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## "Gazing on Vacancy" : Charlotte Bronte's Critical Portrayal of Church Life in Shirley

Emily Pataki Hamburger  
*Montclair State University*

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## Abstract

This study endeavors to explore how the novelist Charlotte Brontë preferred inner religious experience to institutional religious conformity in her own life and how she promoted her own unique spiritual style in her novel *Shirley* (1849). Brontë was brought up in a religious home in an era obsessed with religion. Christianity seemed to have a stranglehold over small and large societal matters in Yorkshire, England where *Shirley* is set, but yet something within the spiritual community was lacking. The Luddite revolutions occurring in Yorkshire are a backdrop to the interior revolutions taking place in the minds of the characters Caroline and Shirley. Throughout *Shirley*, clergymen are satirized. Rectors are nostalgically condescended to. Women are excluded from attending university or holding positions within the Anglican Church. Two women characters stand up to this exclusion, albeit in strikingly different ways. Caroline with her quiet, but critical gaze, reveals the author's simmering disdain for unworthy men-of-the-cloth while Shirley becomes the equivalent of a modern day 501(c)3 founder and CEO. Brontë explicitly calls for reform within the Church.

The messages of *Shirley* as to women are too important to overlook or forget. I conclude, as Brontë does in the text, with a "winding-up" of the characters' enduring impressions and legacies. The text of *Shirley* leaves many issues open and unresolved, particularly as to women and their influence within religious institutions. The denouement lacks emotion and Victorian earnestness. Nonetheless, the dialogue within *Shirley* is exceedingly relevant to contemporary readers who are still eager to explore the rights and roles women are afforded or denied in Christian religious organizations and society as a whole.

MONTCLAIR STATE UNIVERSITY

“Gazing on Vacancy”: Charlotte Brontë’s Critical Portrayal of Church Life in *Shirley*

by

Emily Pataki Hamburger

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts

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Department of English

Thesis Sponsor -- Lee Behlman

Committee Member -- Johnny Lorenz

Committee Member -- Laura Nicosia

“GAZING ON VACANCY”: CHARLOTTE BRONTË’S CRITICAL PORTRAYAL OF  
CHURCH LIFE IN *SHIRLEY*

A THESIS

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EMILY PATAKI HAMBURGER

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2020

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When Lyndall Gordon writes in her biography of Charlotte Brontë (1994), of Charlotte's father Patrick having allegedly fallen "into habits of intemperance," Gordon states that he declined into this mode "together with his curate, Malone" (331). This study will not explore the life - or drinking habits - of Patrick Brontë, however it *does* relate to why Gordon referred to Mr. Brontë's curate as "Malone". Mr. Malone is a fictional curate in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849). Malone "made free with the punch" (*Shirley* 31). "He speedily helped his Rector empty the decanters" (105). Malone was not the name of any of Mr. Brontë's actual curates. That Gordon confused curates' names, and that none of her editors ever noticed, is a testament to how many curates Charlotte Brontë came across while living with her father in his perpetual curacy in Haworth parsonage, in the region of Yorkshire England. The accidental (and telling) switch within Gordon's Cheltenham Literary Prize-winning biography further speaks to the vast number of characters within *Shirley* that are employed by and affiliated with the Anglican Church. There are so many fictional, diegetic curates that Gordon apparently mixed up the real with the fictional in this instance.

Indeed the character of Malone is said (in another section of the Gordon biography) to be based on Mr. Brontë's curate at the time referenced in Charlotte's life story, a certain James William Smith: "Local readers at once recognised the vulgar, insensitive Mr Malone as James William Smith, curate to Mr Brontë from 1842-4" (Gordon 182). "In the region in which the novel is set, there were too many curates" (Maynard *Brontës and Religion* 201), so many that Lyndall Gordon substituted the fictional for the real. So what?

Charlotte Brontë asserted in a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey that “you are not to suppose any of the characters in “Shirley” intended as literal portraits. It would not suit the rules of art” (Smith xiii). With that advisory given by the author herself, I will demur from ascribing too much import to biographical details and will instead confront and explore the text of *Shirley* as a work of fiction and social commentary – one that was in part inspired by Charlotte Brontë’s life in Yorkshire, but is certainly not *entirely* based on historical facts or actual people. I will note, however, that Brontë may have written this advisory concerning the “rules of art” to guard herself from potential local ill-will, given how she often drew from life experience to craft her fictional characters.<sup>1</sup>

What is a curate in Brontë’s *Shirley* context and why are they present in the novel? Curates were university-educated *men* in supporting administrative and ministerial roles within Protestant parishes. They did not enjoy the prestige, job security, nor the income that a rector or bishop would hold within the Anglican order. They were low men on the totem pole, so to speak, and Charlotte Brontë generally held a low view of them, in part because there were so *many* of them and yet with so few accomplishments to identify. The curates in the novel are rarely seen actually doing any markedly religious work. To Brontë, who believed herself to be a genius after the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, curates were buffoons and she was not shy about portraying them unforgivingly in her follow-up project to *Jane Eyre*.

The market of highly-educated yet ineffectual men-of-the-cloth was flooded, in Brontë’s critical view, while the Anglican parishes struggled organizationally, financially, and spiritually within this status quo. Brontë, who could not aspire to preach nor serve in

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<sup>1</sup> Her reasons for advising in correspondence against supposing the *Shirley* characters are literal portraits are not fully known. Many biographers including Gordon and Harman have described well-documented life events which arguably led to Brontë’s crafting of people and places in her fiction.



a salaried Church role due to her sex, identified as a member of the Church of England (Maynard *Brontës and Religion* 196). However, she was not cowed by the patriarchy within which she was raised and the text of *Shirley* demonstrates her willingness to ask tough questions of the men running things (or being groomed to run things), and of the scriptures and rules the Anglican Church was based upon and enforcing. At the time she was authoring *Shirley*, Brontë lived with her father, the perpetual curate of Haworth Parsonage, and her quiet life inevitably involved attending his church services, maintaining acquaintances with various church staff, including the sexton and the curate, and witnessing projects and people throughout the parish in social and political contexts.

