Dialogue, Discourse, Theft, and Mimicry: Charlotte Brontë Rereads William Makepeace Thackeray

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In enthusiastic praise of *Vanity Fair*, Charlotte Brontë wrote, “I regard Mr. Thackeray . . . as the legitimate high priest of Truth” ([Correspondence 243](#)). Perhaps this reverence has confused critics who see in Brontë’s subsequent novel *Shirley* an unsuccessful adaptation of Thackeray’s techniques. But to revere is not necessarily to imitate slavishly. And to speak, as have critics in the past, of women’s texts as adaptations of men’s texts corroborates notions of women’s texts as belated, derivative, or secondary to the male tradition. Further, it forecloses in advance some of the most important questions those textual revisions generate. I wish to engage here with a range of concepts under the rubric of intertextuality, all of which are related through their focus on language and its operations, and all of which are informed by the conviction that meaning is a process of differentiation and that every text, therefore, borrows from, echoes, imitates, mimics, parodies precursor texts.¹

I am interested in setting forth a more complete theory of textual relationships than has been implied by the term “influence.” Influ-
ence studies have tended to take a "tradition-bound position" which "regards literary influence as a benign, even reverential endorsement of humanism" (Renza 186). Textual imitation, in this light, reinforces rather than challenges traditional values. It also implies a hierarchical relationship between originary genius and derivative talent, and takes as foundational the notion of agency. In contrast, a theory of intertextuality is born with the death of the author; by focusing on what Clayton and Rothstein have called "the impersonal field of crossing texts" (3), such a theory challenges traditional concepts of humanism, hierarchy, and agency. So understood, influence and intertextuality are an antipodes of critical discourse, a conceptual opposition.

But to insist upon the irreconcilability of that opposition jeopardizes feminist analyses that hope both to engage the broader field of language relations implied by intertextuality and at the same time to stipulate a gendered subjectivity as origin of text. Feminist critics Nancy Miller and Susan Stanford Friedman have usefully addressed this apparent incommensurability. Miller proposes a method of reading as "arachnology": "a critical positioning which reads against the weave of indifferentiation to discover the embodiment in writing of a gendered subjectivity" (80). This method, she argues, "may allow us to refuse and refigure the very opposition of subject and text, spider and web" (97). Friedman helpfully develops this idea of "political intertextuality," insisting that "we must separate the concept of intertextuality from the death of the author," and adding that such a separation has been common among American critics, who "have resisted the inevitability of this connection" (159). Friedman grounds her own argument in the work of Julia Kristeva, who coined the neologism "intertextuality" in 1966 and has subsequently criticized readers for distorting the meaning she intended. As Friedman points out, the idea of intentional meaning makes ironic her discourse on anonymous intertextuality. Rather than indict Kristeva for inconsistency, Friedman uses this conflict to emphasize that "the discourses of influence and intertextuality have not been and cannot be kept pure, untainted by each other" (154). Inevitably, intertextuality has its own roots in the discourse of influence.
We must take the inevitable melding of these concepts, then, not as a pollution but as a productive fertilization. The concept of intertextuality as I will engage it here stipulates textual revision as a strategy for destabilizing the status quo, employing tactics that, as some have noted, have particular power for unsettling gender arrangements. Although my theory retains the political implications of influence and authorship, it welds that politics to a postmodern methodology. The theories of Mikhail Bakhtin, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, and Luce Irigaray promise to produce a more adequate reading of Brontë's *Shirley*, both in its relationship to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and in itself, as well as a more sophisticated poetics of women's fiction in general.

In its extreme form, the idea of intertextuality postulates an antimimetic contagion of writing and so puts paid to the notion of one text specifically imitating another. It raises the question of how I will legitimately engage *Vanity Fair* as a precursor for *Shirley*. Why choose one text over another? Why that particular text? I can give no fully satisfactory a priori rationale; Bronte's admiration for Thackeray, her evident close knowledge of his work, a similarity of technique and subject—such facts certainly invite the comparison. But a justification of the choice must lie in the fruitfulness of the enterprise itself: a study of the intertextual relationships between the novels yields impressive insights. At the same time, a general notion of intertextuality, such as I engage here, makes it possible to expand our discussion beyond the particular discursive intersections of these two literary texts to consider how Thackeray's and Brontë's novels interact with other discursive formulations of a culture, how they circulate within a broad network of political and social values.

Mikhail Bakhtin develops his ideas of intertextuality within his broader theory of dialogism, or "double-voiced discourse," which has significant implications for notions of artistic creativity and which suggests a liberating relationship between "influence" and aesthetic production. In his fourth essay in *The Dialogic Imagination*, Bakhtin speaks of the "importance of struggling with another's discourse, its influence in the history of an individual's coming
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to ideological consciousness.” He adds that “One’s own discourse and one’s own voice, though born of another or dynamically stimulated by another, will sooner or later begin to liberate themselves from the authority of the other’s discourse” (348). The process of liberation receives further impetus from the constant competition of a variety of alien voices within any individual consciousness, any individual text. All language for Bakhtin is dialogized; that is, it bears within itself the history of its use, a “constant interaction of meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others” (426). His addendum—“the internal dialogism of double-voiced prose discourse can never be exhausted thematically” (324)—emphasizes the effect of dialogic language in unsettling established meanings.

