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'Mediocrity in the sensations': Charlotte Brontë and the Yorkshire Marriage

'Would Mr. T - and I ever suit- ?' Charlotte Brontë wondered to Ellen Nussey in 1851, when all prospects of a romantic marriage seemed to be fading.[1] 'Mr. T' was James Taylor (c. 1817-1874), a manager at Smith, Elder and Company, who published *Jane Eyre*, Taylor himself being instrumental in recommending publication of the novel. The relationship became more personal over time, as the two corresponded and Taylor arranged for her to receive boxes of books from the firm. Elizabeth Gaskell believed he proposed marriage to her, but according to Margaret Smith there remains some uncertainty about this.[2] Either way, the relationship between the two continued in its uneasy state while Taylor was away in India on behalf of the firm, and Brontë once more played out the mental scenario she rehearsed repeatedly with Ellen as to whether or not she could see herself married to the man who had most recently raised that possibility.

From the start, she found Taylor, notwithstanding his appreciation of her work and undoubted intelligence, physically repellent. Reporting her first meeting with him to Ellen, her sentences emerge in typographical gulps, with frequent dashes between short half-sentences: 'He tries to be very kind and even to express sympathy sometimes - and he does not manage it - he has a determined, dreadful nose in the midd[l]e of his face which when poked into my countenance cuts into my soul like iron -'. The 'iron' reference echoes what she has said in the same letter about his management of the '40 young men [kept] under strict control by his iron will,' while a comparison with ' the Helstone order of men' links him directly to the harsh Yorkshire clergyman of *Shirley*, the Reverend James Helstone.[3] What is interesting about this description, however, is not just the porous boundaries between her fiction and the

new people she was meeting, but the sudden lurch of physical violence as the dreadful nose pokes beyond her 'countenance' and into her very soul. Setting aside the all-too-obvious phallic images of penetration, this startling metaphor reflects the interconnectedness, for Brontë, of embodied and psychological subjectivities. As William Cohen puts it in his discussion of 'Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*' (2003), Brontë not only 'dramatizes the strangeness of the idea of *being inside any body* at all,' but also 'the idea that human subjects dwell in their bodies, and that bodies serve as vehicles or containers for invisible spiritual, psychological, or mental contents.'[4]

Brontë is of course well known for emphasizing the physicality of her leading characters. Her technique can be seen at its crudest in her famous descriptions of the Belgian schoolgirls encountered by *The Professor's* William Crimsworth at Mdlle Reuter's school. Each of these extended pen-portraits begins by itemising the bodily features of his pupils, and then connecting them to specific behavioural characteristics, so that the first of these (for example), Aurelia Koslow, is large-footed, with 'body long, legs short, bust much developed but not compactly moulded.' 'So much for person,' Crimsworth continues, 'As to mind, deplorably ignorant and ill-informed.' Even an apparently harmless-looking appearance, as with the 'dumpy but good-looking' Adèle Dronsart, belies the reality of her 'Gorgon-like' disposition and 'panther-like deceit about her mouth.'[5] What interests me for the purposes of this essay collection, however, is the ways in which Brontë explores, via references to bodily sensation and material objects, both in her letters (chiefly to Ellen) and in her fiction, the experience of deciding to marry, and the alienating nature of its operation for those bystanders, like herself and Ellen, who felt destined never to be swept up in a reciprocal romance. Time and again, as she and Ellen reviewed their own prospects

and those of their circle (for example Joe Taylor and Amelia Ringrose, and also the Robinson daughters, Anne's former charges), Brontë pits the romantic ideal against the harshness of bodily and material realities. While her dislike of uncouth rich and ignorant people is well known to Brontë scholars what I aim to do in this essay is investigate the relationship between her intensely physical and metaphorical language in the context of theories of embodied subjectivity, in order to deepen our understanding of how she interpreted the mysteriousness and incomprehensibility of sexual attraction as she witnessed it around her. Alongside this I will juxtapose discussion of the materialism - the emphasis on wealth and worldly values - which accompanies both her dialogues with Ellen about their friends' marriages, and the ways in which this transfers to her representation of the abrupt and business-like arrangements of unromantic settlements in her fiction.

Critical Theory of the Body

Critical theory of the body in relation to its representation in literary texts has evolved significantly over recent decades, especially through discussion of how, as David Hillman and Ulrika Maude phrase it, 'the immediate materiality of the body can be represented in literary texts, and how, conversely, the body can itself be "written" - marked and changed by ideological and sociological forces.' [6] As Hillman and Maude argue, the application of body-centred theory to the study of literary texts has become increasingly eclectic, with a growing emphasis on what can be loosely called 'historico-materialist' approaches, compensating for the fact that physical bodies in literary texts (unlike in films) can be represented only by language.[7] Critical approaches of this kind focus on what it feels like to live within a particular body, whose predispositions dominate daily experience. Of particular interest here might by the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61), whose rejection of the Cartesian

mind-body dualism in favour of the notion that 'we are our bodies,' develops the notion of the 'perceiving body-subject.' In *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), he argues that the perceiving mind is an incarnated body, and the body is one's 'point of view upon the world,' as well as our means of communication with it.[8] In Lecture 5 of *The Phenomenology*, 'Man Seen from the Outside,' Merleau-Ponty explains the workings of his theory by which he draws on his memory of a person's body 'animated by all manner of intentions, the origin of numerous actions and words,' to form a 'sketch of their moral character.'[9] An angry person, for example, will be 'inhabited' by this anger, which will distort his facial appearance, so his eyes become bloodshot and his cheeks pale or purple. At the same time, the observer has to find a way of coping, or seeking equilibrium, while maintaining what Merleau-Ponty calls the 'burden of being myself':

