, I do not mean by this to revise our understanding of Bertha herself, or even to comment on her mental state; rather, of interest here is Brontë's attribution of conventionally masculine, rational traits to a being ostensibly defined by her female body and animal instincts. As subsequent chapters will show, Brontë repeatedly uses laughter to challenge gendered oppositions between the intellectual and the animal, between restraint and impulse, between self-possession and sexuality. In Bertha's case, this is achieved through troubling the opposition between sane and insane.

²³ Shuttleworth, p. 35.

²⁴ Ibid, p. 50. Shuttleworth explains further that 'true selfhood' was not conceived as 'the naked display of the insane, but rather the artful concealment and dissimulation of the social creature ... Indeed, the condition of selfhood is dependent on having something to conceal ... *Awareness of an audience, and of one's ability to baffle their penetration, constitutes the essential basis of selfhood*' (p. 38; my emphasis). Thus, the element of performance in combination with the air of secrecy are strikingly suggestive features of Bertha's laughter.

Silent revolt and sudden glory

What, then, are the wider implications and reverberations of this echo-waking laughter? And how should we interpret the odd juxtaposition of Bertha's sinister laugh with Jane's rebellious musings? Jane confesses herself 'discontented', revealing her notorious restless thoughts while pacing the third story corridor:

[M]illions are in silent revolt against their lot. Nobody knows how many rebellions besides political rebellions ferment in the masses of life which people earth. Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts ... they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation ... it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings ... It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex.

This is abruptly followed by the comment that 'when thus alone, I not unfrequently heard Grace Poole's laugh: the same peal, the same low, slow ha! ha! which, when first heard, had thrilled me' (pp. 109-10). Here again we have Bertha aligned with the masculine, not on the grounds of her coarseness or physical appearance but by the resonance of her laughter with the scornful, hypothetical male laughter reproved by Jane. Generally, however – playing on well-established associations – critics have preferred to identify the laugh not with the mocking utterance of women's 'privileged fellow-creatures' but with the radical threat of rebellion, and the breaking free of 'rigid restraint' initially contemplated by Jane.²⁵

²⁵ Shuttleworth, for instance (p. 163) sees the significance here mainly in terms of Jane's attribution of the laugh to the servant Grace Poole. The laugh thereby represents a 'sexual and social challenge', while Jane's sense of 'thrill' is a response which 'directly implicates her within this disruptive domain.' On the contrary, I would say 'thrilled' is meant in the sense of disturbed and unsettled – as one would be by contemptuous or creepy laughter. For Gilbert and Gubar (pp. 348-9), Bertha's laughter coming at this juncture is representative of the irrational within Jane, the 'bad animal' that is 'still lurking somewhere ... waiting for a chance to get free.' According to Jean Wyatt, the 'preverbal' Bertha 'addresses the quirks of

As discussed in the previous chapter, the act of laughter – like that of bursting into tears – is suggestive by its nature of an ‘uprising’, mirroring the concept. When the tyrannical Brocklehurst assigns Jane to the humiliating punishment of public exposure, she feels that her sensations ‘all rose, stifling my breath and constricting my throat’ until she manages to ‘[master] the rising hysteria’ (p. 67). But here we are in the domain of physical compulsion and the natural, bodily eruption (of emotion, or violence). For Bakhtin, ‘the people’s laughter’ has its powerful levelling effect because laughter ‘degrades and materializes.’²⁶ But Brontë’s alternative depiction of secretive, controlled laughter is not evocative of the corporeal in this way – it evokes not the lower bodily stratum but ‘higher’ mental powers. The relationship between laughter and rebellion remains pertinent, but the overtly explosive threat makes way for the sense of something more quietly (if not silently) dangerous. Consider for instance the storming of the mill in *Shirley*, Brontë’s most conspicuously political novel. For all its ultimate violence, the scene is conceived principally as a well-ordered and cool-headed assault, not the spontaneous outbreak of an unruly mob. Embittered rather than enraged, the

a female unconscious through images of painful incarceration and fiery revenge ... A fairly simple example of their collaboration occurs when Jane makes her famous third-story speech against the confinement of women [and] Bertha’s mad laughter rings out in confirmation.’ Wyatt, ‘A Patriarch of One’s Own: *Jane Eyre* and Romantic Love’, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, 4 (1985), 199-216 (p. 207). And for Judith Williams (p. 35), Bertha’s laugh belongs to ‘the realm of irrational forces such as passion and imagination.’

²⁶ Bakhtin, p. 20. He elaborates: ‘Degradation here means coming down to earth ... To degrade [means] to concern oneself with the lower stratum of the body, the life of the belly and the reproductive organs ... it has not only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one’ (p. 21). Indeed, the radical implications of ‘the people’s’ Carnival – with its suggestion of both comic debasement and comic regeneration – are limited by the temporary nature of the liberation from the established order that (both historically and symbolically) it offers. According to Ghose, historians are ‘sceptical about the implications of festivity.’ While it ‘did on occasion lead to the articulation [of] protest ... the main function of festive occasions was to celebrate the community and reaffirm communal solidarity.’ For Ghose, ‘one of the most pernicious fallacies to have taken hold of literary studies is the notion that laughter represents the authentic expression of the masses, a direct articulation of natural bodily impulses’ (pp. 64, 68-9). Certainly – as I will explore further presently – Brontë regularly suggests that laughter’s dangerous or rebellious character lies not in its function as an ‘authentic expression’ or ‘natural bodily impulse’ (whether of ‘the masses’ or of women) but in its power to coolly subvert or transcend such expressions and impulses.

‘hundreds’ of rioters make no more noise in their disciplined approach than a ‘muffled ... measured’ sound, ‘a low conference’, and a ‘slow-filing tread.’²⁷ It is significant that when we meet one of the rebels it is the smirking, self-possessed Moses Barraclough, who has ‘a kind of leer about his lips’, as though ‘laughing in his sleeve at some person or thing.’²⁸ Like Bertha’s acts of rebellion, which smack more of patient, calculated destruction than of outright bedlam, seditious behaviour in *Shirley* is stealthily rather than anarchically dangerous. This is reflected in the power which, throughout Brontë’s writing, is attached to mysterious, underhand forms of laughter, examples of which far outnumber wild outbursts. Just as she dwells on carefully meditated instigations of class rebellion rather than fear of the loud, unthinking mob, so her representation of subversive laughter tends to take a sharper, quieter, more unnervingly sarcastic shape than the Bakhtinian model would lead us to look for. The danger for those in power to be wary of is that of an *intelligent* threat posed from below.

Throughout the century, the most commonly cited explanation of laughter was Hobbes’s claim that, in essence, laughter is the expression of a sense of one’s superiority.²⁹ The unpleasant notion that we laugh out of triumph or exultation (or in Hobbes’s term, ‘glory’) was usually evoked in order to be disputed, but it nonetheless held great sway in the nineteenth-century imagination, and its applicability to the

²⁷ Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 283, 284.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

²⁹ Hobbes suggests this both in *Leviathan* (as quoted in the previous chapter), and in *Human Nature* (1650): ‘the passion of laughter is nothing else but a sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves, by comparison with the infirmities of others, or with our own formerly ... It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over ... For laughing to one’s self putteth all the rest to a jealousy and examination of themselves.’ Hobbes, *Human Nature and De Corpore Politico*, ed. by J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics, 1999), pp. 54-5. As Bartlett points out (pp. 10-11), the idea had other exponents – from Aristotle to Laurent Joubert – but was (and is) popularly attributed to Hobbes. Bartlett describes laughter in Rider Haggard’s *She* (1886-7) as ‘a powerful Hobbesian tool of expression for women [lacking] other physical and emotional outlets’ (p. 118) – an assessment which, however, again construes laughter as a ‘physical and emotional outlet’ rather than a purposeful act.

mocking laughter characteristically assigned to villains on both page and stage is easily perceived. Merle Tönnies observes that melodrama ‘foregrounded laughter, making it the hallmark of a character’s quality ... the villain was readily recognisable for the audience by his laugh of (short-lived) triumph over the other characters.’ But, ‘interestingly, the same interjection “Ha! ha!” could also (although more rarely) signify exactly the opposite kind of superiority, the successful stratagem of a positive character against a bad one.’³⁰ As seen in Bertha’s curiously contemptuous ‘Ha! ha!’, Brontë, too, is drawn to the possibilities for recasting the superior laugh; increasingly in her fiction we find it transferred from powerful aristocrats to more downtrodden figures – imprisoned lunatics, but also penniless governesses.

Hobbes’s comments on laughter belong to his theory of the ‘passions’; the idea that laughter (spontaneously) arises from ‘some sudden *conception* of some *eminency* in ourselves’ implies an instinctive, uncontrolled response.³¹ But what Brontë explores is laughter’s ability to provocatively perform, as well as simply express, superiority and (self-) knowledge, an insight which she develops in the arena of gender politics, through

³⁰ In keeping, however, with the contemporary mood as described in Chapter One, in the ‘more frequent variant [of laughter in the theatre] the triumphant element was toned down significantly or omitted completely ... laughter of this kind was a social affair. It could contain traces of ridicule [but] predominantly, it showed good-natured fellow-feeling which united all participants. The spectators were drawn into the same emotional group when they joined in with this laughter ... Laughter then became the cure for all kinds of misery.’ See Tönnies, p. 100. The contrast is further elucidated by John, who writes that ‘melodramatic villains’ were ‘invariably individualistic rather than socially constructive; they expose the existence of the private self which melodrama works so hard to downplay; and perhaps most importantly, they are often the most intelligent characters in the genre, threatening its general elevation of emotion over intellect.’ See John, *Dickens’s Villains*, p. 11.

³¹ David Heyd provides a helpful analysis of the extent to which Hobbes viewed laughter as a ‘voluntary’ act. On the one hand, laughter is not the ‘*means* for the achievement of a superior position’, but an ‘*expression* or an effect of a feeling of supremacy’ (Heyd’s emphasis). On the other hand, it is not altogether ‘a blind impulse over which reason has no control’ (‘with the possible exception of hysterical laughter’) – it ‘is an emotion whose analysis typically reflects the general Hobbesian conception of man’s nature as a social creature: the ceaseless competition for positions of power, the unrelenting struggle for self-preservation, and the purely egoistic nature of man, who continuously strives for superiority over others.’ See Heyd, pp. 286, 288, 290.

the ongoing and meticulously detailed power struggles that her novels dramatise.³² To trace this development briefly, in *Angria* (the subject of the following section) women tend to figure as the objects of men's superior laughter, but in *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*, we find unsettlingly knowing smiles appropriated by the heroines. The laughter of Shirley and Caroline is softened in an attempt to emphasise their femininity, but in *Villette*, Brontë's interest in the knowledge and power not just implied but carried by the superior laugh is brought very much to the fore. The sense of innate superiority that buoys up Brontë's abused or neglected protagonists is crucial to their characteristic strength as victims who overcome adversity on their way to triumph, and (although they are better known for their explicit complaints to the reader or their passionate bursts of outspoken self-defence) it is, I contend, in the frequent projection of their inner thoughts through the medium of the smile or laugh that this strength is most compellingly made apparent.

My assessment runs contrary to a certain tradition of reading Brontë's novels, where the focus is on her fierce defence of feelings, desires or the body – that which has been denied or repressed. As Caldwell notes, Brontë's novels have often received attention for their expression of 'violent emotion' – with critics tending either to valorise or criticise what Matthew Arnold described as her 'hunger, rebellion and rage.'³³ Terry Eagleton refers to the '*sexual demand*' that pervades her writing – 'an angry, wounded, implacable desire for full personal acceptance and recognition – which

³² It is tempting to surmise that Jean Rhys picked up on the politics of laughter in *Jane Eyre*, since her 1966 novel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (London: Penguin, 2000), which undertakes a defence of Bertha ('Antoinette') by fictionalising her prehistory, similarly abounds in transferrals of power and knowledge through laughter. 'I didn't like the way you laughed', complains a troubled Antoinette to Rhys's Rochester, but he is later made uneasy in his turn: 'she'd laugh for a long time and never tell me why she laughed' (pp. 66, 76).

³³ Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine*, pp. 98-9. Arnold's comment was made in reference to *Villette*, in a letter of April 1853, cited in *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. by Miriam Allott (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 201.

breaks beyond the boundaries of any social or narrative closure.³⁴ Describing critical approaches to Victorian women's writing more generally, Helena Michie discusses the common emphasis on 'reclaiming the body', whereby the female body in Victorian texts is an 'insubstantial outline that it is the task of feminism to flesh out.'³⁵ Critical interpretations of laughter often entail an analogous project of recovery, and take a similar view of rebellion as the outbreak of 'natural' urges in defiance of civilization or oppression. For Anca Parvulescu, the 'passional burst of laughter' is a transgressive act, since 'the ostracizing of the passions' over the course of history is linked to 'the prohibition on excessive, extravagant, open-mouthed, loud forms of laughter.'³⁶ Laughter 'seems to obey reason less than any other passion. A rebel, it sneaks in and overpowers reason.'³⁷ But for Brontë, laughter is *not* about the assertion of sexuality or

³⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'Introduction to the Second Edition' (1988), in *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës*, Anniversary Edition (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p. xxix. (Eagleton's emphasis.) Barbara Hardy observes that Brontë's 'outbursts' on the subject of women's plight (including Jane's third story speech) 'have the appearance of a spontaneous overflow of feelings too strong to remain within the form of fiction ... they are powerful reminders of the novelist's feelings ... feminist deviations from a structural norm.' See Hardy, *Forms of Feeling in Victorian Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1986), pp. 129-30. See also, for instance, Miller's assessment that Brontë 'poured her egoism into a new and specifically female form of self-expression. In Jane, she let out the pent-up emotions of a woman who feels the world against her, and in doing so she indicted the society which had told her to suppress her passions [in] the interests of womanly duty.' Brontë's novels challenge normative femininity through their 'passion and violence' and are remarkable for their acknowledgment of 'erotic feelings', 'sexuality' and 'desire' (Miller, pp. 13, 18, 52).

³⁵ Helena Michie, *The Flesh Made Word: Female Figures and Women's Bodies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 127-8. 'Victorianism remains the main enemy', Michie states, while feminism has set out to 'construct a female body in the face of patriarchal convention.' But (as have many other critics, following Foucault's *History of Sexuality*, 1976-84) Michie does also complicate the picture of 'Victorianism' as 'the historical site of repression, silence, and prudery' (p. 4).

³⁶ Parvulescu, p. 7.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 30. Butler (building on Foucault) provides a useful insight into the kind of assumptions that sustain such ideas (whether relating to laughter or 'woman'): 'One way in which power is both perpetuated and concealed is through the establishment of an external or arbitrary relation between power, conceived as repression or domination, and sex, conceived as a brave but thwarted energy waiting for release or authentic self-expression' (*Gender Trouble*, p. 95). Similarly, I would suggest, laughter is conventionally seen in terms of 'thwarted energy waiting for release or authentic self-expression' – a 'natural' force in opposition to 'repression or domination.' In Brontë's novels, laughter may not always be equivalent to male despotism, but neither can it be read as an expression of the 'authentic female voice' that Miller (p. 15) attributes to Jane.

‘violent emotion’ – quite the opposite. In her novels, laughter’s liberating potential lies not in its physicality but in its capacity to establish a degree of distance from the body – not to overpower reason but to lay claim to it – and thereby to evade or reject defining gender traits. Bodily or affective laughter, on the other hand, is figured as tame rather than transgressive; it exudes not fiery passions but a warmth that is at once sensual and sentimental. The fact that Bertha’s laughter is not ‘excessive, extravagant, open-mouthed, loud’ – that rather than expressing a kind of mythical, sexual knowledge (as commonly attributed to women’s laughter) it sounds a note of emotional detachment that is in no sense ‘innately’ female – tells us much about laughter’s significance throughout the novels.³⁸ While both Brontë and her critics often cast reason as the enemy of feeling, her representations of laughter invite us to focus instead on the ways in which her characters (both men and women) are empowered through restraint, rather than release.³⁹

Bertha’s disembodied, suppressed yet deliberate laugh is a useful example with which to have begun, with its suggestion of self-control where we might not expect to find it, and of intelligent protest which refuses to be kept out of view (or in her case, hearing). If grotesque and sordidly sensual Bertha resembles the brutish, stupid bully of the novel’s opening pages, John Reed, with his ‘unwholesome skin; thick lineaments [and] heavy limbs’ (p. 9), no less does she recall the small, morbidly thoughtful and

³⁸ The association of women’s laughter with the sensuality of the mouth is usually evoked to explain why it is regarded as dangerous. For instance, Ghose notes that in early modern culture, women’s ‘excessive speech and full-throated laughter were a signal revealing assertiveness and, by extension, sexual voraciousness. Laughing boisterously was a sign of frivolity and sexual availability’ (p. 27). But in early nineteenth-century terms (as argued in the previous chapter) the bodily display of laughter takes on less sordid meanings: ‘frivolity and sexual availability’ translate into desirable lightheartedness and healthy sexuality.

³⁹ The questionable opposition between these terms as they are applied to understandings of subjectivity, the emotional life, and Victorian culture more generally is explored by John Kucich, in *Repression in Victorian Fiction: Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot and Charles Dickens* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), pp. 1-3. I engage with this work in the next chapter.

resentful Jane, ‘a noxious thing, cherishing the germs of indignation at [her] treatment’ (p. 16). Such an assertion, indeed, only serves to add to the substantial body of criticism which doubles or equates Bertha with Jane, and the modern feminist appreciation of Bertha as victim rather than monster. But the route taken here is different: identifying Bertha first as demonic (masculine) villain allows us to focus in on the liminal link between the innocent oppressed and the despotically sadistic, since her hollow, mirthless laugh registers the discontent of the former while echoing the articulate contempt of the latter.

II

*There was a laughing Devil in his sneer,
That raised emotions both of rage and fear.*

Byron, *The Corsair* (1814)

*That smile, if oft observed and near,
Waned in its mirth and wither'd to a sneer;
That smile might reach his lip, but pass'd not by,
None e'er could trace its laughter to his eye.*

Byron, *Lara* (1814)⁴⁰

Amongst Brontë's early stories, ‘The Spell’ (written in 1834) is one of the most complex and experimental. An extravagant Gothic romance, it is a classic example of the sophisticated, self-reflexive approach to storytelling that accompanies the early stories’ apparently immature immersion in farce, clichés, and supernatural absurdities.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Byron, *The Corsair*, Canto I (ll. 223-4), and *Lara*, Canto I (ll. 299-302). Taken from *Lord Byron: Selected Poems*, ed. by Susan J. Wolfson and Peter J. Manning (London: Penguin, 1996).

⁴¹ Heather Glen describes the ‘self-reflexive playfulness’, the mixing of ‘romance’ with ‘ironic anti-romanticism’, and ‘the sense that pervades all [Brontë’s] youthful writings, of the literary world as a place not of artless self-expressiveness but of artful self-presentation, in which different roles may be tried out,

The narrator Charles Wellesley announces at the outset his intention: to ‘revenge’ himself on his brother (Zamorna) by proving him insane. He offers his readers (the people of Angria) this ‘proof’ by means of elaborate fabrication; Zamorna’s insanity ‘is declared in my present work rather by implication than assertion.’⁴² What follows is – at the level of the story’s ‘real’ framework – whimsical invention on Charles’s part, a story designed to expose Zamorna’s ‘double-dealing, hypocritical, close, dark, secret, half-insane character’ by revealing that he has an identical twin, Valdacella. The existence of Valdacella has been hitherto unknown due to a spell cast by a mysterious character (implicitly the Devil) at the twins’ birth, forbidding them ever to be seen together at the same time in public, on pain of death. The conceit is Charles’s satirical way of accounting for Zamorna’s varying moods, changeable affections, and the many lives he seems to live. As Shuttleworth shrewdly observes, the ‘critical industry devoted to unearthing the presence of psychological “doubles” in Brontë’s novels is here unceremoniously pre-empted.’⁴³

‘The Spell’ is a study in character, and – in keeping with its layered structure – a story about the study of character, focusing obsessively as it does not only on the psychology of Zamorna but on the experience of those, particularly his wife Mary, who try to get to the bottom of his secret, to make sense of his behaviour. Most baffling of all is his laughter. At one point described as ‘the well-known Ha! Ha! of Zamorna’ (p. 120), his laugh is ever-ready but it is by no means the familiar, signature laugh that the

contemplated, explored and satirized.’ See *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 9-10. As Christine Alexander asserts, ‘the juvenilia demonstrate that even at an early age, Charlotte’s grasp of narrative process and its implications was surprisingly sophisticated.’ See Alexander’s introduction to *Tales of Glass Town*, pp. xiii-xliii (p. xxi). (‘The Spell’, technically, was written before the kingdom of Angria was created, but for the sake of clarity I will refer to all the early writings as ‘Angrian.’)

⁴² ‘The Spell: An Extravaganza. By Lord Charles Albert Florian Wellesley’, in *Tales of Glass Town*, pp. 66-150 (p. 67). In this part of the chapter, references to ‘The Spell’ will be given in parentheses after quotations.

⁴³ Shuttleworth, p. 117.

phrase suggests; instead its tone is relentlessly varied, and in need of frequent authorial elaboration lest its particular inflection be lost on the reader. Zamorna, after all, ‘displays all the strange variableness & versatility which characterize possessed lunatics’ (p. 67). Laughter acts in the story as the central motif for his unpredictable character – the measure and expression of his changeable moods and the multiple sides of his personality.

Much of the story is concerned with the painful suspense and uncertainty suffered by Mary, whose constant tears are set in opposition to Zamorna’s constant laughter, and whose sanity is threatened by the end of the story far more than his is convincingly thrown in doubt. She not only has to undergo jealousy at the discovery of other women (who in ‘reality’ are Zamorna’s mistress and previous wife, but who in the story are eventually accounted for by Valdacella); her suffering is also the subject of amusement and derision by the two men who so confuse her as she is passed, obliviously, from one to the other. Zamorna’s laughter is comfort or torture to Mary according to its tone; he ‘tried to cheer me with his wild musical laugh – & never in vain, for that laugh, when not fierce or scornful, is a cordial itself to my ears’ (p. 87). The Duke’s ‘Ha! Ha!’ is ‘sometimes smothered’ and ‘sometimes bursting forth in its full cordial clearness of sound’ (p. 130); ‘cordial clearness’ provides her with transparency and comes as a (medicinal) relief to Mary, while laughter with a ‘smothered’ quality conveys secretiveness and hostility. His smiles, too, differ in their expression – sensitive to rebuff as well as to ferocity or scorn, Mary is continuously humiliated when confronted (unbeknown to her) with Valdacella:

It was a curious glance that he gave his lady. The vermilion lip was bit in as if to suppress the half comic smile that mantled round it; the eye-brow was raised. The light of the eye was arch, scrutinizing, rather satirical yet kind-enough: it forbade

fear, yet did not invite any of that overflowing tenderness with which Mary was inclined to greet him. She stood silent, blushing & embarrassed (p. 118).

When (as a result of Mary prying into her husband's secrets) the Devil's 'curse' comes into effect and the real Zamorna begins to die, laughter becomes the key symptom as Mary, amidst her growing confusion, finds herself having to discern between healthy and unhealthy, as well as between cruel and kind. She is concerned to find him laughing 'sweetly, but not heartily' (p. 125), tapping into the connotations of 'heartiness' both with flesh and feeling, good health and good nature. 'I begin to think you have a double existence', she complains, but is relieved to at least find his tenderness (sweetness) restored; '*that* [Zamorna] was strong & in full flourish; *this* [Zamorna] droops at present. But to my eyes the pale lips that now smile on me are dearer a thousand, a million times than those ruby ones that sneered at me an hour ago' (p. 124; my emphasis). Mary, in other words, is relieved to recognise the authenticity and affection in the 'pale' smile, despite the ominous absence of colour.

Crucially, since Zamorna is an important template for Brontë's later heroes (Rochester not least), it is through pitting smiles against sneers, sweetness against scorn, and heartiness against hollowness, that Brontë tests and explores the contradictions and Byronic dimensions of his shape-shifting character. For Charles, Zamorna's madness consists not in outward excess but inner corruption; 'there are black veins of utter perversion of intellect born with him & running through his whole soul', he insists (p. 67), equating and collapsing intellectual and moral perversion with bodily perversion. Both black veins and black soul become manifest as the curse grows stronger (essentially, as his health weakens and the Devil comes closer to claiming him): he asks Mary with 'an ironical laugh' if she thinks him 'a walking skeleton, a sort of living symbol of death', causing her to realise with alarm that 'there was a morbid feeling about him.' In this deranged state, the Duke is 'even wildly gay, yet he could not

communicate a corresponding spirit to his guests. They saw it was all assumed, hollow-hearted, & all that sort of cheerfulness is more depressing to a spectator than the most determined melancholy' (p. 100). Perverse and sarcastic, Zamorna's mirth is akin to the Devil's 'hollow laugh' (p. 113) and has a freezing effect on those around him which reflects his emotional coolness and loss of (figuratively flowing) spirits. He smiles 'coldly' at Mary as he tells her with 'ineffable contempt': 'I despise you thoroughly' (p. 102). Holding her 'overflowing tenderness' in check, and failing to 'communicate a corresponding spirit to his guests', the mentally, morally, and physically ill Zamorna is drained of all sociable warmth and geniality, his laughter no longer 'bursting forth in its full cordial clearness of sound.'⁴⁴

A man of 'desperately moody humours', Zamorna is not permanently morose or morbid, himself affirming 'the soundness of my mental and corporeal condition' (p. 99). Indeed, Valdacella causes further confusion during his twin's decline by continuing to behave with expressive joviality, with 'the fine glowing clearness which [his complexion] ever wears in perfect health' and without a trace of 'languor & feebleness' (p. 117). Valdacella 'looked, talked, laughed & swaggered as usual' (p. 116). When the curse is lifted and the secret finally out in public, the clearing of the air is expressed with a symbolical openness of expression, as the pair stand together and enjoy their triumph at having tricked everyone: 'turning to each other, [they] burst into a loud & ringing laugh.' Hobbesian yet hearty, their laughter rises above the confusion 'like a

⁴⁴ The terms of the contrast resemble, for instance, Carlyle's in *Sartor Resartus*, between the smile wherein 'lies a cold glitter as of ice' and the 'bursting forth' of Teufelsdröckh ('loud, long-continuing'), with the accompanying moral judgment that 'no man who has once heartily and wholly laughed can be altogether irreclaimably bad.' Note that while Zamorna's morbid melancholy is glamorized, it is not (as in eighteenth-century understandings of the relationship between ill health and moral feeling) indicative of superior moral sensibility – quite the opposite. In early nineteenth-century thought, laughing had replaced languishing as the sign of moral worth; the 'man of feeling' had been replaced by the man of 'good feeling'; sympathy had become something to be expressed robustly through community feeling and hearty conviviality. (For eighteenth-century beliefs in the links between moral worth and bodily weakness, see Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: the Making of the Romantic Disease* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 51, 53-5.)

trumpet swell over the roar of a cataract' (p. 141). The swiftly alternating masculinities represented by Zamorna, the combination he embodies of brusque boisterous energy with darkly sinister broodiness, is comically suggested by Charles: 'Fiercely malignant were their mutual glances for some seconds, but all at once something, probably the resemblance, appeared to strike them in a ludicrous point of view. They burst into a simultaneous laugh [and] strode to opposite parts of the room' (p. 145). Yet, since no 'Valdacella' exists, Charles's facetious resolution of the enigma can hardly be said to throw reassuring light on the darker shades of Zamorna's character, ultimately representing him as it does as a slippery, multifaceted being.

What emerges with the most constant emphasis from this story, as from the rest of the saga is, most simply, Zamorna's immensely powerful presence. Whether expressed through hearty exultant laughter or through bitter scorn, his ability to belittle and disconcert everyone around him is pronounced, and finds its chief expression in the meeting of his self-assured laughter with their baffled confusion. Confronted by a group of Angrian noblemen, Valdacella is unabashed by their demands that he explain his behaviour, first laughing in their faces, then 'lean[ing] back in the sofa, regarding his guests with a smile of the most strange & inscrutable significancy. It was such as one might suppose a man might assume when on the eve of accomplishing a grand piece of gullery on an extended scale' (pp. 134-5). Ultimately it is Zamorna's 'close, dark, secret' mysteriousness, his withholding of knowledge – the 'strange & inscrutable significancy' of his laughter – which makes him powerful. Tellingly whenever his servant, Eugene Rosier, makes similar gestures they provoke indignant anger: Rosier irritates with his 'slight laugh [and] sly look of his ineffably mischievous eye' (p. 72), his 'low whistle [and] strange kind of smile' (p. 109), and 'a roguishly significant smile [which] told that he had solved the riddle' (p. 119). These covertly confident displays of understanding are presumptuous from a servant.

Zamorna asserts his supremacy at every opportunity. When menaced he knows how to '[throw] into his countenance more scorn than a horse could stomach',⁴⁵ meeting threats with 'lofty scorn' or by 'lifting his lip with a sour sneer.' Even the weather is challenged by him in this way: he 'presented to the [wind]' a 'desperate grin [that] seemed daring the snow flakes to a comparison of whiteness.'⁴⁶ His laughter is frequently accompanied by a gesture of violence. When his brother protests at being whipped by him, Zamorna 'answered this appeal with a laugh intended, I have no doubt, to display his white teeth, and a sneer designed to set off his keen wit, and at the same instant he gently touched his riding-wand.'⁴⁷

The Duke's 'low & meaning laugh' (p. 133) is the most often heard amidst abounding instances of 'peculiar' masculine laughter in the Angrian tales, which (as with Bertha's 'curious cachinnation') is always mysterious, vaguely hostile or aggressive, and individualised (in Byron's phrase, 'the peculiar smile [which] boded no good, whatever it express'd'). The nobleman Hartford mutters 'with the dark, sinister smile peculiar to him' while Lord Richton assumes 'a half rueful, half jesting expression.'⁴⁸ The sinister Northangerland has 'a kind of dry, brief laugh' and 'a queer sort of smile.'⁴⁹ In one scene, we are told that 'the Ambassador, every two minutes, te-he'd his snivelling laugh, and Hartford curled his lips into a half-sour, half-rakish smile.'⁵⁰ Hartford elsewhere is described as 'dissevering his lips with a devilish grin' that is 'kindled partly by wine and partly by the instinct of bloodhound exultation',

⁴⁵ 'The Duke of Zamorna', in *Tales of Angria*, ed. by Heather Glen (London: Penguin, 2006), pp. 131-95 (p. 188).

⁴⁶ 'Mina Laury', pp. 200-1.

⁴⁷ Brontë, *The Green Dwarf: A Tale of The Perfect Tense* (London: Hesperus Press, 2003), p. 5.

⁴⁸ 'Mina Laury', pp. 194, 200.

⁴⁹ 'Caroline Vernon', pp. 242, 271.

⁵⁰ 'The Duke of Zamorna', p. 169.

while Sir William Percy smiles ‘with an expression meant to be very inexplicable and mysterious.’⁵¹ Zamorna, indeed, appears frequently jolly and jovial in comparison with this shady crowd.

The sheer range, violence and inventiveness of the vocabulary Brontë employs to describe laughter is indicative of her preoccupation with it; alongside tittering and chuckling we encounter ‘nichering’,⁵² ‘keckling’,⁵³ and ‘trying to smile but only girning, to use an expressive Angrian word.’⁵⁴ And its real significance is never far below the surface: strikingly, the power carried by laughter is exclusively male – men compete and jostle for the advantage amongst each other while women are powerless, anxious and unlaughing. In this sense the Angria tales depict the perceived reality which Brontë’s later novels attempt to subvert. Mina Laury talks politics and ‘Mr O’Neill bowed in deference to her opinion, but smiled at the same time as if he doubted its justice.’⁵⁵ Caroline Vernon lies awake, in love with Zamorna and worrying that ‘he would laugh at me & say I was a fool.’⁵⁶ And Mary, whose constant doubts about her husband have ‘weakened her nerves & made them prey to a hundred vague apprehensions’ is handled by Zamorna with ‘laughing banter about her over-anxiety’, or ‘rewarded’ for her silence by being ‘favoured’ with a ‘smile, which as good as said he

⁵¹ ‘Henry Hastings’, in *Tales of Angria* (pp. 201-322), pp. 251-2, 266.

⁵² For instance in ‘Caroline Vernon’, p. 238, and ‘The Duke of Zamorna’, p. 153 (‘Percy nichered a faint laugh’). ‘Nichering’ also features – in the context of concealment – in *Jane Eyre*, when Rochester is disguised as a gypsy (‘the old crone “nichered” a laugh under her bonnet and bandage’; p. 219).

⁵³ Zamorna’s ‘most hearty laugh’ is contrasted with Percy/Northangerland, who ‘keckled too, very faintly.’ See ‘The Duke of Zamorna’, p. 154.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-7.

⁵⁵ ‘Mina Laury’, p. 208.

⁵⁶ ‘Caroline Vernon’, p. 292.

thought she was looking very handsome.⁵⁷ As comes across so strongly in ‘The Spell’, her worst fear is ridicule – to be greeted with sneers instead of gratified by smiles.

The close association of laughter with power is a recurring theme in Brontë’s writing, and in these early works we find the beginnings of her use of this theme to explore unequal gender relations, and the habitual means by which men assert their superiority over women. For Zamorna it is a matter of management: privately enraged when Mary follows him against his orders, coming dangerously close to encountering his mistress, he affects to laugh ‘heartily’ at her for her pursuit, and manages to placate her ‘by dint of lies and laughter,’ with ‘teasing raillery.’ Mary protests that her ‘mind is weakened’ by ‘tears and terrors’ and apologises that she is ‘neither so handsome nor so cheerful as I once was.’ Successfully silenced and got rid of, the manipulated Mary is too broken in spirits to be cheered; she is ‘far too much in earnest to join in his laugh.’⁵⁸ The torture of Zamorna’s sarcasm is vividly described by Louisa Vernon, an ex-mistress kept in virtual imprisonment, who therefore requires less conciliatory management than Mary, and who finds him ‘an impenetrable iron-man.’ She wails: ‘he smiles as if he were amused at my anger & that smile of his is so – I don’t know what – vexing, maddening – it makes him look so handsome – & yet it tears one’s heart with passion. I could draw my nails down his face till I had scraped it bare of flesh.’⁵⁹ Both attracted to and infuriated by his smile – tearing at her heart, it makes her want to rip it from his face – Louisa’s desire for violence (and her violent desire) only renders her further subject to Zamorna’s contemptuous amusement.

Louisa’s naive young daughter Caroline is brought up in doubt about her good looks and power to please; Zamorna (her guardian) always ‘smiled in silence when she

⁵⁷ ‘Mina Laury’, pp. 180, 244.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 220.

⁵⁹ ‘Caroline Vernon’, pp. 248-9.

appealed to him,' and he and Northangerland (her father) privately conspire behind her back, constantly smiling at her shows of innocence, 'laughing quietly' in an 'undertone' when she amuses them.⁶⁰ Her powerlessness in the face of Northangerland's opposition to her will, when she had thought she was able to influence him, is made comically but starkly apparent when she resorts to cold-shouldering him: 'She seemed quite unconscious of any absurdity in her indignation, though it produced much the same effect as if a squirrel had thought proper to treat a Newfoundland dog with lofty hauteur. Northangerland smiled when her back was turned.'⁶¹ In the two men's competition for control over this plaything, it is Zamorna who wins when he successfully seduces her. She is entranced by his mysterious airs, and rendered giddy with self-conscious nervousness when he silently scrutinizes her: 'the young lady laughed again, fitfully & almost hysterically – as if there was some internal struggle between tears & laughter.' Characteristically self-possessed in the face of this hysterical confusion, Zamorna ('Satan's eldest son') takes advantage despite her 'piteous upward look'; he 'smiled at the mute prayer.'⁶² Whisked off to a secluded country retreat, it is only to be assumed that Caroline will in time grow resentful of that satanic smile, echoing the frustrated cry of her discarded mother: 'there is something so scornful about your lips. I do hate you! I abhor you!'⁶³ Zamorna's scornful lips provoke the mad rage and fitful hysterics – the mingled tears and laughter – that Bertha's laughter notably does *not* resemble.⁶⁴

By this point it must be apparent that there is a significant gap in Shuttleworth's otherwise comprehensive analysis of 'penetrating power' in Brontë's writing (and her

⁶⁰ Ibid., pp. 259, 252, 258, 271.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 281.

⁶² Ibid., pp. 301, 309.

⁶³ 'The Duke of Zamorna', p. 155.

⁶⁴ However, in the same way that Bertha's madness is inherited from her mother, so Caroline's 'mother's excitable temperament was roused within her' ('Caroline Vernon', p. 270).

early writings specifically). ‘All dominant men, whether heroic or villainous, are given penetrating, piercing eyes’, she notes.⁶⁵ ‘Women, Brontë suggests, can have no such answering power of the gaze which can wield such public humiliation.’⁶⁶ But Shuttleworth leaves unaddressed the particular force carried by male laughter, with its surely more palpable ability to ‘humiliate’, and its extra connotations of aggression and superiority. As difficult to ignore as it is ostensibly covert, the Hobbesian laughter that Brontë so persistently attributes to Angria’s bullies is clearly an extension, a more antagonistic version of the penetrating gaze. The preying, uncertain sense that one is being mocked is (recalling Foucault’s analysis of the Panopticon) akin to the insecurity accompanying the suspicion that one is ‘seen through’, stripped, defenceless (Mary standing ‘silent, blushing & embarrassed’). Angria is a world in which men are the harbourers of knowledge (placing women in a corresponding state of doubt and dependence), and the primary expression of this order is the superior, enigmatic smile or laugh. It is clear that additional power accrues to men through this particular means of flaunting their self-assurance.⁶⁷ When Mary records watching (and feeling aroused by) Zamorna’s disrespectful ‘ransacking’ invasion of another woman’s desk and portfolio, crucial to the scene is not just his public scrutiny of her private papers but his scornful dismissal of them: reading her letters, he ‘laughed at some & sneered at others, tossed the seals & wax & wafers about.’ Since the desk also contains literary ‘manuscripts’, we

⁶⁵ Shuttleworth, p. 110.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 211.

⁶⁷ The effects of Zamorna’s laughter (especially on women) can be appreciated by referring back to Hobbes’s insight in *Human Nature* (pp. 54-5): ‘It is no wonder therefore that men take it heinously to be laughed at or derided, that is, triumphed over ... For laughing to one’s self putteth all the rest to a jealousy and examination of themselves.’ Indeed, although (as mentioned previously) Hobbes generally conceived of laughter as a sudden outburst or ‘passion’, he does here suggest that triumph or superiority can be successfully conveyed – producing insecurity in others – through the more secretive and dignified act of ‘laughing to one’s self.’

cannot doubt that anxieties about female creative efforts, exposed to a confidently judgmental male readership, are here being raised (pp. 85-6).

It is unspoken ridicule's bewildering ability not only to express derogatory knowledge of and power over the female, but also to baffle female understanding and rebuff interpretation, which Brontë explores so closely, and yet which is absent from Shuttleworth's evaluation. A pointed display of mystery – meaning acknowledged even while obscured – the secretive laugh is a more tantalisingly unanswerable gesture than the gaze, an openly challenging provocation which refuses to reveal or to share. Employing Deborah Lutz's observation that the Gothic 'involves shining a fitful light on the shadows while holding on to their depths' – that its 'dual power' is 'to both uncover and darken' – Zamorna's smile can be understood as a characteristically Gothic image for reasons beyond its familiarity as a stereotype.⁶⁸ 'The Spell' is not really about Zamorna's 'madness' but about his mystique. And his 'mystique' is no vague, feminine quality but a powerful tool. The mocking demeanour by which he disguises his own secrets, baffles understanding and evades scrutiny is simultaneously the means by which he registers his understanding of and penetrating contempt for others. It is while 'smiling' that, Mary records, 'he held me at arm's length &, still smiling, looked through my eyes into my very heart' (p. 88). 'I cannot help smiling at the whole female character', he sweepingly tells her; 'so finely epitomized in you' (p. 103). Through

⁶⁸ Deborah Lutz, 'Gothic Fictions in the Nineteenth Century', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel 1820-1888*, ed. by Kucich and Taylor, pp. 76-89 (p. 89). The mechanism by which sinister laughter both sustains and lifts its mysterious cover is similarly captured in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's interpretation of the veil, which in '[concealing] and [inhibiting] sexuality comes by the same gesture to represent it'. See Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (London & New York: Methuen, 1986), p. 143. Berns (p. 84) suggests that laughter is inherently mysterious: 'In contrast to emotions, which tend to be symbolically specific', laughter presents us 'with no more than the behavioural syntax, specifying neither content nor message.' And 'the dark side of Romanticism cherishes the notion of "the inexpressible" or "the unutterable", [elevating] this motif to a standard convention of Gothic literature.' But alternatively the motif, or mechanism, can also be understood by referring back to Thackeray's satirical style – Brontë's perception of his writing as scathing yet subtle, damning yet discreet – and his provocative self-defence in *Vanity Fair*: Have I 'once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water?'

mockery (the ‘handsome’ smile that ‘tears [Louisa’s] heart with passion’) he demonstrates confidence in his sexual power over women. When the newly revealed ‘Valdacella’ assures the crowd he is no stranger to them (‘I know you all, body, mind & estate’), it is with ‘that bold & mischievous smile’ which had earlier ‘distressed’ Mary that he persuades a former flame of Zamorna’s that they are better acquainted than she realises.

