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## —[Gliding] all revealed||: The Making and Breaking of Myths in Shirley

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“[Gliding] all revealed”: The Making and Breaking of Myths in *Shirley*

by

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the Upper Division Honors Program.

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## I. Introduction

*Shirley*, published in 1849, only two years after *Jane Eyre*, has a markedly different setting and tone from its more Romantic predecessor. *Shirley* aims to accurately depict life during the beginning of the nineteenth century amid the Industrial Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, the War of 1812, and the Luddite riots. The cultural climate was one of upheaval and political turmoil, and these political crises are linked to the social crises of the age, especially the rising rate of single women.

Statistics released in 1851 showed that after twenty years of age, “about 106 women are to be found for every 100 men” (Greg 12). W.R. Greg notes in his article “Why are Women Redundant?,” “that in a thoroughly natural, sound, and satisfactory state of society all women, as a rule, above twenty years of age — *except the redundant six per cent. for whom equivalent men do not exist here*—would be married, [...] [but] the actual proportion who *are single is thirty per cent*” (12, author’s emphasis). This startling discrepancy between the number of women who theoretically should be married and those who were married, for Greg, and for much of society, seemed to be “indicative of an unwholesome social state, and [was] both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong” (5). While a higher mortality rate for men contributed to the discrepancy between the sex ratio, political and social issues were also major reasons. The wars, emigration to the United States and British colonies, and a later male age of marriage (often to delay the financial burden of marriage and children) all contributed to the growing number of old maids in Britain.

This surplus of women served as a “frightening social harbinger” (Auerbach 109) of the possible destruction of society. The myths of the temptress mermaid and the Medusa old maid were projected onto Victorian women as a way to explain the political and social turmoil of the

time. They are a reflection not so much of women themselves, but of man's insecurities. The terrible mermaid enchantress seeks to ensnare a husband, and the Medusa old maid reminds men of their failures. In *Shirley*, Brontë debunks these two myths and offers a new set of myths by which womankind can live.

*Shirley* is a story with a double plot and double heroines. It chronicles the social and political atmosphere of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. One plot strand deals with the political upheaval that was occurring as a result of the Industrial Revolution, in particular the Luddite revolts. The other plot strand focuses on 'the woman question' and the lives and romances of the two heroines, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keedlar. Caroline, whose abusive father has died and whose mother left her in her infancy (and who we later learn is Mrs. Pryor, Shirley's ex-governess), lives with her uncle, Mr. Helstone, a widowed rector. Caroline falls in love with her cousin Robert Moore, who lives with his spinster sister Hortense and is a mill owner who must deal with a large number of disgruntled workers. Shirley, the title character, does not grace the pages of the novel until about a third-of-the-way into it. She is an orphaned and rich landowner who often dons the mask of a gentleman and becomes "Captain Keedlar." Shirley falls in love with a member of the Moore family as well, her former tutor and Robert and Hortense's brother, Louis Moore. Shirley and Caroline become close friends and help each other towards their double marriage at the end of the novel. The other set of characters who inform my argument are the heroic set of old maids: Hortense, along with Miss Ainley and Miss Mann, are three of the most prominent spinster figures whose presence inspires horror in the male community, but peace and alleviation from suffering in the female community.

Shirley and Caroline, who are young, beautiful women, are designated by men as mermaids while the old maids in the novel become Medusas. As Brontë shows, however, these

women reject and defy these stereotypes, these Romantic myths created by men. In this rejection, Brontë sets up the tension between Romanticism and Realism in the novel. *Shirley* purports to be a historical novel, dealing with the Luddite riots at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it evokes a sense of Realism. In fact, Brontë's narrator (an unnamed woman in the community) remarks at the opening of *Shirley*, "If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken [...] Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning" (Brontë 5). While some might question the Realism in a novel whose narrator addresses the readers directly, "the narrator in Victorian novels, who makes moral comments and is frequently characterized as an 'intrusive' narrator, does not, in fact, shatter the realistic illusion" (Fludernik 63). Instead of making the narrative less believable, "these narratorial comments and moral judgements [*sic*] on what happens lend authenticity to the events depicted, adapt the fictional world to the needs and worldview of the reader, and ultimately bring together and superimpose the real and the imaginary worlds in the reader's mind" (Fludernik 63). It is within this backdrop of Realism and history that Brontë chooses to write her novel that most seeks to answer the "woman question." She rejects the more Romantic characters one finds in *Jane Eyre*, along with its Gothic and melodramatic elements. Instead, she infuses *Shirley* with a myriad of real women who are not drawn "in the model line" (59). They all have imperfections because they are authentic women.

The two most prevalent Romantic, patriarchal myths that take hold of *Shirley*, the myth of the mermaid and of the Medusa, are both related to the Greek myth of Perseus and Andromeda. Adrienne Auslander Munich discusses in detail this last myth in her book *Andromeda's Chains: Gender and Interpretation in Victorian Literature and Art*. This image of

the chained Andromeda replaces that of Prometheus, who was so important to the Romantics, and it became a sort of male myth for the Victorians. Munich notes, “In the sense that the Andromeda myth took the fancy not of women but of men artists during the years between 1830 and 1895, it can be thought of as a male myth. Its polarized gender roles present a structural paradigm for an unequal distribution of power ostensibly favoring men” (13). During an age in which ‘the woman question’ was key, it is no wonder that a woman surfaces as a dominant image of a creature which men must both bind and rescue (Munich 10-11). While, “[w]ith the exception of [George] Eliot’s allusions, no woman writer treats the Andromeda myth [...] [for] its patriarchal terms did not leave them the scope to conceive of womanly activity” (Munich 33), Brontë addresses the other creatures present in the Andromeda myth: the Nereids (or mermaids), from whom Perseus rescues Andromeda, and the Gorgon Medusa whom he also slays.

In the Andromeda myth, Andromeda is threatened by the Nereids (or mermaids) and must be rescued by Perseus. Perseus is the ultimate male hero who destroys both the mermaids and the Medusa, creating a safe space for the marriage between himself and his angelic wife Andromeda. Andromeda can be read as a pure, virginal woman, an “angel in the house.” “The angel in the house” figure is derived from the Coventry Patmore poem of the same name which sets up the domestic angel-wife as the perfect model for all women. This image became wildly popular throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and as Virginia Woolf famously stated, “Killing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (*Women and Writing* 60). In *Shirley*, Brontë inverts this image of the male hero who destroys these mythical female monsters. Instead, Brontë kills the only example of the “angel in the house” found in the novel, Mary Cave, Helstone’s deceased wife. Her name suggests the Virgin Mary, and she is described as “a girl with the face of a Madonna; a girl of living marble; stillness personified [...] beautiful as a

monumental angel” (Brontë 50). Helstone neglected his wife, though, for he thought, “so long as a woman was silent, nothing ailed her, and she wanted nothing” (50). Because he could not clearly understand womankind, he was unable to see his wife as a “companion, much less his confidant, much less his stay” (51). As a result, she was “hardly under the sod when rumours began to be rife in the neighbourhood that she had died of a broken heart” (51). Helstone, then, (even whose name suggests the terrors of Hell and a hard heart of stone) is no Perseus who rescues Mary Cave. Instead, it seems as though he is the death of her.

After the narrator recounts the death of this seemingly perfect and angelic woman, the reader is left with nothing but the images of women as mermaids and Medusas. Brontë, however, endeavors to resurrect women from these damning myths that depict them as essentially monsters. Like the mermaid who at last “glides all revealed” (Brontë 232), exposing her other half which is hidden beneath the surface, Brontë reveals what she perceives as the true, submerged nature of women, only, unlike the mermaid, it is not horrifying, but inspiring.

The first chapter addresses the patriarchal myth of the mermaid enchantress. Brontë’s two heroines Shirley and Caroline both seek to express their discontent with the patriarchal reading of women through shattering the traditional patriarchal myth of the mermaid enchantress that Shirley details. The narrator presents the girls’ opposition to patriarchal society by addressing this myth directly, noting the ways in which Shirley and Caroline could fall under the category of “mermaid,” and through depicting their subversion of this myth in which male characters seek to entrap them. Shirley and Caroline’s resistance to the category of “mermaid” advocates a new look at women and the realization that the mermaid figure is not a true or accurate depiction of womankind.



The second chapter focuses on the myth of the Gorgon old maid and the transformation that can occur from mermaid to Medusa. The male characters fear the old maid Medusa figures because they remind them of the possibility of their castration or impotence. The men are impotent to promote positive social change for women or to prevent the political upheaval that is resulting from the Luddite revolts. Once again, the men cannot see women as they truly are and use Romantic myths to explain what they cannot understand. Yet, Brontë's spinsters are not grotesque monsters if seen clearly. Instead, she sets them up as a group of heroic and Christ-like females who help to save the community and the family through their practical goodness.

The final chapter analyzes the myths that Shirley and Caroline create as an alternative to the patriarchal myths of the mermaid and the Medusa. The two main heroines, Shirley and Caroline, each envision a new myth for womankind. Shirley's myth hails Eve, the symbol of every woman, as a great Romantic Titan goddess. Caroline, however, opts for an approach more grounded in Realism; she desires a mother and an accepting female community. Another of Shirley's Evean myths is described not as a new myth she envisions for women, but as an explanation of how the situation of woman has come to be. Because Brontë has two heroines, she is able to explore the implications of each of Shirley and Caroline's myths and the possibility for their success. Their respective successes are reflected in the portrayal of their future marriages.

## II. “Temptress-terror[s]!”: The Myth of the Mermaid Enchantress

Shirley paints a picture of the male vision of young women such as Caroline and herself as temptress mermaids, and her description of the mermaid serves as a critique of this Romantic figment of male imaginations. The novel draws many comparisons between the two heroines and the vision of mermaids, particularly because of their two “instruments” – music and their curly hair. While these instruments, in the case of the mermaid/siren, suggest her wily and wanton ways, Brontë shows how her heroines cannot actually be put into the mermaid mold based on these stereotypes. In their direct interactions with men, Shirley and Caroline reject or defy the mermaid myth. They argue with Joe Scott over his understanding of Eve as the ultimate mermaid figure, and, more importantly, they escape from and shatter the mermaid myths in which their male acquaintances try to trap them: Robert mistakenly believes Shirley is a mermaid who has tried to ensnare him as a husband and asks for her hand in marriage. Martin Yorke tries to essentially make Caroline his slave when she steps into the real-world fairy tale he has created. Neither Caroline nor Shirley, however, allows herself to be defined as a mermaid by either Robert or Martin. While in some superficial qualities they may seem mermaid-esque, they have no terrible other-half lurking underneath the surface. They, unlike men, are able to see women clearly and know that in the realms of Realism, the mermaid does not actually exist.

