

2002

Textual Mediums : Reading as Agency in Vilette and Behind a Mask

Sarah Herchel
Lehigh University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://preserve.lehigh.edu/etd>

Recommended Citation

Herchel, Sarah, "Textual Mediums : Reading as Agency in Vilette and Behind a Mask" (2002). *Theses and Dissertations*. Paper 731.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Lehigh Preserve. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Lehigh Preserve. For more information, please contact preserve@lehigh.edu.

Herchel, Sarah

Textual Mediums:
Reading as
Agency in Vilette
and Behind a
Mask

June 2002

Textual Mediums: Reading as Agency in *Villette* and *Behind a Mask*

by

Sarah Herchel

A Thesis

Presented to the Graduate and Research Committee
of Lehigh University
in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts

in

English

Lehigh University

May 2002

This thesis is accepted and approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Arts.

April 30, 2002
Date

Beth Dolan Kautz
Thesis Advisor

David Hawkes
Co-Advisor

Barry Kroll
Head of the Department

Table of Contents

I. Title Page	i
II. Signature Page	ii
III. Abstract	1
IV. Textual Mediums: Reading as Agency in <i>Villette</i> and <i>Behind a Mask</i>	2-20
V. Works Cited	21
VI. About the Author	22

Abstract

Both Charlotte Bronte and Louisa May Alcott have their main characters of *Villette* and *Behind a Mask*, and, respectively, read other characters, particularly male characters, actual books, and the situations in which the women find themselves. I examine what it means to be a woman character in nineteenth-century literature who gains agency through reading and gazing at her surroundings. Scopophilia, a psychoanalytic term for pleasure through looking, is used by the characters Lucy Snowe and Jean Muir in effective ways. The heroines are able to perform their desires through reading, observing, and manipulating their circumstances, and they satisfy their longing to be free and 'feminine' women in a patriarchal society.

The main discovery of this paper is that the women heroines succeed at reversing the male role of viewer and the female role of objectified. My reading shows that these women appropriate the male gaze, the act of reading texts, and situations in a way that empowers them as female characters with freedom and agency.

Both Charlotte Bronte and Louisa May Alcott portray the act of reading in their texts as a form of agency for women. Lucy Snowe of *Villette* (1853) and Jean Muir of *Behind a Mask* (1866) are both characters who actively but secretly 'read' people around them and gain power through this reading. In many ways, both Lucy and Jean quench their feminine desire to have control and power within relationships and society by utilizing scopophilia, or a form of a female gaze, by observing men, texts, and situations around them, and then gaining pleasure through this action. In effect, these women modify the script of the woman's role in nineteenth-century culture by reading and beholding those around them, rather than remaining placid and apathetic. Tania Modleski, in her book *Loving with a Vengeance*, argues that for women, "[T]he necessity of 'reading' people, especially men, is tacitly acknowledged in...narratives...heroines engage in a continual deciphering of the motives for the hero's behavior" in much literature, including that of the nineteenth century (Modleski 34). She goes on to say that in reality, "women always had to 'read' men" throughout history (Modleski 34). Specifically, Lucy and Jean gain freedom of thought and performance as a result of their scopophilic behavior. Typically reading is thought of as a masculine activity, but Lucy and Jean successfully appropriate and perform a sort of role reversal in reading and are able to objectify, examine, and manipulate men in a patriarchal and bourgeois society (Showalter 129).

Before examining the heroines' scopophilic behaviors, I would like to think about the motives for their actions. Although both women crave freedom and a physical space of their own, the motives for their watching seem also to differ from each other. While Lucy wants a space where she can be open to love and thought,

Jean desires money and status (as well as a physical space that signifies wealth).