In comparison, women’s rare laughter is a symptom of nervousness, a loss of control, or a flimsy bluff for emotion. Caroline laughs ‘almost hysterically’ in response to her sexual confusion and her ‘internal struggle between tears & laughter’, while Mina Laury gives ‘a somewhat forced laugh’ to unconvincingly hide her feelings (p. 128). Smiling for Mary is a means of ‘evading [Northangerland’s] sarcasm’;⁶⁹ another time she attempts ‘my father’s sneer, for my heart was choking in my throat ... I laughed scornfully, for my blood was up’ (p. 91). In this case the sadistic male laugh is faintly echoed by the daughter, losing its effect by being stripped of its veil of mystery. Mary betrays the emotion and physical compulsion behind the sneer, which is explained from her perspective: haughtily affecting superiority in front of her husband’s mistress, she gives us pitiful insight into the vulnerability – the wounded heart and boiling blood – that is the motive for her hostile laughter.

In the novels to come, we find a more alert, considered representation of laughter’s role in social interaction and its roots in mental calculation. We also find Brontë’s female characters less passive in the face of satirical attacks. Mary’s meek recourse to sighs and sobs in response to Zamorna’s tiresomely reiterated mockery is largely left behind, as Brontë’s interest in her heroines’ skill at staving off, and even initiating, intimidation through their own insinuating smiles takes centre-stage. But, as

⁶⁹ ‘Caroline Vernon’, p. 235.

Brontë goes about adapting the devices and images of her Gothic fantasy world to her works of contemporary realism, the demonically shape-shifting Zamorna never goes away. He continues to emerge, smugly amused, in later, more realistic representations of charismatically threatening men – all the more troubling for being less crudely depicted. Though it is in *Villette*'s Graham Bretton that we find the clearest modern reincarnation of Zamorna and the contradictions (coldness and warmth, cruelty and heartiness) that he embodies, it is to *Jane Eyre* – and Brontë's most famous 'Byronic' hero – that this chapter will now return.

III

*Though too well bred to quiz men to their faces,
Her laughing blue eyes with a glance could seize
The ridicules of people in all places –
That honey of your fashionable bees –
And store it up for mischievous enjoyment.*

Byron, *Don Juan*

*... many a withering thought lies hid, not lost,
In smiles that least befit who wear them most.*

Byron, *The Corsair*⁷⁰

Blanche Ingram, the society beauty who physically resembles Bertha Rochester (as she was before becoming a hideous 'hyena') is given comparable moral traits too; she represents the bad manners and unpleasant qualities that Brontë perceived to thrive amongst the supposedly 'well bred' upper classes. Blanche reveals her arrogance with frequent displays of scorn. She 'laughed continually; her laugh was satirical, and so was

⁷⁰ Byron, *Don Juan*, Canto XVI (ll. 843-47), and *The Corsair*, Canto III (ll. 638-9).

the habitual expression of her arched and haughty lip' (p. 172). She looks down at the child Adèle 'with a mocking air' (p. 173) and responds to the topic of 'good-natured' governesses by 'curling her lip sarcastically' (p. 178). Another foil to plain, polite Jane, Blanche is one source in the novel of confidently superior female laughter, absent in the male-dominated Angria.

At the same time, though not an aggressive laugher, Jane firmly retains a sense of innate superiority amidst her sneering 'betters', assured of her inner worth. Often this is evidenced simply by her composure – her calm imperviousness to the scorn of those she thinks beneath her – as displayed in the company of her Reed cousins:

Young ladies have a remarkable way of letting you know that they think you a 'quiz,' without actually saying the words. A certain superciliousness of look, coolness of manner, nonchalance of tone, express fully their sentiments on the point, without committing them by any positive rudeness in word or deed. | A sneer, however, whether covert or open, had now no longer that power over me it once possessed: as I sat between my cousins, I was surprised to find how easy I felt under the total neglect of the one and the semi-sarcastic attentions of the other (p. 229).

Jane here attests to the power of the wordless sneer to embarrass by making itself obvious despite remaining supposedly 'covert.' But Georgiana Reed's 'semi-sarcastic attentions' are wasted on the self-possessed Jane, having (at least so she asserts) no power over her. More to the point, Jane herself is more prone to sarcasm than she admits. Though it is Blanche who belongs to the kind of fashionable milieu portrayed in Byron's *Don Juan* (above), Jane is quick to 'seize' on the ridiculous and 'store it up for mischievous enjoyment' – her resilience has as much to do with her irreverent sharpness as with her quiet dignity.

Indeed, Jane is more subversive of feminine conduct codes than Blanche, who reserves her 'satirical' laugh for other women (in particular children, the slow-witted,

and social inferiors) while lavishing flattery on the powerful Rochester. As Robin Jones summarises, ‘in their cultural roles as nurturers, [women] are the repositories of aggression, not the instigators. Laughter in women is unexpected because [the] marginal aren’t expected to laugh at the dominating force, nor is humorous aggression appreciated in women.’⁷¹ Though unfeminine in her aggressive arrogance, Blanche at least does not challenge social or gender hierarchies, indeed she often supports them; as Jones further observes, ‘she and other women in the novel laugh, not when it moves them, as much as when it is appropriate. They respond to the social codes of the situation.’⁷² As well as highlighting Blanche’s fundamental subservience to male power, in contrasting the notion of being ‘moved’ with that of responding to ‘social codes’, Jones here suggestively touches on the pitting of authenticity against artificiality that, as I argued in Chapter One, shaped nineteenth-century strictures on laughter. Brontë’s conflicted, irresolute handling of this theme is reflected in the ambivalent characterisation of Jane, whose laughter serves in the novel to emphasise, alternately, two sides of her character which exist in tension. Her often sly rebelliousness and ‘semi-sarcastic’ challenges to social rules – her determined resistance to Rochester as a ‘dominating force’ – sit in problematic combination with Brontë’s painstaking efforts to depict her as morally attractive, open, and a stark contrast to the sneering Blanche.

While the problem of un/natural expression is explored fully in the next chapter, it will be useful here to draw on Moshe Barasch’s division of ‘human expression and gesture’ into ‘movements we believe to be part of “Nature”, and movements based on a (more or less) deliberate use of available cultural conventions’:

⁷¹ Jones, p. 202.

⁷² Jones (p. 204) discusses the blushing giggles, titters and hysterical squeals performed by the women in response to the men, calling ‘attention to themselves specifically from men, when propriety does not allow the use of language.’ Thus, laughter is used to emphasise femininity (and availability) rather than to convey disdain or self-assurance. Blanche’s assumption of superiority has its limitations; her display of class status cannot ultimately compensate for her powerlessness as a woman reliant on marriage.

Gestures of the first kind are performed spontaneously, involuntarily, and perhaps even without our being aware of the fact that we are performing them ...

Conventional gestures are in the first place conceived as a means to communication.

The readability of the natural gesture is a side- or after-effect; it has little to do with the aim of the gesture. The conventional gesture is – at least in its origins – performed in order to convey a message.⁷³

It is this distinction between the spontaneous and the ‘(more or less) deliberate’ – the instinctive and the performed – that preoccupies Brontë, with laughter as the image she repeatedly returns to. Blanche’s assertions of superiority and her flirtations with Rochester are in line with social codes, ‘performed in order to convey a message.’ In showing off, Jane notes critically, she is ‘self-conscious – remarkably self-conscious indeed’ (p. 172).

The point is constantly reiterated. Blanche is ‘very showy, but she was not genuine: she had a fine person, many brilliant attainments; but her mind was poor, her heart barren by nature: nothing bloomed spontaneously on that soil; no unforced natural fruit delighted by its freshness’ (p. 185). The familiar imagery of ill-nature is present: Blanche is superficially brilliant but not (healthily) spontaneous, fresh, blooming; her sourness of disposition is reflected in the quality of her ‘fruit’ – her ‘forced’, false gestures (images through which Jane snidely de-sexualises her rival). Watching her with Rochester, she ponders:

Surely she cannot truly like him; or not like him with true affection! If she did, she need not coin her smiles so lavishly; flash her glances so unremittingly; manufacture airs so elaborate, graces so multitudinous ... I have seen in his face a far different expression from that which hardens it now while she is so vivaciously accosting him; but then it came of itself: it was not elicited by meretricious arts and calculated

⁷³ Moshe Barasch, *Giotto and the Language of Gesture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), pp. 3-4.

manoeuvres; and one had but to [address] him when needful without grimace – and it increased, and grew kinder and more genial, and warmed one like a fostering sunbeam (p. 187).

As in the imagery applied to the alternating sincerity and sarcasm (or wholeness and hollowness) of Zamorna's smiles, genuine geniality here has an organic quality, evoking warmth and light; it generously spreads, flows, and produces a natural response in surrounding faces. In contrast, Blanche's shallow grimaces, coined smiles, manufactured airs and calculated manoeuvres are contrived 'means to communication' which have a freezing effect, 'hardening' Rochester's face.

In her own way Jane too is artful, even flirtatious. As a narrator she constantly lays bare for the reader her strategies, her consciousness of her power over Rochester, or her means of manipulating him. Troubled on one occasion by her 'earnest, religious energy', he begs her to 'look wicked, Jane; as you know well how to look; coin one of your wild, shy, provoking smiles ... teaze me, vex me ... I would rather be incensed than saddened' (p. 282). Subtle the coincidence may be, still apparently it is not only Blanche who knows well how to 'coin' her smiles; Jane simply manages hers rather better. As critics ever since Elizabeth Rigby have suggested, she is not *quite* as genuine as she would have us believe.⁷⁴ Eagleton, for instance, recognises that Jane's efforts to 'demonstrate her quietly self-sufficient independence of Rochester' involve 'a good deal of dexterous calculation – calculation which, if pressed too far, would seriously undermine Jane's credibility as a character.' He observes, moreover, that Rochester's request in the original manuscript – 'coin one of your wild, shy, provoking smiles' – is

⁷⁴ In an unsigned review of *Vanity Fair* and *Jane Eyre* in the *Quarterly Review*, 84 (1848), 153-85, Rigby (later Lady Eastlake) likened Jane to her scheming contemporary and fellow governess, Thackeray's Becky Sharp.

misprinted in the first edition as ‘wild, *sly*, provoking smiles’, and suggests that this ‘is not, perhaps, wholly insignificant.’⁷⁵

However, language which betrays Jane’s sly side, her awareness of social codes or her self-conscious management of her own behaviour, contends with more purposefully emphatic passages in which Brontë seeks not only to differentiate her from scheming, artful Blanche but to give her something of the characteristics of a conventionally appealing, feminine heroine. Rochester assesses her from the beginning as ‘grave’ and ‘quiet’, but goes on to ask:

Do you never laugh, Miss Eyre? Don’t trouble yourself to answer – I see, you laugh rarely; but you can laugh very merrily: believe me, you are not naturally austere, any more than I am naturally vicious. The Lowood constraint still clings to you somewhat; controlling your features, muffling your voice, and restricting your limbs; and you fear in the presence of a man ... to smile too gaily, speak too freely, or move too quickly: but in time, I think you will learn to be natural with me ... and then your looks and movements will have more vivacity and variety than they dare offer now
(p. 138).

The pattern of *Jane Eyre* as *Bildungsroman* is often described in terms of progression from unrestrained passion to strict self-control; Jane learns to curb her impulses and manage her behaviour (and her ‘features’). But, as explored in the previous chapter, the importance of ‘naturalness’, the desirability of open impulsiveness, could be insisted on no less than restraint and discretion; studied behaviour is desirable only when the mental effort required is kept invisible. In light of this, a more accurate assessment of

⁷⁵ Eagleton, p. 18. Joseph Litvak, too, casts Jane as a performer, declaring that her ‘satirical demystification – the adversarial uncovering of Blanche’s inept theatrical “calculations” as such – emerges here as an ardent vicariousness that does not so much undermine as upstage it.’ ‘One must admit that [Rigby] may have a point,’ Litvak suggests, ‘for there is often a sense in which Jane’s inwardness borders on – indeed, collapses into – the very staginess or bad acting from which it would distinguish itself.’ See Litvak, *Caught in the Act: Theatricality in the Nineteenth-Century English Novel* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), pp. 38, 70.

the term ‘management’ is offered by Michael Kearns, who proposes that Jane’s ‘development consists of learning to analyze her impulses and learning when and how to repress them, when to give them free rein ... What Jane must learn is to increase her mental health by *management* of her impulses.’⁷⁶ Though the importance of giving ‘free rein’ to emotion might seem to be at odds with Victorian codes of conduct, it is an important part of Jane’s character development: the ‘Lowood constraint’ is something she must shake off as she ‘learns’ to behave more gaily and merrily.

Thus, while the child Jane is castigated for the outburst that lands her in the Red Room, what is really considered disturbing is how eerily quiet and grave, ‘sullen and sneaking’ (p. 15) she had been beforehand. What Jane lacks (and ironically must ‘endeavour to acquire’) is not only mastery of her emotions but also ‘a more sociable and child-like disposition, a more attractive and sprightly manner, – something lighter, franker, more natural as it were’ (p. 7). Jane may hold herself proudly different from the Reeds, but her older self does understand their repulsion; she criticises their faults while being retrospectively able to appreciate what an ‘uncongenial alien’ she must have seemed to them, as an inaccessibly reserved and serious child. The naughtiness of a ‘sanguine’ and ‘romping’ child, she understands, would have been easier to tolerate in the midst of such a robustly insensitive family (p. 16). Hence, just as Rochester hopes, Jane’s maturation does in some ways involve ‘warming’ and ‘lightening’ up, becoming more desirably good-humoured. Her cheerfulness is important to him in being connected to her physical health and appearance: at Gateshead she had felt her ‘physical inferiority’ to her ‘contented, happy’ cousins (p. 7), but at Thornfield her increasing happiness – the result of her sexual awakening – renders her (unlike the ‘barren’, ill-natured Blanche) plumper, fresher, more buoyant and ‘blooming.’ Rochester may not

⁷⁶ Kearns’s emphasis, p. 146.

appreciate being ‘vivaciously accosted’ by the shallow, unwomanly Blanche, but it is *natural* vivacity which marks the improvement in Jane’s health and temperament.

Recalling again that she had impressed him initially as quiet, sober and self-contained, Rochester then records his impressions when spying on her the next day:

I think those day-visions were not dark: there was a pleasurable illumination in your eye occasionally, a soft excitement in your aspect, which told of no bitter, bilious, hypochondriac brooding: your look revealed rather the sweet musings of youth, when its spirit follows on willing wings the flight of Hope ... how curiously you smiled to and at yourself, Janet! There was much sense in your smile: it was very shrewd, and seemed to make to make light of your own abstraction (p. 313).

While Jane is shrewdly sensible and intelligent, she is crucially different from *Villette*’s Lucy Snowe, and from William Crimsworth in *The Professor* before her: she is not overly embittered or morbid. She suffers from no ‘hypochondriac brooding’, and she is not too self-absorbed, being able to make light of her own serious thoughts, while the language of illumination, softness, and sweetness goes to reaffirm her essential healthiness of spirit. This is stressed by Rochester yet again:

Your habitual expression in those days, Jane, was a thoughtful look: not despondent, for you were not sickly; but not buoyant, for you had little hope, and no actual pleasure ... There was something glad in your glance, and genial in your manner, when you conversed: I saw you had a social heart; it was the silent school-room – it was the tedium of your life that made you mournful (p. 314).

The point is hard to miss; Jane is not naturally grave or eccentric, but waiting for Rochester to unlock her ‘social heart’ (and, by implication, her *woman*’s heart).⁷⁷

⁷⁷ As Shuttleworth comments (p. 212): ‘Brontë’s desire to empower her heroines is undercut by her need to confirm their expressive purity.’ It is through the smiles and laughter of her heroines that Brontë most clearly insists on this ‘expressive purity’, yet ‘purity’ implies not simply sexual innocence, but healthy sexuality. When she radiates physical health, Jane is ‘pure’ insofar as her smiles *express* moral goodness, leaving her free from the contamination of (internal) cankering thoughts, and unhealthy desires.

More tellingly still, when he is disguised as the gypsy, Rochester moves from the reading of Jane's palm to deliver the following verdict on her mouth:

it delights at times in laughter: it is disposed to impart all that the brain conceives; though I dare say it would be silent on much the heart experiences. Mobile and flexible, it was never intended to be compressed in the eternal silence of solitude: it is a mouth which should speak much and smile often.

He upbraids himself for not making her happy; 'I wish to foster, not to blight ... my harvest must be in smiles' (p. 201). But the words and smiles that Rochester here desires are not the 'wicked' smirks and sharp-tongued sarcasms that the modern reader enjoys (that which 'the brain conceives'). When he demands to be 'pleased' by learning more about her, the '[not] very complacent or submissive smile' with which she responds does not betray what her 'heart experiences.' What he is after at this point is not to be vexed and incensed, but rather the heartfelt, earnest smiles that will prove her genuine pleasure in him, and expose (or illuminate) for him her inner depths: he wishes to 'draw [her] out' (p. 132). On seeing Rochester when she returns from her visit to Gateshead, Jane fails 'to control the working muscles of my face – which I feel rebel insolently against my will, and struggle to express what I had resolved to conceal. But I have a veil – it is down: I may make shift yet to behave with decent composure' (p. 244). Her smile in this instance represents the transcendence of emotion over studied behaviour, of feeling over composure – only a (literal) veil can protect her inner self

Nonetheless, it is also through laughter that Brontë's 'desire to empower her heroines' comes through most strongly – when their smiles are more private and knowing (and consequently, less womanly). Miriam Bailin writes that 'illness, as [Brontë] defines and portrays it, can [be] a register of deviance or alienation from social and personal norms, and in this respect [she] was in a critical position to judge from her experience the painful effects of marginality and social aberration.' However, I would argue that Brontë's female characters are at their most deviant or marginal not when laid low with definite diseases – in the sickroom scenes discussed by Bailin – but when they are tainted with the vague *suggestion* of illness, insofar as this encompasses their moral as much as their physical health. See Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of Being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 48.

from his penetration. In the same way as a blush, which, as Mary Ann O'Farrell analyses, 'in seeming involuntarily and reliably to betray a deep self ... assists at the conversion of legibility into a sense of identity', Jane's involuntary smile opens her subconscious up for translation, not simply surfacing but *creating* an 'authentic' emotional core.⁷⁸ Rochester's wish 'to foster, not to blight', for a 'harvest' in smiles, echoes Jane's description of his countenance growing 'kinder and more genial, and [warming] one like a fostering sunbeam' (p. 187). As we will see, the language of fostering and nurturing runs through Brontë's descriptions of romance, typically with men seeking to 'draw out' the previously shaded, unsexed woman – restoring her to physical health and emotional warmth, and successfully producing smiles of feminine feeling.

So, given Rochester's roots in the figure of the worldly Byronic hero, how can the supposedly softened, mellowed and amiable Jane have any kind of edge over him? The answer lies not only in Jane's more memorable, sharply unsentimental moments (her 'vivacity' is double-edged) but also in the care Brontë takes to strip Rochester of the sarcastic tendencies that make Zamorna an intimidating figure. If Rochester's dark past, moody scowls and bitter speeches are indications of his Byronic origins and borrowings, he less often indulges in Byronic sneers; this particular aspect of his behaviour belongs to that side of his Romantic character which must be tamed, or made palatable to Jane.⁷⁹ 'You are dreaming, sir – or you are sneering', she suspects when he

⁷⁸ Mary Ann O'Farrell, *Telling Complexions: the Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p. 5.

⁷⁹ For more on Rochester's resemblance to and points of diversion from the Byronic hero, see Sarah Wootton, "'Picturing in me a hero of romance": The Legacy of *Jane Eyre's* Byronic Hero', in *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre*, ed. by Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinger-Schartmann (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2007), pp. 229-241. Peter L. Thorslev points out that 'the true Byronic Hero' is also 'a Hero of Sensibility', combining 'Gothic misanthropy' with softness and a capacity for love. See Thorslev, *The Byronic Hero: Types and Prototypes* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1962), p. 180.

tells her she is a beauty; ‘For God’s sake, don’t be ironical!’ (p. 259) She is deeply irritated on the rare occasions when we do glimpse a Zamorna-like display of power gloating over dependence – as when she produces her small supply of money and ‘He took the purse, poured the hoard into his palm and chuckled over it as if its scantiness pleased him’ (p. 224). Or when ‘he smiled; and I thought his smile was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched’ (p. 269). Jane shares the anxieties of Mary: her fears surface in a nightmare which features Rochester looking on ‘with his arms folded – smiling sardonically, as it seemed’ (p. 243). But she is intolerant of this attitude; just as his physical strength must ultimately be impaired to facilitate their equality, so his wit must be curbed.

Instead, what Jane seeks to bring out is the ‘kinder and more genial’ side of the embittered Rochester, much as he aims to develop the ‘social heart’ of his thoughtful and reserved governess. Drawing again on the contrast of artifice and authenticity, surface and depth, she comments:

I could imagine that most observers would call them [the other gentlemen] attractive, handsome, imposing; while they would pronounce Mr Rochester at once harsh-featured and melancholy looking. I saw them smile, laugh – it was nothing: the light of the candles had as much soul in it as their smile; the tinkle of the bell as much significance as their laugh. I saw Mr Rochester smile: – his stern features softened; his eyes grew both brilliant and gentle, its ray both searching and sweet (p. 175).

While watching, Jane realises: ‘I feel akin to him – I understand the language of his countenance and movements’ (p. 175). The harmony between them is simultaneously spiritual and sexual – evoking the common equation of soul and body as identified in the previous chapter. Though he is ‘harsh-featured’, his smiles have gentleness, depth, meaning – smiles for Jane and Rochester are the true windows to the soul, the quietly profound ‘language’ through which they communicate, and express their inner selves:

Mr Rochester had sometimes read my unspoken thoughts with an acumen to me incomprehensible: in the present instance he took no notice of my abrupt vocal response; but he smiled at me with a certain smile he had of his own, and which he used but on rare occasions. He seemed to think it too good for common purposes; it was the real sunshine of feeling – he shed it over me now (pp. 245-6).

Thus, the language of feeling and fostering rests on a notion of mutual exchange: it is not only Rochester who considers himself to be tending a plant, watching a fruit fill out – Jane is quite as intent on cultivating his good humour (when she is not trying to aggravate him, that is). And Rochester is susceptible to influence in a way that Zamorna is not: Mary waits with bated breath to see if she will be rewarded with smiles or humiliated with sneers, Jane simply rejects the latter: ‘For God’s sake don’t be ironical!’

Indeed, the emphasis on Rochester’s innately benign nature, and the process by which he is tamed and softened, is crucial to his redemption. Jane’s use of the phrase ‘for God’s sake’ is not flippant. Brontë draws on a Byronic theme: the lost innocence of the hardened cynic. For instance, of the ‘Giaour’, whose ‘ghastly mirth’ ‘mocks at Misery’, and whose ‘bitter smile [transfers] to others fear and guile’, the poet insists:

Time hath not yet the features fix’d,
But brighter traits with evil mix’d;
And there are hues not always faded,
Which speak a mind not all degraded
Even by the crimes through which it waded:
The common crowd but see the gloom
Of wayward deeds, and fitting doom;
The close observer can espy
A noble soul, and lineage high.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Byron, *The Giaour: A Fragment of a Turkish Tale* (1813), ll. 848-69 (taken from *Selected Poems*).

Jane's achievement is not only to (somewhat unconvincingly) restore Rochester's piety by the end of the novel, but to relieve his gloom and take the sting out of his sarcasm – to emphasise his 'brighter traits', and thereby overcome his degradation. When thwarted in his bigamous scheme, Jane sees 'a grim smile contort Mr Rochester's lip' in the church; the sight of Bertha produces 'a smile both acrid and desolate' (pp. 291, 293). But these dark, blasphemous smiles are a contrast to the final image of the punished, but spiritually cleansed Rochester, whose 'noble soul' is finally brought to the surface: 'Blind as he was, smiles played over his face, joy dawned on his forehead: his lineaments softened and warmed' (p. 437).

According to Kathleen Tillotson, 'Mr Rochester looms up at first like Zamorna; but unlike him, he can be mocked [and has] a conscience dormant, not dead.'⁸¹ The assessment is an insightful one, casually linking Rochester's moral potential with his openness to (Jane's) mockery. Indeed it is his benign qualities which render him vulnerable to affectionate ridicule; the 'softening' of his 'stern features' works to feminise him, evoking the openness and readability associated with innocence and naivety. If Zamorna 'finds an amusement in playing with [Mary's] fears – piquing or soothing them as caprice directs,'⁸² it is Jane who, in a significant echo, knows 'the pleasure of vexing and soothing [Rochester] by turns' (pp. 157-8). The de-Byronizing process has much to do with de-mystification: his secret must be outed, then ominous grimaces can be replaced with the emergence of 'the real sunshine of feeling', 'joy [dawning] on his forehead.'

Given this conditioning of his character, it is a short step to perceiving that, anodyne as the smiling exchanges between Jane and Rochester generally are (being

⁸¹ Kathleen Tillotson, *Novels of the Eighteen-Forties* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1954), p. 287.

⁸² Brontë, 'Stancliffe's Hotel', in *Tales of Angria* (pp. 67-123), p. 120.

imbued with a healthy glow), Brontë does not lose sight of the power balance at stake in the representation of laughter. The language of power remains ever-present, albeit in mild terms. ‘You master me’ Rochester complains; ‘I am influenced – conquered; and the influence is sweeter than I can express; and the conquest I undergo has a witchery beyond any triumph *I* can win. Why do you smile, Jane? What does that inexplicable, that uncanny turn of countenance mean?’ (pp. 260-1; Brontë’s emphasis). Jane tells him he should excuse the uncomplimentary thought that produced her frustratingly ‘inexplicable’ smile, since ‘it was involuntary’, but her ability to tantalise him in this way is recurrently underlined. ‘Speak!’ he insists when she asks a favour, ‘but if you look up and smile with that countenance, I shall swear concession before I know to what, and that will make a fool of me’ (p. 261). These are turns of phrase which imply for the most part innocently affectionate attempts at ‘witchery’ and ‘conquest’, but at times Jane’s evocation of laughter to illustrate her control over a situation appears rather more self-aware and darkly coloured. ‘Mr Rochester affirmed I was wearing him to skin and bone, and threatened awful vengeance for my present conduct at some period fast coming,’ she tells us. But, confident of her ability to ‘keep him in check’, she asserts: ‘I laughed in my sleeve at his menaces’ (p. 274). Her strategy is generally defensive: when she refuses to say what is worrying her, on the grounds that ‘I dare say you will only laugh at me for my pains’, he replies ‘I’ll laugh at you heartily when to-morrow is past; till then I dare not: my prize is not certain’ (p. 278). In this way they battle over who is in a position to laugh at whom – who is to secure the prize, and who is to be made the ‘fool.’ Taken together these exchanges indicate Brontë’s consistent attention to the connection between laughter and power, and are characteristic of the tense, tactical – and really far from straightforwardly open – relationship between the lovers.

However it is with the introduction of St John Rivers – and the contrast he supplies to Rochester – that laughter’s importance for Jane becomes markedly apparent.

St John has ‘a peculiar smile, more solemn than cheerful’ (p. 351). When Rosamond Oliver tells him about how much fun she has been having, Jane watches his response with interest:

It seemed to me that Mr. St. John’s under lip protruded, and his upper lip curled a moment. His mouth certainly looked a good deal compressed, and the lower part of his face unusually stern and square, as the laughing girl gave him this information. He lifted his gaze, too, from the daisies [which he is crushing underfoot], and turned it on her. An unsmiling, a searching, a meaning gaze it was. She answered it with a second laugh, and laughter well became her youth, her roses, her dimples, her bright eyes (p. 364).

Jane is both fascinated and unnerved by the ‘mute and grave’, ‘stern and distant’ St John. If Rosamond, with her dimples and bright eyes, is a picture of merry, feminine innocence, St John’s ‘unsmiling’, ‘searching’, ‘meaning’ gaze is representative of the crushing, masculine ‘penetrating gaze’ analysed by Shuttleworth. With his youth and good looks, his professionalism and his name, St John strikingly anticipates Graham Bretton (or ‘Dr John’) of *Villette*, whose searching, scrutinizing gaze reflects his investigative role and medical authority. But the difference between them is no less striking. Dr John is jolly and continually laughing, where St John’s rare smiles are ‘peculiar’, ‘solemn’, ‘bitter or sad’ (p. 355). It is spiritual authority that the latter represents, and he takes nothing lightly.

The discomfiting effect of this sternness is vividly described by Jane:

By degrees, he acquired a certain influence over me that took away my liberty of mind: his praise and notice were more restraining than his indifference. I could no longer talk or laugh freely when he was by; because a tiresomely importunate instinct reminded me that vivacity (at least in me) was distasteful to him. I was so fully aware that only serious moods and occupations were acceptable, that in his presence every

effort to sustain or follow any other became vain: I fell under a freezing spell (pp. 397-8).

Jane is thus silenced and sobered in the company of cold, hard, humourless St John, with his ‘marble’ features, in a way which reinforces his powerful, steely grip on her emotions. The ‘freezing’ effect of his seriousness is linked to his lack of sexual interest in her – laughter and sexuality (with their shared relationship to vitality, fluidity, emotion and the body) must alike be repressed. Where Rochester’s spiritual yet sunny smiles have their melting, thawing effect, Jane considers the less pleasant sensation that would result from marriage to the coldly unresponsive St John, being ‘forced to keep the fire of my nature continually low, to compel it to burn inwardly and never utter a cry, though the imprisoned flame consumed vital after vital’ (p. 408). Jane evokes the entwined dangers of emotional and physiological obstruction – neither sexual release nor relief through laughter would be possible.

Their incompatibility is highlighted when Jane throws aside her submissiveness to defend the claims of her ‘heart’ (and her ‘vitals’):

I will not swear, reader, that there was not something of repressed sarcasm both in the tone in which I [spoke], and in the feeling that accompanied it ... He was silent [and] I presently risked an upward glance at his countenance. His eye, bent on me, expressed at once stern surprise and keen inquiry. ‘Is she sarcastic, and sarcastic to *me!*’ it seemed to say. ‘What does this signify?’ (pp. 406-7; Brontë’s emphasis)

What it signifies is her unwillingness to continue repressing her instincts, and her resentment of his power over her. But, importantly, it is her sarcastic streak as well as her passionate impulses that have been let loose – that which ‘the brain conceives’ as well as that which ‘the heart experiences.’ His ‘stern surprise’ reveals his intolerance not merely of general levity but of being personally mocked; ‘Do not let us forget that this is a solemn matter’, he reproves her, ‘one of which we may neither think nor talk lightly

without sin' (p. 407). 'For God's sake don't be ironical!' he might as well say. But it is in this scene that Jane loses something of her awe of him; the 'veil fell from his hardness and despotism.' His stern imperviousness to her attempts at good-humoured familiarity has made him seem not quite mortal, and therefore beyond ridicule. The comparison with Rochester is obvious when she contemplates 'his features, beautiful in their harmony, but strangely formidable in their still severity: at his brow, commanding but not open; at his eyes, bright, and deep, and searching, but never soft; at his tall, imposing figure' (p. 407). It is more than 'openness' and 'softness' that St John is missing; his good looks are also a bar to Jane feeling at ease with him. This is something she admits on her very first meeting with Rochester, when she tells us she had 'a theoretical reverence' for beauty, but that if Rochester had been a 'handsome, heroic-looking young gentleman' she would have been too shy to approach him (p. 113).

Rochester's ugliness and oddities give him a vulnerability that has a levelling effect between them. He recalls that at first Jane was restrained by habit, 'and a good deal afraid of making herself disadvantageously conspicuous by some solecism or blunder', but that soon 'you seemed to get used to me' (pp. 313-4). Getting used to him had involved familiarising herself with his weaknesses – feeling confident enough to 'laugh in her sleeve at his menaces,' without 'reverence' and without worrying that it might be she who is vulnerable to humiliation, made 'disadvantageously conspicuous.' Her inability, in contrast, to laugh whether openly or in her sleeve at St John – his demand to be taken seriously – erodes her sense of self-confidence. She realises that his severity and frigidity forbid intimacy – so she could never be his wife – but that otherwise she would be happy to 'toil under eastern suns ... admire and emulate his courage, and devotion, and vigour; accommodate quietly to his masterhood; smile undisturbed at his ineradicable ambition' (p. 407). That odd clause underlines Jane's needs: she is content to suffer, to admire and to emulate, but she must also retain her

passive-aggressive sense of superior understanding – at a distance she would still be able to discreetly express her acknowledgement of the ludicrous in St John’s formidable earnestness. He disconcerts her not only because he is too oppressively serious, it is implied, but also because she can in no way cast him as an object of raillery – and his resistance to this role leaves her no means of compromising his ‘masterhood.’

In finally revealing her true character (which encompasses both her ‘natural’ desires as a woman, and her unwomanly bent for satire), Jane alienates and offends her cousin: ‘most bitterly he smiled – most decidedly he withdrew his hand from mine’ (p. 413). Paradoxically, it is both her passionate earnestness (on the subject of herself and her earthly rights), and her refusal to be consistently (and submissively) earnest, which disillusion him. Her feelings on returning to Rochester, who is not only still alive and conveniently widowed, but endearingly damaged into the bargain, present a manifest contrast and confirm what it is exactly that Jane requires to be comfortable:

I soon had the room in more cheerful order ... My spirits were excited, and with pleasure and ease I talked to him during supper ... There was no harassing restraint, no repressing of glee and vivacity with him; for with him I was at perfect ease, because I knew I suited him: all I said or did seemed either to console or revive him. Delightful consciousness! It brought to life and light my whole nature: in his presence I thoroughly lived; and he lived in mine. Blind as he was, smiles played over his face, joy dawned on his forehead: his lineaments softened and warmed (p. 437).

But there is more to Jane’s satisfaction than the release from ‘restraint’, the renewed permissibility of ‘glee and vivacity’, and the promise of sexual fulfilment. Rochester is soon accusing her of ‘wickedness’, of being a ‘mocking changeling.’ When he jealously demands to know if she has been with other men, she refuses to answer: ‘I laughed and made my escape, still laughing as I ran up stairs. “A good idea!” I thought, with glee. “I see I have the means of fretting him out of his melancholy for some time to come”’ (p.

438). Her motives are still redemptive – to enhance Rochester’s ‘brighter traits’, to ‘fret him out of his melancholy.’ But her cheerfulness is tinged with the consciousness of power: she is the one to do the ‘fretting’, and thereby to control him – to laughingly ‘make her escape’ while leaving him anxious and (quite literally) in the dark. Through the example of St John Rivers, *Jane Eyre* teaches that there ought to be a healthy balance between grim earnestness and sociable merriment, between overt severity and thoughtless frivolity. But it also implies that a balance of power between the sexes is necessary, and that the role played by laughter is absolutely crucial to the establishment or destruction of this balance. Being in a position to poke fun without leaving herself vulnerable to sarcasm – being able to comfortably ‘smile undisturbed’ – is key to Jane’s sense of that self-assurance and security which Brontë denied the weeping women of her early stories.

*

This chapter has explored the significance of the expressive face in both consolidating and questioning gender norms, showing how Brontë alternately embraces and distorts conventional representations – of the superior sneer, and of ‘natural’ feminine merriment. At many points in *Jane Eyre*, Brontë echoes popular suspicion about calculated or underhand laughter, idealising spontaneous emotional expression; she naturalises her heroine’s laughter in an attempt to distance it from the aggressive, self-aware performances of Blanche, and from the grim, mirthless tone of Bertha’s disruptive cackle. But beneath these efforts lurks a canny awareness of laughter’s subversive or strategic potential, derived from her recognition (evident throughout the Angria stories) of laughter’s role in male manipulation of women. Thus, not only is Jane able to ‘keep [Rochester] in check’, but his laughter, too, is softened – his Byronic swagger muted in this crucial respect – and it is therefore not Rochester but Bertha, strikingly, who is the main source of masculine, mocking laughter in the novel.

Judith Lowder Newton suggests that, in novels by female authors,

the very covertness of power, the nature and degree of its disguise, the very omission of overt reference are of the greatest interest, for subversion, indirection, and disguise are natural tactics of the resisting weak, are social strategies for managing the most intense and the most compelling rebellions.⁸³

But as seen in Zamorna's smiles, the appearance of covertness and disguise may also be a stereotypically male (and specifically gentlemanly) resource, the trick being that these smiles are *not* discreet or subtle at all, but pointed and visible. The 'intense and compelling rebellions' depicted by Brontë depend not on a characteristically female mode of resistance, but on the continual questioning and blurring of the boundaries between 'masculine' and 'feminine.' Laughter can be used to cement these boundaries, but can also dissolve them. While in many respects *Jane Eyre* is, in John Bowen's words, a novel 'fascinated by the physicality of sensation', with Jane 'constantly [emphasising] the desires and needs of the embodied self',⁸⁴ Jane at other times seeks to escape the embodied (gendered) self, through laughter that is self-assertive in its very refusal to exhibit instincts or desires. Brontë's 'best mature fiction is remarkable for the subjective intensity of its female first-person narrators,' declares Lucasta Miller, 'but in her juvenilia she tended to adopt the pose of a cynical and detached male narrator.'⁸⁵ In the chapters that follow, I will question the idea of an authentic but repressed female voice, showing how the adoption of 'cynical and detached' laughter is indeed a 'pose'

⁸³ Judith Lowder Newton, *Women, Power and Subversion: Social Strategies in British Fiction 1778-1860* (New York & London: Methuen, 1981), p. 9.

⁸⁴ Bowen, 'The Brontës and the Transformations of Romanticism', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel, 1820-1880*, ed. by Kucich and Taylor (pp. 203-19), p. 214.

⁸⁵ Miller, p. 4.

for Brontë's heroines, but one that allows escape from the constraints of 'natural' female identity.⁸⁶

As the next chapter will show, gender boundaries are particularly fluid in *The Professor*, a novel which draws attention to the 'tactics' and 'strategies' of the male protagonist in securing his masculine identity. Just as Bertha's villainous laughter emerges from her disempowered condition, so in *The Professor* we watch the development of the protagonist from feelings of inferiority, to (at least in his own self-presentation) the role of smug tyrant. While Shuttleworth and others have recognised William Crimsworth's progress from uncertain beginnings to masculine confidence, for Shuttleworth it is Crimsworth's 'interpretive powers' – rather than, as I will argue, his powers as an actor – that 'underwrite his ascent from his initial highly ambivalent gender and class position to that of confirmed masculinity and social power.'⁸⁷ In tracing the process whereby the sensitive Crimsworth learns to imitate the mocking contempt that is directed at himself, expressing and thereby creating a Hobbesian armour of superiority, Brontë alerts us to the element of performance (rather than innate superiority) that drives masculine behaviour.

There may seem to be a contradiction here. As explored in the last chapter, idealised pictures of laughter in the first half of the century generally evoked masculine behaviour of a very different kind: laughter was supposed to promote sympathy, not superiority; it represented moral feeling, not mocking contempt. However, the alternative picture painted by Brontë reflects the fact that ideals of middle-class

⁸⁶ Miller is discussing narrative voice, but – as I hope has been made clear – cynicism and detachment characterise (and empower) not only the male speakers but the male actors in Brontë's juvenilia. Just as Brontë's use of a masculine narrator need not imply the suppression of her 'real' voice, so the kind of gender-posturing that she depicts is not simply a form of cover or pretence but, more radically, a means of self-definition. This idea will be explored more fully in Chapters Three and Four.

⁸⁷ Shuttleworth, p. 125.

masculinity were in a state of transition, with the rise of (in Jane Wood's words) 'bodily vigour and mental toughness' as 'the hallmarks of manliness.'⁸⁸ Hearty laughter, we have seen, was held to promote robust physicality, but also 'overflowing' emotional sentiments – bodily vigour, but not mental toughness. With increased emphasis over the Victorian period on the conservation of energies and the strength of mind over body, the association of laughing excess with manly health disappeared; the idea of abandonment to bodily impulse, and indulgence in feeling, came to connote simply weakness.⁸⁹ In *North and South* (1854-5), Elizabeth Gaskell captures the turn to sternness (concomitant with the rise of industrial society) in her portrait of the factory owner, Thornton:

Now, in Mr. Thornton's face the straight brows fell low over the clear, deep-set earnest eyes, which, without being unpleasantly sharp, seemed intent enough to penetrate into the very heart and core of what he was looking at. The lines in the face were few but firm, as if they were carved in marble, and lay principally about the lips, which were slightly compressed over a set of teeth so faultless and beautiful as to give the effect of sudden sunlight when the rare bright smile, coming in an instant and shining out of the eyes, changed the whole look from the severe and resolved expression of a man ready to do and dare everything, to the keen honest enjoyment of the moment, which is seldom shown so fearlessly and instantaneously except by children. Margaret liked this smile.⁹⁰

Gaskell, like Brontë, conveys uneasiness respecting this 'severe and resolved expression.' Just as Jane and Lucy are relieved when 'sudden sunlight' breaks out on the faces of Rochester and Paul Emanuel, so the 'rare bright smile' here figures as a

⁸⁸ Wood, p. 73.

⁸⁹ As Shuttleworth emphasises, physiological and social diagnoses were intertwined in fears about men becoming 'feminized': 'In accordance with the economic theories of control which regulated social and psychological discourses of the [Victorian] era, masculinity becomes a function of the practices of containment and control.' 'Manhood, and hence a confirmed sense of self-identity, depended on the production and controlled retention of the life force.' See Shuttleworth, pp. 131, 142.

⁹⁰ Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 80.

necessary point of reassurance: the lifting of the mask provides insight into Thornton's capacity for spontaneous feeling, so that it is now Margaret who is enabled to 'penetrate into the very heart.' The transition from firmness and sharpness to child-like impulse acts to momentarily dissolve the distinctions between masculine hardness and feminine softness that were becoming increasingly rigidified around mid-century. But, crucially, Brontë's anxieties centre not only on such 'marble' images of grim austerity – her St Johns and Brocklehursts – but on the more complex threat represented by the sneer; her recognition of the laughing face as an exercise in cool self-government, or a mask for patriarchal power. And while she draws on Byronic imagery to convey this hint of intimidation in the midst of laughter, her preoccupation with the sneer – especially in *The Professor*, whose hero was intended to be representative of 'real living men'⁹¹ – in fact suggests a pressing concern with contemporary social realities.