Shirley describes the patriarchal mermaid myth when she imagines what she and Caroline will see on their planned sea-voyage to lighten the “inexpressible weight” (231) on Caroline’s mind (her unrealized desire for work and unrequited love for Robert Moore). She imagines that on a “full harvest-moon” (232) she will hear the cry of a mermaid and call Caroline to see it. She illustrates what they will see together:

We will both see the long hair, the lifted and foam-white arm, the oval mirror brilliant as a star. It glides nearer: a human face is plainly visible; a face in the style of yours, whose straight, pure (excuse the word, it is appropriate), – whose straight, pure lineaments, paleness does not disfigure. It looks at us, but not with your eyes. I see a preternatural lure in its wily glance: it beckons. Were we men, we should spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress; being women, we stand safe, though not dreadless. She comprehends our unmoved gaze; she feels herself powerless; anger crosses her front; she cannot charm, but she will appal us: she rises high, and glides all revealed, on the dark wave-ridge. Temptress-terror! monstrous likeness of ourselves! (232-233).

This myth, told to a solely female audience, Caroline and Mrs. Pryor, relates how Shirley understands the way in which men generally see women. After hearing the mermaid myth, Caroline exclaims, “But, Shirley, she is not like us: we are neither temptresses, nor terrors, nor monsters” (233). Shirley responds by saying, “Some of our kind, it is said, are all three. There are men who ascribe to ‘woman’ in general, such attributes” (233). Critics such as Tara Moore believe that Shirley’s response to Caroline shows that she accepts and supports this patriarchal understanding of woman as monstrous “enchantress.” Rather than defending womankind, the myth serves to educate Caroline on womanhood’s meaning, seen through a patriarchal lens (Moore 480). I, on the other hand, argue that Shirley does not propagate the patriarchal view of women. Instead, she criticizes the men who ascribe such attributes to women and the women who buy into and act out the role of the terrible temptress. Shirley does not create this mermaid

myth as an explanation of what women *are*, but as a criticism of the way men *perceive* them to be.

First of all, immediately before Shirley tells her mermaid myth, Caroline imagines a sort of mini-mythical scene of her own in which a “patriarch bull, huge enough to have been spawned before the Flood” (232) upsets a herd of whales, causing them to flounder and roll in his wake. Interestingly, this is the scene Caroline says she will imagine in order to forget the “inexpressible weight” (231) she has on her mind as a result of the limitations put on her by patriarchal society. As a woman, she is unable to question Robert about his feelings for her. The narrator explains, “A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation; a lover feminine can say nothing” (101). Nor can she seek employment to make her own way in the world and not depend on a marriage that seems to her improbable at this point. She wishes to escape the restrictions she experiences and find a place “where neither fisherman nor hunter ever come” (231). Nonetheless, she cannot seem to escape from the “fisherman” or “hunter,” both patriarchal symbols. Her mini-myth represents the destructive patriarchal force that limits female activity and expression, and it is this limitation which inevitably encourages women to succumb to mermaid tendencies. Unable to find suitable life options besides marriage, they are forced to use snares and wiles to catch a husband.

Shirley expresses her dissatisfaction with the patriarch bull in Caroline’s mini-myth saying, “I should not like to be capsized by the patriarch bull.” (232). This hardly sounds like a statement one would make moments before creating a myth, as Tara Moore proposes, that aligns itself with the patriarchal bull and its erroneous view of women. Furthermore, a close reading of her short myth reveals her true intentions: to criticize patriarchy for assigning Woman the description of “[t]empress-terror” and women who allow men to delineate themselves in this

way, not realizing that the mermaid “enchantress” is not a true likeness of womankind but an untrue, “monstrous likeness” (232-233).

In her myth, Shirley spots something while “watching and being watched by a full harvest-moon” (232). She thinks she “hear[s] it cry with an articulate voice” (232) and calls Caroline to come witness the mermaid: “We both see the long hair [...], the oval mirror brilliant as a star”(232). These descriptions are replete with images that are found throughout the rest of the novel. The vulval round images of the “full harvest-moon” and “oval mirror” clearly associate the mermaid with feminine nature. (Vulval images will also take on new meaning, as we will see in the next chapter, when they are transformed into the horrible likeness of Medusa’s head). Additionally, the voice, or music, and hair are two of the most important symbolic images of a mermaid nature in the text.

In the Victorian imagination, music and the female voice seemed to suggest a siren’s song. In fact, “conventional Victorian images of mermaids conflate their sensuality and their musicality: a mermaid’s singing lures men to their deaths” (Cooper 189). Furthermore, while “the discipline of music making became an act that could define middle- and upper-class experience [...], [a]lternatively, playing the piano could be interpreted as a seduction technique. This figure of the seductive musician was exemplified by the mermaid or siren” (Cooper 189). Shirley has a moment herself when she is perceived to be singing a siren song of her own. One of her suitors, Sir Philip Nunnely, petitions Shirley to play a ballad he wrote. The narrator describes her performance and the reaction of the ladies:

Shirley sang [the words] well: she breathed into the feeling, softness; she poured round the passion, force: her voice was fine that evening; its expression dramatic: she impressed all, and charmed one [...]. [T]he ladies were round her – none of

them spoke. The Misses Sympson and the Misses Nunnely looked upon her, as quiet poultry might look on an egret, an ibis, or any other strange fowl. What made her sing so? *They* never sang so. Was it *proper* to sing with such expression, with such originality – so unlike a school-girl? Decidedly not: it was strange; it was unusual. What was *strange* must be *wrong*; what was *unusual* must be *improper*. Shirley was judged. (509-510, author's emphasis)

These women judge Shirley as a siren whose song is meant to seduce and “charm” Sir Philip Nunnely. The narrator even suggests that they look upon Shirley as a “strange fowl,” perhaps to elucidate a connection between the classical understanding of a siren as a woman-bird hybrid. These women, who have bought into the patriarchal myth of the mermaid, misjudge Shirley and her originality. Soon afterwards, Sir Philip offers Shirley his hand in marriage, and she rejects it, much to everyone's surprise. In doing so, she challenges all those who believed her to be a mermaid/siren. She may be “*strange*” and “*unusual*” but she is not “*wrong*” or “*improper*.”

The image of the mermaid's “long hair” (232) also resurfaces in the text and, like Shirley's piano, serves as type of instrument as well. “Woman's loom or hair is her instrument, in the fullest sense of the word: on it she may, mermaidlike, lure men to their deaths or, like Philomela, report her own destruction” (Gitter 938). (This illustration of Philomela “[reporting] her own instruction” is the image of Medusa and her serpent-hair we shall find in the following chapter). Brontë's attention to hair is not unusual for it follows “a well-established literary tradition with roots in ballads, fairy tales, and Teutonic and classical myths” that “[t]he Victorians thoroughly explored and greatly enriched” (Gitter 936) through art and literature. Although women's hair “has always been a Western preoccupation, for the Victorians it became an obsession. In painting and literature, as well as in their popular culture, they discovered in the

image of women's hair a variety of rich and complex meanings, ascribing to it powers both magical and symbolic” (Gitter 936). The Victorians had trouble reading the meaning behind a woman’s hair, however, and, as a result, it took on varied meanings. “[I]f the woman was benign, her hair might be a nest, warm and sheltering, but if she was a treacherous mermaid, it could be an alluring but deadly snare” (Gitter 943). The image of woman-as-mermaid can be seen in the Miltonic vision of the first woman:

She as a veil down to the slender waist  
Her unadornéd golden tresses wore  
Dishevelled, but in wanton ringlets waved  
As the vine curls her tendrils. (*PL* 4.304-307)

For the Victorians, though not necessarily for Milton himself<sup>1</sup>, Eve is a prime example of a woman whose alluring nature has snared a man in a (very literally) deadly way, and her “temptress” ways are suggested by her “wanton ringlets.” Gilbert and Gubar echo this Victorian understanding, remarking, “[Eve’s] golden tresses waving in wanton, wandering ringlets suggest at least a sinister potential” (199). They also suggest that Eve’s curls indicate her association with Satan in the form of a snake as well as Milton’s snaky female image of Sin. Bram Dijkstra comments on the 19<sup>th</sup> century vision of long hair as well in *Idols of Perversity: Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de-Siècle Culture*: “Given the period’s cliché that long hair was virtually synonymous with mental debility, poets and painters found woman’s tresses to be a particularly apt medium for the symbolic depiction of the dangers of the clinging vine” (229). Like Milton’s Adam, Victorian men see Eve (the symbol of all womankind) “in outward show / Elaborate, of inward less exact,” (*PL* 8.538-539). In comparison to Adam, woman is seen as “th’ inferior, in the mind / And inward faculties” (*PL* 8.541-542).

