The Perceived Anti-Catholicism of Charlotte Brontë’s Novel: *The Professor*

My eye rested on the green door of a rather large house opposite, where, on a large brass plate, was inscribed ‘Pensionnat de demoiselles’. Pensionnat! The word excited an uneasy sensation in my mind – it seemed to speak of restraint.  

Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 54

In a forward to the first edition of *The Professor* Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte Brontë’s husband, wrote, ‘the authoress made some use of the materials in a subsequent work – *Villette*’.¹ He also pointed out that the two stories ‘are in most respects unlike’.² It is true that there are striking differences in the actual texts, not least that *The Professor* is narrated by a man, its central character,³ whereas *Villette* is narrated by Lucy Snowe. Nonetheless in both novels, Brontë used similar tropes of anti-Catholic writing to articulate a sense of female melancholia and isolation and the use of surveillance as an instrument of control.⁴ It is the expression of anti-Catholicism in *The Professor* that this section will particularly concentrate upon; specifically how certain stereotypes are employed by Brontë and how they can be interpreted in the light of nineteenth-century cultural perceptions. These are also reflected in Chapter 9 in relation to Brontë’s *Villette*.

Although *The Professor* contains fewer overtly anti-Catholic references than *Villette*, there is, nevertheless, a feeling of general disapproval of Rome running through the book. Through the vehicle of William Crimsworth, who is portrayed as both staunchly English and Protestant, Brontë is able to express many current nineteenth-century, masculine ideas about Catholicism.

Through Frances Henri she explores her own concerns about the place of the unprotected, lonely spinster in society. Because the narrator of the
The novel is a man, *The Professor* reflects a slightly different form of anti-Catholic sentiment from *Villette*. The relationship between Protestant Crimsworth and his Protestant pupil takes on a different significance from the Catholic master/Protestant pupil relationships of Charlotte Brontë and her Belgian teacher M. Heger, and her later creations M. Paul Emmanuel and Lucy Snowe. At no point does Crimsworth feel the attraction of the Catholic religion itself and his observations on its followers are slanted differently from Lucy Snowe’s as they can be seen as more gender specific. However, the ‘Jesuitical’ figure of Hunsden, his only friend, plays a significant and interesting part in the story.

Crimsworth’s reaction to the Catholic girls and women he meets in Brussels reflects the nineteenth-century English Protestant male’s idea of convents, Catholic girls’ schools and nuns. It is interesting to note what he expected to see when he first met Zoraïde Reuter, the directress of the Pensionnat de Demoiselles where he was to take up the post of the Professor of English:

> I had thought to see a tall, meagre, yellow, conventual image in black, with a close white cap, bandaged under the chin like a nun’s head-gear …. (Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, p. 71)

The woman he actually meets proves to be quite the opposite: young, attractive and flirtatious as well as devious and sexually dangerous. She represents the ‘other face’ of the nun, emphasising the duality of this imaginative perception. In similar manner, the girls in the pensionnat are described as ‘youthful beings … with their nun-like robes and softly braided hair … a kind of half-angels’ (*The Professor*, p. 76). Crimsworth soon discovers their ‘true natures’. He finds his pupils to be liars, tale bearers, and backbiters, but worst of all they are sexually precocious. Gilbert and Gubar find an explanation for Brontë’s vilification of her own sex in her own English anti-Catholicism’. They argue that

> She [Brontë] herself allows Crimsworth to offer this as a reason for his feelings, and certainly Brontë’s attacks on the Catholic church in *Villette* and elsewhere in *The Professor* suggest that he may be criticising the students at the pensionnat not for being girls but for being Catholic girls. (Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, p. 322)

This argument has similarities to other critical positions cited later, but it may just as well be the case that Brontë uses a generally accepted stereotypical view of Catholicism to make a more profound, gender-specific