Lucy's school house represents, on the most surface level, a space for her to teach, but on a more profound level the school house is a place for her to love others while being seen. She builds a home for herself and M. Paul unashamedly. Lucy does not desire to remain hidden, rather she craves a place where she can be accepted for who she is and love those around her openly. Being a teacher puts her in the position of guidance; Lucy cultivates respect from her students and cares for them at the same time. By the end of *Villette* Lucy no longer needs to utilize the scopophilic gaze because she achieves a physical place in which to express that love openly.

This openness to feeling, though, is not what Jean Muir seeks in her observing behaviors. In many ways, for Jean, money is equivalent to freedom and is therefore the object of her desire. The actress is a cold and calculating woman, and her goal is wealth and a space that allows her to feel secure as an upper-class woman. Jean is forced to manipulate the class system, and although she must perform a role in order to achieve this status, she does not seem to care how people view her once she achieves the position. Unlike Lucy, Jean desires a space from which she can look down upon others and has no need for love. Her relationships with Sir John and the other Coventry men, as we will see, are merely tools with which she propels her career as up the social ladder.

Important to the two women's agency in the novels is their invisibility to society and to the people they are examining. By reading and remaining unobserved, the women control what they see and how much of that information they disclose to those around them. By making their true thoughts and feelings unavailable to their

audience, these women transcend the often imprisoning female body and use their intellect and vision to their advantage (Showalter 128). They themselves become the spectator of their world as opposed to being the spectacle. In the nineteenth century, not only was it difficult to have agency as a woman outside of the domestic domain, but also it was nearly impossible to escape the boundaries and limitations of what it meant to have the female form. In order to manipulate the circumstances society presented these women with, they are forced to hide their true selves behind a façade. Both Jean and Lucy manage to alter or hide themselves and their bodies in effective ways.

Jean physically hides her identity with the disguise of makeup and a different personality than she really has. When she wiped “the pink from her face, took out several teeth, and slipp[ed] off her dress [she] appeared indeed, a haggard, worn woman of thirty at least” (Alcott 106). Mary Elliot writes a convincing essay on the gender issues within *Behind a Mask*, and in the essay she makes several points about the agency with which the mask itself endows Jean. Elliot says of Jean, “first, she removes the mask only when she is safe and alone—that is, when she is most herself; second, she recognizes the demarcation between her own identity and that which the ‘mask’ confers; third, she demonstrates her own ‘authentic’ subjectivity by choosing to remove the mask whenever possible” (301). Through wearing her mask, Jean is able to read whomever she desires without ever being truly seen or read herself. The disguise is important because it alters the way in which those around her perceive Jean as woman. The stereotype that she falls into when wearing the mask is one that actually works to Jean’s advantage, and she uses the stereotype of the naïve woman to

attain the wealthy status she is seeking. By keeping her true circumstances hidden, she is able to desire power unabashedly, since the 'real' Jean has never met the people by whom she is surrounded. An advantage of keeping a mask is that this 'true' self will never become the object of the male gaze. Unobjectified, the true Jean will maintain her own independence and power over her actions. The space that is created behind her mask is one that she owns and controls.

Lucy often hides behind the mask of shadows just as Jean hides behind the mask of an altered physical appearance: However, Lucy never wants to be seen, even if she is in disguise. Lucy surveys and reads other people most effectively when she is hidden, and her interests lie in watching people for her own pleasure and learning from their actions. Lucy wants to control those around her, but she desires to do this so that one day she can be comfortable with and secure in herself. Her guise seems to enable her to observe those around her and subject them to her own desires. She utilizes her surroundings, explaining at one point, "the canopy of entwined trees held out a shadow, the night whispered a pledge of protection" (Bronte 576). She also actually disguises herself with garments to watch others at times. The protection that Lucy needs is critical, for much like Jean, Lucy desires to remain a subject in her own existence. Her subjectivity is only possible if she is unseen by those around her, for once her shadows are removed she can no longer look at people without the action being reciprocated and possibly punished. When someone is looking at her, Lucy feels less able to maneuver her body and her thoughts.

