

Dissent in Fragments: Multivocality in *Shirley*

By Heather Miner, Rice University

<1> The conclusion of Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1848) poses a challenge to would-be critics of the novel: "The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest" (599). Despite this warning, "judicious reader[s]" have long attempted to understand Brontë's strange industrial fable, a group that does not exclude the narrator. Though disavowed in the end, Brontë's *Shirley* is a novel constantly invoking and interpreting its own form in search of a "moral." My concern in this essay is to demonstrate the extent to which Brontë's novel actively participates in the critical evaluation of multiple literary forms for political, as well as moral, purposes. Taken together, the discursive intertextuality of *Shirley* argues that the acknowledgment of female voices and domestic privation is a necessary predecessor to attaining political identity in the nation. The strategy Brontë uses in *Shirley* to articulate the need for female participation in national political discussion simultaneously marks an affinity with Chartist artistic goals and disavows radical politics.

<2> Critical quests to understand Brontë's goals in writing *Shirley* concentrate as often on what is not in the book as on what is, resulting in some particularly chary responses to Brontë's foray into industrial fiction.⁽¹⁾ Unlike other classic industrial novels, such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* or Charles Kingsley's *Alton Locke*, *Shirley* studies industrialization not from the perspective of the urban working class but rather from that of a rustic Yorkshire setting and middle-class community. The novel's lack of working-class characters has, therefore, been the focus of much scrutiny. Terry Eagleton has argued that "the major protagonist, the working class, is distinguished primarily by its absence" in significant scenes throughout the novel (47). Indeed, there is neither a consistent preoccupation with industrial strife in the novel nor a plethora of representative laboring characters. These silences stop many critics from identifying *Shirley* as an industrial novel at all; a dismissal that is seemingly strengthened by the novel's historical setting: *Shirley* recasts contemporary Chartist activities of the 1840s onto the Luddite unrest of 1811-12.⁽²⁾ In looking back forty years, Brontë obscured contemporary politics, translating events that the editors of a modern edition suggest were "both too limiting and too fluid, too difficult to define and too intractably present to be transformed into fiction" (Rosengarten and Smith ix). In addition to these thematic critiques of the novel, *Shirley* is often read as an aesthetic disappointment: the text's generic heterogeneity has led most critics to agree that the novel is "ripped apart between poetry and documentary" (Eagleton 47). These two genres are assumed to be in opposition to each other; indeed, the narrator opens the novel by positing these strict assumptions of genre, asking, "Do you anticipate sentiment, and poetry, and reverie? Do you expect passion, and stimulus, and melodrama?" (*Shirley* 39). The first question seems to imply

the second, connecting fiction with pathos and claiming that this work, in contrast, will be in the rival genre of the real and empirical, “something as unromantic as Monday morning” (39). *Shirley* is thus often read as a failure on many fronts, as a novel neglecting to represent the emergent influence of the working class within a genre crippled by its own middle-class limitations and confused generic affiliations.(3)

<3> My purpose in this essay is to show that *Shirley* is, in fact, in conversation with the concerns of industrial politics but is atypical in the insistently gendered correlation it posits between working-class art and middle-class identity. *Shirley* considers the contemporary incursion of working-class figures into middle-class consciousness through an exploration of the aesthetic origins of the industrial nation. Brontë’s novel argues that the establishment of national unity lies in the middle-class appreciation of multiple narrative and historical voices of protest in the multilayered British state. My concentration on Brontë’s novel, an outlier from standard treatments of the industrializing state, is intended to show how a text overflowing with romance plots is shifting the industrial novel away from realpolitik and towards representational-based politics by linking middle-class female voices to working-class artistic forms. The novel’s aesthetic agenda is articulated through Brontë’s attempt to reconcile politics with historical narrative modes. *Shirley* challenges generic dichotomies and divisions between art and politics and, in doing so, restructures the form of the industrial novel.

<4> Thus, I am interested in the text’s redefinition of female involvement in the middle-class community through its internal analysis of multiple literary discourses. This novel is multivocal: implicitly connected to the political turmoil of the 1840s, *Shirley* sustains an artistic detachment from Chartist politics through the guise of historical fiction. The 1810s, like the 1840s, witnessed a series of national and political upheavals, which held out the potential to change conventional cultural values. Brontë’s incorporation of literary working-class voices into this middle-class novel asserts the pertinence of female concerns to public and long-standing industrial problems. The relationship between female involvement in the industrial nation and public national identity is emphasized through the shifts between song, myth, epistle, and drama in the novel. Throughout *Shirley*, prominent female voices are represented as vehicles for understanding the modern British state. Ultimately, these voices are directed into the service of patriotism and cohesive national politics.

<5> In order to study the vexed conservatism and radicalism implicit in my reading of Brontë’s novel, I propose to revise the method for evaluating industrial fiction—a method that relies heavily on political action to determine the genre’s success or failure. Such readings overlook the artistic influence of working-class art and politics in the 1840s. *Shirley*, while rarely explicitly referencing major historical events, as do other industrial novels, is implicitly in dialogue with Chartists’ insistence that working-class art be in the service of a national politics (Scheckner 15). Brontë’s politicalization of various traditional aesthetic texts stems from the Chartist assertion that art should have a political purpose, but *Shirley* rejects the notion that the political foundation of art should be motivated by a radical change in the social structure. The novel proposes that social norms be reevaluated to acknowledge their impact on overlooked female suffering. Brontë, however, does not seek sweeping socioeconomic changes in the class structure. I am suggesting, then, that Brontë’s novel draws on the social aims of Chartist art, but not on the

political ones; the novel is interested in making a political argument not about the working-classes but rather about the equality of suffering shared by the silenced working classes and women. The various aesthetic forms through which national politics are considered together argue that the attention of middle-class Victorians should be directed toward recognizing female political expressions rather than working-class protest. The acknowledgment of disenfranchised voices in the Luddite note, Scottish ballads, and traditional folktales presents the multivocal heritage of Britain. The relationship between Chartist art and protesting voices is an aesthetic conversation with which Brontë is in dialogue. However, co-opting working-class literary forms to signify middle-class female suppression maintains *Shirley's* preeminent investment in elevating the concerns of female voices and rejecting working-class political claims for political representation.

