ABSTRACT

MALCOLM KEITH OGDEN. The “necessity for exertion”: Protestantism, Ideology, and Expendability in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villete*. (Under the direction of Professor Leila May.)

Much of the existing scholarship on Charlotte Brontë's work focuses on her semi-autobiographical 1847 novel *Jane Eyre.* Although Brontë's 1853 novel *Villette* is based on many of the same events as *Jane Eyre*, *Villete's* narrative differs from that of *Jane Eyre* in that *Villette's* protagonist Lucy Snowe does not voluntarily venture out into the world. Rather, what in *Jane Eyre* is largely a journey of self-discovery and self-determination becomes, in *Villette*, a desperate struggle to survive in the wake of terrible loss and decreased social status. As a physically unattractive (according to the conventional standards of the time) female of decreased social status, Lucy is forced to accept whatever professional opportunities become available to her. She is, in several cases, nothing more than a convenient and equally expendable replacement for another worker who has, for various reasons (fired, marriage, etc.), recently departed. Even in her personal relationships, Lucy's narration is rife with uneasiness, jealousy, and a pervasive awareness of her own expendability. In this paper, I pay close attention to how Lucy understands her own situation--particularly this reiterant sense of expendability--through a distinctly Protestant lens; how Protestant belief and language is to exploitation in the novel; and the extent to which Brontë's depiction of Lucy's Protestantism mirrors Brontë's own views on religion, as expressed in her personal correspondences (namely, her letters). I also draw on the work of both Max Weber and Louis Althusser in order to model this complex relationship between Brontë, *Villete’s* narrator Lucy Snowe, Protestantism, and the treatment of certain groups under mid-nineteenth century capitalism. Contrary to scholarship that views *Villete* as a critique of Catholicism exclusively, I argue that *Villete* also implicates Protestant belief in a broader socio-economic critique of the treatment of governesses in the mid-nineteenth century.