An example of Lucy using her anonymity for her own scopophilic pleasure is in the chapter entitled "Cloud". In this chapter, Lucy is able to observe an entire

party while hiding in the shadows disguised. She explains, "I saw the occupants in that carriage well; me they could not see, or, at least, not know, folded close in my large shawl, screened with my straw hat...I felt safe as if masked" (Bronte 565,567). For Lucy, not being known is important for her to maintain her identity. Protecting both her identity and body are high on Lucy's list of priorities. She feels safe when she is masked because it is at those moments that she can truly make observations without being scrutinized. Lucy is able to construct her own pleasure when her presence is kept secret. While watching Paulina and Graham look upon each other Lucy says, "It gave me strange pleasure to follow these friends viewlessly, and I *did* follow them, as I thought, to the park. I watched them alight...amidst new and unanticipated splendors" (Bronte 566). The excitement that Lucy reads the crowd as having is mingled with her own adrenaline rush of trailing her friends. When Lucy watches the party from the shadows, it is as though she is there, participating in the festivities just by describing them to the reader.

Lucy feels a sort of sexual fulfillment vicariously through watching Paulina and Graham's interactions, and because she knows that Graham's love is for Paulina and not herself, there is an awareness that her subjectivity will only last if she remains aloof and undetected. When Graham begins to gaze at Lucy, she says:

Why then did he concentrate on me—oppressing me with the whole force of that full, blue, steadfast orb? Why, if he *would* look, did not one glance satisfy him? Why did he turn on his chair, rest his elbow on its back, and study me leisurely? He could not see my face, I held it down; surely he *could* not recognize me; I stooped, I turned, I *would* not be known. Bronte 571

The moment Lucy is recognized and studied she feels she can no longer control the goings on around her. Lucy feels "oppressed" by Graham's gaze, and she comments

on his level of dissatisfaction with one look. Graham looks hungrily at Lucy, as if he wants gorge upon her for his own pleasure, as his relaxed poise indicates. Lucy's desire is to love without being judged, and the only moments she can be free of judgmental stares are when she is concealed in the shadows. By staring at Lucy, Graham is not only subjecting her to his misconceptions, but also he is robbing her of the power to love in her own way. He essentially takes away her freedom to look. Lucy's imagination and exploring nature allow her to work positively with the situations presented to her. Her agency depends on remaining anonymous and maintaining the ability to gaze as she pleases.

Margaret L. Shaw comments on Lucy, "the secret of Lucy's power as observer is that she... is not fully observable; she is not readable" (5). Lucy is not readable because she does not betray her feelings, and the people that she interacts with tend to brush her off as though she is not important enough for her analysis of character to matter. Lucy says of Graham, "He, I believe, never remembered that I had eyes in my head; much less a brain behind them" (Bronte 120). Because Graham does not consider Lucy to be of the same social status as he is, he does not really see her as a thinking and feeling entity.

Jean's purpose in remaining unseen is different than Lucy's in that Jean wants her body to be seen. When she first meets Sir John, he sees her as quite attractive, and she uses this attractiveness to her advantage. In the garden, Jean walks with an air of confidence about herself looking, "very earnest and pretty...standing there with the sunshine glinting on her yellow hair, delicate face, and downcast eyes" (Alcott 108). She and Sir John interact positively, and she examines him from behind her

mask and at the same time conveys to him a set of beliefs that differ from the ones she actually holds. In actuality, Jean believes that Sir John is a pawn in her game. Instead of expressing this knowledge, Jean forces herself to blush and speak admiringly of him. But the whole time laudatory words such as, she cannot help but “loving [his] virtue and bravery” are a mere part of the plan to achieve the desires that Jean envisions (Alcott 108). Jean is actually manipulating Sir John’s desires to her own ends and says to herself later, “That is done, and very well for a beginning” (Alcott 109). Although the ‘real’ Jean is not seen by Sir John, she never fears that during her interactions she will betray her plan. She acts naïve, bordering on stupid, in front of Sir John in order to win his love, and she lets him believe it is she who is being subjected to his gaze, when in actuality he is her object of scrutiny.