<6> Chartism cohered around the advocacy of the working-class man as an accepted contributor to national politics and, explicitly, fought to attain political recognition through documentary proof of a collective identity. The movement, from its beginning in the late 1830s and through its decline in the early 1850s, sought agency in public campaigns and in literary expression; material and imaginative representation were two twined approaches to greater public representation (Haywood 4). According to Martha Vicinus, Chartists “were deeply concerned with the relationship between politics and art . . . Their goal was a new, class-based literature” (95). Authors of this new, self-conscious cultural perspective seized on prevailing narrative forms, portraying the needed political revolution of national life through aesthetic means. By far the most popular artistic form for Chartist expression was poetry, which could be recited and sung in addition to being quickly republished. Inherently political and prodigiously produced, Chartist poetry presented a defined perspective on society that countered the presentation of the working classes in that other dominant narrative form of the early Victorian period, the middle-class novel (Randall 174, 191; Scheckner 40). Poetry was published alongside book reviews, serialized novels, journalistic articles, and political tracts and widely circulated in Chartist newspapers and journals (Haywood 3). Anne Janowitz notes of this extraordinary literary outpouring: “Chartism as a social and political movement made itself culturally intelligible to its constituencies *through* its use of poetry” (137-38).(4)

<7> Competing portrayals of independent and defenseless women circulated throughout Chartist literature, presenting a unique figure in Victorian fiction, the working woman (Haywood 20). A developing feminist rhetoric was readily apparent in Chartism, reflecting the prominent participation of working women in the early stages of the movement.(5) Though agitation for the vote was rare, female Chartists actively demonstrated against employers and protested against political institutions hostile to the working class (D. Thompson 94). But this undercurrent was impeded by the hegemonic gender discourses prevalent in Chartist writing (Randall 176). Ernest Jones, a well-known Chartist leader and poet, insisted that to “Raise the Charter from the Pothouse” working men must see it as “a domestic spirit, a tutelary saint, a household god before it can arise a legislative power! And what shall make it so,—but the support of women?” (Jones 624). Anna Clark argues that the crippling gender and class politics inhibited the development and success of Chartism: “The Chartist movement was an attempt to create class consciousness as a rational community, both real and imagined, that could draw on traditions of sexual cooperation . . . [I]t failed partially because . . . the movement could not reconcile its egalitarian ideas with its commitment to working-class patriarchy” (246).

<8> Brontë's novel implicitly critiques Chartist aesthetic portrayals of the nation, which diminished female voices and remained committed to conventional portrayals of women. Chartist authors accentuated a connection between political representation and poetry but delimited their demands for political enfranchisement to a class-based experience of oppression. Brontë's novel explores the œuvre of British literary traditions to locate a fundamental principle underlying British art: dissension. Asserting this claim from multiple traditions of British writing allows Brontë to recontextualize various narrative forms for the use of women within the novel. This aesthetic integration unites oppositional voices ranging from a popular literary form, such as a folk song, to a play by the giant of literary traditions in England, Shakespeare.

<9> In the majority of texts Brontë interpolates into her novel, then, domestic concerns are linked with working-class demands for sympathetic public recognition. In order to sustain this connection between the two groups and assert their common interest, Brontë considers the various literary modes through which working-class voices are heard by middle-class audiences. By setting the novel in an originary period for working-class protest, the Luddite era, Brontë asserts the shared female right to participation in public discussions about the formation of a more representative national identity. The initial voice of the working class, a note from a local Yorkshire Luddite that opens the novel, initiates the myriad "moral earthquake[s] . . . heaving under the hills of the northern counties" (62):

[Moore's] eye, in a moment, caught the gleam of something white attached to a part of the harness. Examined by the light of the lantern, this proved to be a folded paper—a billet. It bore no address without; within was the superscription:—

"To the Divil of Hollow's-miln."

We will not copy the rest of the orthography, which was very peculiar, but translate it into legible English. It ran thus:—

"Your hellish machinery is shivered to smash on Stilbro' Moor, and your men are lying bound hand and foot in a ditch by the roadside. Take this as a warning from men that are starving, and have starving wives and children to go home to when they have done this deed. If you get new machines, or if you otherwise go on as you have done, you shall hear from us again. Beware!"

"Hear from you again? Yes; I'll hear from you again, and you shall hear from me. I'll speak to you directly: on Stilbro' Moor you shall hear from me in a moment." (*Shirley* 64)

<10> The note is sent to Robert Moore, the Anglo-French mill owner, who had been awaiting the delivery of new machinery for his textile mill. Appearing in the second chapter of the novel, the transcription of the Luddite note demonstrates Brontë's desire to incorporate historically accurate working-class documents into *Shirley*. Luddite letters, poems, and hymns were a fundamental part of the public face of the first industrial protest movement, the works of laborers ranging from a "bespectacled, graying, artisan . . . with Voltaire, Volney, and Paine on his shelf" to a "collier or a village stockinger" (E. Thompson 714). Luddite protest letters therefore ranged from

highly crafted literary works (“know thou cursed insinuator, if Burton’s infamous action was ‘justifiable,’ the Laws of Tyrants are Reasons Dictates”) to barely literate diatribes (“Never mind Ned lud when general nody and is harmey Comes We Will soon bring about the greate Revelation”) (qtd. in E. Thompson 714). As Adrian Randall points out, letters such as these were an important textual component of Luddism. The means of anonymous communication between workers and employers, letters were tools of labor negotiation throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, allowing “workers to present demands in a form that protected individuals from the sorts of employer retaliation that face-to-face meetings risked” (xv). Anonymous letters, such as Brontë’s fictitious version, were a useful component of instigating dialogue and are an oft-overlooked facet of this early protest movement.