Both Caroline and Shirley are depicted as having long, curly hair, which supposedly suggests their “mental [debilities]” and twisted nature. In the narrator’s description of Caroline she says that “curls became her, and she possessed them in picturesque profusion” (73). Shirley has “curls that looked natural, so free were their wavy undulations” (192). Numerous references are made to their curly, long hair and, yet, each girl (like Milton’s Eve) has an instance in which her curls are described as a veil. During the school feast, Caroline removes her bonnet and her scarf and, “her long curls, falling on her neck, served almost in place of a veil” (290). One evening Caroline spots Shirley walking with Mrs. Pryor and remarks that Shirley “has not covered her head; her curls are free: they veil her neck and caress her shoulder with their tendril rings” (221). It seems as though these long curls, which are traditionally associated with modes to lure in and entrap men, actually serve to protect the girls’ modesty. Furthermore, since they are described as “veils,” there is a sense in which these curls can be seen as the outer-layer through which the male gaze cannot penetrate. Men cannot see through this mermaid-esque veil to the truth that lies underneath: a whole, intelligent, real woman. In fact, the morning after the two girls stole down from the rectory to see Robert Moore and his companions defend his home and mill against rioters, Shirley remarks that the men had no idea that they were watching the confrontation the previous night. Robert probably thinks he has ““outwitted [her] cleverly.”” (333). Shirley also concludes, ““Men, I believe, fancy women’s minds something like those of children. Now, that is a mistake””(333). She rejects the idea of women’s “mental debility,” associated with their long-haired feminine nature. To bring the point home even more, Shirley says this “as she stood at the glass, training her naturally waved hair into curls.” (333). She then goes on to declare, ““If men could see us as we really are, they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, acutest men are often under an illusion about women; they do not read them in a true



light” (333). As she looks into the mirror and curls her hair with her fingers, Shirley seems to recognize it as a veil through which men are unable to penetrate and see the true selves of women.<sup>2</sup>

Shirley, on the other hand, is able to see through to the face of the mermaid. She tells Caroline, “It glides nearer: a human face is plainly visible; a face in the style of yours [Caroline’s face].” Although the mermaid looks *like* Caroline, it does not look *as* Caroline looks. Shirley tells Caroline, “It looks at us, but not with your eyes. I see a preternatural lure in its wily glance: it beckons.” This mermaid’s glances are reminiscent of the maneuvering women Caroline mourns who “scheme, [...] plot, [...] [and] dress to ensnare husbands” (370). Caroline, on the other hand, refuses to do what she considers the “worst of all, [...] to strive, by scarce modest coquetry and debasing artifice, to gain that position and consideration by marriage, which to celibacy is denied” (371). Caroline has no beckoning glance, and employs none of the wiles society traditionally associates with women.

This idea of looking *like* but not *as* Caroline looks is interesting when one considers that the only other instance when the word “mermaid” is used, besides in relation to the mermaid myth Shirley tells, is in a description of Caroline. One evening after visiting with Robert, she feels sure of their mutual love for each other. Caroline states, “Now, I love Robert, and I feel sure that Robert loves me: I have thought so many a time before; to-day I *felt* it” (96, author’s emphasis). She seems to have genuine feelings toward Robert and to have a realistic view of what love should be like. She says of Robert, “He does not flatter or say foolish things; his love-making (friendship, I mean: of course I don’t yet account him my lover, but I hope he will be so some day) is not like what we read of in books – it is far better – original, quiet, manly, sincere” (96). She does not desire his flattery or a grand romance as in novels; she loves him genuinely

and sees a practical future that they may have together.<sup>3</sup> She believes she “would be an excellent wife to him if he did marry [her]: [She] would tell him of his faults (for he has a few faults), but [she] would study his comfort, and cherish him, and do [her] best to make him happy” (96). Yet, immediately after she describes her hopes for her future, the reader receives the following description of Caroline:

She recommenced combing her hair, long as a mermaid’s; turning her head, as she arranged it, she saw her own face and form in the glass. Such reflections are soberizing to plain people: their own eyes are not enchanted with the image; they are confident then that the eyes of others can see in it no fascination; but the fair must naturally draw other conclusions: the picture is charming, and must charm.  
(97)

Caroline is depicted very clearly as a mermaid. She has long hair like a mermaid, looks in a mirror like the mermaid, and recognizes that she is enchanting and charming. The reader must stop and puzzle – Is Caroline a mermaid? This description of Caroline is where the important difference between looking *like* and look *as* comes into play. Caroline *is* charming and enchanting-looking, like a mermaid. (And, for that matter, as I have already discussed, so is Shirley). Caroline appears to look like a mermaid in the beauty and charms of her human-half, but she has none of the terrors that lurk beneath the surface. The mermaid clearly seeks to destroy men, to lure them in with its “wily glance” (232). “[I]t beckons” (232) men to their destruction. While Caroline does desire marriage, she does not desire to entrap Robert, but to love him and be an “excellent wife” (96). Furthermore, if there were any chance of Caroline becoming a “mermaid,” Brontë immediately disappoints Caroline’s hopes with Robert’s “cool welcome” the following day which serves as a “[r]ude disappointment” and “sharp cross” (101)

for her. She realizes that she has been the “sport of delusion” (96) and this signifies her movement from the “Elf-land [that] lies behind [her],” any Romantic ideas she held, to the “the shores of Reality [that] rise in front” (94). From this moment forward, “[h]er earnest wish was to see things as they were, and not to be romantic” (167), and she becomes a proponent of Realism and accurate depictions. Caroline grows throughout the novel to reject Romanticism and the grand myths that often accompany it for Realism.

Caroline, then, (and Shirley as well) are women who can clearly see the mermaid and can recognize her for the creature she truly is, unlike the men who “spring at the sign, the cold billow would be dared for the sake of the colder enchantress” (232). Shirley and Caroline, “being women, [...] stand safe, though not dreadless”(232). What is it exactly that Shirley and Caroline as women dread, though? At first glance it may seem as if Shirley means the enchantress herself, juxtaposing women against the foolish men who risk their safety for the enchantress. Yet, if this is the case, how does the mermaid “[comprehend their] *unmoved* gaze”? (232, emphasis mine). If they dread the mermaid herself, why then is their gazed “unmoved,” implying a lack of emotional response?<sup>4</sup> Instead of fearing the enchantress mermaid, they dread that men see them as the “[t]emptress-terror” (232). The mermaid is “powerless” (232) in their presence because they refuse to be charmed into using “coquetry and debasing artifice” (371) as she does to ensnare men. They see her for what she truly is, not an accurate reflection of themselves, but a “monstrous likeness of [themselves]” (232-233). Unable to charm them as she can men, “she will appal [them] [...] and glides all revealed” (232). Her complete self, a female human-animal hybrid and not a human woman, is only revealed to women who refuse to submit to patriarchal standards. Only the women who do not see with her beckoning eyes understand that she is not like themselves. Men merely see her human aspect, attributing to the whole that of which they

only see a part, but women who look clearly and closely know that this is no woman, but a terrible mermaid. No wonder that Shirley is glad “when at last, and with a wild shriek, [the mermaid] dives” (233). Through her myth she advocates the disappearance of the mermaid as envisioned by patriarchal society instead of propagating the male stereotype.

Joe Scott, Robert Moore’s overlooker, expresses this male stereotype of women throughout the novel. He declares, “‘I’ve seen clean, trim young things, that looked as denty and pure as daisies, and wi’ time a body fun’ ‘em out to be nowt but stinging, venomd nettles’” (124).<sup>5</sup> Like the mermaid, a young woman may seem pure and good upon first glance, but eventually she “glides all revealed” (232). Outside of the church on Whitsunday, Joe Scott further expands his thoughts about women to Shirley and Caroline. For Joe, women are mermaids because they take after the first and ultimate “temptress-terror” (232) mermaid, Eve:

‘I think that women are a kittle and a forward generation; and I’ve a great respect for the doctrines delivered in the second chapter of St. Paul’s first epistle to Timothy [...] Let the woman learn in silence, with all subjection. I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man; but to be in silence. For Adam was first formed, then Eve. [...] And, [...] Adam was not deceived; but the woman, being deceived was in the transgression.’ (311)

Shirley’s immediate response is to cry, “‘More shame to Adam to sin with his eyes open!’” (311). Shirley rejects Joe’s understanding of Eve as a temptress who should be subordinate because of her inferiority. Yet, she then admits to them, “‘I never was easy in my mind concerning that chapter: it puzzles me’” (311). As a Christian herself, it is difficult for her to criticize St. Paul’s view outright without seeming to be a heretic. She can criticize Joe’s view that “women is to take their husbands’ opinion, both in politics and religion” by replying to him,

“Consider yourself groaned down, and cried shame over, for such a stupid observation” (312). She cannot, however, do the same to St. Paul. When Joe asks Caroline, “And what is *your* reading, Miss Helstone, o’ these words o’ St. Paul’s?” (312, author’s emphasis), she suggests a reexamination and a retranslation of the text. She replies:

Hem! I - I account for them in this way: he wrote that chapter for a particular congregation of Christians, under peculiar circumstances; and besides, I dare say, if I could read the original Greek, I should find that many of the words have been wrongly translated, perhaps misapprehended altogether. It would be possible, I doubt not, with a little ingenuity, to give the passage quite a contrary turn; to make it say, ‘Let the woman speak out whenever she sees fit to make an objection;’ – ‘it is permitted to a woman to teach and to exercise authority as much as may be. Man, meantime, cannot do better than hold his peace,’ and so on. (312)

Caroline appeals to Realism, even in respect to the Bible. Though her retranslation is far from credible, Caroline, unlike the puzzled Shirley, is able to produce an argument based on the ideas of historical specificity rather than transcendent Romantic truth. Even so, Joe Scott is correct in answering, “That will n’t wash, Miss’” (312). As Lawson comments, “Caroline’s attempt to ‘re-translate’ Paul here, although perhaps both brave and amusing, is hardly convincing. It will take more than ‘a little ingenuity’ to understand the words of Scripture differently. [...] A successful feminist dissent must come from another direction” (“The Dissenting Voice” 731).

This other direction from which “[a] successful feminist dissent must come” involves Caroline and Shirley shattering the mermaid myth by their real-world interactions with men. Both Shirley and Caroline experience instances in which men see them as enchantress mermaids,

and in each situation they reject or defy the stereotype. In Shirley's case, Robert Moore (encouraged by Mr. Yorke) wrongly believes that Shirley is in love with him and proposes to her so that through her wealth she might save him from economic ruin. She scorns him for his mercenary proposal, and more importantly, she goes so far as to call him "Lucifer—Star of the Morning" (502),<sup>6</sup> one who has greatly fallen in her esteem for believing that she was an enchantress mermaid, that "all the frank kindness [she has] shown [him] has been a complicated, a bold, and an immodest manoeuvre to ensnare a husband" (501). In response to Robert's belief that she courted him, she exclaims, "That is to say, that you have the worst opinion of me: that you deny me the possession of all I value most. That is to say, that I am a traitor to all my sisters: that I have acted as no woman can act, without degrading herself and her sex: that I have sought where the incorrupt of my kind naturally scorn and abhor to seek" (502). That which Shirley "value[s] most" is her dignity as a woman. She is not the enchantress mermaid; she does not play the coquette. In her opinion, the temptress is a traitor to her sex. Robert has not "read [her] actions and motives in a true light;" instead, he has "horribly [misinterpreted] them (503).

Similarly, Caroline shatters Martin Yorke's real-world fairy tale. Martin has expressed his dislike of women saying, "I hate all womenites. I wonder what they were made for [...] I mean always to hate women; they're such dolls: they do nothing but dress themselves finely, and *go swimming about* to be admired. I'll never marry" (152, emphasis mine). As Tara Moore emphasizes as well, for Martin, women are nothing but the "enchantress" mermaid who swim about for compliments.