> there is no "inner" life that is not a first attempt to relate to another person. In this ambiguous position, which has been forced on us because we have a body and a history (both personally and collectively), we can never know complete rest.[10]

This passage captures that sense of physical and mental discomfort often recorded by Brontë when she feels her own inner self crowded by another person's dominant presence or the influx of their values. William Cohen similarly shows how this experience affects William Crimsworth in *The Professor* when, 'Through the body's sensory channels and orifices, the material world comes into and goes out of the self, altering and affecting mind, soul, and heart.'[11] In his extended, book-length discussion of embodiment in Victorian literature, Cohen takes these ideas further by suggesting that 'sensation,' especially as experienced via touch, hearing, vision, or the skin, allows Victorian writers to give 'palpable form to affects' by representing them

in terms of bodily experience. In physiological terms, Cohen argues, drawing on Merleau-Ponty, attending to sense perceptions 'provides a mechanism for showing how the world of objects - including other bodies - enters the body of the subject and remakes its interior entities.'[12]

Pierre Bourdieu meanwhile theorizes the body as 'a repository of ingrained dispositions' which incline us to act in particular ways. These 'ways' become visible in a wide range of transactions and activities, from the way we carry ourselves in public, to the 'more intimate aspects of life.'[13] When applied to class groups, these predispositions, often marked by differences of accent and vocabulary as well as collective shared tastes, stem from (or perhaps help create) a divided social order, split between the dominant and the dominated. Among the 'network of oppositions' Bourdieu cites in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979), a study of French society in terms of those classes that, because of their superior cultural capital, determine the direction of taste in a given social formation, are the oppositions of 'high and low, spiritual and material, fine (refined, elegant) and coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal)...'[14] Although Bourdieu is talking about a very different kind of society from Charlotte Brontë's circle, his theories about the formation of taste in relation to dominant class values can help us better understand her recoiling from the 'coarse (heavy, fat, crude, brutal)' and indeed the 'heavy (slow, thick, blunt, laborious, clumsy)', or quite simply, the 'intelligent' versus the 'dull' which feature so markedly in her fictions of Belgian life, *Villette* (1853) and *The Professor* (1857), as cited above.

Both Bourdieu's and Merleau-Ponty's theories are too complex and many-sided for an essay of this length to do more than adapt aspects of their thinking on the body as 'a repository of ingrained dispositions' and taste as a divisive marker of class

differences, to support discussion of Brontë's response to the evolving fates of her friends, and her transposition of these concerns into her fiction. The notion of the body-subject, which fosters a body-led 'point of view upon the world' is especially helpful in supporting our reading of Brontë's (in effect) lifelong dialogue with herself and Ellen Nussey about the falling-short of other people's romantic aspirations. Their friends' readiness to make do with what seems to her a marriage based on convenience, material comfort, or the absence of other options, rather than the pleasures of intellectual compatibility, was a subject to which they repeatedly turned in their correspondence, and which also became the mainstay of Brontë's fiction. These conversations helped Brontë define what she found repellent as well as mysterious about so many other people's notions of marriage, including what might be called 'the Yorkshire marriage.' For the purposes of this chapter, this is defined as a practical, down-to-earth arrangement between people who value material possessions and a simple animal kind of physical attraction above what Brontë described (in relation to a proposal from Henry Nussey), as 'that intense attachment which would make me willing to die for him.' [15] The 'Yorkshire marriage,' by contrast, wastes no time on the nuances of feeling, and assumes that with the formalising of the practical arrangements, bodies and minds will be as compatible as they need to be.

Mediocrity in the Sensations

The striking title phrase of this chapter - 'mediocrity in the sensations' - comes from a letter of 20 November 1840, addressed to Ellen Nussey about a clergyman, Osman Parke Vincent, who seemed interested in Ellen, but had so far failed to make a formal proposal. Brontë teases her friend with the words Vincent might be expected to say, offering, in return for her hand, 'a kind attached heart, and a moderate competency.' 'You feel a disgust towards him <u>now</u> - an utter repugnance -very likely,' Brontë

