“in this economical town”: The Narration of Love and Economics in *Villette*
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The Narration of Love and Economics in *Villette*

Abstract:

Monetary language pervades the love, romance, and marriage plots in Charlotte Brontë’s final novel, *Villette* (1853). Taking a close look at this theme, I find that Brontë develops a market metaphor—in this case a romance market—that makes the text decidedly economic in its theme and genre. The market trope is developed in two ways—firstly through the commodification of love and identity as the characters interact in the romance market, and secondly through Lucy Snowe’s narration which, while claiming the reliability of an economic history or bank record, is decidedly manipulative of the reader’s narrative expectations of both a marriage novel or even an economic text.

Through the lens of the critical works of the New Economic critics, Mary Poovey and Regenia Gagnier, I argue that *Villette’s* market reflects the changes occurring in economic and literary-aesthetic ideology as well as angst over monetary systems in the mid-19th century. As such, the market trope in the novel allows the reader to question both money and love as systems of the abstract idea of value as well as literature and economics as fictions that attempt to explain and interpret value.

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\(^1\) p. 418 *Villette* (1853) by Charlotte Brontë—all page numbers from this source will be hereafter cited in parentheses with an italicized *V*. 
Questions of Love and Money

The economics of marriage has been a main interest of critics examining Victorian “marriage plot”² novels for many decades now. This interest is largely motivated by various feminist movements aimed at discovering sources of feminine disenfranchisement as well as documenting the roles of early advocates for women’s rights. The Victorian era makes this criticism especially attractive, for it was a time when women took advantage of a new literary form, the novel, to test the waters of what was predominantly a male art form. What is more, the canon of Victorian novels written by women is filled with plots concerning marriage. Wealth, money, property, and value are distinct features of these marriage plots, which enable the feminist viewpoint that women, in that era, were commodified in marriage and yet were disallowed participation in any economic activity outside of the household. Critics who examine this dynamic argue that Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette* functions on this theme, saying that the heroine, Lucy, attempts to break from the fiscal confines womanhood. While such critics use theories of political economy, socialism, neo-classical economics, Marxism, etc. to analyze the economic disempowerment of the female half of the marriage partnership, they frequently ignore the fact that economic forces were far more pervasive in Victorian life than merely in gender dynamics. So mislead, the critics lose the larger implications on economics and marriage that Brontë makes in her novel. We can understand these implications by analyzing the economic theme in *Villette*, while sidestepping the gender discussion that typically surrounds it.

² I borrow this term from Monica F. Cohen who uses it a term for the narrative form of middle-class romances—centered around the making of advantageous marriages—found in many novels of the Victorian era. *Pride and Prejudice* is a perfect example of this form with its focus on the marriage making of the Bennett daughters to wealthier men.
Money, wealth, property, and, more abstractly, value figure in much of *Villette’s* narrative and in the social interaction of its characters (not merely that of the female characters). Moneyed language frequently and almost impulsively colors the plot: words like “credit”(*V*, 365), “payment”(21), “property”(337), “account”(564), “price”(302), “fund” (337), “treasure” (343), “business”(129), “interest”(506), and others. This language, while coating all forms of social interaction, attaches predominantly to the romances in the novel—between Lucy and Paul, Polly and Graham, etc. The feminist perspective tends to interpret the melding of romance and money as evidence of the financial subjugation of women. I focus on romance and money as well, but I find that Brontë employs the interaction of economics and marriage in a marriage market trope or metaphor.

The theme also appears in narration. Lucy Snowe, the novel’s frustrating narrator, claims her story is a record or history, supposedly absent of any poetic flourish. Gail Turley Houston even claims that Lucy’s narration figures much like the balance book of an accountant. I claim that the money theme figures much like the models and analogies common to economic writings. Thus, the narrative examines various economic models of value through its abstract language of value. These include models such as the labor theory of value and the utility theory of value as well as problems facing the naturalization of credit and paper money.

