

Abstract

SWIFT, LINDLEY NOLAN. Lesbian Texts and Subtexts: [De] Constructing the Lesbian Subject in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*. (Under the direction of Dr. Leila May.)

The conflict between essentialist and constructionist standpoints constitute the primary division between proponents of lesbian literary theory and queer theorists. While essentialists view identity as fixed and innate, constructionists consider identity to be the unstable effect of social conditioning. Lesbian theorists argue that the destabilization of all identity categories, accomplished by queer theory, serves to undermine the importance of “lesbian” as a political identity. However, the success of queer theorists, such as Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in challenging the hegemonic power structures that reinforce compulsory heterosexuality should not be underestimated. For the purpose of this thesis, I intend to bridge lesbian studies and queer theory by focusing on what I perceive as their similar aims, primarily the act of reading between the lines of heterosexual narratives. In order to do so, I have chosen to explore *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë and *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier from these two competing perspectives. I first examine *Villette* through the lens of lesbian theory in order to rethink binary oppositions, such as private/public and secrecy/disclosure, as they appear in the text to reveal the forbidden and thus transgressive expression of female same-sex desire or lesbianism and its subsequent repression to the metaphorical realm of the closet. I then use queer theory to deconstruct gender and sexuality in *Rebecca* in the hopes of demonstrating how representations of lesbian desire may serve to subvert naturalized, hegemonic definitions of both.

**Lesbian Texts and Subtexts: [De] Constructing the Lesbian Subject in
Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* and Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca***

by

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Dedication

To Mom and Dad

Thank you for always believing in me and my dreams.

To Heather

You are all I need to get by.

Biography

A native of California, Lindley Swift moved to the South with her family in 1988 and has made North Carolina her home for the past 18 years. An inveterate lover of good books and the beach, Lindley was able to combine both passions while earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from the University of North Carolina at Wilmington, before moving inland to pursue a graduate degree at NC State. Upon completion of her Masters, Lindley will accept a teaching position at Guilford Technical Community College in Greensboro, NC, where she will reside with her partner of 10 years, Heather Marcinowski.

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Table of Contents

	Page
Introduction: In Search of a Lesbian Subject	1
Chapter 1: Lesbian Desire and the Metaphor of the Closet in Charlotte Brontë's <i>Villette</i>	10
Chapter 2: The Performance of Gender and Sexuality in Daphne Du Maurier's <i>Rebecca</i>	37
Conclusion: The Textual Lesbian as Disruptive Presence in <i>Villette</i> and <i>Rebecca</i>	52
Works Cited	56

Introduction

In Search of a Lesbian Subject

Always I read as a lesbian But looking for self-defined lesbian books was never how I approached the subject. I always reinterpreted books to give me what I needed. All books were lesbian books – if they were believable about women at all, and particularly if they were true to my own experience.

-- Dorothy Allison, "Every Book Is a Lesbian Book"

In the title of her 1999 feature article for *Salon* magazine, political activist and LAMDA award-winning author of *Bastard Out of Carolina*, Dorothy Allison, proclaims, "Every book is a lesbian book." Although this statement may seem extreme, it holds important implications for lesbian literary criticism. Most significantly, it suggests that any book, not only those that contain blatant lesbian sexuality, can be read from a lesbian perspective. If every book can indeed be considered a lesbian book, then lesbian subjectivity can inform even the most traditional of romance plots, in novels that have been read predominantly from a heterosexual point of view. I have chosen to explore two such texts from a lesbian perspective – *Villette* by Charlotte Brontë and *Rebecca* by Daphne Du Maurier. Although much consideration has been given to issues of gender and sexuality in *Villette* and *Rebecca*, feminist critics have neglected to examine adequately the sexual identity of the female characters from the social and political positions of either lesbian studies or queer theory; but I have not chosen these particular novels to fill a niche in the current research alone. I have selected *Villette* and *Rebecca* because the otherness of the female characters, their precarious romances, and their embittered passions all lend themselves so aptly to lesbian interpretation. However, Allison's statement does not allow for a broader scope of lesbian analysis alone; it also raises crucial questions that inevitably initiate any venture into lesbian literary criticism:

How does one read as a lesbian? What can be considered a lesbian text? And perhaps, most importantly, who or what is a lesbian?

At first glance, the answers to these questions may appear straightforward and unproblematic. Using Dorothy Allison as an example, we can see how Allison's work could easily be granted admittance into what Bonnie Zimmerman, in *The Safe Sea of Women*, refers to as the genre of "lesbian literature." According to Zimmerman, "lesbian writing can best be defined through a *cluster* of factors; if a writer or text exhibits enough specific characteristics we can call her or it 'lesbian'" (*Safe Sea* 14). Zimmerman proposes three defining criteria for lesbian literature. First, a lesbian writer must "identify [herself] in some way with the lesbian community" (*Safe Sea* 15). This connection can be revealed through either autobiographical influences in her work or her use of a lesbian press. Allison conforms to this first criterion by openly identifying herself politically and individually as a lesbian in interviews as well as in her work. Second, a lesbian text must feature a central lesbian character and position "men firmly at the margins of the story" (*Safe Sea* 15), and third, a lesbian audience must read and identify with the text. Allison fulfills these last two criteria as well. Novels by Allison, such as *Trash*, feature central lesbian characters and relationships, and in turn, her work has the potential to draw a distinctly lesbian audience. In other words, Allison's writing adheres to Zimmerman's criteria for a self-identified lesbian literature, which belongs to a lesbian culture or "a community of writers and readers" (*Safe Sea* 14).

As evidenced by her article in *Salon*, Allison also practices what can be considered the critical task of lesbian reading:

I read books for the queer subtext and because they advocated a world I understood. Books about outsiders, books about inappropriate desire, books where the heroes escaped or fought social expectations, books where boys were girlish or girls were strong and mouthy – all were deeply dykey to me, sources of inspiration or social criticism or life sustaining poetry. (par. 6)

Indeed, as Zimmerman suggests in her analysis of lesbian readers, Allison expresses the desire to read lesbian novels “in order to affirm lesbian existence” (*Safe Sea* 15).

However, the defining characteristics of the genre employed by Zimmerman seem to rely on the acceptance of a universal lesbian subject, a claim to objectivity that I feel is belied by Allison’s description of the lesbian reading process. At no point in the passage does Allison suggest the importance of a central, self-aware lesbian presence in the text; neither must the text clearly identify itself as “lesbian” to be read by Allison as such. Rather, the passage emphasizes the importance of “queer subtext” and the process of “dykonstruction,” in which lesbians have become “adept at deconstruction, patiently reading between the lines, from the margins, inhabiting the text of dominant heterosexuality even as we undo it, undermine it, and construct our own destabilizing readings” (Munt, *New Lesbian*, xiii). Although twentieth-century lesbian writers like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, and Jane Rule have been made responsible for the construction of a modern lesbian subject in literature, it is the constant work of the reader to construct a lesbian identity for herself within the text, a process aided by, but not dependent on, a lesbian protagonist or author.

By assuming a reader-response position toward the text, one can break away from an author-centered analysis that is based on the sexual orientation of the writer. In *Lesbian Subjects*, Martha Vicinus warns against literalism in the search for a historical lesbian subject: “I wish to problematize not only the emphasis upon visibility as an essential marker of the lesbian, but also the necessity of a language of homosexuality as a precursor to a lesbian sexuality” (8). Vicinus both frees the historian from relying on physical or material proof of lesbianism and abandons the idea that lesbianism did not exist before nineteenth-century sexologists identified it as a sexual practice. Rather, Vicinus focuses on what remains unsaid and unseen in history (2), an act of reading between the lines that proves an essential skill in the discovery of lesbian subtexts in literature. The reader must perform an act of interpretation, informed by individual experience, in order to infuse the text with meaning. Thus the intention of the author, i.e. a self-aware sexual identity, becomes less important than the sexual identity or gender interests of the reader as “an undeniable aspect of his or her reaction to the printed page” (Quinn 47). However, in order to explore “lesbian” as a “speaking/reading position” any further (Wilton 14), it is important to understand the complexities that surround “lesbian” as identity.

One of the major difficulties of lesbian literary criticism is the problem of definition. In *Lesbian Studies: Setting an Agenda*, Wilton further characterizes this dilemma: “Not only must it be decided whether the ‘lesbian-ness’ of the text is located in its author, its content, its writing or its reading(s), it must also be decided what, for the purpose of the critical task, lesbian-ness *is*” (133). This self-conscious, some might say obsessive, need for justification that precedes any attempt at lesbian interpretation can be

seen as a direct result of its marginalization by mainstream academic discourse. In fact, lesbian scholarship still maintains a secondary, if not inferior, location within both women's studies and gay studies, a position that has motivated many lesbian scholars to reevaluate these affiliations and, in some instances, propose a separatist agenda. Much like its feminist counterpart, lesbian theory developed as a reaction to subjugation and oppression, but it remains the stigmatized other "in marked contrast to the construction of *heterosexuality* whose privileged position as hegemonic norm renders definition or even self-aware identity redundant" (Wilton 41). Herein lies the division of interests between lesbian-centered inquiry and that of women's or gay studies: "Lesbians share with gay men the stigmatized existence of the sexual outlaw and with women the oppressed existence of the sexually subordinated" (Wilton 42). In part, this divide has made self-definition so vital because lesbian scholars must not only distinguish themselves from other competing interests that threaten to subsume the lesbian perspective completely but also, as Wilton suggests in the title of her book, set an agenda based on specialized issues of importance to the lesbian community.

Classic lesbian theory has attempted to address this aim in a number of ways, most importantly by attempting to define "a category called lesbian" as well as establishing "a lesbian history and tradition" (Zimmerman, "Lesbians Like This," 2, 8). Identity and community politics are central to the understanding of this theory. A lesbian community may vary according to the race, class, or ethnicity of its members, but, from the standpoint of lesbian studies, lesbian communities are invariably composed of "women who love and desire women rather than men" (Zimmerman, *Safe Sea*, 11). This definition grew out of the women's and gay liberation movements to encompass a lesbian

feminist political position that “combined a commitment to female integrity, bonding, and sexual passion with an uncompromising rejection of male-centered ways of thinking and being” (Zimmerman, *Safe Sea*, 10-11). Hence the term “woman-identified woman” can be seen to represent a defining characteristic of lesbian identity. For instance, Catharine R. Stimpson, in “Zero Degree Deviancy,” employs a rigorously literal definition of lesbian identity: “as writer, as character, as reader She is a woman who finds other women erotically attractive and gratifying Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast, and bone” (177). Stimpson calls upon the image of the woman-identified woman whose choice of a female sex partner determines her sexual identity. This identity is embraced within lesbian studies, a field of inquiry that focuses on issues of “sex, sexuality, and sexual identity” in order “to disclose the mechanisms of sexual oppression and identify how those mechanisms intersect and reinforce other matrices of oppression primarily organized around gender, class, or race” (Medhurst and Munt xiv). According to lesbian studies, gender then is the fundamental lens through which to view issues of sexuality, while lesbianism “first and foremost” constitutes a gendered identity of “women who love women – emphasis on ‘women’” (Zimmerman, “Feminism,” 151-52). Bearing this emphasis on gender in mind, lesbianism must not be separated from its political import as a challenge to the patriarchy, an interest that has come to define lesbian feminism.