Thus, despite the positive accounts of bodily laughter presented in Chapter One – which glorified masculinities ranging from the raucous and roaring to the kindly but still carefree – such depictions sat alongside the contradictory, emergent emphasis on the importance of self-control as the sign of successful manliness. Herbert Sussman describes the efforts of male writers to establish 'a psychic armor to contain the inchoate, fluid energy within', presenting 'a particularly fragile and unstable model of the male psyche always at the edge of eruption, of dissolution, of madness.' These feelings of inner chaos were displaced onto women, so that 'male is to female as order is to chaos, external hardness to internal fluidity, boundedness to dissolution,

⁹¹ Brontë, Preface to *The Professor* (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 37-8: 'I said to myself that my hero should work his way through life as I had seen real living men work theirs' (p. 37). However, as the next chapter will explore, Crimsworth's supposed qualities of manly vigour and hard-working earnestness are thoroughly undermined by the author.

containment to eruption.’⁹² Such patterns of thought help to explain why excessive laughter became negatively associated with women and morbid symptoms (the ‘eruption’ and ‘dissolution’ of hysterics) instead of with jovial manliness – and why laughter as the expression of ‘the inchoate, fluid energy within’ was increasingly frowned on and viewed with alarm in the latter half of the century. Physiognomical ideas offer further clues to the hearty laugh’s fall from favour. According to E. S. Dallas (writing in 1861), ‘the extent to which a mouth is open is merely a measure of the passiveness of character.’ Explaining his characterisation of great orators in terms of closed rather than open mouths, Dallas declares that the ‘idiot [has] his mouth wide open ... while, at the other extreme, the man who is intensely active has his lips compressed until sometimes they appear bloodless.’⁹³ The image suggests St John’s compressed, unsmiling lips, but also the restrained and dispassionate (‘bloodless’) sneer of Zamorna. Between these extremes we find that the ‘half-open mouth indicates the receptive character of the listener’, meaning ‘impressibility.’⁹⁴ Applied to laughter, these guidelines are revealing in their implicit equation of the open mouth with inferiority, the shut mouth with authority. Recalling Lavater’s notion that ‘woman laughs; man smiles’, they pit subjection to the body against the achievement of ‘boundedness’ and ‘containment’, aligning openness with the ‘receptive’ and ‘passive’ nature of women.

Certainly, the assumption of ‘external hardness’ is what the initially ‘fragile and unstable’ Crimsworth aims at in his bid for masculine (self-) mastery. A keen physiognomist (but more precisely, I will argue, a keen *pathognomist*), he is intently

⁹² Herbert Sussman, *Victorian Masculinities: Manhood and Masculine Poetics in Early Victorian Literature and Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 19, 21. Sussman is referring to Carlyle in particular.

⁹³ [Dallas], ‘The First Principle of Physiognomy’, *Cornhill Magazine*, 4 (1861), 569-81 (p. 577).

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

attuned to the gendered play of power, as present in facial expression, and specifically in smiles and laughter. *The Professor* anticipates the switching of gender characteristics that runs through *Jane Eyre*, and we see the origins of Jane's character in Frances Henri (who is similarly divided between normative femininity and deviant unsentimentality). But in describing the exercise of sneering despotism from a male perspective, *The Professor* also provides radical insight into the artificiality of gender identity, exposing the insecurities that goad its hero into the role of masculine tyrant – through superior laughter that is neither loud nor open-mouthed.

Chapter Three

Mastery, Mockery and ‘Phases of Physiognomy’ in *The Professor*

Introduction

At a critical moment in *The Professor*, when his bullying, overbearing brother Edward reaches for a whip, William Crimsworth – narrator and hero – is keen to assure us that he is not to be menaced in this way: ‘I permitted myself to laugh with a degree of scorn I took no pains to temper or hide. His fury boiled up, [and he swore] half a dozen vulgar, impious oaths, without, however, venturing to lift the whip.’¹ It is an assertion which might lead us to imagine we are dealing with another Duke of Zamorna – combating his enemies with fierce scorn and laughing in the face of danger, Crimsworth appears to cut a cool and forbidding figure, able to inspire rage and fear merely by showing his teeth.

Such, however, is far from the case. Beneath Crimsworth’s self-promoting version of events lies another story: he is not so much the ‘hero’ as the fool of his own tale, an awkward and highly ridiculous figure who forms the butt of a joke at every turn in the plot. He is mocked or scorned continually – by his relatives, employers, students, and even by his wife. This reality is partly recognised by critics. Heather Glen has pointed to the heavy irony at play and identifies Crimsworth as a satirical take on ‘what was beginning to be a familiar contemporary masculine type ... the self-made man.’²

The critical appreciation of Crimsworth has shifted from mere bewilderment at his

¹ Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 73. Subsequent references to *The Professor* in this chapter will be given in parentheses after quotations.

² As Glen explains, ‘the exemplary life of the self-made man was becoming a well-known genre in the England of the 1840s.’ This autobiographical form set out ‘to inspire those without birth or connections who sought to improve their station in life’, and reached ‘its apogee in 1859 in Samuel Smiles’s best-selling *Self-Help*.’ The ‘literature of self-making was a distinctively masculine genre’, and *The Professor* ‘appears to be a fictional, first-person version’ of these narratives of improvement – except that ‘there is something strangely repellent in this apparently simple story of obstacles surmounted, effort rewarded, and victory won.’ See Glen, *The Imagination in History*, pp. 34-6.

unattractive personality to recognition that his narrative is to some extent intended to be misleading and coloured by his defensive, abrasive character. Making sense of the novel, which in Glen's words 'has generally been adjudged an unpleasant and oddly disquieting book', has been a case of explaining Crimsworth and his dire lack of charisma.³ Thus for Annette Tromly, the novel is about the 'motives and processes of self-presentation; the book is informed by its exploration of the issue. By means of a thoroughly obtrusive and essentially unreliable narrative voice, Brontë explores the reasons and the ways that an autobiographer presents himself to the world.'⁴ Brontë invites us, that is, to look between the lines of Crimsworth's narrative – to recognise her underlying critique of the man telling the story.

Nonetheless, though not usually read now as a mouthpiece for the author, Crimsworth is still largely accepted to be the unnervingly cool and self-controlled character of his own self-presentation – a figure of domineering masculinity. As Shuttleworth observes, the novel 'is centrally concerned, as its working title "The Master" suggests, with questions of mastery and self-control'⁵ – but critics have underestimated the extent to which the cool airs of this 'Master' are ironically treated. Eagleton claims that 'it is the very unshakeability of Crimsworth's composure, its sustained, uncrackable contrivance, which persuades us of the fundamental anxiety lurking unconfessed behind it.'⁶ But – while this chapter will look closer at his unconfessed anxieties – I take as my starting point the assumption that Crimsworth's haughty composure is neither 'unshakeable' nor 'uncrackable', but instead decidedly

³ Glen, Introduction to *The Professor* (pp. 7-31), p. 7.

⁴ Annette Tromly, 'The Professor', from *The Cover of the Mask: the Autobiographers in Charlotte Brontë's Fiction* (1982), in *Critical Essays on Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Barbara Timm Gates (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1990), pp. 103-125 (p. 105).

⁵ Shuttleworth, p. 124.

⁶ Eagleton, p. 78.

flimsy. Crimsworth is represented not only critically, but also comically – he is (as Eagleton writes) a ‘thoroughly unlikable character’ whose aim is to ‘make himself invulnerable to others’, but he is also a laughable character, whose vulnerability is far more in evidence than his success at hiding it.⁷ Recognising the comic dimension of Crimsworth’s characterisation is important, enabling clearer appreciation of the weaknesses that lead to his determined efforts at dignified self-control. And crucially, this is a drama that is played out on the face: in observing the reactions that Crimsworth draws from those around him, we also see how he changes his behaviour in response to their amusement. This chapter thus considers what Tromly calls ‘the motives and processes of self-presentation’ as enacted through facial expression – specifically smiles and laughter – rather than through narrative voice. Identifying the face as the primary site of Crimsworth’s self-presentation and struggle for mastery, I argue that Crimsworth as despot is a ‘self-made man’ in the sense that his tyrannous masculinity is performed (though not, Brontë implies, always as successfully as he claims). For Eagleton, ‘in reading his narrative we have the exasperated sense that he is telling us only what he wants us to know.’ He is ‘a manifestly untrustworthy narrator.’⁸ But, I contend, apart from the fact that a good deal of what he doesn’t want us to know seeps into his narrative, Crimsworth’s means of dealing with it consists in showing other characters only what he wants them to *see*. Not only is he deceptive as a narrator, but (and despite his attempts to deceive us), no less apparent are his efforts at deception in the face-offs that he recounts.

Crimsworth’s anxiety about being laughed at, and resulting mindfulness of laughter’s power, become strongly apparent on reading the novel attuned to its *pathognomic* dynamics. Although Brontë’s fiction has received extensive critical

⁷ Ibid., p. 79.

⁸ Ibid.

attention for its engagement with physiognomy and phrenology (the ‘sciences’ of reading the external appearance and the skull, respectively) these approaches have tended to focus attention on the power acquired through masterful interpretation of another’s bodily appearances. On the other hand, I argue, pathognomy (the study of the expressions; physiognomy in motion) draws attention to the power inherent in being able not only to read appearances, but also to ‘write’ them. Inviting fresh consideration of the ways in which the ‘inner’ self is expressed or performed through the body, a pathognomic focus adds a new dimension to current understandings of psychology and the workings of self-empowerment in Brontë’s fiction. It is particularly productive for a re-reading of *The Professor*, in which Brontë’s use of phrenological and physiognomic terms are prominent and have led to the protagonist being viewed as essentially repressed and self-contained, a closed book. In standard accounts – most notably Shuttleworth’s – mastery of the self and others is gained through an (implicitly one-way) act of interpretation whereby the physiognomist (or phrenologist) accurately penetrates into others’ secrets or ‘inner depths’, himself remaining invulnerable to such scrutiny. In Shuttleworth’s words: ‘Knowledge, for Crimsworth, is power. He sites his struggles for pre-eminence on the battleground of psychological legibility. Social control resides with the figure who possesses the power to read the inner state of the other, whilst maintaining the illegibility of the self.’⁹ Crimsworth (especially through his notoriously invasive phrenological case studies of his female pupils) in many ways

⁹ Shuttleworth, p. 125. Similarly, Dames (p. 108) claims that mastery for Crimsworth is ‘mastering others through seeing them clinically, and avoiding slavery by avoiding the gazes of others.’ However, Dames does complicate this picture in his discussion of phrenology in *Villette*, noting that ‘the paths of the phrenological gaze move in both directions’, to the extent that ‘Lucy reads M. Paul reading her’, so that ‘the field of personal encounter becomes a clash of mutually visible bodies’ (p. 83). Caldwell provides a more orthodox summary: ‘the contest is one of reading faces, of scanning literal features for signs of character. The acute reading of facial features, especially if one can accomplish it without being read oneself, becomes the sharpest of Brontëan weapons.’ Thus, human relationship is ‘a wrestling between parties who try to know one another without themselves being known. Brontëan heroes and heroines are astute readers of character who mask and withhold information about their own characters.’ See Caldwell, *Literature and Medicine*, pp. 106-7.

provides the model example. Sensing that Edward is ‘trying to read [his] character’, he claims to feel ‘as secure against his scrutiny as if I had on a casque with the visor down’ (p. 53). The suggestion is of impenetrability; he may hold the key to others’ inner selves, but no-one can successfully decode *him*.

However, this is not the whole story. What the model as outlined by Shuttleworth does not take into account is the disruptive role played by expression in such social exchanges. This chapter thus challenges the assumption that Crimsworth’s efforts at mastery (of himself and others) centre on making himself illegible, impenetrable, a blank sheet – ruled by restraint and negation. While he does often pride himself on hiding, restraining, or denying emotions, he is otherwise persistent in his endeavours to render his thoughts transparent, in short to make himself *legible* to others (including the reader). That is, his quest for power involves more than accruing knowledge, storing up details of others’ faces while remaining himself unknowable. On the contrary, he aspires to make himself known insofar as he can actively direct the impression he creates, present himself in an impressive or intimidating guise and impose that on others, thereby inviting rather than simply thwarting interpretation. It is not a ‘blank’ mask that he assumes, but an animated one. In exploring this I build on my analysis in Chapter Two of the ‘superior’ laugh as self-assertive and provocative performance; in ‘permitting’ himself to laugh ‘with a degree of scorn I took no pains to temper or to hide’ Crimsworth engages in an act of showing-off that has to do not with self-protection (as in the image of the ‘casque with the visor down’) but with self-projection.

In Part One I provide an overview of pathognomy in the nineteenth century, outlining the distinctions between pathognomy and physiognomy (to which it is closely related), and illustrating how attention to fleeting rather than fixed appearances – the mobile face rather than the static features – allows us to recognise a more dynamic, fluid

conception of power in play than is produced by standard physiognomic readings. I argue that in changing the lens through which Brontë's novels (and especially *The Professor*) are usually viewed – in turning to the expressive subject, as opposed to the passive subject of traditional physiognomic inquiry – we can more readily discern the self-conscious manoeuvres by which identity (in this case, Crimsworth's masculine identity) is performed and transformed. In Part Two I put this into practice, attending to the ways in which Crimsworth affects a scornful demeanour in reaction to the amusement and contempt that he is typically faced with. I begin, however, by throwing into question the unflappable composure and self-command that he boasts of, showing that he is modelled primarily on comic types derived from Brontë's early writings and that the novel does not encourage us to take his despotic tendencies too seriously. After thus identifying him as a laughable figure, whose absurdities are frequently highlighted, I pinpoint the root of his insecurities in the laughter that he provokes – in his sensitivity to the mocking faces that surround him – and finally I follow the process by which he turns this laughter around.

In Part Three, I turn to the characterisation of Frances Henri, and consider the extent to which a levelling of power between the sexes is permitted by so dubious a hero. Certainly, Frances is a clear precursor to Jane, in that subjection to her 'master' is complicated by her disrespectful mockery of his oddities. But, as in *Jane Eyre*, there are limits both to Frances's defiance of masculine authority, and to Brontë's defiance of representational norms in portraying her. As Crimsworth masters the art of the sneer over the course of the novel, Frances mellows and conforms. Whereas Crimsworth learns to control emotion through shows of knowing superiority (the intellect overcoming animal instinct), Frances's womanly impulses rise to the surface. The increased sentimental emphasis on her femininity serves to draw attention away from her mental capacities and self-possession, and towards her sexuality and moral qualities

(a development expressed through smiles which soften and warm in proportion to Crimsworth's self-development as masculine tyrant). Brontë's first novel is thus marked by conflict and hesitations, ultimately returning to the combination of male aggression and female powerlessness – masculine minds and feminine bodies – that defines gender relations in the Angria saga. But it also shows significant signs of deviation from those stereotypes, and a more thorough examination of the expressive processes by which they are enacted and sustained.

I

The physiognomy of laughter would be the best of elementary books for the knowledge of man. If the laugh be good, so is the person.

J. C. Lavater (1775-8)

Charlotte Brontë cannot help herself; she has a morbid tendency to anatomize every passion, every impulse, every expression. Hence what may perhaps be regarded as a defect of all Currer Bell's novels, she must find a motive for every little act, for the twirling of a thumb, and for every tol-de-rol that a man heedlessly sings: she has no idea of purposeless behaviour, uncontrollable impulses without meaning.

E. S. Dallas (1857)¹⁰

Physiognomy – the ancient practice of reading inner character from outward appearance – enjoyed widespread popularity in the nineteenth century, and its influence on the novel (as well as on wider culture and social life) has long been recognised.¹¹ The craze was initiated by the works of Lavater (1741-1801), the Swiss pastor who taught that

¹⁰ Lavater, *Physiognomy*, p. 185. [Dallas], 'Currer Bell', *Blackwood's*, 82 (1857), 77-94 (p. 93).

¹¹ As John Graham records, the publication history of Lavater's *Physiognomische Fragmente* (1775-8) 'is most startling testimony of the revived and sustained interest in physiognomy ... The book was reprinted, abridged, summarized, pirated, parodied, imitated, and reviewed so often that it is difficult to imagine how a literate person of the time could have failed to have some general knowledge of the man and his theories. By 1810, there had been published sixteen German, fifteen French, two American, one Dutch, one Italian, and no less than twenty English versions ... The regular production of the work did not much slacken until about 1870.' See Graham, 'Lavater's *Physiognomy* in England', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 22 (1961) 561-72 (p. 562). For physiognomy's influence on the novel, see Tytler, *Physiognomy in the European Novel: Faces and Fortunes*.

outward signs were the natural manifestation of inner qualities, and that students of physiognomy could learn to read these signs with skill.¹² The pervasiveness in Brontë's writing of physiognomic terms and assumptions, alongside those of phrenology, has been much remarked on by critics.¹³ However, pathognomy – which concerns itself with moods and emotions through the interpretation of temporary expressions – is a much less familiar term, partly because it is often conflated with physiognomy. For instance, in her study of expression in nineteenth-century science and art, Lucy Hartley briefly opines that 'distinctions between pathognomy and physiognomy' do not 'hold up to scrutiny', since both involve 'the examination of external appearances [as] an index to internal states.'¹⁴ During the nineteenth century, the distinctions were often explained only to be dismissed; for instance in the *Monthly Magazine* (1840), we are informed that physiognomy 'teaches the knowledge of character at rest', pathognomy 'of character in

¹² Skill and acquired knowledge were not, however, so important as they were for phrenology. As Tytler notes (pp. 64-5), Lavater stressed that 'we are all born physiognomists' and 'we make physiognomical judgments all the time', but that these judgments could be improved with practice and study.

¹³ As Shuttleworth insists, there are important differences between phrenology and physiognomy (although it is the latter with which I am chiefly concerned): 'Although the two systems ... clearly overlapped in popular usage, they sprang from very different roots, and were associated with quite distinct world views. While physiognomy, as defined by Lavater and other eighteenth-century theorists, was an extension of theology; phrenology, in its English incarnation, was based on a materialist system of the mind and was linked to a specific political and social platform' (pp. 58-9). Michael Davis explores how Brontë 'exploits but also interrogates psychological concepts as adequate terms in which to describe the self, and draws attention to the ideological meanings and relations of power bound up with them. Physiognomy ... is closely identified with issues of social control. It offers a method of policing subjectivity according to social norms of behaviour which are heavily gender-inflected.' See Davis, 'Psychology and the Idea of Character', in *The Nineteenth-Century Novel*, ed. by Kucich and Taylor, pp. 492-508 (p. 496). See also Ian Jack, 'Physiognomy, Phrenology and Characterisation in the Novels of Charlotte Brontë', *Brontë Society Transactions*, 13 (1970), 337-91.

¹⁴ Lucy Hartley, *Physiognomy and the Meaning of Expression in Nineteenth-Century Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 36. Definitions of pathognomy are also offered by Parvulescu (p. 47), and by Julie F. Codell, 'Expression over Beauty: Facial Expression, Body Language, and Circumstantiality in the Paintings of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood', *Victorian Studies*, 29 (1986), 255-90 (p. 274). Simon Bayly has undertaken an imaginative recovery of the word pertaining to theatre and philosophy, in *A Pathognomy of Performance*. His book 'takes up the pathognomical cause', declaring that 'the pathognomist [takes] pleasure in the fact that his quarry is as likely to evade seizure as to yield itself up for capture and consumption.' The pathognomist is alert to 'the deceptions, ploys, ruses, tracks and traces of what she seeks' (p. 2).

motion’ – but ultimately they are ‘but two branches of one science.’¹⁵ But pathognomy *does* have a distinct history of its own, and a relationship with physiognomy which, though close, is not altogether complementary. In this part of the chapter I will explore that history and relationship, in order to suggest the potential usefulness to literary criticism of focusing separately on the neglected ‘branch.’¹⁶

As Mary Cowling points out, interest in pathognomy both preceded the arrival of ‘physiognomy proper’ and overtook it in the latter half of the century (notably with Darwin and his study of expression, from which time the practice became more scientific in focus, and lost the connection to physiognomy – the term ‘pathognomy’ becoming thereafter increasingly obscure).¹⁷ As Cowling explains, it was in fact ‘the tendency to confuse facial anatomy with the fleeting signs of human emotion, which are muscular, and which strictly speaking, belong within the limits of pathognomy or

¹⁵ ‘Physiognomy’, *Monthly Magazine*, 4 (1840), 88-96 (p. 89). A similar summary and conclusion is offered in ‘On the Science of Physiognomy’, *Blackwood’s*, 6 (1820) 650-5 (p. 650).

¹⁶ This has been undertaken in part by Jenny Bourne Taylor, who places the emphasis on motion in her summary that ‘physiognomy saw the face and body as an expressive mask on which the inner drama of identity was stamped.’ See Taylor, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p. 50; see also pp. 81-2 for a discussion of ‘physiognomy’ which crosses over into the domain of pathognomy without making the distinction. Taylor gives a further helpful overview of physiognomic and phrenological trends in ‘Body and Mind’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830-1914*, ed. by Joanne Shattock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 184-204. Although again not identifying pathognomy by name, she observes that ‘physiognomy offered a flexible set of visual codes that connected facial expression to emotional response. Although popular manuals ... tended to stress the significance of static facial features, the emphasis on expression had been taken up and transformed [notably by Bell, who influenced Darwin]’, pp. 188-90. Taylor discusses the importance of expression in fictional texts, describing ‘physical mutability’ in the novels of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins – however (as this chapter will make clear), my analysis differs from Taylor’s in that the mutability she describes is compulsive and physiological: the ‘body acts out the tensions [of] inner psychic struggle. Both the face and the body thus become the means of expressing complex inner tensions, as physiognomy becomes integrated into a wider bodily economy’ (pp. 190-1).

¹⁷ Indeed, Darwin was keen to disassociate his ideas from the pseudoscientific practice of physiognomy. See Cowling, *The Artist as Anthropologist: the Representation of Type and Character in Victorian Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 17-8, 31. Tytler (p. 47) provides a summary of pre-Lavaterian physiognomy, including the eighteenth-century researches of James Parsons (1705-70), who investigated the ‘Actions of the Muscles of the Face and their particular Obedience to the Influence of the Mind.’ Other notable pathognomists included Charles le Brun (1619-90) and Lord Kames (1696-1782) – for details see Cowling, p. 17.

expression’ which was ‘one of the main forces behind the development of [Lavater’s] physiognomy.’¹⁸ Lavater set out to define his work in contrast to pathognomy, stressing that physiognomy ‘is the knowledge of the signs of the powers and inclinations of men’, whereas ‘pathognomy is the knowledge of the signs of the passions.’ Physiognomy addresses ‘the form of the solid and the appearance of the moveable parts while at rest’; pathognomy ‘the moveable parts in motion.’¹⁹ While Lavater did not wholly restrict himself to the permanent features, finding plenty to say about expressions (including laughter) nonetheless he considered the distinction to be an important one, and was wary – for reasons we will see – of reliance on ‘the moveable parts in motion’ as physiognomic signs.²⁰

The advantages of a change in focus have been recognised (in passing) by Paul White, who remarks that:

Charlotte Brontë has often been placed firmly within the Lavaterian tradition, and it is clear that physiognomy remains important for the description and development of her characters; but it is a physiognomy that is highly suspect when restricted to the permanent features of the face, one that unfolds instead through the body’s movements and inner workings.²¹

This is an astute observation, but White’s reference to ‘the body’s movements and inner workings’ reflects his interest in the physiological, rather than physiognomic,

¹⁸ Cowling, p. 13.

¹⁹ Lavater, p. 31.

²⁰ As Sharrona Pearl points out, it was the ‘purists’ who ‘insisted that physiognomy referred only to the shape and structure of facial features and extremities’; ‘most extended the range of their analysis to include expressions (more properly “pathognomy”), body types, and, eventually, hairstyle, clothing, and self-presentation broadly construed.’ See Pearl, *About Faces: Physiognomy in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 6. However despite the all-encompassing nature of physiognomy, the distinctions made by ‘purists’ remained familiar enough, especially earlier in the century (as in the *Blackwood’s* and *Monthly* articles cited above).

²¹ Paul White, ‘The Face of Physiology’, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 7 (2008), <www.19.bbk.ac.uk> [last accessed 22 April 2015] (para. 7 of 24).

dimensions of expression. Omitting the term pathognomy in favour of ‘the face of physiology’, he proposes a shift away from ‘the Lavaterian tradition’ in the direction of the anatomical approach taken by Bell (1824) and Darwin (1872). As I suggested in the introduction to this thesis, pathognomy as understood in this way is largely the study of muscular movements – that which goes on beneath the literal surface of the face. This is not to say that it was physical *instead* of psychological, but rather that it sidelined the question of intentionality on the part of the subject, seeking to explain the correlation of mind and body through accounts of how the inner ‘passions’ produced outward effect, via the physical mechanics of the body. As an artist, Bell was interested in how to portray that ‘mental excitement, which draws the frame into action ... uncontrollable movements of the body, not determined by the will, but spontaneously arising with the state of feeling.’ He traced how ‘states of feeling’ might ‘produce’ a smile by their impact on the muscles, or bring about ‘the condition of a man convulsed with laughter ... incapable of a voluntary act.’²² As a scientist, Darwin was not interested in laughter that is ‘employed in a forced manner to conceal or mask some other state of mind’, but in natural expression that can be reliably analysed in connection with its correspondent emotion – the involuntary laughter that ‘expresses mere happiness or joy.’²³ As suggested in Chapter One, it is just such ‘uncontrollable movements’ that are considered by Spencer and Bain, too, in their physiological accounts of laughter’s function.

As we have seen, Brontë’s novels do contain instances where (in Bell’s words) ‘the actions and expressions of the body betray the emotions of the heart.’²⁴ Jane finds herself failing ‘to control the working muscles of my face – which I feel rebel insolently

²² Bell, pp. 134-5.

²³ Darwin, p. 212.

²⁴ Bell, p. 181.

against my will, and struggle to express what I had resolved to conceal.’²⁵ In *Villette*, ‘a smile of pleasure transforms Paul Emanuel’s countenance ‘from a mask to a face’; it is an ‘illuminated sign of milder [and] warmer feeling.’²⁶ In her analysis of the role of the blush ‘as an act of self-expression’, outside conscious control, with the capacity ‘to reflect a readable self’, Mary Ann O’Farrell demonstrates the convenience of the transparent face as a novelistic device.²⁷ But more prevalent than such spontaneous revelations of feeling in Brontë’s fiction are ‘mask’-like manifestations (or in Darwin’s words, laughter ‘employed in a forced manner’): ‘that strange smile which passes from ear to ear, and is marked only by a sharp thin curve, which fails to spread over the countenance, and neither dimples the cheek nor lights the eye.’²⁸ As E. S. Dallas complained (in the epigraph above), Brontë ‘anatomizes’ every passion, every impulse, every expression – but not in the same physical sense as Darwin and Bell; ‘she must find a motive for every little act ... she has no idea of purposeless behaviour, uncontrollable impulses without meaning.’ That is, the language of expression for Brontë involves a degree of calculation and social awareness; emotion (‘uncontrollable impulse’) rarely goes unmediated by a conscious thought process. How, then, is it to be translated in the context of pathognomy?

The answer lies in the uncomfortable challenges that a pathognomic perspective brings to the practice of physiognomy more broadly conceived – the questions that it may lead to concerning the role of volition on the part of the subject. Lavater believed laughter to be useful to the physiognomist, claiming that ‘the physiognomy of laughter

²⁵ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 244.

²⁶ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 321.

²⁷ O’Farrell, p. 5.

²⁸ Brontë, *Villette*, p. 328. (Cf. Dickens’s description, quoted in Chapter One, of Uriah Heep having ‘not such a thing as a smile about him [so that] he could only widen his mouth and make two hard creases down his cheeks, one on each side, to stand for one.’ Dickens, *David Copperfield*, p. 228.)

would be the best of elementary books for the knowledge of man', but – as suggested by his attempts to differentiate his ideas about physiognomy from those of pathognomy – the matter of expression more generally touches a weak point in his philosophy, complicating his claims to enable the sure decoding of an essential, and essentially passive subject. Carsten Zelle suggests that Lavater's 'scientific' attempts to focus on the skeleton and 'firm' parts of the body (a practice that would be taken to its logical conclusion with the emergence of phrenology) was a means of avoiding the untrustworthy and 'variable' signs that were the province of the pathognomist, who is 'always at risk of being misled by his subject's simulation.'²⁹ Juliet McMaster describes the fashion for simulation that emerged towards the end of the eighteenth century – the manuals that were produced on 'how to fake it' – inspired by the observations of pathognomists, and accounting for Lavater's determined 'preference for physiognomy', strictly defined.³⁰ And as Josh Epstein explains, 'facial expression was eventually abandoned by the disciples of Lavater for its susceptibility to affect as opposed to essential character traits.'³¹

In short, pathognomy raises inconvenient questions. The strict physiognomist preferred a static appearance to study since it could be easily correlated with an innate

²⁹ Carsten Zelle, 'Soul Semiology', in *The Faces of Physiognomy*, ed. by Ellis Shookman (Columbia: Camden House, 1993), pp. 40-63 (p. 45).

³⁰ Juliet McMaster, *Reading the Body in the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 103-4. Peter Hamilton and Roger Hargreaves, who address pathognomy (though not by name) in the context of the emergence of photography, suggest that for physiognomists, the face was 'a sort of mask which may be used, through the mechanics of expression, to hide a person's true nature, but which, if it can be "read" correctly, may be seen to display the essential nature of the person within.' They write that for Lavater, 'passions and emotions were fugitive states, and of merely secondary interest: only by study of the static and fixed countenance might an accurate assessment of moral character be made', whereas Bell, Darwin, and Duchenne de Boulogne (1806-75) set out to demonstrate that the expression of emotion 'should precede the study of the face at rest, and was in most respects a better guide to character and personality.' See Hamilton and Hargreaves, *The Beautiful and the Damned* (Aldershot: Lund Humphries, 2001), pp. 34, 63-5.

³¹ Josh Epstein, "'Neutral Physiognomy": The Unreadable Faces of *Middlemarch*', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 131-48 (p. 139).

essence. But pathognomy – while still looking to read the inner character as present in outer signs – threatens to take power from the interpreter, and hand it to the subject under interpretation. The issue is one of unpredictability; replacing a static face with a mobile one, the pathognomist not only risks being misled, but destabilises the Lavaterian assumption that character is innate and essential, waiting to be decoded. Instead – faced with shifting expressions and changeable inner states – it is the possibilities for self-determination on the part of the subject that come to the fore. And it is precisely these possibilities that rise to the surface when reading faces in Brontë’s fiction. Although pathognomy is not a term that she uses, nonetheless her novels are filled with images of ‘the character in motion’, as well as ‘the character at rest.’ ‘Why do you smile, Jane?’ asks Rochester. ‘What does that inexplicable, that uncanny turn of countenance mean?’³² Such ‘turns of countenance’, or in *The Professor*, ‘phases of physiognomy’ (p. 180), make frequent – though fleeting – appearances, along with the challenge of reading their meaning. It is an interpretative quest which brings to light Brontë’s perception of character as mutable and performed, and hence, her awareness of the constructed, unstable nature of (gendered) identity.³³

³² *Jane Eyre*, p. 261.

³³ In Butler’s words, ‘there is no gender identity behind the expression of gender ... identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results’ (*Gender Trouble*, p. 25). However, whereas I make a distinction between active and passive expression – the former enabling self-definition, and the latter conforming to ‘natural’ behaviour – what Butler describes is ‘the forced reiteration of norms ... Performativity is neither free play nor theatrical self-presentation; nor can it be simply equated with performance.’ See Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 94-5. On the other hand, while drawing attention to Crimsworth’s self-consciousness, I do not see him as simply ‘acting’ or indulging in ‘theatrical self-presentation,’ in the manner of the faking and simulating discussed by McMaster (above). In their discussion of facial expression, the psychologists Alan J. Fridlund and Bradley Duchaine challenge ‘the mythic power of the romanticist Rousseauian view of human nature, which pits a natural and passionate “authentic” self against a Janusian social self.’ They dismiss the distinction between “‘felt” and “false” displays’, showing instead that all expressions ‘arise out of social interaction, thus there is *only* a social self’ (authors’ emphasis). See Fridlund and Duchaine, “‘Facial Expressions of Emotion” and the Delusion of the Hermetic Self”, in *The Emotions*, ed. by Harré and Parrott, pp. 259-84 (pp. 259, 280). Although, as we have seen, Brontë’s novels for the most part maintain the useful distinction between ‘felt’ and ‘false’, this chapter and Chapter Four will highlight the ways in which she collapses it: the ‘real’ emotions of Crimsworth and Lucy are ultimately inseparable, I will argue, from those that they project or perform.

In exploring these ideas I am indebted to Epstein, who focuses on George Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1871-2) in an article which is worth quoting from extensively. Epstein discusses not expression but 'neutrality', claiming that Eliot 'unseats physiognomy as a system of knowledge in order to replace it with an irrevocably contingent state of being, where representational strategies are recognised so they can be used.' The ability of the subject to situate him or herself tactically '[damages] physiognomy as a credible system of meaning', and in this way Eliot '[explodes] the Lavaterian system' – physiognomy 'proves itself incapable to deal with the contingencies of tactical self-representation.'³⁴ It is this concept of 'representational strategies' and 'tactical self-representation' that I engage with in this chapter, showing its applicability to Crimsworth. However, while Epstein insists that *Middlemarch* 'recasts illegibility as a volitional mode of self-presentation', I contend that the points he makes about the deliberately neutral, frustratingly illegible face are pertinent to – and can be fruitfully expanded through – consideration of the deliberately expressive face (as drawn attention to by the novelist), where performance on the part of the subject being read is similarly undermining to the premises of physiognomy. Epstein's article is particularly suggestive in considering the 'neutral' face from a feminist perspective, suggesting the power of the tactically blank face to '[threaten] the male by virtue of its indecipherability.'³⁵ This notion of expression as strategy is key to my assessment of the subversive capacity of smiles and laughter in Brontë's novels more widely – but it is precisely *decipherability*, the subject's role in making herself (threateningly) legible, rather than illegible, which I place at the centre of my argument.

The process of '*surfacing* the personality, of making it completely legible' is touched on from a different angle by Dames, who argues that essential interiority –

³⁴ Epstein, pp. 132, 140, 144.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

represented for Dames by memory – is ‘obscured and demoted’ by the practice of phrenology, a ‘model of visibility’ which privileges ‘surfaces’ at the expense of ‘depths’, rather than simply building a bridge between them. Dames suggests we read Brontë’s work as ‘less a critique of repression than an instance of a psychological model that prefers the progressive, the active, the forward-looking’ to habits of dwelling on the past.’³⁶ I develop this insight by turning from the visibility of the skull to the performativity of the face, arguing that it is chiefly in rewriting himself through active expression that Crimsworth attempts to move forward – to overcome (or ‘repress’) his humiliations. In doing so I also reconsider John Kucich’s analysis of the meanings of ‘repression’ in Brontë’s fiction. As Kucich says, repression ‘is usually understood to be only a defensive practice – at best, a means by which the heroines screen themselves from male vision.’ Yet it is also ‘a powerful aggressive weapon’ which secures stable self-identity, as well as ‘tactical benefits.’ But, demonstrating ‘the extent to which [Brontë’s protagonists] convert repression into power ... self-negating impulses into self-containing ones’, Kucich still accepts the notion of the ‘screen’, of self-containment.³⁷ Thus, Crimsworth ‘[employs] important strategies of reserve’:

The self-suppression apparently enforced by his class position is transformed in this novel from humiliation or defensiveness into devastating personal power ... From the very beginning of *The Professor*, William Crimsworth is adept at using his enforced reserve as an instrument of mastery ... Brontë’s characters demonstrate acute feelings of vulnerability about the details of their inward lives. [But] William’s silence is an aggressive, flagrant performance of his independence, of his imperviousness to Edward’s attacks. Inwardly, William resolves to adopt silent steadfastness as a defiance of his brother’s influence.³⁸

³⁶ Dames’s emphasis, p. 86.

³⁷ Kucich, p. 78.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

Synthesising Kucich's account of the power gained through repression with Epstein's more specific focus on facial expression, in the analysis of *The Professor* that follows I expand on their ideas about aggressive and strategic performance while thoroughly overturning the terms in which they see this happening: neutrality, suppression, reserve, silent steadfastness. Moreover I begin by pushing further Kucich's understanding that it is 'humiliation' that informs Crimsworth's 'acute feelings of vulnerability', by demonstrating that it is, specifically, mockery that eats away at Crimsworth's self-respect – and mockery that, consequently, he endeavours to project back outwards onto the world.

II

The first step, in toppling the persona that Crimsworth builds up for himself, is to recognise the points of continuity between Brontë's juvenilia and her first novel. Supposedly a dry and sober tale, *The Professor* nonetheless shows evidence throughout of the strong spirit of irony and absurdity that colours the Angrian stories. If those stories reveal, as Christine Alexander claims, 'a sense of humour often denied to the Brontës by those familiar only with their later works', in some respects *The Professor* retains a similar comic extravagance.³⁹ The difficulty is that the protagonist, who takes himself very seriously, has tended to persuade readers to take him seriously too. Yet as Heather Glen points out, the narrating personae of the early writings are not 'figures of unquestioned masculine power ... They are themselves objects of representation; they

³⁹ Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Prometheus, 1983), p. 17. In the preface that Brontë wrote for *The Professor* she claims to have turned from fanciful extravagance to 'plain and homely' realism (pp. 37-8). The novel is usually interpreted as her attempt to strike a serious, 'grey and sober' note, following the fragment, 'Farewell to Angria' (c. 1839), in which she declared intent to 'quit [that] burning clime where we have sojourned too long ... The mind would cease from excitement & turn now to a cooler region, where the dawn breaks grey and sober' (*Tales of Glass Town*, p. 314). However, Glen is right to 'question the prevalent view' of 'a straightforward progression from naively diverting romance to a realistic engagement with "Truth"' (*The Imagination in History*, p. 22). The distinction between romance and realism is, as Glen points out, highly dubious – and so too is the transition from exuberant comedy to a serious, 'cooler region.'

are often mockingly characterized, and their weaknesses and inadequacies exposed.’ And *The Professor* ‘seems from the first to have been conceived as a fiction of this kind.’⁴⁰ But while Glen, despite this, considers Crimsworth as primarily representative of the grimly serious self-made man type, my initial focus will be on the ways in which he is trivialised, his ‘weaknesses and inadequacies’ exposed by way of comedy, as well as critique. This is an important distinction because Crimsworth’s foibles and follies are apparent not only in a few satirical touches of the author, for our benefit; his absurdity is a theme acknowledged, signposted in the text – the mocking laughter of the novel’s other characters is constantly creeping into his (and therefore our) line of vision.

Crimsworth’s silliness is threefold: he is a romantic in denial, prone to the kind of high-flown sentiments and enthusiasm that he assures us are alien to his nature; he can be unwontedly stiff, pompous and prudish; and his narrative voice often echoes the camp, affected tones of Angria’s high society dandies. His foolish vanity and priggishness are brought to the fore when, in one incident, his employer’s elderly mother invites him to tea, and he convinces himself that (being French) she intends to make love to him. Responding with exaggerated ‘fearful dismay’ (‘Gracious heavens!’) he contemplates running away; instead he is obliged to sit down, where (observing ‘a bottle of something’ on the table), ‘the cold sweat started on my brow – already I glanced back over my shoulder at the closed door.’ He finds himself ‘seated fairly between’ two old ladies – one ‘as fat and as rubicund as [the other] was meagre and yellow’, with a ‘jolly face’ and ‘a twinkle and leer in her left eye.’ He is shocked by the ‘stiff tumbler of punch’ they pour out, and when they laugh at his attempts at gallantry, he ‘whipped out a white pocket-handkerchief and wafted it, with a French grace, past my nose, bowing at the same time’ (pp. 101-4). The scene derives its humour from the

⁴⁰ Making another suggestive comparison, Glen adds that ‘the voice of the novel’s narrator is as distinct from that of its author as is Lockwood’s in *Wuthering Heights*’ (*The Imagination in History*, p. 34). Indeed, Crimsworth is clearly akin to Lockwood in his blustering pomposity.

image of the discomforted Crimsworth being sandwiched between these caricatured ‘droll old creatures’, and from the contrast between his awkwardness and their harmless merriment. On top of this is there is his horror of being seduced by an old woman (her ‘lace cap with flourishing red roses’ seems at first to ‘confirm [his] worst apprehensions’), and their amusement at his formal flattery. ‘You are a dangerous person, I fear,’ laughs the unsentimental Madame Reuter, ‘if you can forge compliments at that rate’ (p. 104). The scene plays alternately on his English uprightness (confronted with the ‘jolly’ decadence of outrageous foreigners) and his dandified airs, the ‘French grace’ with which he ‘whips out a pocket-handkerchief.’ The handkerchief gesture in particular is redolent of numerous comic instances in *Angria*, where it serves to show up foppishness or wounded vanity.⁴¹

Despite priding himself on his plain spoken, down-to-earth manners (usually manifested in simple rudeness), Crimsworth retains traces of the languishing, dandified type that figures prominently in Brontë’s early stories – as we find, for instance, in the voice of Charles Townshend:

My dear reader, when you are inclined to grow enthusiastic ... just recall my image, leaning over the gallery with my hat on, alternately squeezing and sucking on a remarkably fine Madeira orange, and meantime cocking my eye at the honourable gent ... with an expression sufficiently indicative of the absorbing interest I take in his speechifications.⁴²

Lacking Townshend’s elegance and relaxed confidence, Crimsworth nonetheless echoes something of his pompous wordiness and studied casualness of tone, as in the claim: ‘I like unexaggerated intercourse; it is not my way to overpower with amorous epithets’

⁴¹ It also makes an appearance in *Shirley* (p. 234), where the would-be ladies’ man Malone, ‘finding it desirable to add ease to his other charms ... drew forth to aid him an ample silk pocket-handkerchief.’

