CHAPTER 3

HYSTERIA, FEMALE DESIRE, AND SELF-CONTROL IN VILLETTE

Of the novels written by Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley* is most straightforward in its capturing of the idea that the body is the site of struggle where ideological battles are played out. In *Shirley*, the world is in flux, and the war abroad and the civil strife at home provide examples of how external circumstances affect the characters’ lives. In *Villette*, however, the outer world is significantly more stable, and the wars are largely internal psychological tensions. In *Shirley*, Brontë highlights conflict and war, making war one of the novel’s dominant metaphors. The war in France affects the English homefront. Ideologies are at war on both the national and international levels. *Shirley* explores the tensions at home in England between classes, between genders, between industry and nature, and between the Anglican church and the dissenters, all of which are heightened due to the war abroad. Caroline, Shirley, Robert, and Louis find their hopes and expectations in conflict with the reality that this war brings. Wherever there is conflict, there is a wounded body to signify this conflict. The bodies of the four leading characters can be seen as battlegrounds on which the ideological wars scar and deplete the wholeness of the individual.

The stable outer world found in *Villette* draws the readers’ attention inward into the internal conflicts faced by Brontë’s final heroine. Lucy Snowe leaves her Protestant England for Labassecour where she is confronted by that nation’s Roman Catholic ideology as it is played out through its different concepts of education, religion, and love. Because Lucy must come to terms with her Protestant
repression in a Catholic world where people’s openness to emotion, excess, and the body simultaneously attracts and repels her, in *Villette*, the war of ideologies takes place primarily inside Lucy’s own head.

In *Villette*, Protestantism and Catholicism are the primary ideological systems in conflict.¹ As a Protestant living in a Catholic country, Lucy must come to terms with both religions’ scripts for her as a single woman. As Rosemary Clark-Beattie develops in “Fables of Rebellion: Anti-Catholicism and the Structure of *Villette*,” “Lucy’s exploration of powerlessness . . . takes place in the context of a clash between two different forms of social power” (823). Clark-Beattie acknowledges that placing Lucy within a foreign culture has value “both as a narrative structure and as a psychological strategy, in that it makes visible the selfhood that English society at once forces on her and obliterates from view” (825–26). In other words, in England, Lucy’s very Englishness makes the values and beliefs that constitute her identity invisible. Once Lucy comes into contact with a second culture, these values and beliefs become much more apparent. Living abroad, Lucy must contend with both cultural systems’ ideals of women, neither of which has developed meaningful options of existence for single women. The Protestants, as represented by Dr. John’s understanding of Lucy’s condition, assume a single woman should be an “inoffensive shadow” and as such be quietly resigned to her lot; the Catholics, as represented by Pére Silas’s understanding of Lucy’s condition, assume that a single woman should become a nun and dedicate her life to God (394). Neither ideology accounts for Lucy’s desires to live actively in the world. The discrepancy between Lucy’s inner and outer realities first manifests itself in Lucy’s having the nervous condition of hysteria and ultimately in her having two episodes where hysteria results in actual illness.

In *Villette*, hysteria charts the conflicts between Lucy Snowe’s image of herself and the concepts of womanhood of both the Protestant and Catholic patriarchal cultures. The language of nerves and hysteria is used throughout the text. Lucy Snowe admits she has a nervous condition, affirming, “I am constitutionally nervous” (460). Whereas in *Jane Eyre*, Bertha Mason’s madness is explained by Rochester as a biological heredity condition—even though many contemporary feminists scholars starting with Gilbert and Gubar have argued with this explanation,—in *Villette*, Brontë is much more explicit that Lucy’s nervous condition is brought about by the tenuous conditions of her life as a single woman alone, living abroad, a Protestant in a Roman Catholic country, without friends and family, forced to work for her livelihood. Here, through Lucy Snowe’s conflicting needs of