For second-wave feminists, lesbianism represents a radical political practice in its rejection of traditionally male-dominated institutions, such as marriage, in favor of more egalitarian, women-centered relationships. Wilton notes, “Ironically, feminists tend to position ‘lesbian’ in relation to men; as a woman who is defined precisely by means of

her independence from men, her refusal to have sex with men” (38). The phallocentrism of this standpoint constitutes the primary danger that some see in relying on gender as a primary identification category. Rather, Wilton lauds an “emphasis on woman-identification” that “refuses the penis such a powerful definitional status” (38). Others in the field have widely contested the emphasis on sex, not gender, as the defining characteristic of lesbian identity partly in reaction to psychologists and sexologists who, from the mid- to late-nineteenth-century onward, defined homosexuality, thus lesbianism, in terms of the pathology and perversion of its sexual practice (Wilton 31). However, lesbians of color have opposed models of lesbian identity that assume a hierarchy of oppression, in which gender takes on the most important source of identity as well as the greatest cause of oppression. Likewise, postmodern lesbian theorists have questioned the ostensible disregard for the cultural and historical contingencies that have come to define modern lesbian identity, but regardless of philosophical differences within the field, lesbian theory continues to place an emphasis on identity as “a meaningful political marker” (Zimmerman and McNaron xv), and it is this grounding in identity politics that causes the greatest friction between lesbian and queer theory.

To a large extent, differences between essentialist and constructionist stances constitute this division. Essentialism is the belief in a “natural, fixed, and innate” identity (Jagose 8), while an essentialist view of homosexuality coincides with Adrienne Rich’s notion of a “lesbian continuum,” one that presumes a central lesbian urge that spans history and culture. In contrast, constructionists view all forms of identity, not just sexuality, as dependent upon the society within which they are conditioned. As Annamarie Jagose explains in her overview of queer theory, “constructionists assume

identity is fluid, the effect of social conditioning and available cultural models for understanding oneself” (8). Thus, according to constructionist philosophy, queer theory considers sexuality to be a naturalized category of knowing that must be destabilized and dismantled, much like biological sex or gender, in order to reveal its relationship to dominant power structures. Proponents of queer theory resist all identity categories. Instead they seek to “undermine the notion of a static, unified identity or self” and “question the very existence of categories, identities, and labels” (Zimmerman and McNaron xv). This includes heterosexual as well as gay and lesbian sexual orientations. Thus, queer theory weakens the very term “lesbian,” even as lesbian theory seeks to construct a concrete identity around it.

Although queer theory lends itself to the “post-structural refiguring of identity as a constellation of multiple and unstable positions” (Jagose 3) upon which I have based the premise that the reader continuously constructs lesbian identity by subjectively reinterpreting any given text, this tendency towards deconstruction need not preclude all influences of lesbian theory in my work. In my interpretations of *Villette* and *Rebecca*, I have chosen to apply lesbian theory to the former and queer theory to the latter. That is neither to assume that a lesbian reading of *Rebecca* is impossible nor that a queer reading of *Villette* out of the question.¹ Rather, I have employed the theory that best suits the particular requirements of each analysis. In Chapter 1, I examine *Villette* through the lens of lesbian theory in order to rethink binary oppositions, such as private/public and secrecy/disclosure, as they appear in the text to reveal the forbidden and thus transgressive expression of female same-sex desire or lesbianism and its subsequent

¹ Ann Weinstone provides a queer reading of *Villette* in her article, “The Queerness of Lucy Snowe.”

repression to the metaphorical realm of the closet. In Chapter 2, I use queer theory to deconstruct gender and sexuality in *Rebecca* in the hopes of demonstrating how representations of lesbian desire may serve to subvert naturalized, hegemonic definitions of gender and sexuality.

In the conclusion, I bridge lesbian studies and queer theory by focusing on what I perceive as their similar aims, primarily the act of reading between the lines of heterosexual narratives. As Reina Lewis expresses, in “Death of the Author and the Resurrection of the Dyke,” lesbian literary studies is in need of a more complex criticism that moves beyond the desire for positive role-models epitomized by the “authorial subject” and “work instead with texts as producers and transformers of meaning” (19, 27). Just as “to queer” is to challenge “heteronormative knowledges and institutions” (Sullivan vi), to read as a lesbian is to question heterosexist claims in literature. To do so, I draw upon Wilton’s definition of the textual lesbian: “this lesbian *is* a textual creature, whose political import derives from her disruptive and disobedient presence within/against the master narrative of heteropatriarchy” (133). The textual lesbian can be seen as representative of queer and lesbian theory because she maintains the political objectives of lesbian theory while undermining identity categories that have hitherto been viewed as natural. Thus the choice to examine *Villette* and *Rebecca* is not an attempt to classify them as lesbian texts per se but to seek out the disruptive presence of the textual lesbian within each of them.

Chapter 1

Lesbian Desire and the Metaphor of the Closet in

Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

Aboard “The Vivid,” bound for a new life on the Continent, *Villette*’s female protagonist and narrator, Lucy Snowe, recites, “Stone walls do not a prison make, / Nor iron bars – a cage” (117). On the surface, these two lines of poetry may serve to bolster Lucy’s self-confidence as she sails into the great unknown, yet, upon closer inspection, the verse can be seen to embody a primary theme in the novel, that of imprisonment and release, the suppression of desire and its articulation. In comparison to the newly married and marriageable young women that Lucy confronts on her voyage, Charlotte Brontë’s heroine indeed appears to enjoy, at least momentarily, the independence that her single life affords. Long after the other passengers have been overcome by seasickness and retreated to the cabins below, Lucy remains on deck to contemplate “an uncertain future” bolstered by hope and the prospects of freedom (117). However, this sense of providence and tranquility is short-lived, as Lucy too experiences seasickness, a physical manifestation of the fear and uncertainty that threaten the friendless, jobless woman traveling alone to a foreign land. Although Lucy’s sense of independence remains unhindered by traditional marriage conventions, the absence of corporeal restraints that imprison the body suggests that Lucy languishes within a mental prison, the iron bars and stone walls of which are replaced by the societal limitations of gender and compulsory heterosexuality as well as by the emotional chains of shame and self-doubt that accompany any deviation from normative expressions of desire. Although Lucy is

physically propelled forward with the momentum of the ship and the real urgency of survival, the secret desires of her private self remain locked within.

When viewed from the perspective of gay and lesbian studies, the parameters of Lucy's prison begin to resemble the ontological terrain of "the closet," a metaphorical space that represents "the denial, concealment, erasure, or ignorance of lesbians and gay men" (Brown 1). As this definition suggests, "the closet" has traditionally served as a receptacle for sexual otherness, a state of being in which individuals must hide their sexual identities, desires, and romantic relationships for fear of persecution. As a function of oppression, "the closet" and the corresponding act of "coming-out of the closet" hinge on what Eve Sedgwick in "Epistemology of the Closet" identifies as "the pairings secrecy/ disclosure and private/ public" (48). In *Villette*, issues of public and private knowledge figure prominently, and the novel has garnered much critical attention for its use of surveillance and voyeurism, concealment and disclosure.² In these analyses, scholars often identify what Karen Lawrence, in "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*," terms "dual impulses" (449), or a series of binary oppositions, such as public and private, seen and unseen, interior and exterior that revolve around Lucy's desire at once to observe and be observed, to decode and signify. I want to draw a parallel between the binary relationships found noteworthy by critics of the novel and Sedgwick's seemingly unrelated, although highly relevant, hypothesis that similar pairings or "modern preoccupations" have become inextricably linked to "the trope of the closet" ("Epistemology" 48). In this context, Lucy's repression of desire, as well as acts of

² For further analysis on the binaries alluded to in this section, see Joseph A. Boone's "Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of 'Heretic Narrative,'" Anita Levy's "Public Spaces, Private Eyes: Gender and the Social Work of Aesthetics in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*," and "The Cypher: Disclosure and Reticence in *Villette*" by Karen Lawrence.

secrecy and disclosure, in the novel can be seen as a series of metaphorical closetings and outings evidenced by both physical enclosure and subsequent disclosure, the realization or expression of desire and its often immediate and painful repression. Like the closeted lesbian whose sexuality remains hidden from family, friends, and co-workers, Lucy suppresses her secret desires in a private space within, secrets that become public only when either forcibly or voluntarily disclosed.

Previously, the negotiation of public and private space in the novel has been treated as a heterosexual endeavor. For instance, in their examination of nineteenth-century women writers, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar read Lucy's experience as representative of "the debilitating roles available to the single women the Victorians termed 'redundant'" (407). While Lucy's unmarried status excludes her from the privileged, private, domestic sphere reserved for wives and mothers, survival forces her to enter a public, male-dominated workforce that provides little opportunity for women. Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar view the entire narrative as emblematic of "all women who must struggle toward an integrated, mature, and independent identity by coming to terms with their need for love and their dread of being single" (406). Lucy desires "emotional and erotic involvement," yet fears a loss of self that a traditional marriage demands (Gilbert and Gubar 432). This interpretation assumes that Lucy seeks "an integrated, mature, and independent identity" within an albeit alternative, but nonetheless heterosexual, relationship based upon mutual respect and equality.

Some argue that this goal is realized in her union with Monsieur Paul Emmanuel. However, many critics have viewed the repression of heterosexual desire and the

rejection of romance as crucial forfeitures in Lucy's acquiescence to a life lived on the margins of society. Gilbert and Gubar present the episode in which Lucy buries Dr. John Bretton's letters as concrete evidence that "worship of the godly male, desire for romantic love and male protection, is so deeply bred into Lucy that, at this point, she can only try to repress it" (427). Without family, fortune, or marriage prospects, Lucy has no choice but to become self-reliant in order to survive, a position that forces her out of the private sphere of domesticity and into the public arena. The price of survival within a society that Gilbert and Gubar characterize as "cruelly indifferent to women" (401) not only costs Lucy the capitulation of personal "meanings and goals . . . identity and power" (400) but also requires her to repress her sexual identity and dreams of romantic fulfillment. Yet the object of Lucy's repressed passions and desires often remains as ambiguous as the invisible confines of the mental prison alluded to in Richard Lovelace's poem. As a result, this sexual ambiguity lends itself to a lesbian interpretation that acknowledges the existence of sexuality and desire that fall outside of the heterosexual matrix.