⁴² Brontë, ‘Henry Hastings’, p. 210.

(p. 249).⁴³ He has a habit of undercutting high sentiments with drily ironic reflections, and even has the eye for trivia typical of fashionable Angrian fops – desperately searching for the woman he loves, Crimsworth finds time for such scathing asides as: ‘(Gracious goodness! why don’t they dress better? My eye is yet filled with visions of the high-flounced, slovenly and tumbled dresses ... the ill-cut coats and strangely-fashioned pantaloons)’ (p. 191). He is satirised as a man making his way up in the world, but also for the traits he inherits from his aristocratic mother (and from Angria’s silver-fork figures); it is for this that he is mocked by the straight-talking Hunsden, and despised by his tradesman brother Edward. His delicate notions are constantly coming up against hard truths – as when, before encountering the schoolgirls that live next-door, he is obliged to confess that his ‘sentimental reflections were occasionally a trifle disarranged by the not quite silvery [sounds] which, rising from the unseen paradise below, penetrated clamorously into my solitude’ (pp. 96-7).

The scene in which Edward brandishes a whip at his brother (who is employed as his counting-house drudge) is as much an exercise in comic contrast as it is a serious struggle for power. It is, moreover, recognisably descended from similar incidents in the Angria stories involving the antagonistic brothers Edward and William Percy. In *The Professor*, Edward’s violent ranting is foiled by William’s nonchalant observation that ‘he was going on in the same breath, when an abrupt pause announced that rage had for the moment got the better of articulation.’ Abused as a ‘Hypocrite and Twaddler! Smooth-faced, snivelling Grease-horn!’ he tells us in a parenthetical aside that ‘this last term is – I believe – purely [local] and alludes to the horn of black, rancid whale-oil, usually to be seen suspended to cart-wheels’ (p. 73). Similarly, in ‘The Duke of

⁴³ Cf. Townshend, in ‘Henry Hastings’ (p. 207): ‘I make a point of never speaking in raptures, especially in a stage-coach.’

Zamorna', we find William Percy's tradesman older brother lashing out at him with a whip shouting 'Fire and Fury! Butter and brimstone!' while the sarcastic narrator escapes, 'waving a white handkerchief as a parting token of fraternal affection.'⁴⁴ *The Professor's* comic affinity with *Angria* is most evident in such scenes of boisterous, farcical energy: Crimsworth wrestling an intoxicated Pelet to bed (pp. 208-9), deftly hopping out of Edward's range, or tumbling about having 'a tug for it' with Hunsden (p. 267). The use of slang is also in this spirit; it is hard to imagine characters of the later novels describing themselves as 'a shy noodle' (p. 57) or accused of being a 'Twaddler.' Edward's tirade, indeed, is typical of colourful Angrian 'speechifications' in this line (for instance: 'G – d d – n! Blast such folly! Cursed conceited humbug! Infernal petticoat perverseness! Fetid foppery!'⁴⁵) 'The adult antagonists of *The Professor* bawl puerile abuse like characters from Branwell's and Charlotte's juvenilia', as Stevie Davies observes.⁴⁶

But beneath his refined airs and efforts to rise above such puerile abuse, Crimsworth's lack of dignity is discernible – especially in the earlier parts of the novel. He smugly asserts that if Edward 'could have once placed me in a ridiculous or mortifying position, he would have forgiven me much, but I was guarded by three faculties: Caution, Tact, Observation' (p. 63). Yet the whip-dodging drama forms one of several instances of Crimsworth being placed in ridiculous or mortifying positions,

⁴⁴ Brontë, 'The Duke of Zamorna', p. 177. Alternatively, in *The Green Dwarf* (p. 5), theatrical brutality against a weedier, irritating younger brother is comically presented through the Wellesleys: Arthur (later the Duke of Zamorna) greets the narrator Charles (later Townshend): 'What a little chalky spoon ... The whipping I bestowed on him as stuck to his small body right well', at which Charles indignantly exclaims, 'Fratricide! [...] How dare you speak thus lightly to your half-murdered brother! How dare you demand whether the tortures you have inflicted continue yet to writhe his agonised frame!'

⁴⁵ 'Henry Hastings', p. 254.

⁴⁶ Stevie Davies, 'Three distinct and unconnected tales', in the *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 72-98 (p. 77).

utterly belying his claims to unflappable composure.⁴⁷ Awkward, easily alarmed, and wary of female sexuality, we can by no means trust Crimsworth when he tells us ‘I bowed with instantaneously recovered sang-froid – for I am not easily embarrassed’ (p. 107). He is laughed at by his female pupils, who observe that they have made him blush (pp. 113-115), and he admits to feeling ‘the blood stir about my heart and rise warm to my cheek’ when Pelet mockingly identifies his ‘weak point’ as ‘the sentimental’ (p. 122). When Crimsworth assures Pelet that he may have been abashed in front of the girls at first, ‘but I rallied and got through with all due sang-froid’, Pelet’s response is to brutally undercut his pretensions: ‘I don’t believe you’ (p. 124).

His resolutely masculine abruptness and aggressiveness, as well as his sensitivity, are satirically portrayed. His self-important description of how he asserts himself in the classroom, inviting us to visualise his overly dramatic movements, certainly smacks of absurdity: ‘I entered, flinging the door wide and striding in fast, as it was my wont to do now, for I had found that in entering with aplomb, and mounting the estrade with emphasis, consisted the grand secret of ensuring immediate silence’ (p. 147). Indeed, many of his more sinister traits should be read alongside his laughable traits, and seen in the context of his readily embarrassed nature.⁴⁸ His assumption of

⁴⁷ In this respect, he is comparable to the ‘indignant youth’ Edward Sydney in ‘The Foundling’, who as a prim, proper and overly earnest Englishman in Angria finds himself constantly the butt of jokes amidst the sarcastic, disrespectful residents. Sydney’s enthusiasm and moral ideas are soundly satirised in the story – he is represented as naive rather than heroic. See for instance page 17, where a servant is instructed to pick up the outraged Sydney, and ‘carried him off with the same ease as he would have done a child’, to ‘a burst of laughter from all the spectators’, or page 35, where his chivalrous but farcically unsuccessful attempts to rescue a lady from her horse cause Arthur Wellesley hearty amusement. Brontë, *The Foundling: A Tale of Our Own Times by Captain Tree* (London: Hesperus, 2004).

⁴⁸ For instance, his spying habits appear less disturbing when seen as a continuation of the comical representation of Townshend’s and William Percy’s antics. ‘I quickened my pace to get a nearer view’, or ‘My eye is quick, my fingers are light’ are the boasts of these shameless voyeurs, who delight to be ‘left alone in a lady’s boudoir.’ See ‘Stancliffe’s Hotel’ (pp. 95, 97), and ‘The Duke of Zamorna’ (p. 133). Disappointed that his bedroom window is blocked by a ‘most tantalizing board’, Crimsworth’s opportunistic lechery is in a similarly flippant vein: ‘I thought it would have been so pleasant ... so amusing to have watched the demoiselles at their play ... myself the while, sheltered from view by a modest muslin curtain’ (pp. 54-5). In the manner of Townshend and Percy’s thwarted adventures, he is

callousness towards Frances is redolent of William Percy's rudeness to the 'plain, pinched' Elizabeth Hastings ('pretending not to see her, I carelessly followed the rest and took my place, with all the ease and coolness of my natural habits').⁴⁹ But for all his aggressive unfriendliness, so smugly relayed to the reader, Crimsworth does not really possess the 'ease and coolness' of the haughty Percy. In referring (as Kearns does) to his 'unendearing self-control', his 'phlegmatic and controlled' feelings, critics take him at his own word.⁵⁰ W. A. Craik suggests that 'Crimsworth's scorn and distaste for his young Belgian pupils are hardly natural in the competent and cool young man he is supposed to be; but are very right in *Villette* as the reaction of a nervous and not very competent young woman.'⁵¹ But it is precisely coolness and competence that Crimsworth lacks – his disproportionate feelings of scorn and distaste arise (like Lucy's) from nervousness, from the fear of being undermined.

The spying, suspicious atmosphere, and Crimsworth's habitual recourse to physiognomy or phrenology in his judgments of people, are salient features of *The Professor*. As Glen states, the 'imagery of looking and being looked at runs throughout the novel, chillingly replacing any more intimate conception of human interaction.'⁵² Yet this sinister picture is encapsulated with a playful touch in Townshend's account, in 'Henry Hastings':

annoyed that 'that old duenna of a Directress' has spoilt his fun, not letting him 'get a peep' at the schoolgirls. In effect, the penetrative power of the male gaze is limited here by the ludicrousness of the male in question.

⁴⁹ 'Henry Hastings, p. 240. Percy is satirised for his pompousness and selfishness – later noticing the neglected governess in tears, he decides not to speak to her: 'there was something that suited my turn of mind [in the picture she presented]. I would not break the charm by trying to remove the sorrow' (p. 241). Male obnoxious of this kind is normal behaviour in Angria.

⁵⁰ Kearns, p. 142.

⁵¹ W. A. Craik, *The Brontë Novels* (New York: Routledge, 1968; repr. 2011), p. 53.

⁵² Glen, Introduction to *The Professor*, p. 18.

As she sat shrinking behind me she had taken the opportunity of my seeming abstraction to scrutinize my physiognomy most closely. Consequently, when I made the unexpected movement of turning my head, I saw her veil thrown back and her eyes fixed full on me with a gaze of keen, sharp observation. I protest I felt almost flattered by the discovery. However, I soon recovered my wonted self-possession sufficiently to take revenge by an answering stare of, I flatter myself, at least equal intensity.⁵³

Crimsworth's conceited narrative voice is recognisable in the above, and it is this obsessive attitude towards the reading of faces (as well as the use of the face to enact expressive 'revenge') that I will explore next. But what in *The Professor* has struck readers as disconcerting is for the flippant Townshend a kind of game, in which his own competitive motives are readily offered up to the reader. With the loss of Townshend's calm assurance and casual honesty comes increased authorial attention to those insecurities of the narrator that lurk beneath the surface, and to the role of his own ludicrousness in fuelling his anxieties.

According to Glen, in *The Professor* Brontë 'casts a cold eye on [a] familiar contemporary masculine type'; Crimsworth's 'is not presented as a peculiar or eccentric stance, but as endemic to the world through which he moves. Observation and objectification of the other are central to the dynamics of the society of the novel.'⁵⁴ Without disputing this on the whole, I must insist that Crimsworth *is* both peculiar and eccentric. Not so much a 'type' as a contradictory jumble of types, he inherits from the lively comic characters and scenes of Angria, as well as offering an imitation of the strict self-made man. While it would be stretching it to say that he is affectionately portrayed, to say that he is conceived entirely with 'a cold eye' is perhaps to take him (and his own cold gaze) as seriously as he takes himself. Moreover, the ridiculous

⁵³ 'Henry Hastings', p. 204.

⁵⁴ Glen, *The Imagination in History*, pp. 34, 39.

elements of his character are significant because of the deeper insights that they give rise to. Demonstrating the ways in which Crimsworth is characterised as non-serious is the first step to perceiving him as laughable, and recognising this is key to grasping his acute sensitivity to laughter, and his manner of dealing with it – which consists in ‘answering’ not just with stares, but with *sneers* of equal intensity.

‘A series of covert sneers’

Crimsworth is ill at ease in company and disconcerted by cheerful scenes: he is alienated by the laughter shared between his brother and sister-in-law at dinner (p. 45), while at a party he is made to feel like a ‘block, or a piece of furniture’ amidst the ‘smiling faces’ (p. 57). And while often excluded or sidelined by smiles and laughter, he is more frequently (and more crushingly) their object; his story, on examination, is one of continual humiliation from all sides, and the ways in which he responds to or denies it. Initially his career is triggered by the contempt of his uncle: he would not have chosen to go into trade, ‘but such was the scorn expressed in Lord Tynedale’s countenance ... such the contemptuous sarcasm of his tone’ that it decides him: ‘My father was but a name to me, yet that name I did not like to hear mentioned with a sneer to my very face’ (p. 40). While his aristocratic uncle holds him in disdain for his plebeian heritage, his tradesman brother despises him for his Eton upbringing and the manners that come with it – when he lets out a ‘deep, involuntary sigh’ (of disappointment, so he tells us) on gazing at Mrs Crimsworth, ‘she took it as a homage to her beauty, and Edward ... threw on me a glance – half ridicule, half ire’ (p. 46). He is the victim of misunderstanding again when he romantically believes himself to be in love with Zoraïde Reuter, and she with him, then is disillusioned by overhearing her ‘little laugh of exulting coquetry’ as she and her real lover – Pelet – mock him beneath the open window (p. 139). The closest he has to a friend, Hunsden, seems to find him no

less contemptible, and even Frances's awe of him is significantly tempered with rebellious sarcasm.

In all these cases, Crimsworth's awareness of being mocked is filtered or mediated through the defensive stance of his narrative – thus he reports Pelet telling Reuter that he (Crimsworth) blushes whenever her name is mentioned ('which was a lie, by the by – I had never gone so far as that, after all') (p. 139). The persistence with which such instances are brought to our attention has much to do with the persistent quality of the mockery, as Crimsworth perceives it. While Tynedale sneers 'to his very face' or Hunsden 'only replied by looking in my face and laughing' (p. 79), more often what is evoked is an impression of falsely discreet or undercover mockery which operates by a kind of stealth. Even on first arriving at the school, when Crimsworth is 'willing to take Pelet for what he seemed – to believe him benevolent and friendly' (p. 100), he feels uncomfortable, distrustful of his 'quiet, sarcastic smile', suspecting that he is 'sometimes a little sarcastic and sometimes a little too insinuating' (p. 99). 'I broke from M. Pelet', Crimsworth tells us, 'and as I strode down the passage he followed me with one of his laughs – a very French, rakish, mocking sound' (p. 111). The image perfectly encapsulates the sense that dogs Crimsworth's brash, striding narrative, of having his assertiveness undercut behind his back, or through the open window – of being 'quietly' but persistently undermined.

It is a perception which does indeed 'follow' him everywhere, infringing on his consciousness and impacting on his confidence. Despite his concern when Frances goes missing, he initially refuses to run 'the risk of exciting silly smiles and gossiping whispers' by making enquiries (p. 179). And when he asks Rosalie the portresse for Frances's address, she 'looked up from her work with a knowing smile, precisely the sort of smile I had been so desirous to avoid exciting' (p. 180). The idea of a sustained attack, both blatant and unsettlingly covert, is explored through the manoeuvres of the

schoolgirls, whose continual object is apparently to disrupt his lessons and undermine his authority. Their first reaction to him ('I'm about to split my sides with laughter', 'How he blushed when he spoke!', 'He's a real greenhorn'⁵⁵) is perfectly audible, yet given an air of discretion by being delivered in French, and under cover of the desks – 'behind the lifted lids which momentarily screened the heads bent down to search for exercise-books, I heard tittering and whispers' (pp. 113-4). It is chiefly 'tittering' and 'silly smiles' that are used to threaten Crimsworth in the classroom – the spread of laughter constitutes a 'mutiny' (p. 116). The sexual threat (as traditionally symbolised by women's laughter) is what most discomposes him, as seen in his perception of their boldly promiscuous smiles: 'If I looked at these girls with little scruple, they looked at me with still less ... Hortense regarded me boldly, and giggled at the same time.' As for Caroline, 'parting her lips, as full as those of a hot-blooded Maroon, she showed her well-set teeth sparkling between them, and treated me at the same time to a smile' (p. 115). 'An air of bold, impudent flirtation, or a loose, silly leer' claims Crimsworth, 'was sure to answer the most ordinary glance from a masculine eye' (p. 127).

The ambiguous nature of the taunting that Crimsworth feels himself to be exposed to is apparent in the following passage:

Aurelia's conduct in class, at least when I am present, is something extraordinary, considered as an index of girlish innocence. The moment I enter the room, she nudges her next neighbour and indulges in a half-suppressed laugh. As I take my seat on the estrade, she fixes her eye on me; she seems resolved to attract, and, if possible, monopolize my notice: to this end she launches at me all sorts of looks, languishing, provoking, leering, laughing. As I am found quite proof against this sort of artillery – for we scorn what, unasked, is lavishly offered – she has recourse to the expedient of making noises ... If, in walking up the schoolroom, I pass near her, she

⁵⁵ As translated by Glen, p. 299 (n. 8).

puts out her foot that it may touch mine; if I do not happen to observe the manoeuvre
 ... she affects to fall into convulsions of suppressed laughter (p. 128).

Notable here is his perception of ‘artillery’, ‘launching’, ‘expedients’ and ‘manoeuvres’ – the deliberateness with which the leering Aurelia attempts to seduce him, ‘affecting’ to fall into convulsions of well-aimed laughter. And despite her ‘lavish’ and ‘provoking’ brazenness, the whole is contained by the familiar drama of covertness, of ‘suppressed’ or ‘half-suppressed’ laughter. Back in England, Edward’s taunting had involved the same mixture of subtlety and persistent affront: learning that Crimsworth is religious, he ‘turned the information into a weapon of attack against the equability of my temper. He commenced a series of covert sneers’ – sneers which are his ‘ammunition.’ Crimsworth in turn learns to come ‘prepared, [managing] to receive the mill-owner’s blasphemous sarcasms, when next levelled at me, on a buckler of impenetrable indifference’ (p. 56).

His mingled susceptibility to and disgust for the sensual allure of the girls is sharply appreciated by the ‘rakish’, morally degenerate Frenchman Pelet, with his ‘quiet sarcastic smile’ and lewd insinuations. His mockery of the ‘frigid’ Crimsworth threatens his pretensions to dignity and to sexual aloofness with suitably invasive language: ‘Any woman sinking her shaft deep enough will at last reach a fathomless spring of sensibility in thy breast, Crimsworth’, he taunts, generating the desired response: ‘I felt the blood stir about my heart and rise warm to my cheek’ (p. 122).⁵⁶ Pelet’s teasing has the same effect as the ‘knowing smile’ that Crimsworth is ‘so desirous to avoid’, or indeed of the metaphorical ‘shaft’ with which he is threatened; his probing identification of Crimsworth’s ‘weak point’ has a perceptibly physical impact,

⁵⁶ As William Cohen has compellingly argued, Brontë’s metaphors of enclosure and invasion take on intense significance when read in terms of the embodied experience that they evoke. Crimsworth thus ‘exhibits extraordinary anxiety that others will pierce his armor or get under his skin ... he consistently makes himself hard and impervious.’ And ‘while it entails comprehension and sentiment, penetration also persistently retains the force of its physical meaning in the narrative’s metaphorical tissue.’ See Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), pp. 42-3, 47.

producing a blush (the 'spring of sensibility') which he cannot mask or suppress. It evokes the imposing presence of the 'leering', provocative girls, who show him their teeth in a move which is animalistic and aggressive, yet at the same time mysterious and seductive.

The favourite pastime, indeed, of both Pelet and Reuter consists in testing, probing and tricking Crimsworth, seeking to draw his 'real' self to the surface by exciting involuntary facial expression. Pelet goes into rhapsodies about the girls, much to Crimsworth's suspicion: 'I might have laughed at the director's enthusiasm had I believed it real, but there was something in his tone which indicated got-up raptures. I felt he was only affecting fervour in order to put me off my guard, to induce me to come out in return, so I scarcely even smiled.' His employer's attempts to embarrass him are apparent on his shift in approach when Crimsworth conveys his disapproval: 'He laughed a forced laugh, affirmed that he had only been joking, and demanded to know whether I could possibly have thought him in earnest' (p. 125). Reuter, having lost her flirtatious hold over the schoolteacher, achieves a triumph when her flattery brings about a lapse in his prickly resolve: she 'caught the prohibited smile, though I passed my hand over my mouth to conceal it' (p. 183). Laughter and smiles in these cases work to secure or to surrender control of a situation depending on whether they reveal the inner state (expression as studied by Bell and Darwin) or feature as an exercise in self-mastery (evoking the capacity of the pathognomic subject to simulate or mislead). Thus Crimsworth's inability to cover up his warmer feelings tells against him, whereas Pelet employs his 'forced laugh' in order to regain control. Pelet's 'jesting allusions' (p. 207) to Reuter are particularly sneaky given the fact, later revealed, that he is secretly engaged to her. Asked how he likes Reuter's features, Crimsworth guardedly replies: 'a little harsh, especially her mouth' at which Pelet 'chuckled inwardly' and presses the point: 'There is character about her mouth – firmness – but she has a very pleasant

smile; don't you think so?' 'Rather crafty' is Crimsworth's significant answer. While both Pelet and Reuter seek to catch Crimsworth out, his lurking distrust of their seeming pleasantness is expressed in his recognition of the connection between her 'rather crafty' smile and Pelet's 'inward chuckling.' Given, indeed, the romantic connection between them, and the specific relevance of the mouth as a site of intimacy, we are alerted both to devious conspiracy and to sexual intrigue – Crimsworth is beset by enemies.

Foremost amongst these enemies is his friend Hunsden, who laughs at his 'petulant and snappish' manners (p. 79) and delights in making sport of him. On one of their first meetings Crimsworth begins to understand that Hunsden, though sensitive himself, can be 'selfishly relentless towards the sensitiveness of others' – that he is 'overbearing,' with 'a tone of despotism':

I saw written in his eye and mien a resolution to arrogate to himself a freedom so unlimited, that it might often trench on the just liberty of his neighbours. I rapidly ran over these thoughts, and then I laughed a low and involuntary laugh ... It was as I thought: Hunsden had expected me to take with calm his incorrect and offensive surmises, his bitter and haughty taunts; and himself was chafed by a laugh scarce louder than a whisper (p. 69).

Though Crimsworth claims that his revenge is 'involuntary', its effect and his accompanying satisfaction is significant, marking the realisation of the laughingstock that he can be a bully in his turn – that 'haughty taunts' may be not simply disregarded (as through an impervious countenance), but punished (through an expressive one).

More revealing still is Hunsden's angry response:

I told you that you were an aristocrat, and who but an aristocrat would laugh such a laugh as that, and look such a look? A laugh frigidly jeering; a look lazily mutinous; gentlemanlike irony, patrician resentment ... Now, if you'd only an estate and a

mansion, and a park, and a title, how you could play the exclusive, maintain the rights of your class, train your tenantry in habits of respect to the peerage, oppose at every step the advancing power of the people (p. 69).

Crimsworth's 'aristocratic' nature does not here translate as the delicacy and refinement that Hunsden elsewhere mocks him for, but as haughtiness and obstinacy. His cynical, aggressive laugh with its low, threatening tone transforms him into an empowered, tyrannical figure, one who 'plays the exclusive' instead of being himself excluded and downtrodden.

The transformation attested to by Hunsden is important, explaining Crimsworth's puzzling nastiness – the pleasure he takes elsewhere in that 'laugh frigidly jeering.' Describing Reuter's efforts to gain a foothold over him (and this before he has any reason for hostility towards her), he tells us: 'I found it at once pleasant and easy to evade all these efforts; it was sweet, when she thought me nearly won, to turn round and to smile in her very eyes, half scornfully, and then to witness her scarcely veiled, though mute mortification' (p. 134). It is easy to see that the root of this sadistic tendency is in his own constant experiences of mortification; his aggressive sense of a competitive edge in all his exchanges makes it 'sweet' for him to 'win' – to catch the expression that she fails to veil – and to do so with controlled, 'half scornful' coolness. After learning of her engagement to Pelet, his scorn is redoubled – but still, he implies, enjoyable and performed for effect. Reuter greets him 'with a charming smile – it fell on my heart like light on stone': 'I shot into her eyes, from my own, a look, where there was no respect, no love, no tenderness, no gallantry; where the strictest analysis could detect nothing but scorn, hardihood, irony. I made her bear it, and feel it' (p. 142). This, then, is the unduly stern, hard Crimsworth who has repelled readers. Whereas before thoughts of the schoolmistress had 'made the blood stir about his heart and rise warm to his cheek', here he boasts that his heart is 'stone', the different internal

sensation allowing him to carry out a cooler external show. But the facade of emotional indifference is amply apparent in the intensity of his desire for revenge ('I *made* her bear it, and feel it'). 'Scorn, hardihood, irony' are his weapons of revenge, as they are the same 'weapon of attack' that he feels is used against him – the campaign of sneers that he is repeatedly made to bear, and feel.

His 'buckler of impenetrable indifference', then, begins to seem less a passive and more a reactive device. His assumption of scornful (rather than blank) indifference is habitual. Even on hearing of Frances's mistreatment by Reuter, he displays knowing amusement rather than permitting himself indignation or sympathy: 'I laughed inwardly; all this was so like the directress' (p. 198). Smiling makes Crimsworth feel self-assured, on top of situations, and more importantly helps him convey this to the minds of others. When Reuter witnesses him exercising violence towards her pupils, he tells us that 'her look of affright I answered with one of composure, and finally with a smile, which perhaps flattered and certainly soothed her' (p. 130). He likewise 'smiles inwardly' at the knowledge that she has fallen in love with him, admitting that his '*amour-propre* was excited not disagreeably' (p. 210; Brontë's emphasis). Still, 'I could scarcely pity her' – 'her presence and manner had [a] singular effect on me; they sealed up all that was good, elicited all that was noxious in my nature ... they always hardened my heart.' He feels himself a 'tyrant' (pp. 210-11). Whereas Jane Eyre is mortified to be seen as 'artful [and] noxious', Crimsworth relishes playing the part.⁵⁷ Yet if we needed a reminder that this tyrannical, hard-hearted Crimsworth remains the awkward and bespectacled character of the novel's comic interludes, it comes from old Madame Reuter: when her daughter sighs that his 'haughty smile' makes him as handsome as Apollo, 'the jolly old dame' laughs outright at the idea (p. 211).

⁵⁷ Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, p. 34.

Crimsworth's 'noxious' sentiments find expression in laughter, apparently powerful enough to make Hunsden react with a kind of horror, and to make Reuter grovel in fascinated awe of him. It dramatises for him a turn-around of affairs. Hunsden senses in him a tyrant, but also interestingly describes the 'look lazily mutinous' that accompanies his aristocratic smile. As it happens, it is not in actual class warfare but in maintaining order (and racial supremacy) over his classroom of brutish 'swine' that Crimsworth will find the opportunity to 'oppose at every step the advancing power of the people' (p. 69) – people who, in the girls' case, are themselves inclined both to laziness and to 'mutiny' of a sniggering kind. Implicit throughout is the sense that the urge to oppress (or bully, or intimidate) arises from the fear of being oppressed in turn. Crimsworth may lay claim to intellectual superiority over his students, but beneath airs of sophistication and loftiness lies the same crude instinct to domination. His laugh 'scarce louder than a whisper' speaks to Hunsden of bloodthirsty despotism, just as the girls' sly, knowing smiles are inseparable from what Crimsworth perceives as their dangerous, animal natures. Intellectual and animal energies – airs of refinement and of revolt – are thus intertwined. While passions and impulses certainly play their part in the novel, they are complicated – as I will consider further in the next section – by Brontë's insistence on their *controlled*, manipulated (and manipulating) expression.

Crimsworth's friendship with Hunsden is characterised by the competitive will to dominate, to unbalance, or to express knowing superiority over the other. Having smugly presented Frances to his friend, and after a physical battle of strengths (a play-fight in the street) Crimsworth taunts an aggravated Hunsden, who, 'speaking low and deep ... desired me to hold my peace, threatening to do something dreadful if I stimulated his wrath further by boasting. I laughed till my sides ached' (p. 267). Crimsworth here internalises a projected state, laughing until it produces a physical sensation (aching sides) as though to consolidate his satisfaction, confirm and make

substantial his triumph over Hunsden. He is comforted by thoughts of Frances, which take ‘the sting out of Hunsden’s sarcasm’, so he demonstrates his composure accordingly:

Just then I turned my face a little to the light; the approach of twilight [had] for the last ten minutes, prevented him from studying my countenance; as I moved, however, he caught an expression which he thus interpreted – ‘Confound it! How doggedly self-approving the lad looks! I thought he was fit to die with shame, and there he sits grinning smiles, as good as to say, “Let the world wag as it will, I’ve got the philosopher’s stone in my waistcoat pocket, and the elixir of life in my cupboard”.’ (pp. 231-2)

Positions are again reversed, and Hunsden again clarifies Crimsworth’s ability, through ‘grinning smiles’, to convey his ‘self-approving’ inner state to others, confounding and averting their sarcasm in the process.

Indeed, Hunsden’s key function in the novel is arguably to lay bare Crimsworth’s motivations, to make explicit the trains of thought which are presented to us obscurely. Like Pelet he takes on a patronising role towards him, seeing through his defences and mocking the weaknesses that Crimsworth would keep out of his narrative. He too can produce a blush of embarrassment – at which ‘Hunsden triumphed: his eyes – his laugh announced victory.’ Asked ‘what the deuce are you laughing at’ the sarcastic reply is revealing: ‘At your exemplary composure’ (p. 229). But he has the honesty that Pelet and Reuter conspicuously lack. This honesty is brutal, allowing Brontë to comment with some directness on the psyche of her crotchety protagonist. Hunsden tells Crimsworth outright that when he mentions his name back in England, ‘the women sneer covertly’ (p. 230). He recalls him ‘looking frigidly shy at the commencement of a party, confusingly vigilant about the middle, and insultingly weary towards the end’, thus encapsulating his characteristic progression from lonely naivety

through unwarranted aggressiveness to a self-isolating affectedness. ‘If you are generally unpopular,’ he explains, ‘it is because you deserve to be so’ (p. 230). And he crushes Crimsworth’s retort: ‘No, you are not content; you see beauty always turning its back on you; you are mortified and then you sneer.’ He is ‘tantalized’ by ‘ripe grapes’ but ‘they are out of reach ... you’ll go away calling them sour’ (p. 230). Through this cruelly accurate assessment, we are offered insight into Crimsworth’s character; the introduction of Hunsden’s perspective allows us to see in its psychological simplicity his strategy towards life, his response to being ‘sneered at covertly’ where he wishes to impress: ‘you are mortified and then you sneer.’

Turns of countenance

The atmosphere of ‘looking and being looked at’, the accompanying caution, and the obsessive, careful scrutiny of faces – all these features of the novel are familiar critical territory. Yet, if we take note of Crimsworth’s *specific* alertness with regard to being laughed at, his anxious avoidance of mockery (‘that smile I had been so desirous to avoid exciting’; p. 180), then the reading of faces in the novel takes on a new significance. For what really guides social interaction in the novel is not just the general practice of physiognomy, but a series of distinctly *pathognomic* readings. When Crimsworth turns his face to the light so that Hunsden can ‘study his countenance’, it is specifically so he can ‘catch an expression’ there (pp. 231-2). Once we recognise this, we can observe a different psychological pattern, a different dynamic, than that which has usually been emphasised: Brontë appears less interested in repression (Crimsworth keeping it all in) than in *expression*, and the ways in which it is translated. In turning the focus to his expressive side, we find the novel’s protagonist playing (or at least attempting to play) an active, presiding role over his own image and even his own moods, using the face to simultaneously communicate and establish his ‘inner’ self at

given moments, rather than (more passively) keeping a permanent lock on a single, private identity.

The notion of an essential, unified identity which can be hidden, but gathered from facial signs, is one that Crimsworth himself is reliant on in his efforts to know his enemies. At times, the expression of laughter features as something that obscures or baffles the standard physiognomic reading, rendering facial signs unreliable. Thus he is glad to catch a ‘moment’ when a ‘momentary eclipse’ comes over Hunsden’s face, ‘extinguishing his smile, and replacing, by an abstracted and alienated look, the customarily shrewd, bantering glance of his eye. I employed the interval of silence in a rapid scrutiny of his physiognomy’ (p. 66). As Lavater complained, ‘how often does it happen that the seat of character is so hidden, so enveloped, so masked, that it can only be caught in certain, and, perhaps, uncommon positions of the countenance, which will again be changed, and the signs all disappear, before they have made any durable impression!’⁵⁸ Crimsworth therefore seizes an opportunity to make sense of his friend’s character while his mocking, ‘shrewd, bantering’ demeanour has been superseded by what is presumably his ‘real’ appearance. Hunsden is off guard without his ‘customary’ smile; its eclipse gives Crimsworth an advantage, allowing accurate scrutiny. Similarly, on ‘meeting Pelet’s false glance and insinuating smile’, he is relieved that he ‘had last night opened my window and read by the light of a full moon the true meaning of that guileful countenance.’ He continues: ‘I felt half his master, because the reality of his nature was now known to me; smile and flatter as he would, I saw his soul lurk behind his smile’ (p. 142). Crimsworth’s ‘mastery’ over Pelet is achieved through knowledge of ‘the reality of his nature’, a reality or ‘soul’ which ‘lurks behind his smile.’ The smile is the front, the cover; it obscures ‘true meaning’. Likewise, Reuter’s smiles constitute a misleading appearance, as apparent when Crimsworth catches her off guard: ‘At the

⁵⁸ Lavater, p. 20.

moment I turned her countenance looked hard, dark, and inquisitive ... I had scarce caught this phase of physiognomy ere it vanished; a bland smile played on her features; my harsh apology was received with good-humoured facility' (p. 180). The 'phase' of physiognomy is again implicitly the true one – Crimsworth witnesses the 'hard' and 'dark', sinister personality 'lurking' beneath Reuter's assumed airs of pleasant affability, just as in Pelet he had all along suspected 'the existence of flint or steel under an external covering of velvet' (p. 99).

At other times, however, it is suggested that it is the smiling face which represents the essence of the character in question. And in fact, Pelet is all along characterised by his insinuating sneers; Crimsworth distrusts him long before he is undeceived about his relationship to Reuter. It is not through open, beaming grins that Pelet presents a 'guileful countenance'; the very guilefulness of the countenance is perfectly expressed through the shadiness of his smiles. What Crimsworth reads 'by the light of a full moon' is written just as clearly in the shadowy, menacing aspect of his habitual countenance.⁵⁹ Again we encounter that paradox identified in the previous chapter, whereby the covert and the blatant are inseparable – and deliberately so. An illusion of it but no real efforts at guardedness or deception are made by Pelet; rather, his intention is to intimidate – and it is in precisely the same way that Crimsworth goes about seeking not to hide and restrain, but to impress.

It is this drive to make an *impression* – and the purposefulness of expression through which it is achieved – which not only renders the act of decipherment to some

⁵⁹ Dames makes another shrewd point in this respect, criticising 'the assumption that meaning and human significance reside in a deep interior, which is masked by duplicitous surfaces.' According to Dames, 'critical opinion on Brontë centers around a strong consensus: that the secret, the deep, the nonvisual is where value rests for Brontë and her narrators' (p. 85). He disputes this 'privileging of depth' by pointing to meaning and selfhood as visible in phrenological signs. I argue that the very concept of secret depths is one which is necessarily (and deliberately) brought to the attention, or indeed brought into existence, through 'duplicitous' surface display.

extent redundant (since meanings are being volunteered instead of hidden) but troubles the very notion of an ‘essence of character’ which it is physiognomy’s task to root out. Lavater affirmed that ‘if the laugh be good, so is the person’, and (in an example particularly pertinent to Pelet) surmised that ‘Judas must have been distinguished by an insinuating countenance and an ever-ready smile.’⁶⁰ But not much credit accrues to the physiognomist who can interpret such a pointedly ‘insinuating countenance’, where there is nothing, really, to see through; success rather lies with he whose ‘ever-ready smile’ conveys (rather than betrays) a suggestion (rather than a revelation) of private, mysterious depths. The notion of tactical self-representation discussed in the first part of this chapter becomes considerably more complex when the subject at once aims to render his meaning transparent, and to throw over it a cloak of dark obscurity. Legibility of a kind is offered, but certainly not an ‘open’ countenance.

According to Zelle, physiognomy was intended as ‘a science of the truly authentic self’, transcending ‘masks, simulation, and dissimulation’; the physiognomist was supposed to ‘tear away masks in order to gaze upon a person’s true face.’⁶¹ In short, it was a science in which the existence of an absolute divide between mask and face was desperately grasped at. The same controlling tendency is displayed in the classroom by Crimsworth, whose efforts to secure his mastery over his pupils (the literal endeavour being paralleled by the narrative one) take authoritatively ‘scientific’ form, as he shows off his expertise in physiognomy and – more memorably – phrenology. In one such instance we learn that one of the Belgian girls is ‘an unnatural-looking being – so young, fresh, blooming, yet so Gorgon-like. Suspicion, sullen ill-temper were on her forehead, vicious propensities in her eye, envy and panther-like deceit about her mouth.’ Moreover, ‘she had but two varieties of expression; the prevalent one a forbidding,

⁶⁰ Lavater, pp. 185, 194.

⁶¹ Zelle, p. 44.

dissatisfied scowl, varied sometimes by a most pernicious and perfidious smile' (p. 129). With this attempt to fix the features, to contain and reduce the meanings of the face, Crimsworth echoes the kind of sweeping generalisations provided by Lavater's maxims on laughter. Limited to just 'two varieties of expression', the attractive yet terrifying (or terrifyingly attractive) Adèle is made manageable: Crimsworth is able to set her perfidious smile and 'Gorgon' stare in defiance through this comprehensive summary of her character. Adèle is rendered a passive, rather than expressive subject.

Crimsworth constantly seeks to convince us of his racial, moral and intellectual superiority, in contrast to the brutish stupidity of his pupils. As Jenny Bourne Taylor comments, he is 'establishing his psychological mastery, while exposing [his] anxieties and aggression.'⁶² But, as is the case with Bertha in *Jane Eyre* (and as will be considered further in the next chapter) the bestial, crude and sensual nature of the schoolgirls is combined with deviousness and a capacity for shrewd cunning. 'Brazen' and 'vulgar' they may be, but they are as skilled as Reuter when it comes to the art of subtle intimidation, probing Crimsworth for his weaknesses, mocking his confusion behind their desk lids, and threatening to match his own tact(ics). According to nineteenth-century phrenological philosophy, Crimsworth's task as a self-controlled man is to control and subjugate the lower animal propensities to the higher intellectual faculties.⁶³ But *The Professor* effectively blurs the line between these, drawing attention to the Hobbesian laugh of superiority as a form of sophisticated brutality, animal propensities dressed up by intellectual faculties – the smile of ugly triumph given a certain well-bred shape and precision. By implying that savage instincts are made

⁶² Taylor, 'Body and Mind', p. 189.

⁶³ As Shuttleworth explains, in phrenological thought (especially as influenced by George Combe), 'the march of civilization could be measured by the degree to which men managed to subjugate their lower animal propensities to the control of their higher sentiments and intellectual faculties' (p. 65). Thus for instance the Belgian schoolboys, in Crimsworth's view, do not measure up: 'Their intellectual faculties were generally weak, their animal propensities strong' (p. 97).

socially effective when refined by intellect, or composure, what Brontë dramatises is not the suppression so much as the expressive *channelling* of the passions.

The Professor is centrally concerned with how the language of the body makes legible the inner mental and emotional life, and to see this in terms of the skilful channelling of instinct or passions makes that language seem all the more pointed and highly charged. Crimsworth ‘answers’ Reuter’s look with a smile, ‘shoots into her eyes’ a look, takes pleasure in ‘[turning round] to smile in her very eyes ... then to witness her scarcely veiled, though mute mortification.’ These conversations involve the interplay between thoughts, moods and expressions, not between static personalities.

Furthermore, they require us to look again at the language of affect by focusing in on the bridge between heart and mind, face and mask, subconscious and self-conscious, in ways that trouble attempts to fix character through straightforward interpretation of appearances – or feelings – over which the subject has no control. If Crimsworth’s involuntary bodily or emotional expressions (‘I felt the blood stir about my heart and rise warm to my cheek’) act to unveil and betray him, then he compensates via acts of calculation (‘I permitted myself to laugh’) which enact his ‘seeing through’ or ‘drawing out’ others in revenge. In this sense, the bridge that Brontë’s protagonist crosses is also between ‘mute mortification’ and mocking mastery.

The nature of the provocation that Crimsworth offers his brother – the rage he produces in permitting himself to laugh (channelling the passions) – is something we can appreciate more fully on reading an often cited passage (which actually concerns Edward’s lackey and spy, Steighton) in light of the above observations:

I thought he was trying to read my inner character, but I felt as secure against his scrutiny as if I had on a casque with the visor down – or rather I showed him my countenance with the confidence that one would show an unlearned man a letter

written in Greek; he might see lines, and trace characters, but he could make nothing of them (p. 53).

The first analogy suggests a self-protective strategy: our narrator achieves security by means of an impassive, guarded countenance, wearing armour ‘with the visor down.’ The amendment that follows, however, suggests something rather different. Playing on the actual realities of the situation (Edward and Steighton are unlearned; Crimsworth’s classical education gives him intellectual superiority), Crimsworth compares his face to a letter which is not blank, but inscribed with meaning. Indeed, the very shift in metaphor implies a questioning of the ‘inner character’ at first alluded to, which is replaced by something more versatile. The coarse, frustrated Edward is ultimately thwarted in his efforts to impose mastery over his brother, as his associate, able to ‘see lines, and trace characters’ is unable to translate the provocative signs with which he is presented.