<11> A disembodied Luddite manuscript is, then, an appropriate means by which the working classes enter *Shirley*. In granting the letter space in the novel, the narrator allows the working classes their own textual power, enabling them to represent themselves in a historically distinctive and accurate mode. The Luddite letter asserts the working-class right to articulate their grievances and identity. Claiming an independent political voice distinct from that of the middle-class industrialist, Robert Moore, the letter establishes the ability of rhetoric and text to present an autonomous identity in the community, an assertion of working-class identity predating later Chartist work. As Asa Briggs notes, Brontë “did not confuse the Luddites and the Chartists. She was peculiarly sensitive to the ambivalent attitude of the mill owners she was describing, men who opposed the . . . politics of the British Government . . . while at the same time they demanded stricter government intervention to suppress machine wrecking and attacks on property” (214). The novel deliberates on this ambivalent moment in relations between middle-class employers and working-class protesters, an uneasy yet potentially generative moment that is crystallized in the Luddite note.

<12> Within the generic context of this middle-class novel, the Luddite letter is an important instance of class and domestic dissent. In *Shirley*, as Tim Dolin has noted, the ability to speak from an authentic perspective is a crucial part of differentiating oneself in the “wordy combat” in society (*Shirley* 85; Dolin 207). Vocalization is only valuable, though, amidst the cacophony of speech in the community if it is articulate and constructive. The ability to narrate subjectivity is what distinguishes the speaker from the “cloven tongues” of the dominant community (*Shirley* 45). Robert Moore, the narrator tells the reader, “did not sufficiently care when the new inventions threw the old work-people out of employ . . . and in this negligence he only resembled thousands besides” (*Shirley* 61). Moore’s development in novel will differentiate him from these “thousands” of detached middle-class capitalists.(6) It is the moral education of this audience, Brontë suggests, that is necessary for an ameliorative relationship between classes to develop.

<13> The letter’s concentration on domestic concerns proves that the overarching tie between private misery and public political action is of principal concern to the note’s working-class author. At the heart of the labor dispute between masculine figures, there is sentiment, domestic suffering and the grievances of “wives and children.” It is from a domestic source that the actions of political violence are born. In his immediate response to the letter, Moore emphatically and repeatedly claims to “hear” and promises to “speak” back. His reaction, though, is solely to the threat expressed in the letter, and not to the primary familial justifications for those threats: he

vocally responds to the financial aspect of the threat but refuses to understand the domestic complaint integrated within. Moore's refusal to acknowledge the significance of the emotional foreshadows a later conversation between Moore and William Farren, a worker at the mill. Farren states, "Ye see we're ill off,—vary ill off: we're families is poor and pined. We're thrawn out o' work wi' these frames: we can get nought to do: we can earn nought" (*Shirley* 156). Moore defends his instantaneous dismissal and misinterpretation of Will's humble complaint by claiming, "I couldn't make distinctions there and then" (*Shirley* 179). Moore consistently disregards the danger of neglecting the private domain.

<14> Here and elsewhere in the text, then, the relationship between "women and children" and public distress implies that private domestic complaints are by definition public concerns. Moore's relationship with his workers is relevant not only to the immediate case of industry but to his domestic relationships as well. As the novel progresses, the marriage plot between Robert Moore and Caroline Helstone is slowed by Moore's withdrawal from Caroline, and his subsequent political disagreement with Caroline's uncle precipitates her physical decline. Moore refuses to be drawn "into a marriage he believed imprudent" for financial reasons (*Shirley* 129). The grounds for Moore's deteriorating relationship with Caroline Helstone parallel those with his workers: in both cases they are based in his inability to understand the link between private suffering and its political impact.⁽⁷⁾ The fundamental importance of the family to the seemingly autonomous concerns of the market is misinterpreted in Moore's reading, an act that is mapped onto the state of the nation as a whole: ignoring domestic complaints threatens national unity.⁽⁸⁾

<15> The magnitude of the letter, then, to the subsequent topics developed in the novel is further manifested in the narrator's "translation" of the working-class dialect into the "legible English" of the middle class. Anticipating the translation of French into English throughout the book (in a conversation between Robert Moore and his sister, the narrator notes that, "as this is an English book, I shall translate it into English"), the narrator intrudes to mediate between readers (*Shirley* 91). The act of translation locates the implied audience as national, diverse in geography and language. Among this nation of readers, the ability to understand the vernacular of the working classes, as with the ability to comprehend the language of the Moore family, the reception of meaning is more important than the expression alone: the message is more important than the mode of delivery. Thus, the transformation of local dialect into standard national diction is a conscious recognition of the influence speech has on directing the response of the audience. At the same time, it is significant that the "peculiar" orthography of the note mimics local Yorkshire speech. The suggestion of dialect makes the document realistic: the language of the "operative classes," as with that of Hiram Yorke and Will Farren, ties the speaker's identity to real social experience (*Shirley* 335).⁽⁹⁾

<16> The narrator's intervention to decipher reinforces the meaning of the working classes' claim for recognition to middle-class readers. Recognition, however, is not to be confused with appreciation. The narrator's position of authority stems not only from the retelling of stories from multiple members of the community but also from the firmly middle-class and conservative interpretation given to translating the relation between the individual and the community. Throughout the novel, the narrator moves from scenes establishing a linkage between working and middle-class domestic concerns to those qualifying the sort of dissenting voices the text is

interested in articulating. The Luddite letter as an instance of working-class discursive opposition is an important hallmark authorizing silenced voices, but Brontë's concern is more with advancing the interests of middle-class women than with advancing working-class political movements. Following the transcription of a lengthy Wesleyan hymn later in the novel, the narrator notes that, amid the "shouts, yells, ejaculations, frantic cries, [and] agonized groans," it was a wonder that the "roof of the chapel did *not* fly off; which speaks volumes in praise of its solid slating" (*Shirley* 164, 165). Brontë's ironic detachment from the dissenters, akin to her reserved distance from the Luddites, who would not otherwise be "legible," maintains a tenuous dissociation from identification with the "lower class[es]" (*Shirley* 320). The mediating interjection of the narrator asserts that the choice to acknowledge discourse as a public articulation of identity is ultimately decided by the middle-class auditor.