The term, "heterosexual matrix," coined by Judith Butler and cited by Ann Weinstone, in her article, "The Queerness of Lucy Snowe," is taken to mean "the entire economy of exchange, including the exchange of women, that seeks to centralize heterosexuality through the maintenance of the marginality of other desires" (367). As a single or redundant woman, Lucy appears to exist outside the heterosexual matrix, but she also continues to be defined by it and found lacking. According to Weinstone, Lucy's "psychic turmoil" originates in this troubled "relation of and relationship to the heterosexual marriage plot" (367). Lucy not only loathes the "involuntary self-erasure" demanded of women within "normative heterosexual relations" but also harbors the "fear

of appearing singular,” a solitary woman, marked by sexual and gender difference, consigned to the margins of society (Weinstone 369-70). Weinstone describes Lucy’s “unreadable, unclassifiable, sexually queer” version of desire as an act of decentering heterosexual unions in favor of a “transgressive desire for solitude and different male-female relationships,” which appears as a sexually diffused “brother-sister covenant” that is reflected in both Lucy’s relationship with Dr. John Bretton as well as with M. Paul (368, 376-79). However, I find it problematic that even within a queer reading of *Villette*, Weinstone refuses to acknowledge the possibility that Lucy harbors a potent same-sex attraction that significantly affects the course of her narrative.

Feminist critics have discussed Lucy’s gender difference and consequent marginalization in terms of social redundancy, the rejection of traditional heterosexual relationships, and the transgressive urge to remain celibate, all of which rely upon the repression of heterosexual desire. In contrast, I view Lucy’s interaction with, relationship to, and self-positioning to opposing female characters as an instantiation of same-sex desire. The expression or realization of this desire manifests itself in Lucy as an intensely self-conscious, though euphoric, sense of liberation or outing, which is met by an equally, if not greater need for censure and repentance or closeting. Thus, Lucy undergoes a self-imposed isolation, represented by the paradigm of the closet, as a reaction to latent same sex desire that can find no legitimate physical or emotional outlet, a desire that is met with Lucy’s often-vain attempts at reconciliation nonetheless. When viewed in this light, the episode aboard “The Vivid” signifies a momentary recognition of desire, which is marked by the introduction of Ginevra Fanshawe and closely followed by Lucy’s

realization that her sexual identity can never be fully actualized and consequently must be repressed.

Before explicating this passage further, I want to establish a pattern of female homoerotic desire ubiquitously met by closetization, which emerges in the first chapters of *Villette* and is enacted throughout the rest of the novel. During Lucy's stay at Bretton, Paulina Home serves as Lucy's object of observation and desire, and Lucy spends a great deal of time in the study of the young girl's character. Although just a child, Paulina, otherwise known as Polly, is described as "a neat, completely-fashioned little figure, light, slight, and straight" (64). Polly is a woman in miniature. As noted by Kate Millett, even at a tender age, Polly is by all accounts "the golden one, the perfect woman. John Graham's pretty Polly, the apple of her daddy's eye" (653). A model of nineteenth-century femininity, Polly inspires Lucy's jealousy as well as her desire to possess "the demure little person" (73). However, irritated and uninterested by Polly's daily fulfillment of domestic roles – "sewing, or drawing figures . . . never kindling once to originality, or showing a single gleam of the peculiarities of her nature" (81) – Lucy must be content to observe Polly in her interactions with Graham, for as Lucy notes, "[Polly's] little character never properly came out, except with young Bretton" (81). Lucy's position as outsider in this threesome is worth noting for two reasons: first, with one exception, Lucy's attentions are all but rejected by Polly, and second, Lucy can be seen to rehearse her role as redundant woman in her peripheral observation of the heterosexual discourse emulated by Polly and Graham. Lucy certainly does not aspire to behave as Polly does towards men ("One would have thought the child had no mind or life of her own, but must necessarily live, move, and have her being in another . . . she nestled to Graham,

and seemed to feel by his feelings: to exist in his existence" [83]), yet Lucy exhibits the same single-minded fascination with Polly, and later Miss Marchmont, that she accuses the child of earlier in the chapter.

Indeed Polly remains at the center of Lucy's gaze ("the minute thing's movements and behavior gave, as usual, full occupation to the eye" [72]) in much the same way that male figures comprise the sole focus of Polly's interest and, perhaps, purpose in life.

Although as Millett observes, "Lucy had no father to dote upon her, nor any John to court her, and she is painfully aware that Paulina is lucky" (653), I hardly consider Polly to be a mere substitute or a temporary fascination in the absence of a male love-interest. While it is true that Lucy may lack a male figure of idol worship, her criticism of Polly's doting behavior towards men can be seen as symptomatic of rejection and jealousy. True, Lucy considers Paulina's attentions "absurd" and calls her a "busy-body," but certainly Lucy is also responding to a lack of attention on the part of "the little woman" (74) who takes such great pains to dote on Graham as well as her father. Rather than emulating the model of femininity performed by Polly, Lucy desires her affection. This desire is at last realized on Polly's final night at Bretton: "wishing, yet scarcely hoping that she would comply I took her in. She was chill; I warmed her in my arms. She trembled nervously; I soothed her. Thus tranquillized and cherished she at last slumbered" (92). However, Lucy is at once thrown from the warmth and comfort of Polly's affection into "a long time, of cold, of danger, of contention" (94), a period in Lucy's life left unexplained, except to say that it was a nightmare. Like so many other instances in the novel, the disclosure of Lucy's desire for Polly drives her far from the scene of its admission and into the service of Miss Marchmont.

The solitude and confinement of Lucy's interment as Miss Marchmont's nursemaid can be seen as a physical embodiment of the closet, into which Lucy effectively withdraws from the outside world. As Gilbert and Gubar suggest, "The elderly invalid Miss Marchmont, a woman whose self-imposed confinement defines the tragic causes and consequences of withdrawal, serves as a monitory image" for Lucy (405). Miss Marchmont not only suffers from an illness brought about by age but has wasted away with longing for a dead lover. Thus, this chapter may be seen as a foreshadowing of Lucy's unremitting repression of desire as well as a harbinger of its dangers. Kathleen Blake, in her examination of melancholia in *Villette*, finds many such "figural form[s]" of Lucy's repression, including both "an extensive symbolism of cold, beginning with her name" and the spectral figure of the nun, who has been widely viewed as a symbol of "sexual repression" (708). However, what this reading fails to recognize are the gesticulations of desire that Lucy manifests towards her employer. Miss Marchmont becomes much more than a needy convalescent in whose service Lucy earns her keep; rather, Lucy reveals that the "crippled old woman" comes to embody "my mistress, my friend, my all" (97). Lucy further describes the "intimacy" that develops between the two women existing in such close physical proximity with one another: "Her service was my duty – her pain, my suffering – her relief, my hope – her anger, my punishment – her regard, my reward. I forgot that there were fields, woods, rivers, seas, an everchanging sky outside the steam-dimmed lattice of this sick-chamber" (97). In this passage, Lucy details the tender care that one might offer an ailing spouse, not the detached concern one might expect of a hired nurse. Rather than the cold imagery alluded to by Blake, Lucy describes her surroundings as hot and steamy, adjectives that best describe consuming, if

not claustrophobic, conditions. For Lucy, the rest of the world dissolves and all that remains of interest is “the originality of [Miss Marchmont’s] character to study” (97), an interest that borders on obsession.

One might mark the physical manifestation of desire that Lucy demonstrates towards Polly as a maternal lapse in Lucy’s otherwise chilly withdrawal from human contact, or one might dismiss Lucy’s intimacy with Miss Marchmont as nursely duty, but to do so would be to ignore the complexity of the inter-female dynamics that complicate the domestic relationships represented in these chapters. Bretton constitutes only the first in a series of female-gendered spaces in *Villette* that harbor the potential for homoerotic desire as well as the means of repression. In “Multiplicities of Longing: The Queer Desires of *Bleak House* and *Little Dorrit*,” Mary Armstrong locates “domestic homoerotic desire . . . in the structures of family and domestic employment” (62). According to Armstrong, “Female same-sex desire floats and flashes in the fishbowl of domestic relations, palpable, physical, and compelling, yet discursively and structurally contained” (63). Just as servant-mistress relationships in *Bleak House* and, as we shall see, in Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca*, offer the potential for same-sex desire, “the steam-dimmed lattice” can be seen to describe not only the stuffy interior of Miss Marchmont’s “sick-chamber” but may also be read as the “hot, close” (Bronte 95) confines of a lover’s bedroom or the warmth generated by a passionate embrace. Although the nature of Lucy’s interactions with Miss Marchmont were intensely physical – Lucy, for instance, “ministered to her; made the necessary applications . . . succored her” (96) – I do not suggest that Lucy and Miss Marchmont are either desirous or capable of a sexual relationship. On the contrary, Lucy treasures but “a little morsel of human affection . . .

prized as if it were a solid pearl” (97), while maintaining a conscious knowledge that “shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence” belie her affections. Miss Marchmont merely acts as a poor substitute for an active life, a life that Lucy feels vastly unprepared for and wishes to deny. Thus Miss Marchmont’s apartments become a metaphorical closet, in which Lucy admits herself to be “much confined” (95). Much like the old woman who sequestered herself for thirty years in mourning, Lucy describes the multiple levels of enclosure to which she likewise retreats: “I, too, retired to my crib in a closet within her room” (101). If Lucy’s interment in Miss Marchmont’s service represents a warning, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, then it is an admonition that Lucy has no intention of heeding at the time. She recognizes the sacrifice of an active life and observes, “All within me became narrowed to my lot” (97). However, just as circumstance drives Lucy from Bretton, Miss Marchmont’s death unwillingly pushes Lucy from the safety and seclusion of the closet and into the public sphere.

As she embarks on a new adventure, Lucy allows herself to experience life more fully, a truth made evident in her physical enjoyment of the open air and sunshine on the deck of the *Vivid*, a stark contrast to the “Two hot, close rooms” that had become her world under Miss Marchmont’s auspices (95), and in her introduction to and subsequent conversation with Ginevra Fanshawe. Compared to the long-suffering, deteriorated shell of Lucy’s previous employer, Ginevra appears a vision of beauty, youth, and vitality. This passage not only acquaints the reader with Ginevra but also establishes the foundation of Lucy and Ginevra’s relationship as well as planting the first seeds of Lucy’s desire for the girl. Lucy first describes Ginevra as “quite a girl, pretty and fair” (113), and in a later chapter, reveals to Ginevra, “in *my* eyes, you will never look so

pretty as you did in the gingham gown and plain straw bonnet you wore when I first saw you” (153). Early in the passage, Lucy uses surveillance skills to divine information about Ginevra as a matter of immediate interest as well as future reference: “Whether this particular young lady was of the sort that can be most safely be left unwatched, I do not know: or rather did not know then” (114). Lucy veils her desire to observe Ginevra’s beauty behind a concern for Ginevra’s ability to travel unescorted safely.