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The Anglican Church as a whole is in a somewhat insecure place around 1811 and 1812 when *Shirley* is set. It is not the only game in town. Catholicism is an option, as are many dissenting protestant congregations. With ineffectual Anglican curates as the core staff, the flock was hardly thriving. Meanwhile, church life is central to the characters Brontë brings to life in *Shirley*. One cannot imagine life without it. Maynard discusses, in *The Brontës and Religion*, how as people of a certain intellectual era, Victorians had an “obsession with religion” (192). It is no wonder, according to Maynard, that there would be “striking and prominent religious characters” in Brontë novels as well as “scenes turning on religious issues” (192).

Churchgoing England was divided at the time Brontë wrote *Shirley*, between the established Anglican Church which had broken from the Catholics and so-called dissenters in the forms of Unitarians, Congregationalists which were considered intellectuals, and the Baptists and Methodists which were often working class (Maynard

193-94). According to Maynard, “half of the church-going population of England” was comprised of dissenters by the mid-nineteenth century (194). The Anglican Church was, in Maynard’s words, “beset on all sides” (193). The Anglican Church was beleaguered by the competition of various sects as well as divisions within the Church and economic woes which directly impacted its parishioners.

The Church establishment, represented by characters such as Rector Helstone (who will be discussed later), was facing if not an existential threat, at least threats to its numbers and finances at the time of Brontë’s writing. Not only was the establishment in philosophical disputes with Catholics (which Brontë synecdochally refers to as Rome or the Pope in the text) but also with intellectual and working class dissenters. The end result was that men like Helstone, who enjoy a comfortable (if not glamorous) living as a rector, see their parishioners looking for help that was difficult to plainly define. Some are out of work, some families are going hungry, but some parishioners, like Helstone’s own niece Caroline, are suffering in a spiritual sense. Caroline finds herself a Sunday school teacher (“the first teacher of the first class”) with no remunerative professional prospects within the Church because she is female (277). Her seemingly closed existence collides with her pure and dutiful faith within her uncle’s congregation: “I have no object in life,” she worries (403). There is not much money to spare for those out of work, given how the economy is collapsing as a result of the Napoleonic Wars, and this scarcity particularly impacts the industrial region of Yorkshire which had previously built a weaving industry only to see it, like the Anglican Church, “beset on all sides”.

In the setting and time period for *Shirley* demand is drying up due to global politics and trade embargoes, while workers who had supported the weaving industry are

also facing the very real threat of machines taking their jobs; this is another key plot point in the novel, though not the focus of this study. The plight of the unemployed workers (due to the crash in the weaving industry resulting from the ongoing Napoleonic Wars and export restrictions to the Americas in addition to modern technology rendering laborers unnecessary), does not invoke sympathy in the novel's lazy curates, although it does receive a galvanized charitable response once the character of Shirley encounters her neighbors out of work and underfed.

While the weaver characters face unemployment, Brontë's curates, once established in their posts, consider their responsibilities "dull work" (6). They do not have to worry about losing their posts. Curates instead, exist "rushing backwards and forwards, amongst themselves, to and from their respective lodgings...a triangle of visits" to each other, instead of to the sick, the dying, the grieving, the unemployed, the impoverished, and the hungry (7). Their "clerical quarrels... resulted in *nothing*" (emphasis added 10). Brontë establishes her authority on the responsibilities of clergymen unequivocally through the use of the first person voice in the narration: "I have...an idea of what a clergyman's mission is amongst mankind, and I remember distinctly whose servant he is" (35). The repetition of the masculine type ("clergyman," "mankind," "he,") in this statement is significant; in *Shirley* there are no female clergymen and Brontë knew such roles were only available to certain kinds of men (university educated).

Harman in her biography of Charlotte asserts that Brontë may have felt "she was qualified to speak" on religion as a topical subject (333). This is an understatement. She was absolutely qualified to speak. Brontë, while fashioning some of the curates as

comical, was also accomplishing something more: she was directly critiquing the bloat, apathy, and inattentiveness within the Anglican Church lower ranks, which in her view was failing everyone. When describing the curates within the community, the narrator reveals that Caroline was “listening to nothing, and gazing on vacancy” (117). The real work, as Brontë perceived it, the work that plainly is needed throughout the Yorkshire parishes, which the curates utterly fail to see, is to urgently “alleviate the distress of the unemployed poor” and it is this empathy and charity that Brontë associates with Helstone (at his better moments) and especially the idealized Shirley as a type of feminine and faultless Robin Hood (274).<sup>2</sup>

While they are busy accomplishing “nothing” the curates’ treatment of the serving class is blunt, dismissive, and disrespectful. In the first chapter of *Shirley*, three of the Yorkshire community’s curates descend upon a landlady, Mrs. Gale, and proceed to enjoy a feast, much to the dismay of the young servants who had been counting on some leftovers for their own meals. ““Cut [the bread], woman,”” shouted the aforementioned character of Malone “and the ‘woman’ cut it accordingly” (8). That Brontë places the word ‘woman’ within inverted commas indicates her awareness that such an appellation and order by Malone is demeaning to Mrs. Gale. The three curates who occupy this opening chapter are called Malone, Donne, and Sweeting. This scene which Charlotte Brontë’s publishers urged her to edit out, starts: “an abundant shower of curates has fallen upon the north of England” (5). Her publishers Smith, Elder requested that she not open the novel with such a scene and Brontë replied, ““Is it because...this scene strikes you as unfeminine?”” (Miller ix, citing *Letters of Charlotte Brontë* Smith (ed.)). “Some

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<sup>2</sup> Robin Hood is mentioned by Caroline to Shirley: “there are mementos of him still existing” (*Shirley* 201). Shirley’s ethos of sharing her largesse makes it fitting that she is the character in the novel who is made aware of Robin Hood’s historic presence in the Yorkshire environs which she inhabits.

readers would take fright at it” – is how Miller describes the publishers’ concern over the curates’ coarse and uncharitable depiction (Miller ix).