III

With the late arrival to the plot of Frances Henri, we are presented with another curiously two-faced heroine. At the time of the novel’s publication, some critics perceived Frances as a redeeming feature, a pleasant antidote to the Professor himself. Elizabeth Gaskell, who thought *The Professor* ‘disfigured [by] coarseness’ nonetheless advised George Smith that its publication (after editing) would not further damage Brontë’s reputation, as it contained amongst other things ‘the most charming *woman* she ever drew, and a glimpse of that woman as a mother – very lovely.’⁶⁴ W.C. Roscoe described Frances as ‘a refined and softened Jane Eyre ... decidedly the most attractive female character that ever came from the pen of the author’ and went on to lament her

⁶⁴ Gaskell to Emily Shaen (September 1856), in the *Letters of Mrs Gaskell*, ed. by J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester University Press, 1966), pp. 408-12 (p. 410), Gaskell’s emphasis. See also her letter to George Smith (August 1856), p. 403.

fate in the clutches of the ‘bashaw-like’ Crimsworth with his ‘affected indifference and simulated harshness.’⁶⁵ Yet while giving ‘a charm to the book’, she was still recognisable to Roscoe and others as a precursor to Jane and Lucy, as ‘the plain, piquant, strong-minded, fascinating little girl.’⁶⁶

Ambitious yet timid, Frances’s combination of strong-mindedness and sweet docility is precisely what fascinates Crimsworth. In characteristically controlling terms, while leaning (or looming) over his new pupil, he instructs himself: ‘chide her, or quietly approve; you know the effect of either system; you know her smile when pleased, you know the play of her looks when roused; you have the secret of awakening what expression you will, and you can choose amongst that pleasant variety’ (p. 224). But the extent of his actual power over her expressions and moods is uncertain. The pleasure Frances takes in a submissive meekness and mildness to her ‘master’ is frequently disrupted by sharply articulated expressions of defiance – in the form of smiles – which pose a distinct challenge to Crimsworth’s ‘systems’ of management.

Frances employs her smiles – at least initially – to register plainly her discontent or to assert her self-worth, even as she behaves submissively. Thus Crimsworth is first intrigued on watching her being lectured by Mademoiselle Reuter:

Without reply, Mdlle Henri turned away; dissatisfaction was plainly evinced in her face, and a smile, slight and brief, but bitter, distrustful, and, I thought, scornful, curled her lip as she took her place in the class; it was a secret, involuntary smile, which lasted but a second (p. 154).

Later, he observes that she momentarily objects to a command from Reuter, ‘then smiling, with that same bitter, derisive smile I had seen on her lips before, she hastily

⁶⁵ [W. C. Roscoe], ‘Miss Brontë’, *National Review*, 5 (1857), 127-64 (pp. 161-2).

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* The improvement specifically lies in Frances’s ‘intellect being reconciled with [sweetness]’, the relevance of which I will discuss shortly.

rose and made her exit' (p. 173). What is striking about these shows of feeling is how markedly at odds they are with conventional rhetoric about desirable female conduct, countenance and characteristics. The humble lace mender has the haughty 'curled lip' of Blanche Ingram. Quiet and obedient she may be, but her smiles are everything that was held to be suspect in commonplaces about laughter: bitter, derisive, scornful, secret, brief.⁶⁷ Although Crimsworth accounts for them as 'involuntary', these shady smiles nonetheless make her private thoughts, her dissatisfaction and her sense of innate superiority clearly legible in a way which (in line with the usual paradox) suggests at the same time concealment and cynicism. Transparency of a sort there is, but not the requisite 'openness.'

Such signs of rebellious inner feeling are not restricted to those she dislikes, as Crimsworth discovers:

On looking up, I saw the sun had dissevered its screening cloud, her countenance was transfigured, a smile shone in her eyes – a smile almost triumphant; it seemed to say '[you] need not so carefully moderate your language. Do you think I am myself a stranger to myself? What you tell me in terms so qualified, I have known fully from a child.' [But] in a moment the glow of her complexion, the radiance of her aspect, had subsided ... So quick was the revulsion of feeling, I had not time to check her triumph with a reproof; ere I could contract my brows to a frown she had become serious and almost mournful-looking (p. 165).

The incident is similar to that in which Reuter lets down her guard ('I had scarce caught this phase of physiognomy ere it vanished; a bland smile played on her features'; p. 180), except that in this case the momentary expression appears to have a more deliberately communicative purpose. It 'seemed to say' to Crimsworth that she is 'not a

⁶⁷ Tromly argues that Brontë supplies us with dark hints concerning Frances and her past – that there is more to her than meets (Crimsworth's) eye: 'Although critics have tended to see only Crimsworth's romanticized portrait of Frances, there is ample evidence [that] Brontë's portrait, which lurks behind Crimsworth's, is meant to be considerably more subtle, complicated, and ambiguous.' Tromly, pp. 116-7.

stranger to herself' and even that she knows already how talented she is, without his condescending praise of her work – a self-knowledge which undermines his importance in the role of mentor. Moreover, while Reuter allows a hard, mean look to supersede her assumed appearance of affability, with Frances it is a smile that breaks through a 'serious' and 'mournful-looking' countenance. Yet Frances's smile does not, at this stage, present a sweet and sunny contrast to Reuter's sinister hardness of expression. Despite the imagery of a brightly transfigured countenance and glowing complexion, the 'real' Frances that the smile gives us access to is not all warmth and gratitude but rather a 'triumphant' figure whose smugness needs to be 'checked' with a 'reproof.' Crimsworth's controlling response, however – which is to 'contract [his] brows to a frown' – is too slow to take effect; Frances is able to evade him in this pathognomic game.

Indeed, if it is through the amusement of the novel's other characters that Crimsworth's faults and quirks are drawn to our attention and his stern authority undermined, then Frances is no exception. She appears unabashed on receiving a lecture:

To this wise speech I received no answer; and when I looked up, my pupil was smiling to herself a much-meaning, though not very gay smile; it seemed to say, 'He talks of he knows not what': it said this so plainly, that I determined to request information on the point concerning which my ignorance seemed to be thus tacitly affirmed. [He does so.] An odd question, and bluntly put; it excited a second smile (p. 168).

The substitution of smiles for verbal language ('I received no answer') is strongly apparent here – and apposite, given the language barrier. Again, the 'much-meaning' expression 'seems to say' (and say 'plainly') something specific, made excusable by its supposed privacy: she smiles 'to herself'. In its subtlety it deflates the wordy pomposity

of Crimsworth's 'wise speech' (which has been to insult her), while quietly flagging up Crimsworth's 'oddness' and 'bluntness' of manner in the midst of his assumption of superiority.⁶⁸ She smiles both 'at me' and 'on me', he later admits (p. 277; Brontë's emphasis), raising the question of what precisely the difference might be – at any rate, she doesn't smile 'with' him.

Thus, Brontë highlights the expressive power of the underhand smile, from a disadvantaged woman with a struggling grasp on the English language, to further belittle her self-styled draconian protagonist. But this is only one function of Frances's subversive expressiveness – her smiles also emphasise her *likeness* to him; their affinity. On top of the neatness and intelligence that he finds such a refreshing novelty in his classroom, what these sneers signal to Crimsworth is a certain anti-social tendency, a peculiarity which marks her out not just as different from the rest, but as self-consciously, proudly different, and above the ordinary. They are indications in short of her suitability for him, proof that she partly shares his sourness or 'noxiousness', his superior aloofness from others. In contrast to the physical and spiritual bond between Jane and Rochester, the attraction here is of a primarily intellectual rather than emotional or impulsive character – a meeting of minds, rather than hearts. It is the same ironic recognition of kinship that occurs early in Crimsworth's acquaintance with Hunsden, when they share a rare moment of harmony: 'I could not repress a half-smile as I said this; a similar demi-manifestation of feeling appeared at the same moment on Hunsden's lips' (p. 82). These half- or demi-demonstrations underline the meeting of like minds, in an oddly sociable yet obstructed ex/repression of emotion – two cynical, undemonstrative characters venturing out of shadowy reserve, meeting each other half way.

⁶⁸ Cf. Charles Townshend in 'Henry Hastings': 'I expected the lady would turn enthusiastic and indignant at this, but she only smiled' (p. 204).

But while it serves initially to mark her out with distinctness, Frances's strong-mindedness as we first encounter it is not allowed to stand. Her controversial smiles appear on what is initially (like Jane's) a 'grave, joyless face' (p. 155), and it soon appears that in their sharpness and intelligence they are the unfortunate side-effect of poor health and spirits – it is this which explains their edgy, unfeminine quality. Crimsworth quickly decides that Frances is not Belgian: 'her complexion, her countenance, her lineaments, her figure, were all distinct from theirs, and, evidently, the type of another race – of a race less gifted with fullness of flesh and plenitude of blood; less jocund, material, unthinking' (p. 151). This is, at first, a positive comparison; Crimsworth is drawn to the physical deficiencies which present so manifest a contrast with the 'material' figures of the despised, 'unthinking' schoolgirls. Their 'giftedness' in flesh and blood is, he makes clear, the natural accompaniment to their lewdness, their stupidity, and their 'jocund' insensitivity. Frances's racial superiority (she is half Swiss, half English) is written on her body – or rather, it is emphasised by the fact that we do not at first see her body (unlike the full-bodied and fully described Belgians), since it is her mind that takes precedent. Crimsworth's first mention of her is accompanied by a refusal to describe her appearance, and when he does he focuses on her face, and specifically her forehead – the site of phrenological clues to her character, and specifically evidence of her intellectual capacities. Her very thinness and physical insignificance (as with the child Jane next to her robust cousins) is a pointer to her superior mental qualities.

But this characterisation, and the connection it gives her with Crimsworth, is no sooner established than it is problematised. Frances's bodily weakness sets her apart from the boisterous, jolly crowd but it also disadvantages her as a teacher, and makes her unhappy, as Crimsworth observes:

Human beings – human children especially – seldom deny themselves the pleasure of exercising a power which they are conscious of possessing, even though that power consist only in a capacity to make others wretched; a pupil whose sensations are duller than those of his instructor, while his nerves are tougher and his bodily strength perhaps greater, has an immense advantage over that instructor, and he will generally use it relentlessly, because the very young, very healthy very thoughtless know neither how to sympathize nor how to spare. Frances, I fear, suffered much; a continual weight seemed to oppress her spirits ... whether in her own abode, wherever that might be, she wore the same preoccupied, unsmiling, sorrowfully resolved air that always shaded her features under the roof of Middle Reuter, I could not tell (p. 160).

Thus, her ‘much-meaning, though not very gay’ smiles signal her originality at the expense of her happiness. The generally ‘unsmiling’ air which ‘shades her features’ is a symptom of ill-health, which must be put to rights. Superior to her healthy and ‘thoughtless’ pupils, Frances nonetheless implicitly thinks too much, cutting a ‘wretched’ and morbid figure with her ‘oppressed spirits’, and is consequently disempowered amongst them.

What ensues is a more explicit and detailed version of the progression from weedy rebelliousness to well-adjusted roundness that Brontë would impose on Jane Eyre. Inspired by Crimsworth, Frances speedily changes ‘for the better’:

When I first saw her, her countenance was sunless, her complexion colourless; she looked like one who had no source of enjoyment, no store of bliss ... now the cloud had passed from her mien, leaving space for the dawn of hope and interest, and those feelings rose like a clear morning, animating what had been depressed, tinting what had had been pale. Her eyes, whose colour I had not at first known, so dim were they with repressed tears, so shadowed with ceaseless dejection, [were now] lit by a ray of the sunshine that cheered her heart ... That look of wan emaciation which anxiety or low spirits often communicates to a thoughtful, thin face, rather long than round,

having vanished from hers; a clearness of skin almost bloom, and a plumpness almost embonpoint, softened the decided lines of her features. Her figure shared in this beneficial change; it became rounder (p. 175).

Controlling as ever, Crimsworth of course is behind this development, which is presented in the same horticultural terms as in *Jane Eyre*: ‘I watched this change much as a gardener watches the growth of a precious plant, and I contributed to it too, even as the said gardener contributes to the development of his favourite.’ He boasts expertise on how to ‘foster’ his pupil, ‘cherish her starved feelings’, and, crucially, ‘induce the outward manifestation of that inward vigour which sunless drought and blighting blast had hitherto forbidden to expand’ (p. 176). Luckily, overwork does not make Frances ‘pale or feeble’; ‘perhaps the stimulus it communicated to her mind counterbalanced the inaction it imposed on her body’, Crimsworth suggests (p. 175). Of course, it is her ‘feelings’, as much as her intellect, which had been ‘starved’, and it is implicitly emotional excitement, and sexual awakening, which restores Frances to bodily health. In Shuttleworth’s evaluation: ‘following interaction with her “master”, her “old maid’s” state of withered self-control and obstructed flow is transformed into one of vital animal health.’⁶⁹ Finding a man to distract her from unhealthy brooding and a ‘joyless’ life, she comes to partake of the ‘vital animal health’ of the sensual schoolgirls.

This does not make her loud, coarse or boisterous – animal health instead translates into moral health (following the usual alignment of physical, emotional and

⁶⁹ Shuttleworth, p. 140. The assumptions behind these contrasting images of healthy and unhealthy femininity would later be applied to the author herself. Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* came out in 1857, and was enormously influential in shaping Brontë's reputation, as Miller has explored. Miller describes how Gaskell created a ‘feminine, domestic image’ of Brontë, but also presented her as ‘damaged’, implying that ‘the unacceptably unfeminine elements of her novels were morbid symptoms of her unhealthy single state’ (pp. 61, 34). In this way, Gaskell held Brontë up as a model of self-sacrificing femininity, while attributing the morbid side of her character to deprivation of the sexual and emotional fulfilment so necessary to women's health. The result was a portrait of ‘a woman of suffering’ which downplayed her literary achievements, lamenting the conditions of her life while refusing to taint her moral character by drawing attention to her intellectual success – as Miller claims, ‘the *Life*'s whole strategy is to get readers to judge Charlotte as a woman not an author’ (pp. 32, 75).

moral traits in definitions of ‘natural’ femininity) – but it does otherwise go to normalise her, where before she had seemed eccentric.⁷⁰ Through sunny imagery Frances is rendered warmer, sweeter, clearer (more open) and thus is essentially feminised: the softening of the ‘decided lines of her features’ implies a corresponding softening of her decidedness of character – she loses something of her sharpness. The new intent focus on her body, her ‘figure’, draws attention away from her individuality and on to her identity as a (fulfilled) female; edginess is sacrificed to plumpness. At the core of this process is the strongly emphasised connection between filling out and cheering up. ‘Animated’ by newly flowing spirits, Frances is buoyed up by the ‘fullness of flesh’ but more suggestively by the ‘plenitude of blood’ running through the other girls’ veins. Later Crimsworth remarks that after he has sternly lectured her, ‘her spirits would maintain their flow, often for some hours, and, as I remarked before, her health therefrom took a sustenance and vigour’ (p. 204). In ‘[inducing] the outward manifestation of [inward] vigour’, he plays on the interconnectedness of health and (flowing) spirits; the ‘ray of sunshine that cheered her heart’ brings colour and animation to her countenance and complexion, it lights up her previously dim, tearful eyes and shaded features. This is a literal inside-out transformation that gives Frances a crucial transparency which before she had lacked. It is now the tell-tale (female) body,

⁷⁰ Brontë’s association of intelligence with eccentricity – and her mixed feelings respecting these characteristics, her awareness that they are not desirably feminine – are suggested in a letter of January 1847: ‘I cannot decide from what you say whether she is really clever or only eccentric ... I generally feel inclined to fight very shy of eccentricity myself – by which observation I don’t mean to insinuate that I class myself as clever’ (*Letters I*, p. 510). However, her ambivalence more generally respecting the positive value of happiness and physical health reflects not only her scepticism regarding the conventional equation of these assets with *moral* superiority (as reflected in the portrait of the schoolgirls, both here and in *Villette*), but also her attachment to older ideas about the relationship between poor health and *mental* superiority. Discussing the association of morbidity with poetry and genius (‘melancholy passions’ and ‘intellectual pursuits’) in eighteenth-century discourse, Lawlor (p. 54) points to the paradox of those whose ‘hyper-sensitive constitutions and all-too-responsive nerves brought the blessings of a refinement and taste that set them apart from the correspondingly insensitive world, but also cursed them to a life of physical and mental suffering.’ This aptly describes the experience of isolation and suffering as mixed blessings that is undergone by Brontë’s protagonists, as they veer uncertainly between convention and eccentricity, animal health and intellectual morbidity, cheerfulness and bitterness.

rather than any deliberate, assertive facial expressions, which serves to communicate Frances's inner self to the world.

As Frances gradually blends in with the school's 'normal', healthy women, her merriment and naturalness form a contrast to, for instance, the assiduous student and future nun, Sylvie, whose 'weak health stunted her growth and chilled her spirits' (p. 131). More alarmingly there is Léonie Ledru, who represents the moral failings commonly associated with a quietly cynical, intellectual character: she is a 'diminutive, sharp-featured, and parchment-skinned creature of quick wits, frail conscience, and indurated feelings; a lawyer-like thing.' In the classroom she responds to success with 'a pert smirk, and a hard glance of triumph' (p. 150). Léonie's 'parchment' skin is evocative both of poor health and its cause: intellectual habits. 'Diminutive' and 'sharp-featured' (a description which conveys both lack of flesh and the sharpness of her 'quick wits'), her physical failings reflect her emotional and moral deficiencies, while the added slur, 'lawyer-like', underlines her 'frail conscience' but also, by placing her in a masculine profession, her unfeminine nature. Yet, unpleasant as she is, her 'pert smirk' and 'hard glance of triumph' are disconcertingly close to Frances's similar brief smile of 'triumph' on being praised for schoolwork.

The feminine traits that Frances comes to take on are the same that Crimsworth had desperately tried to discern in Mademoiselle Reuter, when he was originally attracted to her. Talking to her at dusk (that softener of physiognomies) Crimsworth is able to 'fancy her forehead as open as it really was elevated, her mouth touched with turns of sweetness as well as defined in lines of sense' (p. 109). 'She laughed a little, quite good-naturedly', Crimsworth decides (p. 110), and he is pleased to have 'kindled a little merry smile on her countenance' at which 'I thought her almost charming' (pp. 134-5). 'Now, Zoraïde Reuter', he summarises, 'has tact, "caractère," judgment, discretion; has she heart? What a good, simple little smile played [earlier] about her

lips' (p. 137). Of course the schoolmistress, like her pupils, eventually fails the test of 'heart'; physically plump and healthy, while 'the colour on her cheek [is] like the bloom on a good apple', Crimsworth was wrong in imagining the apple 'as sound at the core as it is red on the rind' (p. 108).⁷¹ Thus, initially impressed by Frances's 'bitter, derisive' smiles, it is soon 'bloom', 'sweetness', 'simplicity' and 'merriment' that he most appreciates in her, in his search for authenticity. And the change is duly reflected: looking for the 'exulting smile' he had 'elicited' before, he notes instead that she blushes. 'If she did smile, it was very softly and shyly; and instead of looking up to me with a conquering glance, her eyes rested on my hand' (p. 174).

Frances's normalisation is confirmed in the observation that 'when the young and healthy saw that she could smile brightly, converse gaily, move with vivacity and alertness, they acknowledged in her a sisterhood of youth and health, and tolerated her as of their kind accordingly' (p. 176). But what exactly is the significance of her arrival in this healthy sisterhood? A bitter rebelliousness and 'conquering glance' may have given way to a 'soft', 'shy' subservience in some respects; we are now told that 'she looked down, smiling softly and passively' (p. 280). But Brontë is also concerned to show how, in a society with little patience for the low-spirited or intellectually inclined, she is empowered by this change – at least in relation to her students:

She now took her place amongst her pupils with an air of spirit and firmness which assured them at once that she meant to be obeyed ... They felt they had lost their power over her ... she would no longer have taken [disobedience] to heart; she possessed a source of comfort they could not drain, a pillar of support they could not overthrow: formerly, when insulted, she wept; now, she smiled (p. 176).

⁷¹ Cf. Crimsworth's disappointment over his 'lively' and 'cheerful' sister-in-law (pp. 45-6), whose 'good animal spirits' and 'flow of good-humour' are signs of shallowness and mundanity: 'I sought her eye, desirous to read there the intelligence which I could not discern in her face ... but I watched in vain for a glimpse of soul.'

What we have actually seen is that formerly, when insulted, she smiled – but there has been a shift in the meaning of her smiles. Before, they were the outlet for a streak of bitter discontent which makes her intriguing to readers and a match (in both senses) for Crimsworth, but did not substantially benefit her. Though ‘much-meaning’ they were ‘not very gay’ and perhaps not very potent either. On the other hand, the less interesting smiles of genuine contentment are the reflection of an internal ‘source of comfort’, a ‘pillar of support’ whose metaphorical substantiality mirrors her increased physical strength. It is the capacity to ‘smile brightly’ – rather than sarcastically, as for Crimsworth – which ultimately fortifies Frances against the bullying contempt of others: they have ‘lost their power over her.’

Describing Crimsworth and Frances’s happiness together, towards the end of the novel, Brontë endeavours to strike a careful balance in her portrayal of Frances. The face she turns towards Crimsworth is ‘sweetened with gaiety, and pointed with defiance’ (p. 204). She criticises him with a ‘sourire à la fois fin et timide’ (p. 248).⁷² And in their scenes together:

She would show me what she had of vivacity, of mirth, of originality in her well-dowered nature. She would show, too, some stores of raillery, of ‘malice,’ [roguishness] and would vex, tease, pique me sometimes about what she called my ‘bizarreries anglaises,’ [English peculiarities] my ‘caprices insulaires,’ [insular whims] with a wild and witty wickedness that made a perfect demon of her while it lasted (p. 276; Glen’s translations).

But the ‘elfish freak’, he continues, would always be brief (p. 276). Sometimes he would attempt to ‘arrest bodily the sprite that teased me. Vain idea! no sooner had I grasped hand or arm than the elf had gone; the provocative smile quenched [and replaced by] a ray of gentle homage ... I had seized a mere vexing fairy, and found a

⁷² Translated by Glen as ‘a smile at once shrewd and timid’, p. 311 (n. 8).

submissive and supplicating little mortal woman in my arms' (pp. 276-7). In other words, Frances remains a quirky character, well able to appreciate and mock the quirks of her 'master.' He is even so gallant as to claim that her teasing makes him 'in a fashion (though happily she did not know it), her subject, if not her slave' (p. 204). But while she may have achieved a degree of authority over her pupils, this is hardly the case with Crimsworth. Her wry and sour smiles are now 'sweetened with gaiety' as well as 'pointed with defiance'; the defiance she offers is vexing but not incompatible with the feminine charm that Gaskell was so approving of, and if Crimsworth is provoked by her occasional 'wild and witty wickedness', he is compensated by her conventional womanly submissiveness. Her designation as 'sprite', 'elf' and 'fairy', as in *Jane Eyre*, trivialises and makes light of her rebellion – she is charmingly evasive of his strict management, piquantly and flirtatiously disrespectful, but ultimately embraces and takes pleasure in his authority.

The real 'perfect demon' that emerges is the taunting Hunsden, who writes informing Crimsworth that he is coming to visit. 'Oh, confound him!' is Crimsworth's response. 'Let him come, and let him laugh ... Were he the devil himself, instead of being merely very like him, I'd not condescend to get out of his way, or to forge a smile or a cheerful word wherewith to avert his sarcasm' (p. 220). As it is sarcastic rather than 'cheerful' smiles which he generally forges to avert sarcasm, Crimsworth's defiance indicates that their tense relationship is to be renewed, with all the usual alertness to facial expression. But Hunsden's main function at the end of the novel is as a sinister, demonic foil to the new-found placidity of Crimsworth and Frances. At first finding his old friend without money or prospects 'he laughed, as mockingly, as heartlessly as Mephistopheles' (p. 233). And, importantly, it is in his meeting with Frances that Brontë examines the necessary consequences of her loss of a close, secretive and

‘shaded’ character. Frances’s patriotic ‘enthusiasm’ brings out Hunsden’s satirical streak, ‘thawed [his polite] reserve as fire thaws a congealed viper’:

I use this not very flattering comparison because he vividly reminded me of a snake waking from torpor, as he erected his tall form, reared his head ... and putting back his hair from his broad Saxon forehead, showed unshaded the gleam of almost savage satire which his interlocutor’s tone of eagerness and look of ardour had [caused] (p. 259).

Being largely concerned with the hero’s self-protection against ridicule, *The Professor* does not (as the early writings do and as *Shirley* does with particular rigour) dwell much on the particular vulnerability of women in the (literal) face of male mockery. But with Frances’s transition from cynicism to naivety we see just this in action, as with her new pleasant openness she exposes herself both to Hunsden’s satire and to a ‘low laugh’ which her husband supposedly ‘could not suppress’ (p. 262). Previously quiet and downtrodden, Frances is now confident, communicative and vocal – but in this situation, it is by no means clear that her assertiveness puts her in a strong position. She is unable to ‘avert his sarcasm’ with words.

While it might seem that Hunsden, too, enacts a kind of self-exposure, drawing back his hair and revealing his face ‘unshaded’, it is significant that what he confronts Frances with is his large forehead – a gesture which reminds us of his impressive intellect. The mind is the seat of ‘savage satire’, and the snake-like Hunsden – faced with Frances’s charming outburst about fellow feeling and community spirit – is the representative of anti-social and morally questionable feeling. (He recalls, furthermore, Brontë’s use of serpentine imagery to describe Thackeray’s satirical savagery.) With his Mephistophelian manners, Hunsden comes to stand in as an eccentric contrast to wholesome domestic contentment. Again he ‘laughed – his laugh of unmitigated scorn’ (p. 261); ‘he sneered diabolically’ (p. 262), and Frances rebukes him with animated

moralising. He is impressed when she ‘clears conventional limits’ by talking about hell with an ‘uncompromising sort of accent’, but Crimsworth quickly assures us that she is not proud to be controversial: ‘the display of eccentric vigour never gave her pleasure, and it only sounded in her voice or flashed in her countenance when extraordinary circumstances – and those generally painful – forced it out of the depths where it burned latent’ (p. 262). In essence, the ‘painful circumstances’ of solitude, poor health, and social and financial insecurity are what made her interesting; the bitterness or noxiousness formerly attached to Frances as well as to Crimsworth was a sign of frustrated mental superiority but also dangerously close, in moral terms, to those latent ‘burning depths’ (the allusion being clearly to the hell which Frances is unintentionally drawn to dwell on, by its sneering representative, Hunsden).

What happens in *The Professor*, as it will in *Jane Eyre*, is that to some degree a tone of moral responsibility takes over; there is an anxious shift in the direction of safe conformity. Crimsworth’s ‘success’ story is about more than money and status – it charts also his dubious integration into normality; the social security he craves has as much to do with his personal ease in society as it does his financial ease. Before his fortunes change he is chagrined that Hunsden expects to find him ‘on the summit of prosperity, about to be married, to step into a warm nest, to lie comfortably down by the side of a snug, well-fed little mate’ (p. 219). How ironic, he thinks, that ‘instead of a pair of plump turtle-doves, billing and cooing in a bower of roses, he [will find] a single lean cormorant, standing mateless and shelterless on poverty’s bleak cliff’ (pp. 219-20). Hunsden will find the same awkward, vulnerable and unendearing character who stood alone and unsmiling at his brother’s party, refusing to be sociable, and harbouring sour grapes. The turtle-dove picture evokes prosperity (the nest) and resultant health (plumpness); it is further suggestive of sexual fulfillment and the animal body – and finally it is a sentimental picture, of birds ‘billing and cooing in a bower of roses.’ It is

eventually realised (at least up to a point): from scornful and sharp Frances becomes tame and ‘happy as a bird with its mate’ (p. 276), Crimsworth loses his ‘lone cormorant’ status, and both leave the teaching profession to embrace the warmth, softness and joyful contentment of the nest. Crimsworth remains abrupt, eccentric and unpleasant, but nonetheless finds himself a family man in the Edenic abode of ‘Daisy Lane’, in the healthy English countryside. The wholesome environment is poisoned, nonetheless, by that sarcastic viper, Hunsden – a reminder of those ‘burning depths’ which still remain latent.⁷³

Another reminder is their morbid son Victor, a Byronic phenomenon with a ‘large forehead’ (p. 288) whose temper ‘emits, now and then, ominous sparks ... it appears in the grinding of his teeth, in the glittering of his eye’; there is a ‘cloud on his bony brow’, and ‘a fit of mute fury [would likely] sicken his body and madden his soul’ (p. 289). ‘I never saw a child smile less than he does’ remarks Crimsworth, ‘nor one who knits such a formidable brow’ (p. 286). Interestingly, this sinister child is named after Victor Vandenhuten, an unremarkable Belgian of the placid and well-fed type that the judgmental Crimsworth has spent much of the novel deriding. The humility that he admits to on meeting Vandenhuten is anomalous: ‘As I exchanged a smile with him, I thought the benevolence of his truthful face was better than the intelligence of my own. Characters of my order experience a balm-like solace in the contact of such souls as animated [his] honest breast’ (p. 237). Vandenhuten gives him ‘a smile of benignant content’ and, he records, ‘I went away with its sunshine in my heart’ (p. 238). The uncharacteristic episode is significant in the light it sheds (the phrase being apt) on Crimsworth’s character, and on the novel’s attempted turn to cheerful conventionality

⁷³ The disturbing ending has been much commented on by critics. Glen, for instance, describes the world of *The Professor* as one of ‘ominous instability’, noting that ‘in the closing pages of the novel there are a series of disquieting images of violence and unease’ (*The Imagination in History*, p. 47). See also Shuttleworth, pp. 145-7.

over bitter individuality. It appears to express a kind of genuine longing, rather than disguised contempt, on Crimsworth's part – an almost poignant acknowledgment of his own lack of 'benignant content', and perhaps even an admission of intellectual pride, or racial snobbery. Certainly it is an instance of a physiognomic reading which privileges the 'honest breast' over the intellectual forehead, and an exchange which allows warmth from an unlikely source to influence the narrator's somewhat withered good nature. Nonetheless, the hearty Belgian's qualities are not realised in his namesake, who is depicted under an ominous cloud. 'He never looks so like his mother as when he smiles', muses Crimsworth – 'pity the sunshine breaks out so rarely!' (p. 289)

*

Writing before critics had begun to appreciate the coherence of the novel – the ways in which Crimsworth's story is filtered and distorted through his manner of telling it – Carol Christ suggests that *The Professor* 'is not a successful book' because Brontë 'creates a hero in William Crimsworth who embodies the values of self-discipline and self-denial':

Because Crimsworth is so self-consciously controlled and because Brontë never takes us beyond the surface of that control, the narrator is both uninteresting and unsympathetic. Brontë's insistence on imaginative control inhibits her own imagination, making her unable to portray the psychology of control in her character with any depth or complexity.⁷⁴

Needless to say, such judgments overlook the imaginative effort involved in portraying a character through the elisions and propaganda of his own narrative. Moreover it is the 'self-consciousness' of Crimsworth's self-disciplining that allows Brontë to explore the 'psychology of control' – and with great depth and complexity. The access we are given

⁷⁴ Carol T. Christ, 'Imaginative Constraint, Feminine Duty, and the Form of Charlotte Brontë's Fiction', *Women's Studies*, 6 (1979), 287-96.

to his motivations and to his physical (as well as narrative) manners of self-presentation enable us to see Crimsworth embodying the self-control that he represents; ‘taking us beyond the surface of his control’ is precisely what the novel *does* achieve – through what Dallas described as the author’s ‘anatomizing’ approach to human behaviour (see the epigraph to Part One). Cohen has insightfully proposed that the novel supplied Brontë with ‘the opportunity to imagine being a man, and in particular to speculate about how it feels to inhabit a male body. In pursuing a fantasy of male embodiment [she] dramatizes the strangeness of the idea of *being inside any body at all*.’⁷⁵ Certainly, as I have argued in this chapter, *The Professor*’s psychological complexity lies in its recognition of the ways in which character is built through its projected appearances on the surface of the body – and in imagining how these appearances may be manipulated from the ‘inside.’ The experiment of inhabiting a male body/ mind thus lays the groundwork for the future novels, in which female identity is similarly forged – or rather resisted – through expressive performance and mental effort.

While Christ’s dismissal of Crimsworth as ‘uninteresting’ is easily disputed, her charge that he is ‘unsympathetic’ is true enough – especially when he is compared to Frances, who, as the clear precursor to Brontë’s later heroines, has engaged readers’ sympathies more readily.⁷⁶ But it should be stressed that Crimsworth’s limitations as a relatable protagonist lie not in the fact that he is male, but rather in the non-seriousness with which – as I argued at the beginning of Part Two – he is portrayed. The feelings of isolation that he experiences are not wholly matters for empathy, being largely deserved, absurdly represented, and fairly satirised. At the same time however,

⁷⁵ Cohen’s emphasis, p. 41.

⁷⁶ Judith Williams, for instance, describes her as ‘a character capable of engaging our sympathies as William never can’ (p. 13), though this judgment rests on Williams’s acceptance of Crimsworth’s self-presentation – Frances’s ‘struggle with poverty, bereavement, and disappointment in love’ is ‘more moving’ than Crimsworth’s ‘calm progress’ (p. 13) and ‘total control’ (p. 10).

Crimsworth's anxiety (for those very reasons) about being a misfit – his consciously employed survival strategies, his ever-ready sneer – prepare the ground for Brontë's increasingly serious representation of laughter's pervasive influence on social life. It is Crimsworth's eccentricity and sensitivity to ridicule that make him an outcast figure of a distinctly Brontëan kind and in which he anticipates Brontë's more understandably defensive female protagonists, particularly Lucy Snowe. For all his unsympathetic and even comically presented traits, Crimsworth (as well as Frances) is a precursor of sorts for the vulnerable heroines of the later novels, *The Professor* forming a link between the flippancy of the juvenilia and the earnestness of those novels. He may be foolish but he is also hyper-sensitive, conscious of being at odds with the world around him for distinctly personal reasons, and in this self-consciousness he paves the way for the representation of Lucy, and her more painful experiences of marginalisation and indignity – as well as her more successful attempts to combat them.

Chapter Four
‘Not ill-natured, but ... too significant to be generally thought amiable’:
Morbid Laughter in *Shirley and Villette*

Introduction

In Chapters Two and Three I have traced Brontë’s mingled resistance to and acceptance of ‘positive’ constructions of laughter as natural and wholesome. I have discussed the ways in which Brontë’s intelligent heroines sit outside of ‘healthy’ representational norms, as well as outside of the social mainstream more generally, despite Brontë’s reluctance to fully endorse the dark, eccentric or unsentimental tones of their laughter. I now argue that it is in *Villette*, her final novel, that Brontë converts this abnormality into subversive power – into a full-fledged challenge to prevailing gender ideology. The last of Brontë’s women to experience laughter as oppressive or despotic, Lucy Snowe is also the most successful, in her sharply self-expressive smiles, at exercising this despotism in return.

I consider *Shirley* and *Villette* in sequence because of the dramatic shift in ideas that takes place in the course of the former novel: a turn to disillusionment which is carried over, with more positive effect, into *Villette*. Through Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, Brontë posits laughter both as the source of women’s misery, and the key to their empowerment, with a logic that the novel struggles to sustain. Caroline and Shirley are conventionally and healthily attractive, physically and morally; Caroline’s mild gentleness and Shirley’s colourful, vibrant sociability in different ways conform to the ideal femininity which is manifest in their good looks. Contemptible male types are meanwhile introduced in order to offset the heroines’ natural superiority, the novel initially working to place women – as the champions and embodiment of healthy amiability – in positions of communal solidarity and power over feeble and ridiculous men. These men, characterised by their morally off-colour laughter, are made the

objects of women's emphatically good-natured and well-mannered mirth in an effort to elevate 'feminine' values, while adhering to contemporary sentimental ideas about those values. It is thus a novel in which the gendered categories of mockery and mirth remain rigidly divided. Brontë seeks to combat male mockery through the power of female mirth, setting up a battle of the sexes in which men laugh nastily and women (at least initially) laugh nicely.

However, this attempt at a righting of the power imbalance is thwarted, I will argue, by the novel's underlying cynicism respecting the power of laughter to positively transform the community. Following the process in *Shirley* by which healthy feminine triumph is ultimately met with, and eroded by, brutal discipline and disease, *Villette* replaces merry, attractive heroines with a sour and plain one; it turns from sociable, optimistic feeling to anti-social withdrawal – but it also converts anxiety and inconsistency into useful knowledge. If *Shirley* ends with the bleak acceptance that genially wholesome women are the prey of powerful men – that open laughter is in the grip of the predatory sneer – *Villette* in turn asks rather more productively *what might be done* with that awareness. The novel may not be any more cheerful for this, but in discarding the soft smiles and bright buoyancy of Caroline and Shirley respectively, Lucy is less weighted down and less exposed by that 'openness' required of the conventional heroine. In both novels, Brontë uses the language of laughter to address the discord between self and society, and between men and women. But whereas *Shirley* rails against a sick society, *Villette*'s more subtle critique is achieved through following a 'sick' protagonist through scenes that are (falsely) vibrant with apparent health. Brontë thereby collapses the binary of negative mockery and positive mirth by demonstrating their interconnectedness – and from this emerges her most clear-sighted vision of laughter's dominion over social life.

I

It is better to go to the house of mourning, than to go to the house of feasting ... Sorrow is better than laughter: for by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better. The heart of the wise is in the house of mourning; but the heart of fools is in the house of mirth... For as the crackling of thorns under a pot, so is the laughter of the fool: this also is vanity.

Ecclesiastes, 7:2-6

More explicitly and more pressingly than in Brontë's previous novels, *Shirley* poses a series of questions about laughter's moral and social value: when is it appropriate and when inappropriate to laugh? Is laughter beneficial or destructive to communities? Is it irreligious? Is it always at someone else's expense? A curiously conflicted novel, *Shirley* is filled equally with mourning and with feasting, with sorrow and with laughter – it veers between hearty good humour and grim warnings akin to that propounded in Ecclesiastes. Although the novel is packed with ostensibly comic characters and scenes, the overall impression it leaves is however a sombre one, and the questions it poses have by the end been answered with decided pessimism.

But if *Shirley* ultimately settles on a gloomy note, it is not consistently severe on the theme of laughter. Particularly in the first two volumes, the narrator's frequent condemnations of mean-minded laughter (which includes but is not restricted to the laughter of 'fools') are bolstered by efforts to justify or celebrate that which is sociable and good-natured. Of the eponymous heroine, we are told that 'when animated, [her] wistfulness became blent with a genial gaiety, seasoning the laugh, the smile, the glance, with an unique flavour of sentiment, so that mirth from her never resembled "the crackling of thorns under a pot".'¹ The novel's moral position on laughter is a qualified, and distinctly gendered one. Specifically, *female* mirth – of which *Shirley* is the

¹ Brontë, *Shirley*, p. 219. Although it is not explicitly evoked by Brontë, *Shirley*'s laughter appears to follow the alternative biblical maxim that 'a merry heart doeth good *like* a medicine' (Proverbs, 17:22). Subsequent references to *Shirley* will be given in parentheses after quotations.

representative – is held up by the narrator as a source of social healing and a signifier of spiritual depth, in opposition to the various shallow and unpleasant masculine varieties that Brontë describes. The novel's defence of 'genial gaiety' is bound up with the endeavour to represent morally healthy, admirable heroines, insofar as it is the tone of their laughter which sets them apart from the novel's ill-mannered men, and is used to illustrate their superior qualities.

The foremost examples of these unpleasant types are the curates Malone, Donne and Sweeting, who as religious specimens present a stark contrast to the unsmiling severity of St John Rivers. From the opening scene through to the novel's conclusion this trio is regularly introduced to furnish illustrations of impolite laughter. Particularly abhorrent is Malone, who, drinking excessively, 'waxed by degrees hilarious after his fashion ... said rude things in a hectoring tone, and laughed clamorously at his own brilliancy' (p. 8). This clamorous laughter is both boorish and malicious: 'Each of his companions became in turn his butt. Malone had a stock of jokes at their service, which he was accustomed to serve out regularly on convivial occasions like the present' (pp. 8-9). Brontë emphasises the inappropriateness of the curates' greed (in the midst of a community which is starving) in conjunction with the unseemliness of their high spirits; their 'mocking laughter' (p. 10) is persistently linked to their habits of gluttony and intemperance. Thus Malone 'waxed very exultant over the supper: he laughed aloud at trifles; made bad jokes and applauded them himself; and, in short, grew unmeaningly noisy' (p. 24). Laughing at his own jokes, and at trivialities, Malone displays the vanity and shallowness of the biblical fool – this is, implicitly, the 'crackling of thorns' that Shirley's laughter does *not* resemble, and it reverberates throughout the novel.

Its reverberations are amplified by the sheer volume of this 'unmeaningly noisy' laughter. For gentle, sensitive Caroline Helstone, the offensive tones of the curates' cachinnations figure as an invasion of her personal space, as 'through the closed doors

Caroline heard their boyish laughter, and the vacant cackle of their voices' (p. 93). As the Rector's niece she is obliged to entertain these unwelcome visitors, whose vacant cackling and 'silly ridicule' of the local people (p. 99) are not merely an annoyance but, by force of volume, a form of assault, her exposure to the constant sound of inane laughter bringing on physical distress. Caroline falls victim to 'a sort of brain-lethargy' caused by 'the unmeaning hum round her: the inharmonious, tasteless rattle of the piano keys, the squeaking and gasping notes of the flute, the laughter and mirth of her uncle and Hannah and Mary, she could not tell whence originating, for she heard nothing comic or gleeful in their discourse' (p. 103). Spreading from the curates to the entire company, the sound of laughter takes on a nightmarish meaninglessness comparable to the 'inharmonious ... squeaking and gasping' of the music, with Caroline left feeling both isolated and trapped in the midst of merriment. However, what separates this scene from comparable incidents in *Villette* is the sense that Caroline's distress is justified by the vileness of the company. As flutes and pianos are conventionally accessories to social harmony – but only when played well – so the implication is that the laughter here is of a false, perverted kind, and that in better company Caroline would be perfectly cheerful. In other words, she is alienated not because of any innate anti-social quality or morbid temperament, but because of the circumstances of the case, the lack of anything genuinely 'comic and gleeful' to enjoy. The narrator is clear (at this stage in the novel) about the distinctions to be drawn between felicitous and foolish mirth, and the importance of drawing such distinctions is a constant refrain.