concedes, '-but be so good as to remember you don't know him.' [16] In this extended semi-serious discussion of how a woman should feel about a marriage proposal, Brontë, posing as Ellen's 'Grandmother', ironically advises that 'Mediocrity in all things is wisdom- mediocrity in the sensations is superlative wisdom' (*Letters* I, 233). Weighing the balance between tolerance of a man and wanting to die for him, as well as coming to love a man after he has proposed - indeed some months after the marriage ceremony, rather than before - are all issues Brontë advises Ellen to consider, summing up: 'On one hand don't accept if you are certain you cannot tolerate the man - on the other hand don't refuse because you cannot adore him' (*Letters* I, 234). These carefully-chosen words are the flipside of the tortured repressed passion of Jane, Lucy, Caroline and Shirley, not to mention all her Glass Town and Angrian heroines. They imply that thinking through the alternatives to Byronic romance, and finding a language to distinguish the lukewarm marriage of convenience (such as Vincent might offer Ellen) from the steadfast devotion of a seemingly dull man whose repressed feelings were as powerful as Lucy Snowe's - but not matched by her own on this occasion - came to preoccupy Brontë through her fiction as a significant counter-current to the grand romances she is best remembered for.

This is by no means the only occasion when Brontë, tongue-in-cheek, but with an underlying seriousness, recommends reining in the emotions in order to protect oneself from overwhelming expectations of happiness. Her visits to London to stay with her publisher, George Smith, and his mother, are a case in point: the physical exhaustion these produced, mitigated by the emotional relief of escaping the loneliness of the Parsonage for a while and spending time with an attractive man, prompting her to steady herself before this exposure to overmuch excitement:

'gladness is an exaggeration of sentiment one does not permit oneself,' she told Smith before one such visit in 1851: 'to be pleased is quite enough - and not too well pleased either - only with pleasure of a faint tepid kind - and to a stinted penurious amount.' [17] To Smith's mother she explained more directly that as a girl she had received 'a somewhat sharp lesson on the duty of being glad in peace and quietness - in fear and moderation.'[18] Juliet Barker calls this an 'enigmatic remark,' but from whatever overflow of childish spirits this memory emanated, it certainly left its mark.[19] Perhaps the reprimand came from her father, who appears in her letters as the only partially self-restrained, and sometimes unpredictable, observer of all his children's follies and tragedies. When James Taylor called at the Parsonage with apparently amorous intentions, Mr Brontë seems to have recommended acceptance, on the grounds that 'a prospective union, deferred for 5 years, with such a decorous reliable personage would be a very proper and advisable affair.'[20] Whether or not his daughter perceived the irony of this advice, given her father's desperate attempts to remarry in the years immediately after his wife's death, she was adamant that were she to marry James Taylor, her 'heart would bleed.'[21]

For all her laughter over her own and Ellen's comic-romantic interludes, one might argue that 'mediocrity in the sensations' was exactly what Bronte herself finally settled for in agreeing to marry Arthur Bell Nicholls, as much for her father's benefit as for her own. To Ellen two months before the wedding she confided:

> I am still very calm - very - inexpectant. What I taste of happiness is of the soberest order...The whole thing is something other than imagination paints it beforehand: cares - fears - come mixed inextricably with hopes. [22]

The shock to her father, when Mr Nicholls proposes, is described in physical terms at least as palpable as those she attributed to herself at the prospect of marrying James

Taylor. While Mr Nicholls shakes 'from head to foot, looking deadly pale, 'Papa worked himself into a state not to be trifled with - the veins on his temples started up like whip-cord - and his eyes became suddenly blood-shot -' In Merleau-Ponty's terms, Mr Brontë is 'inhabited' by an anger which explodes in his facial features, while her own 'blood boiled with a sense of injustice.'[23] As for Ellen, a significant gap of nine months in their (at least extant) correspondence seems to signal a serious breakdown of their friendship, triggered by the very issue Brontë so often explored in her fiction: the alienating nature of a friend's marriage when it seems to contradict all previously shared values and, even more, a history of shared ironic counselling. When the language of embodied subjectivity speaks of bleeding hearts and bloodshot eyes, and the body is fully engaged with the expression of mostly negative sensations, the wonderment at other people's romantic resolutions poses a further challenge to Brontë's articulation of the 'marriage problem' in her writing.

The Unexpected Marriage

The opening sentence of Charlotte Brontë's final, unfinished novel, *Emma* (1854), spoken by the narrator, Mrs Chalfont, 'We all seek an ideal in life,' seems to encapsulate the pursuit of perfection which characterizes the themes of Brontë's own correspondence about marriage. Mrs Chalfont, however, is a widow, by her own account 'entirely tranquil and unexpectant' (almost the same word used by Brontë to describe her own feelings before her wedding) who then summarises her own marriage in two sentences: 'I married when I was very young. I lived for fifteen years a life which, whatever its trials, could not be called stagnant.' [24] In firmly eschewing passionate language and only hinting, via a negative construction, at a turbulent past, Mrs Chalfont's romantic history in many ways typifies a subtext about marriage which runs through Brontë's entire oeuvre, providing a pragmatic undercutting of the

passionate romances for which she has become a byword. In other words, for every Jane Eyre or Lucy Snowe who will consider no one other than a soulmate for whom they have an intense infinity, there is someone willing to make do, in order to have a comfortable home and a tolerable level of companionship.