Julia Kristeva develops a concept of text as mosaic that borrows from Mikhail Bakhtin’s formulation of text as “double-voiced discourse,” and in the process of drawing from a powerful precursor to authorize her own voice, she enacts the very pattern that I identify in Brontë’s response to Thackeray. Kristeva’s theory conceives of “intertextuality” as a “mixture of textual signs, citations, and echoes.” Writing in the context of Derrida and Lacan, as well as Bakhtin, Kristeva transforms Bakhtin’s emphasis on the word to a focus on texts: “Any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another” (66). Bakhtin’s dialogized word and Kristeva’s intertext both pinpoint the inevitable incorporation of one work by another and the effects that textual appropriations may have for liberating an individual’s own voice. Quite literally, Kristeva has incorporated Bakhtin’s voice to liberate her own, a “self-authorizing strategy [that] she uses often” (Friedman 147). Friedman adds, “This ‘misreading’ . . . does not eliminate the other, but rather borrows his authority from the position of disciple. Intertextuality was paradoxically born under the guise of influence” (147). Just so, in her imitation of Thackeray’s narrative omniscience, Brontë discovered a new capacity to speak authoritatively.

Michel Foucault’s concept of discourse lies aslant the Bakhtinian/Kristevan emphasis on the transformative/liberatory effects of
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dialogism and mosaic. Foucault defines discourse as “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation” (107). He continues, “thus I shall be able to speak of clinical discourse, economic discourse, the discourse of natural history, psychiatric discourse” (107–8). Foucault is less interested in the way one text revises another—all part of a literary discourse—than in the way different discursive formations operate and cooperate as a technique or “form of power which makes individuals subjects . . . subject to someone else by control and dependence, and tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge” (212). Thus, although Foucault’s “discourse” is not specifically about literary intertextuality, it bespeaks the fundamental intertextuality of different discursive formations. Applying Foucault, we will conceive of intertextual relations between works not as transformative and liberatory, but as conservative, tending to a consolidation of certain powers. Foucault’s concepts give us access to the way different discursive formations interrelate to create a certain kind of gendered subject. However, by working to uncover the mechanisms by which we are subjected, an intertextual approach helps to destabilize a traditional humanistic perspective and so frees us from its normalizing tendencies.

Although Roland Barthes conjoins the death of the author with the birth of the text and so postulates a radical intertextuality where every text is potentially an intertext for every other, in practice Barthes’s radical theory is constrained by his reading practice in S/Z, where the “interpretive results do not take one further than a highly skilled, subtle formalist might go” (Clayton and Rothstein 23). Barthes’s practice, then, helps justify my practice in this essay, which remains focused on only two texts. Yet the theory remains highly suggestive and indicates a way of beginning to conceptualize the revolutionary potential in the woman’s signature. That potential is encoded in Barthes’ work as theft: “the only possible rejoinder . . . [is] neither confrontation, nor destruction, but only theft: fragment the old text of culture, science, literature, and change its features according to a formula of disguise, as one disguises . . . stolen goods” (10). Barthes’s analogy of borrowing
to theft emphasizes the transgressive quality of intertextuality when one deliberately appropriates another's goods and disguises them for her own uses. Barthes's meaning remains playful and oblique, as is his style, which thus becomes an exemplification of his meaning. I will exploit his concept by focusing on theft as a technique to disrupt seemingly stable cultural encodings. Such an approach helps explain the way Brontë plays with the trope of tears in the Victorian novel. Tears serve as a primary Victorian encoding of femininity. Tears both define and undermine the woman, signifying both sensitivity and enfeeblement. That old cultural text must be appropriated—that is, stolen—fragmented and disguised, or re-presented. This process works to effect a transformation.

Like Barthes, Luce Irigaray investigates deliberate, even staged, responses to another's prose, for the purpose of disrupting established meanings. Irigaray identifies "mimicry" as an "interim strategy" for "destroying the discursive mechanism" which has oppressed woman. "It means to resubmit herself . . . to 'ideas,' in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make 'visible,' by an effect of 'playful repetition,' what was supposed to remain invisible" (76). This formulation addresses explicitly gender issues, as the other theories do not. Parody and mimicry are strategies in which "the woman deliberately assumes the feminine style and posture assigned to her within . . . discourse in order to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her" (220). Applying Irigaray's concepts, I argue that Brontë stages, or exaggerates, the stylization of woman as mermaid and the posture of woman as wife.

Although these concepts of dialogue/mosaic, discourse, theft, and mimicry are related, they should not be conflated with each other, as each offers a unique angle of vision on intertextuality, particularly in Shirley, where Charlotte Brontë responds to one precursor text, Vanity Fair. Emphasizing as I do the liberatory effects of such intertextual relations, I wish to modify Nancy Miller's phrase "political intertextuality," which stresses a process of "overreading" to discern the woman's signature. I adopt instead
the phrase "strategic intertextuality" to suggest both the politics of signature and its transformative potential.

The concept of strategic intertextuality opens the way for an enlarged poetics of fiction, one that shows more clearly how Shirley cites, absorbs, and transforms Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*. Brontë accomplishes these ends by adopting a third person narrator who echoes key passages of narrative commentary on the ideology of womanhood, by linking domestic and carceral discourses, by revising the Victorian trope of tears, and by parodying feminine paradigms and traditional plots.