In “Depolicing *Villette*: Surveillance, Invisibility, and the Female Erotics of ‘Heretic Narrative,’” Joseph Boone identifies acts of surveillance in the novel as means of “social control” enforced by “the everpresent threat of imprisonment or incarceration, which is manifested throughout *Villette* in the series of stifling enclosures that mark Lucy’s precarious negotiation of the competing paths of desire and duty, of expression and repression” (26). Madam Beck may use surveillance to intuit the secret lives of her pupils and staff, thereby gaining an upper hand and satisfying her desire for knowledge, but for Lucy, the act of observation arouses a different kind of desire. As Millett remarks, Lucy “studies Ginevra Fanshawe” and is aroused by her beauty, “a masculine lust” that must be overcome to achieve the maturity and success of the narrative’s dénouement (651). Yet more than a need to transcend desire for the sake of individual growth, a sense of self-doubt and fear of rejection appear to frustrate Lucy’s initial desire for Ginevra. Upon first seeing Ginevra, Lucy notes, “she also glanced in my direction, and slightly curled her short, pretty lip. It might be myself, or it might be my homely mourning-habit that elicited this mark of contempt; more likely both” (114). Lucy self-consciously acknowledges the fear that Ginevra will not return her admiration, and by the end of the chapter, Lucy comments, “Many a time since I have noticed, in persons of Ginevra

Fanshawe's light, careless temperament, and fair, fragile style of beauty, an entire incapacity to endure . . . the man who takes such a woman for his wife, ought to be prepared to guarantee her an existence all sunshine" (118). Lucy at once admits the depths to which she has examined Ginevra's personality and the lengths to which she has considered her own ability to provide a life of pleasure that Ginevra requires and, perhaps, remains entitled to in Lucy's mind. The bitterness that Lucy expresses in the passage might be attributed to the impossibility of pursuing a romantic same-sex relationship, a matter of both gender ("the man who takes such a woman") as well as practicality ("an entire incapacity to endure"). Before reality sets in, Lucy cannot help but smile at the airy, blasé quality of Ginevra's conversation, a much-needed reprieve from the serious tone of the previous chapters, indeed a breath of fresh air. After meeting and conversing with Ginevra, Lucy passes the remainder of the day in what may be the happiest mood she has expressed thus far in the narrative. However, a combination of mental anxiety and motion sickness soon dampen her spirits, pushing her both physically inward, below deck with the other passengers, and psychologically inward, as evidenced in her growing intolerance for Ginevra. Rather than the dispelling of desire that Millett suggests, Lucy must closet desire, a matter of both secrecy and denial, symbolized by her retreat below deck and her seeming dislike for Ginevra, which is apostrophized by vocal indignation and rebuff. The closet is thus both a physical location (the cabin) as well as a psychological domain (emotional withdrawal), which act in collusion as both a metaphorical reprieve from a hostile world and a repository of repressed desire that frequently coincide with homosocial and homoerotic interaction.

At the completion of the voyage and upon arrival in Boue-Marine, Ginevra and Lucy part, but not before Ginevra acts as an agent of Fate, which represents a female gendered force in the novel. Although a housekeeper mentions it verbally, a beautiful schoolfellow initially cements the idea of seeking employment as a foreign governess in Lucy's imagination: "Fate took me in her strong hand; mastered my will; directed my actions" (126). Unlike a traditional marriage plot in which a man guides a woman's fate, Lucy allows the influence of a beautiful woman to affect her life's course. More importantly, Ginevra mentions the town of Villette and Madame Beck's desire for an English governess as a passing thought, a "slight sentence uttered carelessly and at random" (121). When the two women meet again, Ginevra "[encounters] Lucy with very little surprise" (148), as if she expected this outcome all along. Lucy takes this lack of enthusiasm personally and refers to Ginevra as selfish, perhaps out of embarrassment for unduly anticipating their reunion. That Lucy seeks employment in the same residence as Ginevra may appear coincidental, but it is my contention that Ginevra takes on a more important role than many critics have awarded her in the past. Some perceive Dr. John, rather than Ginevra, to be the messenger of Fate who steps in at an opportune moment by negotiating the language barrier and thereby locating Lucy's trunk. Although Lucy treats him more generously than Ginevra, Dr. John more haphazardly directs Lucy towards the Rue Fossette. The "true young English gentleman" tries to be of service by leading Lucy through a park, which he deems too dangerous for a woman to cross alone at night, but he leaves her too soon. Dr. John tries to point Lucy in the direction of an inn, but instead he delivers her straight into the hands of "two mustachioed men" who terrify and harass Lucy (125-6). It is those same men who chase Lucy out of the public sphere, a world of

physical danger, fear, and sexual impropriety, and onto the doorstep of the very place Ginevra suggested to begin with, the sheltered world of the “Pensionnat de Demoiselles.”

Perhaps in reference to the devout Catholicism of its citizens, Lucy declares Villette a “land of convents and confessionals” (165). The school itself once housed a convent, a community of women that guaranteed its members’ physical safety, seclusion, and sexual abstinence. Lucy describes the building’s interior as “a series of the queerest little dormitories – which, I heard afterwards, had once been nuns’ cells” (130), suggesting that she may have found the ultimate closet within the confines of the Rue Fossette, for it offers her the possibility of survival outside of compulsory heterosexuality. Yet, Lucy soon realizes that this reprieve from the hostile world of men offers no respite from illicit desire. Instead, Lucy must exist in close proximity to that which she desires most while simultaneously repressing that desire. As Mark Hawthorne suggests in his study of the paradigm of the closet and the coming-out experience in canonical literature, “closets act as both havens and prisons. We want to flee to the closet to find safety, but we also need to escape from the closet to continue our growth” (66). In this sense, the metaphor of the closet constitutes a major paradox. In what Sedgwick refers to as the “regime of ‘the open secret’” (45), same-sex desire is ever-present, but rarely acknowledged. This seems representative of Lucy’s experience in a number of ways. When viewed as a figural representation of the closet, Rue Fossette takes on many of the nuances that Hawthorne generalizes in his discussion of the closet as metaphor. The school may at first offer a reprieve from Lucy’s financial and emotional struggles, only to become a prison that impedes Lucy’s growth as an individual, unless she continues to test its boundaries. Nina Auerbach, in *Communities of Women*, asserts that

although the “demi-convent” provides a temporary retreat for Lucy, “the haven of this decorous girl’s boarding school is a mirage: at heart it is a nest of schemes and secrets” (99). Lucy belongs to a paradoxical world where everyone is under suspicion, yet all admonitions of sexual desire go left unsaid.

In yet another paradox, Lucy begins “The Fete,” a chapter detailing her formal induction into Villette society, by revealing a self-imposed isolation from her peers: “I lived in a house full of robust life; I might have had companions, and I chose solitude” (194). This testament to her reclusive nature corresponds to her position as outsider and onlooker in the Bretton household. Indeed, the statement can be seen to represent Lucy’s overall withdrawal from a hostile society that penalizes gender and sexual difference. In her self-imposed isolation, Lucy’s categorical rejection of companionship is noteworthy because she is in fact the rejecter and not the rejected. As we have seen aboard the *Vivid*, Lucy wields rejection as a weapon against the torment of abject desire. This pattern is repeated in Chapter 14, as Lucy lists the various character flaws one by one of three potential allies and systematically dismisses them as unworthy. In the language generally reserved for courting rituals or sexual propositions, Lucy discloses, “Each of the teachers in turn made me overtures of special intimacy; I tried them all” (194). All narcissistic, all avaricious, all insipid, the unworthy three earn Lucy’s disdain as representatives of the worst that the female gender has to offer. Most evocatively, Lucy compares the Parisienne, Mademoiselle Zélie St Pierre, in a grotesque, yet sexually charged manner, to a reptile that reveals “its snake-head” to her but once, enough to effectively arouse Lucy’s “curiosity” (194). The snake is at once a phallic symbol, described by Lucy as a “long thing from forked tongue to scaly tip” (194), as well as a classic female symbol of

shedding and regeneration. This combination of masculine and feminine imagery is repeated again in the novel to describe homoerotic desire – e.g. Lucy’s cross-dressing theatrics later in the chapter – yet the image of the snake is more significantly reminiscent of the Judeo-Christian creation myth, in which Lucy represents an Eve-figure tempted by the phallic, snake-like guise of Zélie St Pierre. As Eve approaches the Tree of Knowledge and suffers the fateful fall from innocence, so Lucy both seeks and derives knowledge from her interaction with Zélie, a knowledge that can be understood as tantamount to sexual knowledge. Sedgwick, in her discussion of the closet metaphor, argues that by the end of the nineteenth century, knowledge and sexual knowledge had become indistinguishable: “as obvious to Queen Victoria as to Freud . . . knowledge meant sexual knowledge, and secrets sexual secrets” (“Epistemology” 49). That Lucy seeks solitude in the walled confines of the garden, an area forbidden to the female students and described in language highly suggestive of female sensuality, also maintains special significance in a passage that calls upon the metaphor of the Fall. Yet, the question remains, what really took place between Lucy and this Parisienne to inspire such a rebuke and lasting animosity? What is the true nature or quality of the knowledge that Lucy discerns? As with so many other instances in the novel, the sexually suggestive passage remains unclear.

Throughout the novel, Lucy uses evasive and serpentine tactics to obscure a logical progression of events that indicate a concealment of sexual secrets, leaving the reader with more questions than answers. Gilbert and Gubar attribute this elusive quality to a lack of viable narrative structures through which Lucy can adequately tell her story: Lucy “finds herself using and abusing – presenting and undercutting – images and stories

of male devising, even as she omits or elides what has been deemed unsuitable, improper, or aberrant in her own experience” (419). From a feminist perspective, Gilbert and Gubar envision Lucy as the unwilling captive of a patriarchal culture that oppresses women socially, economically, and politically, a point with which I resoundingly concur. However, I attempt to take Gilbert and Gubar’s critique one step further in order to address how the condemnation and consequent erasure of transgressive female sexual desire might influence the narrative convention of the novel. As demonstrated in her proceedings with Zélie St Pierre, Lucy appropriates and modifies a patriarchally defined prelapsarian imagery to describe the solicitation of desire between two women. Whether indicative of homosexual or purely homosocial desire, a “diacritical opposition” that according to Sedgwick, “seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women . . . than men” (*Between Men* 2), Lucy must nonetheless rely upon masculine literary constructions to describe a forbidden desire that has been denied and made invisible within that selfsame culture. Thus, Lucy rejects the advances of all three women not only because she finds their company disagreeable but also because her desire for female companionship breaches the known boundaries of homosocial conventions. Unlike her employer Madam Beck, Lucy cannot simply look upon these women “with an odd mixture of discrimination, indifference, and antipathy” (195), for they serve her interests in more ways than one. As in all encounters with members of the same sex, they inform Lucy’s constant search for a self-affirming female sexual identity.