The Anglican Church was now beset by one of its own (Charlotte), albeit in fictional form, rather than journalistic, tract, or pamphlet media. Her ‘heretic’ authorial voice is referenced by the biographer Gordon in the context of negative reviews of *Shirley* (254). “‘Shirley’ disgusted me at the opening, and I gave up the writer and her books with a notion that she was a person who liked coarseness,’” the Anglican priest and author Charles Kingsley wrote to Brontë’s friend, writer Elizabeth Gaskell (Gordon 328). Kingsley ultimately lauded the novel, but its opening chapter about the curates, as his correspondence reveals, discomfited him to the point of disgust (Gordon 328-29).

I will examine, in addition to the largely comical but seriously substandard curates, the characters of Rector Helstone and the titular heiress Shirley, who complement each other and collaborate in surprising ways. Through Helstone and Shirley, and to some extent Caroline as well, Brontë is actually calling for reform within the Anglican Church on multiple fronts. “*Shirley* is *very consciously* an attack on the religion of the patriarchs,” wrote Gilbert and Gubar in *Madwoman in the Attic* (emphasis added 392). *Shirley* rejects “old myths and the degrading roles they provide” (392). Brontë critiques the characters of the curates, and some of the elder, more authoritative rectors, in economic and political terms as well. Not only are the men within the Anglican Church dismissive of female characters’ intellects and capabilities, several curates and rectors appear, in many respects, ill-suited for the jobs they hold and ineffective at basic pastoral tasks such as knowing the needs of the poor within the parish and having the ability to fund-raise for building projects.

Meanwhile, the *female* characters, desperate for something to do, are structurally excluded from the respected, salaried professions within the Anglican Church: “God save it!” Brontë writes of Britain’s Church, “God also *reform it!*” (emphasis added *Shirley* 285). Brontë’s curates are predominantly (but not entirely) intemperate, small-minded, obtuse, awkward, and ineffective moochers, undeserving of the privileged positions they have attained in status-conscious British life. England is referred to as “*priest-ridden*” (53). The respect unquestioningly granted to clergymen in Victorian England is taken for granted and is precisely why Brontë’s publishers and some readers did not want her critique to be printed. It was not a question that such roles were dignified ones, the position itself was supposed to confer dignity and holiness on its occupant. Brontë saw things differently. For Brontë to imply that clergymen lacked temperance, dignity, divinity, and even basic social skills, seemed at first blush to be heresy. As an example, the curate Donne in the text repeatedly scoffs at Shirley’s unhidden coolness towards him and his peers; Donne has taken for granted that Shirley would defer to them and donate to their projects without question.

To be a curate meant several things in early 19<sup>th</sup> century Yorkshire, not the least of which were a steady income (during the Napoleonic Wars, this no doubt helped), a place to live, most-likely a servant or several, a respected role within a community where church-life was hugely demanding of parishioners’ time, the status to publish opinions in the press, and the clout to seek funding from anyone including the landed gentry (such as Shirley) for church projects like schools, feasts, building projects, and numerous missionary outlays. These entrees into many aspects of society meant that curates were considered to be acceptable marriage material within the middle class, and marriage

could usher in added ability to acquire more land, influence, and income, if the right match was attained. "Christianity and sex had become very much cooperating agents" (Maynard *Victorian Discourses* 100). This was a virtual cycle that Brontë was scrutinizing: to be a curate meant the potential for advantageous marriage, which could lead to heightened status economically, socially, and politically. Brontë implies that the curates in *Shirley*'s world (most of them) deserved no such advantages.

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Women, in the world of *Shirley*, clearly have less advantageous cards to play. As to the leading characters of the novel, there is Caroline on the one hand, and Shirley on the other. Gilbert and Gubar point out that Caroline and Shirley are linked by the dead figure of Mary Cave. Shirley's father's middle name is Cave, and Caroline's uncle Reverend Helstone was married to Mary Cave (Gilbert 388). Caroline and Shirley by the end of the novel are also sisters-in-law - marrying two brothers. Throughout the text, they are allies, friends, but also foils.

Caroline is described as fairy-like, bookish, a lady, and as has previously been mentioned, she teaches Sunday school. The narrator indicates that Shirley is dealt the better set of cards in that she is an heiress and thus has the liberty of movement, choice, and largesse that Caroline does not. While Caroline mopes and worries, Shirley embraces her independence and treads into male-dominated territory with gusto. Unlike Caroline, who does not know her mother and is being raised by her dead father's stern brother, Shirley can choose to live in Yorkshire or relocate to another family property. Shirley can donate generously within her parish, which she does, on her own terms once she realizes that the curates are largely useless. Caroline is not as wealthy and not nearly as decisive.

Throughout the text she expresses the desire to have something professional to do beyond the confines of her uncle Helstone's rectory.

Though Caroline may not explicitly declare a desire to be a preacher, the indicators of such a calling are there. She is earnest in her faith, constantly reading and reaching out to others in the parish – the children, Mrs. Pryor (her long lost mother), William Farren (a laid-off mill worker) – while viewing the curates with skepticism and distrust. Shirley, because of her inheritance, does not pine for a professional post, but she does explore how belonging to a church does not necessarily mean mimicking those enrolled in it. Both of these women represent the upcoming generation, the younger set, while Rector Helstone is very much the older and less flexible generation, on his way out.