*Text as Dialogue/Mosaic*

Thackeray is astute about the realities of that Victorian icon, "the Angel in the House." He conflates her fate in the home with that of other institutionalized beings like idiots and madmen confined to insane asylums. And he apparently caught Brontë's attention with this profound glimpse into women's lives, this perception of the discipline, the imprisonment, and the punishment. Thackeray writes,

O you poor women! O you poor secret martyrs and victims, whose life is a torture, who are stretched on racks in your bedrooms, and who lay your heads down on the block daily at the drawing-room table; every man who watches your pains, or peers into those dark places where the torture is administered, must pity you. . . . (552)

Brontë rewrites,

You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. . . . Bitterness is strength—it is tonic. Sweet mild force following acute suffering, you find nowhere: to talk of it is delusion. There may be apathetic exhaustion after the rack. (128)
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Despite thematic parallels, formal differences abound. Thackeray represents the feminine from the comfortable distance of an explicitly male narrator and narratee (e.g., “We are Turks with the affections of our women” [169], and “Oh, be humble, my brother, in your prosperity!” [552]). And, although he adopts an ironic stance, that same male narrator ultimately cannot resist reinscribing an ideology of female selflessness that promises to make his own life pleasant when women “consent to remain at home as our slaves” (169).

The imprisonment and secret suffering of idealized women which pass momentarily under Thackeray’s sympathetic patriarchal notice become a major agenda in Brontë’s novel. Most notably, of course, she represents the feminine experience from a woman’s perspective (“let [the scorpion] sting you through your palm,” and “after your hand and arms have swelled and quivered long with torture”). The choice of the second person “you” is significant because it alludes both to the reader and, as a colloquial usage, to the writer. We are inside the experience rather than comfortably outside—the narrator and narratee at this moment share the female position, together in the torture chamber of Victorian ideology, which dictates that “[a] lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish” (128).

A simple illustration of the difference emerges when we compare the following two narrative generalizations, which echo each other. Thackeray’s narrator writes: “The best of women (I have heard my grandmother say) are hypocrites” (165). Brontë’s narrator responds: “All men taken singly, are more or less selfish” (183). Virginia Woolf called this capacity for generalization about the other sex “one of the good offices that sex can discharge for sex—to describe the spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head” (94), which neither sex can see for itself.

Although Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar are right to say that Brontë adopts a third person narrator like Thackeray’s, that claim is still too imprecise to tell us anything about how the text is actually working (373). In Gérard Genette’s more precise terms, both
narrators are heterodiegetic (outside the story they narrate). But Brontë’s narrator often resembles more closely the homodiegetic (or first person) narrator of Jane Eyre than she does the narrator of Vanity Fair. There is a difference in focalization. Genette reminds us of the crucial distinction between who sees and who speaks, that is, between mood and voice. Who sees in Brontë’s Shirley is often an impassioned and angry woman who exhorts “Men of England,” “Men of Manchester,” “Men of Yorkshire,” and “Fathers” to release their daughters from crippling custom. This focalizer/narrator usually stands at a great remove from the narratee she most frequently postulates, a comfortable and complacent patriarch. Consider this exhortation: “Men of England! look at your poor girls, many of them fading around 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. . . .” (378). Sometimes parodic, sometimes complacent, sometimes self-righteous—the focalizer shifts and so testifies, as does her tendentious tone, to the uneasiness of the narrator/narratee-as-patriarch relationship.

The focalizer of Thackeray’s novel is, in contrast, a comfortable, genial, and kind patriarch, who ultimately comprehends women’s lives within the general tale of vanities he unfolds. Thackeray’s novel charts a movement toward a normative position—the carnivalesque atmosphere of a London fair that includes both Becky and Amelia—from which all human life, the generic man, is exposed in the folly of his vanity. The concluding vision is produced from a consonance of values between the focalizer/narrator and narratee: “Which of us is happy in the world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?” The third person plural bespeaks an amiable companionship that seems to be denied by the tendentious tone of Brontë’s narrator.

By shifting from Thackeray’s companionable friendship between focalizer and narratee, Brontë also dramatically shifts the effects of her narrative; and it no longer seems adequate to conclude (as Gilbert and Gubar do in an otherwise insightful discussion) that Brontë was trying to create the calm objectivity and magisterial
omniscience of a Thackeray and thereby “becomes enmeshed in essentially the same male-dominated structures that imprison her characters” (373). Indeed, the case appears quite otherwise: Brontë wishes to expose “calm objectivity” as a by-product of ideological conservatism. Rather than enmeshing her in male-dominated structures and ideologies, her revision of Thackeray’s calm objectivity becomes a wedge for exposing further the ideological gap that his irony has already opened between the idealization and the reality of women’s lives. Thackeray’s voice, which Brontë echoes, authorizes her own more urgent tones, but her urgency, which cannot assume congruence with another, in turn lends authority to very different narrative ends.

