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## "Making the Prude" in Charlotte Brontë's *Villette*

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Partial Answers: Journal of Literature and the History of Ideas

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 8, Number 2, June 2010

pp. 325-339

10.1353/pan.0.0185

ARTICLE

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### Abstract

This essay explores one version of a recurring pattern in the Victorian novel, the tendency to compare English and French models of national character. While many novelists, including Charlotte Brontë, portray French women as possessing an immoral theatricality, and deploying deceptive "public" personae that contrast with the Englishwoman's devotion to her national and domestic homes, Brontë's *Villette* endows French theater with the power to question British national gender ideals.

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In British nationalist discourses of the nineteenth century, Englishness is often defined in strong opposition to features that the English, particularly the middle classes, associated with the French.<sup>1</sup> In the English novel, however, comparisons of French and English national character serve less to draw clear distinctions between these cultures than to test the salience of various national traits.<sup>2</sup> This essay considers Charlotte Brontë's *Villette* in the context of a pattern that recurred in English novels of the second half of the nineteenth century — the structural pairing of Englishwomen with a cast of villainous French actresses. In Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*, the Anglo-French Becky Sharp is placed beside the guileless Amelia Sedley; in *Jane Eyre*, both Jane and Rochester compare Jane's self-discipline and discretion with the moral license of the French actress Céline Varens, Rochester's lover in Paris; and in *Middlemarch*, Dorothea quietly suffers through her marriage to Casaubon while Laure, the actress whose story is recounted by Lydgate, calmly murders her husband because she finds him "too fond" of her. These oppositions are versions of what was perceived as a more general opposition between English and French culture — the English love of the home against French cynicism toward intimate communities, but it focuses on concepts of the roles of

<sup>1</sup> Many examples of these oppositions can be found in Linda Colley's well-known argument that Britons created a cohesive national identity in opposition to France and the French. While Colley focuses on the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many nationalized oppositions that take hold in this period persist in English nationalist discourse throughout the nineteenth century. More recently, Margaret Cohen and Carolyn Dever (12–13) have argued that English and French culture were less strongly opposed in the aesthetic sphere, where cultural and literary forms were freely exchanged throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the case of *Villette* the situation is further complicated by the presence of fictional Labassecourian culture, which is distinguished from the French (as of Vasthi, Zélie St. Pierre, and Père Silas), as well as from possible Spanish influences of the olive-complexioned M. Paul Emmanuel.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this essay I use the term "English" to describe English novels and novelists under consideration, unless "British" is specifically used to denote them in cited texts. "English" is the term used more frequently in *Villette*.



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