<17> Yet it is in working-class literature and literature attuned to insurgent political agitation that Brontë sees an opening for legitimating female protest. The narrator's translation demands the acknowledgment of experiences that might otherwise go unappreciated.⁽¹⁰⁾ Bringing to light the sufferings of the working-class home, the note makes clear that these domestic concerns do matter for the middle-class reader. The narrator's superseding knowledge and manipulation of local and (inter)national language allow for her both to translate and to recognize the heterogeneous community. The intermingling of the middle-class voice of the narrator alongside that of the working class is a crucial part of appreciating the language of both classes as equally representative of Britishness and British national concerns.

<18> Reading the integration of these genres as Brontë's method of establishing a working-class voice within the middle-class story allows us to see the multiform text as a factor of Brontë's reexamining the structural possibilities of the industrial novel.⁽¹¹⁾ While augmenting the novel's formal organization, she validates the authority of the novel to speak to contemporary politics aesthetically: the politics of the novel are enhanced when diverse genres of literature speak to themselves and to long-standing social hierarchies. As was Gaskell, Brontë was drawn to the industrial novel genre to voice underrepresented political actors, but, unlike her approach in *Mary Barton*, Brontë's purely aesthetic interpretation of politics distances *Shirley* from industrial social commentary; instead *Shirley* attempts to claim a more broadly representative and gendered voice of artistic dissent. The particularly aesthetic basis of this new political voice could only have been realized against the backdrop of Chartism. As Scheckner points out, "Chartist literature had to move beyond the bourgeois culture of the Romantics to continue the radical tradition of such giants as Milton, Burns, Shelley, and Byron . . . [T]he Chartists were motivated by class interests—reflected in their verse—that no poet or writers of fiction before them had had" (31). Brontë's focus on gendered interests, though firmly centered in bourgeois culture, attempts to connect with this radical tradition of British authorship.

<19> Building upon the manifold concerns of the Luddite note, the subsequent turn to *The Tragedy of Coriolanus* legitimizes the protest of the poor by establishing its origins in a text by the most canonical of British writers, William Shakespeare. Caroline Helstone reads the drama to Robert Moore to open a discussion of poverty from the perspective of a Roman military commander and statesman. Caroline challenges Moore to interpret class struggle and the specific consequences of his patrician attitudes aesthetically. Reading the play aloud, Moore "appreciated

the power, the truth of each portion; and, stepping out of the narrow line of private prejudices, began to revel in the large picture of human nature, to feel reality stamped upon the characters who were speaking from that page before him” (*Shirley* 116). Paralleling the situation of the British workers with that of the Roman poor, the pertinence of the drama divorces the contemporary conditions of the impoverished from the industrial nation and looks at the history of subjugation.

<20> Though the “large picture of human nature” in *Coriolanus* is based on economic relations, the introduction of the drama signals an important bridge to the issues of middle-class female neglect, not working-class protest, which will dominate much of the rest of the novel (*Shirley* 116). Caroline’s response to the play allows her to establish and narrate her own political opinions and to put forward her identification with the workers. Caroline initially interprets the tragedy in light of Moore’s situation: “You must not be proud to your workpeople; you must not neglect chances of soothing them, and you must not be of an inflexible nature” (*Shirley* 117). She then allies her sympathy with the workers, claiming, “I cannot help thinking it unjust to include all poor working people under the general and insulting name of ‘the mob’” (*Shirley* 118). Finally, she links the conflict between Moore and his workers to the domestic, asking Moore, “If you were proud and cold to me and Hortense, should we love you? When you are cold to me, as you *are* sometimes, can I venture to be affectionate in return?” (*Shirley* 118). Caroline’s interpretation reflects the protest of the workers artistically, while simultaneously privileging the bourgeois voice as a translator of working-class suffering.

<21> Thus, *Shirley* capitalizes on the discursive authority in working-class and canonical literature in order to validate the public grievances of women. However, in a novel that frequently quotes major literary figures—including Racine, Shakespeare, Cowper, and Hugo—the oscillation between high and low voices suggests that Brontë is not simply seeking to enlarge middle-class perception through art commonly appreciated by, and coming from, the privileged, but she attempts to bring traditional unsophisticated aesthetic voices to recognition as well. The succeeding inclusions of suppressed voices enter through song and folklore, modes of expression insistently tied to local identity. The narrator, though, does not draw on oral tradition simply to solidify the link between native space and indigenous forms but, rather, integrates the localized female voice into national concerns, as with “Puir Mary Lee.”

Who has read the ballad of “Puir Mary Lee?”—that old Scotch ballad, written I know not in what generation nor by what hand. Mary had been ill used—probably in being made to believe that truth which was falsehood: she is not complaining, but she is sitting alone in the snow-storm, and you hear her thoughts. They are not the thoughts of a model-heroine under her circumstances, but they are those of a deeply-feeling, strongly-resentful peasant-girl. Anguish has driven her from the ingle-nook of home, to the white-shrouded and icy hills: crouched under the “cauld drift,” she recalls every image of horror,—“the yellow-wymed ask,” “the hairy adder,” “the auld moon-bowing tyke,” the “ghaist at e’en,” “the sour bullister,” “the milk of the taed’s back:” she hates these, but “wuar she hates Robin-a-Ree!” (*Shirley* 129)(12)

<22> Why does the narrator choose to bring a ballad, rather than a poem or tale, into the story to develop Caroline's suffering? Though many ballads are literary, rather than the genuine products of an oral folk tradition, their presentation of action through vocal narration and (seemingly authentic) British origins was a key facet of the genre's resurgent popularity among nineteenth-century middle-class readers.⁽¹³⁾ Throughout the novel, Shirley and Caroline repeatedly employ various texts to reimagine their historical and social identities, manipulating traditional interpretation of the Bible, canonical literature, French poetry, and myth to assert feminine power in literature. The ballad needs no such manipulation. It is through oral dissent that the girl's complaint, and she, is given notice.