Text as Discourse

Ideological issues focus on that idealized icon of womanhood in Victorian England, the Angel in the House. In nineteenth-century discourse, the home became an institution encoded as feminine. The celebration of home (with its presiding feminine angel) as a refuge from the harsh realities of the commercial world masked its status as a prison for women, enforcing the kind of self-discipline Foucault points to in Discipline and Punish. The disciplinary controls exerted by the home (controls which actually work on the mind as would those in Bentham's proposed Panopticon) are imaged by both Thackeray and Brontë as bodily tortures. Thackeray is comfortably explicit: “[Amelia’s] life, begun not unprosperously, had come down to this—to a mean prison and a long, ignoble bondage. . . . How many thousands of people are there, women for the most part, who are doomed to endure this long slavery?” (552). Brontë picks up the echo of Thackeray's idea and extends its historical implications by critiquing the institutionalization and discipline of women's lives, the way in which the normative, the ideology of womanhood, becomes a straightjacket or prison.

To demonstrate the breadth of her grasp and depiction, we may refer to Discipline and Punish and its discussion of the emergence of
new modes of discipline in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These new modes include (1) an unseen but all-seeing surveillance, (2) a regime of the norm, and (3) various techniques of the self and its sexuality (summarized in Miller viii). In discussing the locus and operation of discipline, Foucault notes parenthetically that it would be interesting one day to explore “how intra-familial relations have become ‘disciplined’” (215). Brontë, in fact, anticipates this provocative idea in *Shirley*. There she depicts the disciplinary action of the normative in women’s lives, in both Victorian house architecture and domestic occupation. The house and its routines become spaces structured for the inculcation of a social ideology that proves particularly destructive for women.

Foucault points out that the nineteenth-century prison depended on two major principles to enact its reform. The first is strict isolation. Without insisting on a rigid homology between the operations of prisons and the ideal upper-class home, we can still be struck by Caroline Helstone’s extraordinary isolation in the novel. Mark Girouard, in *Life in the English Country House*, notes that nineteenth-century architecture began to enact rigid segregations: between masters and servants and between men and women. The essential quality of the Victorian home was privacy (285), but another word for privacy is isolation. In the Victorian house, rooms became encoded as masculine or feminine. For example, the dining room was a masculine space decorated in “massive oak or mahogany” to mirror “masculine importance,” while the drawing room became a feminine space capturing “feminine delicacy” in “spindly gilt or rosewood, and silk or chintz” (292).

Such historical details confirm the inscription of sexual difference and the disciplinary action of segregation and isolation in the home. They work on Caroline both to sap her energies and to preclude rebellion or dissent. The narrator tells us at one point, “Caroline was limited once more to the grey Rectory; the solitary morning walk by remote byways; the long, lonely afternoon sitting in the quiet parlour which the sun forsook at noon” (375), a routine which the narrator summarizes as the “solitude, the sadness, the nightmare of her life” (381). The preponderance of nouns, adjec-
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tives, and verbs suggesting isolation is noteworthy: “solitary,” “remote,” “lonely,” “quiet,” “forsook,” “solitude.” Rose Yorke describes Caroline’s life as a “black trance like a toad’s, buried in marble,” and “a long slow death.” The rectory is a “windowed grave;” her life “monotony and death” (384, 385). Caroline longs for a profession or a trade “fifty times a day” because labor can “give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single master-torture. Besides,” Caroline adds, “successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none” (235). But Caroline is already so well disciplined by her lady’s life that she can take no effective action.

The second principle that Foucault articulates as necessary to the regulatory action of prisons is work: “Work is defined, with isolation, as an agent of carceral transformation” (240). Ironically, Foucault cites the women’s workshop at Clairvaux as “the perfect image of prison labour.” He quotes from Foucher’s 1838 text De la reforme des prisons: “on a throne, above which is a crucifix, a sister is sitting; before her, arranged in two rows, the prisoners are carrying out the task imposed on them, and, as needlework accounts for almost all the work, the strictest silence is constantly maintained... It seems that, in these halls, the very air breathes penitence and expiation” (243). I term this example ironic because anyone who has read Shirley will be aware of the prominence of needlework in Brontë’s novel—where sewing is a disciplinary activity.

Caroline first appears in the novel subject to just such a regimen as Foucher described. She is under the instruction of her cousin, Hortense, who is teaching her “fine needlework” (103):

The afternoon was devoted to sewing... unnumbered hours [of] fine embroidery, sight-destroying lace-work, marvellous netting and knitting, and, above all, [of] most elaborate stocking-mending... It was another of Caroline’s troubles to be condemned to learn this foreign style of darning, which was done stitch by stitch so as exactly to imitate the fabric of the stocking itself; a wearifu’ process, but considered by Hortense Gérard... as one of the first “duties of woman.”... No time did [Hortense] lose in seeking up a hopeless pair of hose, of which the heels were entirely gone, and in setting the
ignorant English girl to repair the deficiency: this task had been commenced two years ago, and Caroline had the stockings in her work-bag yet. She did a few rows every day, by way of penance for the expiation of her sins. (107–8)

Brontë writing on domestic life, employing such terms as "condemned," "penance," "expiation," and "sins," echoes Foucher writing on prison discipline. At one point Caroline argues, "If I sew I cannot listen; if I listen, I cannot sew" (115), pointing to the way sewing curbs and regulates activity of the mind.

