Chapter 3

_Shirley_ or the condition of women in the English middle-class

3.0: INTRODUCTION

The first novel under investigation here is _Shirley_ by Charlotte Brontë. This novel was published under her pseudonym Currer Bell in 1849. It never became as famous as _Jane Eyre_ , and it is only quite recently that critics began to appreciate the novel more, either examining it as a ‘condition-of-England novel,’ or reading it from a feminist perspective.

With her sisters Emily and Anne and her brother Patrick Branwell, Charlotte Brontë spent her youth at Haworth, a lonely village in Yorkshire, where her father was vicar. The children were left to themselves very much and this isolation led to extensive reading. They started writing stories and poems at a very early age, and later Charlotte, Emily and Anne all published novels. What is particularly noteworthy about all of Charlotte Brontë’s work is the fierceness and passion with which she, as one of the first important women writers of English literature, demands the right of the woman to emotional and sexual independence.

This tendency can be traced in _Jane Eyre_, but it is also present in _Shirley_.

Within _Shirley_ this struggle is depicted through two main characters. The female protagonists of the novel are Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar. Overall, the opposite traits of “passionate feeling and excitement,” of “individual freedom and fulfilment,” on the one side, and those of “self-transcending or self-denying duty and moral responsibility,” on the other, are distributed over two separate characters in this novel.\(^1\) Shirley Keeldar embodies hope, love, feeling, and high spirits, devotion to personal satisfaction and freedom, and total rejection of social conventionality. Caroline Helstone, on the other hand, conscientiously adheres to the rules belonging to her social role; she is the typical ‘Angel in the House.’ She tries to suppress her feelings, and represents endurance, moral and social duty and a sense of responsibility. Shirley is brilliant and extrovert, whereas her mirror image Caroline is much more subdued and introvert. The term ‘mirror’ does not mean exactly the

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same; very often, in fact, it stresses the differences between both women. Shirley, however, is not a dependent member of the family, a housekeeper, or a housewife. She is a wealthy heiress who owns her own house, the ancestral mansion usually reserved for the hero. And she clearly enjoys her status as ‘lord’ of the manor as well as its ambiguous effect on her role in society. In general, she is the ‘rebel’ character in the story. However, it would really be going too far to call her a ‘monster,’ since her looks and her behavior are both far from ‘monstrous.’

The setting of Shirley is Yorkshire, and the period the latter part of the Napoleonic wars, the time of the Luddite riots (1811-1812), when the wool industry was suffering from the almost complete stop of exports. In spite of these circumstances, Robert Gérard Moore, half English, half Belgian by birth, a mill-owner of stubborn character, persists in introducing the latest labor-saving machinery. He seems unafraid of the opposition of the workers, which results in an attempt first to destroy his mill, and finally to take his life. To overcome his financial difficulties he proposes to Shirley Keeldar, an heiress of independent spirit, while under the mistaken impression that she is in love with him. He himself is not in love with her, but with his gentle and quiet cousin Caroline Helstone. Caroline is pinning away for love of him and through enforced idleness in the oppressive atmosphere of her uncle’s rectory. Robert is angrily rejected by Shirley, who is in love with his brother Louis, a tutor in her family, who is also of proud and independent spirit. The misunderstandings are gradually resolved, and the two couples united.

The style of this novel can be referred to as social realism. It is written in the third person and we are mostly told about the events by an omniscient narrator. A notable aspect of this novel is how it represents the standardized socialization of young women at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in accordance with the practices adhered to during this time.

The title of the book is a sign of the importance that Shirley is meant to assume in spite of the infrequency of her appearances in the plot. The title was in fact decided upon only days before the completion of the manuscript. In March 1849, the novel had been tentatively referred to as “Shirley,” but other titles were also considered. On August 21 Brontë wrote to her publisher W. S. Williams:

If I remember rightly my Cornhill critics object to ‘Hollows Mill,’ nor do I now find it appropriate. It might rather be called ‘Fieldhead’ – though, I think ‘Shirley’ would perhaps be the best title: ‘Shirley,’ I fancy, has turned out the most prominent and peculiar character in the work.

2 The style of Brontë’s earlier novel Jane Eyre was often referred to as Gothic realism. Shirley, on the other hand, is more regularly described as reflecting ‘social realism.’ The story is very much concerned with the plight of the workers and the ‘woman question.’ The problems of these ‘ordinary’ people are rendered with close attention to the physical setting and to the complexities of social life, hence the term ‘social realism.’ Judith and Andrew Hook even go so far as to call it a “condition of England novel”: “Introduction,” Shirley, 10.

Brontë’s observation is revealing, because in spite of the novel’s title, Caroline Helstone is more often the center of attention than Shirley is. Shirley does not come into the novel until it is one-third over but she is “prominent and peculiar.” With her appearance in the novel, Shirley seems to give support to Caroline, and Caroline hopes that in Shirley she has found a woman free from the constraints which threaten to destroy her own life. It is no coincidence that Shirley appears when Caroline has been completely immobilized through her own sensitivity and self-restraint. Her feeling of despondency seems to bring about the emergence of a free and uninhibited ‘double.’ That Shirley is indeed Caroline’s ‘mirror image’ becomes clear from a structural comparison of both girls throughout the novel.

In the description of the socialization of both Shirley and Caroline, the three aspects indicated in the previous chapter express how both women are set up as mirror images. Their education as part of the gender specific socialization is especially noteworthy. The role of the lady as class specific goal of the socialization offers another useable point of departure for comparison, namely the employment of role attributes, such as clothes. Noteworthy, too, is the overall behavior of both protagonists. A comparison of their behavior reveals that, the further on we get into the story, the more similarities we can observe. This is remarkable, because up to the middle of the book, their behavioral patterns seem to be complete opposites. The influence of contemporary patriarchal society seems to be such that no woman can escape it, and that even such opposite characters as Shirley and Caroline are brought into line with the prevailing norm and value system.

3.1: THE PARISH SCHOOL OR THE PRIVATE SCHOOLROOM

Brontë depicts the upbringing of both girls as mostly taking place in the home, and it is only the Sunday school and the Parish school of Briarfield that are actually mentioned as institutions. Yet, at the Sunday school Caroline is a teacher who instructs the village girls, and Shirley merely attends the annual feast for Whitsuntide. A glimpse of Shirley’s own socialization and education is given at the beginning of Volume III. It becomes clear that Shirley had a governess, Mrs. Pryor, and that she was educated by the tutor Louis Moore in the Sympson household when she was a little older. French and drawing are mentioned as subjects, but there is no indication of a rigorous study program, or a preparation for higher education. In itself the level of education Shirley received may have been quite high. Louis Moore is presented as a good tutor, and the surroundings of a private schoolroom may have been more stimulating than an actual schoolroom, thus encouraging genuine learning.

Both Shirley and Caroline’s schooling is portrayed against a background of opposing educational discourses thematized through the two schoolrooms. As Elizabeth Gargano observes in her article on education in Shirley:

The parish school is a nexus of boundaries, hierarchies, and divisions, the prop of church and state. The private schoolroom, in contrast, is staged as a privileged site of intellectual and emotional exploration, a sanctuary for both childhood’s anarchic impulses and adulthood’s hard-earned and private liberties of the spirit.4

Gargano sees in *Shirley* a rewriting of Rousseau’s *Julie, ou La nouvelle Héloïse (Julie, or the New Heloise)* (1760) and she points out the similarity between Rousseau’s story about an eroticized relation between tutor and pupil and the relationship between Louis Moore and Shirley. More important in the context that is investigated here is that she links many aspects of Shirley’s education to the more liberated ideas about education by both Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) and Johann Pestalozzi (1746-1827) (Gargano, 783). In this context, Caroline is linked to the village school and her mirror image Shirley considered symbolic for the private schoolroom. Caroline is educated to a large extent in a homely context, too, but she is most regularly associated with the village or parish school; the opposites represented by the parish school and the private schoolroom where Shirley receives her education depict exactly the contrast that can be observed in the behavior of both girls and in the discourse that is going on about education in the mid-nineteenth century.

Aspects of Gargano’s interpretation are illuminating, especially because traditional criticism has so far given a completely different interpretation to these different schoolrooms. Many critics view Moore’s schoolroom as an unqualified site of patriarchy and oppression. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, for example, believe that “Shirley’s final return to the rhetoric of the classroom only confirms and completes her fall” (Gilbert & Gubar, 393). Yet this interpretation impoverishes the varied meanings Moore’s private schoolroom may have, and it also fails to explain the dynamic that draws Shirley to the room and to Moore. Furthermore, halfway through the nineteenth century there is a debate going on about education. This debate considers education in itself as a comment on norms, values, and power relations. Seeing Louis’ schoolroom as a symbol of Victorian social authoritarianism limits our understanding of it. A close look at the private schoolroom reveals that it was often experienced as a nice and quiet study environment encouraging genuine learning. The parish schoolroom, on the other hand, is an exponent of the church and of under-privileged education.

A contemporary study and one of the authoritative voices within the debate on the educational context is Herbert Spencer’s book *Social Statics* (1850). In this study Spencer contrasts the “coercive” and authoritarian “physical-force system” of education with a “non-coercive treatment” that appeals to the higher feelings and fosters the culture of the sympathies. He attacks “coercion,” which he considers vicious, and prefers equity, which teaches a child “to be a law to himself” (Spencer 1892, 84-85). Spencer refines this distinction in the study *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1861) (discussed in

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5 In the novel *Julie, ou la Nouvelle Héloïse* (1760), Rousseau’s greatest popular success, a critical account of contemporary manners and ideas is interwoven with the story of the passionate love of the tutor St. Preux and his pupil Julie, their separation, Julie’s marriage to the Baron Wolmar and the dutiful, virtuous life shared by all three on the Baron’s country estate.

6 Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827) was a Swiss pedagogue, but he was also famous as philanthropist and social reformer. It was his goal “den Menschen zu stärken” (to make people stronger) and to teach them “sich selbst helfen zu können” (to be able to help themselves). He focused especially on primary education, usually starting in the home, even before children went to school. His teaching method was all-round, dealing with intellectual aspects, moral and religious aspects and handicraft or needlework in a harmonious way. He expounded his pedagogical ideas in *Wie Gertrud ihre Kinder lehrt* (1801; Breslau: Schriften hervorragender Pädagogen Heft 13, 1917).

Chapter 2 of this dissertation). In this book he argues for a pedagogy which is in accordance with the method of nature following the suggestions which the unfolding mind itself gives.\(^8\) Spencer believed that the “main obstacle to the right conduct of education lies rather in the parent than in the child” (Spencer 1892, 87). Widening this idea to broader social terms, the problem can be considered to lie in society, because it does not seem to respect the natural law of human development. In that perspective, the non-coercive schoolroom can even be seen as corrective to the prevalent social norms.

At the same time, however, education’s traditional aim is to accustom the child to those activities which will in future life be required of it in a world that is necessarily social (Spencer 1892, 86-87). And so, as non-coercive education strives to realize the natural inclinations, it conflicts with the limitations imposed by contemporary society. Even when the ideal schoolroom would like to remain separated from society, because it can thus allow the individual to develop according to his or her internal and natural laws, it is still influenced by the restraints and deformations which society imposes on the individual. In his theory of education, Spencer reveals ideas that are also part of the Victorian belief “that education is the great panacea for human troubles.”\(^9\)

Spencer’s argument is interesting because it supports elements of the Rousseauian tradition which, adapted by the writings of Johann Pestalozzi, had a great influence on the nineteenth-century English debate on education. In his novel *Émile*, Rousseau formulated the opposition as follows: “[f]orced to combat nature or the social institutions, one must choose between making a man or a citizen, for one cannot make both at the same time.”\(^10\) Yet, the choice generally made is a mixture of both, which according to Rousseau is unsatisfactory.

Spencer’s studies repeat the Rousseauian opposition. He confirms that, whereas the coercive schoolroom produces a debased version of the ‘citizen,’ a creature shaped for and controlled by social institutions, the non-coercive schoolroom attempts to educate a ‘free’ individual, an ideal human being, whose Utopian harmony with ‘natural’ moral laws may ultimately make him or her unfit for society. The introduction of more liberal educational programs allowed for Victorian optimism about the progress of education, as well as the belief that the prevalent abuses of the educational system could be mended. The contrasting of coercive and non-coercive pedagogies also encouraged the mid-century ideal of individualism. Thus the non-coercive schoolroom is marked out as the free territory where the deadening conformity of coercive education, representative of traditional social pressures, can be evaded or transformed.