As Lucy’s unfavorable description of Zélie St Pierre suggests, the woman possesses few redeeming qualities that would be valued in friendship or otherwise. Yet, Lucy’s negative opinion of the Parisienne is instrumental in understanding the damaging

effects of the patriarchal culture's condemnation and erasure of sexual difference on individual identities. Lucy characterizes Zélie as "prodigal and profligate" (194), an immoral degenerate, in effect, a monster – all terms that have been employed by the dominant culture to describe homosexuality. As Susan Wolfe and Julia Penelope suggest in their article, "Sexual Identity/ Textual Politics: Lesbian {De Com} positions," which provides an evaluation of lesbian identity in the postmodernist, poststructuralist era, "looking to others within [patriarchal] society cannot provide . . . a positive identity (self-concept)" for women "whose sexual desires are directed toward other women" (6-7). Perhaps, Lucy's severe disapproval of Zélie suggests an internalized homophobia, a censorious characterization of her own desires as decadent, an "insipid, heartless, brainless dissipation of time" (195). Using Dracula and Frankenstein as examples, Hawthorne asserts that those characters who "seem to have no redeemable qualities," those whom the dominant society have labeled "monsters" or "the 'unforgivable' Other," can be seen to represent "the dark inner secrets that threaten to break from their conforming closets and wreak havoc on civilized order" (32). Zélie's character flaws represent Lucy's socialized contempt for unsanctioned female sexual desire, a desire that must be controlled and repressed at all costs.

At this point, I would like to turn again to the garden last discussed in reference to the Parisienne; however, I will now focus on that space as a symbol of the closet, a space to which Lucy retreats from the lively world of the Rue Fossette. As suggested by the legend of the nun entombed within its recesses, "the garden is an emblem of the buried life" (Gilbert and Gubar 410). The garden itself is defined by both its walls as well as the rarity of its content: "where all is stone around, blank wall, and hot pavement, how

precious seems one shrub, how lovely an enclosed and planted spot of ground!" (172). Metaphorically, the surrounding stone can be seen as a symbol of masculinity, the public sphere from which Lucy flees, while the garden represents a female gendered space, the haven in which Lucy seeks refuge. Although the alley is forbidden to students, a taboo punishable when breached, Lucy is attracted to the secluded nature of the path and feels akin to the peculiarities that leave it "neglected" and "shunned" (174). The forbidden element of the garden is significant because it not only secures Lucy's privacy, but it also sets Lucy farther apart from normalized expressions of desire exhibited by her students and fellow teachers. Despite the fact that Lucy ironically refers to the alley as the "straight and narrow path" (174), she must transgress the boundaries of the garden and strike out independently in order to claim this place for herself. In doing so, she succeeds in nurturing the "tintless flowers that barely survive amongst the shrubs" (174). Thus, the garden may represent the buried life insomuch as the nun's interment constitutes the expelling of desires so criminal as to be punished by death.³ However, Lucy does not expel her desires within the walls of the garden; on the contrary, she simultaneously nurtures them and resists those who threaten her autonomy. Like many other critics, Boone assumes that men constitute Lucy's major love interests in the novel – i.e. "Lucy's hidden passion for Dr. John Bretton" or "an increasingly erotic alignment with her fellow teacher, M. Paul" (32-3). To the contrary, I would argue that Lucy attempts to disempower heterosexual conventions, and although a witness to heterosexual discourse, she refuses to participate. As if in direct challenge to Dr. John, Lucy forges a path for herself that defies the one through the park, on which no woman must walk alone at

³ See Linda C. Hunt's article, "Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*," for further discussion of vaginal imagery and nature in Brontë's work.

night. Although Boone argues, “the garden is a space to be penetrated” (22), Lucy does not welcome this male intrusion into her consecrated female space. The secluded garden path is indeed penetrated by Dr. John, but it is desecrated by his presence as well. In protest, Lucy proceeds to rid her garden of his mark by erasing his footsteps and reviving the trodden plants: “It was sacrilege – the intrusion of a man into that spot, at that hour” (180). Thus, it proves problematic to find the garden as heterosexually significant when men are overwhelmingly shunned from its recesses.

Appropriately enough, the vaudeville scene detailed in “The Fete” takes place in the more public areas of the garden and commences with a description of young girls, tripping past Lucy in “a diaphanous and snowy mass” of femininity. Lucy’s refusal to wear such a costume, which consists of “[a] clear white muslin dress, a blue sash (the Virgin’s colours)” (199), can be seen not only to represent her desire to remain outside the male heterosexual trade of women but also to distinguish herself from the group of young girls as an onlooker rather than a participant. Thus, Lucy dons a gray “gown of shadow” with the intention of disappearing seamlessly into the crowd (200). This plan is foiled, however, when M. Paul forces Lucy to take a male role in the play or, more figuratively, forces Lucy to become a gendered participant in the action. Interestingly enough, she receives the role of Ginevra’s wooer – a pursuer of the beloved, not an object of desire clad in virginal white. Although she agrees to play the part, Lucy refuses to dress entirely as a man, a dilemma that M. Paul confronts in the following passage: “How, accept a man’s part, and go on the stage dressed as a woman . . . something you must have to announce you as of the nobler sex” (208). In “Representing the ‘Latent Vashti’: Theatricality in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*,” Lisa Surridge notes that, although

liberating, female cross-dressing “was not free from sexual exploitation or gender stereotyping” (842); thus, Lucy’s rejection of masculine attire can be seen as “her refusal to perform as sex object” (842). While this certainly coincides with Lucy’s desire to maintain her position outside the heterosexual matrix, it also seems as though Lucy is hesitant to fully accept any role just handed to her. Instead, Lucy plays on the phrase “nobler sex” (208), as if her version of masculinity will be inherently nobler because performed by a woman. Linda C. Hunt, in “Sustenance and Balm: The Question of Female Friendship in *Shirley* and *Villette*,” sees this compromise as emblematic of Lucy’s struggle to integrate opposing gender roles. Although Lucy, as a workingwoman, is “compelled by life to play a role considered masculine by society,” she refuses, along with the manly garb, “to give up what she considers essential to her womanhood” (Hunt 64). Hunt views this dedication to femininity as a sign that Lucy has acknowledged “her need for emotional and sexual fulfillment” (65), a need that she attempts to fulfill in a heterosexual relationship with M. Paul. By maintaining a semblance of her female identity, however, Lucy’s performance allows for the possibility that a woman can actively pursue another woman in much the same way as a man.

Once given license to perform, Lucy takes advantage of the freedom the role affords her. She relishes the experience, seriously wooing Ginevra, becoming rival to Dr. John, and playing the role as vividly as possible so as to challenge the fop of Ginevra’s affections. This freedom is not merely the liberating result of costume change, however; it is as if the play provides Lucy with an appropriate subject onto whom she can project her unsanctioned desire: “I acted as if wishful and resolute to win and conquer. Ginevra seconded me; between us we half-changed the nature of the role, gilding it from top to

toe” (210). Until this point, Lucy must be content to observe Ginevra from afar as one of her many admirers, but in the play, Lucy “rivalled and out-rivalled” the competition for Ginevra’s affection (210). Together, Lucy notes, the women “half-changed the nature of the role,” a testament to the feeling that they inspire in one another. Although in analyses of the scene, scholars typically acknowledge the passion with which Lucy infuses the performance as well as the desire that Lucy directs towards Ginevra, they seldom acknowledge that passion or desire as being sexual in nature. For instance, Hunt will admit that Lucy “fiercely courts Ginevra,” but it is “the latent attraction she feels for Ginevra’s ruthlessness” that fuels her ardor (62). In other words, Lucy admires Ginevra’s self-confidence and lack of morality but does not desire her physically or sexually. Similarly, Surridge asserts the play as a dramatization of “latent desires and hostilities among Ginevra, Lucy, Dr. John, and de Hamal” (840) but perceives the latent desires dramatized in the scene as all heterosexual in nature. In contrast, I view Lucy’s preparation for the role, the performance itself, and her return to the position of onlooker as a series of metaphorical closetings, outings, and re-closetings that occur as a reaction to the realization, expression, and subsequent repression of same-sex desire.

Before the play begins, M. Paul relegates Lucy to the attic to rehearse, a closet space that, as the afternoon wears on, Lucy grows to resent. As she continues to practice her part, Lucy’s hunger is aroused and her separation from the festivities becomes unbearable. M. Paul leads her out of the closet and literally feeds that hunger with not only food but also the opportunity to act out her desires on stage. Lucy only remembers one significant piece of advice given by M. Paul before the play begins: “he recommended each to penetrate herself with a sense of her personal significance” (209).

Lucy teasingly remarks that many of the girls are too self-important already, but this statement is particularly applicable to Lucy, who shuns the spot light and prefers invisibility. In effect, the play endows her with a sense of confidence previously lacking, but perhaps more compellingly, Lucy experiences a visceral thrill in the act of performance that is suggestive of female auto-erotica. At first, Lucy says, “I accepted a part to please another: ere long, warming, becoming interested, taking courage, I acted to please myself” (211). Lucy both masters the role as Ginevra’s wooer and harnesses the desire that stirs as a result. However, Lucy soon realizes, “to cherish and exercise this new-found faculty might gift me with a world of delight, but it would not do for a mere looker-on at life: the strength and longing must be put by” (211). In this passage, Lucy at once laments the short life of her theatrical career and acknowledges the necessity of shelving or repressing a longing that cannot be brought to fruition off stage. As Surridge suggests, “Brontë’s cross-dressed and triumphant heroine discovers a ‘keen relish’ for the liberating and subversive experience . . . almost immediately, however, she resumes her quiet spectator role” (842). Once that desire awakens, Lucy’s fear of disclosure takes precedence and she must repress that which she cannot control.