When Caroline returns to her uncle at the rectory, he approves her day with the words, "Well, that will do—stick to the needle . . . and you’ll be a clever woman some day" (122). At home, if she is not sewing for the Jew basket (134), she is making dresses for herself: "Some gloomy hours had she spent in the interval. Most of the time had been passed shut up in her own apartment [sewing]; only issuing from it, indeed, to join her uncle at meals. . . ." (243–44). Again, Caroline’s routine echoes Foucault’s discipline of work punctuated by meals. Later, Caroline asks the logical question which is focalized through the narrator’s satiric eyes: "What do [fathers] expect [daughters] 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 germ of faculties for anything else: a doctrine as reasonable to hold, as it would be that the fathers have no faculties but for eating what their daughters cook, or for wearing what they sew" (377).

As assiduously as Caroline sews, Shirley avoids the needle. With heavy irony the narrator relates: "[Shirley] takes her sewing occasionally: but, by some fatality, she is doomed never to sit steadily at it for above five minutes" (372). Or we are told, "After tea Shirley reads, and she is just about as tenacious of her book as she is lax of her needle" (373). Playing the transvestite Captain Keeldar—indipendent, wealthy, and parentless—Shirley can assume many male freedoms and prerogatives and so throws into relief the narrow disciplines of a woman’s usual lot.
Of course, Victorian ladies did not spend all their time in isolation or at their needle. Their isolation might otherwise be enviable; one might see it as privacy, a room of one’s own. The corollary discipline in their lives Caroline characterizes as “unprofitable visiting”—the routine of morning calls and afternoon teas (377). I mentioned earlier that the drawing room became a feminine space in Victorian England. Mark Girouard adds that the “drawing room acquired two new functions in the Victorian period, as a result of the inane ceremony of morning calls and the more genial celebration of afternoon tea” (293). Morning calls “(which by late nineteenth century took place in the afternoon) . . . involved carriage visits from one local hostess to another, and a quarter of an hour’s polite conversation in the drawing room” (293). Such rituals virtually held mistresses hostage in houses, morning and afternoon, giving and receiving these “inane” visits.

These rituals function in ways similar to Bentham’s proposed Panopticon, a prison designed so that the inmates would be constantly under an unseen but all-seeing surveillance. Although ladies at home did not live in glass cells, there was the constant possibility that they would be visited at any moment. They had, in effect, to be always ready for the regulatory gaze of society. Morning calls and afternoon teas served as a continual check over their behavior. This control was further enhanced by a normative code of behavior set out in the etiquette books, a widely popular innovation in the Victorian age.

The first view we have of Caroline Helstone at home presents her subject to just such a disciplinary regimen. The narrator relates, “When she had dined, and found herself in the Rectory drawing-room alone, having left her uncle over his temperate glass of port, the difficulty that occurred to and embarrassed her was—How am I to get through this day” (130). The doorbell interrupts her thoughts, and curates join her uncle in the male space, the dining room. Caroline has a new worry “lest they should stay to tea.” Her fate is sealed when four ladies are announced to her in the drawing room, and Caroline wishes herself “meantime at Jericho” (131). The social rituals are an agony to Caroline—her visit with the ladies is
punctuated, we are told, by silences of five minutes, and the ordeal leaves Caroline with a full sense of her "ignorance and incompetency." The narrator is both savage and funny in the following comment: "Pause third came on. During its continuance, Caroline was feeling at her heart's core what a dreaming fool she was; what an unpractical life she led; how little fitness there was in her for ordinary intercourse with the ordinary world" (133). She can revive "the flagging discourse" only "by asking them if they would all stay to tea" (133).

One form of discipline gives way to another as Caroline feels the pressure of the normative. Tea must be followed "in the natural course of events" by music. Caroline has opened the piano, we are told, "knowing how it would be" (140). For Caroline, the result of this discipline, called entertaining, is a "sort of brain-lethargy" and a "deadened spirit" (141). She escapes briefly to the dining room and "rested herself—rested at least her limbs, her senses, her hearing, her vision—wearily with listening to nothing and gazing on vacancy" (142). This is a characteristically grim picture of institutional control, the power of the normative in women's lives. What began with Thackeray's metaphor for Amelia's imprisonment in "woman's lot" expands in Brontë's novel to become an exploration of the connections and links between two seemingly different discursive formations: the domestic and the carceral.

Text as Theft

To turn from Foucault to Barthes is to take up a dramatically different idea, the notion of cultural revision, and thus to think about intertextuality in a very different way. The "old text of culture" undergoes a change of features, as in Brontë's "theft" of the Victorian trope of tears, a powerful signifier of femininity. Brontë appropriates metonymic associations of tears—sobs, sighs, weepings—as attributes of a landscape, of nature, of fate. So personalized through a feminine trope, the destructive powers of nature and fate are read as woman-inspired, as a consequence of rage
simmering below the surface of women’s acquiescence in domestic arrangements that disempower them.

Tears were the Victorian trope par excellence for femininity, ushered in with Victoria, the girl queen, and Barrett Browning’s poetic paean to her:

God save thee, weeping Queen!
Thou shalt be well beloved!
The tyrant’s sceptre cannot move,
As those pure tears have moved!
The nature in thine eyes we see,
That tyrants cannot own—
The love that guardeth liberties!
Strange blessing on the nation lies
Whose Sovereign wept—
Yea, wept, to wear its crown!