Thus, despite frequently adopting a flippant tone, the narrator is earnest and didactic on the subject of ill-judged laughter, as for instance in defence of the old maid Miss Ainley, whose sincere piety forms a contrast with the bad example set by the curates:

She was religious [and] referred to religion often in sanctioned phrase – in phrase which those who possess a perception of the ridiculous, without owning the power [of] truly judging character, would certainly have esteemed a proper subject for satire: a matter for mimicry and laughter. They would have been hugely mistaken for their pains. Sincerity is never ludicrous; it is always respectable ... Let those who cannot nicely, and with certainty, discern the difference between the tones of hypocrisy and those of sincerity, never presume to laugh at all, lest they should have the miserable misfortune to laugh in the wrong place, and commit impiety when they think they are achieving wit (p. 156).

Coming down heavily on the crime of laughing ‘in the wrong place’, the narrator is no less critical of the absolutism of dour Mrs. Yorke, who thinks hard things ‘of any unhappy wight – especially of the female sex – who dared in her presence to show the light of a gay heart on a sunny countenance.’ In Mrs. Yorke’s estimation, ‘to be mirthful was to be profane; to be cheerful was to be frivolous: she drew no distinctions’ (p. 126). The narrator calls for compromise, challenging on one hand the ‘crackling thorns’ and on the other the grim outlook of Mrs. Yorke – it is thus precisely those distinctions between mirthful and profane, and between cheerful and frivolous, that the novel seeks to establish.

Proper subjects for satire

It is Shirley who (arriving towards the close of the first volume) provides the required role model, bringing a spirit of amiable sociability to the community. When we first meet her, ‘mischief, spirit, and glee sparkled all over her face’ and she has a ‘joyous laugh’ (p. 174). She is deemed a beneficial example for physically weak and low-spirited Caroline, who (for reasons we have seen) ‘could not be cheerful in company’ (p. 164). The point is made by Shirley herself, who triumphantly observes: ‘Caroline is laughing, Mrs. Pryor: *I made her laugh; I have done her good*’ (p. 206; Brontë’s emphasis). But it is stressed that Shirley has moral standards with her merriment. She

‘never laughed at her former governess [Mrs Pryor]: even the little formalities and harmless peculiarities of that lady were respectable in her eyes.’ Had it been otherwise, the narrator points out, ‘she would have proved herself a weak character at once; for it is only the weak who make a butt of quiet worth’ (p. 175). Shirley thus proves herself above that kind of raillery which typically targets old maids; she is able to accurately judge who constitutes ‘a proper subject for satire.’ The youthful appearance of her suitor Sir Philip ‘had at first elicited some laughing, though not ill-natured, remarks from the merry Shirley.’ However, ‘she soon checked her sarcasm on this point ... A spare and rare shaft she still reserved for his unfortunate poetic propensity [but] she would tolerate no irony save her own’ (p. 398). If Shirley’s high spirits are made acceptable by her considerateness for others, her capacity for ‘mischief’ is rendered open, pleasant, and ‘joyous’; her sunny disposition ‘robbed her very raillery of its sting’ (p. 251) – through the usual careful phrasing, female laughter is purified and disarmed.

But, sweetened as it is, what Shirley exerts in the narrative is no less than a compelling satirical power. Whereas Caroline had been victimized before, in company with the no-nonsense Shirley she is not only restored to health but acquires cheerfulness, confidence, and protection. Shirley wields social power, and her point of view is authorised and carried by laughter. Thus, ‘[such] books as Miss Keeldar had read with the most pleasure, were Miss Helstone’s delight also. They held many aversions too in common, and could have the comfort of laughing together works of false sentimentality and pompous pretension’ (pp. 188-9). With the heroines set up in this way as the right judges of ‘proper subjects for satire’, the behaviour of the curates becomes matter for fun rather than frowning distaste. Malone’s clumsy courting sends Shirley to the window ‘to laugh her silent but irrepressible laugh unseen: it turned Caroline’s head aside, that her long curls might screen the smile mantling on her features.’ Though they are impeccably ladylike in their discretion, Malone is put in his

place – his own ‘hollow laughter’ is shown up in all its feeble inadequacy by Shirley’s ‘mirth-lit face’, when he falls down the stairs. Observing Malone slipping ‘in his stately descent’ Shirley condescendingly ‘took pity – she ceased to laugh; and Caroline was too true a lady to smile even at any one under mortification.’ Nevertheless Malone glares at them ‘as if he would have liked to clutch one and gripe her to death’, and the reader is presumably meant to enjoy the joke (pp. 233-5).

Shirley’s laughter effects an infantilization of the novel’s weak male characters, consolidated by the facetious satire with which they are treated by the narrator. This is evident for instance in Shirley’s adoption of Sweeting, who, unlike Donne and Malone, receives a flower ‘like a smart, sensible little man’, and is beckoned apart to help Shirley prepare a picnic ‘as a reward for his good manners’ (p. 238). At the picnic a comparison is drawn between the wholesome merriment of the good-natured, feminine (or feminised) part of the company, and the anti-social conduct of Malone and Donne, who ‘contributed but little to [the party’s] vivacity, the chief part they played in it being what concerned the knife, fork, and wineglass.’ As well as being busy eating and drinking, the curates are ‘too much occupied with their own jokes to notice what passed at the other end of the table’ (pp. 238-40). It is scenes like this which serve most emphatically to make those distinctions which Mrs. Yorke refuses to draw; Shirley’s bright vivaciousness enables her to be the figurehead for acceptable light-heartedness and sociability, which is portrayed in opposition to the mock-conviviality represented by the curates. From being dreaded visitors, whose presence is oppressive to Caroline, they become belittled and marginalised, dismissively satirised and easily shunted to the end of the table.

Shirley’s strength of character also makes easy work of her uncle Sympson, a mean-minded bore who arrives in the neighbourhood intending to exert control over his niece, and who expresses his sense of self-importance with a ‘chuckling laugh’ (p. 457).

Shirley is provocatively witty and contemptuous in her defiance of this would-be tyrant, causing him to rage furiously but impotently ('[this] is not a laughing matter!') in another scene in which female humour triumphs over inadequate masculinity (p. 462). Shirley's satirical power extends, to an extent, over more dignified men too; she is cheerfully patronising in her attitude towards Helstone, for instance, who is a fierce and oppressive uncle to Caroline. 'Captain Keeldar' (the masculine nickname serving to emphasise her position of condescending joviality) is 'charmed' to have been able to please him with food, noting approvingly that he 'did justice to it, though in a gentlemanly way – not in the mode Mr. Donne would have done, had he been present' (p. 231). Men in the novel are ranked in dignity in accordance with their appetite – only pious, mild-tempered Mr. Hall, who is 'no bon-vivant' but a 'naturally abstemious man', and whose good nature is signalled by his 'benignant' smile, escapes Shirley's (and thus the novel's) satirical teasing (pp. 229, 231).

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As we will see, both the innocence of Shirley's sense of humour and the position of power it puts her in are, ultimately, undermined. Acting as a wholesome put-down to the follies of men like Malone and Donne, her laughter is less effectual against the novel's more intelligent, socially influential male characters. But her initial characterisation does enable Brontë to flirt with a reversal of power relations, and in a spirit which verges at times on the vicarious. Ladylike and discreet as Shirley and Caroline might be, the objects of their mirth are not always protected from the 'sting' of raillery:

[Malone] saw the laugh – it was unmistakeable – he was made a joke of – his gallantry, his chivalry were the subject of a jest for a petticoat – for two petticoats – Miss Helstone too was smiling. Moreover, he felt he was seen through, and [he] grew

black as a thunder-cloud. When Shirley looked up, a fell eye was fastened on her:
Malone, at least, had energy enough to hate: she saw it at a glance (p. 252).

What this passage dramatises is Shirley's power to humiliate, and Malone's vulnerability to the humiliation imposed on him. Like Crimsworth, and like Martin Yorke, who though himself partial to 'a refreshing laugh of scorn' (p. 477) is also 'as sensitive to ridicule as any girl' (p. 493), the supposedly coarse and insensitive Malone deeply resents the emasculating feeling that he is 'seen through.' Women's laughter is not consistently harmless or hidden from sight: in this and other instances it is something that its victims are necessarily exposed to, and which enacts punishment rather than promoting social harmony and good will.

As a rich and independent heiress, Shirley provides an illustration of male power redesignated to morally responsible hands; Brontë's typically plain, poor and obscure heroines make way for one with beauty, wealth and influence. And this is not all she possesses; Shirley's position of power is expressed in the physical health which, in turn, lends her an *energy* unique to Brontë's heroines, and the 'healthy' good spirits in which they are generally impoverished. Favourable circumstances produce the capacity to laugh, and that laughter consolidates the power it reflects. But *Shirley* is a novel of harsh truths and probing realism, and the ethical quality of this laughter does not go wholly untarnished. Shirley represents a fantasy of female invulnerability, as well as a moral lesson in female compassion, and there are tensions produced by this dual function which the novel's simplistic distinctions between good nature and bad manners fail to resolve. The ideal of a moral, essentially female alternative to the laughter associated with male characters is shakily balanced with the privileging of the female satirical perspective – Shirley's smug superiority over the curates, who provide her with 'amusement', even 'sport' (p. 251) seems at times hardly compatible with the work of justifying laughter's social and moral value. But more damagingly, the attempt to

champion healthy, feminine mirth while turning a grave, earnest face to irreverent male laughter is increasingly thwarted by the insidious, and decidedly *unhealthy* effects of masculine laughter which, instead of being foolish and crude, is impeccably polite.

Significant smiles

If for all their obnoxiousness, the curates constitute a kind of false threat – a means by which the heroines are shown to advantage – a more challenging face is shown by the novel's 'heroes' and respectable men. Particularly in the case of mill-owner Robert Moore, the familiar objection is raised to a different kind of anti-social tendency, to laughter that is quieter, cooler, and compatible with the gentleman. This tendency is characterised principally in terms of sinister reserve (boisterous joviality, for all its very different power to oppress, is restricted to the loud and stupid curates), and is expressed in smiles which jeopardise the feminine good humour that the novel celebrates.

Helstone fixes nervous Mrs. Pryor 'with his sarcastic, keen eye' (p. 168); Mr. Yorke smiles, amused, at Shirley's earnest criticisms of him (pp. 309-10); Moore '[smiles] in deep secrecy at [Shirley's] naïveté and simplicity' (p. 446), or '[chuckles] drily ... his cap brim over his eyes, shading in some measure their deep dancing ray of scorn' (p. 114). Once again, scorn and sarcasm are ostensibly secretive or shaded, yet effectively target female weaknesses, or 'openness.' Moore's show of concealment is very different to Caroline considerately turning her head aside, 'that her long hair might screen the smile mantling on her features'; his cap brim serves an altogether more hostile purpose than her long, feminine curls. Helstone likes to see women 'as silly, as light-headed, as vain, as open to ridicule as possible' (p. 99). His contemptuous laughter at Caroline's 'namby-pamby' desire for a change in her life gives literal manifestation to the general, sneering male attitude to women's concerns which the narrator protests at, when s/he urges the 'fathers of England' not to dismiss increased opportunities for

women ‘with an idle jest’ (pp. 163, 330). Individual mocking faces are in this way used to illustrate the widespread, habitual putting down of women. And the sinister impression persists when a laugh or smile is accompanied by less-than-reassuring disclaimers that it is benign, as when ‘the hardest of laughs, though [by] no means insulting, was the response of the Rector’ (p. 112). Or when Moore smiles ‘in his way, with that expression which gave a remarkable cast of sweetness to his mouth, while his brow remained grave’, or ‘smiled pleasantly, but his lips continued sealed’ (pp. 244, 262). Laughter hides sealed, silent depths: Helstone is merry in company but ‘stern and silent at home, [where] he locks his liveliness in his book-case ... the knitted brow and brief word for the fireside; the smile, the jest, the witty sally, for society’ (p. 181). Such laughter is disciplinary in its effects, and characterised by underlying coldness and seriousness. It is employed too by the masculine, tyrannical Mrs. Yorke, who, despite her disapproval of sunny feminine countenances, has ‘her own peculiar short laugh’, drily directed at girlish enthusiasm, and is in the habit of ‘hurling’ sarcasms at Caroline (pp. 338, 339).

In contrast to the curates, Moore and Helstone are powerful patriarchs, emotionally inflexible but admirable for their intelligence and self-command – ‘no animal vice was lord of them: they looked and were superior beings’ (p. 113). The novel criticises their hardness but endorses their moral uprightness and leadership skills; the scorn of these ‘superior beings’ is preferable to the ‘boyish laughter’ of the curates (boyishness implying not endearing charm but immaturity and dissolute habits). Nonetheless, the crushing effects of this scorn are represented as a source of deep unease. In a novel preoccupied with the challenge of interpreting and combating laughter, with power dynamics centred on reading and responding to the face, laughter of this kind is far more successful at demonstrating superiority. The curates’ laughter is loud but not so lingering in its effects; they are transparently Hobbesian in their

exchanges – manageable through being so easy to read and to judge. The contrast between intellectual and animal natures is apparent when we are told that ‘Helstone smiled sardonically; Malone laughed a horse-laugh’ (p. 16), or when Moore’s ‘queer, quiet smile’ is juxtaposed with the violent ‘Ha! ha!’ of Malone (p. 20). Aggression, it is again suggested, may be more unsettling in combination with restraint and understatement: oppressors of the working classes as well as of women, Moore and Helstone share ‘a cynical smile flashed into each other’s stern eyes’ as they contemplate crushing a rebellion (p. 113). The novel’s earnest criticism of masculine laughter is shared and seemingly influenced by Anne Brontë’s *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), a novel in which – as Juliet McMaster has explored – laughter connotes tyranny but at the same time excess and a contemptible lack of self-government.² However, in *Shirley*’s representation of laughing masculinity, drunken immaturity is neatly separated from the tyrannical power that is wielded by the morally upright gentleman.

In *Shirley* we find a sustained exploration of the social effects of this understated mockery – its capacity to produce discomfort, to diminish more pleasant laughter or stop it in its tracks: Moore teases the ‘discomfited’ Shirley, who ‘laughed at her own over-eager generosity’; ‘Moore laughed too – very quietly, though.’ ‘You ought to be thankful’, Shirley complains, ‘and not mock me’ (p. 303). The quiet persistence of

² See Juliet McMaster, “‘Imbecile Laughter’ and ‘Desperate Earnest’ in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*”, *Modern Language Quarterly*, 43 (1982), 352-68. McMaster raises a number of interesting ideas in this article, in which she demonstrates that ‘the imagery of laughter, smiles, and tears forms a consistent pattern in the novel by which Anne Brontë articulates her moral theme and develops her characters and their relations with one another’ (p. 358). She argues that Anne Brontë ‘explores the huge discrepancy between the moral standards for women and men’ through a comparison of ‘Regency and Victorian mores’, in which raucous laughter is representative of ‘the masculine ethos of the Regency’, in contrast to the women’s moral, ‘Victorian’ solemnity. This results in an ‘alignment of fun and laughter with the men, moral earnestness and tears with the women’ – the men ‘have a monopoly on gaiety, as the women on seriousness.’ But McMaster finds no distinction between ‘imbecile – mindless, inappropriate, irresponsible’ laughter, and more dignified, menacing mockery (pp. 354, 357, 361). *Shirley* is also set in the Regency period and is similarly based on a division between men and women – however it aligns morality (and women) with ‘gaiety’, not seriousness, while its moral critique is split between loud-laughing raucousness and smooth-smiling ridicule.

Moore's laughter has the same function as his disconcerting gaze, as recognised by Shirley: 'you can't fix your eyes on him but his presently flash on you. He is never off his guard: he won't give you an advantage ... Oh! I know that sort of character ... it is one that piques me singularly' (p. 232). In short, Shirley's satirical authority is thwarted by Moore:

I rather like to entertain a circle of gentlemen ... it is amusing to observe how they enjoy a judiciously concocted repast. [They] seem to retain something of the naïveté of children about food, and one likes to please them ... I watch Moore sometimes, to try and discover how he can be pleased; but he has not that child's simplicity about him. Did you ever find out his accessible point, Caroline? (p. 231)

Shirley is unable to find out an accessible (weak) point, and thereby to gain 'an advantage', because of his exemplary self-government. Whatever advantage she may gain over the novel's less guarded male characters, Moore's lack of 'amusing' child-like naivety makes him a 'superior being.'

Caroline, who herself has a kind of 'child's simplicity', is no match for this kind of laughter. Though she voices disapproval at Moore's lack of sympathy for the unemployed, her devotion to him is largely reminiscent of that shown by gentle Mary Percy to Zamorna. The narrator at times joins Caroline in stressing Moore's essentially good and admirable character (presumably since it is so often brought into question) – it is claimed for instance that he is 'not habitually given to sarcasm, especially on anything humbler or weaker than himself' (p. 151). A similar blindness is shown by the grave, earnest child Rose Yorke, who gives voice to the pervading suspicion with which laughter is viewed in the novel by declaring that Moore 'looks too sorrowful to be false ... If he were always laughing, I should think he forgets promises soon, but Mr. Moore never laughs' (p. 132). This pronouncement, echoing the assumption that 'by the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better', fails to take into account the

warning signs provided by the ‘deeply secretive’ smiles playing around his lips; Moore may not laugh much, but his falseness to Caroline is foreshadowed in his countenance all the same. Moore’s untrustworthiness is likewise signalled by his mockery of the unfortunate Miss Mann, a ‘cankered old maid’, and Caroline’s response on one such occasion is shrewd: ‘Ah! Robert, you do not like old maids. I, too, should come under the lash of your sarcasm, if I were an old maid’ (p. 152). She is troubled too by Miss Ainley’s rough treatment, and ‘how gentlemen always sneer at her!’ (p. 151) When abandoned by Moore, Caroline is left vulnerable to just such a fate – prompting her determination to befriend these old women, and take them seriously. The need for a more earnest model of female solidarity than that offered by Shirley is thus suggested. Indeed, for all Shirley’s refusals to make fun of Mrs Prior, the promise of communal feeling through laughter is overshadowed not only by men but by the ‘lash of sarcasm’ that Mrs. Yorke, for instance, applies to other women. Scepticism emerges regarding the possibility of sisterly laughter, with good spirits beginning to seem a less sure remedy for women’s grievances.³

³ Brontë expresses similar ambivalence in a letter of August 1846 to her friend Ellen Nussey, concerning a mutual acquaintance of theirs. The letter is worth quoting at length here, for the comparison it offers between the author’s personal observations and her fiction: ‘Greatly was I amused by your accounts of Joe Taylor’s flirtations – and yet something saddened also – I think Nature intended him for something better than to fritter away his time in making a set of poor, unoccupied spinsters unhappy – The girls unfortunately are forced to care for him and such as him because while their minds are mostly unemployed, their sensations are all unworn and consequently fresh and keen – and he on the contrary has had his fill of pleasure and can with impunity make a mere pastime of other people’s torments. This is an unfair state of things, the match is not equal. I only wish I had the power to infuse into the souls of the persecuted a little of the quiet strength of pride – of the supporting consciousness of superiority (for they are superior to him because purer) of the fortifying resolve of firmness ... Perhaps luckily their feelings are not so acute as one would think and the gentleman’s shafts consequently don’t wound so deeply as he might desire – I hope it is so’ (*Letters I*, pp. 494-5). These comments highlight Brontë’s perception of a power imbalance (‘the match is not equal’) between confident men and ‘persecuted’, ‘tormented’ women (particularly ‘spinsters’). The ‘supporting consciousness of superiority’ that she advocates here and at many points in *Shirley* (a superiority based on ‘purity’ and ‘quiet strength’) is implicitly of a serious nature – she hopes that these women might be too dignified to feel ‘the gentleman’s shafts’ – but elsewhere in her novels (especially in *Villette*), consciousness of superiority as a talisman against ridicule manifests itself in answering mocking smiles.

This sincerity of tone, and the oppressive atmosphere created by cruel laughter, becomes more prominent as the novel progresses. Moore is made to seem demonic, hidden behind a gravestone, ‘his dark eyes shining, and his lips parted with inward laughter’ (pp. 216-7). At the end of the novel, the supposedly reformed Robert is still to be found ‘laughing in his sleeve and sneering with every feature of his pale, foreign face’ (p. 532) – hardly an image to affirm his newly declared moral earnestness. Indeed those contradictory physiognomic displays, his ‘half smiles’, are an apt reflection of his half English, half Belgian identity, foreignness accounting for the shady side of his character that accompanies his admirable English uprightness. Nonetheless his temperament cannot fully be accounted for in this way, since disturbing male behaviour is endemic to the society Brontë depicts. Caroline is beset even by the young misogynist Martin Yorke; ‘I made her sob, shudder, almost faint: I’ll see her smile before I’ve done with her’ he resolves (p. 482), in an eerie echo of Shirley’s announcement: ‘*I made her laugh ... I have done her good.*’ Martin’s manipulation of Caroline arises from a fascination with her feminine charms and a will to control her bodily and emotionally. ‘You *may* laugh’, he tells her – ‘I have no objection to see you laugh: your teeth – I hate ugly teeth; but yours are as pretty as a pearl necklace’ (p. 495; Brontë’s emphasis). In opening her mouth to laugh, Caroline’s merriment becomes subject to male voyeurism and triumph, her inner feelings rendered transparent to the gratified Martin.

Whereas Caroline slips back into a state of innocent vulnerability, the effect of such controlling attitudes on Shirley is more interesting: she takes on the *taint* of male behaviour. Even in the earlier stages of the novel, when the emphasis is more on her healthy good nature, a few jarring instances stand out where that good nature is problematised – where she is made to seem cynical and knowing, in the jostle for power. For all her celebrated openness, she displays at times an acute awareness of the power of the enigmatic smile. If Helstone ‘[smiles] a little grimly’, suspicious that

‘something in petticoats was somehow trying underhand to acquire too much influence’, Shirley ‘comprehends’ the expression and responds by ‘smiling queerly to herself’, an expressive act consolidated by her strategic self-positioning:

Shirley stood behind the Rectors, leaning over their shoulders ... listening to all they said, and still at intervals smiling her queer smile – a smile not ill-natured, but significant: too significant to be generally thought amiable. Men rarely like such of their fellows as read their inward nature too clearly and truly. It is good for women, especially, to be endowed with a soft blindness: to have mild, dim eyes, that never penetrate below the surface of things (pp. 229-30).

It is certainly ‘significant’ that Shirley imitates the ‘queer, quiet smile’ of Moore. It is significant that, despite all apparent efforts to endorse a conventionally attractive, perfectly good-humoured heroine, Brontë should undermine all this with the insistence on an expression which (though of course ‘not ill-natured’) is yet distinctly not amiable. As Malone had recognised that he was ‘seen through’, Shirley here reads the ‘inward nature’ of her guests, and shows it. The smile is an expression of knowledge, and knowledge as power; it is ‘comprehending’, penetrating, and unfeminine.

The unamiable display is unmistakably a response to the repressive effects, as illustrated throughout the novel, of masculine sarcasm on facial expressiveness. In Shirley’s case, affective demonstration is curbed and exchanged for cool intelligence. When Moore examines ‘with rather significant scrutiny her still flushed face,’ a ‘pleasant enough smile played on her lips, but she hid it’ (p. 302). The ‘pleasant enough smile’ is increasingly compromised or hidden; under the scrutinising male gaze the merry laugh becomes muted, concealed. And when it does appear, it takes on increasingly the characteristics of ‘masculine’ laughter – her protective, feminine disposition is necessarily called into question when we are told she is capable of ‘a jesting, gibing laugh’ in Caroline’s direction, and is ‘ever ready to satirize [enthusiasm]’

(pp. 288,291). Interestingly, the trajectory followed by Shirley is exactly the reverse of that assigned to Frances and Jane, who begin as edgy, sharp characters but who improve in health and amiability.

Louis Moore, who does not appear until the end of the second volume, is the principal cause of this change in Shirley's character. The power struggle between them begins when Louis succeeds in stealing the affections of Shirley's dog. The first time this happens he 'smiled one little smile to himself', and the second time 'the significant smile again rippled across [his] quiet face' (p. 380). 'Full of odd, quiet, out-of-the-way-humour' as he is described, Louis typically smiles 'into his book' (pp. 384, 385), a gesture indicative of secrecy and intellect. Like his brother, Louis does not 'laugh much, but [utters] in the quietest tone the wittiest things' (p. 389). The effect on Shirley is that she is transformed from 'a wild, laughing thing' into a more cynical, guarded character (p. 385). Denying her feelings for this 'odd, quiet' tyrant, she 'laughed: she laughed again; each time with a slightly sarcastic sound' (p. 382). Under pressure, she hides a smile which 'she would not permit to expand' (p. 410). And she 'scornfully ridicule[s]' the idea that she is out of sorts, while Louis smiles to see her 'in such a mood' (pp. 416, 420). Shirley is tamed and subdued, but without falling into the state of glowing, complacent contentment that is Frances's response to her subjection by Crimsworth – Brontë implies, this time, that vitality and cheerfulness may be eroded rather than awakened by a man's influence. By the finale, the previously jolly heroine is characteristically to be found partaking in embittered 'gibes and jests' (p. 506), or with a haughtily scornful 'curled lip' (p. 516). These expressions are, evidently, her most potent means of resistance to the controlling, predatory Louis, as she gradually succumbs to him – 'her little spark of temper dissolved in sarcasm, and eddied over her countenance in the ripples of a mocking smile' (p. 517). The phrase (echoing the smile that 'ripples' across Louis's face) aptly reflects the larger pattern of the narrative:

Shirley's rebellious and emotional spirit (as well as her independence) is curbed, and her character sours.⁴

Both heroines are saved from the threat of death by the conclusion of the novel: Caroline is raised from her sickbed, and Shirley's bite from a rabid dog proves harmless. Louis, too, recovers from illness and Robert from injury. Yet these restorations to health – insofar as they are symbolic of a larger salvation of the community – are no more convincing than any other aspect of the 'happy ending', which critics agree is laced with cynicism.⁵ The note of disillusionment is a bitter one – in the first two volumes feminine mirth had been invested with the potency to restore the community to moral and spiritual health, yet the redeeming contagiousness of the heroine's laughter proves less effective than the negative contagion that overrides it. The novel's turn to cynicism is a turn to morbidity, Shirley's corruption (for all her renewed bodily health) evinced by the unhealthy quality of her laughter. Caroline, saved from spinsterhood (and the ill health that this entails) retains her femininity and healthy colour – restored by maternal care – only to be claimed by Robert, who at the last glimpse is ominously sneering with every feature of his pale face.

Faces in *Shirley* thus register a movement from expression to repression, from optimism to pessimism, and from health to morbidity, while the gendered operations of power that bring this about are closely recorded. Shirley's souring, her internalization of male sarcasm, is not a positive indication of her refusal to be patronised but a defeatist

⁴ As Kucich sees it, Shirley 'seems to turn to repression very gradually, after having been characterized early in the novel as a creature of spontaneous passions' (*Repression in Victorian Fiction*, p. 75). It is through her laughter, I suggest, that this development can be seen most clearly.

⁵ Christopher Lane, for instance, describes the double wedding as parodic, and claims that *Shirley* '[anticipates] *Villette*'s complex antisocial impulses.' I agree with Lane that *Shirley* essentially 'distrusts [claims] about social harmony' and 'undermines [myths] about communities.' See Lane, *Hatred and Civility: the Antisocial Life in Victorian England* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), pp. 90, 96. In the view of Robert Bernard Martin, 'Nowhere does the novel seem more sober, more disillusioned than in the conventional "happy" ending.' Martin, *Charlotte Brontë's Novels: The Accents of Persuasion* (New York: Norton, 1968), p. 135.

development, akin to her loss of liberty in marriage – the rhetorical energy spent on elevating healthy, feminine good humour leads only to the conservative ‘taming’ of the heroine by her ‘master.’ In *Shirley*’s two narratives, of redemptive female power and of destructive male power, it is the latter that triumphs. Nonetheless, Shirley’s change of mood represents an exchange of naive earnestness for cool self-government which will be turned to more positive account in *Villette*. Stripped of her benign amiability, Shirley loses the claim to moral superiority that had to an extent empowered her: in suppressing her heroine’s high spirits and buoyant health, Brontë ends by denying the subversive potential of these qualities for women, showing instead how easily they can be trampled and exploited. But Shirley’s change in temperament anticipates Lucy Snowe, for whom the cultivation of ‘masculine’ sarcasm proves a more tangible source of power and protection. A self-confessed stranger to mirth, Lucy is nobody’s fool.

*

Before moving on to *Villette*, however, it should be acknowledged that *Shirley* is in certain respects a humorous novel, which in places recalls (as *The Professor* does) the boisterous, farcical energy of the early writings, and which – also imitating the early writings – adopts the strident satirical voice of *Blackwood’s* and *Fraser’s* magazines. It features stock-comic scenes and caricatures, with clergymen being chased by dogs and Hortense Moore fussing over slovenly servants. ‘Much of *Shirley* seems lacking in the sobriety which its subject-matter might appear to demand’, comments Glen.⁶ Bowen observes that ‘the narrator embodies a kind of teasing, humorous aggression that reminds us why Charlotte Brontë so admired the satirical smack of Thackeray.’⁷ What

⁶ Glen, ‘*Shirley and Villette*’, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, pp. 122-47 (p. 124). As Glen further observes, the tone of *Shirley* is ‘closer to the flippancies of *Blackwood’s* and the early *Fraser’s* than it is to the moral seriousness of the condition-of-England novelists’ (*The Imagination in History*, p. 145).

⁷ Bowen, ‘The Brontës and the Transformations of Romanticism’, p. 215.

are we to make of these humorous elements, this ‘satirical smack’? And more perplexingly, why are they attempted in a novel which otherwise so strenuously seeks to criticise standards of taste in matters of humour – and in particular to tackle male irreverence and flippancy?⁸ Since (as I argued in Chapter One) the narrator’s complaints about levity and scornful cynicism closely echo the author’s frustrated complaints about Thackeray’s narrative voice – those traits of his that she did *not* admire – why are these moral scruples embedded in a novel which itself seems to imitate a ‘masculine’ satirical style? A reader may well experience the same doubt as Yorke, who gazes at Shirley ‘much puzzled. He could not divine what her look signified; whether she spoke in earnest or jest: there was purpose and feeling, banter and scoff playing, mingled, on her mobile lineaments’ (p. 312). There is a parallel between Shirley’s ambiguous (indeed, androgynous) mobile lineaments and Brontë’s intentions in *Shirley*; is she in (feminine) earnest or in (masculine) jest? It is difficult to ascertain what ‘face’ the narrator is showing us at any one time.

But it is Brontë’s stance of disapproval towards laughter that prevails – for all its flourishes of comedy, *Shirley* leans heavily towards the sombre and the disapproving. As I have shown, the novel consciously raises and engages with questions of (in)appropriate ridicule, voicing moral concerns about why, how, and at who characters laugh – and given the uneasy conclusions that it reaches, it would seem perhaps appropriate that *Shirley* does not raise many wholehearted laughs. Recurring constantly throughout, laughter yet for the most part offers no more light relief than does Brontë’s handling of hunger, political unrest, disappointed love or the omnipresence of death. Satiric ridicule prevails over spirited comedy; Shirley’s joyful mirth gives way to knowing smiles, and

⁸ The novel’s hypocrisy in this sense is highlighted by such reviews as that in the *Atlas*, which complains: ‘All this is very coarse – very irreverential. And there is ... an unseemly mode of allusion to solemn topics, a jesting with scriptural names, and a light usage of scriptural expressions, which will grate painfully upon the feelings of a considerable number of [readers].’ Unsigned review, 3 November 1849 (pp. 696-7).

earnest moral outbursts (in defence of sunny countenances) are subsumed by sardonic narrative cynicism.

The Yorke household is emblematic. As we approach it, the narrator prepares us for jolly, heart-warming, Dickensian domestic scenes: the curtains do ‘not entirely muffle the sound of voices and laughter’ (p. 125). However on entry to this ‘house of mirth’ what we actually find is Mrs. Yorke, who wears the ‘cloud and burden people ever carry who deem it their duty to be gloomy’ (p. 126), and Mark Yorke, for whom ‘Life will never have much joy ... by the time he is five-and-twenty, he will wonder why people ever laugh, and think all fools who seem merry’ (p. 129). Still, laughter there is – Mrs. Yorke likes ‘to crack a dry jest’, and the family are much enlivened in mocking their visitor’s misfortunes (pp. 131-4). For Martin and Matthew Yorke, ‘a dry laugh, an insulting sneer, a contemptuous taunt’ are the precursors to fighting (p. 482), while as for the ‘irresistibly comic’ Jessie, the narrator abruptly switches from her joking banter to a vision of her lying ‘cold, coffined, solitary’ (pp. 342-3). The destructiveness of men’s laughter, and the death of women’s laughter, are the respective themes here. Despite intermittently gesturing towards a brighter view (chiefly through the ‘genial gaiety’ of its heroine), *Shirley* more often conveys suspicion of laughter, which falls into the camps of intemperate folly or sneering aggression. Brontë thus presents ill-natured laughter as the symptom of social sickness, while throwing cold water on contemporary wisdom that it is by the cheerfulness of the countenance that the heart is made better.

II

Villette was hailed by the critics as a decided improvement on *Shirley*, yet critical enthusiasm was tempered by distaste for what was perceived as a ‘morbid’ taint. The charge was most famously brought by Harriet Martineau, who complained that ‘an atmosphere of pain hangs about the whole’ – that even ‘the gaiety has pain in it.’ Martineau looked forward to future novels, to the improvement that would be seen ‘when the cheerfulness of health comes in with its bracing influence.’⁹ The reviewer for the *Spectator* described ‘the morbid feeling so predominant in the writer’, while the *Examiner* felt the author ‘to lapse occasionally into a tone of irony a little harder than is just and now and then to give vent to a little morbid wail.’¹⁰ The reviews equated the painfulness or unhealthy tone of the writing with its voicing of grievances, its indulgence in the ‘morbid wails’ of discontent.

‘That’s a plaguey book that *Villette*,’ commented Thackeray. ‘How clever it is – and how I don’t like the heroine.’¹¹ Thackeray identifies the source of ‘plaguey’ uneasiness, the ‘crabbed and crusty’ protagonist Lucy Snowe, whose awkwardness and reserve are conveyed through her infamously evasive, unreliable narrative voice.¹² Brontë returned in *Villette* both to introspective first-person narration and to a small, poor, plain and obscure heroine, one who, as Martineau opined, ‘may be thought a

⁹ [Harriet Martineau], unsigned review in the *Daily News*, 3 February 1853 (p. 2). Martineau’s criticisms (also expressed in a private letter to Brontë) brought an awkward end to their friendship: Brontë explained to George Smith (in a letter of March 1853) that ‘the differences of feeling between Miss M. and myself are very strong and marked; very wide and irreconcilable ... In short she has hurt me a good deal.’ See *Letters*, III, pp. 141-5 (p. 142).

¹⁰ Unsigned reviews in the *Spectator*, 12 February 1853 (pp. 155-6), and *Examiner*, 5 February 1853 (pp. 84-5).

¹¹ Thackeray, letter to Mrs Procter (April 1853), in *The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (London: Oxford University Press, 1945-6), III (1946), pp. 250-2 (p. 252).

¹² Brontë, *Villette*, p. 233. Subsequent references to *Villette* will be given in parentheses after quotations.

younger, feebler sister of Jane. There is just enough resemblance for that – but she has not Jane’s charm of mental and moral health, and consequent repose.’¹³ Certainly, the hypochondriac Lucy is far removed from both the feminine sweetness of Caroline and the sociable vitality of Shirley. Brontë, who originally assigned her the surname ‘Frost’, intended her to be for the most part a ‘morbid and weak’ character, lacking warmth, and ‘healthy feeling’¹⁴ – she is a misfit, ill at ease with social norms. And Lucy’s alienation and morbid turn of mind are accentuated by her presence in the midst of people who are variously light-hearted, boisterous, or cheerfully complacent. As she is told when she takes part in the school play, she threatens to ‘spoil all, destroy the mirth of the piece, the enjoyment of the company’ (p. 139).

In his review of the novel, G. H. Lewes declared that Brontë ‘has not the humour, so strong and genial, of Mrs. Gaskell. There are, occasionally, touches approaching to the comic in *Villette*, but they spring mostly from fierce sarcasm, not from genial laughter.’¹⁵ The common slippage between humour and laughter is particularly significant in this case since it is Lucy’s preference for ‘fierce sarcasm’ over ‘genial laughter’ on the thematic, as well as the narrative level, that colours the mood of the novel. As an example, Lewes notes that ‘Ginevra Fanshaw [sic] is “shown up” in all her affectations and careless coquetry, but there is something contemptuous in the laugh, nothing sympathetic.’¹⁶ Unable to distinguish between the mood of the author and of the narrator, between the temperament of Brontë and that of her characters, Lewes borrows the very images in which the novel itself abounds to describe his perception of an approach that is (satirically) contemptuous rather than (humorously)

¹³ Martineau, review in the *Daily News*, p. 2.

¹⁴ Brontë to W. S. Williams (November 1852), *Letters* III, p. 80.

¹⁵ Lewes, unsigned review in the *Leader*, 12 February 1853 (pp. 163-4).

¹⁶ *Ibid.* Martineau, too, responded to the novel’s comic side with misgivings: humour, she acknowledged, ‘is felt throughout, though there is not a touch of lightheartedness from end to end.’

sympathetic. For Lucy's morbid nature is illustrated not only in the plainness of her face but in the sneers that appear on that face; it can be located in her lack of amiability, her 'tone of irony', and most clearly in the embittered quality of her laughter.

The turn to morbidity is a turn inwards, involving a shift in focus from outward appearances to inner experience, from the social effects of laughter (as recorded in *Shirley*) to its self-conscious motives. Lucy cannot be described as 'open' in any sense, and as readers we are made to translate and read between the lines of what she tells us, in the same way that she conducts her physiognomic and phrenological 'translations' of the faces she encounters. But like Crimsworth, though she represses information, Lucy is strikingly *expressive*, and while keeping her 'essential' self guarded and mysterious, she gives us detailed accounts of how she consciously manipulates her manners and expressions – the habits through which she (per)forms her identity. Her response to the medical advice that, essentially, she should cheer up and make herself agreeable, is to exclaim: 'No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to *cultivate* happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure' (p. 250; Brontë's emphasis).¹⁷ The metaphor is significant, given the horticultural language applied to the transformations undergone by Jane and Frances on the route to health and happiness, and Lucy's protest signals that she will *not* take this route, will not be moulded into a conventionally feminine shape. But, though Lucy scorns the idea that one can 'cultivate' the required *emotional* qualities, the phrase is otherwise an apt one for the way that she develops her sense of self. *Villette*, like *The Professor*, centres on pathognomic exchanges, recording the processes of communication between self and society; Lucy's struggle to empower herself as a marginalised, miserable figure amongst happy, healthy groups is played out

¹⁷ Brontë plays with a variant on this idea in a letter of July 1851, to George Smith: 'Tell your Mother I shall try to cultivate good spirits as assiduously as she cultivates her geraniums.' *Letters* II, pp. 662-5 (p. 664).

on the mobile face. As Shirley learns to imitate the ‘masculine’ smirk, so Lucy controls her expressions in response to circumstances, preserving integrity and avoiding self-exposure through carefully calculated smiles.

If *Shirley* is ultimately pessimistic in the insights it gives into the link between laughter and power, this is because it fails to overcome the impasse created by Brontë’s conflicting subversive and conservative impulses. Power is for the most part straightforwardly gendered (with men as tyrants, women as victims) and the moralising narrator stops short of endorsing female behaviour which transgresses conventional stereotyping. Defiant (masculine) laughter on women’s lips – the smile that is ‘too significant to be generally thought amiable’ – is portrayed with uneasiness, rather than being construed as liberating. *Villette*, however, leaves behind many of the conformist inhibitions of *Shirley*; it does not betray the same anxiety to be in line with ideals of health and sociability. Those features of Shirley’s and Caroline’s characters that translate into ‘healthy’ laughter are not insisted on for Lucy, who (without being immoral) lacks moral *health*. What is gestured towards or hinted at, yet usually retreated from, throughout Brontë’s previous writing – the sense that this lack may carry subversive potency – is finally embraced in *Villette*. Less attractive, less obviously likeable than the other heroines, Lucy panders less to sentimental expectations and her defiance of social (and literary) norms finds expression in her face; Brontë unleashes the power of the sardonic sneer without apology, with a firmer conviction than is evident in her other works.

Despite this firmer conviction, *Villette* is also in many respects a more nuanced novel than *Shirley* – less constrained by gender stereotypes, more flexible in its conception of power relations, and evasive of didactic certainties. The greater psychological complexity of *Villette* is apparent in the organization of the previous novel into types. For instance, the pairing of Shirley and Caroline had allowed Brontë to

represent women alternately in the role of victim or role model, and through the splitting of men from boys, male characters could be easily either demonised or belittled. Graham Bretton, however, combines a sarcastic air with a boyish boisterousness – both of which Lucy feels to be threatening. He embodies simultaneously the thoughtless joviality which in *Shirley* amounts only to inanity or self-abandonment, and a cool, scrutinising cynicism. Likewise, Paul Emanuel combines the ‘feminine’ qualities of openness and earnestness with a sardonic Byronic streak, a capacity for smirking cruelty and spite. Lucy herself combines the vulnerability of the sensitive woman with the sharpness of a worldly-wise one, bringing together fear of mockery with the ability to combat it: she carries all the tormenting weight of low spirits while boasting too an edgy self-assurance, which ensures that power flows continually in more than one direction.