So far so like Charlotte Lucas from *Pride and Prejudice* - and indeed many other nineteenth-century novels where the romantic protagonist is appalled at the willingness of other people (or even herself- George Eliot's Gwendolen Harleth, for example) to settle for whatever they can get in the married world. As we know, Brontë found it difficult to love *Pride and Prejudice*, but she went much further than Austen in exploring the strangeness of other people's marriages from the perspective of someone who had written herself out of the game. She and Austen were alike in both enjoying gossip about the courtships and proposals going on around them. They also both received proposals of marriage, so were not complete outsiders to the marriage market: but Brontë, I would suggest, coins some of her most inventive language - both in her letters and her novels - to describe that moment when people whom one has known and perhaps liked for a long time, disappear suddenly into the private, intimate world of marriage, leaving their single friends outside a firmly closed door. These counter-current marriages take a number of different forms. The simplest is the abrupt departure into marriage of friends her characters have respected. These are love-matches, but they occur on the sidelines with no attempt to interest readers in their history. A classic example of this occurs in *Jane Eyre*, when Miss Temple makes a sudden exit from Jane's life:

> But destiny, in the shape of the Rev. Mr. Nasmyth, came between me and Miss Temple: I saw her in her travelling dress step into a post-chaise, shortly after the marriage ceremony, I watched the chaise mount

the hill and disappear beyond its brow; and then retired to my own room.[25]

Significantly, this triggers what Jane calls 'a transforming process' in her own life, in that Miss Temple takes with her 'the serene atmosphere I had been breathing in her vicinity' (p. 150). Stripped of its romantic narrative of courtship and emotion, Miss Temple's abrupt history curtails what has been for Jane a kind of osmosis or transference of temperament from her teacher to herself. 'I had imbibed from her something of her nature,' Jane says, 'and much of her habits: more harmonious thoughts: what seemed better regulated feelings had become the inmates of my mind' (p. 150). Under Miss Temple's influence Jane has become more content: 'to the eyes of others, usually even to my own, I appeared a disciplined and subdued character' (p. 150). This time the suppressing of her turbulent feelings has been achieved via a porous absorption of Miss Temple's nature, while Miss Temple herself becomes little more than a disembodied 'travelling dress' stepping into a carriage. When the immediate shock has worn off, however, Jane feels a return of her old restlessness, and a realization that 'a varied field of hopes and fears, of sensations and excitements, awaited those who had courage to go forth into its expanse, to seek real knowledge of life amidst its perils' (p.151).

Brontë seems to repeat, and even parody, the scene of Miss Temple's departure with Ginevra Fanshawe's elopement six years later in *Villette*, when Ginevra (Lydia Bennet-like) is also whisked away in a carriage. As Lucy puts it: 'The nymph was vanished, engulfed in the past night, like a shooting star swallowed up by darkness'; while collectively the school community recall a 'thundering carriage-and-pair...as well as that puzzling signal, the waved handkerchief.'[26] For Madame Beck, this breach of security at her *pensionnat* is felt on the body, as Lucy observes: 'Never had I seen Madame Beck so pale or so appalled. Here was a blow struck at her tender part,

her weak side' (p. 573). Again it is the effect on the devastated watchers that most interests Brontë, the sensations of the couple blanked out of the narrative as beyond imagination, while the bystanders register the full impact of a friend's abrupt exit into adult sexuality. As for Ginevra, she describes herself and her lover more crudely in a letter as '"gone like a shot"' (p. 573): '"we never meant to be spliced in the humdrum way of other people"' (p.573). The inevitable display of marital delight on her return, with all the details of legal settlements and material support, leaves Lucy stoically unimpressed: 'I gave her only the crust of my nature,' she admits, noting Ginevra's amusement at her gibes: 'the more impassible and prosaic my mien the more merrily she laughed' (p.576). Where emotional fulfilment is unobtainable for Brontë's bystanders they retreat into a dry metaphorical language which here drains her of all fleshly content.

The Material Marriage

While Ginevra's is very far from being a 'Yorkshire' marriage, in terms not just of its location, but also its self-conscious drama, it represents all the materiality of the typical shallow 'Happy Pair' (as Chapter 40 is ironically titled), whose mutual contentment, however short-lived, baffles many of Brontë's more reflective protagonsits. There is nothing remotely interesting about Ginevra's husband, whom her uncle de Bassompierre dismisses as a 'nincompoop' (p. 576), but in achieving her marriage 'portion,' she retains her jubilance under the cloud of his disapproval. As a spectator Lucy sees only as much of the marriage as is shown to her in person or by letter, until Ginevra fades out of the novel, along with the rival couple, Paulina and John Graham Bretton. These marriages, while less abrupt than Miss Temple's, are solid business affairs, and even the more sensitive Dr John himself 'a man of luck, a man of success' (p. 405), is able to control his emotions in order to bring about desired