In her portrait of a weeping monarch, Barrett Browning attempts to bridge the gap in the signifier “tears” between strength of sensibility and weakness of will.


Thackeray’s genial irony reveals his relish for this feminine trope. In the opening pages of *Vanity Fair*, Amelia Sedley drownsin a rhetoric of tears. Everyone, including Amelia herself, cries at her departure from Chiswick Mall: “[S]he had a pair of eyes, which sparkled with the brightest and honestest good-humour, except indeed when they filled with tears, and that was a great deal too often; for the silly thing would cry over a dead canary bird; or over a mouse, that the cat haply had seized upon; or over the end of a novel, were it ever so stupid” (14–15). From introduction to farewell, Amelia’s story is awash in tears: “Emmy’s head sank down, and for almost the last time in which she shall be called
upon to weep in this history, she commenced that work" (658). Women's work.

For Becky Sharp, Amelia's dark side, "Nobody cried," and the implied inversion also holds true: she cried for nobody (16). At her crisis, discovered by her husband with Lord Steyne, her schemes exploded, she sits "in the midst of her miserable ruins with clasped hands and dry eyes" (516–17). The narrative indictment implicit in her "dry eyes" anticipates Becky's textual reentry as the bewitching, yet treacherous "syren." Thackeray's negative interpretation of the opposing signifier "dry eyes" keeps women under the tyranny of the sign "tears."

In contrast, Brontë pursues what was implicit in Thackeray's representation of Amelia, the way a woman's tears inscribe her within a cultural economy of prescribed suffering. Brontë's narrator in Shirley enjoins women to short-circuit the signifying current so that dry eyes encode power. As the tears that image her sensibility dry up, so does her susceptibility to disappointment, disease, death: "You expected bread, and you have got a stone, break your teeth on it, and don't shriek because the nerves are martyrized. . . . You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly on the gift; let it sting through your palm. . . . the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob" (128). In Brontë, the answer to the question "Why not cry?" is plain: "[I]f you survive the test—some, it is said, die under it—you will be stronger, wiser, less sensitive" (128).

Into the narrative spaces left blank because there are no tears to fill them pour the woman's questions, effectively silenced in Thackeray's text: "How am I to get through this day?" (130). "What am I to do to fill the interval of time which spreads between me and the grave?" "What was I created for, I wonder?" "Where is my place in the world?" (190).

It remains, then, for Brontë to fragment the old text of culture, tears, to change its features through disguise: "[Caroline] returned from an enchanted region to the real world: for Nunnely wood in June, she saw her narrow chamber; for the songs of birds in alleys,
she heard the rain on her casement; for the sigh of the south wind, came the sob of the mournful east" (189). Women may be dry-eyed, but the world weeps. Rain and winds, disguised sobs and sighs, imbue the world with a feminine sensibility that threatens to rend the fabric of existence. The sobs of the future sound an apocalyptic note: “The future sometimes seems to sob a low warning of the events it is bringing us. . . . At other times this Future bursts suddenly, as if a rock had rent, and in it a grave had opened, whence issues the body of one that slept. Ere you are aware, you stand face to face with a shrouded and unthought-of Calamity—a new Lazarus” (399). What rough beast slouches toward Bethlehem to be (re)born? Is it woman?

Text as Mimicry

Brontë's narrator is often angry, only occasionally antic. Yet the playful impulse erupts at key moments. What confuses, perhaps, is the way Brontë's admiration for Thackeray's art coexists with criticism of his perspectives. The letter in which she identifies the author of *Vanity Fair* as "the legitimate high priest of Truth" continues in a reverential vein: "He, I see, keeps the mermaid's tail below water, and only hints at the dead men's bones and noxious slime amidst which it wriggles; but his hint is more vivid than other men's elaborate explanations" (Correspondence 224). Brontë echoes *Vanity Fair*’s narrator, who comments, "In describing this syren, singing and smiling, coaxing and cajoling, the author, with modest pride, asks his readers all round, has he once forgotten the laws of politeness, and showed the monster's hideous tail above water? No!" (617). Nonetheless, that narrator relishes a brief glimpse or two below the waterline, where the mermaid's tail is "writhing and twirling, diabolically hideous and slimy, flapping amongst bones, or curling round corpses" (617).

Dorothy Dinnerstein identifies the mermaid's threat with the element in which she lives, "the dark and magic underwater world from which our life comes and in which we cannot live” (5). That
threat also lies in the oppositions she embodies: human/animal, charmer/destroyer. For all of his decorum, the narrator's alignment of Becky "shed-no-tears" Sharp with the mermaid reinforces a figurative economy in which woman's superficial charm conceals a deadly purpose: "They look pretty enough when they sit upon a rock, twanging their harps and combing their hair, and sing, and beckon to you to come and hold the looking-glass; but when they sink into their native element, depend on it those mermaids are about no good, and we had best not examine the fiendish marine cannibals, revelling and feasting on their wretched pickled victims" (617). Who are "they"? Who is "you"? Who are "we"? "They (mermaid/women) beckon "you" (men/the masculine narratee), and thus "we" (male narrator and readers—men/women?) must keep our bodies and minds above water. What happens to women caught and deformed in this syntax, as both third person object/Other and first person subject?