Brontë sets the stage for another mermaid myth, this time imagined by Martin, while he reads his book of contraband fairy tales in the woods. In Shirley's myth she sees the mermaid in the sea as it emerges with a cry during a "full-harvest moon" (232). Similarly, "the moon waits

on [Martin]" as "[a] second legend bears him to the seashore" (531). Here at the seashore, a "lone wanderer" is investigating some unusual vegetation which has a "treasure of shells [...] clustered in the *curls* of the *snaky* plants" (532, emphasis mine). Perhaps it is no wonder that at the moment he sees the "curls of the snaky plants," that he spots a band of mermaids:

He hears a cry. Looking up, and forward, he sees, at the bleak point of the reef, a tall, pale thing – shaped like a man, but made of spray – transparent, tremulous, awful: it stands not alone: there are all human figures that wanton in the rocks – a crowd of foam-women – a band of white, evanescent Nereides" (532).

His reading is interrupted by Caroline who is coming through the woods to see Robert, who is being nursed back to health at the Yorke household after being shot. Tara Moore notes, "Just after reading about and imagining the Nereides' wanton play, Martin is hailed by Caroline, whom he mixes up with his mermaid fantasy. [...] Caroline is suddenly, and quite obviously, ensnared in a myth constructed by a man" (481). Martin believes he "[has] power over her" (541) and tells Caroline, "[B]e ruled by me, and you shall see Moore yourself" (542). He has distracted his mother and the nurse Mrs. Horsfalls so that Caroline can see Robert, putting "the whole house and all its inhabitants [...] under a spell, which [he] will not break till [she is] gone" (542). In return for this favor he decides that he will demand a kiss. Yet, Martin seems more like the side-kick and Caroline the hero/heroine in this scenario. She is the one, after all, "who climbs to the imprisoned Robert's bedchamber" (Moore 481), facing the threat of "the dragon who guarded his chamber" (536), "that ogress old Horsfall" (537).

After the successful adventure, she and Martin make plans to meet again so she can visit Robert. When Martin becomes difficult and demanding, however, Caroline declares that she will see Robert with or without his help. She shatters his fantasy by denying that he has any power

over her, declaring that he is “not handsome” (555), and never giving him his expected kiss. Although Martin still believes that she will come “again, again, and yet again” (557) to coax him into helping her to see Robert, this is, in fact, their last encounter since Robert gets better and returns home where Caroline can see him at her leisure. Tara Moore comments on the abrupt ending of Martin’s myth:

The relationship comes to an odd, seemingly ill-worked ending because, despite Martin’s confidence in repeated encounters, this has been their last. [...] The abrupt ending of the relationship/fairy tale of Martin and Caroline emphasizes its moral message rather than as an advancement of the plot. Brontë presents her readers with a sample of the manner in which male-sponsored roles fail when applied to more realistic situations. (482)

Caroline refuses to submit to Martin’s control within his mermaid fantasy, and she is less terrible to him because he sees her as a temptress, than because he cannot control her.<sup>7</sup> She is not a mermaid who swims about in need of male favors or compliments. She achieves her desired end, marriage with Robert, without him. Caroline’s Realism wins out over Martin’s Romanticism; he cannot keep her trapped within his Romantic myth because his myth fails when applied to actual situations.

After listening to the girls’ discussion of the mermaid myth, Mrs. Pryor, who has also been present, questions them, ““We are aware that mermaids do not exist: why speak of them as if they did? How can you find interest in speaking of a nonentity?”” (233). This matter-of-fact question from the wise Mrs. Pryor points to the heart of what Shirley and Caroline have been aiming to show all along: Mermaids do not actually exist. They are only the Romantic figments of male imaginations. While Shirley answers, ““I don’t know”” (233) to Mrs. Pryor’s question,



the reader guesses that she does, in fact, know. She recognizes that in order to conquer the myth of the mermaid she must look at it straight on and defy it.

### III. “[T]hat dread and Gorgon gaze”: The Myth of the Spinster Medusa

*Shirley* also focuses on the myth of the Gorgon old maid and the transformation that occurs from mermaid to Medusa. Like the mermaid figure, Medusa’s hair has special significance, symbolizing the abuse she suffered at the hands of Neptune, patriarch of the sea. The men in the novel dread the Medusa’s petrifying stare because it is a reminder, as Freud notes, of the possibility of their castration or impotence. Brontë demonstrates man’s impotence to promote positive social change through more opportunities for women or to avert the impending Luddite revolts. Once again, the men (with the exception of the “sand-blind” (570) vicar Mr. Hall) are unable to see women as they are realistically, but only through their imposed Romantic visions. The women are able to recognize the inherent goodness and inner beauty of the old maids, however, and seek them out when in need of advice, even in practical matters. While old maids in Victorian literature are typically portrayed in a disparaging or comically grotesque light, Brontë creates a set of heroic female spinsters who are Christ-like saviors and support the family institution instead of destroying it, as men often feared they would.

Brontë draws upon the myth of the Medusa in order to describe another way in which men see women. While the young, beautiful, women are the temptress mermaids who enchant and destroy men with their wily glances, the old, barren, maids are Gorgon Medusas who petrify men with their horrifying stares. Although the origins of the Gorgon Medusa are “multiple and obscure, [...] [b]y far the best known, fullest, and most influential account of the Medusa story in Greek or Roman literature comes in books 4 and 5 of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid [...] Under Ovid’s pen the Medusa story is transformed into a legend” (Suther 165). Perhaps it is appropriate that Ovid relates Perseus’s slaying of the Gorgon Medusa in conjunction with his slaying of a great sea creature in order to rescue Andromeda from “the Nereids / Whose power is

terrible” (Ovid 5.16-17). Andromeda, who is beautiful, modest, and “too much the virgin/To speak to any man” (Ovid 4.682-683) sounds familiar to the Victorian ideal of the angel in the house. Perseus, embodying manliness, saves her from a fate of being devoured by these sea creatures. He is both the conqueror of the Nereids (sea nymphs or *mermaids*) and Medusa. In this myth, the reader sees a hint at what Brontë will elucidate as a connection between the two. Unlike Perseus, however, the men in *Shirley* do not prevent women from a fate of succumbing to the mermaids, nor do they destroy the Gorgon Medusa who remind them of their impotence and failure at creating a world where young women do not surrender themselves to mermaid tendencies and then become old maid Medusas.

According to Ovid, “Medusa belongs to a second set of three sisters, the Gorgons. (Ovid numbers the first set, the Gray Ones, at two. They were born old and share a single eye and a single tooth which they pass between themselves)” (Suther 165). Perseus seeks out the Gorgons’ home in order to steal this eye, knowing that looking at Medusa’s face directly will turn both man and beast to stone. Perseus is victorious in his mission, decapitating Medusa’s head while she slept by eyeing her in the reflection of his shield. When questioned by Andromeda’s family why only Medusa had serpents for hair, Perseus replies,

That, too, is a tale worth telling.

She was very lovely once, the hope of many

An envious suitor, and of all her beauties

Her hair most beautiful. (Ovid 4.792-796)

Her hair was transformed by Minerva from “most beautiful” to horrifying serpents after Medusa was raped by Neptune in Minerva’s temple. Minerva “hid her eyes / Behind her shield, and punishing the outrage / As it deserved, she changed her hair to serpents” (Ovid 4.799-801).

Perseus' description of Medusa before her rape sounds eerily similar to the image of the mermaid – a young beauty whose crowning feature is her hair and who has many men desiring her. Instead of using her hair as an instrument to “lure men to their deaths,” however, she uses it as Philomela does, to “report her own destruction” (Gitter 938). Ovid's Philomela is raped by King Tereus of Thrace who also cuts out her tongue so that she could tell no one of his heinous deed. Her narrative is not silenced, however, because she uses her loom to create a tapestry that details what has happened to her (Ovid 143-152). In a similar manner, Medusa's hair is the loom, or the instrument, by which what has happened to her is revealed; “the strands of hair she plaits, the threads she weaves are, as J. Hillis Miller and Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have noticed, analogous to the narrative thread, the story line, the strands of the plot” (Gitter 938). Her narrative thread details the abuse done to her by the patriarch of the sea which causes her to be transformed from a woman-fish hybrid with alluring hair whose gaze has the power to enchant and excite to a woman-serpent hybrid with horrifying hair whose stare has the power to petrify. Indeed, there remains a connection even in art between the mermaid/siren and the Medusa. “Many of the painters of the turn of the century depicted Medusa frontally, with her mouth half-parted, or [...] wide open in a silent scream, the snakes of her viraginity threatening the male viewer even as he was being lured by the enticements of bestial forgetfulness emanating from the cavernous vulval round of this ultimate siren” (Dijkstra 310). The Medusa seems to be the full-grown fulfillment of the mermaid figure. Medusa is only mermaid matured.

The Medusa myth is closely related to the old maids of *Shirley*, who too are “gray ones,” and often depicted as having a Gorgon aspect. Their hybridization can be understood in light of a cultural phenomenon: “In Victorian England the steadily rising percentage of unmarried women made the old maid a familiar domestic appendage and a frightening social harbinger”

(Auerbach 109). Often represented in fiction, “[t]he pity and contempt that diminish so many Victorian portrayals of spinsterhood are talismans to dispel two central cultural fears: that of the female hero, and the starker, still less readily confronted spectacle of the defeat of the family and the mutation of the race forecast in impersonal, irrefutable tabulations” (Auerbach 114). Brontë turns these fears of the old maid as female hero and destroyer of families on their heads, though, by creating a set of heroic old maids who are the saviors of mankind and families. Although literarily the old maid

assimilated most easily as a comic grotesque, forcing her hopeless needs on fastidious men, or as a sacrificial angel to a surrogate family [...] in the fervent vision of some less orthodox writers [including Charlotte Brontë], she becomes a figure we do not expect: an authentic female hero, with angelic and demonic capacities shaping the proud uniqueness of her life. (Auerbach 111)

In a world where “[man’s] good woman is a queer thing, half doll, half angel; their bad woman almost always a fiend” (333), the old maids in *Shirley* have both the aspects of the angel and the demon. Most of them exhibit a sense of deference toward patriarchal society, especially church authority, symbolized by the rectors. On the other hand, they are demonized and neglected “because they are not pretty, and young, and merry” (171). Synthesizing the images of angel and demon, they become “*authentic* female hero[es]” (emphasis mine). Unlike the Romantic, mythical visions of the old maid as Medusa or as a “comic grotesque,” they are *real* women, and what’s more, they are heroes.