<23> Predating the development of the domestic marriage plot, so ubiquitous in the Victorian novel, traditional ballads are succinct, formulaic, and compelling (Gerould 11). The romantic ballad is a historical form that emphasizes female participation in the action of the narrative. As a voice coming through the fiction of ballad and across time, then, the ballad is significant in the mimetic environment of the novel, an example of a female voice transcending the limits of historical abstraction and locale to have continued relevance. The lament of an unknown Scottish peasant girl has immediate bearing on the life of Caroline because of the vocal resonance of oral tradition that modern narrative forms subsume. Singing, "Now I maun sit 'neath the cauld drift and mourn, / And curse black Robin-a-Ree!," the ballad of "Puir Mary Lee" is this novel's definition of a simple and emotive poetic voice. Connecting narrative action and vocal recognition of an independent female voice in the local example of "Puir Mary Lee," the peasant girl's recitation of her troubles is part of the novel's consistent connection of alternative aesthetic texts with moments of female self-actualization. The narrator draws on a traditional form of oral expression that predates that of the novel to reach back into a past that recognized female speech as a legitimate form of artistic narration.

<24> Brontë is interested in the apolitical pertinence of this voice. Unlike the insistently male authoritative voice in the Luddite note, the ballad enables the incursion of a common female voice into the novel. Linking middle-class women and the working classes through their use of narrative to vocalize their own troubles, Brontë brings the active voice of the working-class heroine into the center of middle-class domestic life. The incorporation of the geographically specific, but timeless, ballad "Puir Mary Lee" into the supralocal issue of female abnegation is heightened by the narrator's assertion that "what has been said in the last page or two is not germane to Caroline Helstone's feelings" (*Shirley* 129). The defensive narrator, intent on denying a straightforward parallel between Caroline and Mary Lee, is undermined by the obvious relevance the ballad does have to Caroline's plot, underlied by the swift progression from a scene of Moore's rejection of Caroline to the "peasant-girl[']s" lament. The female voice in "Puir Mary Lee," as with that of most ballads, relates a single dramatic action and its consequences: the tragic consequences of abandonment. Akin to the Luddite note, a working-class voice seizes authority to enter into a middle-class discussion; here, the concern is of the potential marriage between Robert Moore and Caroline Helstone, an issue that has public and private significance. The ballad instructs the reader to trust an independent female voice and the validity of sentiment to define the social experience. This double valence validates female knowledge and the female author's prerogative to narrate.

<25> Whereas the narrator converts the Luddite note into standard English spelling, she leaves the ballad of “Puir Mary Lee” untranslated from Scottish dialect. Orthographically situating its history in regional, rather than national, discourse, the dialect in the ballad ties the speaker to an unaffected local identity. To translate the speech would refuse the local attachment inherent to the vernacular. Moreover, there is no need to translate the ballad, because it does not voice a present threat. For “Puir Mary Lee,” as with various characters who speak in a distinctive Yorkshire dialect, language is a means of representing authentic local identification. Simultaneously, though, the introduction of Scottish dialect in conjunction with Yorkshire speech is part of a creation of a cross-national British affiliation. Distinct local languages are made homologous through the narrator’s treatment of them: the local affiliation of language connects the peasant in Scotland and the workers in Yorkshire through the refined, middle-class voice of the narrator, who can allow authentic local voices to be narrated within an overarching middle-class critical narration.⁽¹⁴⁾ The narrator is both national and local, uniting the language of limited provincial knowledge into the consciousness of the literate middle-class individual. The narrator becomes a spokesperson of a British identity, able to incorporate local and national discourse into the composition of the middle-classes’ consciousness.

<26> The thematic appreciation of Mary Lee’s voice, though, is met with an attendant rejection of her symbolic pertinence. Essentially, the ballad is a conventional tale many times told. This, however, is not the novel Brontë will write. The narrator prefaces that “Puir Mary Lee” is insistently not a patent representative of the “model-heroine.” Brontë’s novel rejects the formulaic and predictable story of romantic tragedy. While Mary Lee is overcome by her abandonment, Caroline will be saved, not by her lover but by her mother. The narrator’s appreciation for the pathos in Mary Lee’s story, then, does not replay the same old stories in the same way but, instead, rejects traditional romance and marriage plots. By implicitly figuring Mary Lee as both typical and outmoded, Brontë explicitly rejects the gender paradigms present in this popular narrative form. This ballad, as with the Luddite note, figures domestic suffering as primarily caused, and solved, by males for their own interests and for the interests of dependent women. Rejecting the female passivity inherent in this teleology, *Shirley* rewrites the paradigm: Caroline’s domestic life is reformed around familial, not marital, relationships, and Shirley Keeldar momentarily embraces her political and public communal role, rather than a domesticated role. Mary Lee is a simple, provincial “girl” whose character is easily accessed through her voice, making her akin to other characters in the text who exist only within a voice of local identity. The narrator extracts from their story those experiences that can contribute to the common life of the community, while firmly keeping the “girl” in her “place.” The narrator’s quest, then, for public vocal authority acknowledges the protest tradition in working-class narrative forms but rejects the modern relevance of this historically distanced voice (“written I know not in what generation nor by what hand”) and the dependent female subjectivity presented therein.

<27> This bifurcated structure of including and then reinterpreting working-class aesthetic voices for their modern and gendered relevance ironically culminates in a scene that flattens out female voices. It is in the central scene of the Whitsunday parade that middle-class and working-class voices are integrated into a united voice of national and local affiliation. The composed voice of the narrator traverses into the story space when various voices are joined together to project inclusive British identity.

Helstone signed to his bands: they clashed out with all the power of brass. He desired them to play “Rule, Britannia,” and ordered the children to join in vocally, which they did with enthusiastic spirit. The enemy was sung and stormed down; his psalm quelled: as far as noise went, he was conquered.