As Brontë tells it, *Shirley's* curates' lack of merit is clear not only due to how they mistreat and misread women like Mrs. Gale, Caroline, and Shirley, but also because the Church employment structure excludes women and rewards such unqualified men for landing in roles beyond their capabilities or their interests. They are qualified in that they have a university education (which Caroline and Shirley do not) but their personas display a lack of empathy expected for the role of a clergyman. Shirley states, “I consider myself not unworthy to be the associate of the best of them” (203). With this statement, she is firmly planting herself as an equal amongst all types of men. As the character William Farren says of the clergy at one point to Shirley, “They're allus magnifying their office: it is a pity but their office could magnify them; but it does naught o' t' soart” (*Shirley* 307). There are examples throughout the text of the curates embarrassing themselves not only among characters like Shirley, who looks down on their behavior, but also among the servants who often speak ill of them. Mrs. Gale



describes them as setting “everybody beneath their “fit”” (8). The character critiques appear to be happening from several vantage points. The curates are also criticized by their superiors, Helstone says they are ““Bad boys! - bad boys!”” ““They want caning”” (11). Effectively, the curates are criticized from every angle in society: by the servants, by their colleagues or mentors, and by the higher classes. They too are “beset on all sides”.

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One of the other landed gentry, a character simply (and aptly) named Yorke, rails against the structure of the Church in a broader way: ““such a humbug as a bench of bishops – such an arrogant abuse as a pampered, persecuting established Church...where...a host of lazy parsons and their pauper families were kept on the fat of the land”” (53). Yorke employs the word “humbug” in an attack on the bureaucracy which in his view is ruled by bishops. Yorke is stating that the lazy parsons are not serving in any meaningful way and to a man with status and wealth like Yorke, the families of the parsons and the parsons themselves are paupers surviving off of the fat of his land. They are not only financially poor (compared to Yorke), the parsons are spiritually poor as well. Their financial status matters less than their spiritual emptiness. Brontë has such a connection to the region of Yorkshire, though she may not endorse this opinion set forth by the character of Yorke, *per se*. It is rather an opinion offered up to evince how the Anglican Church was under scrutiny not just by *Shirley*'s author, but by powerful figures such as Yorke comes to represent.

As a writer, Brontë was extremely sensitive not just to the characters and matters she was portraying, but also to how that portrayal might be received. She was daring, she

broke ground, but she was not immune to hurt feelings and harsh criticism. She lived outside of London, but was highly cognizant of what the London literati declared about her. Her ability to see things from many points of view is one of the strengths of *Shirley*. She has the gall to write critically not only of the Church men but of the establishment as a whole. Whether the Yorke perspective matters much to her or whether it is just one extreme voice in her mélange of eccentric parish characters is less important than the overall impact of the novel, which is the articulation of previously unsaid or taboo opinions against a powerful and revered institution.

One reason why it is so striking that Gordon mixed up the identity of a fictional curate with the curate from Brontë's life which he was said to be based on, is that they seem in this way to be fungible, and of such little worth. *Shirley* concludes with accounts of Malone's ridiculousness that the narrator cannot even fully explain (594). Gordon can mix their identities up, the fictional and the real, and no one really notices. They are that unremarkable. Not only was the market flooded with them, as Brontë and Maynard point out ("too many curates"! ) but within the Church they were difficult to truly see and differentiate. They lacked distinguishing attributes. They were unseen or invisible; Meaningless. Who they really were did not seem to matter. They are synecdoches for larger emptiness and failing in the Anglican Church.

There seems to be no end to Brontë's judgment of the curates on a moral basis, her prose is preaching the need for reform within the Church ranks, and I will explore that a bit further now. The curates are portrayed as cowardly: Malone "turned tail" when encountering Shirley's bull mastiff while Donne locks himself on a second floor, afraid of the same dog (262). When assured the dog is away, Malone slips on his way back

down the same stairs that he and Donne had scampered up. This scene illustrates the thin skin of the curates in their interaction with Shirley's pet, but prior to their fleeing the dog, Shirley witnesses them beating it as well. Throughout the novel, Brontë repeatedly discusses Malone's incongruity with things of nature, in this case, a domestic pet. It is implied that the dog is a judge of character in that it harbors no ill-will toward the two more likable clergymen within the scene: Sweeting and Hall (266).

In this way, I think Brontë is not subtle in her message that a creature like a dog could decide for itself whether a visitor was morally good or bad. This is an oversimplification of a rounded character like Malone, but still remains consistent with the theme that he is somehow in conflict with nature and natural things. Brontë does not let up in her assault on all things curate, and if read from the perspective of her Yorkshire community (as it widely was) the scenes were considered comical. Read in the twenty-first century, I must try and find layers of meaning that these portrayals can still teach us. The upshot is that Brontë was a very judgmental writer, she had a critical eye, a piercing gaze, and the novel does not relax in its expressions of disappointment towards the role of the curate throughout.

Both Malone and Donne in separate ways are calculating and greedy with Shirley. Malone eyes her wealth in the context of a potential marriage to her, Donne instead wants to exploit Shirley to fund a building project (264, 273). Donne entirely takes for granted that Shirley will give generously to his project, which she does not, but he also expresses utter shock when Shirley asks him to leave her well-appointed home. "Turn out *a clergyman?*" (273). This statement speaks to the aforementioned status which men of the cloth enjoyed within the British church communities. Were they not holy? To turn out a

clergyman, in Donne's view, simply was not done, however presumptuous, cloying, or rude they were. There was, in his view and society's a sort of diplomatic immunity assigned to them, which Brontë believed they had not earned, and in some ways, abused. Compound that with the lack of self-awareness the large and often drunk Malone conveys in his awkward and lumbering interactions with the ladies.

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While the Luddite revolts were occurring in Yorkshire within her plot, Charlotte Brontë wraps the story of *Shirley* with another form of symbolic breaking-down: her attack on mechanizations, rules, structures within her Church. Luddites sought to break mechanics in a literal sense when the advancement of technology led to layoffs. They are referred to as frame-breakers in the text (35). Brontë attacks, with her prose, structures and routines in an abstract, artistic, and figurative way. Her critique, while simultaneously discussing Luddite politics in 1811 and 1812, more-fully explores a breaking-down of structural patterns in the Anglican parishes and a concern over how ineffective the Anglican employees were in responding to the real needs of their parishioners and unemployed neighbors. The main rule Brontë is assailing is that which excludes women from jobs in the Church. Aware of this exclusion, Caroline and Shirley are experiencing revolutions in their own minds at the same time.