Staging the feminine—the stylization and parody of stereotypes and norms which is Irigaray's recommended tactic—becomes Brontë's strategy as she, too, introduces in Shirley the figure of the mermaid. First the narrator inexplicably describes her pure, meek heroine, Caroline Helstone, "combing her hair, long as a mermaid's . . . enchanted with the image" in her mirror (123). In light of her own letter of praise, it seems unlikely that Brontë has forgotten Thackeray's description of mermaids "combing their hair." The point seems to be that this enchantress enchants only herself. The man she dreams of winning resolutely resists her charms and proposes to a woman with money.

The mermaid figure returns when Shirley and Caroline plan a tour to the Faroe Isles; Shirley promises "seals in Suderoe, and, doubtless, mermaids in Stromoe" (248). The world Caroline longs to leave, the world of her uncle's rectory (rather than the mermaid's element) is here associated with "remnants of shrouds, and fragments of coffins, and human bones and mould" (248). Shirley spins out a fantasy of their nocturnal encounter with a mermaid: "an image, fair as alabaster" (249). Her features align her explicitly with Caroline: "The long hair . . . a face in the style of yours [Car-
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oline's] . . . whose straight, pure lineaments, paleness does not disfigure" (249). She holds a mirror in her hand, and serves herself as a mirror. Shirley exclaims: "Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves!" (249). Whereas a man would "spring at the [mermaid's] sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress," the two women "Stand safe though not dreadful." The mermaid "cannot charm," because they are like her, but "she will appal," again because they are like her.

The conflict between Thackeray's "they" and "we" has been resolved in Shirley's identification of woman with mermaid. Caroline demurs; Mrs. Pryor protests: "We are aware that mermaids do not exist. . . . How can you find interest in speaking of a nonentity?" (250). Shirley responds, "I don't know" (250), and the scene abruptly ends. It remains an unassimilable bolus, undigested by the narrative.

Such is Brontë's game. She assumes the feminine style and posture to uncover the mechanisms by which it exploits her; introduces, in short, the "patriarch bull . . . huge enough to have been spawned before the Flood" (249). This creature—not in traditional mythology—takes his place alongside the mermaid. Shirley comments to Caroline, "I suppose you fancy the sea-mammoths pasturing about the bases of the 'everlasting hills' . . . I should not like to be capsized by the patriarch bull." Isn't Thackeray just such a "patriarch bull" to Brontë, who defined his mind as "deep-founded and enduring," and who located in the concluding part of *Vanity Fair* "a sort of 'still profound' . . . which the discernment of one generation will not suffice to fathom" (Correspondence 224)? Isn't Thackeray just such a literary leviathan enjoying the authority of the patriarchal bull or, rephrased, the bull of patriarchal authority? He might, indeed, capsize Brontë's small craft.

All parodies risk being recuperated: "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony" (Butler 139). Brontë's revisions of the marriage plot signal a parodic repetition not only of
Thackeray's art but of novel conventions in general. Indeed, Thackeray's own parody of marriage as fulfillment no doubt suggested the whole network of constricting codes, values, and beliefs distinctive to the culture that both he and Brontë inhabited; his iconoclasm in the face of those norms must have encouraged her further parody. At the same time, her novel's traditional conclusion, marriage, seems ultimately to recuperate the very values Brontë set out to parody. That is, we close with the romance we were initially advised to reject in favor of something "real, cool, and solid" (39).

But the parodic impulse is still at play. Although Brontë has not altered the plots in which women's lives are to be circumscribed, she has done something equally radical. She has changed the meaning of that plot, has altered the way in which the women's lives are to be understood. If we return once more to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, we recall that he opens his novel with the departure of his female protagonists, Amelia Sedley and Becky Sharp, from Chiswick Mall. They will make their way in the world, where the route to success is, essentially, marriage. Becky immediately and typically queries, "If Mr. Joseph Sedley is rich and unmarried, why should I not marry him?" (25). The narrator ironically asks whether "once landed in the marriage country, all were green and pleasant there" (250). But Thackeray embeds this question within the larger vanitas theme informing his novel so that the question of women's fulfillment is not directly engaged.

Brontë's *Shirley* expends one-sixth of its length before a major female character is even introduced. Yet the novel clearly focuses on two women: Shirley Keeldar and Caroline Helstone. Why does Brontë so structure her novel? One immediate and frequently given answer is that we are to see the women's lives within the mercantile world of men and masters, both women and workers suffering from "the dehumanizing effect of patriarchal capitalism" (Gilbert and Gubar 387). Such thematic observations are certainly valid, but the structure and events of the first several chapters also have the significant effect of beginning to unseat patriarchal ideologies of womanhood through mimicry, a process that intensifies when the women are actually introduced.
Brontë opens with a male world devoid of women, except as servants. Women are negligible, insignificant, and ignored. The male world of guns and machinery and power is inaccessible to women or to women's influence. Very subtly, the text raises a question: What meaningful role can women have in men's lives and in a patriarchal culture? We are early vouchsafed an answer: the fable of Mary Cave. Mary Cave was the site of a contest and conflict between Yorke and Helstone. Helstone won her, "a girl with the face of a Madonna; a girl of living marble," "beautiful as a monumental angel" (81). This bride is no sooner invested with her offices as Victorian angel in Helstone's house than she begins a decline that ends in her death. Mary's demise is "scarcely noticed" by her husband because "she is of no great importance to him in any shape" (82). The Victorian myth of woman's regenerative moral sensibility is here mimicked and exploded.