“Now, follow me!” exclaimed Helstone; “not at a run, but at a firm, smart pace. Be steady, every child and woman of you:—keep together:—hold on by each other’s skirt, if necessary.” (*Shirley* 301)

This scene marks the novel’s cumulative scene, correlating speech with active political force, as the distinction between narrative agency and effective public movement is abrogated. The performative song is the zenith of collective expression, drawing together oral tradition and the patriotism. Written in 1740 by James Thomson and put to music by Thomas Arne, “Rule, Britannia” was an immensely popular song in the nineteenth century, but as Linda Colley points out, “[T]he chorus is so rousing that it scarcely seems to matter that it is Britain’s supremacy *offshore* that is being celebrated, not its internal unity” (Colley 11). The power of empire lies in the patriotism it evokes, rather than in the actual dealings of empire. It is the means by which Brontë can present a vision of unified identity. The group song represents a voice that is not exclusive, such as the Wesleyans, nor violent, such as the Luddites. This vocal battle, instead, is a musical event “that links the Established Church to national identity, resolution, and military discipline,” as Pam Morris notes (296). The union of traditional establishment figures overcomes the alliance of dissenters. The communal voice of “Rule, Britannia” incorporates the voice of the individual but does not recognize individual power (Buzard 234). The patriotic symbolism of the song emphasizes neither local nor class identities but a seemingly united and nationalistic front.

<28> The group is joined together to contribute to hegemonic class discourse by physically rending apart the opposing nonconformists. The Whitsunday marchers are voices in accord, both harmonious and thematically united in patriotism, unlike the voices of the cacophonous, “most dolorous of canticles” sung by the fractioned Dissenters, who are embodied by their “large, greasy” and drunken leader. With their union against “[t]he Dissenting and Methodist schools, and the Baptists, Independents, and Wesleyans, joined in unholy alliance,” the Whitsunday Parade insists on the necessity of multiple groups to partner together to defend this representative national community (*Shirley* 300). Rather than sing an Anglican hymn, and therefore favor the voice of the national Church as the foundation for cross-class unity, the culmination of disparate class voices comes through secular, cross-class action. This is, clearly, a conservative representation of national identity, in which working-class children, led by staunch middle-class Tories, overcome a group “for the honour of the Establishment” (*Shirley* 300). As Morris notes, “Since the Dissenters are elsewhere identified with working-class protest, this incident constructs a reassuring image of a vigorous national solidarity that embraces women as well as children of the laboring class, rallied effectively to proper leadership . . . against boastful, ill-led rebellion” (297). Brontë use of “Rule, Britannia” is essentially an aesthetic example of the tail wagging the dog. Religious or industrial dissenters form the two key oppositional groups to the middle class in the novel; the Whitsunday Parade and the attack on the mill provide two venues in which the classes clash publicly and two alternative possibilities for dealing with class conflict. Whereas in the Whitsunday Parade dissent is negated by an opposing coalition of the

classes and sexes, the coalition of manufacturers who suppress the workers in the riot scene “pay” for their violence with the shooting of Moore.(15)

<29> Transcending both the local religious authority of Helstone and the noblesse authority of Shirley, “Rule, Britannia” is not the aesthetic property of a specific place or class. The insistently British song allows for the integration of the powerful voices of the working classes alongside the traditional, conservative leadership embodied by Helstone and a new figure of feminine power, Shirley, enabling Brontë to project a version of British identity rooted in patriotic, conservative consensus. Ironically, then, by enacting the role of Captain Keeldar through song, Shirley reaches the height of feminine power in a scene in which she is one of many voices allied in public action. The “scholars and teachers—who did exactly as he told them . . . marching with cool, solid impetus . . . between two fires—Helstone and Miss Keeldar” are a class community united to expel deviance; the patriotic voices of working-class children are joined with those of the middle class to demand conformity (*Shirley* 300). Conveying domestic or working-class grievance is no longer the point of artistic action; instead, the ostensibly national communal voice expresses a collective power manifested in the militaristic repulsion of the Dissenters. As such, the central thematic merger of myriad textual and spoken voices becomes apparent: individual voice finds definitive narrative agency as part of the conservative political community. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer notes, the sort of feminine paternalism embodied in Shirley signifies the extent to which “paternalism is an assumption central to Brontë’s imagination of human relations” (37).(16)

<30> Subsequent to the parade, then, Brontë rewrites the founding figure of feminine representation as an embodiment of aestheticism. The conventional lament of Mary Lee is replaced by the mythological figure of Eva:

[Eva] sat, her body still, her soul astir; occupied, however, rather in feeling than in thinking, —in wishing, than hoping,—in imagining, than projecting. She felt the world, the sky, the night, boundlessly mighty. Of all things, herself seemed to herself the centre,—a small, forgotten atom of life, a spark of soul, emitted inadvertent from the great creative source. She asked, was she thus to burn out and perish, her living light doing no good, never seen, never needed—a star in an else starless firmament, which nor shepherd, nor wanderer, nor sage, nor priest tracked as a guide or read as a prophecy? Could this be, she demanded, when the flame of her intelligence burned so vivid; when her life beat so true, and real, and potent; when something within her stirred disquieted, and restlessly asserted a God-given strength, for which it insisted she should find exercise? (*Shirley* 457)

Providing contemporary figures in society with a history of representation is a crucial component when acknowledging their claims to national concern, as the historical setting of the book demonstrates. As Brontë argues, the past is always political, though, as is the aesthetic. The tale “The First Blue-Stocking” was supposedly written by Shirley while she was a pupil, this quasi-Biblical, quasi-mythic tale of Eva claims “the Woman God” as the original manifestation of humanity. This reimagining of Genesis erases Eve’s sins and critiques Milton’s representation of Eve, whose innate weakness, uncertainty, and lowliness excluded any possibility of coequal companionship with Adam. Instead, Brontë’s Eva is the primary source of light in the

encompassing darkness, made significant not by her life-giving powers but by her inquiring mind. The tale, which is not reinterpreted by the narrator, echoes *Shirley*'s historically oriented attitude toward public recognition, offering alternative narratives of the past. Earlier in the novel, conversing with Joe Scott, Shirley contradicts Joe's approval of conventional gender roles by saying that the biblical Eve "coveted an apple, and was cheated by a snake: but you have got such a hash of Scripture and mythology into your head that there is no making any sense of you" (*Shirley* 321). The existence of the "Scripture and mythology" as a guide to modern perception is undeniable; to combat these representations of femininity, new stories must be told. Eva enables feminine power to be realized as myth, erasing historical and cultural distinctions between women and thereby coalescing multiple female identities into a singular vision of femininity. At the end of Shirley's essay, she asks, "Who shall, of these things, write the chronicle?" (*Shirley* 490). Shirley becomes the link between mythic history and female participation in arenas far greater than those domestic life offers.