Unlike laborers who also appear in *Shirley*, within working class and industrial roles such as weaving in the factories – a vast Yorkshire industry before and also during the writing of *Shirley* – the curates did not create anything tangible. Further, they seemed to waste their college educations cavorting amongst themselves eating, gossiping, and drinking, within a limited circuit between their various domiciles. That curates could

waste their college educations while women were not permitted to attend university seems to add to the sting of how Brontë viewed their ineffectiveness in her Yorkshire society.

Brontë implies that the curates were not only college educated, but from an even more privileged subset of male society: likely graduates of the most elite institutions in the United Kingdom: Oxford or Cambridge (6). Their overabundance, in Brontë's view and experience, has already been discussed. The shortage of results within their field of ministry troubled Brontë morally, as much as it irked her socially. According to Gordon, Charlotte Brontë's own husband, the curate Arthur Bell Nicholls, earned £100 annually. To put that into perspective, the author George Eliot was paid £10,000 for her novel *Romola* (Gordon 251).

Many readers, writers, and social influencers of her time were offended by Brontë's portrayal of curates (Maynard *Victorian Discourses* 102). The abundance of these types of educated-yet-useless men in parishes is a nuisance and strain in Brontë's view. They have "fallen" as if from the sky, from a storm cloud or some other providential or natural precipitation. They've descended into these roles, haphazardly. "Every parish has one or more of them" (5). This critique is a personal one for Brontë, because this is what she lived: "obsession with religion" (Maynard *Brontës and Religion* 192). Although she identified as a member of the Church of England, Brontë had to take on the rules and traditions which so fully excluded women like her from opportunities to think, preach, earn money, and shape policy within communities (196).

Brontë also was troubled by the Oxford Movement's reversion to conservative rules, for example a "renewed idealization of celibacy" and "sexual repression" among

other expectations that pushed women even further to the background of life (Maynard *Victorian Discourses* 99, 101). Men of the cloth, thus represented not only job opportunities and positions of influence entirely unavailable to women, but policies that, in Brontë's view, harmed women in a deeper more physical and psychological way. The parts (curates) stand for the whole (Church); they are synecdoches. They "ought to be doing a great deal of good" within their parishes, but in this novel, they were not (*Shirley* 5).

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Moving away from small scale tableaux such as rude behavior in dining rooms and salons, I will now examine that institution in a larger and perhaps even more unsettling framework. What was the Anglican Church to the outside world – beyond Yorkshire, beyond England, beyond even the British Empire? Brontë refers to the curates as "invaders" in the context of missionary work, which is illuminating (emphasis added 108-10). "The Rector's cook...had been put out of humour...when the invaders came so unexpectedly in such strength" (110). The usage of the word "invaders" can suggest a number of interpretations. First, it can be satirical in that the curates are encroaching on other characters' working space, domestic lives, and basic privacy. Brontë is not afraid of melodramatic turns of phrase. She employs political language in this instance, to describe even the most domestic of settings. That is partly why she was so successful in her time, because she could describe intimate dynamics with such potent and powerful words. In so doing she broke ground as a novelist; the interior world of her characters could take on the importance of a vast universe of action and ambition.

The juxtaposition of what seem to be incongruous words and moments can come off as silly at times. Is a curate also an invader? The intention is there to make a point as only Brontë can. In *Shirley* the narrator has a silly side, just as she has a serious side. The curates can be ridiculous and ominous simultaneously. Moreover, I believe there is also something serious and imperial about the word “invader” that is worth exploring as I explore the Anglican Church as an institution.

*Shirley* is not a novel about imperialism and missionary work on the whole, however, the reality of British imperialism should not be ignored. Whether Brontë was using the word “invader” in this ironic way is not entirely known, but it is notable in how closely it appears in the context of the missions, which is not extensively discussed throughout the rest of the novel. “His station made him holy...the white surplice covered a multitude of sins” (255). The use of the word “white” can have layers of meaning as well. The curates, who wear the white surplice, are Caucasian. The missionary baskets are used to fund the “regeneration of the interesting coloured population of the globe” (108). Could the “sins” Brontë is referring to not only be the local, domestic sins of the curates like how they treat servants and women, but also the sins of imperialism? And are the sins connected and related: the unworthiness of the men entitled to take on leadership positions at home and abroad, the unpreparedness for the missions they may pursue, the contradictions underlying the privileged status of the men-of-the-loth and their ineffectiveness, their shortcomings.

The missionary work described in *Shirley* is considered and described as a chore within the spiritually-starved community: the missionary basket was made “by *reluctant* hands” (emphasis added 108). Again Brontë employs synecdoche so effortlessly. They do

not want to do the work. ““Put down the sewing; *I am an enemy to it,*”” Caroline says to her mother; Caroline would prefer to use her eyes to read (emphasis added 419). The ladies charged with maintaining missionary baskets sew and craft little items such as baby socks, and then the basket is passed from household to household with the expectation that ladies will contribute small items which will ultimately be sold to the men in the community at inflated prices in order to raise and then send money to overseas missions – imperial missions. The arrangement is all a construct, it is not a real market for crafted items. This is in stark contrast to the out-of-work mill laborers who used to be employed by the weaving industry but now struggle to feed their families. Machines and politics have shut the laborers out of their prior careers.