Traditionally, men are the thinkers and voyeurs, and Mary Ann Doane articulates an important question that can be applied to Lucy and Jean:

The difficulties in thinking female spectatorship demand consideration. After all, even if it is admitted that the woman is frequently the object of the voyeuristic or fetishistic gaze ... what is there to prevent her from reversing the relation and appropriating the gaze for her own pleasure? (180)

The two heroines being examined in this paper perform this reversal in a brilliant way, and the men around them never know that they are being subjected to the women’s desires. In part, Graham and Sir John never realize this reversal because they do not respect the women as intellectually active creatures. The act of hiding the female form when reading and viewing is important to these women’s agency because much of their aggressive behaviors and desires are disguised as well as their physical appearances. Disguising these behaviors is necessary for the women to

accomplish their desires because, in society, objectifying others is viewed as masculine. The consequences of appropriating masculine behaviors are several, including a loss of respect and therefore little resulting pleasure for the women who achieved the appropriation. When Jean paints herself as a different person, she is writing a script in which a demure young woman is an innocent victim, whereas in reality, she is preying on the Coventry family. Her disguise is necessary because it permits others to regard her as a stereotypical woman, while at the same time giving her uncharacteristic power. The woman who looks aesthetically like an innocent actually performs the often male role of the culpable. Lucy does something different with her mask, in that she does not masquerade as an innocent, but rather hides her whole self. She shies away from interactions which may put her in the position of revealing information about herself. The shadows, however, are necessary to mute her analytical nature in many situations, as seen in the "Cloud" chapter. Acting in ways that society values as feminine is necessary for acceptance. Appearing to adopt this value system enables these heroines to pursue their true pleasures covertly.

Jean Muir masquerades and is 'recognized' as a 'typical' female entity by the Coventry men. Ned, Gerald, and Sir John all see Jean as a meek woman who is a good confidant. Jean uses their misperception of her as a romantic character and invites them to open up to her. Her invitation is luring and almost mesmeric, and Jean is aware that her prepared script will be performed. She is said to "penetrate Gerald with her eyes" and says to him, "I have the fatal power of reading character; I know you better than she [Lucia] does, I see--...under the ice I see fire, and warn you lest it proves a volcano'" (Alcott 152). Jean reads Gerald well, but her

interpretation of him is not only powerful because it is on target and based on intuition. It is also intriguing because Jean's reading takes on a masculine assertiveness and even a probing masculine quality, i.e. "penetrating" look. This look is comparable to a scopophilic one in that by penetrating Ned she makes him subject to her power; she is making Ned her plaything! Jean reads men while maintaining a feminine façade and employing and appropriating stereotypically masculine tools such as the male gaze. Her intuition causes the reader to both loath and envy Jean at the same time.

Both the readers of *Behind a Mask* and the other characters have emotions towards Jean that "consist of a complex mixture of anger, envy, and sneaking admiration" because we recognize her agency and power but do not find it 'socially acceptable' of women in the time period (Modleski 33). Women of today as well as women of the nineteenth century have conflicted responses to powerful and sometimes manipulative women. Gender stereotypes allow little room for mobility, and characteristics that are traditionally masculine are shunned when it is a woman embodying them. Of particular interest in Modleski's observation is the idea that women have a "*sneaking admiration*" for those other women who can successfully use masculine qualities to their advantage. It seems that society either feared women reading or held strong disbeliefs that they were capable of reading intelligently and analytically. In *Behind a Mask*, after Jean's true identity is discovered through her letters, Lucia exclaims, "She never wrote that! It is impossible. A woman could not do it" (Alcott 195). Lucia, a woman herself, doubts that a woman could articulate herself so clearly and aggressively in a letter, but the tone she uses to chastise Jean

seems to indicate jealousy. Jean writes phrases in her letters that imply strong will, intelligence, and wit. For example, she says, "Monsieur is used to being worshipped. I took no notice of him, and by the natural perversity of human nature, he began to take notice of me" (Alcott 196). The perpetual stereotype of human nature dictating behaviors is interesting. Rather than attributing her intellect for Sir John's desire, Jean is assured that human desire is all based on an inherently natural game. Jean understands this game well.