The illness and confusion of “The Long Vacation” following “The Fete” exemplify the danger that unleashed desire poses to Lucy’s mental and physical well-being. Weinstone describes Lucy’s illness as a form of “self-punishment . . . the storm of inner turmoil caused by Lucy’s struggle to contain, and shame at having displayed, her queer version of desire” (369). Although I agree that Lucy’s illness can be considered an “[act] of self-erasure” after a demonstrative “[act] of creative self-constitution” (Weinstone 369), in some respects Lucy not only punishes herself but also upbraids those

in close proximity to her, those who best lend themselves as targets for displaced angst. For instance, the “cretin” left in Lucy’s care over the holidays, may symbolize a new sense of empowerment, a disavowal of self-abnegation in her reluctance ever again to care for an invalid, as she once cared for Miss Marchmont. However, the cretin, as the name suggests, stands for more than just an unpleasant hindrance to Lucy. She embodies “the unspeakable, the inconsequential, the poor, the criminal, the unwanted, the rejected” (Hawthorne 32), all the societal labels used to define sexual difference. Lucy meets the desire aroused in her theatrical wooing of Ginevra with “an inhospitable bar to admission I dared not give such guests lodging. So mortally did I fear the sin and weakness of presumption” (228). Once again, Lucy struggles with the recognition that her desire cannot be realized tangibly; thus, she refocuses her sense of self-loathing inward and the fear of rejection outward. Like *Zélie St Pierre*, the cretin comes to represent a warped manifestation of all the negative connotations that Lucy internalizes and society attributes to same-sex desire. Left behind, unwanted and rejected, the cretin embodies Lucy’s abandonment by the same people with whom she refuses to engage on an intimate level. In order to protect herself from the disappointments and pain of unrequited desire, Lucy rejects others before she can be rejected, criticizes others’ flaws before she can be criticized.

This hypercritical disposition may contribute to Lucy’s frequent vision of herself as superior to the models of girlhood and womanhood that she observes around her. For instance, at the end of Chapter 3, Lucy wonders how Paulina Home will ever “get through this world, or battle with this life” (93), while as we have seen, Lucy judges Ginevra as too fragile to endure hardship. Kathryn Bond Stockton views Lucy and

Ginevra as more closely related than Lucy may care to admit (140). On board the Vivid, Ginevra first appears donning conservative attire, “a costume plain to Quakerism” (113) that can be likened to Lucy’s regular appearance. At one point, Lucy is even mistaken for Ginevra by the foppish de Hamel. Stockton further compares the two women’s family status and social standing: “Ginevra, we learn, was the daughter of a man whose family connections were unquestionably good (Lucy’s were too) but who had little money (Lucy’s own bind)” (140). Although the women face many of the same challenges at the material level, Stockton notes a somewhat hypocritical “[disdain] for Ginevra’s resourcefulness” (140) on Lucy’s part. At the end of Chapter 6, Lucy claims that she “[dares] not for one moment dwell on a comparison of position;” yet, it’s clear that Lucy’s contempt for Ginevra’s shallowness originates in a sense of jealousy. Lucy is judged physically as inconsequential, although beneath her homely exterior, she possesses deep sensitivity, intelligence, and a class status that, albeit fallen, surpasses that of many of her peers. However, Ginevra possesses beauty, charm, and style as well as social connections that belie her similar class status; thus, she is judged by male suitors as more worthy of attention than Lucy. Herein Lucy’s hypocrisy is revealed because these same traits draw her to Ginevra, making the latter all the more worthy of interest and surveillance. Lucy is at once attracted to Ginevra’s beauty, charm, and carefree attitude and equally irritated by her incapacity to tolerate loneliness or physical suffering, a trait Lucy highly values. Although it is a broad assumption on Lucy’s part that Ginevra has never suffered, Lucy understands Ginevra’s desire for an advantageous marriage. Ginevra’s union with de Hamel is driven by material concerns and a real need for financial security. As a testament to her true feelings, Lucy’s bitterness and criticism are

derived in part from the fact that Ginevra will never be content to reside in the shadows with Lucy. Thus, Lucy remains highly critical of Ginevra's inability or lack of courage to live outside traditional gender relationships. As with Zélie St Pierre, Lucy positions herself as the rejecter and the not rejected in her relationship with Ginevra. Thus Lucy always maintains her dignity as well as a sense of superiority.

At the end of the novel, it appears as though Lucy, Ginevra, and Paulina have all happily united with their male love interests, a turn of events which may suggest that *Villette* ultimately affirms traditional gender roles and relationships. However, I find Lucy's romantic attachment to M. Paul, in particular, to be, if not entirely unconvincing, tenuous at best. I share Auerbach's criticism that the romance "springs into prominence only in the third volume of the novel, and only in the last chapter does Paul move from being Lucy's colleague to being her need" (108). Although the novel consistently tracks Lucy's interactions with M. Paul, the postponement of their romantic relationship suggests a sense of hesitation on Lucy's part that I attribute to her conflicting same-sex desire. Furthermore, the relationship is marked by absence and can be summed up in the following remark: "I thought I loved him when he went away; I love him now in another degree; he is more my own" (Bronte 595). This passage is telling because Lucy and M. Paul spend the first, and only, three years of their relationship apart, and as Lucy admits, "they were the three happiest years of my life" (593). To the best of the reader's knowledge, the relationship works not in spite of their separation but because of it. In M. Paul's absence, Lucy enjoys the independence of a single woman as well as the validating effects of a heterosexual relationship, even if it is in name only. Thus the textual lesbian can be seen to be at work not only in the expression of lesbian desire

exhibited by Lucy throughout *Villette* but also in the challenge to heterosexual conventions represented by Lucy's distant and sexually ambiguous relationship with M. Paul.

In the next chapter, I will explore the ways in which the textual lesbian continues to challenge heteronormativity in Daphne Du Maurier's gothic romance, *Rebecca*. As in *Villette*, the identification of queer subtext is crucial to my discussion, yet I shift the focus away from the substantiation of lesbian desire required to construct Lucy Snowe as a lesbian subject to the performative aspects of naturalized identity categories, such as gender and sexuality, displayed by *Rebecca*'s nameless narrator.

Chapter 2

The Performance of Gender and Sexuality in

Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*

Gender and sexuality figure prominently in Daphne Du Maurier's novel of romance and intrigue, *Rebecca*. As the new mistress of Manderley, the narrator must meet the high expectations of her husband's family and friends, as well as the house staff, if she wishes to live up to the prestige of the former Mrs. Rebecca de Winter. However, to her distress and embarrassment, the narrator finds herself ill prepared for the demands of her newly acquired position as high-society wife and clearly lacks the accomplished sophistication with which Rebecca performed this role. In "'Returning to Manderley' – Romance Fiction, Female Sexuality and Class," Alison Light attributes this ineptitude to the class disparity that exists between the narrator and her new husband, Maxim de Winter. By comparing the "confident social and sexual place" of the aristocratic Rebecca to that of the insecure, up-start narrator (10), Light explores the subjectivity of the narrator as it evolves in resistance to the model of gender and sexuality provided by Rebecca. In this analysis, the construction of femininity is a process of "wishful projection and identification, displacement and repulsion" (Light 13). Although Light finds subversive potential in the portrayal of alternative modes of female sexuality and briefly acknowledges heterosexuality as a socio-political construct, she credits Rebecca alone as "the named subject of the novel, she who dictates its movements, pushes epilogue to prologue, and structures the impossibility of its ending" (18). In contrast, I want to shift the focus away from Rebecca, at least in the first part of the analysis, in order to undertake a deeper exploration of the narrator herself and examine how her

character presents a literary model of the processes of identity formation and the construction of a gendered subject. To track this development, I employ Judith Butler's theory of performative gender, which proves useful as a way to explain the narrator's growth from inexperienced tomboy to lady of the manor over the course of the novel. According to this theory, a gendered identity is not essential to the subject; rather, gender is performed. It is my assertion that *Rebecca* subverts rather than reinforces naturalized, hegemonic definitions of gender and sexuality in the portrayal of female characters that perform a parodic repetition of gender that disrupts those categories.

In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that gender is constructed, reinforced, and internalized through a series of acts and gestures that inscribe a gendered identity "on the surface of the body" (136). According to Butler, this "gendered body" is performative because the internal reality, the "organizing gender core," is an illusion, a fabrication produced by the repetition of these acts and gestures (136). Drawing from Simone de Beauvoir's groundbreaking feminist text, *The Second Sex*, in which Beauvoir suggests, "one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one," Butler asserts that the "repeated stylization" of gender on the surface of the body "[congeals] over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (33). Gender is shown "to be a performatively enacted signification . . . one that, released from its naturalized interiority and surface, can occasion the parodic proliferation and subversive play of gendered meanings" (Butler 33). The parodic repetition of gender, defined as the failure to perform gender convincingly or to do so in such a way as to emphasize "the disjunction between the body of the performer and the gender that is being performed" (Salih 65), reveals that all gender is, in fact, "imitative" (Butler 137). If gender and sexuality are social

constructs, and if no original, core identity exists then one can subvert those categories by performing gender “in ways which will draw attention to the constructedness of heterosexual identities that may have vested interest in presenting themselves as ‘essential’ and ‘natural’” (Salih 65). Thus the failure of these naturalized identities may provide opportunity for the construction of new, subversive identities and perhaps transgressive expressions of sexuality. The question remains – does Du Maurier accomplish this level of subversion in *Rebecca*?

In her “rereading” of *Rebecca* through the lens of queer theory, Janet Harbord argues as much. Yet, although Harbord asserts that Du Maurier’s female characters participate in “a performative sliding across the categories” of gender and sexuality (99), she goes no further in her application of performative gender theory than Butler’s criticism of psychoanalysis and its role in creating and maintaining the heterosexual matrix. I make the case that the female subjects of the novel reveal the imitative construction of gender and sexuality through a parodic repetition of acts. The subversive potential of *Rebecca* thus reveals itself in two significant ways. First, the parody produced by the narrator’s initial failure to perform properly her social and domestic duties as wife disrupts the illusion that domesticity is the natural state of femininity and that it is not class determined, as shown in Light’s class-based account. Secondly, the sexual deviance that actively belies Rebecca’s public performance of the perfect wife and hostess corrupts a deeply held gender ideology that “good” women, those that exemplify ideal femininity, are modest, chaste, and heterosexual. Herein lies the dilemma so aptly identified in Light’s essay: in order to become a mature woman, the narrator must identify to some extent with the model of femininity provided by Rebecca, but, at the

same time, “the second Mrs. de Winter must take pains to see that she does not end up murdered too” (16-7). Over the course of the novel, the narrator attempts to establish herself as the new mistress of Manderley by repetitively performing the very roles that Rebecca once so effortlessly perfected. She accomplishes this feat through the internalization of Rebecca’s memory, the handling of Rebecca’s possessions, and the inhabiting of spaces previously occupied by Rebecca. I do not suggest that the narrator intentionally pursues these avenues as a means of constructing a gendered identity. Rather, the narrator expresses an understandable curiosity regarding her predecessor as well as the desire to fulfill her duties as wife, for which Rebecca provides a successful model. However, the fact that Rebecca’s performance was itself parodic, indeed nothing more than an act, makes possible the idea that the narrator (and the reader too) may succeed in deviating from hegemonic gender binaries regulated and enforced by a system of compulsory heterosexuality.