Men are unable to see the old maids in this light, however, because for them the figure of the Medusa old maid is a reminder of their failure in both the political and social realms. They are unable to stop the workers’ rebellions and unwilling to promote social change for young

women. Freud's "Medusa's Head" note sheds some light upon this concern about the figure of Medusa and its relationship to political and societal change. This short note points to why the male characters seem unwilling and unable to look clearly at the situation of women and alter it. Freud explains,

We have not often attempted to interpret individual mythological themes, but an interpretation suggests itself easily in the case of the horrifying decapitated head of Medusa.

To decapitate = to castrate. The terror of Medusa is thus a terror of castration that is linked to the sight of something. Numerous analyses have made us familiar with the occasion for this: it occurs when a boy, who has hitherto been unwilling to believe the threat of castration, catches sight of the female genitals, probably those of an adult, surrounded by hair, and essentially those of his mother [...]

The sight of Medusa's head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone. Observe that we have here once again the same origin from the castration complex and the same transformation of affect! For becoming stiff means an erection. Thus in the original situation it offers consolation to the spectator: he is still in possession of a penis, and the stiffening reassures him of the fact. (272)

In other words, the sight of the Medusa's head forces a man to recognize the possibility of his castration or impotence. The Gorgon old maids remind men of their impotence in the political and social realms.

Neil Hertz, in his essay "Medusa's Head: Male Hysteria under Political Pressure," seeks to elucidate how Freud's "Medusa's Head" is related to political pressure and revolution. Hertz draws from Freud's belief that "[i]n later life grown men may experience a similar panic, perhaps

when the cry that throne and altar are in danger” (“Fetishism” 215). He expounds upon this correlation between men’s similar reaction to the Medusa’s head and to political revolution, using examples of prominent historical figures such as Victor Hugo and Maxime Du Camp, whose writings represent “what would seem to be a political threat as if it were a sexual threat” (27).

A prime example Hertz gives from Victor Hugo is his narrative of the events of the June days during 1848 in France. In Hugo’s purported eye-witness account of the June 23 uprising, a young, beautiful whore appears on the top of the barricade, pulls up her dress, and calls out for them to fire at her belly if they dare, which they do. A second woman repeats her action, this time even younger and more beautiful. Hertz comments, “What the revolution is said to be doing figuratively is precisely what — in a moment—each of the women will be represented as doing literally, suddenly displaying monstrous and unknown forms to a horrified society” (29). The horror of seeing their vuval “Medusa’s head” is a reflection of the horror of political revolution.

Hertz believes that in Maxime du Camp one can find an even “more explicit linking of what is politically dangerous to feelings of sexual horror and fascination” (32). Maxime du Camp wrote a four-volume denunciation of the Commune in *Les Convulsions de Paris*. He also included a defense of the verdict that exiled French painter Gustave Courbet for his supposed role in the destruction of the Vendôme column, which was the Napoleonic monument to the victories of the Grande Armée (Hertz 32). Hertz explains that Maxime du Camp believed that “both in his theory of painting and in his practice Courbet revealed himself as just the sort of person who would get mixed up in just this sort of thing [political revolution]” (32). Why is Courbet the sort of person to be involved in the politically radical behavior of toppling a column

(a possible phallic symbol)? Because he is the sort of person who would paint *L'Origine du monde*, a painting focuses on a naked woman's genitals. Hertz points out that du Camp, in describing the nude's body as "'convulsed,' for example, is to assimilate her horrid appeal to that of the political 'convulsions' du Camp is charting in Paris" (35). For Hertz, it is not "unreasonable that [du Camp's] hatred of the Commune should have lead him, by free association, to Courbet's nude" (36).

As in Hugo and du Camp, in *Shirley*, the reader can see how "these powerfully rendered Medusa-fantasies [...] are offered as substitutes for a more patient, inclusive account of political conflict" (Hertz 40). The glaring image of the Medusa practically opens the novel, with the first mention of the Gorgon old maid appearing as early as the second chapter. As the Irish curate Malone comes searching for Robert Moore to help protect his mill from the "score of greasy cloth-dressers [who] might beat up Moore's quarters that night" (18), he runs into Moore's sister Hortense. Hortense pops her head out from the door to ask if the frame-carrying wagons have come, and the narrator notes,

It might not be the head of a goddess – indeed a screw of curl-paper on each side the temples quite forbade that supposition – but neither was it the head of a Gorgon; yet Malone seems to take it in the latter light. Big as he was, he shrank bashfully back into the rain at the view thereof; and [...] hurried in seeming trepidation down a short lane, across an obscure yard, towards a huge black mill. (20-21).

Why would the sight of an old maid in her curlers cause such a large man to shrink back and run away in "trepidation" (21)? Her Gorgon-like aspect (made complete by the curl-paper which will transform her hair into something twisted, snake-like) reminds him of the possibility of



impotence, of his failure to protect Moore and his new machinery. It suggests the breaking not only of the textile frames, but of the framework of society. Perhaps, as Freud notes, he also experiences the discomfort of an attraction toward what he knows should not attract him, hence his shrinking “bashfully.” In other words, he is “scared *stiff*.”

Robert Moore too had once fallen under the “Gorgon gaze” of the old maid Miss Mann and “he had never forgotten the circumstance” (173). Miss Mann has “a formidable eye for one of her sex” (173), and her name further suggests the castration complex men experience when she fixes her eyes upon them. She is, after all, Miss *Mann*. Faced with a “Man(n)” devoid of a phallus is “no ordinary doom” (173). In fact, it is so horrifying that the narrator notes, “[Moore] considered [being fixed with Miss Mann’s eye] quite equal to anything Medusa could do: he professed doubt whether, since that infliction, his flesh had been quite what it was before, -- whether there was not something stony in its texture. The gaze had had such an effect on him as to drive him promptly from the apartment and house (173).” Miss Mann effectively unmans him. This castrated state is echoed by Moore’s later confession to Caroline after he has been shot by one of his former disgruntled workers. He tells her, “I am hopelessly weak, and the state of my mind is inexpressible – dark, barren, impotent” (547). Moore is unable overcome the political threat of this local rebellion to the nation-wide Industrial Revolution, resulting in feelings of inadequacy and impotence.

This language of impotence is found throughout the novel in relation to the “woman question” as well. Caroline reflects to herself:

I believe single women should have more to do – better chances of interesting and profitable occupation than they possess now [...] My consolation is, indeed, that God hears many a groan and compassionates much grief which man stops his ears

against, or frowns on with impotent contempt. I say *impotent*, for I observe that to such grievances as society cannot readily cure, it usually forbids utterance, on pain of its scorn [...] People hate to be reminded of ills they are unable or unwilling to remedy. (369, author's emphasis)

She bemoans the current situation of single women for their lack of opportunities outside of marriage, recognizing that “[t]he great wish – the sole aim of every [young woman with no employment] is to be married, but the majority will never marry: they will die as the now live. They scheme, they plot, they dress to ensnare husbands.” (370). Caroline continues her soliloquy crying,

Men of England! Look at your poor girls, [...] 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? (371)

Caroline references the coquetry and artifice of the mermaid and the wretchedness of old maids which result because they do not have “an interest and an occupation which shall raise them above the flirt, the manoeuver, the mischief-making tale-bearer” (371). Instead of creating a better world for women, men maintain the ideals of a society where women transform first to mermaids and then to Medusas.

Men fear the treacherous snares of the temptress mermaid and the chilling stare of the Gorgon Medusa, yet they are unwilling to work towards social change that would allow for women to escape the status of mermaid, and eventually Medusa. Instead of providing an alternative outlet for the “mermaids,” gentlemen turn them “into ridicule” (370), and for the

“Medusas” like Miss Ainley, “gentleman always sneer at her” (171). Men would rather spend their time running in terror from, or deriding these mythical woman creatures than work to break the bonds that chain them to their half-bestial image. Perhaps this is because their true understanding of women is so stunted that they are unable to recognize them for what they truly are, neither mermaids, nor Medusas, and certainly not castrated males. Hélène Cixous echoes this idea in her landmark “The Laugh of Medusa,”

Too bad for them [men] if they fall apart upon discovering that women aren't men, or that the mother doesn't have one [penis]. But isn't this fear convenient for them? Wouldn't the worst be, isn't the worst, in truth, that women aren't castrated, that they have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning? You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (12)

Cixous suggests that men prefer to fear women than to understand them. She also draws a link between Medusas and Sirens (although she interestingly suggests that it is men themselves who call each other to their death instead of women). If they would only look at Medusa directly, they would realize that she does not petrify but purify. It is, after all, the “Medusas” of *Shirley* who “[transcend] the laughter and tears with which cultural complacency endows [them], to ‘establish [their] own landmarks’ with the audacity and aplomb of an authentic hero” (Aubrecht 112).

Although the men of *Shirley* as a general rule cannot truly see the old maids, the women can and learn to recognize them as heroes. After going to visit Miss Mann, Caroline realizes that her “goblin-grimness scarcely went deeper than the angel-sweetness of hundreds of beauties” (173). In truth, she has only become “corpse-like” and “grim” because she has endured “cruel,

slow-wasting, obstinate sufferings” and has been repaid “only by ingratitude” by those to whom she “made large sacrifices of time, money, health” (173-174). Caroline also learns “something of the benevolence of [...] [Miss Ainley]; all the neighbourhood – at least all the female neighborhood – knew something of it: no one spoke against Miss Ainley except lively young gentlemen, and inconsiderate old ones, who declared her hideous” (176). The men are unable to penetrate through her “hideousness” to see her goodness, unlike the female community. Shirley decides that as a preventative measure to violence and further political disaster she will donate some of her wealth to alleviate the suffering of the discontented workers, and she knows that in order for her donation to be best spent wisely she and Caroline will need a good counselor. Shirley tells Caroline, ““To that intent, we must introduce some clear, calm, practical sense into our councils so go, and fetch Miss Ainley.”” (253). Instead of appealing to any of the men who are adept in matters of money, they appeal to the practical wisdom of the old maid. In fact, Shirley explicitly states

that the curates were to have no voice in the disposal of the money; that their meddling fingers were not to be inserted into the pie. The rectors, of course, must be paramount, and they might be trusted: they had some experience, some sagacity, and Mr. Hall, at least, had sympathy and loving-kindness for his fellow-men; but as for the youth under them, they must be set aside, kept down, and taught that subordination and silence best become their years and capacity. (255)

Shirley turns society’s expectations on their head. She must involve the rectors because of Miss Ainley’s insistence, but her tone in saying that the rectors “*might* be trusted: they had *some* experience, *some* sagacity” (255, emphasis mine) suggests that there is some doubt as to their wisdom, experience, and trustworthiness. As for Miss Ainley’s wisdom, experience, and

trustworthiness, on the other hand, there are no doubts. Furthermore, Shirley's assertion that the curates should be excluded and taught subordination and silence also points to the greater wisdom of women. Words such as "subordination" and "silence" traditionally would refer to the states in which women should be kept, yet here this inversion makes the reader question which truly is the wiser and more competent sex.