For all these nuances, and for all Lucy’s capacity for self-defence, *Villette* does not lose any of the usual emphasis on the tyranny of laughter. Trivial as it may seem to readers who associate the Brontëan heroine with passionate, defiant independence, what Lucy most wishes to avoid is being laughed at – her dread of mockery is extreme, shaping her behaviour and her relationships with others. In drawing attention to this anxiety of Lucy’s, and her means of responding to it, the novel plays on the same drama of cause-and-effect as *The Professor*, except that Lucy’s trials are portrayed with more poignancy than those of Crimsworth (whose self-diagnosed hypochondria, and misanthropic tendencies, she shares). Lucy laughs aggressively to disguise her insecurities – her displays of smug superiority are transparently compensatory. *Villette* exposes the ways in which ‘good feeling’ (both men’s and women’s) can mask hollowness, hostility or coldness, and in this it is a sceptical, anti-social novel which challenges sentimental clichés and pits the ‘scornful, sneering’ heroine against the world (p. 309). But there is also an emotional complexity, an affective quality granted to

laughter, linked to the recognition of its function as self-protection, and its source in loneliness as well as triumph. In Lucy's own explanation, 'I smiled; but I also hushed a groan' (p. 317). To make sense of this, I will first explore Lucy's complex characterisation, and then turn to the different forms of tyranny represented by the novel's main male characters, Graham and Paul. In showing how mockery lurks beneath the surface of good-natured merriment in the one case, while innocent mirth underlies mocking airs in the other, I argue that Brontë breaks down the terms of opposition that she had set forth in *Shirley*, offering instead a more discerning view of the ways in which laughter – in all its forms – sustains patriarchal power.

'Laying on the lash of sarcasm': Lucy Snowe

One reviewer of *Villette* speculated that Currer Bell 'has been the better for a little happiness and success', since 'the author has gained both in amiability and propriety since she first presented herself to the world – soured, coarse, and grumbling; an alien, it might seem, from society, and amenable to none of its laws.'¹⁸ The opinion, however, is an anomalous one, since most critics equated author with narrator, and 'amiability' (as Brontë had determined) is not one of Lucy's defining characteristics. The sympathetic portrayal of her unhappiness and victimization is complicated by indications that, rather than being consistently faced with a hostile environment, her own hostile exertions – her 'soured' and 'grumbling' nature – contribute to her alienation. This is made clear early, in her response to the 'Watson group' on board the boat to Labassecour (Belgium) (pp. 52-3). From a distance Lucy observes this laughing group of fellow passengers, and is amazed to note that the most beautiful girl of the party is married to 'the oldest, plainest, greasiest, broadest' of the men, yet 'she was gay even to giddiness.' Her laughter, Lucy reflects, 'must be the mere frenzy of despair.'

¹⁸ [Anne Mozley], Review of *Lady Bird* and *Villette*, in the *Christian Remembrancer*, 25 (1853), 401-33 (p. 423).

Her amazement is further compounded when the same girl approaches her ('an utter stranger') to offer her a chair, 'smiling a smile of which the levity puzzled and startled me, though it showed a perfect set of perfect teeth.' Her stiff, untrusting attitude is apparent in her reaction: 'I declined it, of course with all the courtesy I could put into my manner', at which the girl 'danced off heedless and lightsome.' Lucy concedes that she 'must have been good-natured', but 'what had made her marry that individual, who was at least as much like an oil-barrel as a man?' The lack of grounds for disdain here, and Lucy's apparently unwarranted coldness, suggest Crimsworth's judgemental tendencies and unfriendly behaviour – as well as his embarrassment at 'levity' and 'giddiness.'

This is the first of multiple scenes in which Lucy's loneliness is accentuated by her positioning on the outside of sociable gaiety and laughter, 'heedless and lightsome' folk – the kind of staple, heart-warming scene that is so central to Dickens's novels. She betrays a pitiful unfamiliarity with, and mistrust of displays of friendliness or merriment, which here she can only understand by translating as 'the mere frenzy of despair.' This is not to say that she is always unjustified in her coldness – only that the critique of society that she offers us is not entirely an unbiased one. Puzzled by the jolly Watson party, who remain in the background 'laughing and making a great deal of noise', Lucy is considerably more at ease in her meeting with the rude Ginevra Fanshawe, in an exchange which will set the tone for all their future dialogues, and for the novel as a whole. As Ginevra rattles selfishly on, Lucy marks her mixed disapproval and amusement by smiles which, although supposedly covert, consistently fail to go unnoticed by Ginevra (a self-absorbed and generally unobservant character) who twice demands to know why she is being laughed at. The reason – Ginevra's bad manners – is apparent enough to the reader, but so too is the motivation for Lucy's overtly displayed mockery, which is neither subtle nor purely indicative of amusement. Her claim to be

‘only laughing at my own thoughts’ is a typical, and a typically *untrue* claim, since Lucy is clearly also offended and threatened by Ginevra, who has already shown her contempt in similar style, having ‘slightly curled her short, pretty lip’ on first noticing Lucy (p. 53). Imposed upon by this intimidating bluntness, Lucy smiles to denote a supposedly private feeling of superiority which in turn baffles and disconcerts her antagonist. Compared to the good-natured laughter of the noisy group in the background, which Lucy regards with suspicion, the smiles shared between these unlikely friends are characterised by a spirit of competitive provocation.

Repeated constructions of ‘inward’ laughter (as in Lucy’s representation of herself ‘laughing at my own thoughts’) almost always in *Villette* signify precisely the opposite – laughter is never secret or private, but instead introduced for purposes of display and demonstration (even if only for the reader’s benefit). Regina Barreca’s essay on *Villette* and *Jane Eyre* posits humour as the essential survival tool of both protagonists – an assessment which does not entirely account for the complexity with which its usefulness as a ‘tool’ is laid bare by the text, and which underestimates the emphasis on outward effect (on others) over inner comfort (to the self). Jane and Lucy ‘use their wit in a combination of self-defense and mutiny’, Barreca rightly recognises, ‘as a way of negotiating with a world they often dislike and always distrust.’¹⁹ But, focusing on Lucy’s ‘wry observations, satiric perspectives and humorous insights’ Barreca asserts that she meanwhile remains ‘unlaughing’, when in fact it is precisely her expressions of amusement, rather than her amusing narrative asides, which she uses to her advantage in negotiating with the world. Barreca takes at face value Lucy’s claims to discreetly hide her laughter, assuming that she is ‘responding to the maxim that the laughter of women is naturally suspect.’²⁰ But where Caroline Helstone hides her

¹⁹ Barreca, p. 61.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 68, 69.

laughter in earnest – turning aside ‘that her long curls might screen the smile mantling on her features’ – Lucy makes only the pretence of doing so, an act which goes no way to prevent her scorn reaching its target. The difference is significant, and apparent in clues throughout the text. Through Lucy, Brontë uncovers not just the seditious implications of a woman’s smile, but the self-conscious intent with which it could be utilised.

In Villette (Brussels) Lucy finds her way to Madame Beck’s establishment, a school full of ‘healthy, lively girls’ who are ‘a little noisy and rough, but types of health and glee’ (p. 75). Of course this evaluation masks disapproval – Lucy fosters self-righteousness and a defined sense of her own identity as a proud outsider amongst these girls. Like Crimsworth, she pits her Protestantism against their Catholicism, her sound morals against their unprincipled ideas, her intelligence against their stupidity, her good manners against their ‘noisy and rough’ behaviour, her sickly diminutiveness against their robust health. Finally their ‘glee’ differentiates them from Lucy, who proudly acknowledges that ‘gay instincts my nature had few’, holding herself aloof accordingly (p. 109). The continental setting allows Brontë to thematize Lucy’s social isolation in terms of mind against body, and to explain it on the grounds of cultural and religious difference: Lucy’s unsociable stance may be excused given her mental superiority to these foreigners. But the critique being made here is not solely aimed at ‘popish’ ideals, since (as proposed in Chapter One), the alignment of moral and spiritual worth with bodily health, cheerful appearances and high spirits is no less characteristic of an oppressive ideology rather closer to home. Impatience with conventional values is thus displaced, or focused onto a condemnation of Catholicism. In complaining that the ‘CHURCH strove to bring up her children robust in body, feeble in soul, fat, ruddy, hale, joyous, ignorant, unthinking, unquestioning’ (p. 127; Brontë’s emphasis), Lucy

gives vent more widely to her anti-social, and (to use George Meredith's word) misogynist feelings.²¹

However, the 'unthinking' quality of this joyous laughter is soon brought into question. Seemingly organized by the polarisations set out above, *Villette* refuses to simplify character (or national) traits, instead blurring distinctions that at first seem clear-cut. As we have seen, foreignness may be associated with materiality and animal excess, or with deviousness and intrigue – it may be linked to the lively 'health and glee' of the schoolgirls, or to the shady smirks of Pelet or the Moore brothers. *Villette* works to further collapse this distinction in exposing the cunning and artifice that goes hand in hand with the girls' seemingly natural high spirits. Lucy's first trial in the classroom is to quell this gleefulness, which is revealed in its true light, as sadistic and conspiratorial (the same as that which Crimsworth confronts in *The Professor*):

Mesdemoiselles Blanche, Virginie, and Angélique opened the campaign by a series of tittering and whispering; these soon swelled into murmurs and short laughs, which the remoter benches caught up and echoed more loudly. This growing revolt of sixty against one, soon became oppressive enough (p. 79).

Again, the ugly truth about these ironically named beauties is revealed to the reader.

And again this is a 'campaign' – not the natural overspilling of liveliness and good humour, but a calculated mutiny. As with Bertha's laughter, which becomes clamorous

²¹ Although the portrait of Lucy is not autobiographical, Brontë did of course draw on her similar experiences and sentiments as a social alien at a Belgian school. To Emily Brontë (in May 1843) she wrote from Brussels: 'I really don't pretend to care a fig for [anybody] in the establishment'. She observed that Mme Heger (who ran the school) 'cannot comprehend why I do not make intimate friends of [the other teachers]' while M. Heger, she speculates, 'disapproves very much of my unamiable want of sociability. He has already given me a brief lecture on universal bienveillance [benevolence], and, perceiving that I don't improve in consequence, [has] taken to considering me a person to be let alone' (*Letters I*, p. 320). But, interestingly, she portrays her isolation (as she would portray Lucy's) in terms of choice and personal disposition, as well as distaste for the available company – in a letter to Branwell Brontë (May 1843), she wrote: 'I perceive [that] I grow exceedingly misanthropic and sour – you will say this is no news, and that you never knew me possessed of the contrary qualities, philanthropy & sugariness' (*Letters I*, p. 316).

but originates from an identifiable source ('I could have pointed out the door whence the accents issued'), rebellion and disorder do not spontaneously erupt, but are deliberately initiated.

Under threat, Lucy considers how she would return the attack, if she could only do it in English – she would silence them 'with some sarcasm, flavoured with contemptuous bitterness, for the ringleaders, and relieved with easy banter for the weaker, less knavish followers' (p. 80). Sarcasm is her weapon of choice in this battle, and it is controlling and channelling (rather than simply subduing) the girls' mutinous laughter that will prove the crucial skill for Lucy. She measures her first success by the fact that the class were quiet, but 'then a smile – not a laugh – passed from desk to desk' (p. 81). She has not only quelled the chaos but also turned the tide, diverting the girls' vindictive amusement from herself to one of their number. A particular kind of discipline is required here – high spirits must be craftily managed, not merely kept down. As Lucy gains confidence she learns how to 'lay on the lash of sarcasm' (p. 83) as she had felt powerless to do before, but also, importantly, to withhold the 'contemptuous bitterness' that she had imagined herself using. Where an average English girl, she tells us, would quietly settle down to a task, 'a Labassecourienne would laugh in your face, and throw it back to you.' The correct way to respond, she learns, is to take the work back and make it easier, but also to employ mockery. There is a trick to this:

They would feel the sting, perhaps wince a little under a bit, but they bore no malice against this sort of attack, provided the sneer was not *sour* but *hearty*, and that it was well held up to them, in a clear light and bold type (p. 83; Brontë's emphasis).

Lucy's distinction plays into the Victorian doctrine that laughing at others is only acceptable when it is good humoured and open, while underhand laughter with a 'sting' is unpleasant. But, mastering the art of joking in order to assert authority, Lucy's

observations are of a different, wholly unsentimental nature. *Sour* ridicule is ill-advised, but a *heartly* sneer (though something of an oxymoron) will serve well. The oxymoron is appropriate, given the blend of cheerful conventionality and shrewd superiority that is exercised here – by Lucy, and by the sociable yet cynical, merry yet malicious pupils from whom she has learnt it. In this way, Brontë dissolves the apparently stark contrasts between characters and their values; Lucy is more at home in *Villette* than she will admit.

Her smiles – more so than speaking up for herself – are Lucy's standard response to insults, and her pointed way of asserting superior self-knowledge in the face of being misunderstood, or her general superiority in the face of intimidation. Often remaining silent, she is rarely entirely passive, indirect phrasing often highlighting the irony that underlies her accounts of 'inward' or secretive smiles. Insulted by Ginevra, she informs us that 'I delegated the trouble of commenting [to] my countenance; or rather, my under-lip voluntarily anticipated my tongue: of course, reverence and solemnity were not the feelings expressed in the look I gave her' (p. 308). This roundabout way of narrating that she mocked Ginevra, and that she did so expressively rather than in thought, is a typical indication of Lucy's desire to impress upon us, or on other characters, her unperturbed calm. With similar delicacy she describes how, having been humiliated by M. Paul, she gets her revenge while he reads out a translation of Shakespeare:

Of course, the translation being French, was very inefficient; nor did I make any particular effort to conceal the contempt which some of its forlorn lapses were calculated to excite. Not that it behoved me to *say* anything; but one can occasionally *look* the opinion it is forbidden to embody in words ... I had not uttered a sound, and could not justly be deemed amenable to reprimand or penalty for having permitted a slightly freer action than usual to the muscles about my eyes and mouth (p. 330; Brontë's emphasis).

Through such mischievous insinuations, Lucy makes a pretence of passivity: she ‘permits’ rather than performs her contempt, laying the blame on ‘the muscles about my eyes and mouth.’ But the denial of responsibility is unconvincing, given the circumstances and the irony in her tone. More than a hint of the deceptiveness that is habitual to her as a narrator is at work in claims like these. Presuming that Lucy dictates the actions of her facial muscles, and not the other way round, complicates Barreca’s assessment that she has an admirable sense of humour – which, indeed, rather misses the point. Her smiles are better understood as performative manoeuvres – the evidence of active engagement in the process of self-definition – rather than of inner reliance on complacent self-knowledge, or resigned amusement at the ironies of the world.

Comparing the differing conceptions of her character that are held by her various acquaintances – all, she claims, inaccurate – Lucy declines to contradict any of them outright but must still signal her triumphant impenetrability somehow: ‘I smiled at them all.’ Count de Bassompierre knows nothing about her real self – ‘indeed his misconceptions of my character often made me smile’ (p. 285). Ginevra ‘[bursts] into a laugh’ of frustration at Lucy’s mysteriousness; ‘Who *are* you, Miss Snowe?’ she demands, ‘in a tone of such undisguised and unsophisticated curiosity, as made me laugh in my turn’ (p. 308; Brontë’s emphasis). The pair alternate in their intimidation of each other, through laughter intended on Ginevra’s part to break through Lucy’s impenetrable ‘disguise’, on Lucy’s to preserve that shield while ridiculing Ginevra’s ‘unsophisticated’ self-exposure. As Karen Lawrence assesses,

[One] of the striking aspects of Lucy Snowe as protagonist is the degree to which she is primarily viewer rather than a viewed object ... Lucy’s plainness allows her to reverse the gaze, to observe the ‘mystery’ of the male rather than provide the feminine mystique ... instead of being a mark to be deciphered, Lucy [resists] the male as viewer who would interpret her. Although [she] represses her feelings

unhealthily, particularly at the beginning of the story, her emotional reticence does not eliminate the real power that develops by means of her 'invisibility.'²²

While Lucy does not entirely evade scrutiny (and her ability to mystify Ginevra is indicative of the novel's subversion of gender relationships, as well as gender norms), it is true that she is generally misinterpreted through oversight rather than through the applied gaze. But again, in identifying this power of Lucy's, Lawrence attributes it to an appearance of blankness: it is her plainness that allows her to take the role of viewer rather than viewed object. This misses the more aggressive moves by which Lucy (visibly) reverses the *laugh* of male power, securing protection for herself through an 'emotional reticence' that is paradoxically expressive, making a show of the 'mystique' that renders her so difficult to interpret.

The answer to Ginevra's question (who *are* you, Miss Snowe?) is as elusive for the reader as it is for the other characters. Lucy's 'scornful, sneering' laughter might seem to be a symptom of the 'external coldness' assigned to her by Brontë,²³ but Lawrence's claim that she 'represses her feelings unhealthily' requires some qualification. Although (as M. Paul recognises) there is abundant fiery passion beneath this cold surface, nonetheless Lucy defies literary expectations in her stubborn resistance to the melting narrative so often imposed on female characters, and her 'true' self is at no point straightforwardly unearthed.²⁴ As an adolescent, Lucy wishes that the

²² Karen Lawrence, 'The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*', in *Critical Essays*, ed. by Gates, pp. 306-19 (pp. 307-8).

²³ Brontë to W. S. Williams (November 1852), *Letters* III, p. 80. In the words of the *Literary Gazette*: 'To few will she appear, on first acquaintance, loveable. There is a hardness and cold self-possession upon the surface of her character, somewhat repelling; and it is only when you see, by degrees, into its depths, when she flashes upon you revelations of emotion and suffering ... and when you feel what a glow of tenderness and loving-kindness is burning under the unattractive and frigid exterior, that you admit her into your heart.' Unsigned review, 5 February 1853 (pp. 123-5).

²⁴ This is partly because, as Shuttleworth explains (p. 39), selfhood in nineteenth-century psychological thought 'was situated neither in inner impulse, nor in outer social behaviour, but in the self-conscious awareness of the disjunction between the two ... The Victorian conception of selfhood [is] of a private

child Polly ‘would utter some hysterical cry, so that I might get relief and be at ease’ (p. 14) – a desire which seems to suggest that Lucy craves emotional release, for which Polly’s outbreak would be a substitute. But Lucy’s wish must be read in the context of her previous comment, that ‘on all occasions of vehement, unrestrained expansion, a sense of disdain or ridicule comes to the weary spectator’s relief.’ In other words, the ‘relief’ she seeks is from weariness, at Polly’s passionate earnestness – she looks forward to the ‘hysterical cry’ as an opportunity for ridicule, for the indulgence in a superior sneer that it would allow. (And again, this would be a display of superiority, not the retreat into ‘invisibility’ that Lawrence describes.) Lucy manages desire through a tight control over affective impulses – which are sometimes repressed or restrained, but sometimes simply absent; her unsentimental coolness is no mere facade, no flimsy cover for her latent warmth, but an essential element of her characterisation.²⁵

When she does lose emotional control, it is brought on by the oppressive conditions of life under Madame Beck’s watchful regime. Lucy is keen as a narrator to undermine the power that her employer has over her, by impressing on us constantly her

state of being which is constituted only within the social act of exchange ... The erotic interplay which occurs throughout Brontë’s fiction [is] not just a defensive game designed to protect the boundaries of a pre-existent self, but is rather actually constitutive of selfhood.’ Nonetheless, many critics continue to read Lucy in terms of the opposition between public appearances and private self drawn on by the *Literary Gazette* (above). According to Miller, for example, *Villette* shows that Brontë ‘believed that being a woman in her society often involved putting on a social mask to guard the deeper self’; it is a novel ‘about identity and the unconscious in which, as the recurrent images of burial suggest, much of the action takes place beneath the surface’ (pp. 27, 48). While this is certainly true in some respects, I would suggest that the novel’s imagery is more notable for the ways it seeks to *confuse* the distinction between surfaces and depths, masks and faces.

²⁵ Lucy can thus be understood in light of the broader point made by Auerbach (p. 196): ‘It is a critical cliché that Charlotte Brontë is concerned with the conflict between reason and passion or imagination, but her use of these abstractions is defined by her peculiar imagery: the “cooler region” of reason or reality that follows the “burning clime” of impulse and imagination ... The struggle between the worlds represented by fire and ice underlies [*Jane Eyre* and *Villette*], and their vitality comes from the energy of the battle, not from the fulfillment of resolution. Like many Victorians, Charlotte Brontë was a Manichean – a continual clash of opposed forces gives birth to her world – and the world of ice is an active force in her novels, not a mere negation of energy.’ In these terms it can be seen that Lucy’s icy smiles are not the mere negation or suppression of her natural impulses, passion and energy; they have an ‘active force’ of their own.

feelings of superiority, in the face of the older woman's exercise of control. 'I caught myself smiling as I lay awake and thoughtful on my couch – smiling at madame', Lucy tells us, and 'I had occasion to smile – nay, to laugh, at madame again, within the space of four and twenty hours' (pp. 115-6). Knowing her as well as she does, Lucy smiles 'in half-pity, half-scorn' at those who vainly appeal to her warmer feelings (p. 74). But Lucy's smug self-assurance is belied by her breakdown after discovering Beck searching through her private possessions. The usual hardy response, laughter, is soon undercut by the emotional tumult that follows:

How I laughed ... I knew what her thoughts were. The spectacle of a suspicious nature so far misled by its own inventions, tickled me much. Yet as the laugh died, a kind of wrath smote me, and then bitterness followed ... I had never felt so strange and contradictory an inward tumult as I felt for an hour that evening: soreness and laughter, and fire, and grief, shared my heart between them ... Complicated, disquieting thoughts broke up the whole repose of my nature. However, that turmoil subsided: next day I was again Lucy Snowe (p. 119).

Lucy's initial response to her outrage is to laugh in such a way as to show herself above her adversary, whose nature she understands well ('I knew what her thoughts were'). But with the rush of genuine, suppressed anguish that then overwhelms her, Brontë depicts a transition from artificial display to naked, uncontrolled emotion – her claim to being much 'tickled' is belied as a new kind of laughter, hysterical, takes its place. Indeed this, far more than Bertha's controlled cackle, fits descriptions of 'hysterical affections' such as George Combe's (laughing and crying 'alternately and involuntarily, apparently on account of some varying affection of the whole mental system').²⁶ It is the only point in the novel at which Lucy loses control of her laughter, and her assurance that 'next day I was again Lucy Snowe' tells us much about her sense of self.

²⁶ George Combe, *A System of Phrenology* (Boston: Marsh, Capen & Lyon, 1834), p. 319.

She conceives of her real identity as that which she forges in her relations with others – the (sneering) face she presents publicly, rather than any hidden but authentic emotional core. Still, the rare descent into ‘involuntary’ behaviour, foreshadowing her later mental collapse, recalls Lucy’s assumption about the girl on the boat coming over, that (being married to an ‘oil-barrel’) her laughter must be ‘the mere frenzy of despair’ – a diagnosis which, in this case, would seem more accurate.

Lucy does attempt a medical account of her despair, describing ‘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’ (p. 185). The explanation of trapped emotion is interesting for its resonance with contemporary insistence, both popular and scientific, on the importance of laughter as healthy and necessary release – Alexander Bain’s theory, for instance, that ‘the outburst of laughter is nature’s provision for relieving an incompatibility of mental and bodily states, that would otherwise be painful in the extreme.’²⁷ Such rhetoric was applied of course to other forms of unhealthy repression, but Lucy’s mental fragility, her need for an outlet, and indeed her unhappiness, are related to the lack of healthy cheerfulness that would conventionally find bodily expression in laughter. The implication, however, is not that she would make herself better by lightening up (as Graham advises when she describes her state of mind to him), Brontë’s point instead being that, while she is not *allowed* to express her feelings of desire or dissatisfaction, she is not *able* to generate (or ‘cultivate’) the feelings of cheerfulness that are required of her instead. Such commonplaces as, for instance, that laughter ‘is a substitute devised by nature for the screams and shouts of [childhood], by which the lungs are strengthened and the health preserved’ therefore take on a cruel irony in the case of Lucy, for whom mental and bodily health are hopelessly

²⁷ Bain, ‘Wit and Humour’, p. 34.

intertwined.²⁸ Her experience of oppression as physical sensation is apparent in her comment on her painful past: ‘To this hour, when I have the nightmare, it repeats the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs’ (p. 35). The misery that, as Brontë insisted, explains Lucy’s frigidity,²⁹ the embittered feeling or ‘saltiness’ that sticks in her throat, is tellingly figured as an incapacitating weight, an ‘icy pressure’ on the *lungs* – those accessories to the heart, and vehicles of hearty laughter.

‘Bright Animal Spirits’: Graham Bretton

To say that Lucy’s misery is represented sympathetically, her ‘icy’ state of mind attributed to her circumstances, is not to say (as is the case with Frances) that Brontë pathologises her anti-social leanings as the unfortunate side-effects of an unhappy life. Or rather, if Lucy is pathologised, her abnormality is celebrated more than it is lamented. Her unsentimental edge, that morbid taint on her character, is never really represented as in need of fixing, since it defines her – and paradoxically enough is her source of strength. Lucy shuns the companionship of the attractive girl on the boat, whose smile shows ‘a perfect set of perfect teeth’, out of instinctive recognition that she is not akin to these smiling, sunshiny people. Lucy is a marginal figure for reasons beside her gender and her poverty; in her distaste and mistrust for laughter, she gives voice to an outsider’s perspective, bordering on the misanthropic, which is rarely allowed to go uncorrected in the Victorian novel.³⁰

²⁸ ‘Philosophy of Laughter’, *Chambers*, p. 322.

²⁹ As Brontë wrote to Williams in November 1852, ‘anybody living her life would necessarily become morbid’ (*Letters III*, p. 80).

³⁰ Anne Brontë’s Helen Huntingdon, for instance, must learn to laugh as a sign of her recuperation into society. As McMaster describes, she gradually ‘ameliorates’ her ‘sharpness’ out of love for Gilbert Markham, until the ‘smile comes more naturally’ – ‘Laughter at last! And it is both a sign of conscious love and a manifestation of reawakening gladness in a life in which laughter had become horrible ... The

Lucy's mingled feelings of longing and contempt – her envious yet critical and aloof attitude towards the 'insiders' – is best illustrated by her relationship with Graham Bretton. 'There are human tempers', she concedes, 'bland, glowing, and genial, within whose influence it is as good for the poor in spirit to live, as it is for the feeble in frame to bask in the glow of noon. Of the number of these choice natures were certainly both Dr. Bretton's and his mother's.' For Lucy they 'communicate happiness ... Every day while I stayed with them, some little plan was proposed which resulted in beneficial enjoyment.' So far, so straightforward; she benefits from the Brettons' wholesome geniality. Everything Graham does is accomplished 'with the bountiful cheerfulness of high and unbroken energies', and he lets 'his pleasure beam in his eye and play about his mouth.' But, just as these attractive traits spell trouble in the case of the schoolgirls, Lucy is not always so uncritical of his 'bright animal spirits', or willing to see pure innocence in the 'bountiful cheerfulness' of his countenance (pp. 196, 198). In Graham, Brontë succeeds in crystallizing the *double* menace of laughter, recreating in a realist context that same mixed joviality and sardonicism of the Duke of Zamorna – that combination of animal and intellectual energies which in 'The Spell' is represented through the concept of a dual personality. A medical man with boyish charm, Graham's 'animal' spirits complement rather than clash with his intellectual penetration.³¹

bitter resistance to smiles and laughter that her first marriage had induced has been dispelled.' McMaster, 'Imbecile Laughter', pp. 365-6.

³¹ The complex historical connotations of the phrase 'animal spirits' are explored by George Rousseau, who explains that the animal spirits 'pertained to both flesh *and* soul' and 'carried three cognitive meanings': '(1) sources of sensations; (2) seats of temperament, i.e., especially courage and masculinity; (3) sources of human inclinations, i.e., especially vivacity and gaiety of disposition.' See Rousseau, *Nervous Acts: Essays on Literature, Culture and Sensibility* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 18, 20 (Rousseau's emphasis). It will be seen, then, that the phrase is well suited to Graham, who (as well as exemplifying masculine vigour and gaiety of disposition) is characterised both by his materialism and by his noble qualities (flesh *and* soul), and whom Lucy consequently regards with a mixture of derision and hero worship.

Like Mary Percy in her anxious scrutiny of Zamorna's laughing countenance, Lucy is obsessed by the challenge of interpreting Graham's moods and thoughts. Almost never without a smile on his face, these enigmatic smiles must be gauged by Lucy, who offers the following analysis:

As to his smile, one could not in a hurry make up one's mind as to the descriptive epithet it merited; there was something in it that pleased, but something too that brought surging up into the mind all one's foibles and weak points: all that could lay one open to a laugh; yet Fifine [Madame Beck's daughter] liked this doubtful smile, and thought the owner genial (p. 96).

Alternately attracted and annoyed by him, Lucy is plagued by suspicions respecting the uncertain balance of kindness and cruelty in his 'doubtful smile.' The child Fifine, 'an honest, gleeful little soul' with a 'healthy frame ... blue eye and ruddy cheek' (p. 94) is physically and temperamentally akin to the doctor and therefore perfectly comfortable in his presence. But to Lucy his charisma, good looks and physical presence (on top of his social standing and professional authority) make him an intimidating figure. Like Jane in her awkwardness around St John (nodded to in Bretton's alias 'Dr John'), and her acknowledgement that if Rochester 'had been a handsome man' she could not have felt at her ease with him, Lucy is as suspicious of the handsome doctor as she would be of any 'perfect set of perfect teeth.' His smile causes her to feel keenly her vulnerability, and her worst fear: that she should be 'laid open to a laugh.' Speaking 'gravely' but 'chuckling, however, to myself', Lucy's usual recourse to supposedly secretive yet blatant laughter, so effective amongst the thick-skinned Labassecouriennes, overshoots the mark with the more sensitive Englishman. Dr John has 'a fine set of nerves, and he at once felt by instinct, what no more coarsely constituted mind would have detected; namely, that I was a little amused by him.' She observes that 'the colour rose to his cheek; with half a smile he turned and took his hat – he was going. My heart smote me'

(p. 125). Lucy's self-assurance here is checked, since she is in her turn disturbed and stung by the 'half a smile' that her chuckling mockery provokes.

On her first night in Vilette, Lucy is helped by an English gentleman who turns out to be Graham – and, even then, she had been able to acknowledge his kindness only with a reserved suspicion that he may be laughing at her in the dark. 'I don't know whether he smiled', she comments, but he spoke 'in a gentlemanly tone; that it is to say, a tone not hard nor terrifying' (p. 62). Her wariness of a 'hardness' about him is inseparable, contradictory as it might seem, from her wariness of any signs of mischief or levity. Typically, Graham has 'a mischievous half-smile about his lips' (p. 102) or he listens 'good-naturedly, but with laughing indifference' (p. 104). She is relieved on one occasion to find that 'his mouth was not cynical' (p. 191). Mrs Bretton, too, has an indefinable hardness submerged beneath her godmotherly kindness. When Lucy eventually tells us that she had recognised Dr John as the Graham of her childhood, she explains it was on account of his smile (p. 175), and likewise when she wakes up in the Brettons' house, she recognises his mother 'smiling with that smile I so well knew – a pleasant smile, though not soft' (p. 172). In Auerbach's useful description of Brontë's mode of characterisation, 'Lucy does not reflect the stable essence of character; she presents "the *view* of character" as it fluctuates from moment to moment, refracted by the split in Lucy herself ... All the characters who exclude Lucy are split up in this way: lacking a fixed essence, they become unknowable.'³² This is certainly true of Graham, whose fluctuating appearances reflect the 'split' in his character which draws such mixed feelings from Lucy. In contrast to the 'knowable' Paul, whose 'fixed essence' is reassuringly revealed through his authentic smiles, Graham is all perplexing surfaces and hinted, but not readily discernible depths.

³² Auerbach's emphasis, pp. 208, 210.

As Lucy's unrequited interest in Graham grows stronger, his smiles become increasingly a source of pain to her. Desperately clinging to her secrets and in fear for her sanity, she initially refuses to tell the doctor about the ghostly 'nun' she has seen because 'You would laugh ... You are laughing now.' When he insists, she retreats further: 'I felt raillery in his words; it made me grave and quiet';

Graham in mirthful mood must not be humoured too far. Just now there was a new sort of smile playing about his lips – very sweet, but it grieved me somehow – a new sort of light sparkling in his eyes: not hostile, but not reassuring (p. 248).

The qualified strain is characteristic of Lucy's attempts to describe his laughter. And her vulnerability to emotional exposure (her desire for Graham) is intertwined with her dread of being 'laid open to a laugh.' She will only confide in him after again seeking the assurance, 'You will not laugh?' at which Graham evokes the conventional notion of well-intentioned mockery: 'Perhaps I may, to do you good; but not in scorn.' Even his laughter – as he deems – has the capacity to effect good results in a patient, but Lucy will only give in having satisfied herself that 'he now looked like a friend: that indescribable smile and sparkle were gone; those formidable arched curves of lip, nostril, eyebrow, were depressed; repose marked his attitude – attention sobered his aspect' (p. 249). The attractive, 'sparkling' quality of Graham's kindness 'in mirthful mood', his unbounded energy and sense of fun, is 'formidable', powerfully oppressive to Lucy's melancholy state of mind. His charisma threatens to draw her out, to expose her all at once to his erotic power, his clinical gaze, and his ridicule; she is therefore relieved to find him returned to sober earnestness.

As with the schoolgirls, whose jolly good health puts an innocent face on their underlying deviousness, Lucy recognises that Graham's upbeat lightheartedness and good humour mask insult, or at least indifference to her, and that she is chiefly sensitive to this on account of her own contrasting low spirits. 'He had assumed a bantering air: a

light, half-caressing, half-ironic, shone aslant in his eye' she notes another time – but 'mine was a soon-depressed, an easily-deranged temperament – it fell if a cloud crossed the sun.' Lucy is obliged to 'keep down the unreasonable pain which thrilled my heart, on thus being made to feel that while Graham could devote to others the most grave and earnest, the manliest interest, he had no more than light raillery for Lucy' (p. 315). She is simultaneously seduced and chilled by the 'half-caressing, half-ironic' quality of his raillery; if it is beneficial for the 'feeble in frame', the 'poor in spirit', to 'bask in the glow' of such genial tempers as Graham's, it is altogether more damaging when 'a cloud [crosses] the sun.' While she is intolerant of such changes in temperature, Graham himself is insensitive to pain, strengthened by his buoyant spirits. When he has trials to undergo, Lucy observes that 'no temper, save his own, would have expressed by a smile the sort of agitation which now fevered him' – throughout trouble 'his smile never faded', while 'pain only made Dr. John laugh, as anxiety had made him smile' (pp. 432-5). Resilient himself, Graham is unable to wholly empathise with those who are unable to brightly smile through pain (the remedy advocated in Dickens's novels); it is in this way that Brontë accounts for how such characters may be *hardened* rather than softened by the very pleasantness of their tempers.

The correlation between cheerfulness and toughness is illustrated in the fact that Graham is everywhere known for his smiling, good-humoured airs, except by the one person more lively and laughing than him: Ginevra, who finds him absurdly serious and dull. She had hoped that she and her admirer should 'flutter about like two butterflies, and be happy', but instead finds him 'grave as a judge, and deep-feeling and thoughtful' (p. 92). It is significant that to everyone else, with whom Graham is jolly, he is a self-assured, respected, even intimidating figure (especially for Lucy, who wishes that he would be earnest with her instead), whereas his deadly seriousness with Ginevra makes him a pathetic object of scorn and ridicule, and places him in her power. The link

between his hardiness (or hardness) and his merriment is made explicit when Lucy surmises that the ‘strong and cheerful’ Graham is ‘one of those on whose birth benign planets have certainly smiled. Adversity might set against him her most sullen front: he was the man to beat her down with smiles’ (p. 177). Thus, smiled on benignly (unlike the less fortunate, and much sneered-at Lucy) he also survives by smiles. That these are often of a less than benign nature is hinted at in the choice of phrase, ‘beat her down’, while the abstract Adversity being both female and ‘sullen’ seems to suggest Lucy herself, who certainly often feels beaten down – and very often by smiles.

Ginevra, indeed, is the hardest character in the novel – and (once again) she is robust, vibrant, likeable, but at the same time deviously cruel. She receives Lucy’s insults by laughing ‘as if I had paid her a compliment’ (p. 87), while the drier Lucy is with her, ‘the more merrily she laughed’ (p. 477). Her laughter is both how she wounds, and how she demonstrates imperviousness to insult, and the frank openness with which she does both is what shatters Graham’s illusions of her as ladylike, innocent and tractable. Thoroughly disconcerted to find her making fun of his mother in public (pp. 215-21), he stiffly doubts ‘whether Ginevra will have [gained respect] by making a butt of her neighbours’, and assures Lucy he would not mind her laughing at him, ‘but my mother? I never saw her ridiculed before. Do you know, the curling lip, and sarcastically levelled glass thus directed, gave me a most curious sensation?’ Lucy’s empty reassurance relies on the false differentiation between malice and high spirits: ‘if Ginevra were in a giddy mood, as she [is] tonight, she would make no scruple of laughing at that mild, pensive Queen, or that melancholy King. She is not actuated by malevolence, but sheer, heedless folly. To a feather-brained school-girl nothing is sacred.’ But as Lucy well knows, no one in *Villette* is actuated merely by ‘sheer, heedless folly’, which is always inseparable from malevolence. She has consistently mocked Graham’s notions of Ginevra’s unthinking innocence, laughing at his claim that

she is too ‘simple-minded’ to know the value of his gifts (‘I had heard her adjudge to every jewel its price’) (p. 193). Ginevra may laugh openly and without subtlety, but – knowing her scheming character as she does – Lucy’s apologetic construction of her as a feather-brained schoolgirl echoes the naivety of Graham himself.

Disillusioned by the incident, Graham establishes the rules with a pompous didacticism suggestive of *Shirley*’s narrator: ‘The merry may laugh *with* mama, but the weak only will laugh *at* her. She shall not be ridiculed, with my consent at least.’ Realising, however, that he is rising to the bait, he recovers the advantage by affecting merriment: ‘I am glad she laughed at my mother ... That sneer did me all the good in the world. Thank you, Miss Fanshawe!’ Mrs Bretton, too, is far too cheery to be insulted just because Ginevra ‘satirically levels her eye-glass’ at her, exclaiming ‘she is a pretty, silly girl: but are you apprehensive that her titter will discomfit the old lady?’ (pp. 218-9; Brontë’s emphasis) For the remainder of the evening, strong (and rather forced) emphasis is placed on the good-natured merriment and frequent causes for laughter enjoyed by the Brettons’ party, regardless of Ginevra’s superior sneers. The line between folly and felicity is drawn again – only this time with more than a hint of irony. Lucy’s perception of Graham’s superiority is coloured once again by violent imagery, when she notes that Graham’s ‘cheerfulness *seemed* natural and unforced ... I read in [his demeanour] no common mastery of the passions, and a fund of deep and healthy strength which, without any exhausting effort, bore down Disappointment and extracted her fang’ (p. 223; my emphasis). Throughout the novel, the positive connotations attached to ‘naturalness’ and ‘healthiness’ are seamlessly blended in this way with suggestions of self-serving performance and calculated ‘mastery of the passions.’ In a more subtle critique of male power than that offered in *Shirley*, Brontë suggests that it may operate not apart from, but under cover of benign appearances and good cheer.

As Lucy gains emotional distance, she is increasingly wise to the sinister aspect of Graham's smiles. Watching his response to the passionate singing of 'Vashti', she is chilled to observe that 'such a strange smile went wandering round his lips, a smile so critical, so almost callous!' (p. 260) The fleeting evidence of critical callousness towards an openly passionate woman is a key moment of truth, putting Lucy on her guard. But what is most notable about Graham is how Brontë invests his character with such disturbing power, without making it seem disproportionate to his cheerful mundanity. He has all the mysteriousness of a sadistic Angrian aristocrat, yet he has no secrets or latent evil to be revealed, remaining instead an ordinary, kindly enough middle-class man. At sixteen, he is 'animated ... with sanguine health in his cheek ... penetrating eyes [and] a gay smile', and yet, Lucy muses, his portrait raises doubt about his capacity for faith – 'for whatever sentiment met him in form too facile, his lips menaced, beautifully but surely, caprice and light esteem' (p. 170). Two sides of Graham are present in the portrait: the pleasantness promised in the 'sanguine health' and the 'gay smile', and the suspicions menaced by his seductive beauty, the 'penetrating eyes' and sinister lips. Yet these are the same lips that form the 'gay smile'; the two faces form one physiognomic whole. On our first introduction to Graham, his smile is described as 'frequent, and destitute neither of fascination nor of subtlety, (in no bad sense)', and indeed Lucy means it in no *really* bad sense – the ominous biblical connotations of guile and deceit lead to nothing; Graham's snake-like charisma does not conceal satanic depths. Refusing to cast any actual aspersions on Graham's religious or moral respectability, Brontë nonetheless challenges the popular equation of wholesome health with transparent honesty, through a portrait of the unsettling power that may coexist with commonplace masculine benignity.

As romance develops between Graham and Polly (now Paulina, Countess de Bassompierre), Lucy observes with interest his self-restraint and calm amusement:

Not one of those pretty impulses and natural breaks escaped him. He did not miss one characteristic movement, one hesitation [or] one lisp. [At times] she still lisped; but coloured whenever such lapse occurred, and in a painstaking conscientious manner, quite as amusing as the slight error, repeated the word more distinctly. Whenever she did this, Dr. Bretton smiled. [Gradually] the restraint on each side slackened ... already to Paulina's lip and cheek returned the wreathing, dimpling smile; she lisped once, and forgot to correct herself. [Graham] did not grow gayer – no raillery, no levity sparkled across his aspect – but his position seemed to become one of more pleasure to himself (p. 288).