Lucia's skepticism about Jean's capabilities as a writer parallel the way Lucy is ridiculed for her writing talent. Lucy, at a raw moment when her disguise is ripped off, is intellectually raped by two professors on the issue of her well-written essay on which she "*could not, or would not speak*". One professor says, " 'Est-elle donc idiote?'" and Lucy responds to herself, " 'Yes...an idiot she is, and always will be, for such as you'" (Bronte 502). This interaction, though, only demonstrates how Lucy was stripped of her power and agency in reading when she was *forced* to answer questions. The oral fact test performed on her is degrading and pushes her to think in patriarchal ways as she is exposed to the male gaze. What is worse, the gaze is perpetuated not by one man, but by three! This exposure is exactly what Lucy fears, because she cannot think while being watched. But in the very next scene, Lucy successfully rejects the imposed way of thinking, and she explains how she can create an intriguing essay. She says, "I got books, read up the facts, laboriously constructed a skeleton out of the dry bones of the real, and then clothed them, and tried to breathe into them life, and *in this last aim I had pleasure*" (my italics added, Bronte 502-503). When Lucy has pleasure and power in her reading is when she is most successful in,

and she does not have pleasure until she is the creator of her own knowledge. Lucy experiences the freedom to breathe into her own work and in her own way, and then she has ownership and control over the books she was reading and produces an insightful essay. Finding pleasure in a text is critical to a woman's desire to read and utilize the information gleaned from it. Lucy rejected the professors' and M. Paul's imposing patriarchal and traditionalist views of reading and instead succeeded in creating a new life for herself through the texts she read.

We see Lucy use traditional themes pleurably and in a new, perhaps feminine way, in the scene where she is being tested. Lucy seems to be constructing and costuming her inferences from the texts much as she disguises her own body. She exemplifies how she is able to read and write effectively by explaining her thought process. She takes a theme dictated by the professors, "Human Justice", and she feminizes it: "'Human Justice' rushed before me in novel guise, a red, random beldame with arms akimbo" (Bronte 504). Although Human Justice is often personified as a woman, the way in which Lucy feminizes the figure running and monopolizing her thoughts is different than the professors would envision the figure. She envisions a "random" figure which is suggestive of a multiplicity of meanings. Lucy's thought process is not uni-goal-directed; rather her thoughts about Justice are all-encompassing and open. It is interesting that Lucy's thought process allows her to be submerged completely in images and feeling, and then allows her to articulate what she thinks about an issue. A particularly feminine way of reading and thinking permits the reader to have a multiplicity of ideas rather than just one correct idea. Lucy goes on to describe a content woman who takes charge of her domestic situation

by showering the men who menace her with sugar-plums. Lucy triumphs over her interrogators by manipulating their test and throwing it in their face. Here *Villette* “cries out against institutional forces of education, of art, and of religion” because Lucy defies the ways of learning imposed on her by the two professors (Wein 2).