Brontë further plays upon this idea of which is the more competent sex through the reaction of the rectors to the old maid's plan: "Helstone glanced sharply round with an alert, suspicious expression, as if he apprehended that female craft was at work, and that something in petticoats was somehow trying to underhand to acquire too much influence, and make itself of too much importance" (257). Even though Miss Ainley is "fully competent to the undertaking," (254) the rectors are suspicious of any female plans simply on the fact that Miss Ainley is a woman, even though she is more suitable to the task of creating a plan to serve the poor than they are. This instance reflects the larger social issue Caroline has addressed of men not allowing women "better chances of interesting and profitable occupation" (369). Brontë shows that women are clearly capable of succeeding in the male sphere of work if they would only be given the chance. Shirley "caught and comprehended [Helstone's] expression" (257), and must deceive the men into believing that they have thought of Miss Ainley's plan themselves for them to agree to it. She must debase their female plan saying, "'This scheme is nothing, [...] it is only an outline – a mere suggestion; you, gentlemen, are requested to draw up rules of your own'" (257). Furthermore, she dons her male mask of "Captain Keedlar" and tells the rectors, "'This is quite a gentleman's affair [...] The ladies there are only to be our aides-de-camp, and at their peril they speak, till we have settled the whole business'" (258). The women must be seen as subordinate helpers for the plan to find approbation with the rectors. Shirley is able to

successfully manipulate the rectors, which Brontë indicates through Shirley's smile at seeing the plan "they" have drawn up. She has a "queer smile – a smile not ill-natured, but significant: too significant to be generally thought amiable" (258). Shirley has the power of "silent soul-reading" (259) and is able to read men in a truer light than they can read her and the other women. Helstone tells her, "[Y]our little female manoeuvres don't blind me" (258), but the women and the careful reader can see that they clearly do.

There is one exception to the plethora of figuratively blind men in the novel, and that is the physically "sand-blind" (570) Mr. Hall, the vicar of Nunnely. He is the unique example of a man who seems to be able to see women in a truer light than the others. Robert Moore expresses his wonder at the adoration Mr. Hall receives from the townswomen to Caroline: "[T]he whole generation of women in Briarfield seem to have made an idol of that priest: I wonder why: he is bald, sand-blind, grey-haired" (570). Because "gentleman only think of ladies' looks" (171), Robert cannot fathom why the townswomen admire the old, sand-blind Mr. Hall so much. Women, however, are not as blind as men, and are able to see the goodness in Mr. Hall and appreciate the fact that he is able to see them clearly. Interestingly, the only male who is not figuratively blind to the nature of women, is physically blind. Similar to Ovid's blind Tiresias, he is able to see a person's true soul because he is not distracted by his or her outward appearance.<sup>8</sup> As a priest, a stand-in for Christ, he is able to see more as Christ sees humankind. He recognizes that "it is not youth, nor good looks, nor grace, nor any gentle outside charm which makes either beauty or goodness in God's eyes" (270). His friendship with Miss Ainley is a prime example of his "keen" blindness. The narrator explains, "Many ladies [...] respected [Miss Ainley] deeply: they could not help it; one gentleman – one only – gave her his friendship and perfect confidence: this was Mr Hall, the vicar of Nunnely. He said, and said truly, that her life came

nearer the life of Christ, than that of any other human being he had ever met with” (177). Here the narrator interjects to defend her professed realistic portrayals: “You must think, reader, that in sketching Miss Ainley’s character, I depict a figment of imagination – no – we seek the originals of such portraits in real life only” (177). As Brontë tries to demystify the Romantic myth of the Medusa old maid, she will not allow her descriptions to be read as solely an inverted myth of the old maid’s goodness. Her narrator assures her readers of the truth of these very complimentary descriptions.

Comparisons are drawn not only between the old maids and the men, particularly the rectors, but also between the two heroines, Shirley and Caroline, and the old maids. Mr. Hall addresses the young women saying, “Young ladies, when your mirror or men’s tongues flatter you, remember that, in the sight of her Maker, Mary Ann Ainley – a woman whom neither glass nor lips have ever panegyricized – is fairer and better than either of you” (270). In contrast to Robert Moore who “amused himself with comparing fair youth [Caroline] – delicate and attractive – with shrivelled old, livid and loveless [Miss Mann]” (172), Mr. Hall sees correctly, that is to say, he sees through the eyes of the Maker that the young beauties pale in comparison to the old, “shrivelled” maids. The two heroines seem to see their inferiority to the old maids as well. For example, Caroline contrasts herself and Miss Ainley,

What was her [Caroline’s] love of nature, what was her sense of beauty, what were her more varied and fervent emotions, what was her deeper power of thought, what her wide capacity to comprehend, compared to the practical excellence of this good woman? Momentarily, they seemed only beautiful forms of selfish delight; mentally, she trod them under foot. (177)

In other words, Caroline has all the stuff of Romance and the ability to be a Romantic. She recognizes, however, in her development from Romanticism to Realism, that the “*practical excellence*” (emphasis mine) of Miss Ainley exposes Romanticism as selfish and superficial. Miss Ainley, like the other old maids, adheres to the practical and realistic ideas of Realism and cannot be trapped within the Romantic Medusa myth.

Although Shirley and Caroline are set up to be the heroines of the novel, as Mr. Hall seems to intimate, perhaps it is really the old maids who are the heroines. They are not Gorgon Medusas; they are shining examples of Christ. As Mr. Hall declares, “[Miss Ainley’s] life came nearer the life of Christ, than that of any other human being he had ever met with” (177). Miss Mann is also described as a savior to mankind. Caroline learns that “to one wretched relative she had been a support and succor in the depths of self-earned degradation, and that it was still her hand which kept him from utter destitution” (175). They, indeed, are heroes. While many portrayals of Victorian spinsters are filled with contempt and derision in order to “dispel two central cultural fears: that of the female hero, and [...] the defeat of the family” (Auerbach 114), Brontë gives the reader the picture of female heroes who help to save society as well as save the family. They help to defeat suffering in the community through the implementation of Miss Ainley’s plan for the distribution of Shirley’s wealth. They also help to teach young girls like Caroline and Shirley integrity. For instance, under Miss Ainley’s direction, “Caroline became aware of the power a most serene, unselfish, and benignant mind could exercise over those to whom it was developed” (176). Caroline and Shirley do not become old maids themselves, and, as Caroline suggests when she says that “the life which made Miss Ainley happy could not make her happy” (176), they do not desire to be old maids. Nonetheless, the “*practical excellence*” that they have learned from the old maids along with patience allows for their ultimate marriage.



Their continued good character and ability to wait patiently for the men they love enables the double marriage at the close of the novel and the preservation of the family. Even though Caroline may cry out for patriarchy to alter their laws, their codes, their vision of society, so that young women do not become mermaids and then Medusas, it is truly the “Medusa” old maids who save the young women from this fate.

#### IV. "Titan visions" and "filial hopes": Myths Women Create for Themselves

As Kate Lawson aptly notes, in *Shirley*, "[R]ather than speaking through a character, or being expounded through logical argument, the disturbances of female dissent are disclosed in fantastic stories and narrative musings, in an accumulation of disquieting detail, in an accretion of images" ("The Dissenting Voice" 730). Shirley and Caroline express their dissent through their creation of alternative myths to the patriarchal myths of the mermaid and the Medusa. Shirley forms an Evean myth that is a "hash of Scripture and mythology" (304) to describe her vision of a very Romantic, Promethean Eve. Her myth falls short, though, of imagining a new and truly different myth than the traditional patriarchal myths. It ends up only inverting the patriarchal myth, creating a matriarchy. Even though Shirley envisions an Eve myth that is markedly different from that of Milton's, she still resembles Milton through her male identity of "Captain Keedlar" who cares to spend his talents (punning on the Biblical parable of the talents), and her grand and impersonal language. Caroline, on the other hand, desires the comfortable warmth that a female community would offer her. Her "myth," if such a simplistic, personal vision can be called one, is radically different from both Milton's and Shirley's myth. Instead of relying on Romantic conventions, Caroline employs the ideas of Realism. After the entrance of Louis Moore to the narrative, the reader learns of a French *devoir* that Shirley had previously written that also is a type of Eve myth. Entitled "La Première Femme Savante," it describes not how Shirley would like to imagine Eve, but how the character Eva becomes instilled with male knowledge. In other words, it describes how things have come to be, not how Shirley would like them to be. Brontë explores the potential success of imagining a new myth for women through the marriages of Shirley and Caroline as the nature of their marriages is a reflection of the myths they have created for themselves.

The Eve myth Shirley envisions indicates a grand, almost violent overtaking of the traditional patriarchal Eden myth, especially as understood by Milton. This Eden myth is central to the novel as a whole and is a key to fully understanding it. Brontë signals its central importance by placing it structurally in the center of the novel. Furthermore, it is in Chapter XVIII entitled, “Which the Genteel Reader is recommended to skip, low Persons being here introduced.” In a tongue-in-cheek manner, Brontë advises those “Genteel Reader[s]” to skip over her most central chapter! While she qualifies this suggestion with the explanation that “low Persons,” presumably the worker William Farren, will be introduced, the true focus of the chapter is the discussion of three major texts in Western culture: Genesis, Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, and St. Paul’s first epistle to Timothy. The chapter opens with Shirley’s re-envisioning of Genesis 2 and 3 and *Paradise Lost* in her own Eden myth and Caroline’s reaction to it, and it closes with the girls’ previously discussed reaction to Joe Scott’s quotation of St. Paul’s first epistle to Timothy.