Paulina lays herself open to a laugh often enough – from Graham, from her father, and from Lucy, all of whom take a 'pleasure' in her lisping, child-like naivety. Lucy is able to tolerate this rival because she likes her, but also because, as when she was a child, she can ridicule her – she does not entirely respect her. Paulina laughs 'unconsciously', or betrays her feelings with 'an unconscious but tender smile' (p. 290) which makes her transparent, manageable. She is ladylike where Ginevra is rudely direct, but endearingly 'unconscious' where Ginevra behaves with intent; she is 'tender' rather than sharp. Thus her laugh, 'clearer than the ring of silver and crystal', conforms to idealised descriptions of the feminine laugh in its mingled clarity, purity and unobtrusiveness. Its 'clearness' nods to the transparency of the open laugh, clearing her of artifice, but at the same time the evocation of silver and crystal suggests aesthetic surface rather than unseemly bodily depth – delicacy rather than heartiness (p. 279). While tending Paulina, Lucy's distrust and jealousy are kept at bay by a sense of her innocence, over which she can feel superior. She observes that 'her lip wore a curl – I doubt not inherent and unconscious, but which, if I had seen it first with the accompaniments of health and state, would have struck me as unwarranted, and proving in the little lady a quite

mistaken view of life and her own consequence' (p. 264). She thus goes some way to acknowledging her usual hastiness of judgment – it is only the Countess's vulnerable condition (her impaired physical health), and Lucy's position in charge of her, that redeem her from charges of haughty showing off. Brontë maintains an unusual balance in the case of Paulina, whose icy aesthetic perfection does not undermine her emotional softness: 'the smile of feeling, rather than of conscious power, slept soft in her eyes' (p. 370).

In some respects Paulina represents what Lucy herself might have been. Lucy speculates that if Paulina had suffered pain, hardship and fear instead of a comfortable life (in other words, if she had lived Lucy's life) it would have ruined her nerves, and her features – she would have 'lost in health and cheerfulness' (p. 376). Her assessment of the delicate Countess is revealing: 'Graham had a wealth of mirth by nature; Paulina possessed no such inherent flow of animal spirits – unstimulated, she inclined to be thoughtful and pensive – but now she seemed merry as a lark; in her lover's genial presence, she glowed like some soft glad light' (p. 423). Recalling Lucy's words in relation to herself – that to 'bask' in the genial influence of the Brettons is a cure for poor health and melancholy – this suggests that Lucy too might have been healthily glowing, 'merry as a lark', with Graham's love. But at the same time it is recognised that this would not, in fact, have been all gain for Lucy, who is not assigned the innocent, lark-like contentment of Frances ('happy as a bird with its mate') or Jane. It is Paulina who – like those earlier heroines – is given an endearingly elf-like charm ('and the vexed, triumphant, pretty, naughty being laughed'; p. 304). Her rebellious 'triumphs' are spirited but piquant and flirtatious, where Lucy's demonstrations of defiance are emptied of mitigating sweetness.

'From a mask to a face': Paul Emanuel

As Paul replaces Graham as the object of Lucy's romantic interests, she is keen to impress on us simultaneously two contradictory things: the power and status of this intimidating figure, and the mocking levity with which she, Lucy, feels confident enough to treat him. She does the former by stressing that no one would dare 'laugh in his face' (p. 143), or telling us that – at an arrangement of Paul's – 'highly absurd as it was, not a soul in the room dared to laugh', as 'luckless for the giggler would be the giggle' (p. 329). But Lucy does dare to laugh – she delights in it, apparently finding rich stores of entertainment in Paul's eccentricities and ugliness, and (more to the point) a means therein to antagonise and torment him. Early mentions of him are accompanied by assertions of the following kind: 'M. Paul amused me; I smiled to myself as I watched him ... so perfectly in earnest ... so naive' (p. 212). 'He made me smile', she informs us again – 'Who could help smiling at his wistfulness, his simplicity, his earnestness?' (p. 320). Emphasising his short stature and child-like qualities, Lucy repeatedly refers to Paul in belittling terms, more often than not with the epithet 'little.'

Paul, however, is not sweet-tempered but fiery and draconian. Feeling self-conscious in a pink dress, Lucy is relieved when Graham takes no further notice beyond 'a kind smile and satisfied nod, which calmed at once my sense of shame and fear of ridicule' (p. 208). But when Paul sees her, 'sardonic comment [on the dress] gleamed in his eye', while his 'mocking but not ill-humoured gaze' is 'turned to a swarthy frown' when Lucy slights him (pp. 221-2). The reasons for Lucy's transferral of affections are apparent here – Graham's kind but commonplace response is less provocative than Paul's mocking gaze, which does at least express interest in the dress and its wearer, and which furthermore is easily crushed. Lucy finds herself newly empowered in her relations with this alternately challenging and manageable character, whose earnestness and naivety – and consequent sensitivity to insult from Lucy – are as much an attraction

as his fierce masculine vigour. Where the late arrival of Shirley's lover had brought about her subjection to him, Lucy finds on the contrary that she can lay Paul open to plenty of laughter, and pursues her advantage accordingly, taking 'a certain pleasure in keeping cool, and working him up' (p. 201).

The assault is on both sides: Paul relishes Lucy's intellectual failings, taking 'quiet opportunities of chuckling in [her] ear his malign glee' (p. 234), and Lucy wishes she had been better educated, so that with 'one cold, cruel, overwhelming triumph' she could have 'for ever crushed the mocking spirit' out of him (p. 354). But Paul in his turn is stung on finding her playing with a handkerchief he has given her, perceiving her to be 'mocking him and his things' (p. 241). Indeed, the handkerchief comes to play a symbolic part in the contest between them. Lucy records her impressions when Paul arrives at an event to give a speech:

This head I knew ... the amplitude and paleness of brow, the blueness and fire of glance, were details so domesticated in the memory, and so knit with many a whimsical association, as almost by this their sudden apparition, to tickle fancy to a laugh. Indeed, I confess, for my part, I did laugh till I was warm; but then I bent my head, and made my handkerchief and a lowered veil the sole confidants of my mirth (p. 310).

Her manoeuvre here might recall the delicacy of Caroline and Shirley, endeavouring to hide their laughter from Malone. But the handkerchief and lowered veil are introduced as false gestures of discretion (and are by no means 'the sole confidants of her mirth', since she shares her amusement with the reader); like Paul's speech, this is a public performance. The handkerchief device is soon exposed as a superficial display due to a parallel performance from Graham, after Paul has attempted to embarrass Lucy with a jealous whisper. 'The worst of the matter was', Lucy records, 'that Dr. Bretton ... caught every word of this apostrophe; he put his handkerchief to his face and laughed till he

shook.’ Looking over at Paul, Graham observes to Lucy that ‘in his soul he is frantic at this moment because he sees me laughing. Oh! I must tease him ... And Graham, yielding to his bent for mischief, laughed, jested, and whispered on till I could bear no more.’ Graham stops when he realises that there is a space free near Paulina, who (‘ever-vigilant, even while laughing’) he has meanwhile been watching – at which he ‘crossed the room, and made the advantage his own’ (p. 318). The incident throws significant light on Lucy’s similar display of rudeness, moments before. The handkerchief, in *Villette*, is introduced not for purposes of concealment but for purposes of emphasis. Lucy laughs ‘till she is warm’ less because she is naturally tickled at a humorous spectacle than because of her own ‘bent for mischief’, which she yields to quite intentionally, just as Graham decides ‘Oh! I must tease him.’ Laughter in *Villette* is always – whether from the self-assured Graham or the less confident Lucy – an act not of relaxation or abandonment to the moment, but of calculation and strategy, entirely consistent with ‘vigilance.’

But Paul represents something new in Lucy’s life – more than a continuation of the battle of wits she plays with everyone else, and further opportunities for sarcasm. This is first impressed on us through the description of Paul’s smile when he and Lucy are reconciled:

You should have seen him smile, reader; and you should have marked the difference between his countenance now, and that he wore half an hour ago. I cannot affirm that I ever witnessed the smile of pleasure, or content, or kindness round M. Paul’s lips, or in his eyes before. The ironic, the sarcastic, the disdainful, the passionately exultant, I had hundreds of times seen him express by what he called a smile, but any illuminated sign of milder or warmer feeling struck me as wholly new in his visage. It changed it as from a mask to a face: the deep lines left his features; the very complexion seemed clearer and fresher; that swart, sallow, southern darkness which spoke his Spanish blood, became displaced by a lighter hue. I know not that I have

ever seen in any other human face an equal metamorphosis from a similar cause (p. 321).

This smile ('the smile of feeling, rather than of conscious power') marks a turning-point for Lucy in her transition from Graham to Paul. She had previously been used only to artificial gesture, from him as from others – Paul 'grimacing a half-smile, or what he intended for a smile, though it was but a grim and hurried manifestation' (p. 204). This new expression of feeling moves her not only for what it tells her about Paul's character – that he is capable of more than 'the ironic, the sarcastic, the disdainful, the passionately exultant' – but also because these 'milder and warmer' feelings are bestowed on *her*, such a smile being fresh and novel to the emotionally starved Lucy.

Being Lucy, she interprets it in such a way as to make Paul better suited to her ideologically; the smile essentially improves him, rather than simply gratifying her. Thus the 'metamorphosis' is powerful even to the point of going some way to change his nationality, making him more English, and thereby making his very blood more healthy and more acceptable. The concept is that of a blood-deep smile, not a shallow, surface manifestation. Entirely natural (revealing a face where a mask had been), this is an 'illumination' or revelation which renders transparent his whole being; no 'doubtful' secrets lurk beneath it, as with Graham's more ambivalent 'half-smiles'. It comes from Paul's inner depths, whereas for all his flaunted deep 'healthy fund' of spirits, Graham's smiles are characterised by their showy 'sparkle', or even Paulina's laughter as the tinkle of silver and crystal. And it is in complete contrast to such strategic smiles as that of the 'cold, snaky' Zélie St. Pierre, who is eager to secure Paul's attention when he enters the room:

As usual, Zélie rose with alacrity, smiling to the whole extent of her mouth, and the full display of her upper and under rows of teeth – that strange smile which passes

from ear to ear, and is marked only by a sharp thin curve, which fails to spread over the countenance, and neither dimples the cheek nor lights the eye (p. 328).

The true natural smile, Brontë suggests, is in tune with the body, ‘spreading’ organically with easy fluidity – Zélie’s is artificial, mask-like, representing the effect on the face of an exertion of the will, and (as we have seen) it is a far more common phenomenon in *Villette*.

Again in refreshing contrast to the hard-minded Graham, who watches the passionate Vashti with a ‘critical’, ‘callous’ smile, Paul is romantic and subject to his emotions. When his smiles are genuine he labours not to produce but to suppress them, speaking on another occasion ‘in a growl of which the music was wholly confined to his chest and throat, for he kept his teeth clenched, and seemed registering to himself an inward vow, that nothing earthly should wring from him a smile’ (p. 325). Such attempts at self-mastery are futile with Lucy, who notes another time that he ‘covered with his hand the upper part of his face, but did not conceal his mouth, where I saw hovering an expression I liked’ (p. 405). Lucy is again gratified when, fearing she has displeased him, she looks up and finds that ‘his face, instead of being irate, lowering, and furrowed, was overflowing with the smile, coloured with the bloom I had seen brightening it that evening [described above].’ Paul is at the mercy of this ‘overflowing’ expression, which comes spontaneously, from within – similar subjection to his emotions is implied when he is disturbed, and ‘his luminous smile went out’ (p. 481).

But the affective softening undergone by Lucy herself due to this new relationship is by no means so apparent as the change in Frances or Jane – she remains her ‘crabbed and crusty’ self, rather than experiencing any transformation in emotional and bodily health comparable to Paul’s smiling metamorphosis. She is not noticeably normalised, or socialized; womanly impulses do not rise to the surface to crack up her customary mask. Paul, likewise, remains prone to vindictive, sniping moods, which

come to present an enjoyably stimulating challenge to Lucy. In illustration of this, the action on Paul's birthday is played out in the following sequence: first Zélie smiles triumphantly, 'well pleased' when she realises that Lucy has no flowers for Paul, who will expect them (p. 337). Paul enters glowing and radiant – 'in a mood which made him as good as a new sunbeam', Lucy notes; the 'light, playing amongst our plants and laughing on our walls, caught an added lustre from M. Paul's all-benignant salute' (pp. 337-8). This quickly changes to violent fury when he discovers that Lucy has no flowers for him – at which the 'comic side of Monsieur's behaviour' tempts Lucy into the perverse resolve to stay mute instead of producing the present that she does, in fact, have ready to give him. 'M. Paul was so tragic, and took my defection so seriously, he deserved to be vexed' she declares (p. 340), echoing Ginevra's earlier vexing flippancy at the expense of a tragically serious Graham. Aggrieved, Paul commences his revenge by launching into a vicious tirade against England and English women, at which 'Zélie, and the whole class, became one grin of vindictive delight; for it is curious to discover how these clowns of Labassecour secretly hate England' ('secret' sentiments are of course perfectly articulated in the usual fashion). Roused in her turn, Lucy speaks up in protest, which hands the advantage over to Paul, who expresses his triumph accordingly: 'the professor put up his handkerchief, and fiendishly smiled into his folds. Little monster of malice!' (p. 341).

Again, the handkerchief is introduced for purposes of emphasis, not concealment. But the war waged above is a notably playful one, and Lucy's exclamation ('little monster of malice!') conveys affection rather than doubt and mistrust. With Paul, 'malicious' and 'fiendish' smiles have become endearing – the threat posed by masculine laughter has been finally rendered almost tame. Lucy is well-matched with this monster. Herself an artful master of the fiendish smile ('I thought Lucifer smiled' laments Paul when she mocks his religious beliefs; p. 397), she may be

eager for affection but she is nonetheless keen to see Paul assert his strengths and skills amidst the cut-throat atmosphere of Vilette. Once assured of his ‘milder’ and ‘warmer’ feelings for her, she is willing to acknowledge her delight in his sharper side; the sneers which Jane Eyre had dismissed or forbidden with appalled dismay, Lucy encourages. When he ‘sneers’ at her, Lucy tells us, ‘his injustice stirred in me ambitious wishes – it imparted a strong stimulus – it gave me wings to aspiration.’ Previously, that ‘uncomprehended sneer of his made my heart ache, but by-and-by it only warmed the blood in my veins, and sent added action to my pulses’ (pp. 351, 352). Recording the antagonism between Paul and the bluestocking teacher, one Madame Panache (a contest she likens to that between Napoleon and de Staël), Lucy is vexed that Paul cannot disguise his anger and employ mockery: ‘Instead of laughing in his sleeve at his fair foe, with all her sore amour propre and loud self-assertion, M. Paul detested her with intense seriousness; he honoured her with his earnest fury’ (p. 349). Lucy’s frustration arises from her knowledge of the power that can be wielded by putting a triumphant (mocking) face on a battle not yet won – beating down an adversary with smiles. Treasuring for herself Paul’s ‘earnestness’, his inability to disguise emotion, here she wishes he would assume the ‘mask’ that would empower him – laughing in one’s sleeve, it is implied, is as (in)effective as laughing into a handkerchief.

The relationship between Lucy and Paul, then, in many ways consolidates both a defiant anti-sentimentality, and a reconciliation with the heart – a levelling between men and women, made possible by a balance of healthy feeling with eccentric malignancy. But it would not be true to say that in her final novel Brontë entirely resolves her misgivings concerning the gender politics present in laughter. By the end of *Vilette*, when Lucy is thoroughly attached to Paul and in danger of losing him, it is made clear that a transferral of power has taken place – she is less self-controlled, and correspondingly less inclined to sneer at him. This is reflected in her perception of his

behaviour at the midnight fête, during her opium trance. She notes that upon his arrival, the ‘Walravens-party, augmented in numbers, now became very gay ... they drank healths and sentiments; they laughed, they jested’ (p. 466). Paul ‘underwent some raillery, half good-humoured, half, I thought, malicious’ – but, undaunted by his subjection to such raillery, Paul appears utterly in control, his dominance in the group made conspicuous by his joviality. ‘M. Emanuel was indeed very joyous that night’, Lucy jealously remarks; he ‘was the true life of the party; a little despotic perhaps, determined to be chief in mirth ... yet from moment to moment proving indisputably his right of leadership. His was the wittiest word, the pleasantest anecdote, the frankest laugh’ (p. 466).

Paul’s ‘despotic’ mirth is an act of determination; he asserts his ‘right of leadership’ by force of laughter. Perceiving intimacy between Paul and his young ward, the girl’s lover is made jealous and grumbles – ‘whereat M. Emanuel actually laughed in his face, and with the ruthless triumph of the assured conqueror, he drew his ward nearer to him’ (p. 466). What is notable about this scene is how thoroughly the distinctions between positive and negative laughter have been broken down and rendered meaningless. Whether pleasant and frank, or ruthless and exultant, Paul’s laughter rings loudly and oppressively in Lucy’s ears, and it is thereby indistinguishable, ultimately, from Graham’s laughter – Brontë has hit on the sound of patriarchal power. Its aggressiveness is underscored, yet undifferentiated from the jolly festivity of the atmosphere. In this respect, Micael Clarke makes a telling remark in commenting that the fête is supposed to represent ‘community, not anarchy, a festival, not a feast of misrule. But Lucy experiences this fête in a disoriented opium-dream state that evokes the Carnival.’³³ As I suggested in Chapter One, ‘carnavalesque’ laughter

³³ Micael M. Clarke, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*, Mid-Victorian Anti-Catholicism, and the Turn to Secularism’, *ELH*, 78 (2011), 967-89 (p. 984).

(insofar as this implies boisterous mirth and bodily affirmation) became almost synonymous with tame, sentimental laughter in the era of Dickens. Lucy's experience of the laughter here as threatening rather than cheering is a reflection less of her 'disoriented' state than of the general work done by the novel to remove any sense of innocence from 'community' merriment. There is symmetry here too: Lucy again finds herself on the outside of a happy, laughing party, a 'mere looker-on' at the Walravens party, as she had been to the Watsons on the boat coming over. Laughter excludes, even when it does not cause more direct pain.

When misunderstandings are cleared up and Paul presents Lucy with a school of her own, the reversal in their positions of power remains apparent. His benevolent patronage, and her relative position of grateful subordination, is expressed by the 'laughing down-look' he is able to bestow on her (p. 486). Laughing down, he no longer appears so diminutive. At the mention of his ward Lucy is stirred to jealousy, at which 'he smiled, betraying delight', so that it is now Lucy who is 'warm, jealous, and haughty', and her passionate little professor who is smugly entertained (p. 491). Warmth and health are stirred up in Lucy after all – which might be considered something of a double-edged outcome. Having rather less control over the 'conqueror' Paul is the price she pays for her happiness – a happiness whose genuineness is signalled by its resonance in her heart, as well as her face: 'I lifted my happy eyes: they *were* happy now, or they would have been no interpreters of my heart' (p. 483; Brontë's emphasis). Though Paul instructs Lucy before leaving to 'mind your health and happiness for my sake' (p. 487), his implied death at sea creates open-endedness. His drowning might return her to a life of miserable oppression ('the rush and saltiness of briny waves in my throat, and their icy pressure on my lungs'), but after all it is her embittered streak, and her frosty guardedness, that give Lucy her unique appeal amongst Victorian heroines. By subverting the happy ending, Brontë liberates Lucy from social,

and sociable constraints – allowing us to imagine her still living by her sharp wits, and wry smiles.

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Discussing Lucy's retiring habits in terms of her distaste for the prominently visible, fleshy materiality of the models of femininity displayed elsewhere in the novel, Jill Matus points out that she nonetheless 'does not want to play the man, as her insistence on retaining female garb in the school dramatic production reveals.' Lucy 'articulates here the difficulty of envisaging a representation of female desire and sexuality that is not tantamount to looseness and "giant propensities" [the phrase applied to Bertha's sexual appetite in *Jane Eyre*].' Noting that 'the representation of Vashti's passionate self-expression suggests that the assumption of power by a woman is overwhelming, uncontainable', Matus points to the dilemma 'for the woman who does not want to exhibit herself as a spectacle for male consumption.'³⁴ Through her laughter, Lucy in some respects 'plays the man', but it is a role reversal which successfully answers to the problem identified by Matus – the difficulty of assuming (or performing) power without exhibiting herself as spectacle – since she does not laugh with wild abandonment, but with practised self-restraint. In deflecting attention from herself while scrutinising and judging others, Lucy's dispassionate laughter is an act of self-expression which simultaneously sustains her self-protective invisibility.³⁵

³⁴ Matus, pp. 147-8.

³⁵ This strategy might be described, using Litvak's phrase, as 'exchanging theatrical self-display for theatrical self-concealment.' Analysing Brontë's letters, Litvak claims that her 'wish for a sheltering shadow betokens not an anti-theatrical posture, but indeed an intensely theatrical penchant for disguise and dissimulation', p. 87. Lynn M. Voskuil offers a further insight into the kind of power wielded by such a 'posture', noting that 'though she depicts herself as passive, Lucy's position as spectator gives her an authority that seems sometimes masculine.' See Voskuil, 'Acting Naturally: Brontë, Lewes, and the Problem of Gender Performance', *ELH*, 62 (1995), 409-42 (p. 425).

Lucy's smiles are unfeminine not simply because they lack amiable sweetness. She resists gender definition insofar as she retains, for the most part, her ability to mystify and manipulate through laughter, without being compromised by the unwitting establishment of an innate, legible female identity. As discussed more fully in Chapter Three, the power dynamics in Brontë's novels rest on the contrast between the capacity to direct or channel emotions and energies through purposeful bodily display, and the experience of having an 'inner' emotional self betrayed and brought to the surface.³⁶ This opposition is repeatedly disrupted in *Villette*, which cannot be seen to reverse gender roles in any straightforward way, since Lucy directs her sarcasm at both men and women, and is threatened as much by Ginevra and Madame Beck as by Graham and Paul. The androgynous quality of the schoolgirls is reproduced in each and every character, to the extent that at some points Brontë seems to have succeeded in breaking down the restrictive gender boundaries, and accompanying behavioural patterns, that loom so large in her previous novels (*Shirley* in particular). But, ultimately, in blurring the distinction between appearances and authenticity, *Villette* achieves not so much a dismantling of patriarchal power as a clearer conception of its omnipresence. If there is no meaningful difference between Lucy's frigid exterior and her natural self, so Graham's coolness and warmth – his mockery and mirth – are unsettlingly interchangeable. Likewise, the opposition between 'mask' and 'face' is by the end thrown into question, as Lucy struggles to distinguish between Paul's merry and menacing moods. If Paul is 'honest, and not false – artless, and not cunning' (p. 494), he

³⁶ According to Gillian Beer, Brontë 'shows the way in which the inhibited inner world will demand vehement presence. She knows the dangers of being a spectator too long and sees that for her heroine [Lucy] to survive she must act, not only interpret.' See Beer, "'Coming Wonders": Uses of the Theatre in the Victorian Novel', in *English Drama: Forms and Development*, ed. by Marie Axton and Raymond Williams (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), pp. 164-85 (p. 185). But – as implied in Litvak's and Voskuil's readings (above) – the distinction between acting and interpreting is not always a valid one. Lucy's laughter is an act in its very refusal of an 'inhibited inner world'; it works to penetrate into others' secrets through its own performance of secrecy and spectatorship.

nonetheless emerges elsewhere as a hissing ‘boa-constrictor’ (p. 318).³⁷ Smiles and laughter in *Villette* provide insight not (borrowing Auerbach’s terms again) into ‘the stable essence of character’ but into ‘the *view* of character as it fluctuates from moment to moment.’ In some ways Lucy thrives in this environment of ‘doubtful smiles’, but it also fuels her feelings of vulnerability and mistrust – her wariness of being ‘laid open to a laugh.’

Matus points to a further problem, moreover, in the way in which ‘the ambiguous and troubling closure of the novel’ frees the heroine from subjection to the male gaze through killing her emotional life:

Lucy loves Monsieur Paul and is seen, recognised and rewarded by him, however problematic his despotic demeanour may be for modern readers. Lucy survives his loss, has economic independence, and is no man’s slave. But Brontë does not allow her to keep in sight that which reflects her desiring, sexual self, and she becomes understandably associated with frost and cold.³⁸

The laughter I have identified as ‘morbid’ is a source of power for Lucy: expressive but restrained, it combats ‘despotic demeanours’ and throws off slavery (to the gaze, but also to the mockery which is the consequence of being exposed to that gaze). But it is necessarily connected to ‘frost and cold’ in ways which shut down affective impulses and experiences. As I have argued, *Villette* does in some ways achieve the reconciliation of heart and head, and of men and women, that *Shirley* portrays in terms of stark opposition and painful, unresolved conflict. But Brontë’s refusal to confirm a happy life for Lucy with Paul is another indication that gender relations for the author remain

³⁷ Cf. Brontë’s description of Thackeray as an ‘intellectual boa-constrictor ... he does not play with his prey – he coils round it and crushes it in his rings’ (see Chapter One, p. 73).

³⁸ Matus, p. 148.

essentially problematic and unbalanced. Sexual fulfillment, for Lucy, is sacrificed to self-respect.

At the same time, if Brontë does not end on either an altogether happy or a conclusively defiant note, and if Lucy's laughter is at times discomfiting, bordering on the *ill*-nature so tabooed elsewhere in Victorian fiction, we should recognise that this morbidity for Brontë is inseparable from intellect and integrity. It makes its statement through being antipathetic to social and cultural expectations, and to the pressing demand for healthiness. I have traced the development of a mode of laughter which (as I stressed in Chapter One) is subversive, though not in any overwhelming or uplifting way. Resistant to optimism as well as to oppression, the laughter of Brontë's heroines will not be assimilated into the broader traditions of social harmony or wholehearted rebellion. Lucy, indeed, might be partly understood in the terms used by Auerbach to describe an earlier nineteenth-century heroine, Jane Austen's Fanny Price – who '[lures] us out of fellowship to adopt the perspective of the monstrous and the marginal':

Fanny captures our imaginations [by] welcoming the reader into her solitary animosity against the intricacies of the normal. [...] As omniscient watcher and anti-comic spirit [Fanny] possesses a subtler power than we find in brighter and livelier heroines of fiction ... Fanny moves beyond the sphere of traditional heroinism to associate herself with a host of dashing British villains ... a spectral presence at the communal feast.³⁹

Auerbach's perception of Fanny 'adopting the role of traditional literary villains' recalls Bertha Rochester's adoption of villainous laughter, which, as I argued in Chapter Two, establishes her 'spectral presence' but also reverses her victim status and challenges

³⁹ Auerbach, pp. 24, 27. She further describes Fanny as 'joyless', 'a killjoy', and an 'anticomic watcher', defined by her 'resistance to the comic' and to 'those impulses of comedy which bring us together' (p. 25).

female stereotypes.⁴⁰ Drily humorous rather than solemn, and ‘controlling’ through her expressive smiles as well as her quiet gaze, Lucy is not altogether an ‘anticomic watcher.’ Nonetheless, in her withdrawal from community feeling and from the ‘brighter and livelier’ atmosphere that Brontë equates with ‘the normal’, Lucy possesses a power that is simultaneously more subtle and more aggressive than that exerted by Caroline and Shirley. No wonder she so disconcerted the novel’s original critics.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 27. In this sense, Lucy also fits Juliet John’s description of Romantic, melodramatic or Dickensian villainy as being in opposition to community feeling (see Chapter Two, note 3) – but as Auerbach playfully suggests, this might be seen in a positive light after all, making a character wickedly appealing rather than in need of rescuing.

Conclusion

Five years after her death, Thackeray would reflect on Brontë's place in the public imagination: 'Of the multitude that has read her books, who has not known and deplored the tragedy of her family, her own most sad and untimely fate?' Tellingly, he remembers:

the burning love of truth, the bravery, the simplicity, the indignation at wrong, the eager sympathy, the pious love and reverence [of] the woman ... the trembling little hand ... the heart, newly awakened to love and happiness, and throbbing with maternal hope ... that intrepid outspokener and champion of truth, that eager, impetuous redresser of wrong ... the trembling little frame, the little hand, the great honest eyes. An impetuous honesty seemed [to] characterize the woman ... an austere little Joan of Arc marching in upon us, and rebuking our easy lives, our easy morals ... a very pure, and lofty, and high-minded person.¹

Exalting and ennobling Brontë, Thackeray also emphasises her fragility and humanity in line with the general tendency, initiated by Gaskell, to foreground biography at the expense of the literary works, creating a myth of 'the Brontë sisters' according to which they are great geniuses, but *women* before intellectuals. All large eyes, little frame and throbbing heart, this image of embodied womanhood is inseparable from the impression of passionate sincerity that Thackeray calls up; she is an 'outspeaker', but defined by 'simplicity' and 'sympathy', while it is her newly awakened happiness in married life that makes her endearing, vulnerable, and ultimately tragic. Thackeray captures traits that are typically still attached to Brontë today: melancholy, impetuous feeling, truth-telling earnestness.² This thesis has sought to explain why such a 'pure, and lofty, and

¹ Thackeray, 'The Last Sketch', *Cornhill Magazine*, 1 (1860), 485-7 (pp. 486-7).

² As Miller records, the Brontë family has been relentlessly romanticised and 'primarily remembered for its tragedies' (p. 2; see also pp. 29, 63), while another popular image – quite contrary to the idea of wild passions or sincere suffering, but equally anti-comic – is that of Charlotte Brontë as the epitome of 'the current negative stereotype of the Victorian age: prim, priggish, and a prude' (p. 135).

high-minded person' should have had so much to say about something so frivolous as laughter.

Thackeray distances himself from the woman writer through affectionate memories of when she 'took [him] to task' for his flippancy, stressing that she (impulsively) 'jumped too rapidly to conclusions', and using the tribute (though with gentlemanly graciousness, of course) to assure readers that she had been wrong about him: 'I have smiled at one or two passages in the *Biography* [Gaskell's *Life*] in which my own disposition or behaviour forms the subject of talk.'³ The rhetorical imposition of a kindly but corrective smile in the direction of the 'eager', misguided woman is a reassertion of the literal smiles that Brontë recalled being the object of when she first entered literary society.⁴ It evokes the politely satirical strain that (as seen in Chapter One) Brontë perceived to run through Thackeray's novels, and to be especially present amidst his sentimental fervour for the female character. And it is just the sort of smile that Brontë's own novels repeatedly either protest at, or reassign to distinctly unsentimental female lips. The picture drawn by Thackeray is soon thrown into question by a glance at the lively presence of humour and satire in Brontë's writings. But it is perhaps more important to examine the senses in which it is *true* to say that she had little time for laughter, and to question why she so indignantly took Thackeray to task. Brontë's burning love of truth and austere position on flippancy are countered at many points in her novels by her sense of humour, but we should look, too, to the social conditions that produced this ambivalence, this stand-off between the honest, earnest heart and the sly, smirking intellect.

³ Thackeray, 'The Last Sketch', p. 486.

⁴ George Smith would recall Brontë's 'discomposure' when Thackeray teased her in public on one occasion (Brontë herself observed 'the smile on several faces' when he did so). Whenever they met, according to Smith, Brontë's 'heroics roused Thackeray's sense of humour.' See Margaret Smith's notes, *Letters*, II (pp. 300-1, 563).

In Chapter One, I argued that impulsive, unrestrained laughter in the early to mid-nineteenth century was encouraged and enjoyed (theoretically at least) to an underestimated extent, in contrast to the later Victorian wariness (or weariness) over the merits and desirability of such laughter. This change in attitudes can be linked to developments in comic theory and literary values – the ‘change from the pre-eminence of amiable humour to that of comedy of the intellect’, as Martin describes it.⁵ Bowen identifies the 1850s as a ‘watershed in Victorian comic writing’, observing that there is ‘a sharp, indeed epochal, contrast to be drawn between the major fiction before the mid-century ... and after ... The second half of the century’s fiction is notably darker, more pessimistic, and less funny.’⁶ This darker humorous tone is present in the ‘superb comic undercuttings’ of novels including *Villette*.⁷ But as well as reflecting the turn away from jolly optimism and comic resolutions, Brontë’s novels give an early indication of the accompanying cultural shift towards darker views of laughter itself. Brontë’s is an isolated but loud voice of scepticism regarding positive attitudes to laughter in the first half of the century. What her novels demonstrate, moreover, is the far-reaching influence of such attitudes – their shaping power not only over humorous literature, but over dominant conceptions of social conformity and, most pressingly, gender identity.

Laughter’s thematic importance in the novels of Thackeray and Dickens testifies to the significance which it held for writers other than Brontë, as a means of providing insight into character. But while Thackeray and Dickens might seem more obvious subjects for a study of laughter in the era, it is Brontë’s suspicious, often unsmiling stance that has made her the most fruitful starting point for unravelling the ideological threads that held together the cultural approval of laughter. For what Brontë’s novels

⁵ Martin, *The Triumph of Wit*, p. 17.

⁶ Bowen, ‘Comic and Satirical’, p. 266.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-9.

bring to light is a gap between the ideal and the real, between the popular conception of shared, universal laughter and the individual perception of divisive, coercive laughter. The ‘insights’ provided by laughter tended to split character into type – healthy or unhealthy, moral or deviant, insider or outsider – functioning to normalise social cohesion through social pressure (no-one likes to be left out; no-one likes to be laughed at). As a woman, for whom (generally) moral and emotional conformity was expected to a far greater extent, and for whom (personally) the experience of physical and social vulnerability was acutely real, Brontë was far better placed than the nation’s ‘humorists’ to explore these sobering undercurrents. Her novels reveal the constraining effects of the cultural elevation of ‘natural’ or ‘healthy’ emotional expression – the role of laughter in social regulation, the didactic links between good cheer and good conduct – and in doing so they challenge assumptions about the essentially liberal, or liberating nature of laughter. At the same time, they challenge the way in which repression – especially in the context of Victorian patriarchy – is typically conceptualised.⁸ This thesis has stressed the privileged place accorded to laughter in early Victorian culture, but also revealed the strict criteria on which this seemingly permissive stance depended. If the shift towards curtailing and moderating laughter – the later Victorian turn to seriousness – entailed an attempted suppression of the body and its impulses, we should nonetheless recognise what had been suppressed and prohibited before, through the rhetorical devaluation of individual and intellectual expression.

‘Today’, observes Indira Ghose, ‘laughter automatically triggers positive associations: pleasure, relaxation, and a response to humour.’⁹ I would add that laughter is positively associated not only with comedic relaxation but with the more edgy

⁸ In Parvulescu’s terms, for instance (p. 5), the ‘enemy’ against which laughter must ‘revolt’ is ‘a certain kind of seriousness ... Historically, seriousness, in its official tone and respectable dress, has intimidated, demanded, prohibited, oppressed.’

⁹ Ghose, p. 1.

pleasures of satire. But through attending to laughter ranging from hearty guffaws to smiles that, like Frances Henri's in *The Professor*, are 'much-meaning, though not very gay', this thesis has opened up the definition of laughter, looking beyond its immediate connotations and its presence in humorous contexts. In doing so I have demonstrated its pervasiveness in the nineteenth-century imagination, and its role in consolidating specifically early Victorian ideals, by demanding emotional expression and demonising emotional withdrawal. I have shown, moreover, that these expectations were gender-determined: while women were valued and judged according to the warmth of their hearts, the pressure on men to display spontaneity was at odds with the pressure to display self-command. Representations of laughter thus bring into sharp focus the competing and contradictory ideologies of gender in the Victorian period, highlighting the ways in which the instinctive body was positively foregrounded in the interests of social control, before the emphasis shifted to containment and discretion.

Given the similar pervasiveness and the similar assumptions about laughter that prevail in modern (Western) culture, however, I would like to close by considering the wider import of the points that this thesis has raised.¹⁰ More particularly, how do laughter and smiles work to consolidate the gender divide that still cuts through normative roles and behaviour? In the Foucauldian analysis of Sandra Lee Bartky:

Feminine faces, as well as bodies, are trained to the expression of deference. Under male scrutiny, women will avert their eyes or cast them downward; the female gaze is trained to abandon its claim to the sovereign status of seer ... Women are trained to

¹⁰ For laughter's centrality to today's culture, see Chapter One (note 7). But I mean also to refer to laughter's prevalence on a social (and ahistorical) level, in the sense that it is something we do all the time. As Robert R. Provine has found, laughter is 'sprinkled through' or 'punctuates' everyday speech. Reporting that 'only 10% to 20% of pre-laugh comments are even mildly humorous', Provine stresses that an 'exclusive focus on humor deflects consideration of the broader and deeper roots of laughter in human vocal communication and social interaction.' See 'Yawns, laughs, smiles, tickles, and talking', in *The Psychology of Facial Expression*, ed. by James A. Russell and José Miguel Fernández-Dolz (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 158-75 (pp. 166-8). See also Provine, *Laughter: A Scientific Investigation* (New York: Penguin, 2001).

smile more than men, too. In the economy of smiles, as elsewhere, there is evidence that women are exploited, for they give more than they receive in return ... In many typical women's jobs, graciousness, deference, and the readiness to serve are part of the work; this requires the worker to fix a smile on her face for a good part of the working day, whatever her inner state.¹¹

Bartky's observations relate mostly to how women's movements, expressions and body image are habitually restricted and constrained through self-policing – fixed, like the smiles on their faces. But discipline as characterised by Foucault extends to the 'inner state' as well as the surface of the face; as this thesis has emphasised, the body (in the name of 'naturalness') may be required to relax and expand as often as it is confined and contained. Smiles in this sense are not simply (en)forced through affective labour, but expressive of internalised feminine traits. Shirley's 'not ill-natured, but significant' smile aggressively affirms her status as a 'seer' who refuses to look at the world with 'mild, dim eyes.' But laughter, alternatively, may express the same automatic subservience that is communicated when women avert their eyes – as when the knowing, supposedly covert yet direct displays of amusement that accompany Frances's 'conquering glance' are replaced by soft, shy, and downward-looking smiles.¹²

At one point in *Gender Trouble*, Butler describes the 'explosive' laughter that exposes artificial social constraints, evoking 'the laugh of Medusa, which, Hélène Cixous tells us, shatters the placid surface constituted by the petrifying gaze.' Butler contrasts this scornful laughter directed at authority with 'the fear of being laughed at.'¹³

¹¹ Bartky, p. 135.

¹² Bartky's observation that women 'give more than they receive in return' is borne out by Provine's research, which shows that those in subservient social positions laugh (as well as smile) more than those in positions of dominance, with women laughing more frequently than men in social situations. Thus subservience may be conveyed through upward as well as 'downward-looking' smiles. See *Laughter*, pp. 29-30 (see also pp. 33-5).

¹³ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, pp. 102-3.

But she does not tie these comments in with her analysis of ‘gender attributes and acts, the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification’ – laughter’s general effects are noted by Butler but not included within the discussion of how ‘gender reality is created through sustained social performances.’¹⁴ Nor does she connect the fear of being laughed at with the effects of the ‘petrifying gaze’, just as Bartky makes no connection between women’s readiness to avert their gaze, and their readiness to smile. Clearly, there are significant links to be made here: between the disciplinary effects of the gaze and of the laugh (registered in *Shirley* as Helstone’s ‘sarcastic, keen eye’); and between these forms of discipline and the forms of submission, the smiling affects that they produce. It is an accepted truth that laughter wields corrective social power – that we act in the ways we do to fit in, to avoid humiliation. But what about the power of laughter as itself an ‘act’, a style of behaviour or ‘social performance’? Butler recognises the broader ‘shattering’ work done by laughing at existing norms (‘laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism’), but what about the ‘serious’, physical faces of laughter?¹⁵ The move by which the objectified woman ‘returns the glance, reverses the gaze, and contests the place and authority of the masculine position’ is clearly akin to the process by which women refuse to be the ‘object’ of laughter, instead reversing or returning the laugh, contesting authority, laughing back at power.¹⁶ But the notion of ‘laughing back’ too easily slides into critical abstraction – into an understanding of laughter whereby its subversive properties are indistinguishable from those of humour. Just as nebulous ideas of anonymous surveillance are attached (through literary personifications of panopticism) to the image of a pair of piercing eyes, so the social operation of ridicule

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, viii.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, vii.

should be understood as embodied, as residing in the lips. A full account of laughter's despotic hold on daily life would involve careful consideration not only of who mocks who but at *how* men and women laugh and how they are expected to laugh; not only how we are controlled or constrained by laughter, but how we are defined by it; how laughter may defy ridicule or 'shatter the surface of the penetrating gaze', but also how it forms part of that 'surface', or how it may display conformity in preference to spectacle.

Rather than untangling these problems theoretically, I have instead demonstrated their centrality in Brontë's novels, where the interconnections between different kinds of laughter are rigorously (and earnestly) explored. Brontë records male mockery of women, but also the merriment that renders women vulnerable to that mockery; the smiles through which Jane alternately expresses and represses 'herself'; the exposure to laughter that subdues Caroline, while driving Shirley to avoid feminine forms of expression; the sensitivity to laughter that 'makes a man' of Crimsworth, or a woman of Paul. The gendered modes of laughter that pervade these novels sometimes define the 'natural' self in spite of the self, or they may veil, refuse or re-gender that self; they impact on the conduct of others, but they also *constitute* conduct, and thereby constitute character. In taking a pathognomic approach, tracing the changing physiognomies of Brontë's characters (instead of focusing on interactions that revolve around an active interpreter and passive subject), this thesis has made visible the patterns of mockery and mirth that underwrite transferrals of knowledge and power in Brontë's fiction – casting laughter, as it were, into the pathway of the gaze. Highlighting the discursive background to these turns of expression – the ways in which they are inflected by contemporary beliefs about humour, satire, health and morality – I have argued that they have much to tell us about nineteenth-century ideology and assumptions. In *Shirley's* impassioned complaint that the rights of women are dismissed with a jest, in Lucy's

drier complaint that happiness is not a potato, we see the pressure exerted by both jesting and happy faces; the moral and medical insistence on good nature works alongside the satirical policing of social conformity. But Brontë's insights into these mechanisms of entrapment also transcend contextual factors, inviting closer scrutiny of the masks and faces of any society, for clues to the ways in which laughter infiltrates everyday behaviour, identities and relationships.

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