results. Lucy notes, as he approaches Paulina, in the 'Hotel Crécy' chapter, that 'no tyrant-passion dragged him back; no enthusiasms, no foibles encumbered his way' (p. 405). While his sensations are very far from being 'mediocre,' any more than Paulina's, there is a delicacy in the way their bodily rapprochement is described on this occasion: 'When Paulina looked up and he reached her side, her glance mingled at once with an encountering glance, animated, yet modest; his colour, as he spoke to her, became half a blush, half a glow' (p. 405). Everything about the way he inhabits his body suggests an orchestration of feeling finally brought to perfect balance: 'He stood in her presence brave and bashful: subdued and unobtrusive, yet decided in his purpose and devoted in his ardour' (p. 405). Few of Brontë's characters, male or female, achieve this elegant coordination of body and emotions, either at all, or at a moment like this when it is most needed. Dr John's demeanour positions him at the opposite end of the spectrum to those lovers who lacerate hearts or threaten iron control. Such is his fastidiousness that when he declares his feelings in a letter, Paulina feels the need to redraft her response three times, until she has achieved what seems '"a morsel of ice flavoured with ever so slight a zest of fruit or sugar"' (p. 466). This is a couple Lucy respects while also noting how alien they are to her in their good fortune as 'Nature's elect' (p. 552). They too disappear abruptly into marriage and their afterlives are tied up in a summary of subsequent deaths of the old and births of the next generation, with even a lost child quickly replaced.

The Yorkshire Marriage

By contrast the courtship and marriage of Brontë's friends Joe Taylor and Amelia Ringrose, provide a lingering and uneasy narrative through the correspondence with Ellen Nussey. Joe Taylor comes across as a classic example of the bluff materialistic Yorkshireman. As Lyndall Gordon puts it, 'the men she met in West Yorkshire were

either "narrow" curates or worldly cynics like Mary's brother Joseph (Joe), who "demanded looks and means when they came to marry"'[27] As these business-like arrangements sprang up around them Brontë took a keen interest in their progress, but with the detachment of someone who could never choose that kind of relationship for herself. Although she trusted Joe sufficiently to make him a trustee of her marriage settlement with Nicholls, she found his courtship of various women and eventual marriage to Amelia Ringrose an enticing subject of gossip. When he seemed to be interested in Isabella Nussey, a first cousin once removed of Ellen's, whose father was a prosperous woollen manufacturer, Brontë remarked that 'Money would decide that point...' [28] Recalling a previous conversation, she could scarcely believe

> the stress he laid on wealth - Appearance Family- and all those advantages which are the acknowledged idols of the world- His conversation on Marriage (and he talked much about it) differed in no degree from that of any hackneyed Fortune-Hunter - except that with his own peculiar and native audacity he avowed views & principles which more timid individuals conceal.[29]

As for his wife, Amelia Ringrose, Brontë's comments are gentler, but with a touch of condescension: she is 'truly amiable, actively useful,' but neither 'intellectual,' nor 'profound,' even if she is not as bad as her 'heartless' sister Rosy: 'Prosperity hardens her - she writes like one who has almost forgotten what Sorrow and suffering are.'[30] As for her own sister Anne's former pupils, the Robinson sisters, Brontë is appalled at their dogged resignation to their fates: 'Not one spark of love does either of them profess for her future husband,' she told Ellen in July 1848: '- One of them openly declares that interest alone guides her - and the other, poor thing! is acting according to her mother's wish, and is utterly indifferent herself to the man chosen for her.'[31]

Tracing the narrative of these courtships helped Brontë define what it was exactly that she found alienating about the views of those of her friends and neighbours who seemingly disregarded their emotional needs in favour of comfortable 'settlements,' money and status. The dumb-show charade at Mr Rochester's house party in Chapter XVIII of *Jane Eyre*, which Jane describes as representing 'the pantomime of a marriage,' encapsulates the empty grandeur of a landowning alliance between people who look impressive, but lack the physical and mental affinity Jane identifies when she tells herself: 'though rank and wealth sever us widely, I have something in my brain and heart, in my blood and nerves, that assimilates me mentally to him.'[32] What Jane identifies here is a bodily connection that produces a psychological convergence: a phenomenon to which Blanche Ingram and her like will always be strangers, as was Bertha Rochester with her husband.

Empty marriages of this kind emerge early on in Brontë's career, and remain a feature of all her novels, as does (if only briefly in the two 'Brussels' novels, *The Professor* and *Villette*), a north of England, Yorkshire-flavoured setting. In her unfinished novel *Ashworth* (1840-1), set in the West Riding of Yorkshire, Alexander Ashworth pauses in his riotous youth to marry Mary Wharton, the only important events in his undistinguished life being 'his birth, his bridal, and his bankruptcy.' [33] His businesslike attitude to marriage is little different from his friends', Thaddeus Daniels, for example, briskly marrying Harriet Macshane, Ashworth's mistress, notwithstanding her history, after which '[The] misery of her married life drove her to frenzy' (p. 32). Such alliances occur with an abruptness, both in terms of the suddenness of events, and the unlikely compatibility of the pairing, which surprise their friends and neighbours.