The chapter begins with Caroline and Shirley sitting outside of church. Caroline encourages Shirley to go inside to the service, but Shirley refuses, saying that she would rather stay outside with Nature, who “is now at her evening prayers” (302). Shirley then suddenly exclaims: ““Caroline, I see her [Nature]! and I will tell you what she is like: she is like what Eve was when she and Adam stood alone on the earth”” (303). To this Caroline replies, ““And that is not Milton’s Eve, Shirley”” (303). Caroline’s response sets off what becomes Shirley’s preface to her reworking of the Eden myth. Shirley cries,

‘Milton’s Eve! Milton’s Eve! I repeat. No, by the pure Mother of God, she is not! Cary, we are alone: we may speak what we think. Milton was great; but was he good? His brain was right; how was his heart? [...] Milton tried to see the first

woman; but, Cary, he saw her not [...] It was his cook he saw; or it was Mrs. Gill, as I have seen her, making custards, in the heat of summer, in the cool dairy, with rose-trees and nasturtiums above the latticed window, preparing a cold collation for the rectors, – preserves, and “dulcet creams” – puzzled “what choice to choose for delicacy best.” (303)

Shirley vehemently objects to what she understands as the Miltonic vision of Eve.<sup>9</sup> She admits to his genius as a poet, but suggests that his genius did not extend to a clear understanding of Eve and, therefore, womankind. As Lawson remarks, “To discuss the first woman, the original woman, is also to discuss the essential nature of all women” (“Imagining Eve” 412). Shirley is unable to publically condemn Eve’s depiction as she notes to Caroline, “[I]f 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” (333). Shirley feels comfortable speaking so freely about Milton’s “first-rate female [character]” because “[they] are alone: [they] can speak what [they] think.” Outside of their female friendship, their understanding of the true nature of womankind is silenced. Shirley criticizes Milton’s Eve in private, for within this private space reserved for women she can say subversive things without fear of reprisal and outside patriarchal control. Shirley only feels free to express herself among Nature [who, for Shirley, is the modern Eve] and Caroline. She alludes to Book V of *Paradise Lost* in which Eve is preparing a meal for Adam and the archangel Raphael. Instead of envisioning what Shirley believes is the true Eve, she believes Milton sees the image of her employee Mrs. Gill, tied to her domestic duty as cook, as she prepares a meal for the rectors, who, like Adam and Raphael, are symbols of religious patriarchy.

Shirley's sentiments are echoed by Virginia Woolf, who also felt that Milton did not see women in a true light, and relates in her diary, "I scarcely feel that Milton lived or knew men and women; except for the peevish personalities about marriage and the woman's duties" (*A Writer's Diary* 5). Both Shirley and Woolf see Milton as focused on the subordinate position of woman, defined by her duty. Shirley, however, tries to move past what Woolf calls "Milton's bogey" (*A Room* 112), which Gilbert and Gubar define as "his cosmology, his vision of 'what *men* thought' and his powerful rendering of the culture myth that Woolf, like most other literary women, sensed at the heart of Western literary patriarchy" (191, author's emphasis). Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar express the way in which women writers try to overcome "Milton's bogey": "[I]n an effort to come to terms with the institutionalized and often elaborately metaphorical misogyny Milton's epic expresses, many [woman writers] devised their own revisionary myths and metaphors" (189). Indeed, Shirley creates her "own revisionary [myth]" to describe Eve. She declares to Caroline:

'I would beg to remind [Milton] that the first men of the earth were Titans, and that Eve was their mother: from her sprang Saturn, Hyperion, Oceanus; she bore Prometheus — [...] The first woman's breast that heaved with life on this world yielded with daring which could contend with Omnipotence: the strength which could bear a thousand years of bondage, – the vitality which could feed that vulture death through uncounted ages, – the unexhausted life and uncorrupted excellence, sisters to immortality, which after millenniums of crimes, struggles, and woes, could conceive and bring forth a Messiah. The first woman was heaven-born: vast was the heart whence gushed the well-spring of the blood of nations, and grand the undegenerate head where rested the consort-crown of

creation [...] I saw – I now see – a woman-Titan [...] [S]he reclines her bosom on the ridge of Stilbro' Moor; her mighty hands are joined beneath it. So kneeling, face to face she speaks with God. That Eve is Jehovah's daughter, as Adam was his son.' (303-304).

Shirley aims to create an alternate and subversive vision of Eve. In Shirley's eyes, Eve is a Romantic, grand, powerful, "woman-Titan" who can speak face to face with God and resembles the Greek goddess Gaia or Mother Earth. She creates an Eve that completely contrasts her understanding of Milton's Eve. In fact, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that Shirley's Eve resembles Milton's Satan more than his first woman (195). Shirley's Eve is the mother and origin of Prometheus, a very important figure to the Romantics, who connected Milton's Satan to Prometheus' willingness to defy a deity in order to bring the spark of knowledge to humankind. Shirley essentially rejects the purely Christian myth of creation and merges it with Greek myths to forge a myth of Eve and womankind that she can believe.

Yet, even though Shirley's Eve appears to be a great and powerful mythical figure, the myth still is a failure to truly imagine a new vision of womankind. Many critics see her myth as a failure, although for different reasons. Tara Moore, for instance, sees Shirley as propping patriarchal values. Through Shirley's Eve myth Moore believes "Brontë subtly demonstrates the failure of building feminized myths on the foundations of patriarchal systems because, carried to conclusion, the patriarchal narratives deflate the realistic potential of ideal feminine figures" (Moore 478). Though Shirley aims to create a myth centered on the grand figure of Eve, Eve's great contribution, or reason why she is grand, remains the fact that she gives birth to Titan *sons* like Prometheus and the Christian Messiah Jesus. She is not great in her own right, but only because she is the mother of great *men*. While critics like Kate Lawson agree that Shirley's myth

is a failure, she argues that it is not Shirley's aim to support the traditional patriarchal views of women. Shirley's myth fails not because she builds it on the foundations of patriarchal systems, but because she only aims to invert the systems, creating a matriarchy instead of a patriarchy. Shirley is unable to imagine "feminine power which is truly *different* from masculine power" ("Imagining Eve" 416, author's emphasis).

Much like her Eve myth, Shirley establishes herself as a head figure in the patriarchal line, which, as Gilbert and Gubar suggest, limits her to a kind of "male mimicry" (382). The independence she desires is only available to men and when she has business dealings to conduct or wishes to speak with authority and be taken seriously by men she must don her male persona of "Captain Keedlar." Although she aims to subvert patriarchs like Milton, she often succeeds only in imitating them through inversion. Shirley's parents, having only Shirley, "bestowed on her the same masculine family cognomen they would have bestowed on a boy" (191). She is orphaned and the sole heir of her family's fortune, which allows her to be involved in many aspects of the public life that were traditionally limited to men. Shirley often refers to herself as "Captain Keedlar" or suggests, "Shirley Keedlar, 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" (194). This "touch of manhood" does not give her a new vision of female strength and power, however. Instead, it actually moves her to imitate Milton in some ways.

Both Milton and Shirley use their abilities or *talents* to form new myths; in Milton's works and in *Shirley* there is much discussion of the parable of the talents in the New Testament. Milton wanted to be quite sure that he had spent all his talents creating a new, visionary work, "something so written to aftertimes, as they should not willingly let die" ("From The Reason" 54). In his Sonnet XVI, he speaks of "that one talent which is death to hide" (line 3). Brontë too

reveals a preoccupation with the hiding and spending of talents in *Shirley*. Rose Yorke echoes Shirley's desire to spend her own talents when she exclaims to her mother, "And if my Master has given me ten talents, my duty is to trade with them, and make them ten talents more. Not in the dust of household drawers shall the coin be interred" (378). She lists a number of domestic places where she will "*not*" (378, author's emphasis) hide her talents such as the in "household drawers," "in a china-closet," "in the linen-press," and "least of all [...] in a tureen of cold potatoes, to be ranged with bread, butter, pastry, and ham on the shelves of the larder." (378). Rose, like Shirley, refuses to accept the domestic sphere as the only place where they can spend their talents. In fact, it is the vision of woman-as-cook that she detests most of all, alluding to Shirley's rejection of Milton's Eve. Yet, although they describe different Eves, both Milton and Shirley aim to use their talents to create new myths.

Not only does Shirley try to take on the role of a man and spend her talents, but she also uses Miltonic language. Kate Lawson notes that her "language is as vast and impersonal as Milton's, and nowhere do we see the personal, the concrete human life" ("Imagining Eve" 415). For Shirley, the shortcoming of Milton is that he saw Eve as too domesticated and defined by her duties; he sees Mrs. Gill the cook. On the other hand, Shirley's flaw is that she makes Mrs. Gill a goddess. But Mrs. Gill is neither solely cook nor wholly goddess. Milton and Shirley would have been closer to the true essence of Mrs. Gill (the stand-in here for Eve) if they could see Mrs. Gill simply as Mrs. Gill. Both Milton and Shirley present their own Romantic visions of Eve in their myths. In using this Miltonic language, Shirley's Romantic narrative voice differs markedly from that of *Shirley*'s narrator, who opens the novel claiming to adhere to Realism: "If you think, from this prelude, that anything like a romance is preparing for you, reader, you never were more mistaken [...]. Calm your expectations; reduce them to a lowly standard. Something



real, cool, and solid, lies before you; something unromantic as Monday morning” (5). The narrator goes even further to assert that not only is her story an example of Realism, her characters are too: “I describe imperfect characters (every character in this book will be found to be more or less imperfect, my pen refusing to draw anything in the model line)” (59). While the narrator clearly declares her adherence to Realism within the text, Shirley, on the other hand, refuses to draw Eve as an “imperfect character;” instead, she is ““uncorrupted excellence”” (303).

Caroline even remarks to Shirley, ““She [Shirley’s Eve] is very vague and visionary!”” (304). She presents her alternate account of Eve as she critiques Shirley’s myth: ““[Eve] coveted an apple, and was cheated by a snake: but you have got such a hash of Scripture and mythology into your head that there is no making any sense of you”” (304). Caroline is able to recount her Eve story in only one sentence, which contains no adjectives or grand imagines, simply actions and facts. She uses the most mundane and realistic terms, not even the symbolic terms of Christianity. Eve “coveted an apple,” not the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil; she “was cheated by a snake,” not Satan. Her account may seem very minimalist, but its account serves as a clear contrast to Shirley’s grand, mythic version. Moreover, it points to the fact that “[a]lthough criticism of Brontë’s novel tends to privilege Shirley Keedlar as the central defiant figure, Caroline Helstone is in fact a greater force of unconventional expression” (Moore 478).