This fund-raising system is occurring while landed gentry characters like Yorke are critiquing the parsons as lazy and subsisting on the ““fat of the land””. That men are expected to contribute by buying the ladies’ small craft work suggests the futility of the curates’ mode of living and what they consider their work. The curates are not really doing anything meaningful – they are not making anything real. If they are performing funerals and weddings and such, it is not mentioned in the text. They do not seem enthusiastic about doing so when Helstone interrupts their feast in Chapter 1. They would rather just sit about, eat, drink, and quarrel. They are unproductive laborers, yet their employment has not been undone by the advancement of technology, rather it decays internally Brontë argues, from within not without, they are unoccupied and empty. The men in the society are expected (or asked) to pay three times market price for items like baby socks, in order to fund missionary projects which the community does not particularly know nor care about: made by the ““reluctant hands””. So the set-up of how the



ladies and gentlemen finance the missions appears to be as empty and economically strange as how the lazy parsons themselves collect money from the Anglican Church for something of little value - their service.

There is an emptiness permeating the economic endeavors of the Anglican Church. The sewing, the basket, the men that buy the items obligatorily, the distant pursuit of missionary projects which the Yorkshire parishioners know little about. That emptiness is partly a result of the structural problems Yorke rails against: the humbug, and also the incompetence of the curates which incenses Brontë so completely. She also particularly seems to loathe the missions basket items because of the limitations they indicate for what women can and should contribute to the Church. The women have to sew the things, or craft them.

These are activities which Brontë found gendered and utterly irritating. She had no interest and little respect for the practice and instead implies in her text that women should have been allowed to preach, to lead, to earn salaries, to articulate ideas in the press, and in the parishes beyond the making of baby socks. Women who wanted to share ideas in the printed media, like Shirley does, despite having wealth and confidence, faced the added disadvantage of not having gone to university (in addition to the glaring disadvantage of facing sexist rejection by the publishers).

Brontë says that Malone and his colleague, the curate Donne are “neither of any moral use” (111). Donne, who fails to adequately raise funds for a construction project is on “a level below contempt” (112). Why? Because of arrogance, in both their cases. They wear their position with the expectation that it entitles them to respect, professional advancement and financial aid. They reveal this to the characters like Shirley, who,

instead of donating generously to Donne, takes matters into her own hands and forms her own fund to buttress projects she cares deeply about, projects that look nothing like the missionary baskets made by “reluctant hands.” Shirley is eager to help people she can see, and touch, in her community, not in imperial missions in far-off lands. Caroline, whose only role in the Church is crafting and voluntarily teaching children on Sundays, longs for more responsibility: ““successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely hopeless life has none”” (216).

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Rector Matthewson Helstone is a foil to the curates: all fire and brimstone, abstemiousness, punctuality, and poise. This is because he has attained a professional position that allows for more financial security and decision-making authority, plus he is about twenty years older. To be a rector was a more prestigious role than to be a curate who was like a deputy of a lower rank in every respect. Helstone, however, is the novel’s most fallible character. I believe he represents the generation which came before Shirley in his out-moded and often hateful sexist remarks. Indeed his backstory indicates that he neglected his wife and never showed affection toward his niece who lives with him. Despite being “potent in a [social] circle” (284) Helstone was not a nurturing husband, his wife died and they never had children.

Brontë crafts a bleak view of parish life throughout the text. Church-going has become, for the characters in *Shirley* a joyless occasion, much like contributing to and sampling from the contents of the missionary basket. “There were few people at church” (166). The Rectory, which Helstone occupies for life, is said to have graves under the kitchen (277). Sunday is described as dark and wet (166). The establishment has come to

represent something shrouded, something dead, even. Rector Helstone makes a “slow march down the *cemetery*” (244). It is as if he is declining to somewhere truly dead – even more dead than dead – where corpses break apart and decay.

No image of Helstone is quite so haunting as the one of his “slow march down the cemetery” on the property where he and his niece live. He is representative of aging and death. He, however, is still alive throughout the text and Brontë demonstrates his strengths as well. Helstone invests personally in the construction of “two large schoolrooms” at the Whitsuntide celebration he “would not wait a second for anyone” before the events commence (276-77). Helstone is exacting, he has high expectations of others. The curates have seemingly no expectations of themselves but high expectations that they will be provided for by characters like Shirley and Yorke (landed gentry).

Like the narrator, Shirley is unambiguous in her calls for reform in the Anglican Church: “I think the Establishment is indeed in a poor way, and both she and her sons appear in the utmost need of reformation” (349). She is uncowed (due largely to her privileged financial position) in her willingness to skip out on quotidian demonstrations of piety, she forgets a creed Helstone asks her to recite: “I can’t remember it quite all”, (192), she refuses to be on time or attend certain services: “often had a careless way of lingering behind time” (277). Shirley seeks to raise more funds for the local poor and unemployed when she observes the curates accomplishing so little in this role. Shirley shows how her concept of religion thrives outside of church walls: in nature as well as in her own imaginative writing.

Maynard discusses how Patrick Brontë’s well-read and vigorously thoughtful children placed “emphasis on religion as a living force within the individual, as a living

connection between individuals, rather than as an institution” (*The Brontës* 196). This value system is recorded in an account of Charlotte speaking with her sister, the author Emily Brontë and a friend of theirs: “One time I mentioned that someone asked me what religion I was of (with the view of getting me for a partizan) and that I had said that was between God and me, – Emily (who was lying on the hearth-rug) exclaimed, “*That’s right*” (emphasis added, from a letter by Charlotte Brontë to friend Mary Taylor quoted in a note to chapter VIII in Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*). This record evinces what Maynard also argues – the Brontë sisters were less concerned with institutions and dogmas (because institutions were so confining, especially to women), and more dedicated to and stirred by their personal connections to the spiritual world – an extremely private matter. Human language is “inadequate to the task of understanding God” (Miller xiv).