Before further embarking on a “Butlerian” reading of the text, it is important to draw the distinction between performance and the performative. Paul McIlvenny, in his discussion of the performativity of sexuality and gender in talk, effectively explains this difference: “it is important not to . . . suppose that the force of a performative (what it does) derives from the subject or the intention of the subject who utters it, nor to reduce performativity to a theatrical performance behind which lies a ‘real’ essence or self who chooses to act” (118). In other words, subjects, in this case the characters of *Rebecca*, do not pre-exist the performance; “there is no doer behind the deed” (Salih 45). The narrator’s namelessness suggests this very absence of identity. Similarly, even though the moniker Rebecca is over-determined, it never proves to be more than a signifier. For the

narrator, Rebecca's name is first a symbol of unattainable femininity and later a representation of the dangers of deviant female sexuality, but as Harbord suggests, Rebecca ultimately exists as a fictive creation, never corporeal, "always in the process of construction for the reader, recalled 'through the eyes' of a number of characters" (100), most crucially those of the narrator. In comparison, the narrator's identity is undone by an absence of a gender-specific signifier. The only reference to a name comes in the form of a compliment bestowed upon the narrator by Maxim – "You have a very lovely and unusual name" – to which she answers, "My father was a lovely and unusual person" (24). We are not told whether they are referring to the narrator's given name or surname in this exchange, but it does seem odd for her given name to be associated with a male family member rather than a female descendant. Perhaps this passage merely indicates the naming of a child by a father, a lovely and unusual name chosen by a lovely and unusual man. However, the ambiguity allows room for speculation as to the narrator's own perception of her gendered identity.

Throughout her discussion of the text, Light refers to the narrator as "the girl," yet this gendered description proves to be paradoxical. The narrator scarcely ever refers to herself as a girl in the present tense, and her admission of girlhood carries only the most negative of connotations: "This including me in the conversation found me at my worst, the raw ex-schoolgirl, red-elbowed and lanky haired" (16). The narrator establishes girlhood as an ex-identity not to be remembered fondly but with contempt. Rather, the narrator more often identifies herself as a young boy, an androgynous, pre-sexual figure who expresses a sort of infatuated puppy love and admiration for Maxim. As the relationship progresses, the narrator wishes to become a woman in order to advance the

schoolboy crush into a sexually mature romance. After an outing with Maxim early in their relationship, the narrator admits, “I wished he were less remote; and I anything but the creature that I was in my shabby coat and skirt, my broad-brimmed schoolgirl hat” (33). The narrator yearns for a more sophisticated persona with which to attract Maxim’s interest, yet, hidden within her plain schoolgirl garb, the narrator feels overshadowed and insignificant beside the mere signature of the absent wife: “the name Rebecca stood out black and strong, the tall and sloping R dwarfing the other letters” (33). Unlike traditional romance narratives, the movement from girlhood to womanhood, from sexual naiveté to sentience, does not appear to occur naturally once the heroine marries the hero. *Rebecca* starts where most narratives leave off – the marriage of the central female character. Thus, we must suffer through the difficult transition from adolescent insecurity to a more confident adult identity along with the narrator.

If the progression of the narrator involves the transition from inexperienced girl to that of sexually mature, self-possessed woman, as Light suggests, then the label of girl remains relevant only as long as adult womanhood has yet to be achieved. What interests me is the performative aspect of the narrator’s development into a gendered subject, in this case, a married woman. When subjectivity is viewed as a performative process, the repetition of acts constitutes identity; therefore, the girl must begin to perform acts attributed to adult womanhood in order to forge a female gendered identity. “Since the gendered body is inseparable from the acts that constitute it” (Salih 65), the narrator begins to be identified as mistress of Manderley only when she performs the acts that signify her as such. For instance, upon her arrival at Manderley, the narrator shies away from assuming an authoritative stance and hesitates “to interfere with the running of the

house” (75). However, the parody of this performance lies, not in the narrator’s youth and inexperience, but rather, in her failure to make the transition from girl to woman appear easy and natural. Thus, the narrator’s inefficiency in the performance of domestic duties emphasizes the social construction of gender and sexuality.

It can be argued that prior to her relationship with Maxim, the narrator does not participate in acts that constitute the gendered identity of woman either. Her sex alone recommends her as an adequate companion for her employer, Mrs. Van Hopper. Otherwise, the narrator performs the self-proclaimed role of “whipping boy” (12), or glorified servant. However, in order to carry out her role as mistress of Manderley, the narrator must leave her tomboyish inadequacies behind and learn to perform the role of woman. As the narrator first comes to know and find herself attracted to Maxim, she characterizes her crush as that of “a little scrubby schoolboy with a passion for a sixth-form prefect” (35). From the wearing of Maxim’s jacket to the biting of her fingernails, the narrator reveals not only her youth but also performs the role of an awkward adolescent male. The narrator even makes use of performative language when she describes herself as “playing the schoolboy again” (36). It seems unlikely that the much older, more sophisticated gentleman would find the femininely deficient narrator very attractive at all, a possibility of which the narrator appears keenly aware. Accordingly, the narrator expresses the desire to be “a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls” (37), as if the semblance of a sophisticated, sexually provocative woman will make her so. Butler refers to this phenomenon as “the appearance of substance . . . a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the

mode of belief” (141). The desire to look like a refined woman in silk and pearls indicates the narrator’s belief in the transformative potential of these vestments. To don the guise is to become the guise.

The narrator’s first impulse is to acquire all of the trappings of femininity. Janet Harbord suggests that, in *Rebecca*, an emphasis is placed on costume and appearance as a way to establish “a binary between artifice and authenticity” (101). If authentic femininity can only be achieved by repetitive performance, as Butler suggests, then the narrator need only play the part of sophisticated woman over and over until the role “congeals” into a substantive identity. Herein lies the artifice. In her desire to be “a woman of about thirty-six dressed in black satin with a string of pearls,” the narrator invokes a model of female gender reminiscent of Rebecca, which explains Maxim’s rejection of the narrator’s fantasy. Maxim reacts harshly to the very suggestion: “‘You would not be in this car with me if you were’ ‘I ask you,’ he said gravely, ‘because you are not dressed in black satin, with a string of pearls, nor are you thirty-six’” (37). In his rejection, Maxim expresses his disillusionment with this “mode of belief.” He has lost faith in the authenticity of the constructed identity that the narrator and perhaps the reader alike expect him to find alluring. As we later learn and perhaps suspect all along, the ideal of Rebecca as perfect wife has been a carefully crafted fantasy. Through her private rejection of marriage tenets and her participation in extramarital sexual relations with, some assume, both men and women, Rebecca openly mocks the belief in a primary or stable gender identity that is presented by her very public performance of a proper woman. Light suggests that this deviance undermines “the whole fabric of the social order” (15). Consequently, the maintenance of “male authority and of masculinity itself”

warrants and, in fact, demands the execution of aberrant female sexuality (Light 15). Rebecca's murder can be justified in its attempts to "rescue and re-establish norms" of acceptable bourgeois femininity and female sexuality, as Light proposes (11), or this extreme act of violence can be seen not only to demonstrate what Butler identifies as the "clearly punitive consequences" of failing to perform gender correctly (139-40) but also to attest to the importance of maintaining the gender charade.

I'm not suggesting that Maxim acts in full knowledge of these phenomena. Rather, I argue that he reacts in defense of his own manhood, which comes simultaneously under attack as Rebecca rejects the sanctity of their marriage agreement and the laws of inheritance. In their final confrontation, Rebecca threatens, "We could make you look very foolish, Danny and I" (279), but, in reality, she has already made him the cuckold by failing to keep up *her* "part of [their] dirty, damnable bargain" (278). Rebecca appears capable of supporting two identities – the staged identity of perfect wife and the sexually liberated identity that lurks behind the veil. Rebecca's acknowledgement of the ruse, her joyful realization that the couple has "acted the parts of a loving husband and wife rather too well" (279), illustrates the marked distinction between "performance (which presupposes the existence of the subject) and performativity (which does not)" (Salih 45). The fact that Rebecca approaches marriage as a performance indicates that the role of wife does not figure constructively in her gender as an individual subject. Despite his unhappiness, Maxim seems unable to separate the role of husband from his sexed, gendered identity, which suggests that, for Maxim, to be a husband is performative. The narrator reads this loss almost immediately: "He had the face of one who walks in his sleep, and for a wild moment the idea came to me that perhaps he was not normal, not

altogether sane” (29). The dissolution of his marriage, through the termination of his wife, causes Maxim to experience an identity crisis that results not from an aftereffect of guilt and remorse, but from the disruption of the naturalized categories of gender and sexuality upon which his identity has been based. He pursues the narrator precisely because of her difference from Rebecca and because her boyish lack of sexuality poses little threat to his fragile identity. However, in order for the narrator to accept fully the role that Maxim offers her in his marriage proposal, an acceptance that will reinstate his former identity as well, the narrator must shed her androgyny and sexual innocuousness.

Although the narrator expresses the desire to present a more evocative appearance of womanliness in the early chapters of the novel, the identity, or more precisely the female gendered identity, of the narrator only begins to become established upon her arrival at Manderley. The narrator comes to understand what the world of Manderley expects in and of its mistress through the lasting imprint of the first Mrs. de Winter. The construction of this identity is achieved through both the imitation and the repetition of gender acts that are shaped by a number of influences, including: an internalization of communal memory, the manipulation of female-identified objects, and the negotiation of female spaces, all of which have been associated with or once belonged to Rebecca. Together these effects appear to create a formidable chimera of womanliness that terrifies and intimidates the narrator. Immediately, the narrator is subject to constant comparison to Rebecca by both Maxim’s family and acquaintances, yet she can’t help but feel inadequate: “I realise, every day, that things I lack, confidence, grace, beauty, intelligence, wit – oh, all the qualities that mean most in a woman – she possessed” (131). However, the narrator must come to terms with this image in order to take possession of

her new life, a task that requires the narrator to act out Rebecca's former position as mistress. In the morning-room, a place characterized as "a woman's room" (82), the narrator sits at Rebecca's desk, holds her pens, uses her stationary, imagines the many correspondences Rebecca must have kept in order to fulfill her role as hostess successfully. The narrator is surprised to find "that this room, so lovely and so rich in color, should be, at the same time, so business-like and purposeful" (83). This is a room in which the repetition of feminine duties, the planning of menus, the ordering of dresses, the organizing of social events, take place and effectively cement the identity of hostess. The narrator undergoes a similar act of inscription in her exploration of Rebecca's bedroom. Upon entering the room, the narrator observes, "the room had more of an appearance of a setting on the stage. The scene between performances" (165). This observation is emblematic not only of the marriage ruse but also the privacy and intimacy of the room. As in the morning-room, the narrator attempts to inhabit Rebecca's space and take possession of Rebecca's things. She sits at the dressing-table, touches the brushes, strokes the dressing gown, the nightdress, and the monogrammed quilt, picks up the slippers, and opens the wardrobe (166-7). This is a room in which the repetition of feminine duties, the donning of appearances, the carrying out of the beauty ritual, the consummation of the marriage bed, take place and effectively cement the role of wife. That the narrator fails to perform these roles successfully can be blamed in part on the housekeeper, Mrs. Danvers.