These contrasting opinions, as explained by the theories of Rousseau and Spencer, can be traced in the personalities of the two main characters of *Shirley*. That the contrast is present

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\(^8\) Herbert Spencer, *Education: Intellectual, Moral, and Physical* (1861; London: Routledge, 1993) 65-66. Spencer advocated the more liberal side in the debate. The articles in this collection had previously been published in magazines in which he criticized standard methods of teaching Latin and Greek, which crushed the spirit of individual enquiry, and advocated the teaching of the sciences, including social sciences, because they were concerned with the problem of survival. Art, although it had no problem-solving power, he considered important because it yielded immediate good.


in Brontë’s novel is quite remarkable, since both protagonists are girls. Girls would, in general, receive a more coercive type of education. Caroline’s upbringing and resultant behavior is wholly in accordance with the traditional education she would receive in real life as a girl. She is educated to become the perfect wife, housewife, and mother. Shirley’s education, however, has liberal and intellectual aspects that can only be explained by the fact that she has such a high social status. She is an ‘esquire’ and is occasionally viewed as and treated like a man.

Caroline’s education partly takes place in a homely context, too, but, overall, her socialization is depicted both in relation to her humble background and the traditional contents. Being the niece of the Rev. Helstone, with a father who is dead and a mother who has disappeared, she is brought up in a modest way by her uncle. Mr. Helstone does not think an elaborate or liberating education necessary for Caroline (S, 76, 93, 98-99). He considers it enough if she gets some lessons from Hortense Moore, and helps at the Parish school. College or university is not considered necessary. Caroline is quite disappointed about this, and she states:

Look at the numerous families of girls in this neighbourhood … The brothers of these girls are every one in business or in professions; they have something to do: their sisters have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing, no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. This stagnant state of things makes them decline in health: they are never well; and their minds and views shrink to wondrous narrowness. (S, 391)

The uncle does not even consider it necessary to give Caroline a more stimulating or thorough education to encourage vertical social mobility in the form of an advantageous marriage, an argument that is the most generally accepted motivation for a girl’s education at the time.

Alongside her connection with the parish school, the homely upbringing Caroline receives is her instruction by Hortense Moore (S, 76). In this context, her subjects are limited to French, drawing, needlework, and other accomplishments. These subjects properly relate to both the gender specific role of the woman and the class specific role of the lady. Caroline is not exactly brought up in the tradition of “conspicuous consumption” or idleness that Thorstein Veblen is so contemptuous about, but she is not taught for a profession, or to earn money, either.

Shirley is not a so-called Bildungsroman. In fact, Shirley depicts Bildung in reverse, first introducing the adult heroines and later on allowing the reader glimpses of the schooling that helped to form them. In Shirley, Brontë aptly depicts the contemporary opposing ideas about education by linking the novel’s two female protagonists with these contrasting opinions. One opens new perspectives of individualistic freedom, whereas the other represents the mechanisms of authoritarian control. Brontë’s depiction of this dualism, however, also reveals that each approach incorporates elements of the other. Both types of education encourage young people to move from the sheltered domesticity of childhood into a wider realm of adult experience. Both serve as the breeding grounds of individual growth from private desires to public responsibilities (Spencer 1850, 86).
Two scenes in the novel illustrate the clash between such private wishes and public responsibilities. The first scene concerns the day of the feast at the Parish school. Caroline goes to fetch Shirley, because she is afraid that Shirley might otherwise be too late. She is right; when she reaches Fieldhead, Shirley is still lying on the couch, reading a book.

It was well she had come, or Shirley would have been too late. Instead of making ready with all speed, she lay stretched on a couch, absorbed in reading: Mrs. Pryor stood near, vainly urging her to rise and dress. Caroline wasted no words; she immediately took the book from her, and, with her own hands, commenced the business of disrobing and re-robing her. Shirley, indolent with the heat, and gay with her youth and pleasurable nature, wanted to talk, laugh, and linger; but Caroline, intent on being in time, persevered in dressing her as fast as fingers could fasten strings or insert pins. At length, as she united a final row of hooks and eyes, she found leisure to chide her, saying, she was very naughty to be so unpunctual; that she looked even now the picture of incorrigible carelessness: and so Shirley did – but a very lovely picture of that tiresome quality. (S, 295)

It is Caroline, with her traditional and coercive upbringing, who realizes that Shirley with her position and responsibility has the duty to appear on time. She coaxes Shirley into sense and functions as her corrective, thus stabilizing the accepted norms and roles.

The other scene takes place in the Fieldhead schoolroom. During the little gathering in that room, other guests appear; and Shirley has to leave the company, and attend to the family from De Walden Hall in the expected way, but she does not really want to. Caroline tells her to go, and so do Louis Moore and Mr. Hall. Yet, Shirley is not really convinced, and she asks those who want her to leave to raise their hands. The reflection in the mirror above the fireplace reveals a unanimous vote against her, and she gives in and goes (S 466-469). In this context, too, she is corrected by a ‘mirror image’; now it is an actual reflection in a mirror that advocates her compliance with a norm, but the effect is the same.

A liberating and freedom stimulating education may seem ideal, but it has aspects that do not coincide with Shirley’s social position. It is interesting to see that in addition to Caroline, her mirror image, it is both Louis Moore and Mr. Hall who point out to Shirley that she has to fulfil her duty. Louis Moore and Mr. Hall have more liberal and humanistic views and they understand and respect women, yet it is exactly their more nuanced ideas that make them realize how important it is to fulfil the duties connected with one’s social position, if one wants to be accepted by the immediate social context. The private schoolroom thus becomes a transitional site, mediating between the two oppositions, depicting that each approach relates to both the civilized ‘Angel in the House’ and to more rebellious behavior, to both the private and the public sphere, and to the domestic as well as the worldly context. Brontë’s social and historical realism gives a very accurate portrayal of the educational possibilities for women at the time. Her interest in better opportunities for women stretches the depiction of possible chances for women in the 1810s to the limits, whilst her historical precision prevents it from being too extreme.
3.2: BIRD OF PARADISE VS SNOW-WHITE DOVE

Throughout *Shirley* the two main characters Shirley and Caroline are also contrasted and compared as far as their use of the role-attribute clothing and their overall appearance is concerned:

[Shirley] presented quite a contrast to Caroline: there was style in every fold of her dress and every line of her figure: the rich silk suited her better than a simpler costume; the deep-embroidered scarf became her; she wore it negligently, but gracefully; the wreath on her bonnet crowned her well; the attention to fashion, the tasteful appliance of ornament in each portion of her dress, were quite in place with her: all this suited her, like the frank light in her eyes, the raillying smile about her lips, like her shaftstraight carriage and lightsome step. Caroline took her hand when she was dressed, hurried her down-stairs, out of doors, and thus they sped through the fields, laughing as they went, and looking very much like a snow-white dove and gem-tinted bird-of-paradise joined in social flight. (S, 295)

This contrast is sustained by Brontë throughout the novel and the difference in appearances between both girls is at least as telling about their personalities and their social position as their more general behavior or the education they receive. Here follows a typical description of Caroline, the ‘Angel in the House’:

To her had not been denied the gift of beauty; … she was fair enough to please, even at the first view. Her shape suited her age; it was girlish, light, and pliant; every curve was neat, every limb proportionate: her face was expressive and gentle; her eyes were handsome … Her mouth was very pretty; she had a delicate skin, and a fine flow of brown hair, which she knew how to arrange with taste; curls became her, and she possessed them in picturesque profusion. Her style of dress announced taste in the wearer; very unobtrusive in fashion, far from costly in material, but suitable in colour to the fair complexion with which it contrasted, and in make to the slight form which it draped. Her present winter garb was of merino, the same soft shade of brown as her hair; the little collar round her neck lay over a pink ribbon, and was fastened with a pink knot: she wore no other decoration. (S, 75)

In both her appearance and use of fashion, Caroline depicts quiet modesty, gracefulness and simplicity. Mrs. Humphry would have been thrilled about Caroline’s appearance. In her book *Manners for Women*, she states in a chapter called the “Ethics of Dress:”

The object of a fashionable woman in dressing, is to make herself distinctive without becoming conspicuous – to excel by her union of graceful outline and fidelity to the fashion of the moment (no easy task), and, while offering no striking contrast to those around her, so to
individualise herself that she is one of the few who remain in the memory.¹¹

Mrs. Humphry is very much aware of the intricacies of dress and she stresses:

As things are, many fail in such trifles as fastening on a veil, adjusting the collar or the ribbons at neck and waist, or in achieving the necessary harmony between costume and coiffure. (Humphry, 64-65)

Caroline is depicted as having the right instinct for the correct wear of fashion. Shirley dresses more extravagantly, but this suits her personality. The use of clothing and jewelry by both women is more an indication of their identities, rather than proof of extravagant spending behavior. Shirley is quite rich, though not the richest person in the neighborhood and her position brings with it certain responsibilities as well as certain expectations. People would consider it odd, if she were to dress or behave more modestly, or live as a recluse. Here follows Robert Moore’s impression of her:

Shirley’s clear cheek was tinted yet with the colour which had risen into it a few minutes since: the dark lashes of her eyes looking down as she read, the dusky yet delicate line of her eyebrows, the almost sable gloss of her curls, made her heightened complexion look fine as the bloom of a red wild-flower, by contrast. There was natural grace in her attitude, and there was artistic effect in the ample and shining folds of her silk dress – an attire simply fashioned, but almost splendid from the shifting brightness of its dye, warp and woof being of tints deep and changing as the hue on a pheasant’s neck. A glancing bracelet on her arm produced the contrast of gold and ivory: there was something brilliant in the whole picture. (S, 249)

In contrast to the ‘brilliant’ dress of Shirley, Caroline, being the Rector’s niece and of a more humble background, was expected to dress less flamboyantly, and behave in a more modest and conventional way:

In Miss Helstone, neither he nor any one else could discover brilliancy. Sitting in the shade, without flowers or ornaments, her attire the modest muslin dress, colourless but for its narrow stripe of pale azure, her complexion unflushed, unexcited, the very brownness of her hair and eyes invisible by this faint light, she was, compared with the heiress, as a graceful pencil-sketch compared with a vivid painting. (S, 249-250)

The two girls are compared like this throughout the novel. The interwovenness of their appearances and their behavior with their social status is undeniable. Shirley’s outgoingness is confirmed by the bright colors that she wears (S, 249, 312). Her social status is reflected in the costly material of her dresses, which are usually of silk or satin, and in the jewelry she always wears.¹² Caroline only has one ring and a trinket or two (259). And her dresses

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are of more subdued colors (brown, merino, grey, azure, white), of less costly material (muslin), and she occasionally makes them herself.\textsuperscript{13}

Brontë’s intertwining of their appearances, their behavior and their social status is not as limiting to the characters’ individual identities as it may seem. Caroline, for example, values and appreciates the right fashion and, in spite of her limited upbringing, she knows exactly what suits her and Shirley’s status - probably better than Shirley does, who seems to be more unconcerned about these things. Caroline is the one with the better taste, and she knows what is ‘proper.’ The other characters in the novel also notice and appreciate this, and Caroline is the one who is most often referred to as “the lady” (S, 323, 437, 568).

Shirley is depicted as having been a tomboy, and is even now, at the age of twenty-one, more nonchalant about her clothing, and does not seem to notice other people’s shortcomings in this context. During all the years that Mrs. Pryor takes care of her, Shirley does not perceive that she dresses in an old-fashioned way (S, 195, 223). Caroline immediately notices this, and she considers it a pity that Mrs. Pryor looks older and more unattractive than she needs to look. She therefore makes her a new wardrobe and corrects her style (599).

Caroline’s understanding of the right style in fashion also becomes apparent in her contacts with Hortense Moore. During her visits to the cottage, as soon as dinner is over,

Caroline coaxed her governess-cousin upstairs to dress: this manoeuvre required management. To have hinted that the jupon, camisole, and curl-papers were odious objects, or indeed other than quite meritorious points, would have been a felony. Any premature attempt to urge their disappearance was therefore unwise, and would be likely to issue in the persevering wear of them during the whole day. Carefully avoiding rocks and quicksands, however, the pupil, on pretence of requiring a change of scene, contrived to get the teacher aloft, and, once in the bed-room, she persuaded her that it was not worth while returning thither, and that she might as well make her toilette now; and while Mademoiselle delivered a

\textsuperscript{13}Detailed information about both the colors and the material can be found on the following pages in S: 176, 240, 249-250, 294, 306, 312, 637.
solemn homily on her own surpassing merit in disregarding all frivolities of fashion, Caroline denuded her of the camisole, invested her with a decent gown, arranged her collar, hair, &c. and made her quite presentable. But Hortense would put the finishing touches herself, and these finishing touches consisted in a thick handkerchief tied round the throat, and a large, servant-like black apron, which spoiled everything. (S, 80)

The other Yorkshire people also notice Hortense’s unusual fashion items; they laugh at her “black sabots,” for example (S, 66). Caroline is too intelligent and too gentle a person to do that, but when Hortense offers her a few copies of some traditional Belgian items of clothing, Caroline refuses them (80). The subsequent quarrel that they have is not characteristic for Caroline, but it does support the idea that she has a better sense of style than Hortense does. Both the fichu and the apron are depicted as unflattering fashion items.