Shirley is cut from the same cloth. When Helstone, a guest in Shirley’s home instructs her to recite St Athanasius’s Creed, Shirley’s response is: “Let me gather up my flowers” (191). This evasive response is telling in many ways. As mentioned, she ultimately tells Helstone she has forgotten St Athanasius’s Creed, but her focus on the flowers is consistent with her communion with nature throughout the text, and her preference to nature of establishment structures. Further, it is reminiscent of the dialogue between Charlotte and Emily Brontë outlined above. In many simple details, Shirley is separated from the establishment. The narrator says “she had no Christian name but Shirley” (191). She acknowledges that there are other forms and objects of worship that exist for her, most significantly, what she calls Nature in a female form: “if we had been content to worship her only, she would have filled our hearts” (202). Brontë idealizes

Shirley and the workings of her mind: "Fate had been benign to the blissful dreamer...in her future were rosy hopes" (220).

One of the strangest things about Shirley is how easy her life is relative to the rest of the characters of the novel. She does not seem to grieve for her departed parents, of which not much is known other than that they were extremely wealthy and well-behaved. She is not only wealthy, but healthy, "fine as the bloom of a red wild-flower" (235). Shirley is able to spend countless hours lying "stirless on the turf, at the foot of some tree of friendly umbrage" and roaming about her vast properties (219). Nature, which Shirley refers to in the feminine form with a capital "N" is exceedingly kind to Shirley, while many around her are suffering due to layoffs at the Mill and a collapse in the weaving economy.

Several times she is described in connection with fairies: "When I was a little girl my nurse used to tell me tales of fairies being seen" (224). She fantasizes about mermaids as well, implying that she is like one – seeing her reflection like that of a mermaid's in an "oval mirror" (231-32). She has this magical, visionary propensity, an otherworldly sensitivity, that is in stark contrast and yet is oddly compatible with Helstone. Nonetheless, she is resistant to patriarchy: "I should not like to be capsized by the patriarch bull" she says while fantasizing about sea voyages and "sea-mammoths" (232).

"Nature" Shirley dreamily says, "is now at her evening prayers" (302). Shirley will not go in to the chapel to worship as "how hot it will be in the church! I would rather not enter" (302). In addition to Nature as a type of deity, Brontë is also offering up other so-called "gods" by way of Shirley's musings: "philosophy", "resolution", and "resignation" (332). Brontë is suggesting alternative and perhaps more intellectual

approaches to religion – more expansive ideas, beyond the tenets of Christianity. Shirley, who was not given a Christian name, is a free-thinker in these respects.

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As an author Brontë chooses not to shy away from the idea that the Bible need not be interpreted literally. She demonstrates this in *Shirley* with her lengthy analysis and questioning of the writings of St Paul which indicate woman should not “usurp authority over the man; *but to be in silence*” (emphasis added 311). Caroline Helstone challenges the translation of St Paul’s first Epistle to Timothy (second chapter) in the New Testament explicitly, declaring that language which is interpreted as sexist may have had a different meaning in the original Greek: “if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated” (311-12).

Guarded as she is, as to the patriarchy, Shirley quickly steps in, once she observes the lazy parsons, to take on a leadership role in raising funds for the local poor. She scorns their “hypocrisy” (239). It has already been discussed how she shuns Donne from her home when he offends her in soliciting her money in a rude way. Malone is afraid of her dog. She is in many ways on her own in her youthful, spirited approach to helping the community. She recruits the assistance of an old maid call Miss Ainley, and that of Helstone and Caroline. With the endorsement of Helstone and the guidance of an old maid, Shirley forms the equivalent of a modern-day 501(c)(3) to aid the poor.

Miss Ainley, is in some respects nun-like: virginal, alone and unmarried, dedicated passionately to doing religious good works in her parish. Meanwhile, Shirley lives on property that was once a nunnery. The ideas around nuns, especially during Victorian times are interesting to explore in *Shirley*. It is not a coincidence that one of the

communities in the text is called Nunnely. Looking at the most extreme role a woman could occupy in a faith: Maynard argues that nuns were “symbols of the failure of love” (*Victorian Discourses* 110) and it is no coincidence that Shirley’s community is named Nunnely, which looks and is spelled almost entirely like nunnery, and was once a nunnery (Gilbert and Gubar 386). This appellation of Nunnely in *Shirley* brings to mind the confining status of nuns: women who do not marry, do not raise families, devote whatever sexual or spiritual energy they may have to their faith and their parish duties, and are simultaneously not allowed to hold the prestige and power of the role of priest or leader of any post outside of a nunnery.

I believe Shirley is taking the baton from Helstone in a generational sense, and it is striking that she is female and he is male. In this way, she represents hope. Brontë is explicit on this point: Shirley “looked happy” (conversing with Helstone) “a joy of the past and present, of memory *and of hope*” (238). Shirley and Helstone “*mutually approved each other’s arrangements*” (281). Brontë is creating this impossible “gem-tinted bird-of-paradise” as her offering of hope to reform the establishment (279). And it seems Helstone is largely okay with this. Helstone’s collaboration with Shirley is in some respects shocking, given that he is such a sexist throughout the novel. He also tells Caroline and Shirley that Miss Ainley is more perfect than they are, because she is an old maid who has more thoroughly dedicated her life to religious works. Pleasing Helstone or not, is of little concern to Shirley and Caroline, they really do not care what he thinks of them or Miss Ainley, but they are aware of his power as a Rector.

The narrator discusses the difference between persuasion and compulsion and it echoes consistently with Shirley’s approach to religion (337). Where a Helstone is

dogmatic and punctual (his name evokes fear and firmness) a Shirley is more flexible and ephemeral. She is the bird-of-paradise who also happens to have a lot of money to play around with. Brontë, according to Maynard, had read writings of atheists (Maynard *Brontës and Religion* 194) and was not afraid to recognize intellectual arguments beyond the bounds of the Anglican Church. Her sister Emily Brontë went even further in her own literature to suggest interpretations and approaches to spirituality that had little to do with Christianity and much more to do with connections to the beauty and sanctity of the land.