Brontë returns to the north of England marriage in *The Professor* (1857), where William Crimsworth's elder brother Edward marries a handsome but shallow 'trophy wife', while William himself declines his uncle's offer of one of his six cousins. In her 'Author's Preface' to the novel, Brontë recalls her intention that her hero 'should not even marry a beautiful girl or a lady of rank' (p.3). Having passed from the Crimsworth options for marriage, the novel then switches to Brussels and the flirtations of M.Pelet and Mlle Reuter which briefly also implicate him; but through the outspoken manufacturer, Yorke Hunsden (based on Joshua Taylor, Joseph's father) with his Belgian connections, Brontë is able to continue the brusque assessment of marriage which the novel resumes at intervals through Hunsden's visits and letters. Like Brontë herself in her letters to Ellen, Hunsden constructs a comic courtship between Crimsworth and Zoraide Reuter for his own entertainment, which he more than half believes. The difference between gross caricature and the reality of Crimsworth's quiet controlling courtship with Frances Henri further exposes the gap between the kind of marriage other people visualise, and the intensely private and complex process of analysis and watchfulness all Brontë's more sensitive protagonists undergo.

In *The Professor*, this gap instigates Brontë's most scathing type of travestied romance, on the part of both men. It is perhaps significant that this kind of language is not shared by the women, but by cynical bachelors, including Hunsden's friend Brown, who claims Crimsworth is 'on the point of forming an advantageous match with a pursy little Belgian schoolmistress' (p. 193). Crimsworth himself gives back as good as he gets in his anticipation of surprising Hunsden with the reality of his personal life: ' What will he say when, instead of a pair of plump turtle doves, billing and cooing in a bower of roses, he finds a single, lean cormorant, standing mateless

and shelterless on poverty's bleak cliff?' (p. 193) As for the wedding of the actual couple, Pelet and Reuter, Crimsworth dismisses it with a newspaper-style report, further distancing himself from a relationship he always saw as insulting to his finer tastes. After the church wedding, '"the happy pair," as newspapers phrase it, were on their way to Paris; where, according to previous arrangements, the honeymoon was to be spent' (p. 198). Like Jane Eyre after Miss Temple's wedding, Crimsworth leaves his teaching post, and starts a new phase of his life - the marriage of another person having thrown into stark relief the frustrations of his own position.

The Mysteries of Choice

Curiously, Brontë then repeats the fantasy courtship trope in Hunsden's recalculation of whatever strange romantic relationship his friend is now contemplating, which even encompasses the newly married Mme Pelet, or else a 'Wilhelmina Crimsworth' (p. 230), his friend's imaginary female counterpart. Crimsworth responds in kind by defining the object of his feelings as a 'lace-mender', thereby playing down both her intellectual and social credentials. After examining her, Hunsden's verdict is: '"Your lace-mender is too good for you, but not good enough for me; neither physically nor morally does she come up to my ideal of a woman"' (p. 243). His description of what he requires in a woman is one of the most directly physical of any of Brontë's male protagonists, his list including '"straighter and more harmonious features, to say nothing of a nobler and better developed shape than that perverse, ill-thriven child can boast"' (p. 243). Brontë's favouring of the asexual childlike physique in her more tasteful characters is familiar enough, but the bluntness of these male exchanges captures the solid presence of the body which no amount of high-mindedness in her novels is prepared to underestimate. As for the formal ceremony, the marriage procedure for Crimsworth and Frances Henri is as quick as the Pelets', this time

leaving Hunsden as the excluded outsider, as another friend gives the bride away: 'we drove all together to the Protestant chapel, went through a certain service in the Common Prayer Book, and she and I came out married' (p. 245). Repeatedly in the novels (*Jane Eyre* excepted), the marriage ceremony itself is the most perfunctory of transactions, as if to stress that the transition from single to married, girl to bride, is as nothing compared with the emotional complexities of the journey to the altar.

This is especially true of *Shirley*, which offers perhaps Brontë's lengthiest debate, among both women and men (something lacking in the male-dominated *Professor*), about the requirements for complete bodily and psychological compatibility. The lengthy negotiations of the four key protagonists contrast strikingly with the businesslike arrangements of the previous generation. Even if it recounts a distant coupling, as when Mr Helstone wins the monosyllabic 'girl of living marble,' Mary Cave, the bluntness of its sudden enactment retains the power to shock with its language of the done deal: 'She accepted him at the first offer, and they were married.' [34] This type of marriage introduces the mystery of choice, a theme that continues to fascinate Brontë throughout her career. All she suggests here is that, for Mary, 'the clergyman was preferred for his office's sake' (p. 81), even though his rival, Hiram Yorke, loved her passionately.