Caroline also helps Shirley to dress in the correct way, and she eventually even assists her with her wedding dress and her future ward-robe (S, 295, 637). On these occasions, Caroline the ‘Angel in the House’ and Shirley’s mirror image, again acts as her corrective. The issue of the correct use of fashion is thematized by making it such a conscious process. At the same time, the appropriate style is stabilized by the corrective example of Caroline. She knows exactly what is proper and suitable for every occasion, and she helps and corrects Shirley through her influence.

At the same time, fashion is for Caroline also a means of anticipation. It is a way for her to indicate that she would like to belong to the next social layer. She does have a decent enough middle-class background, but she is not rich, and she certainly does not belong to the aristocracy. Traditionally, ‘ladies’ came from the aristocracy. The anticipatory adaptation shown by Caroline here, and her acceptance of the norms, attitudes, values, and fashion of a social group that is still above her, indicate that she would like to become a member of this (reference) group. For Caroline this leads to a type of behavior that is even more ladylike and perfect than the behavior of some of the other, ‘established’ ladies in the novel. Mrs. Yorke’s appearance, for example, when she visits Hortense Moore is described as follows:

And opening the door, she made visible an ample spread of crimson skirts overflowing the elbow-chair at the fireside, and above them, presiding with dignity, a cap more awful than a crown. That cap had never come to the cottage under a bonnet: no, it had been brought in a vast bag, or rather a middle-sized balloon of black silk, held wide with whalebone. The screed, or frill of the cap, stood a quarter of a yard broad round the face of the wearer: the ribbon, flourishing in puffs and bows about the head, was of the sort called love-ribbon: there was a good deal of it. - I may say, a very great deal. Mrs. Yorke wore the cap – it became her: she wore the gown also – it suited her no less. (S, 396)

“That great lady,” as she is referred to, is firmly established as ‘lady’ in the neighborhood - so much so, that a little extravagance cannot harm her reputation. Similarly, Shirley’s nonchalance is not too heavily criticized either. On the contrary, people find her charming and they appreciate her social nature. The way she dresses reveals that the heiress is rich,
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very rich; she possesses a clear thousand a year. Caroline does not have a penny. Yet even though their financial situation is so different, there is a sense of equality between both girls that the other gentry of Briarfield and Whinbury do not show towards Caroline. The reason was, the narrator explains, that

Shirley’s head ran on other things than money and position. She was glad to be independent as to property: by fits she was even elated at the notion of being lady of the manor, and having tenants and an estate: she was especially tickled with an agreeable complacency when reminded of “all that property” down in the hollow, “comprising an excellent cloth-mill, dyehouse, warehouse, together with the messuage, gardens, and outbuildings, termed Hollow’s cottage;” but her exultation being quite undisguised was singularly inoffensive; and, for her serious thoughts, they tended elsewhere. To admire the great, reverence the good, and be joyous with the genial, was very much the bent of Shirley’s soul; she mused therefore on the means of following this bent far oftener than she pondered on her social superiority. (S, 224)

Shirley likes her possessions, but she honors and respects different things than property. Shirley’s is a very luxurious position to be in, but Caroline can also learn a little from her in this context. The narrator seems to suggest that Caroline might relax a bit more. This would make her less anxious or timid, and save her quite a few sleepless nights. All this worrying does not do her any good:

Caroline looked at the little mirror before her, and she thought there were some signs [of an old maid]. She could see that she was altered within the last month; that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed – a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected: she was not, in short, so pretty or so fresh as she used to be. She distantly hinted this to Fanny, from whom she got no direct answer, only a remark that people did vary in their looks; but that at her age a little falling away signified nothing, - she would soon come round again, and be plumper and rosier than ever. Having given this assurance, Fanny showed singular zeal in wrapping her up in warm shawls and handkerchiefs, till Caroline, nearly smothered with the weight, was fain to resist further additions. (S, 176-177)

The use of clothing seems to mediate between the two oppositions, too. A good understanding of and adherence to the right code of fashion may facilitate social mobility or ensure acceptance by the social context. Yet a more nonchalant attitude may result in a more relaxed look and a more relaxed mind. Bronté seems to want to stress that each approach has positive and negative sides, and the main characters learn from one another without one approach really seeming to be preferred, though it has to be admitted that the more nonchalant use of role-attributes seems to be reserved for the rich only.
3.3: WHEREIN MATTERS MAKE SOME PROGRESS, BUT NOT MUCH

In *Shirley*, Charlotte Brontë is also concerned with the opposition between the more general behavior of both protagonists, and she links this with the contrast between the opposite traits of passionate feeling and excitement, of individual freedom and fulfilment, and those of self-transcending or self-denying duty and moral responsibility. Rather than presenting this kind of divided approach in one character, as she does in *Jane Eyre*, she splits the behavior into two parts, assigning that of the timid and dutiful young girl to Caroline, and that of the tougher and more independent woman to Shirley. That Shirley is indeed Caroline’s ‘mirror image’ also becomes clear from a structural comparison of both girls throughout the novel in the following contexts.

**General behavior**

We have already had a look at their education and the use of clothes by both girls, but their overall appearance, their interests, and their behavior are also compared in a broader context. Caroline is Brontë’s first ‘beautiful’ heroine. Yet, a great part of the overall praise of Caroline in the novel is in conventional terms of mere prettiness, and the narrator finishes Caroline’s introduction to the reader in words that seem ambiguous: “So much for Caroline Helstone’s appearance; as to her character or intellect, if she had any, they must speak for themselves in due time” (S, 75).

Reader reports show that Caroline appealed greatly to contemporary readers, but perhaps this is not so surprising as she is the perfect example of the popular idea of the Victorian ‘heroine’: pretty, sweet, gentle, retiring, trembling at a frown, and with no particular gifts of genius. Throughout the story she depicts the typical ‘Angel in the House’ and with a change of clothes and name, she might double for any of the heroines in less important novels of the period. Yet, Caroline is also portrayed as a woman condemned by circumstance to have neither an all-round education nor the chance of a stimulating development of her intellect. This makes her a timid girl, less intellectual and more sentimental than she might have been, if she had received better schooling. That women can thus be molded into a shape that they may not naturally have, because of the mistaken ideas that society has about them, is pointed out by Shirley. In the novel, she states:

If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women; they do not read them in a true light; they misapprehend them, both for good and evil: their good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend. Then to hear them fall into

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14 This is the title of Chapter XII, Vol. III, in the original version of *Shirley* (S, 594).
16 Robert Martin postulates this in *The Accents of Persuasion*. He briefly compares Caroline to Rosamund Oliver in *Jane Eyre*, but considers the depiction of Caroline as most closely resembling the ideal of the Victorian heroine, 123.
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extasies with each other’s creations, worshipping the heroine of such a poem - novel - drama, thinking it fine - divine! Fine and divine it may be, but often quite artificial - false as the rose in my best bonnet there. If I spoke all I think on this point; if I gave my real opinion of some first-rate female characters in first-rate works, where should I be? Dead under a cairn of avenging stones in half an hour. (S, 352)

It is interesting to see that Shirley refers to the exact opposition of the traditional images used of women in literature by men that I also refer to in my introduction and that Gilbert and Gubar discuss in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Shirley (and Brontë) recognize that the images are “artificial” and the opposition is identified as untrue, confirming my sense that the relationship is a more complex doubling or ‘mirroring’ rather than a fixed contrast.

In the novel, Caroline is portrayed as shy. Her timidity is illustrated by Yorke’s comparison of her pale quietness to one of the marbles of Canova (S, 539). She is, Shirley tells Moore, quite feminine, “nor of what they call the spirited order of women” a girl whose rare outbursts have no “manly fire,” but only “a short, vivid, trembling glow, that shot up, shone, vanished” and almost “left her scared at her own daring” (363). Yet, at the same time, as Shirley also points out, Caroline “though gentle, tractable, and candid enough, is still perfectly capable of defying even Mr. Moore’s penetration” (363).

Caroline’s depicted attitude seems to originate from the represented social context. It is not that she does not understand things or does not want to be a more spirited or liberated person. She is poor, she is a dependent member of the family, and though she may eventually inherit something from her uncle, she does not have the money or property that Shirley has. Consequently she cannot afford to be as independent, ‘manly’ or single-minded as Shirley can. Shirley’s independent behavior is tolerated because of her social position and her financial situation. Being an esquire allows her certain liberties that Caroline does not have.

Shirley is quite ‘beautiful,’ too; but she is less angelic or perfect than Caroline. She is described as pale; and though she wears expensive clothes, she wears them with a nonchalance that betrays that her appearance is not Shirley’s main concern (S, 335). The other characters in the novel refer to her behavior or manner more often than to her appearance or beauty. Helstone, for example, when mentioning Shirley for the first time to Caroline, comments that “she is rather a fine girl; she will teach you what it is to have a sprightly spirit: nothing lackadaisical about her” (193). The narrative confirms this:

Shirley Keeldar was no ugly heiress: she was agreeable to the eye. Her height and shape were not unlike Miss Helstone’s: perhaps in stature she might have the advantage by an inch or two; she was gracefully made, and her face, too, possessed a charm as well described by the word grace as any other. It was pale naturally, but intelligent, and of varied expression. She was not a blond, like Caroline: clear and dark were the characteristics of her aspect as to colour: her face and brow were clear, her eyes of the darkest gray: no green lights in them, - transparent, pure, neutral gray; and her hair of the darkest brown. Her features were distinguished; by which I do not mean that they were high, bony, and Roman, being indeed rather small and slightly marked than otherwise, but
only that they were, to use a few French words, “fins, gracieux, spirituels:” mobile they were and speaking; but their changes were not to be understood, nor their language interpreted all at once. (S, 198)

In connection with the impression the appearances of both girls make on others, it is Caroline’s prettiness that is accentuated whereas Shirley is depicted as being intelligent and distinguished. This is very much in accordance with the general opposition of passivity and sensitivity, and independence and rationality.

The opposition between independence and rationality, on the one hand, and timidity and sensitivity, on the other, can also be traced in the interests that Shirley and Caroline have. Their literary tastes are frequently mentioned, for example. Unlike Shirley, an omnivorous reader, Caroline rejects the more intellectual pleasures of Racine and Corneille, whom Hortense Moore admires so much, and prefers the romantic poetry of Chénier in French, and the poetry of the sensitive and hypochondriac Cowper in English. It is only when she is stimulated by the presence of Robert that she reads Shakespeare’s comic scenes “with a spirit no one could have expected of her, with a pithy expression with which she seemed gifted on the spot, and for that brief moment only” (S, 91). The narrator thus seems to suggest that she has more potential in this context, than she is in the habit of expressing.

By means of characterization by literary taste, the quality and state of Caroline’s mind are also illustrated when “she sits alone, ‘still as a garden statue,’ reading old books provided by her uncle’s library” (Martin, 126):

[T]he Greek and Latin were of no use to her; and its collection of light literature was chiefly contained on a shelf which had belonged to her aunt Mary: some venerable Lady’s Magazines, that had once performed a sea-voyage with their owner, and undergone a storm, and whose pages were stained with salt water; some mad Methodist Magazines, full of miracles and apparitions, of preternatural warnings, ominous dreams, and frenzied fanaticism; the equally mad Letters of Mrs. Elizabeth Rowe from the Dead to the Living; a few old English Classics: - from these faded flowers Caroline had in her childhood extracted the honey, - they were tasteless to her now. (S, 389)

It seems remarkable that Caroline could have enjoyed them in childhood, and that they “were tasteless to her now” seems to suggest that her taste has improved with age.

Shirley’s taste is depicted as more mature and better developed, but she has a large library at Fieldhead. All of the books are her own, and she can buy any other books she might like. Again, the habitus and the financial position of both girls are as formative of their characters and the social roles they (have to) play, as their personalities are. Ignoring the differences between them, Shirley formulates the similarities she notices as follows:

Her predilection increased greatly when she discovered that her own way of thinking and talking was understood and responded to by this new acquaintance. She had hardly expected it. Miss Helstone, she fancied, had too pretty a face, manners and voice too soft, to be anything out of the common way in mind and attainments; and she very much wondered to see the gentle features light up archly to the reveillé of a dry sally or two
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risked by herself; and more did she wonder to discover the self-won knowledge treasured, and the untaught speculations working in that girlish, curl-veiled head. Caroline’s instinct of taste, too, was like her own: such books as Miss Keeldar had read with the most pleasure, were Miss Helstone’s delight also. They held many aversions too in common, and could have the comfort of laughing together over works of false sentimentality and pompous pretension. (S, 225)

Shirley and Caroline share many basic values related to sincerity, honesty and uprightness. Again Caroline’s potential talents are stressed. It is the likeness, the similarity between both girls that makes the contrasting and comparing by means of the ‘mirror image’ acceptable, too. In this way, it becomes possible to compare or contrast an individual aspect, while the other factors remain constant. The compared aspect can thus be raised to a higher level of consciousness in the reader.