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Brontë entirely acknowledges the possibility that religions which she respected can still disappoint and that even personal faith can be dashed. She illustrates this through Helstone's niece, Caroline, who considers her petitions (prayers) were "unheard and unaccepted" (332). Caroline believes "God had turned his face from her" and she experiences "religious despair" (332). It should be noted that it is through Caroline that Brontë's narrator details sincere loathing for the curates. Shirley as well criticizes them, but they are foremost encountered by Caroline, who lives with her uncle Helstone, similar to how Brontë lived with her father in his perpetual curacy.

Gilbert and Gubar view *Shirley's* treatment of the Woman Question in the context of anorexia. The curates are the opposite of anorexic; they are parasitic. Gilbert and Gubar argue that the nearly nonexistent professional prospects for a feminine (yet genteelly-poor) character like young and thoughtful Caroline Helstone (Rector Helstone's niece and ward) directly led to Caroline's refusing to eat or socialize because she was confined to a small space in society that was punishing in how little purpose and hope it availed her. In a critical chapter called "The Genesis of Hunger", Gilbert and Gubar



juxtapose “voracious curates” with the anorexic Caroline (Gilbert 373). The curates, in fact, have the college education, the salary (though small, it is still enough to live alone on). They have the opportunity to preach, to assist in policy making and public service, their roles are – relative to Caroline’s – feeding their daily lives, and they are voracious in how they take from this privilege, what they want. Because she is a woman, Caroline is not provided the opportunity to go to university, to preach, to direct policy or to support herself in a church position: “I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my head” says the frustrated Sunday school teacher (216).

Boumelha notes that while the old maids of *Shirley* are confined to do much of the parish’s charitable work and occupy endless hours of solitude and celibacy, the youngest women in *Shirley* “are able to envisage another life for themselves”, perhaps as Charlotte and Emily Brontë seem to have envisaged the possibility of another form of religion for themselves (99). Unlike with the curates, the reader of *Shirley* does not encounter any of the female characters abusing or degrading individuals within or below their social castes.

Brontë is creating truly unrealistic characters throughout *Shirley* which are at the same time grasping for deeply serious, realistic reform. *Shirley* is so beautiful, so wise, so healthy, so charming and so well-off that she seems to have the world at her feet. Caroline is desperate for purpose and companionship and ultimately wins the man of her dreams. Helstone is hard as nails and able to control the parishioners like the most powerful of shepherd directing his flock. Meanwhile, as has been exhaustively discussed, the curates fail miserably. Brontë’s publishers did not want to open the novel with a

chapter mocking clergymen. Brontë pushed back, arguing that it was realistic and had to be written...so it was.

As idealistic as Shirley's pursuits are, there is a frustrating quality to how perfectly she goes about getting what she wants. She is twenty-one years old, yet demonstrates the political skill and persuasiveness of someone far more mature. She charms Helstone, she pushes out the offensive Donne and Malone, she debates Yorke and Caroline fearlessly. She is speaking what seem to be Charlotte Brontë's values and opinions, while also evincing a bit of Charlotte's sister Emily as well. Many critics have said that Shirley is based on Emily, and as a tribute, as Emily died during the writing of this novel, it is a generous one. All the while Shirley is a work of fiction. It is helpful to remember as Maynard observed, if ever picturing the Brontë sisters inhabiting the fictional minds of Caroline or Shirley, that there was a preference for "inner experience replacing institution" within Brontë's approach to Christianity (*Brontës and Religion* 193).

The novel falls into romantic defaults in the latter half. Caroline marries, Shirley marries, although she delays and delays in strange ways and with excuses. These women who pushed back so hard on the establishment, they settle down and start families. The idealization of Nature seems to fall apart, leaving the novel's conclusion with a very bitter tone. In lieu of the turf and the flowers which surrounded Caroline and Shirley, the region of Yorkshire ultimately becomes more industrialized, not less. "A lonesome spot it was – and a bonnie spot – full of oak trees and nut trees. It is altered now" (607). There is a sort of helplessness in this, just as the novel on the whole did not reform the Anglican Church in material ways. It is direly disappointing to read in the final lines of *Shirley* how

the Nature which the young female characters were able to commune with no longer has the power that they seemed to see and sense in it at the start of the story.

The outcomes for the curates are discussed with disdain in the “Winding-up” chapter: “Were I to give the catastrophe of your life and conversation, the public would sweep off in shrieking hysterics” she says of Malone (594). Of Donne, Brontë writes, if “taste in architecture had been the same thing as consistency and earnestness in religion, what a shepherd of a Christian flock Mr Donne would have made!” (595). Helstone, of course, does not change – this is his strength throughout the novel. Diamond-like *Helstone* is unbreakable, ancient, and enduring. His protective nature towards his niece, his lack of any children but his flock, his assiduousness in ritual and preservation make him stand alone as a male figure Brontë is painting almost favorably.

Although the heroines Caroline and Shirley swoon into a predictable plot “winding-up” in marrying gentlemanly brothers, what they do and say throughout the text, still holds up as groundbreakingly thoughtful and innovative, daring, and astute. So unlike the author in their mysteriousness, their charm, and their financial strength, the young women are conduits for all of Brontë’s frustrations and opinions: the obvious irritation she felt for the undeserving curates, the agony she experienced in being excluded from professional, religious, and educational institutions, the stalling of spirit which she witnessed in her Anglican Church, the hardships of the laborers in Yorkshire, and the belief that just because things had always been done a certain way does not mean that way is right nor the most fruitful. *Shirley* is Brontë’s bird-of-paradise: a character so incredible and exotic, I wonder whether Brontë herself could ever imagine traveling to such a place (paradise), physically or spiritually. I suspect she was able to travel to the

latter, a spiritual refuge in her own mind – free from the noise of curates and their clamoring, quotidian quarrels. I know in her lifetime she never made it to the former (the tropics). Although *Shirley* does not end on an entirely uplifting note and no character reaches a paradise, the mere germination of intellectual ideas conceived by Brontë's heroines, should blossom and still flower today.

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