In light of this history, Yorke's second choice of wife seems inexplicable, given his sociable habits, while she resents his having any friend beyond herself. 'Why he chose her,' ponders the narrative, ' - how they contrived to suit each other, is a problem puzzling enough, but which might soon be solved if one had time to go into the analysis of the case' (p. 166). All that is suggested in passing is that she suited the 'shadowy' side of his character, which has some affinity with her pessimism. At the Yorkes' house in the 'Briarmains' chapter where there is much teasing talk about

Robert Moore's 'unsentimental' attitude to marriage, attributed to him by 'a lady' (p. 172), Mrs Yorke warns him of the risk of producing a 'set of great, rough lads' such as her three eldest sons (p. 171). The irony of Brontë's treatment of unromantic courtship in her novels is that her most fastidious characters are often the ones who most energetically deny the possibility of romance. Robert Moore sounds positively Wildean, like a character in *The Importance of Being Earnest*, when he claims: '"Marriage! I cannot bear the word: it sounds so silly and utopian!"' (p. 180). '"I am not romantic,"' Robert insists, '"I am stript of romance as bare as the white tenters in that field are of cloth...Love for me? Stuff!"' (p. 181) - a good bluff Yorkshire denial of the softer emotions, more often expressed by men than by women in the novels.

Of all Brontë's novels, *Shirley* carries the most extended dialogues about the mysteries of attraction and the impossibility of marrying without the kind of physical and emotional affinity shared by Jane and Rochester, albeit expressed in less memorably passionate terms. Shirley's strenuous arguments, first with her uncle, Mr Sympson, and then with Louis Moore, hammer out the meaning of love in exchanges where the narrator's interventions disappear completely and the reader follows a debate where it can sometimes be difficult, at least in the Louis Moore exchange in Chapter 36, to remember who is speaking. These debates are partly triggered by the pressure on Shirley to marry a wealthy or even titled husband, such as Sir Philip Nunnely, whose youth and basic decency are not sufficient in themselves to win her hand. His proposal to Shirley, echoing the terminology of the Rochester house party's charade scene, becomes another 'pantomime' (p. 509), the words exchanged being inaudible to everyone in the room except Shirley herself, who is 'struck so still, you might have fancied that whisper a charm which had changed her to a statue' (p. 508). In the novel's sequence of marriage proposals, long past, and newly mooted, women's

bodies turn to marble and stone. Those faced by Shirley are encouraged by her uncle, Mr Sympson, who cheerily backs an earlier offer from Mr Sam Wynne, including a '"fine unencumbered estate!"' as '"Decidedly suitable! Most proper!"' (p. 443). Shirley listens, 'pale as the white marble slab and cornice behind her' (p. 443). As for Sir Philip's proposal, which takes place after dinner at Nunnely Priory, it happens not far removed from where Sir Philip's mother has been 'eyeing her stonily from her great chair by the fireside' (p. 508).

What shocks Mr Sympson most about Shirley's attitude to marriage (as does Jane Eyre's in her exchanges with St John Rivers) is the 'unfeminine' violence of her language. Teasing her uncle over her mystery 'idol' of the soul, whom she eventually confesses to be the Duke of Wellington, Shirley piles metaphor upon metaphor to describe his qualities: '"his mind has the clearness of the deep sea, the patience of its rocks, the force of its billows...I daresay he can be harsh as a saw-edge, and gruff as a hungry raven"' (p. 516). Wellington at least has the solidity of a force of nature, unlike the effete Sir Philip, with his feeble poetry, and callow youthfulness which Shirley finds unappealing in a husband. All Brontë's objections to materialist marriages of convenience reach a climax in this showdown with her uncle, when Shirley confronts him with taking 'the World' for his god: '"See him busied at the work he likes best- making marriages. He binds the young to the old, the strong to the imbecile. He stretches out the arm of Mezentius, and fetters the dead to the living' (p. 519). Mezentius, who appears in Books vii-x of Virgil's *Aeneid*, was a mythical Etruscan king, a despiser of the gods, and notoriously savage on the battlefield. His invocation at this point in the argument, along with the Biblical cadences of Shirley's accusation, relegates Mr Sympson's values to a primitive past which made no recognition of the individual's emotional and physical fulfilment in marriage.

While Shirley's own savagery on this subject, culminating in the accusation that Mr Sympson's god is 'a masked Death' (p. 519), breaks down her uncle's ability to respond with other than broken exclamations, her own capacity to articulate her attraction to Louis Moore is severely tested by Moore's ability to respond in kind. In his diary he observes her closely, both in terms of body and changeable moods. He actively strives with language to articulate what he admires in her, her eye, for example, uttering 'a language I cannot render' (p. 567); he sees and listens to her, and even 'felt her, in every sentient atom of my frame' (p. 567). 'Once I only *saw* her beauty,' he confesses, 'now I *feel* it' (p. 568). Louis's diary becomes the means by which he expresses feelings that go beyond the conventional admiration a man in his position might feel for a woman of higher social position. Privately he expresses a bodily absorption in her, where seeing becomes feeling, and approaches as closely as he can to breaking down the physical separation between them. 'My design this morning, he admits,' was 'to read a line in the page of her heart' (p. 569). In his tight, repressed dialogue with Shirley, however, he senses limits, beyond which her face tells him she will not pass. Both speakers taunt and test the sincerity of the other before they are able to reach an agreement, and Shirley makes the simplest of declarations: '"Dear Louis, be faithful to me: never leave me. I don't care for life, unless I may pass it at your side"' (p. 579).