The behavior of both girls offers another interesting context for comparison. Shirley seems to be a projection of Caroline’s more repressed feelings, and she sometimes almost seems to perform certain acts “for” Caroline. Caroline indicates in volume 1 that she wishes she could understand the trading customs of men, while Shirley is actively engaged in business with Robert Gérard Moore, sees “a newspaper every day, and two of a Sunday” and reads the “letters of the civic leaders” (S, 200, 327, 539). Shirley’s own comment on this is:

Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman, and something more. I am an esquire: Shirley Keeldar, Esquire, ought to be my style and title. They gave me a man’s name; I hold a man’s position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood; and when I see such people as that stately Anglo-Belgian – that Gérard Moore before me, gravely talking to me of business, really I feel quite gentlemanlike. (S, 200)

Part of this is pleasantry, because Shirley is speaking to someone who is ambivalent about her independence and some of her activities, Mr. Helstone. But it is noteworthy that work and independence seem so closely associated with masculinity that it appears to limit Shirley to a kind of “male-mimicry” (Gubar, 11).

The contrast between the two girls is again suggested by Shirley’s first interest in Caroline “because she was quiet, retiring, looked delicate, and seemed as if she needed some one to take care of her” (S, 224). Given a boy’s name at birth, Shirley has grown into man’s estate as lord of the manor, supervisor of her own farm, owner of the mill. And, as Mr. Sympson finds out to his embarrassment, head of the family. “I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman, and something more,” she says in triumph to the Rector:

I am an esquire … You must choose me for your churchwarden, Mr. Helstone, the next time you elect new ones: they ought to make me a magistrate and a captain of yeomanry: Tony Lumpkin’s mother was a

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colonel, and his aunt a justice of the peace – why shouldn’t I be? (S, 200)

Shirley loves to talk business, she stands at her fire with her hands held behind her back, she rides alone across the moors, taking the descents as fast as her horse will go, she sings with unladylike expression, and she whistles, to the dismay of Mrs. Pryor, who criticizes her about some of her habits: “[m]y dear, do not allow that habit of alluding to yourself as a gentleman to be confirmed: it is a strange one. Those who do not know you, hearing you speak thus, would think you affected masculine manners” (S, 209-210).

Shirley is also depicted as having a martial spirit that inflames with any hint of resistance. “Bad manners!” she says of the dissenters who are pushed into the ditch when they obstruct the school procession, “and I hate bad manners. Of course, they must have a lesson” (S, 304). And at the threat of danger to her property, she becomes as dangerous as her hero, Wellington:

For, after all, if political incendiaries come here to kindle conflagration in the neighbourhood, and my property is attacked, I shall defend it like a tigress – I know I shall. Let me listen to Mercy as long as she is near me: her voice once drowned by the shout of ruffian defiance, and I shall be full of impulses to resist and quell. If once the poor gather and rise in the form of the mob, I shall turn against them as an aristocrat: if they bully me, I must defy; if they attack, I must resist, - and I will. (S, 267)

The influence of Shirley’s habitus becomes visible here. In spite of her open and kind nature, she is capable of seeing the poor as “the mob.” Caroline (and some of the spinsters in the novel) have quite a different attitude. They see the suffering of the poor and try to help them.

Though Caroline does not talk business in the way Shirley does, she is quite an active person with a few tasks that can be considered work. From the age of twelve onwards she has been a teacher at the Sunday school (S, 284). It is not mentioned whether she receives a salary for this task; no doubt it is regarded as an honorary activity, as Caroline is the Rev. Helstone’s niece. Caroline also runs Helstone’s household, and she is the one who receives guests, and organizes lunches or tea for visitors (111-112). Such tasks are usually reserved for the women of a household and are mostly unpaid. Helstone does not exploit Caroline, though; on the contrary, he is quite protective of her. And when Caroline, after having been disappointed by Robert, suggests that she would like to take a job as governess, Helstone will not hear of it. He tells her that if she wants a change of scene she may take a holiday and go to a watering-place with Fanny. He also indicates that he means to provide for her, later on, and eventually he introduces her to Shirley. Both Shirley and Mrs. Pryor will not support Caroline’s plan either. Shirley considers it degrading, and Mrs. Pryor was quite unhappy when she was a governess herself in the Hardman household (196, 375-376). Caroline does not have her own mansion or cloth-mill and her work does not immediately

Tony Lumpkin is a character in a comedy by Oliver Goldsmith (1730-1774). He is the hilarious problem-child of Mrs. Hardcastle in She Stoops to Conquer (1773).

Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington (1769-1852). Wellesley was granted the title of Duke of Wellington in 1814. He was then put in command of the forces which defeated Napoleon at Waterloo in June 1815.
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contribute to her own business profits. But she does work, and even Shirley admits that she has never seen anyone as active as Caroline.

It is interesting to note that even such a timid character as Mrs. Pryor works, first as a governess, and later on as a companion. Even the spinsters, Miss Ainley and Miss Mann do volunteer work. They help the poor, and they assist in any project that may alleviate the suffering of the unemployed workers. All of these women are portrayed as performing social roles in society that are valuable and necessary. Yet, most of their activities are unpaid and taken for granted. The one who is woken up in this context is the reader. By making it such a conscious process, by thematizing work and business and by linking them so obviously to gender roles, Brontë makes the reader notice the still restrictive norm and value system of patriarchy.

The emancipation of women is a topic that pre-occupies Brontë in all of her novels, but nowhere else seems it as important as in *Shirley*. The contrast between the two genders and also between “the modern woman” and “the womanly woman” is made continuously throughout the story (Martin, 129). In this novel, both Shirley and Caroline seem to be annoyed by the curates (Mr. Donne, Mr. Malone and Mr. Sweeting; S,6) most of the time. *Shirley* as a novel has been criticized for its lack of a coherent plot or a logical story line. On the whole these curates seem out of place in the novel - they do not really contribute to the development of the story - but there is one thing that they do add. They provide interesting pictures of what type of social roles young men could fulfil at the time. These curates receive the best education, they have the interesting jobs, and they have all the chances in the world to use their talents to do good. And they bungle it. They are egotistical, they only care about money and material things, and they are derogatory to women and ordinary Yorkshire people. *Shirley* is very forward-looking in its presentation of independent pictures of gender roles. The women in the novel, rich and poor, at least try their best. And limited as they are by their sex in patriarchal society, they seem to achieve more than the curates.

Brontë’s views and ideas on gender roles are not only depicted through such oppositions, they are also explicitly described. In the chapter called “Two Lives,” the first scene is of Shirley at Fieldhead. The narrator states:

> How does she look? Like a lovelorn maiden, pale and pining for a neglectful swain? Does she sit the day long bent over some sedentary task? Has she for ever a book in her hand, or sewing on her knee, and

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21 One argument that has often been introduced to explain this is the circumstances under which Brontë wrote the novel. It took Brontë two years to write *Shirley*. The first two volumes went well until the bleak months from September 1848 to May 1849 when she saw first her brother and then her two sisters die one after another. She commenced slowly with the third volume during the summer of 1849, dispatched the manuscript in early September and saw the novel published on 26 October 1849. See *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Miriam Allott, 12-13.
eyes only for that, and words for nothing, and thoughts unspoken? By no means. Shirley is all right. (S, 385)

Instead of working for the hated “Jew-basket,” Shirley occupies herself happily around the house and farm, then throws herself on the floor to read single-mindedly. While Shirley is so occupied, Caroline moons about the Rectory garden, unhappy and wondering how Miss Ainley “managed to be so equably serene in her solitude” (S, 390). But at the end of the chapter it is Caroline who has a long interior monologue on the condition of women in nineteenth-century England. It is an interesting paragraph, and the narrator creates a balance in it between the obvious truth of Caroline’s complaints and the ironic contrast of her musings to the more active lives of Shirley and Miss Ainley:

The brothers of these girls are every one in business or in professions … their sisters have no earthly employment, but household work and sewing; no earthly pleasure, but an unprofitable visiting; and no hope, in all their life to come, of anything better. …The great wish – the sole aim of every one of them is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as they now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands. The gentlemen turn them into ridicule: they don’t want them; they hold them very cheap … Fathers … are angry with their daughters when they observe their manoeuvres: they order them to stay at home. What do they expect them to do at home? If you ask, - they would answer, sew and cook. They expect them to do this, and this only contentedly, regularly, uncomplainingly all their lives long, as if they had no germs of faculties for anything else … Could men live so themselves? Would they not be very weary? … Men of England! look at your poor girls, many of them fading round you, dropping off in consumption or decline; or what is worse, degenerating to sour old maids, - envious, backbiting, wretched, because life is a desert to them; or, what is worst of all, reduced to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage, which to celibacy is denied. Fathers! cannot you alter these things? … Keep your girls’ minds narrow and fettered – they will still be a plague and a care, sometimes a disgrace to you: cultivate them – give then scope and work – they will be your gayest companions in health; your tenderest nurses in sickness; your most faithful prop in age. (S, 391-393)

Both Brontë’s description of more liberated behavior for women and the quoted monologue ensure that the reader is confronted again and again with more liberated views on the possibilities for women. In the monologue, the words are Caroline’s, but the ideas are clearly Brontë’s. In the rest of the novel there are a few other occasions where Caroline utters such liberated and extended thoughts. Yet, this is remarkable, because overall, one gets the impression that it is Shirley who has the more complex ideas. It is therefore

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22 Brontë elaborately explains in Shirley what a ‘Jew-basket’ is. Briefly it can be described as a basket with pin cushions, needlebooks, articles of infant-wear etc. made by the women in a community and sold to the men. The basket moved around from house to house and its goal was the conversion of Jews and colored people to Christianity (S, 112).
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noteworthy that Brontë gives these thoughts to Caroline, as she is basically the one who needs to be converted.

Shirley is already a step ahead, but perhaps her ideas are too high-flown. The difference between Caroline’s overall more conventional attitude towards a woman’s place and Shirley’s vision of her sex as exalted creatures of infinite capability, comes out most clearly in the scene after the school-feast. The two girls descend the hill to the church, which Shirley cannot bear to enter because of its heat and the dreary, conventional sermons she knows the clergy will be preaching. Caroline is nervous at missing the service, but Shirley has her own pantheistic devotions to make: “Nature is now at her evening prayers: she is kneeling before those red hills. … Caroline, I see her! and I will tell you what she is like: she is like what Eve was when she and Adam stood alone on earth” (S, 319). Caroline suggests that the vision is unlike Milton’s Eve.23 “Milton’s Eve!” Shirley exclaims:

Shirley’s comment on Milton’s Eve again stresses the limited view patriarchy has of women and represents a much more exalted view. But Caroline retreats into religious and social orthodoxy and objects that this Eve is pagan. “She is very vague and visionary! Come, Shirley, we ought to go into church.” Shirley, in the grip of a larger perception, refuses: “Caroline, I will not: I will stay out here with my mother Eve, in these days called Nature” (S, 321).

Throughout the novel the reader is thus not only confronted with the different behavioral patterns of both protagonists, but also with monologues, comments and refutations that underline the preference for different and better options for women. The repetition of these ideas and the simplicity with which they are interwoven with the rest of the quite traditional love story ensure a natural blending in with the rest of the plot. Taken apart, however, some of Brontë’s ideas are indeed revolutionary.

Even though the comparison between Shirley and Caroline seems quite straightforward, there is an extremity in the ideas expounded in the following context, too. Throughout the novel, Shirley is always Caroline’s leader; she climbs walls, jumps hedges, restraining Caroline’s emotions during the siege of the mill and preventing her from rushing headlong among the fighting to be with Robert and, as Shirley points out, to be nothing but a nuisance to him. Without a second thought, Shirley orders bedding, clothing, and wine to be sent from Fieldhead to the wounded soldiers and rioters, while Mrs. Pryor wonders passively whether it would be proper to do so. There is a likeness suggested in the

23 John Milton (1608-74), Paradise Lost (1667), the great English epic poem about the creation and fall of man.
hesitancy of Mrs. Pryor and in the nervousness with which Caroline deals with such a simple matter as ordering a meal for visitors in her own house.

It is Shirley who shows the more ‘masculine’ behavior. Many of her tasks or activities do not seem representative of what the typical woman in contemporary society would do, or how she should behave. Shirley becomes an intriguing instance of what might be, and with her independence and active nature she can be a good example for anticipation for others. But Caroline and Mrs. Pryor and many of the other women present a more realistic picture of what was expected of and possible for women at the time.