The Coventry men do not see through Jean’s romantic mask, and she uses her romantic appeal to gain power by reading novels and stories to them. Jean, too, has control over her reading and interpreting of texts. She essentially holds the pen by choosing the tone and style in which she reads to them. Jean actively reads to Edward from romance novels, and it is as though these novels put irrational feminine (by society’s standards) thoughts in his head. Jean reads to Edward, but in addition to reading to him she also reads him. Jean evaluates Edward’s character and chooses romance novels as the most effective texts to overpower him with. She pin-points Edward as a character that will be compelled by these novels, and Jean essentially writes a script with which he falls into line. While listening to Jean read aloud, Edward “devours her with his eyes” (Alcott 122). It is intriguing that Alcott would choose to say that Edward devours Jean with his eyes because, in reality, Edward cannot see Jean at all. He has invented a character in conjunction with the one she created for herself. Edward does not see the real Jean, and it is this blindness that allows her to overpower him and the rest of the Coventry men. Edward sees the character that Jean has created for herself; a wholesome and inviting young woman who would make a good wife. Gerald observes that his brother “makes himself the hero, Miss Muir the heroine, and lives the love scene with all the ardor of a man whose heart has just waked up. Poor lad! Poor lad!” (Alcott 122). The sympathy for

Edward is created because he is considered to be weak in romanticizing life. The act of “ ‘inverting the stereotypes’ ” is one that enables Muir to control Ned (Modleski 22). Men are expected to behave rationally even when it comes to love, and Edward’s ideals have been shaped by the impossibilities and adventures in the romance novel. Jean has basically become “ ‘the culture’s ultimate monster: a man herself, she has treated men like women’ ” (Elliot 302).

Jean is capable of appropriating a masculine role in the types of books she reads, for Jean is also interested in reading traditionally ‘masculine’ texts. Men are portrayed as reading history or current events, more often than women, but in *Behind a Mask* Jean is seen enjoying history texts. Sir John listens to Jean and Bella read:

‘Novels!’ thought Sir John, and smiled at them for a pair of romantic girls. But pausing to listen a moment before he spoke. He found it was no novel, but history, read with a fluency which made every fact interesting, every sketch of character memorable, by the dramatic effect given to it. Sir John was fond of history, and failing eyesight often failed his amusement. (Alcott 118)

Sir John assumes that women would read only romance novels, and that reading this type of writing would therefore make them “romantic girls”. In other words, reading these novels makes the girls whimsical and irrational, when in fact it is Edward in *Behind a Mask* who Jean actually refers to as a “romantic boy”. Jean, however, is much more calculating than romantic. She is reading history, which then had a male-based readership, and she reads it in a way that makes it interesting. Performing her role as woman is deliberate for Jean; she chooses how to inflect her voice and steers the history (and the future) in the direction she desires it to go. She has scrutinized and studied the men around her, including Sir John, in order to discover what would captivate his attention. Sir John comments on the voice inflections Jean uses in her

reading and is interested in hearing more based on the way she presents the text. Jean mesmerizes Sir John by dominating and manipulating a text. She controls the material she reads, and through this power controls those around her. Jean successfully plays the role of a 'good woman' while maintaining a personal space for observation and planning.

In this overt way, Jean has empowered herself through reading. She has power over Edward by reading to him, and she gains control over the other Coventry men in similar ways. In addition to reading aloud, Jean also reads in private, when writing her letters, and she is constantly storytelling throughout the novel. Jean is arguably the strongest character in Alcott's *Behind a Mask*; she is a talented actress, and she actually uses stories of romance to work to her advantage. In a disturbing letter which she wrote to a friend, Jean says how she fooled Gerald Coventry by telling him "a romantic story of S.'s persecution" (Alcott 198). Jean actually uses characteristics of a heroine in a romance novel to empower her as a woman. She has the ability to manipulate men's foolish beliefs that women are romantic characters, and even says, "What fools men are!" (Alcott 198) She manipulates their faulty belief to fulfill her desire to have a wealthy position in society. Her reading to Sir John ensures her the place she truly desires.

Jean's command over the Coventry men's feelings and viewpoints is similar to the way that Lucy is in touch with Graham's emotions. As shown earlier, Lucy guides her situations through reading men. For example, in the chapter "The Fete", Lucy appropriates Graham's desire for Ginevra as she performs the role of a male.