<31> As Caroline argues, "[N]obody should write poetry to exhibit intellect or attainment. Who cares for that sort of poetry? . . . And who does not care for feeling—real feeling—however simply, even rudely, expressed?" (*Shirley* 233). The narrator's appreciation for expressions of "real feeling" is demonstrative, but so too, then, is the need to move toward the current moment and away from specifically working-class narrative forms whose rhetorical significance, Brontë argues, has been lost in conventionality. For Brontë, the recognition of traditional voices is a primary step in the movement toward a broader understanding of the female voices that consistently reconstitute national identity, an argument reiterated in the novel's closing scene:

"What was the Hollow like then, Martha?"

"Different to what it is now; but I can tell of it clean different again: when there was neither mill, nor cot, nor hall, except Fieldhead, within two miles of it. I can tell, one summer-evening, fifty years syne, my mother coming running in just at the edge of dark, almost fleyed out of her wits, saying, she had seen a fairish (fairy) in Fieldhead Hollow; and that was the last fairish that ever was seen on this country (though they've been heard within these forty years). A lonesome spot it was—and a bonnie spot—full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now." (*Shirley* 599)

<32> The introduction of Martha and the narrator, marking a shift from heterodiegetic to a homodiegetic narration, on the final page reinforces the consistent integration of long-established stories into the middle-class consciousness of the novel. Martha's voice is reassuring to the contemporary reader: the great fear of revolutionary change demanded by the working-class voice is assuaged by the words of an elderly, female domestic. Unlike other characters from Yorkshire (such as Joe Scott or Will Farren), Martha serves no explicit didactic purpose, but this is not to dismiss the importance of her final words. Rather, by granting the penultimate lines to the "old housekeeper," the narrator cedes the concluding interpretative voice to a figure that represents the continuation of traditional narrative forms in the present. The narrator relates that "[t]he other day I passed up the Hollow, which tradition says was once green, and lone, and wild," just prior to Martha's remembrance of the Hollow as "[a] lonesome spot—and a bonnie spot—full of oak trees and nut trees" (599). Martha becomes the figure who voices "tradition,"

able to narrate the history of the Hollow and the present changes. She is the closing voice because she can narrate the past in the present, linking the history of the novel to the contemporary world of the narrator. Wholly unlike the corrupt curates who opened the novel, Martha's accent reflects her right to speak validly for local identity. Again, though, the sophisticated middle-class voice of the narrator intervenes in Martha's tale to translate.

<33> In a letter to her publishers responding to the critical response to *Shirley*, Brontë writes, "You both of you dwell too much on what you regard as the *artistic* treatment of the subject— . Say what you will—gentlemen—say it as ably as you will—Truth is better than Art . . . Ignorant as I am, I dare to hold and maintain that doctrine" ("To W. S. Williams" 185). Brontë restates her belief in "Truth" more emphatically at the completion of *Shirley*: "Note well! Whenever you present the actual, simple truth, it is, somehow, always denounced as a lie . . . whereas the product of your own imagination, the mere fragment, the sheer fiction, is adopted, petted, termed pretty, proper, sweetly natural. . . Such is the way of the world" (*Shirley* 587). Brontë's seeming embrace of realism over aestheticism presents a false dichotomy between truth and art that is rejected in *Shirley*. A purely pragmatic portrait that denies the artistic bonds to an established aesthetic community is meaningless. So, too, is an aesthetic portrait that denies realistic legitimacy. Brontë's attempt at political representation was therefore mediated through artistry, a search for authentic British voices. Brontë suggests that the guiding force needed to quiet the national community is not to be found in destructive radicalism but by aesthetic progressiveness. Satisfying social tensions, Brontë argues, can only be done through acknowledging silenced histories of suppression that are, at their roots, histories of gender relations, and by re-forming the expression of protest. The old stories and old truths remain in interpolated tales, and through their acknowledgment and dismissal, the novel's authority comes from its own form.

Endnotes

(1)As Catherine Gallagher has shown, "[T]he novel . . . underwent basic changes whenever it became a part of the discourse over industrialism" (1). Industrial fiction attempted to represent the reality of working-class life and understand demands for social reform by narrativizing tangible expressions of labor unrest, such as strikes, riots, working conditions, and labor negotiations. Yet critics generally concur that this subgenre of social realism did not succeed in these goals. Gallagher argues that the industrial novel is distinguished by its ultimate failure to aesthetically reconcile the debates concerning political emancipation into the structure of the middle-class, domestic realist novel (62-110). This perspective was initially suggested by Raymond Williams: though emphasizing the radicalism apparent in the genre's representation of

the working classes, Williams argues that the concluding emigration or marriage plots in many industrial novels negated the demand for true social improvement (99-119).

The opinion that industrial novels failed in their representational and political goals has continued to guide critical responses to the genre, but recent criticism has shifted focus to locating how cultural authority is discursively directed in the novels. Brantlinger argues that “[t]he emergence of fictional realism as a distinct novelistic discourse” was marked by “the reification of the social status quo, notably involving, in industrial novels such as *Mary Barton*, the themes of resignation and class reconciliation. In the school of hard reality, the working-class student learns to accept his station in life . . . as inevitable” (96). For further work on the exercise of linguistic ability by middle-class orators and the incoherence of the working classes in industrial fiction, see also Kreilkamp, 35-68.(^)