When the negotiations have finished, even the marriages between Caroline and Shirley with each of the Moore brothers lose their flesh and blood reality as they too become newspaper reports:

> This morning there were two marriages solemnized in Briarfield church, - Louis Gérard Moore, Esq., late of Antwerp, to Shirley, daughter of the late Charles Cave Keeldar, Esq. of Fieldhead: Robert Gérard Moore, Esq., of Hollow's mill,

to Caroline, niece of the Rev.Matthewson Helstone, M.A., Rector of Briarfield. (p. 599)

Ultimately all marriages in Brontë's novels - except perhaps Jane's and Rochester's, because of the ongoing autobiographical voice - disappear behind the closed doors of church and home, and become just another sealed-off private history, unreadable to outsiders. The debate about marriage, however, extends the length and breadth of Brontë's writing life: initially through dialogues between pairs of male and female friends, building to a climactic and heated argument across the gender divide, as with Jane and Rochester, Shirley and Louis. The notion of the 'Yorkshire marriage' as an example of an alien set of values, operates alongside the intense awareness of bodily sensation between lovers who feel mutual attraction, but who are anxious about making an irrevocable commitment to lifelong union. While the Yorkshire marriage may underestimate the importance of a unique passionate attachment between husband and wife, Brontë's attempt, in body-led writing, to steady herself in favour of a sober acknowledgement of the blend of fears and hopes in marriage further highlights the strangeness of other people's romances, and the heightened solitude of the bystander. As Mrs Pryor puts it in *Shirley*, 'Two people can never literally be as one' (p. 366). Brontë's acute awareness of this bodily and emotional as well as legal expectation of the married state, passes in her writing from its consummation with Jane and Rochester's final reunion, to Lawrentian battles between couples who resist the demands of marriage as urgently as they long for them. In acknowledging her own romantic fantasies, which imagine complete physical and emotional reciprocity between husband and wife, Brontë also never forgot the self-steadying advice she offered Ellen Nussey on the need for 'mediocrity in the sensations': the inner voice

counselling modest expectations and self-protection against being physically overwhelmed.

[1] CB to Ellen Nussey , 9 April 1852, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press), Volume Two 1848-1851 (2000), p. 599.
[2] See Smith biographical summary of Taylor's life in CB *Letters*, Vol Two, pp.liii-lv.
[3] CB to EN [?5 December 1849], CB *Letters* II, p. 299.
[4] William A. Cohen, 'Material Interiority in Charlotte Brontë's *The Professor*,' *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 57: 4 (March 2003), pp. 443-476; p. 445.
[5] Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (1857) rpt ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), pp.98-100.
[6] *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature*, ed. David Hillman and Ulrika Maude (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 1
[7] *Ibid*, p. 3.
[8] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), trans. Colin Smith (London and New York, 2005), p. 81.
[9] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans Oliver Davis, with Introduction by Thomas Baldwin (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 82. This title is Davis's translation of *The Phenomenology* (originally *Causeries* in French).
[10] *The World of Perception*, trans. David, pp.86-7
[11] Cohen, 'Material Interiority,' p. 476.
[12] William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), p. 6.
[13] *Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), p. 13.
[14] Pierre Bourdieu, 'Conclusion' to *Distinction*: *A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1979; trans Richard Nice (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984), p. 468.
[15] CB to EN, 20 November 1840, in *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, Volume One 1829-1847 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 233-4.
[16] *Ibid*, p.233.
[17] CB to George Smith, 12 May 1851, CB *Letters* II, 615.
[18] CB to Mrs Elizabeth Smith, 20 May 1851, CB *Letters* II, 618.
[19] Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), p. 953.
[20] CB to EN, 5 May 1851, CB *Letters* II, 611.
[21] CB to EN, 23 April 1851, CB *Letters* II, 609. For further information on the women Mr Brontë proposed to by letter see Barker, pp. 106-15.
[22] CB to EN, 11 April 1854, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, Volume Three 1852-1855 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), p. 240.
[23] CB to EN, 15 December 1852, CB *Letters* III, p. 93
[24] Charlotte Brontë, *Emma* (1854) in *Unfinished Novels* ed. Tom Winnifrith (Sutton Publishing 1993), p. 98.
[25] Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* : *An Autobiography* (1847), rpt.ed. Richard Nemesvari (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview 1999), p. 150.
[26] Charlotte Brontë, *Villette* (1853), rpt. ed Mark Lilly (Harmondsworth: Penguin 1979), p. 573.
[27] Lyndall Gordon, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1994), p. 153.
[28] CB to EN, 24 April 1845, *Letters* I, p. 391.
[29] *Ibid*, p. 392,
[30] CB to EN, 8 December 1851, CB *Letters* II, p. 726.
[31] CB to EN, 28 July 1848, CB *Letters* II, p. 92.
[32] *Jane Eyre*, p. 261; p. 253.
[33] Charlotte Brontë, *Ashworth* (1840-1), in *Unfinished Novels* (1993), p. 30.
[34] Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* (1849), rpt. ed. Andrew and Judith Hook (Penguin: Harmondsworth 1974), pp. 81-82.