Watching Graham while acting, Lucy is able to read his feelings and use them in her performance:

The spectacle seemed somehow suggestive. There was language in Dr. John's look, though I cannot tell what he said; it animated me: I drew out of it a history; I put my idea into the part I performed; I threw it into my wooing of Ginevra. (Bronte 173-74)

In this scene, Lucy succeeds as a student, an actress, and as a *man*. She is not playing a 'typical' female damsel role in M. Paul's production; rather she is playing the part of a love struck male. The fact that she can play this part well through performing a man's feelings shows that Lucy is an avid and analytical reader. She watches Graham intensely, and she actually allows his energy to flow through her own body. Her agency emerges from this pleasure. Lucy says, "I acted to please myself" (Bronte 174). These performances are visual and then sensory for Lucy. Much like Jean, Lucy takes control of what she reads, no matter what the medium, and creates agency for herself through this analysis. In acting out sexual desire there is a suggestion that Lucy desires to love in public in the same way as Graham does. Lucy is restricted by her gender, but when she acts the man's role in the play she is able to tap into her sexuality openly without being degraded for such feelings. In fact, by the end of the play Lucy is lauded for her performance. Performance and desire are so intertwined in these texts that we must wonder if desires can only be attained through playing a part.

Much like the pleasure she gains through constructing situations around her and performing other's feelings, Lucy finds agency and freedom in interpreting books and letters. She reads and writes well in the traditional sense, and she receives much encouragement and reading material from M. Paul. However, Lucy is able to reject

much of the constricting and typically 'feminine' ways of reading that M. Paul suggests. He is her teacher, and in many ways has the dominant role in the relationship. However, M. Paul's leading role in the partnership is a result of Lucy's consent and even desire to allow M. Paul to feel like he is in control. The reader sees Lucy as dominant in the relationship especially at times when she is reading. For example, she critiques M. Paul's book on religion as "intended wholly and solely for those whose head is reached through the heart. Its appeal was not to intellect; it sought to win the affectionate through their affections, the sympathetic through their sympathies" (Bronte 518). This astute critique of the preaching text points to Lucy's rejection of the stereotypically feminine way of reading and to her embracing of a patriarchal way of reading. Like Jean, she handles her reading materials and subverts her position as a woman in society with skill. She will not be won over through her emotions, and instead she demands to be challenged intellectually. She says the "little book" amused her and that it was "sentimental [and] shallow" (Bronte 518). The novel seems to suggest here that most of society believes women capable of reading only in emotional and nonintellectual ways.

Although the two heroines use many of the same tactics to achieve agency and subjectivity, their motivations and desires differ, and therefore the outcomes of their behaviors are dissimilar. Both desire to revel in the pleasures of reading and writing their own lives, but Lucy wants her desire to succeed and love to remain unseen, while Jean ultimately wants an exposure of her desires. A difference, however, in their performance of the scripts they write for themselves is the idea that Lucy wants to remain socially acceptable in society's eyes, while Jean wants to champion over

the patriarchal society. Both heroines manipulate their position in society either by taking advantage of stereotypes of women, or by making use of feminine ways of thinking. By the end of *Villette*, Lucy achieves her desires; she establishes the school she imagined, and she is an empowered woman. She does not, however, flaunt her success to the people around her. Lucy is interested in gaining pleasure for herself through loving and caring for others, which the schoolhouse allows her to do. Lucy says:

My schoolhouse flourishes, my house is ready: I have made him [M. Paul] a little library, filled its shelves with the books he left in my care: I have cultivated out of love for him (I was naturally no florist) the plants he preferred, and some of them are yet in bloom. I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own.

(Bronte 616)

Lucy feels she possesses M. Paul, her schoolhouse, and, finally, herself. She attained this house through her scopophilic behaviors and skilled reading, and finally the reader sees how Lucy can perform the kinds of activities she longed to do throughout the novel. No longer does she need to exist vicariously or in secret; Lucy lives openly and free, though tucked out of the view of outsiders, in her schoolhouse.