(2)Indeed, the question of how to categorize *Shirley* is longstanding: Gallagher argues that industrial strife had little impact on the novel’s form and, thus, disqualifies it as an industrial novel (2); Rebecca McLaughlin situates *Shirley* in “the ‘woman question’” genre (217); and Gisela Argyle suggests that *Shirley* has links to a range of genres, such as the comedy of manners, psychological romance, historical novel, and political novel (743). Argyle reads the third-person narrator and Brontë’s formal experimentation in *Shirley* as part of her “literary series” from *Jane Eyre* to *Villette* (741). (Following Argyle’s convention, I refer to the narrator as “she” in this article, though throughout the novel, including the heterodiagetic moment in the conclusion, the narrator’s gender is unclear.)(^)

(3)This is not a view that has been entirely dismissed yet, though the historical aesthetic context emphasized in my reading of *Shirley* intersects with recent critical work on Brontë by Juliet Barker, Sally Shuttleworth, and Heather Glen, who have opened the door to understanding Brontë’s imaginative treatment with industrial and material culture.(^)

(4)Critical interest in Chartist poetry and fiction has grown strongly in the last few decades. A representative sampling of current work on Chartist poetry appeared in a special issue of *Victorian Poetry* dedicated to “The Poetics of the Working Classes,” ed. by Florence S. Boos. In addition to those critics cited above, key critical works on Chartist literature include Epstein and D. Thompson; Mitchell; Devereux; Wheeler; Haywood, *Revolution in Popular Literature*.(^)

(5)As Jutta Schwarzkopf notes, “For women, participation in Chartism was to represent the high, and at the same time final, point of their involvement in radical politics. With the waning of the Chartist movement, women almost entirely disappeared from working-class campaigns for the next three decades” (4).(^)

(6)At this early moment in the novel, though, Moore lacks individuation, as do the working classes. Webb argues that the voice of William Farren, whom “Charlotte Brontë allows . . . to speak of himself as ‘poor,’” is the only orator of the working classes in the novel, and “speaks as if being in work and being out of work were the essential question, whereas the essential question is: Who will control the work?” (135). Yet the entrance of a working-class voice through the letter asserts the cause of economic depression in a way that reflects the Luddite

interpretation of poverty. Though not a visible act of violence, the letter is a demonstration of the working poor's collective political action. The Luddites are aware of who controls the work; they seek to have their protest recognized.^(^)

(7)On the link between female characters and Luddism in *Shirley*, see Zlotnick, 87-98.^(^)

(8)This point is compounded if one considers the financial implications of Moore's oversight. The Victorian publication market was flooded with advice manuals, written by middle-class authors for the "good" of the working-class people aspiring to middle-class respectability. These proved a primer of bourgeois values that would benefit industry by strengthening the morals and manners of domestic life according to the principles of political economy. The virtues of prompt, steady application, temperance, sobriety, prayer instead of pleasure, and so on, all contributed to the necessities of mass production. Robert Moore's indifference to the working-class household threatens not only his physical property but could threaten his commercial aspirations, as well. The scholarly works in this area is substantial but for a good introduction, see Attar and Horn.^(^)

(9)James Buzard proposes that Brontë "tries in *Shirley* to disrupt the logic of crisis by showing critical moments succeeded or interpenetrated by others in which multiple identities might coexist and reciprocally reinforce one another" (236). Though Buzard investigates this interdependence in the relationship between characters in instances of crisis, I see this dependency ingrained in the relationship between the narrator and the working classes.^(^)

(10)This is a move that extends beyond the pages of *Shirley*. In editing the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë wrote to her publishers, "It seems to me advisable to modify the orthography of the old servant Joseph's speeches—for though—as it stands—it exactly renders the Yorkshire accent to a Yorkshire ear—yet I am sure Southerners must find it unintelligible —" ("Brontë To W. S. Williams" 479).^(^)

(11)According to Rosemarie Bodenheimer, the textual polyglossia gives the book "a peculiar improvisatory shape" (41). Yet the "shape" of the novel is an abiding concern shared by other industrial novelists: Stone provides an account of Gaskell's shifting rhetorical and narrative strategies that also structurally reform her industrial novel.^(^)

(12)"The Ballad of Puir Mary Lee" was published in *The Book of Scottish Song: Collected and Illustrated with Historical and Critical Notices* (1843). This anthology contains the abridged version of the ballad that is quoted in *Shirley*.^(^)

(13)In this sense, Brontë's inclusion of the ballad into *Shirley* recalls the ways in which Walter Scott used poetry and ballads in his novels, as authentic voices that could express emotional depths that prose fiction could not. According to Gerould, throughout oral history songs have given "aesthetic pleasure not only to the simple folk who have sung them, but to persons of more sophisticated taste who have formed their standards and developed their appreciation with reference to the music and poetry of canonical art" (11).^(^)

(14)As Smith observes, the narrator “crosses all of the dialect boundaries of the novel,” able to use Yorkshire dialect, French, and her own middle-class voice (638).(^)

(15)The conservative paternalism in *Shirley* is made apparent in Philip Roger’s study of the manipulated historicism in the novel. See also Collier’s reading of Brontë’s strategies for class containment in *Shirley*.(^)

(16)Robert Moore, Brontë’s ‘captain of industry’ is notably absent from the culminating patriotic scene. Brontë’s representation of the nation in the Whitsuntide Parade is a celebration of a fundamentally English identity, which Robert and Louis Moore, with their “hybrid” French and English background, have not yet embraced (Bodenheimer 60). Over the course of the novel, Caroline will, as Pam Morris notes, “instruct Moore in the necessary qualities of leadership for an English capitalist employer . . . into a properly English moral understanding of the responsibilities of leadership . . . rejecting those ‘sceptical, and sneering’ French attributes that her cousin has acquired” (292). Robert’s financial losses stemmed from the consequences of the French Revolution, a pointed harbinger warning English readers of armed class warfare. If bourgeois England was to calm working-class protesters, the government would have to assume an open recognition that, as William Farren puts it, “starving folk cannot be satisfied or settled folk” (319-20). Brontë’s faith in a united, educated national front to counter violent, anti-Establishment movements is predicated on her belief in the diverse and representative artistic heritage in Britain. Robert Moore’s “hybrid” background implicitly suggests the failed French response to quelling dissent and, instead, optimistically represents England as a nation imaginatively open to, and indeed created through, dissenting voices.(^)

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