Partner choice

Another context in which it is interesting to compare Shirley and Caroline’s behavior is the way Brontë depicts each in the selection of a partner. Shirley seems to like men, and she tells Caroline,

> [man] is a noble being. I tell you when they are good, they are the lords of creation, - they are the sons of God. Moulded in their Maker’s image, the minutest spark of His spirit lifts them almost above mortality. Indisputably, a great, good, handsome man is the first of created things. … Nothing ever charms me more than when I meet my superior – one who makes me sincerely feel that he is my superior. (S, 219)

Brontë’s depiction of Shirley here is noteworthy. In spite of the very liberated ideas that are consistently expounded throughout the novel, Shirley’s behavior in this context is quite naïve and seems more like idolatry than an objective interpretation of the role of men in society. Shirley is still quite a young woman and is portrayed as a product of her time. She likes her own liberty, but she is also very impressionable. It takes a while before Shirley really discovers her “superior” in the story, though. She has many suitors; quite a few men in the neighborhood are interested in Shirley. Except for Sweeting, all of the curates are intrigued by her. Both Malone and Donne consider her a suitable marriage partner, but solely because she is rich. Brontë stresses the economic and social motivations in the selection of a partner in the contemporary social context. The men completely ignore the fact that Shirley is an individual and that she has her own personality. But Shirley makes fun of them, “[h]ere comes a diversion. I never told you of a superb conquest I have made lately – made at those parties to which I can never persuade you to accompany me; and the thing has been done without effort or intention on my part: that I aver” (S, 276). In this case Shirley refers to Malone. Peter Augustus Malone had first been interested in Caroline, but on finding out Shirley’s wealth he redirects his attention to Shirley:

Miss Helstone, indeed, was amused by more than one point in Peter’s demeanor: she was edified at the complete though abrupt diversion of his homage from herself to the heiress: the 5,000£. he supposed her likely one day to inherit, were not to be weighed in the balance against Miss Keeldar’s estate and hall. He took no pains to conceal his calculations and tactics: he pretended to no gradual change of views; he wheeled about at once: the pursuit of the lesser fortune was openly relinquished for that of
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the greater. On what grounds he expected to succeed in his chase, himself best knew: certainly not by skilful management. (S, 279)

Mr. Donne, arrogant, conceited, and egotistical has a similarly insensitive approach:

He knew no more, however, how to set about the business than if he had been an image carved in wood: he had no idea of a taste to be pleased, a heart to be reached in courtship: his notion was, when he should have formally visited her a few times, to write a letter proposing marriage: then he calculated she would accept him for love of his office, then they would be married, then he should be master of Fieldhead, and he should live very comfortably, have servants at his command, eat and drink of the best, and be a great man. (S, 280)

Both Malone and Donne do not seem to realize that Shirley is a ‘real’ human being, that she is intelligent, and that she likes making up her own mind about things. But Shirley can laugh at the behavior of Malone, and when Donne starts insulting her Yorkshire neighbors, she throws him off her property. Still, Brontë’s representation of such courtships is quite revealing about the lack of real communication between the two genders that seems to be part of everyday life.

There are also other young men in the neighborhood who would like to marry Shirley, but she refuses them, to the great dismay of her guardian, Mr. Sympson. Shirley honestly admits that she scorns Mr. Sam Wynne (S, 555). She quite likes Sir Philip Nunnely, but only as a friend. She can esteem him, but she thinks he is too young, and she knows that his family would not approve, because they do not consider Shirley to be his equal in rank and position; and she also points out that she could never marry him, because he is not her better. Again Shirley mentions that a man should be her superior. This focus on the fact that a partner should hold her in check seems to be engrained in the contemporary norm and value system to such an extent that Shirley is depicted as being unable to escape it either.

Throughout the whole selection process, however, Shirley is the one who tends to make the choices. She has a serious argument with Mr. Sympson about her refusal of Sir Philip, but the only marriage offer that really worries Shirley herself is Robert Moore’s proposal. His request to Shirley to marry him comes out of the blue, and it is solely motivated by financial reasons. Robert is hurt by Shirley’s answer, but he also knows she is right:

‘God bless me!’ she pitilessly repeated, in that shocked, indignant, yet saddened accent. ‘You have made a strange proposal – strange from you: and if you knew how strangely you worded it, and looked it, you would be startled at yourself. You spoke like a brigand who demanded my purse, rather than like a lover who asked my heart.’ (S, 534-535)

Robert realizes his mistake, “[a] queer sentence, was it not, Yorke? and I knew, as she uttered it, it was true as queer. Her words were a mirror in which I saw myself” (S, 534). Again Brontë uses the term ‘mirror’ whilst correcting a character’s behavior. The notion of reflection in relation to the adherence to a norm is present in the novel at various levels.

The only man depicted in the story with whom Shirley seems to be able to communicate on an equal basis is Louis Moore, her former tutor. Shirley will not allow her pride and self-respect to be humbled by easy mastery, and when she finally admits her love for Louis, she

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warns him that she will preserve her independent nature, that she can be ‘mastered’ but never ‘tamed.’ She battles to the last in defense of a freedom that she is anxious to lose, and finally consents to dwindle by slow degrees into a woman and wife. Convinced at last that she and Louis are completely equal, she refuses to acknowledge that money has any power where real love is concerned, and asks only to stay in the loving relationship of pupil to Louis as master:

‘Mr. Moore,’ said she, looking up with a sweet, open, earnest countenance, ‘teach me and help me to be good. I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property; but I ask you to share the burden, and to show me how to sustain my part well. Your judgement is well-balanced; your heart is kind; your principles are sound. I know you are wise; I feel you are benevolent; I believe you are conscientious. Be my companion through life; be my guide where I am ignorant; be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always!’ (S, 624)

Shirley finds it quite hard to give up her independence, and at the prospect of losing her total freedom, she gnaws at her chain, like the leopardess to which Louis compares her, and tries to escape the impending marriage until Louis forces her to name a date. But in Brontë’s representation she selects Louis, she admits that she loves him, and keeping in mind the fact that all this was supposed to have taken place during the period of the Luddite revolts, 1811-1812, her behavior seems very modern. Yet, the extract also seems to reveal that the character Shirley is not yet able to become fully emancipated. The social context is portrayed as still too conservative to allow her total freedom. Shirley would need a man to guide and protect her, and the phrase “be my master where I am faulty” sounds quite submissive to modern ears.

Caroline’s behavior in the selection of a partner is portrayed as more subdued, and more in accordance with the norms and values usually adhered to during this time. Caroline is very much in love with Robert Gérard Moore. She cherishes the time she spends at the cottage, but when it seems that Robert is shifting his attention to Shirley or seems in any case no longer interested in Caroline, she withdraws into herself and becomes ill. Caroline has no other suitors. Malone is mentioned briefly, but he was only interested in the money that he supposed her to have (S, 120, 279). She does have a good friend in Mr. Hall, but he would be far too old for her, and he seems to function more as friend and guardian angel (284).

Unlike Shirley, Caroline is characterized as being extremely sensitive, and when she believes that Robert no longer loves her, she begins to decline in a physical and spiritual way. She does not blame Robert, however, but herself:

Robert had done her no wrong: he had told her no lie; it was she that was to blame, if any one was: what bitterness her mind distilled should and would be poured on her own head. She had loved without being asked to love, - a natural, sometimes an inevitable chance, but big with misery. (S, 106-107)

In her hypochondriac state, she longs to leave the Rectory. “I think I grow what is called nervous,” she tells Mrs. Pryor. “I see things under a darker aspect than I used to do. I have fears I never used to have – not of ghosts, but of omens and disastrous events; and I have an inexpressible weight on my mind which I would give the world to shake off, and I cannot
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do it.” Brontë’s representation here shows the normative type of behavior for women at the time. Caroline would only be allowed to remain passive, even when for a girl in her position marriage to a decent and hardworking man might be the only chance of an acceptable future without poverty or too much humiliation.

Robert Gérard Moore’s behavior does not make it easier for Caroline. In his conduct towards her, he is very often motivated by money, as well. Unlike Malone, Robert is aware of the fact that Caroline will not have such a large inheritance from Mr. Helstone as the rest of the neighborhood thinks, because Helstone has invested quite a lot of his money in a new church (S, 120). He also does not allow himself to fall in love with Caroline, or to woo her, because he is almost bankrupt. It is only when trade is made possible again that he reconsiders marriage (640). He then acts in a decent enough way, first asking Mrs. Pryor and Mr. Helstone for permission, and then proposing to Caroline.

Overall, Shirley is portrayed as showing the more active, and, towards the end, even more troublesome behavior. She proposes to Louis, rather than the other way round, and when she has to name a date, she keeps postponing the marriage, and she lets others organize everything. Caroline shows the more traditional behavior, answering Robert’s proposal in a modest way and stating that she will be his ‘caretaker’ in future. Still, Shirley’s emphasis on the fact that her spouse needs to be her superior presents proof that times are not yet as liberated as they would need to be to make real emancipation possible.

As Martin points out: “If Shirley has courage, dignity, and pride, Caroline has boundless sympathy with those whom she loves,” and a great feeling of responsibility. “Feminine” characteristics seem as important in the world as the “masculine,” and either can become limiting if they exclude the other (Martin, 134). Caroline, towards the end of the book, is portrayed as having learned partially to control her emotions and to be more active, and she has learned to defend her own attitudes and opinions (S, 402-406). Shirley has learned to love and to share her duties and responsibilities. If the two women had remained as they were at the beginning of the novel, there would be a danger of Caroline’s becoming the timid woman that her mother is, afraid of life and love, and worried about the respectability and conventionality of actions. Mrs. Yorke, on the other hand, may stand as a warning to Shirley, the mature woman into whom she might grow without the civilizing influences of love: hard, haughty, proud, scornful of beauty, and sparse of affection.

Brontë’s novel presents a range of choice of social roles for both women, and Caroline and Shirley go through a difficult process in finding their places in the world. Spinsterhood is shown to be unattractive, but apparently marriage fails for many, too. Mr. Helstone is too hard to make his marriage a success, Mrs. Pryor is too unfortunate in her choice to succeed in holding together a marriage to a despotic man, and both believe that the institution itself is little more than a purgatory. Some men, like Yorke, marry while they are still in love with other women, and can see only financial advantage in marriage.

The description of the weddings contributes to Brontë’s bleak representation of gender roles. The formal announcement of the marriages is given as follows “Louis Gérard Moore, Esq. late of Antwerp, to Shirley, daughter of the late Charles Cave Keeldar, Esq. of Fieldhead: Robert Gérard Moore, Esq. of Hollow’s mill, to Caroline, niece of the Rev. Matthewson Helstone, M.A. Rector of Briarfield” (S, 645). But in its traditional formality this announcement reads like a parody. Now it is Louis and Robert who are the “esquires.”
Shirley has only her first name given; she is identified through her father. Similarly, Caroline is identified through her relation to her uncle. No detailed description of the ceremonies or of dialogue between the male and female characters is provided. The lines which would be said are apparently so common as to be unnecessary to repeat. The marriages would suggest that the two women enter into communal bonds with their husbands, yet no wedding scene is provided. Their feelings are not alluded to. Actually describing their experiences seems of no interest to the narrator who quickly skips to the conclusion. The ideal future that is depicted there is an ambiguous one, and it is not surprising that some readers feel that Caroline gets worse than she deserves in marrying Robert, whose vision of the future is less of a home than of a model community with a mill that he runs, while Caroline looks after the ‘feminine’ side of the settlement:

The copse shall be firewood ere five years elapse: the beautiful wild ravine shall be a smooth descent; the green natural terrace shall be a paved street: there shall be cottages in the dark ravine, and cottages on the lonely slopes: the rough pebbled track shall be an even, firm, broad, black, sooty road, bedded with the cinders from my mill: and my mill, Caroline – my mill shall fill its present yard. (S, 644)

The homeless, destitute, and unemployed, he tells Caroline “shall come to Hollow’s mill from far and near; and Joe Scott shall give them work, and Louis Moore, Esq., shall let them a tenement, and Mrs. Gill shall mete them a portion till the first pay-day” (S, 644).

Such a Sunday-school as you will have, Cary! such collections as you will get! such a day-school as you and Shirley, and Miss Ainley, will have to manage between you! The mill shall find salaries for a master and mistress, and the Squire or the Clothier shall give a treat once a quarter. (S, 644)

The men continue to assume that they are superior. Robert organizes the model community and decides which roles the others play, while the women and the workers remain subordinate. In fact, they depend upon him and Louis Moore, Esq. The two women are finally described as “Mrs. Louis” and “Mrs. Robert;” their individual personalities retreat into the background (S, 646). If this is heaven, the heart scarcely leaps at it. Man and woman, husband and wife, remain separate in function and sympathies, not really grown into one flesh, or one soul. The women will run both the Sunday-school and the day-school. These roles are appointed to them. Nowhere does the novel thus seem more sober, more disillusioned than in the conventional ‘happy’ ending.