Shirley’s “Titan visions” contrast with Caroline’s “filial hopes” (305), and Caroline imagines a different sort of “mother” than Shirley’s Mother Nature/First Mother Eve: “Shirley had mentioned the word ‘mother:’ that word suggested to Caroline’s imagination not the mighty and mystical parent of Shirley’s visions, but a gentle human form – the form she ascribed to her own mother; unknown, unloved, but not unlonged for” (304-305). Caroline dreams that her mother who abandoned her in her infancy “[looks] upon her fondly with loving eyes, and [says]

to her tenderly, in a sweet voice: – ‘Caroline, my child, I have a home for you: you shall live with me. All the love you have needed, and not tasted, from infancy, I have saved for you carefully. Come! It shall cherish you now.’” (305). Caroline longs for the warmth and personal intimacy that a close, female community would offer her. She desires love and acceptance from *her* mother, not a “vague and visionary” ancestress. She also adheres closer to the proposed Realism the novel offers. Her “myth of the ideal mother and the female community she represents, though less grand than Shirley’s vision of Eve, is certainly more realistic and more subversive of the Victorian codes of gender that offer women few options” (Moore 489). It is Caroline, then, who creates a more radically different vision of woman. Her vision does not rely on or prop patriarchal standards; it is a community of loving, although imperfect, women.

The other myth Shirley creates, Louis Moore recites toward the end of the novel, but chronologically Shirley has written it before her Eve myth related to Caroline. This myth differs strikingly from Shirley’s Eve myth. Although it also is an Eveal story, unlike her other myth, it is not an Eve myth, but an *Eva* myth. It was written as a *devoir* for Louis, her tutor, in his native language of French. Shirley, therefore, is writing under male supervision, and cannot, as she expresses to Caroline “speak as [she] thinks” (303). Furthermore, she is not able to write in her own native tongue. The title of this *devoir* is “La Première Femme Savante” or “The First Learned Woman,” or, as the chapter is titled, “The First Bluestocking.” Shirley describes how this woman would become learned: “[A]bove those eyes, when the breeze bares her forehead, shines an expanse fair and ample, – a clear, candid page, whereon knowledge, should knowledge ever come, might write a golden record.” (454). This Eva is waiting for a male figure to write his knowledge across her forehead, her “clear, candid page.” “When she was alone Eva was compared to a *tabula rasa*---a ‘clear, candid page’ — waiting to be written over by knowledge,

a writing which is a gift but also a kind of defacement. In the writing of male knowledge she is changed: her blankness is spoiled, her page is overwritten” (Lawson, “Imagining Eve” 421). Not only is her page overwritten by male knowledge, she is unable to find meaning or value without the notice and care of a male figure. She is not a “great creative source” herself, but an “inadvertent” emission (455):

Of all things, herself seemed to herself the centre, – a small, forgotten atom of life, a spark of soul, emitted inadvertent from the great creative source, and now burning unmarked to waste in the heart of a black hollow. She asked, was she thus to burn out and perish, her living light doing no good, never seen, never needed, – a star in an else starless firmament, – which nor shepherd, nor wanderer, nor sage, nor priest, tracked as a guide, or read as a prophecy? (454-455)

The “shepherd,” “wanderer,” “sage,” and “priest” are all notably traditional figures of patriarchal society. Eva will “burn out and perish” (455) without patriarchal society. She cries out, “Guidance – help – comfort – come!” and is answered by the “Comforter,” or “a Son of God” (455-456). This “Comforter” names her “Eva” (455) and claims her as his own, to which Eva replies, “Oh, take me! Oh, claim me! This is a god” (456). Lawson describes this exchange between Eva and the “Comforter” as a sort of “rape fantasy, where the woman desires the violent intrusion of a male figure into her lonely and unfulfilled life [...] [S]he is feeble and secondary, and can only be restored and redeemed by the male figure” (“Imagining Eve” 421). Shirley, here, expresses the traditional male myth of womankind, a creature who is secondary and subordinate. “This myth is not so much an attempt to defy traditional roles as to understand their source [...] Brontë abandons the attempt to produce a myth rooted in an idealist version of

the feminine and instead makes do with a myth which explains the terrible limitations placed on women's roles, limitation of which the novel is acutely aware" (Lawson, "Imagining Eve" 412). That Shirley recognizes the limitations of her Eva myth is made especially clear by the doodles she draws in the margins of Louis' books while he recites her myth. Although she is only able to write in the margins, what she doodles is note-worthy: "little leaves, fragments of pillars, broken crosses" (457). "[L]ittle leaves" suggest minuteness, and perhaps a diminutized or destroyed feminine Nature. "[F]ragments of pillars" insinuate the crumbling of the columns of society, and "broken crosses" symbolize the break-down of religion. Perhaps what the present Shirley recognizes upon hearing her past *devoir* is that with the destruction of Nature, of the woman with the "clear, candid page," the destruction of society will also follow.

The novel closes with the marriages of the two heroines; Shirley marries Louis Moore while Caroline marries Robert Moore. Each marriage reflects the myths that the women have created for womankind in the novel. Caroline, who has moved from Romanticism to Realism, who desires a female community, receives it in the end. In fact, Caroline has the best of both worlds: She marries Robert and is able to become an accepted member of society, but she also has her feminine community with her mother who lives nearby. It is clear that this feminine community is of the utmost importance to Caroline. She tells Robert after his proposal, "I cannot desert [my mother], even for you: I cannot break her heart, even for your sake" (603). Caroline, who has learned the value of Realism and practicality, ends up realizing what looks like the happiest ending.

Shirley, although she too seems to end up happy, has a much more difficult time reaching that final stage of a happy marriage. Because of her grand and Romantic notions, she fears that after marriage she and her husband will become unhappy and that he will soon weary of her. As

her Eve myth demonstrates, Shirley is prone to idolize and romanticize, and the practical, mundane life that probably awaits her may be wearisome. Her husband Louis seems to be prone to some of the same mistakes of Shirley as well. He describes her in grand, figurative terms such as “Pantheress! – beautiful forest-born! – wily, tameless, peerless nature!” and calls her his “life and idol” (591). While they may experience more difficulties than Caroline and Robert, Caroline suggests that Shirley’s marriage “*is* Romantic, but it is also right” (569, author’s emphasis). Romanticism is not wholly without value, but Brontë suggests that in order to imagine the best possible situation for womankind, one must employ Realism, “[s]omething real, cool, and solid, [...] something unromantic as Monday morning” (5).

## V. Conclusion

*Shirley*, which followed the subversive, wildly popular, Gothic Romance *Jane Eyre*, is considered to be a failure in many respects by critics. It is neither grand nor Romantic, and the ending, especially to feminists, seems ill-worked and unsatisfying. They desire something “more” than the “Moorees” for these heroines. *Shirley*, however, is formed on a completely different foundation than *Jane Eyre* – one of realistic, mundane, daily life. I believe it is this realistic foundation that so often unsettles critics and, yet, redeems the novel. Elizabeth Gaskell, in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, tells her readers that “Miss Brontë took extreme pains with ‘Shirley’ [...] She tried to make her novel like a piece of actual life, —feeling sure that if she but represented the product of personal experience and observation truly, good would come out of it in the long run” (315). Brontë does not and cannot depict a world that is steeped in fact and history that also depicts a woman stepping out beyond the realistic boundaries of her sex, as the feminist critics would like to see her do. This fact, however, does not mean that the novel is not subversive or feminist in its own way. We can see her dissent through the instances and images that are contrary to the Realism of the novel: through Romantic myths of the mermaid enchantress, the spinster Medusa, and Shirley’s Eve myth. The novel serves not to prop the Romantic aspects of these myths, but to debunk them. Shirley and Caroline reject being delineated as mermaids; the old maids like Miss Mann and Miss Ainley defy their stereotypes; the patriarchal inversion of Shirley’s Eve myth is criticized. Only Caroline’s realistic female community “myth” is left untouched, and it is within this last “myth” that the reader sees Brontë’s hope for a positive, progressive future for women.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For a book-length discussion of Milton as a possible feminist, see *Feminist Milton* by Joseph Anthony Wittreich.

<sup>2</sup> Although beyond the scope of this paper, it would be an interesting study to analyze the images of men's hair. Milton's Adam has "hyacinthine locks / Round from his parted forelock manly hung / Clust'ring (*PL* 4.301-303). Robert too has "round curls" (217).

<sup>3</sup> *Shirley* often alludes to romantic novels, books, and model heroes or heroines from literature, discussing them as if they were artificial and unrealistic. The self-reflexive tone of the novel sets it up as if it actually were real life and supports Brontë's aim to create a novel based on Realism as well as points to Caroline's movement from Romanticism to Realism.

<sup>4</sup> Some readers may take "unmoved" to mean "fixed" or "not wavering." However, if Caroline and Shirley are fixed, or enchanted, by the mermaid, this would give her power, not make her feel powerless.

<sup>5</sup> Joe Scott's comment that women turned out to "be nowt but stinging, venomd nettles" (124) refers to the previously discussed images of women's hair. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, defines "nettle" as, "[a]ny of various plants with inconspicuous green flowers and (usually) stinging hairs that constitute the genus *Urtica* (family Urticaceae)." In other words, for Joe Scott, women turn out to be nothing but stinging, poisonous clusters of hair.

<sup>6</sup> Here, the man becomes the figure of Satan as opposed to the woman.

<sup>7</sup> In this sense, we see a role reversal of the myth in that Martin becomes the manipulator, the one who ensnares, becoming himself an almost mermaid-ish figure.

<sup>8</sup> One might also note the importance of snakes in Ovid's story of Tiresias. Through the touching of snakes, he is able to experience life as a woman for seven years, which makes him more fully equipped to be a wise man (Ovid 67).

<sup>9</sup> As noted earlier, Shirley's understanding of Milton's Eve may not have been Milton's own understanding of her, but this chapter focuses on Shirley's understanding of *Paradise Lost*, which would have been similar to that of many other 19<sup>th</sup> century men and women.