Jean performs a more conniving and exhibitionist sort of action, for by the end of *Behind a Mask*, she is openly saying, “‘Is not the last scene better than the first?’” (Alcott 202). Jean desires that her performance be recognized and even acclaimed, whereas Lucy does not want recognition. Jean says, “Hands off, gentlemen! You may degrade yourselves to the work of detectives, but I am not prisoner yet, Poor Jean Muir you might harm, but Lady Coventry is beyond your reach” (Alcott 201). Jean reveals that she was playing a game with the Coventry family, and she revels in

her newly acquired high status. This difference between a humble woman versus a proud woman is a fundamental one. Although Lucy desires agency, she is aware that an openly powerful woman will never have the same respect that a submissive woman will have. Jean cares not for respect, but rather for wealth and security, and she throws these elements she's gained in the Coventry family's face without concern for respect.

These women triumph as the heroines of these two works both by enacting a feminine way of reading their situation and those around them and also by co-opting a more traditional and patriarchal way of reading. Lucy and Jean are aware of the gender code that seemingly binds them, but they use masculine tools, such as observing and reading, to give them power over those surrounding them. The heroines are successful in being the authors of their own lives as well as the authors of those whom they may wish to control. Both Bronte and Alcott question the position of women within society and reveal the means by which they are able to break out of that confining role. Lucy and Jean are both characters who use their knowledge of feminine stereotypes, methods of acting and storytelling, and intellectual skill in order to read the situations in which they are placed. They literally read texts and write books and letters while maintaining a feminine façade and employing masculine tools to help them succeed in a patriarchal society. By reading texts in a way that is most comfortable and pleasurable for her, Lucy is able to gain power through them. Jean, by reading to both Ned and Sir John, and telling stories throughout the novel, remains the romantic character the men in the novella perceive her to be, but she achieves power over the men by feminizing them. A

friend of Bronte said, "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not be," but it seems that both Bronte and Alcott have proved that with the ability to read texts effectively, a woman has the power to achieve her desires and succeed within a patriarchal society (Wein 10). The heroines manipulate all mediums of texts ranging from men to situations to books. They script these mediums in a positive way that enables them to have agency, and ultimately to act out their desires freely, in their confined and structured lives of middle-lower class women of the nineteenth century.

Works Cited

- Alcott, Louisa May. *Behind a Mask. Alternative Alcott*. Ed. Elaine Showalter. New Brunswick, New Jersey, London: Rutgers University Press, 1988. 97-202.
- Bronte, Charlotte. *Villette*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1984.
- Doane, Mary Ann. "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing The Female Spectator". *Writing on the Body: Female Embodiment and Feminist Theory*. Eds. Katie Conboy, Nadia Medina. Columbia UP, New York. 176-94.
- Elliot, Mary. "Outperforming Femininity: Public Conduct and Private Enterprise in Louisa May Alcott's *Behind a Mask*." *American Transcendental Quarterly* 8 (Dec 1994): 299-310.
- Lee, Elizabeth. "The Femme Fatale as an Object".
<http://www.victorianweb.org/victorian/gender/object.html>
- Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance: Mass Produced Fantasies for Women*. Routledge, 1990.
- Shaw, Margaret L. "Narrative surveillance and social control in 'Villette'." *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 34 (Autumn 1994): 813-821. online 1-20.
- Showalter, Elaine. *Sister's Choice*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991.
- Wein, Toni. *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900* 39 (Autumn 1999): 733. online 1-17.

About the Author

Sarah Jean Herchel was born in West Springfield, Massachusetts, November 5, 1977. She is the daughter of Henry and Jean Herchel. Sarah graduated from Lehigh University in 2000 with a B.A. in English and Psychology. She attended Lehigh University for her M.A. in English Literature and graduated in 2002. Sarah currently teaches reading skills in Boston, Massachusetts.

**END OF
TITLE**