How can we interpret the social roles for women represented in this novel? I agree with Susan Gubar’s notion that, in spite of her independent activity and exuberant liveliness, Shirley seems slightly unreal and that this “very unreality serves to remind us that she is part of a fantastic wish-fulfillment, and affirmation of what ought to be possible for women.” Gubar suggests that Shirley is a projection of Caroline’s mind, “a double that seems to contradict her own hopeless situation, making her fate ‘merely’ psychological and therefore idiosyncratic” (Gubar 1976, 11). Whereas Gubar’s interpretation of the doubling process is psychological, my own reading of this technique focuses on the social, educational and material aspects. Yet, in spite of Gubar’s different interpretation of the doubling process and her focus on the mental aspects, her conclusion resembles the one I
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trace through the mirroring process and the more social nature of the comparison between Shirley and Caroline. Gubar states that Caroline’s isolation and her discontent must be either her own fault, or otherwise the very structure of English society must be found guilty.

If not, the source of tribulation is not merely the dependent status of women but the very ways in which male society defines even those few women upon whom it confers independence. When even Shirley is shown to be incapable of escaping the confines of being born female, just such a lesson seems implied. (Gubar 1976, 11)

Indeed, for all the seeming optimism in the mirroring process, Shirley does not represent the release she first seems to suggest. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar believe that, instead, she herself becomes caught in the traditional social roles for women that she learns from her ‘mirror image’ and that cause her to copy Caroline’s immobility. In their opinion, she begins to resemble Caroline in the course of the novel to such an extent that she finally yields to Caroline’s fate; for all her assertiveness, she is as limited by her gender, as excluded from male society, as her friend (Gilbert & Gubar, 383). My own close reading of the text explains this process in a different way. Shirley is corrected by her mirror image Caroline and the immediate social context. The prevalent norm and value system is thus stabilized but the social mechanism is also exposed. The traditional happy ending of the two marriages made the novel acceptable reading for the contemporary reader. Yet, through the narrative strategies she used, Brontë not only stressed the limits of patriarchy on the lives of all women; with the mirroring techniques Brontë also introduces other options. The exposure of readers to other life styles, experienced in the very personal process of reading a novel, at least enabled Brontë to initiate a consciousness raising process, and to make the contemporary reader ‘experience’ that they need not be in the “same place” all of their lives.

3.4: THE MORAL

Charlotte Brontë ends the story with the following:

The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for the moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer directions. I only say, God speed him in the quest! (S, 646)

Despite the apparent irony of this passage – especially in its reference to a male reader – there is indeed a ‘moral’ in Shirley, especially for the woman reader. The ‘moral’ that comes to the fore in my reading of Shirley would seem to be that the contemporary society depicted in the novel does not yet allow women to be fully liberated and the social equals of men. Shirley is corrected by her ‘mirror image,’ and shown the proper behavioral patterns for young women in the early nineteenth century. Both Shirley and Caroline are still debarred from many male activities. Shirley enjoys some liberties that not many female protagonists before her had: she is allowed to inherit an estate of considerable size and nobody seems to thwart her attempt to run the estate in a businesslike way. In the end, nobody prevents her from marrying the man she really loves, even when he is ‘only’ a tutor. Shirley thus also functions as mirror image to Caroline. It is Shirley who is the more
active, businesslike and modern woman. With her example, she shows Caroline that there is a lot more that women can do or achieve, than Caroline might have considered possible.
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On the one hand, Brontë’s use of the ‘mirror image’ indicates the restricted roles available to women. Shirley, too, is coaxed into sense, she changes her behavior and the novel even concludes with the traditional ending, marriage. Caroline and Shirley accept social roles which would have gratified Mrs. Ellis, the author of conduct books and conservative advice manuals for women. They yield to the power of Robert and Louis Moore, seem to be satisfied to run a Sunday school and day-school for the children associated with the estate, and they are expected to have a “humanizing” influence on their husbands. But, on the other hand, Brontë also nicely shows her characters and readers what was and what might have been. And, though both past and present readers could safely read such a ‘conventional novel,’ they were still also presented with an intriguing example for anticipation. This alternative is given to the readers through the employment of the motif of the ‘mirror image.’ By means of parallels and contrasts, the mirrored protagonists could be linked with the stereotypes of ‘the Angel in the House’ and the ‘monster,’ but Brontë’s quite subtle use of them gives them a less extreme quality. For both contemporary and present-day readers this mild application of a consciousness-raising technique could, at least, give them an impression of possible alternatives to accepted female behavior without inciting readers to revolutionary alternatives. An explicit moral is not stated in the novel, but a “judicious reader” can recognize Brontë’s comment on the still repressive tendencies of patriarchy and at the same time infer the suggestion for the emancipation of women.

3.5: “GOD DELIVER ME FROM MY FRIENDS”

In the author’s preface to Jane Eyre, Brontë praises W. M. Thackeray as a novelist dedicated to the reformation of society. Shirley, too, seems to be dedicated to this goal. In the novel, there is a concern for both the female individual and society at large, and in this context, it focuses on the interaction between the two. That the ‘woman question’ would be a theme in this novel was already pointed out by Charlotte Brontë to her literary advisor, W. S. Williams. In a letter to him, she states, “I wish to say something about the ‘condition of women’ question” (Smith, 66). She admits that she finds this an awkward subject, and seems unsure about how women can achieve equality or have the same professions that men have. She also believes that it is especially philosophers and

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28 W.S. Williams (1800-1875) is Smith and Elder’s “sympathetic literary advisor,” George Smith (1824-1901) is the publisher. Brontë had good contacts with both and they exchanged quite a few letters. Both Smith and Williams also sent Brontë many parcels with new books and magazines (Allott, 14-15).
legislators who should “ponder over the better ordering of the Social System.” But she admits that:

At the same time, I conceive that when Patience has done its utmost and Industry its best, whether in the case of Women or Operatives, and when both are baffled and Pain and Want <both> triumphant – the Sufferer is free – is entitled – at last to send up to Heaven any piercing cry for relief – if by that cry he can hope to obtain succour. (Smith, 66)

Throughout the novel, Brontë shows how the patterns of women’s lives (and those of the workers) are shaped by social attitudes and forces over which they have no control. That the woman question is one of the main themes in the novel is recognized by both readers and critics of the time. When Shirley appeared in October 1849, it was positively received by reviewers and readers alike, and most of them were intrigued by Brontë’s attempt to represent the still restricted social roles for women in society.

Brontë’s novel Shirley was extensively reviewed in daily and weekly newspapers and in almost all of the monthly and quarterly periodicals of any standing. It is interesting to see that so much space was used in the reviewing of this novel. Most articles included a summary of the story together with a few extracts that could illustrate Brontë’s style, characterization and powers of description. Many reviews were quite long, perceptive and well-documented.

In my discussion of the reviews, I will concentrate on the articles and comments that were published immediately after the appearance of the book in 1849. Many reviews and studies have been written in later years, and even today new interpretations come out regularly, but as it is my intention to focus on the narrative techniques used in each novel and to study the subsequent impression each novel made on contemporary readers, I will limit my approach accordingly. With my examination, therefore, I do not mean to present a conclusive interpretation of the reviews of Shirley; rather, I want to see whether contemporary readers noticed the use of narrative strategies, particularly the mirroring technique and the use of stereotypes, or the emancipatory allusions in the novel.

Characterization

It is interesting to notice that most of the comments on Shirley by contemporary critics praised the main female characters. An unsigned review in the Daily News points out:

Shirley is the anatomy of the female heart. By Shirley we mean the book, and not the personage; for the true heroine is the rector’s niece, the history of whose heart is one of the most beautiful chronicles ever set down by a female pen. … The merit of the work lies in the variety, beauty, and truth of its female character. Not one of its men are genuine. There are no such men. … The women, however, are all divine.30

29 For a complete list of all of the reviews I collected at Colindale, the Newspaper section of the British Library, see the Appendix.
30 This was originally an unsigned review in the Daily News (31 October, 1849): 2.
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This review in the Daily News was the first one that appeared. It angered Brontë and she mentions it in quite a few letters. Writing to W. S. Williams, she asks: “Are there no such men as the Helstones and Yorkes? Yes there are. Is the first chapter disgusting or vulgar? It is not: it is real.” She adds that she scorns the praise of this critic and points out “Were my Sisters now alive they and I would laugh over this notice” (Smith, 272). On the whole the article is not negative; indeed, it was used to promote Shirley in America. It seems to be mostly the quality of the analysis that Brontë objects to. In another letter she refers to the critic as “incompetent, ignorant, and flippant” (Smith, 278). Compared to the more sophisticated methods of present-day academic criticism, some early Victorian reviews do seem quite long-winded and most neglect to pay close attention to narrative strategies or techniques.

Many critics and readers did, however, notice and consider the mirroring techniques and the ‘woman question; clearly, the novel had impact on individual readers. Most of the major reviews are represented here, together with many of those on which Brontë herself commented in her letters.

Brontë herself considers the article in the literary review the Athenaeum too severe. In relation to the characterization of both women it nevertheless states:

Her main purpose has been, to trace the fortunes and feelings of two girls. The one, Caroline Helstone, is a clergyman’s daughter, neglected – not maltreated – by her unobservant father [sic], a harsh courageous man, whose right place would have been the army and not the church. The other is Shirley Keeldar, heiress and lady paramount of the district. The one is tender, the other is sparkling: both suffer from the malady of unrest and dissatisfaction, - on the prevalence of which among women of the nineteenth century so many protests have been issued, so many theories of ‘emancipation’ have been set forth.

The overall tone of this review is indeed less positive than in the previous one mentioned, but this passage clearly shows that the writer did notice the representation of the stereotypic images of the female main characters, the comparison between them and the plight of women in contemporary society. These points also gain far more attention than the points that are criticized. It is a pity that so many of the reviews are “unsigned” or “anonymous,” it therefore remains difficult to ascertain whether there is a difference in evaluation between male and female critics, if there were indeed any women submitting reviews to these journals.

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31 The Barre Patriot from Massachusetts quotes a third of the review in its section on literature; 6: 20 (30 November 1849): 2.
32 Brontë states this in a letter to W. S. Williams (19 November 1849) Smith 290-91.
33 This article was originally published as an unsigned review in the Athenaeum (3 November 1849): 1107-1109; cited in Allott, 122-124.
34 In a letter to Laetitia Wheelwright (17 December 1849) Brontë writes that she had dinner at the Smiths: “There were only seven gentlemen at dinner besides Mr. Smith but of these five were critics – a formidable band – including the literary Rhadamanth of the “Times”, the “Athenaeum” the “Examiner, the “Spectator” and the “Atlas’: Men more dreaded in the world of letters than you can conceive.” (Smith 309-310). In her study, Smith adds: “C.B. met Henry Fothergill Chorley (1808-72),
Whatever the political or religious leanings of individual reviewers, there was general enthusiasm about Brontë’s realistic depiction of her central female characters. Brontë’s lively descriptive gifts, her robust English style and her truthful delineation of character are praised by the reviewer of the *Weekly Chronicle*. This review focuses on the contrast in the representation of the two female protagonists, and states:

> [Caroline] is the most charming character in the book – gentle, patient, firm, her quiet influence gradually works a change in the haughty nature of Robert Moore. The author embodies in her one form of womanly strength – the power of endurance. The heiress, Miss Shirley Keeldar, impulsive, almost masculine like her Christian name, strong in will and action, forms a contrast to Caroline Helstone; while the same feminine refinement, and a certain sympathy in the best traits of their disposition, draw them together and unite them. Shirley has the beauty of the rose – Caroline’s emblem is the violet. The first compares herself to the leopardess – the second is more lamb-like in her every-day life, but with a store of dormant courage.