This pattern is repeated when we focus on Robert Moore, the mill owner. He generally avoids his home where his sister, Hortense, presides: "its air of modest comfort seemed to possess no particular attraction for its owner" (91). He prefers the snuggery and isolation of his separate quarters in his mill. After he is wounded by the would-be assassin's bullet, he is apparently transformed, a transformation signaled by his confession to his sister, "I am pleased to come home" (555). The narrator dryly comments, "Hortense did not feel the peculiar novelty of this expression coming from her brother, who had never before called the cottage his home; and to whom its narrow limits had always heretofore seemed rather restrictive than protective" (555).

The narrator builds on this kind of observation by associating both Louis and Robert Moore, the prospective husbands of Shirley and Caroline, with rock or stone. Louis is described as "cool as stone" and like "a great sand-buried stone head" (575). Robert asks Caroline, metaphorically, "if that rose should promise to shelter from tempest this hard, grey stone" (595). The reader inevitably recalls the narrator's angry summary of women's lives: "You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it and don't shriek because the nerves are martyried" (128). Is the
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narrator suggesting that, in marrying Louis and Robert, the women have ingested stones that their “mental stomach[s]” must digest? That possibility recalls the metaphor of torture with which we began. The gap opened there has widened and exposed the Victorian ideologies of womanhood as dangerous romances, which, in Mrs. Pryor’s words, “show you only the green tempting surface of the marsh, and give not one faithful or truthful hint of the slough underneath” (366).

Aggressively, the narrator entitles her final chapter “The Winding-Up,” and opens, “Yes, reader, we must settle accounts now” (587). The chapter is full of metalepses, or moments when the narrator transgresses the boundaries of the narrative, speaking directly to her characters. “Are you not aware, Peter,” she asks of one, “that a discriminating public has its crotchets: that the unvarnished truth does not answer; that plain facts will not digest?” (587). Plain facts that don’t digest recall stones that the women receive in place of bread, another undigestible morsel. A page later the narrator gloats: “There! I think the varnish has been put on very nicely” (588). Is the narrator varnishing the truth for men who don’t wish to digest plain facts? The tendentious tone continues—“you cannot know how it happened, reader; your curiosity must be robbed to pay your elegant love of the pretty and pleasing” (588). The narrator, in effect, tells us that the conclusion is varnish, put on to feed her narratee’s love of “the pretty and pleasing.” And Charlotte Brontë subverts our expectations that marriage can resolve the conflicts and fulfill our own narrative desires. The marriages, too, are a varnish “put on very nicely.”

Thus, although the novel concludes with a pair of marriages, that ending should be read parodically. Brontë begins by promising us something called “reality” and concludes, laughingly, with something looking, at first glance, like “romance.” But that romance turns into a “manufacturer’s daydreams,” something that looks very much like garden-variety industrialization. The fairies and ladies disappear.

Thackeray, in contrast, begins with a puppet show—the Becky and Amelia dolls—and he concludes, ostensibly, with the same
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“game,” as we children are admonished to “shut up the box and puppets.” But who can forget the closing injunction: “Ah Vanitas Vanitatum! Which of us is happy in the world? Which of us has his desire? Or, having it, is satisfied?” (666)? An ex cathedra pronouncement; a brilliant and pithy summa on the human condition; a magnificent moral gesture. One might want to argue, however, about whether Becky and Amelia have had their desires or have been had. Or, if one is Charlotte Brontë, one might want to try mimicry: “The story is told. I think I now see the judicious reader putting on his spectacles to look for a moral. It would be an insult to his sagacity to offer direction. I only say, God speed him in his quest!” (Shirley, finis).

Summa

This essay has employed a variety of critical concepts, from dialogue to discourse to theft to parody, in order to develop a theory of strategic intertextuality. Such a theory emphasizes not only the signature of the woman in the text, but also engages the transformative potential of woman, which it focuses by engaging the liberatory impulse implicit in certain concepts of intertextuality, as opposed to the conservative bent of influence. Even a Foucauldian emphasis on discourse works to uncover and so destabilize the mechanisms by which one is subjected. My analysis has necessarily privileged Brontë’s text over Thackeray’s, yet I hope it has also engaged both texts in such a way as to make clear their currency within the general signifying practices of their culture. Assuming such currency provides the basis for any intertextual study, and it suggests the scope of Thackeray’s own parodic impulse in the novel, which I have only minimally addressed. It also stresses the way influence and intertextuality become mutually entangled, the way one novel’s engagement with another is not a simple process of transmission, but a dynamic encounter with the cultural values that saturate any literary object. That contestation of word
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with word, text with text, has the power to generate a productive friction that destabilizes the ground of meaning and so facilitates change.

Notes

1. In the concept of intertextuality with which I engage, readers will recognize the influence of Jacques Derrida. His memorable formulation—"Il n'y a pas de hors-texte" [There is nothing outside the text] (158)—challenges a traditional mimetic understanding of literature as referring both to world and to precursor works, and thus it opens up rich possibilities for our understanding of narrative interrelationships.

Bibliography

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