According to Holly Blackford, in her examination of servant/ mistress relationships in female Gothic literature, Mrs. Danvers still serves Rebecca, even after death, and thus resists the narrator's attempts to replace Rebecca as *her* mistress and *her*

object of desire (Blackford 242). The narrator's feeling that "the most beautiful room in the house" still "belonged to somebody else" (166) is not a figment of her imagination, yet Rebecca is no longer the owner. Instead, Mrs. Danvers prohibits the narrator from taking charge of the West Wing. It is Mrs. Danvers who ultimately brings about the narrator's greatest performative failure. Along with most everyone else, the narrator perceives Rebecca's performance of gender to be natural, inborn, and effortless, a polish the narrator finds it impossible to replicate. The narrator observes, "I dare say I've been very stupid. I'm not good at meeting people, I've never had to do it, and all the time I keep remembering how – how it must have been at Manderley before, when there was someone here who was born and bred to do it, did it all naturally and without effort" (131). Indeed the narrator fails to perform convincingly a "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler 141) in her role as mistress and hostess, a failure best demonstrated in the narrator's choice of costume for the masquerade ball at Manderley. The narrator chooses "a fancy dress" as a declaration of femininity intended to surprise, delight, and perhaps seduce Maxim. However, the party's shocked, horrified reception of her costume demonstrates the public's role in gauging and censuring inappropriate performances of gender. Blackford argues, "All the characters in the book are engaged in an elaborate performance to protect themselves from the truth of themselves If all are performing roles, then the horror of the text is the fact that people may be more social role than interior subjects" (246). Indeed a failure such as this reveals discontinuities in the foundations of gender identity, "a parodic repetition that exposes the phantasmic effect of abiding identity as a politically tenuous construction" (141). However, I disagree that this realization constitutes "the horror of the text." Although embarrassing for the narrator,

this failure uncovers the potential for a transformative definition of gender, a subversion that progressively unfolds in the novel.

Perhaps it is this painful failure of repetition that induces the narrator to claim to be Rebecca's enemy; however, I do not believe her to be so. Rebecca may have posed a threat to the tenets of marriage and thus may remain the enemy of Maxim, but Rebecca serves as a successful representation of female gender for the narrator. As the second Mrs. de Winter, the narrator does not usurp Rebecca's role as wife; rather she emulates Rebecca's performance of female gender. In her study of *Daphne Du Maurier*, Nina Auerbach makes the compelling argument that the narrator looks to Maxim "for some sign of how she is supposed to behave" (108). However, Rebecca seems to serve as a greater mentor for the narrator than Maxim. By the end of the novel, the narrator accepts her position as mistress of Manderley in action as well as in title: "It was going to be very different in the future. I was not going to be nervous and shy of the servants anymore I should learn bit by bit to control the house" (376). In part, the narrator learns to fill this role according to the model left by Rebecca, but perhaps more importantly, like Rebecca before her, the narrator shows an understanding of the role she must perform in order to give the public appearance of a happily married wife. In her debut as hostess, the narrator is dismayed to observe that she and her husband act as "two performers in a play, but we were divided, we were not acting with one another. We had to endure it alone, we had to put up this show, this miserable, sham performance for the sake of all these people I did not know and did not want to see again" (225). Like Rebecca, the narrator draws a distinction between the performance of gender and the performative act of gender. Instead of reinforcing the notion of natural or original gender, the narrator remains aware

of the act of gender inscription, as if the internalization of a gendered identity was her conscious decision. Thus, by emphasizing the constructedness of heterosexual identities, Du Maurier's novel achieves a much greater feat of dissidence than literary critics may have given her credit for in the past.

The question remains: does the failure of heterosexual identities in the novel allow for the reconstruction of more subversive identities or the possibility of transgressive expressions of desire? Tamsin Wilton suggests that "the dead Rebecca's dreadful secret is precisely that she was a lesbian . . . a secret so dreadful that, both in the eyes of the reader and in the eyes of his second wife, it justifies Maxim de Winter murdering her" (129). Indeed, as previously discussed, Rebecca is punished for aberrant female sexuality, for, whether heterosexual or homosexual, she deviates from the tenets of her marriage contract, a fact that renders her "vicious, damnable, rotten through and through" in the eyes of her husband (271). However, the indiscretions of the living Rebecca do not interest me so much as the narrator's obsession with the deceased first wife. Rather than cementing a primary marital relationship with her new husband, the narrator spends most of the novel pursuing a relationship with Rebecca. As Blackford observes, the figure of Rebecca "becomes the heroine's obsession as much as she is the housekeeper's obsession" (247). Just as Lucy Snowe fanatically observes the characters of Paulina, Miss Marchmont, and Ginevra, the narrator creates and recreates the image of Rebecca in her mind. Only at end of the novel, when the couple is banished from Manderley and the mystery of Rebecca has been solved, can the narrator focus on her heterosexual union with Maxim. Yet, as in *Villette*, this final affirmation of the marriage convention, which ironically comes at the beginning of the novel, appears dubious at

best. The second chapter of *Rebecca* finds the narrator and Maxim living abroad, far from Manderley, and, though they no longer harbor secrets from one another, their married life together is sequestered and dull. It is as if the narrator, like Lucy, has found a closet in which to hide from the past as well as from her desire for Rebecca.

Conclusion

The Textual Lesbian as Disruptive Presence in

Villette and *Rebecca*

In his examination of queer methodology, entitled *Queer Theories*, Donald E. Hall asks “the fundamental question of what texts or sorts of texts lend themselves to queer analysis” (115). I pose a similar question in the introduction – what can be considered a lesbian text? And more specifically, can either *Villette* or *Rebecca* be considered lesbian texts? According to Zimmerman’s definition of lesbian literature, neither novel fulfills enough of the criteria to be considered as such. Biographers present evidence that both Brontë and Du Maurier may have been intimately involved with women at some point in their adult lives.⁴ However, as intriguing as this idea may be, it remains unnecessary to the critical task at hand. As Hall suggests, “biographical linkages can constrain readings unnecessarily,” while centering on the experiences of the author as a clue to his or her intent serves to “impose a limit both on its import and impact” (126). Rather, the ability to find a queer subtext in a novel adequately defines its appropriateness for queer analysis. It is my contention that *Villette* and *Rebecca* contain a disruptive presence similar to the one Hall discovers in his queer reading of the “The Yellow Wall-Paper,”⁵ a presence that Tamsin Wilton describes as “the textual lesbian.”

⁴ For instance, Charlotte Brontë and Ellen Nussey shared a lifetime friendship and exchanged over 500 correspondences. Some are quite impassioned, particularly those that involve the separation of the two women (Lewis 25). Similarly, Daphne Du Maurier had several relationships, perhaps sexual in nature, with different women, including actress Gertrude Lawrence and friend Ellen Doubleday (Wilton 129).

⁵ According to Hall, despite its lack of explicit sexuality, “The Yellow Wallpaper” is a suitable candidate for queer analysis because “it is a text that one might say ‘queers’ the reader in the discomfort it causes us, and queerly refuses to assuage our discomfort even in its final words and images” (116). I use this excerpt from Hall to emphasize the importance of close reading in the search for queer subtext.

As mentioned in the introduction, the textual lesbian created by lesbian literary studies can be defined as a “disruptive and disobedient presence within/against the master narrative of patriarchy” (Wilton 133) and can be seen to subvert “heteropolarities” or categories of identity, such as man/woman, in much the same way that queer theory works to deconstruct sex, gender, and sexuality. Thus, despite the tensions that exist between lesbian literary studies and queer theory, they ultimately share a similar aim: to present “a recognition of and challenge to the heterosexist and homophobic nature of the established canon” as well as to introduce “a necessary eccentric perspective from which may be ‘read’ the hegemonic structures and relations of the heteropatriarchy as they impact on and inflect the production and consumption of literary texts” (Wilton 135). That lesbian and queer theories accomplish this goal in very different ways is made apparent by the definitional status that they award the subject.

The decision to apply lesbian theory to *Villette* and queer theory to *Rebecca* has been based on the construction of the subject in each novel. The definition of lesbian identity provided by lesbian theory seems to be the most provocative way to substantiate the same-sex desire that must be repressed by Lucy Snowe in *Villette*. Although Lucy has no legitimate outlet for her desire, she can nonetheless be viewed as a woman who finds other women erotically attractive. According to the principals of lesbian theory, the primary definition of a lesbian is a woman who loves and desires other women. Lucy can neither express nor manifest this desire; thus, she must repress it to the metaphorical realm of the closet. Eve Sedgwick may chart the progression of the closet from homosexual symbol to cultural signifier, but in my analysis of the closet metaphor in *Villette*, the closet is inextricably linked to the repression of same-sex desire. Despite the

changing definition of lesbian desire over time, this drive constitutes an important aspect of Lucy's identity and, hence, subjectivity. It is this same-sex desire that acts as the disruptive force or the textual lesbian in *Villette*, for it challenges traditional gender roles that define female fulfillment in heterosexual terms.

In contrast, the precarious portrayal of gendered identities in *Rebecca* simply calls out for a "Butlerian" reading. Rather than trying to prove the existence of a lesbian subject, as in *Villette*, the object of this analysis has been to prove the lack of concrete identity, heterosexual, lesbian, or otherwise. For instance, the narrator's often failed attempts to transform herself from schoolgirl to woman, from wallflower to wife, reveal the constructedness of her gendered identity, for she must imitate the stylized repetition of acts performed by Rebecca in order to properly execute her duties as mistress of Manderley. However, Rebecca's seemingly effortless and natural fulfillment of her wifely and domestic duties is nothing but a façade. Thus, *Rebecca*, in its entirety, may be seen to represent the disruptive power of the textual lesbian because the parody produced by these failures serves to destabilize the naturalized appearance of gender as a concrete identity, and because gender serves to reinforce heterosexuality, this institution becomes compromised. The possibility for transgressive sexual desire arises from this failure as well, as demonstrated by the narrator's obsession with Rebecca, a same-sex obsession similar to that portrayed by Lucy Snowe in *Villette*.

Although lesbian theory serves to prove the existence of a lesbian subject, while queer theory works to dismantle all identity categories, including those that exist outside mainstream sexual discourse, it is not the case that the two theories contradict each other; rather they each concentrate on different but related features of the protean flow of

human sexual reality, and, when used together, capture the dialectic between these different features.

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