This reviewer highlights both the differences and the resemblances between the girls. The issue of emancipation is not explicitly mentioned, but the reviewer concludes:

> There is intrinsic evidence in the book in favour of the rumour that the author is a woman. The female characters are all drawn with care, minuteness, and truth to nature, …; and the philosophy and opinions are such as we might expect from a woman. 35

In this review, as well as in most of the other articles, reference is made to the fact that Currer Bell must be a woman. It irritated Charlotte Brontë that so many critics kept stressing this issue; she preferred straightforward discussions of the novel(s), rather than this almost gossip-like concern about the gender of the author. 36 One of the few articles that did not mention this issue was an anonymous review in the *Britannia*. The writer of this review again mainly focuses on the depiction of both heroines, but keeps referring to Mr. Bell. In the discussion of both heroines, it is especially the contrast between both heroines that is again stressed:

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35 This unsigned review was originally published in the *Weekly Chronicle* (10 November 1849): 3.
36 In 1850, Charlotte Brontë’s “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell” put a stop to all speculation on the sex of the ‘Bells.’ The wording of the passage where she explained the adoption of their ‘noms de guerre’ is noteworthy: “Averse to personal publicity, we veiled our own names under those of Currier, Ellis, and Acton Bell; the ambiguous choice being dictated by a sort of conscientious scruple at assuming Christian names positively masculine, while we did not like to declare ourselves women, because – without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’ – we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice…” Quoted from the Norton edition of *Wuthering Heights*, 41.
Shirley Keeldar is a young lady, a Yorkshire heiress, with very independent notions, and a somewhat masculine style of thought, though her face and figure are delicate in the extreme. She has been named Shirley from the failure of male issue, and it is her whim sometimes to assume mannish airs. Mr. Bell has exerted all his ability to render this character at once original and attractive, and he has perfectly succeeded. She is like no other heroine of romance ever drawn. Wilful, obstinate, proud, pettish, provoking, she has a soul capable of the purest and deepest passion, and all her singularities of manner and expression only serve to set off her genius. In contrast is another young girl, Caroline, of a softer and gentler nature.

Many critics seem to be pleased with the portrayal of both girls, even when one of them is quite a liberated spirit. Rather than criticizing Brontë’s way of characterization, they like it and, overall, these reviews are noteworthy for their discernment and tolerance rather than for any narrow moralistic judgment.

Not all of the articles dealt with here are actual reviews; some are extracts from letters or more personal reader reports, but they were all responses from the contemporary reading public. Most of the reactions show an intense engagement of the readers with the events in the novel. Such involvement seems to become even stronger with ordinary woman readers. Quite a few women read Shirley. As Smith mentions in the “Introduction” to The Letters,

By the end of August the novel was finished, and on 26 October it was published by Smith, Elder and Company. Copies were sent to Harriet Martineau and Mrs Gaskell, and Charlotte was relieved and encouraged by their praise. (Smith, xx)

Martineau and Gaskell apparently did not write any reviews, but other female readers do compliment Shirley, though their comment is, on the whole, less thorough and well-thought through than the comment from many (male) critics. Catherine Winkworth praises the aesthetic aspects of Shirley, and she focuses on the characters again:

The book is infinitely more original and full of character than the ordinary run of novels – it belongs quite to a higher class – ... Caroline and Mr Helstone are thoroughly good characters. Shirley and Mrs. Pryor are good ideas, but badly worked out – the rest seem to me all exaggerated – Oh, Hortense Moore should be excepted, she is good, too.

In spite of the almost naïve approach in this extract it is interesting to see that the writer discussed the novel in a letter to her friend Eliza Paterson. Even in such a personal account, the writer does not hesitate to add a few comments on the novel.

38 This extract originally appeared in a letter to Eliza Paterson. It was published in Memorials of Two Sisters, Susanna and Catherine Winkworth, ed. Margaret J. Shaen (1908); cited in Allott, 147; cited in Smith, 303.
Emancipation

Brontë’s friend Mary Taylor was equally thrilled. She mentions *Shirley* in several of her letters to Brontë. When she first makes mention of the novel, she has not read the whole book, yet. She has then only seen extracts of it in the *Manchester Examiner* of 7 November 1849. But in this first reaction she does mention the ‘woman question’ and comments on the position of women especially in relation to work. But she seems quite stern and states “you seem to think that some women may indulge in [work]” (Smith, 392). Taylor herself believed all women should work. In the second letter in which she refers to *Shirley* she has read the whole book and is very enthusiastic about it. She states:

Shirley is much more interesting than J. Eyre – who indeed never interests you at all until she has something to suffer. All through this last novel there is so much more life & stir that it leaves you far more to remember than the other. (Smith, 439)

Yet, even though the reactions by all these ‘ordinary’ female readers were quite positive and intense, there is no thorough analysis of the aesthetic, ethical or moral aspects of the novel, no real analysis of the depiction of the female protagonists and only the occasional reference to the ‘woman question.’ Within the comment on the ‘woman question,’ the focus is on the issue of more useful occupations for women only. The issues of education or equal rights within marriage are not discussed.

In spite of the tendency by many professional reviewers to disregard larger structural devices at work in the fiction of the time, too, there was no mistaking that some of Brontë’s innovations lay, as the *Globe* emphasized, in her observation of everyday reality for women. The review in the *Globe* also discusses Brontë’s points raised about the position of women in society and again focuses on the issue of more useful occupations for women. It indicates that:

The rights of women generally, or at least their natural interests … are asserted by our authoress with justifiable warmth of feeling in several passages of these volumes.  

The review inserts an extract from *Shirley* on the general rights of women and quotes the discussion between Shirley and Caroline about professions for women (S, 391-392); it concludes,

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39 *Manchester Examiner* (7 November 1849) Columns 1-2; Smith, 394.
40 This duty of work was preached in Mary Taylor’s own novel *Miss Miles, or A Tale of Yorkshire Life Sixty Years Ago* (1890), along with women’s obligation to help each other if they could; but ultimately, if women suffering in solitude had instead ‘met together to make their wants known, and asked for help, no advice could have been given them, except to win a living for themselves, and not beg for it’ (*Miss Miles*, end of Ch. 28); Smith, 394.
41 Mary Taylor’s letter is dated 13 August 1850. Her reaction came rather late, but she wrote her letter from Wellington, New Zealand, and Smith adds in a note: “the Constantinople arrived in Wellington on Saturday 27 July 1850.” It was only then that she had received Brontë’s book; Smith, 441.
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we are really and seriously desirous to see [women] succeed in whatever other objects they choose to aim at. Of general intellectual cultivation, women have often as much as, often more than, the men they associate with. The question is whether that cultivation can be turned to any or what – untried uses! If any such uses really remain undiscovered, the discovery must, we suspect, be made by the ladies themselves. Men cannot, our authoress would perhaps say, will not help them. But not less certainly, men cannot hinder them from fulfilling their own mission, whatever it really is.

This reviewer does not mention the contrast or opposition between Shirley and Caroline, but Brontë’s preoccupation with the plight of women is clearly understood.

Aspects of rebellion

The range of contemporary opinion about Brontë is especially reflected in the periodicals whose particular religious or political bias may influence their literary reviews. The radical Examiner always approved of Brontë. Albany Fonblanque praises especially the depiction of the characters in an unsigned review in the Literary Examiner; though he sometimes considers them too intellectual:

The personages to whom Currer Bell introduces us are created by intellect, and are creatures of intellect. Habits, actions, conduct are attributed to them, such as we really witness in human beings; but the reflections and language which accompany these actions, are those of intelligence fully developed, and entirely self-conscious. Now in real men and women such clear knowledge of self is rarely developed at all, and then only after long trials. We see it rarely in the very young – seldom or ever on the mere threshold of the world.

Most of Fonblanque’s article is very positive about Shirley. He does not explicitly mention the ‘woman question’ but admits that “[t]he lesson intended is excellent.” He points out that “[Brontë] seems to be, in the main, content with the existing structure of society” and notices “a rational acquiescence in the inevitable tendencies of society,” but adds “this acquiescence we suspect to be reluctant.” Fonblanque formulates his findings very carefully, but he seems to have understood the gist of the novel. Brontë herself was pleased with his review. In a letter to Williams she states “I am willing to be judged by the Examiner … Fonblanque has power, he has discernment – I bend to his censorship (Smith, 278-279)

Brontë was most enthusiastic about the review by Eugène Forcade in the Revue des deux mondes, though. A short (translated) extract from his article is repeated here:

43 The review was probably by the radical journalist Albany William Fonblanque (1793-1872). The Examiner was edited by him (1830-47) and by John Forster (1847-55); he continued to contribute reviews after 1847. Brontë seems to have been assured of his authorship of this review. See her letters to Williams (5 November 1849) Smith, 278-79, and to Ellen Nussey (16 November 1849) Smith, 285. Fonblanque’s article originally appeared as an unsigned review in the Literary Examiner (3 November, 1849): 692-694.
Here then are three questions for Shirley to answer: Is Currer Bell a woman? Does the quality of Shirley fulfil the promise of Jane Eyre? Is Currer Bell really one of those bold and rebellious spirits so rightly mistrusted by law-abiding citizens in these unquiet times?

In the first place, Currer Bell is a woman: this is definitely proved by Shirley. The novel abounds in female characters which only a woman could have touched in with such delicacy and variety. The cause of women is defended throughout the book with a conviction and a skill perfectly characteristic of those who are pleading their own cause. As a picture of society, the novel could have been called Shirley, or the condition of women in the English middle-class...

Currer Bell has … retained one of the most piquant spices that enlivened his first book and has even increased the dose here and there: the moral freedom, the spirit of insubordination, the impulses of revolt against certain social conventions.\textsuperscript{44}

In a letter to her friend Ellen Nussey, Brontë writes in relation to this article:

“Shirley” makes her way. The reviews shower in fast. … The best critique which has yet appeared is in the “Revue des deux Mondes” … Comparatively few reviewers, even in their praise, evince a just comprehension of the author’s meaning. Eugene Forsarde [sic] … follows Currer Bell through every winding, discerns every point, discriminates every shade, proves himself master of the subject, and lord of the aim. With that man I would shake hands, if I saw him. I would say, “You know me, Monsieur; I shall deem it an honour to know you.” \textsuperscript{45}

Charlotte Brontë never did shake hands with Forcade. But Forcade’s reaction clearly shows that Brontë’s ideas about norms, values, and social roles for women were indeed picked up

\textsuperscript{44} Eugène Forcade’s article originally appeared in French in the Revue des deux mondes (15 November, 1849) in tome 4, 714-735; cited in Allott, 142-146; translation hers. In the original review Forcade explicitly refers to the first English version of Shirley. At this point in time, the novel had not been translated into French, yet. The quoted passage is as follows in his review: “Voilà donc trois questions auxquelles Shirley a d’abord à répondre: Currer Bell, est-ce une femme? Le mérite de Shirley tient-il les promesses de Jane Eyre? Currer Bell est-il décidément un de ces esprits rebelles et téméraires contre lesquels les malheurs du temps inspirent aux honnêtes gens une si juste défiance? Premièrement, Currer Bell est une femme: le roman de Shirley en est la preuve définitive. Ce livre abonde en caractères de femmes qu’une femme seule a pu nuancer avec cette variété et cette finesse. La cause des femmes y est défendue partout avec la conviction et l’art tout personnels à ceux qui plaident pour leur compte. Considéré comme peinture de moeurs, ce roman pourrait s’appeler Shirley, ou de la condition des femmes dans la classe moyenne anglaise (716). Currer Bell a conservé cependant, en augmentant la dose ça et là, une des plus piquantes épices de son premier livre: la liberté morale, l’esprit d’insoumission, les velléités de révolte contre certaines conventions sociales” (719).

\textsuperscript{45} Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857; London: Penguin Classics, 1997) 307-8. This letter is als mentioned in Smith’s study in Vol. II. 293-294. The punctuation and some of the spelling is quite different there, though. The extract here cites Gaskell.
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by readers, even across borders. It is also significant that it was a male critic who read, understood and approved of Shirley as a novel depicting the “condition of women in the English middle-class.” And it is intriguing that the spirit encouraging “moral freedom,” “insubordination,” and even the impulses of “revolt” are noticed and applauded.

Negative reviews

Corse and Westervelt point out that nineteenth century novels were mostly read for and judged concerning their moral value (Corse & Westervelt, 139-161). Seen in this light it is not surprising that Shirley received some negative criticism. Yet, only eight of the thirty-one reviews and reader-reports discussed here were quite critical. These reviews were the ones published in Bentley’s Miscellany, the Church of England Quarterly Review, the Economist, the Edinburgh, The Athenaeum, The Spectator, The Times and the Westminster. The review in the Economist is critical throughout. It does not approve of the abundance of characters, though the reviewer seems to like the way Brontë can make a character come alive in even a very brief passage. Yet, the article is quite thorough and, even when the reviewer does not like Shirley’s conduct, the gist of the novel is distinctly noticed and the article concludes:

The book is not, as a whole, natural; but there are many characters in it sketched to the life. That its impassioned and exaggerated language will be as beneficial as it will be much admired, we are inclined to doubt, while we warn our young readers that the wilfulness and more than ordinary energy ascribed to Shirley is much more pleasing in books than in actual life. Exaggeration of conduct is more likely to be pernicious.

46 Another interesting example in this context is mentioned in the article “The Reception of Charlotte Brontë’s Work in Nineteenth-Century Russia” by O. R. Demidova, The Modern Language Review Vol. 89, No. 3 (July 1994): 689-696. Demidova asserts that: “Brontë became the first woman writer since George Sand (and the first woman realistic writer) in whose work the question of the position of women occupied such an important place; this circumstance was one of the reasons for her lengthy period of popularity with the Russian public. The theme of the position of women was a traditional one in Russian literature from Karamzin and Pushkin onward. Democratic journalistic and critical writings played an active part in the struggle for the equality of women; a sympathetic attitude towards the position of women was a general feature of the work of many Russian writers in the 1840s and 1850s. … this theme acquired social resonance and, from being peripheral, was transformed into one of the major preoccupations of Russian literature” (691). Brontë’s work was at first available in Tauchnitz’s English-language edition, but was soon after its publication translated into Russian, and published by the Otechestvennye zapiski press. Shirley was available as Sherli by Korrer-Bellia from 1851 onwards in a translation by V. V. Butuzov (693).

47 Allott confirms this, stating: “Early Victorian reviews differ noticeably from our own chiefly because of the long-winded style then favored, the habit of moral explanation is closely associated with it, and the absence of detailed attention to particular narrative procedures, though interest in the novel as a literary form is lively and grows with the growing importance of the novel throughout the nineteenth century;” Allott,17. Other studies that support these views are: Richard Stang, The Theory of the Novel in England 1850-1870 (1959), and Kenneth Graham, English Criticism of the Novel 1865-1900 (1965).

than exaggeration of sentiment; and the more seductive is the eloquence
of Currer Bell, the more mischievous may be the influence of the very
masculine, wilful character of the heroine of the present novel. The
reviewer of this weekly magazine objects to some of the aesthetic aspects of the novel;
most of the commentary, however, relates to the ethical aspects like the represented spirit of
insubordination and the plea for emancipation. It does not approve of the mature
constructive dialogue that seems to be introduced and believes that a more liberal tolerance
of women’s rights will endanger society in general.

Similarly negative, but much less serious, is the tone of the review in The Times. This
article is derogatory and sometimes even frivolous. Caroline’s illness is ridiculed, as is
Shirley’s masculine behavior:

Miss Keeldar has much of the metal of the sterner sex beneath her soft
skin, and asserts intellectual independence as a woman’s right. There is
always danger in dealing with such delicate commodity … one awkward
touch spoils the picture and yields a caricature … she ‘sees newspapers
every day, and two of a Sunday’ she reads the leading articles and the
foreign intelligence, and looks over the market prices; in short, she reads
just what gentlemen read; she hates needlework, but is tenacious of her
book.

Brontë read this review when she was visiting her publisher and his family in London at the
beginning of December 1849. She was shocked and disappointed by the review and so were
many others. The whole article was disparaging in tone, especially in relation to the
depiction of both female main characters and the use of the derogatory word caricature. He
disapproved of the liberal behavior of Shirley, and condemned the novel’s emancipatory
intent, yet the plea for equality was quite obvious to him.

Some other reviewers were quite annoyed about the article in The Times. The review in The
Era, for example, points out:

“Shirley,” however, has the disadvantage of being a second offspring of
the brain. It has not put “Jane Eyre” in the shade ... The Times newspaper
has thought it worth while to devote a column of its “valuable space” to
the subject of those two extraordinary works, and in drawing comparisons
between them, has attempted to damage the reputation of the later
production.

The review continues to focus on the writer of Shirley and states:

And who is Currer Bell? The Times says a woman … It is not easy to
believe that the works we have mentioned, with all their masculine power
– all their potent passion – the white heat, as it were, of the feelings – all
their depth of reflection and cool acumen are the emanations of a female
mind – but the sex is little known to those who would believe it incapable

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50 This unsigned review originally appeared in The Times (7 December, 1849).
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of reaching all that has made Currer Bell celebrated. A woman does nothing by halves; she can feel more intensely, and observe more sagaciously than a man, and when she does think, a male philosopher is no match for her.

This reviewer likes Brontë’s depiction of women and is intrigued by the character of Shirley. The contrast between the gender-biased representation of women in general and the portrayal of Shirley is stressed:

Shirley herself will captivate many, but there will be more in her to admire than to love. To the majority of mankind a woman cannot be too womanly, and we need not stop to consider what that is. Shirley is, however, to use a slangy term, a “spicey creature.” Whatever be her precise nature, she has habits calculated to frighten half the men in the kingdom out of all thoughts of proposing for her – she is too brilliant, too profound, too self-possessed, we had almost said too gentlemanly.

This reviewer concludes:

[Brontë] has the vigour of De Stael, and the pathos of Miss Landon; the sense of Mrs. Montague and the feeling of Charlotte Young. She is in some respects like to many, but altogether unlike any one who has preceded her, so, is it to be wondered at, the “Shirley” is an extraordinary book? It is likely to excite more than to edify; but so does all that comes from such pens.

Reading this review, one wonders whether this reviewer was a woman. The reviewer’s emotional response to both the novel and its criticism can be explained by Iser’s phenomenological approach to the reading process. This reviewer is intrigued by the novel, and empathizes with both the characters and the writer of the novel, so much so that she publicly defends Brontë against the Thunderer’s critique.

G.H. Lewes

The most famous, though not the most positive, review was by G. H. Lewes in the Edinburgh. Throughout his article Lewes criticizes aspects such as the unity of the novel, but most of his article, six pages, is devoted to a discussion of the social roles available for women, and to an explanation of whether he considers men and women equal. His discussion is inspired mainly by a few passages in Shirley, all of which focus on the behavior of both Shirley and Caroline. In relation to the character Shirley, he states: “The manner and language of Shirley towards her guardian passes all permission.” But Caroline is criticized as well:

Even the gentle timid, shrinking Caroline enters the lists with the odious Mrs. York and the two ladies talk at each other, in a style which, to southern ears, sounds both marvellous and alarming. (Lewes, 161)

Overall, Lewes considers Brontë’s female characters “given to break out and misbehave themselves upon very small provocation” (Lewes, 161). He also does not think that Caroline behaves like a real woman:

There are traits about this character quite charming; and we doubt not she will be a favourite with the majority of readers. But any one examining ‘Shirley’ as a work of art, must be struck with want of keeping in making the gentle, shy, not highly cultivated Caroline talk from time to time in the strain of Currer Bell herself rather than in the strain of Helstone’s little niece. We could cite several examples: the most striking perhaps is that long soliloquy at pages 269-274 of the second volume, upon the condition of women, - in which Caroline takes a leaf out of Miss Martineau’s book. The whole passage, though full both of thought and of eloquence, is almost ludicrously out of place. (Lewes, 165-166)

Some of the things the protagonist Caroline Helstone states may seem out of character, but this is only true if one accepts Caroline as the typical ‘Angel in the House.’ Throughout the novel, however, Caroline also shows a different side: she is very thoughtful and she has a great sense of responsibility. In the story, Caroline has the age that a bachelor student of today might have, and this is exactly the age at which young people would start to develop their own ideas.

Shirley’s religious unorthodoxy is criticized. It is especially her “tirade about Milton’s Eve” that seems unwomanly to Lewes:

as an eloquent rhapsody we can scarcely admire it too much; but to be asked to believe that it was uttered in a quiet conversation between two young ladies, destroys half our pleasure. (Lewes, 167)

When the female protagonists seem to rise above their average being, they are censured most. It is only the description of the mermaid, an a-sexual and ineffective woman, that receives some positive criticism, and Lewes ends his discussion of the novel with a quote:

Our closing word shall be one of exhortation. Schiller, writing to Goethe about Madame de Stael’s ‘Corinne,’ says, ‘This person wants every thing that is graceful in a woman; and, nevertheless, the faults of her book are altogether womanly faults. She steps out of her sex – without elevating herself above it. (Lewes, 172-173)

After reading his review Brontë wrote Lewes a number of letters. The first one was quite brief and stated: “I can be on my guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends!” Lewes had apparently praised Jane Eyre, and Charlotte Brontë had expected an understanding review of Shirley, especially in relation to the female characters. But, even though Lewes led quite a ‘modern’ life himself and seemed to be in favor of emancipation, the conduct of both the ‘angel’ and the more rebellious character went too far to his liking. In another letter to Lewes, Brontë is more specific about her annoyance. “I was hurt,” she

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54 A very thorough study of the correspondence between Brontë and Lewes can be found in Franklin Gary’s article “Charlotte Brontë and George Henry Lewes,” PMLA Vol. 51, No. 2 (June 1936): 518-542.
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wrote to Lewes, because “after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly – I even thought so cruelly – handled the question of sex” (Smith, 332). Not only her female main characters were criticized, but Brontë herself as well.

Brontë did not really mind criticism in itself. She read most of the contemporary reviews and refers to many of them in her letters. With regard to Lewes’ article she did in fact pay attention to many of his remarks. The criticism which she received from him made her more aware of the necessity of self-criticism in her writings, opened her eyes to genuine literary problems and made her artistically more self-conscious (Gary, 540). But his condemnation of the female main characters is prejudiced, as is his interpretation of the ‘woman question’ and women’s ability to write in general.55

Lewes seems to come close to one of those men who do “not read [woman] in a true light” (S, 352). His reaction is not representative for all of the responses, however. In general, most contemporary readers and critics liked the novel. The use of the stereotypical images is noticed, as is the ‘woman question’ and the suggestion for more liberal behavioral patterns for women. It seems to be the balance between the sweet, docile, and acceptable behavior of the ‘Angel in the House,’ Caroline, and the more extreme behavior of Shirley that makes readers like the novel. Readers get an impression of alternative behavioral patterns, but Shirley adapts her conduct and the novel ends with the traditional resolution in marriage. This realistic novel would have thus fitted in with the interpretive reading strategies of the 1850s. The novel could, in a way, be read as moral instruction and, though Shirley does not resemble the image of selfless nurturer, Caroline does, and the novel as a whole becomes quite acceptable.

Overall, Shirley was recognized to be Charlotte Brontë’s most socially concerned novel, intended in her own words to be “unromantic as Monday morning,” and one of its most important themes - the position of women in society - is formulated in the novel’s pleas for better education for girls, and more useful occupations for women who seem to be condemned by society either to matrimony or, as old maids, to a life of self-denial and acts of private charity (S, 5). One of the most important techniques used by Brontë to represent these issues is her use of the ‘mirror image.’ The use of this technique permits Brontë to be quite outspoken in her interpretation of the social roles for women in contemporary society, without being too controversial.

Most critics and readers understood these issues to be the main themes of the novel and applauded its representation, even when, on the whole, narrative strategies were not yet generally discussed in contemporary reviews. Except for the article in The Times and G. H. Lewes’ negative review, most readers and critics could not really find any fault with the novel’s social aspects. Brontë was praised for her vigour and originality, her accurate English and her social and historical precision. In spite of the sometimes simplistic readings of the earliest critics, the hints of emancipation were understood without the novel gaining

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55 George Eliot (Marian Evans, his wife) stated about his approach to her own writing skills “[Lewes] distrusted – indeed, disbelieved in – my possession of any dramatic power … his prevalent impression was, that though I could hardly write a poor novel, my effort would want the highest quality of fiction – dramatic presentation.” J. W. Cross, George Eliot’s Life as Related in her Letters and Journals (New York: Harper, 1885) I, 298-299.
a ‘subversive’ reputation and *Shirley* remained in print throughout the nineteenth century. It was Leslie Stephen who first pointed out the possible explanation for the appreciation of her work by the contemporary reader, in spite of its sometimes unorthodox aspects. He described this as “the inherent flaw in her thinking which carried her to protest against conventionality while adhering to society’s conventions.” It was precisely this ambiguity, achieved by the mild application of the mirroring technique, that made *Shirley* acceptable reading.

Noteworthy about the reception of this novel is the interest Brontë herself shows in the comment of her readers and critics. Brontë had a reputation of living an isolated life, but she knew and met many of the critics and readers personally. She wrote about them and to them in her letters. The reviews and comments that seemed to strike her the most were the articles especially dealing with her depiction of the ‘woman question.’ She is grateful for Fonblanque’s and Forcade’s thoughtful comments, but she is furious about Lewes’ condemnatory review. The communication frame of this novel not only seems to open up a dialogue between the ‘text side’ and the ‘reader side,’ but also between the novelist and the reader.

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56 Leslie Stephen, “Charlotte Brontë,” *Cornhill Magazine* 108 and 109 (December 1877); Allott, xiii, 413.
57 Thackeray was apparently also very supportive of and complimentary towards Brontë, but Smith points out in her “Introduction” that “Charlotte’s correspondence with Thackeray has not yet come to light, though rumours of its survival have circulated, and forgers have supplied unconvincing notes from Charlotte” (Smith, xxiii).