For clarity, I employ value as a broad term that has meaning across various topics, which intertwine in the context of *Villette*. I use value as it is related directly to price or monetary worth in an economic model (as in the labor theory of value and the utility theory of value) and value as moral or social importance in a society (the moral, social...
value of marriage for instance). Additionally, I will use value as it relates to informative 
worth in an economic text (the accuracy of bank records or a paper on the usefulness of 
credit systems) and value as it relates to emotional or cultural significance in a literary 
text (what makes a literary piece worth reading and what do we expect out of a valuable 
piece of literature). These different concepts of value intertwine and often merge 
completely in Villette, which allows their diverse contexts to correspond.

Noting the moneyed language, it is easy to view Villette as a novel that points out 
the socioeconomic differences faced by men and women and how women’s inability to 
participate fully in the financial world was hindered by women’s limited rights to 
property, and the examination can fit nicely. In this view, Lucy fights the fiscal 
boundaries of her gender and manages, at the end of the novel, to escape the traditional, 
commoditized role of the domestic wife. However, examining Villette through the lens of 
economics, unrestricted by this feminist view, shows us instead how the novel uses a 
market atmosphere to make a statement on the influence of money on social interactions 
in general, and as a result has a larger scope than the feminist viewpoint suggests. It is not 
gender, but it is all social interaction that is forged around the exchange of wealth. This 
means that it is not just the woman who is subjected to the inequalities of the marriage 
market, but also the man. Similarly, it is not just the marriage market that is controlled by 
economic forces, but also the friendship market, and the family market. In this reading, 
Lucy, instead of escaping her commodification, remains ensnared as a market participant, 
subject to the fluxes of the price of her labor. By accepting the schoolhouse business that 
is Paul’s investment in Lucy’s love and business savvy, Lucy’s love with Paul condenses 
to a capital investment. The reduction of love to money is a move that does not suggest
any sort of resistance or escape but rather an entrapment in the economic system, and Lucy’s narrative style emphasizes this entrapment.

In embracing concepts more familiar to an economist than a novelist, Brontë—consciously or not—transcends the genres of both romance novels and economic texts. By placing a market model within the confines of a fictional, romantic plotline, Brontë embraces two genres at once, though to what end, is not entirely clear—yet. What is clear is that Brontë takes the concepts of the current theories of economics (many of which are in contention around the time that Brontë wrote Villette) and incorporates them into Lucy’s narration, which is unreliable, fractured, and often manipulative of the reader’s expectations. Many critics have noted these narrative techniques but do not connect them to the economic theme, which causes them to ignore or misinterpret the expanded genre of Villette.

To discover the message of Brontë’s incorporation of economics into her “marriage plot,” as well as the supporting reason why Lucy’s narration, while claiming to be reliable, is not, I will examine Villette’s economic theme through the critical lens of New Economic History, predominantly using the works of Mary Poovey and Regenia Gagnier.¹ Such a scope allows me to realize why Lucy’s economic model is as confused as the state of theoretical economics during Villette’s moment in history. Mainstream economic theory was, during the mid-19th century, as undecided as many of the economic elements in the novel—we don’t know if Brontë is loyal to Smith’s political economy, Mill’s pseudo socialism, or if it experiments with the up and coming marginal revolution.

New Economics will also help examine the reasoning—as it relates to Brontë’s previously un-diagnosable genre—behind the narrative manipulation of Lucy Snowe.

Understanding Brontë’s economic theme and narrative form yields insight concerning the dynamic between love and money in *Villette*, which allows us to understand Brontë’s message regarding the relationship of marriage and money. It will allow us to answer such questions as: Does the pervasive language of economics cause us to define love and marriage in monetary terms? Is marriage, like money, just an artificial system designed for social cooperation and placation? And most importantly, are love and money separable?

*Villette’s Romance Market*

The language of money and economics in *Villette* develops the image of an economic market—complete with goods, services, producers, consumers, prices, etc., and even incorporates physical locations in which the economic activities take place. The market trope manifests in many elements of the novel and mostly in the romantic relationships. One manner in which Brontë incorporates the trope is in gift-giving between romancers—the gifts representative of the exchange of a priced good in return for love and affection. Another is how the identities of the characters are defined by the monetary value of their class, labor, property, inheritance, and even their consumptive choices. This monetary definition of the characters’ identities and the metaphor of gifts as commodities result in the reduction of love and marriage to an amount of money. Using Reginia Gagnier’s *The Insatiability of Human Wants*, a critical work on Victorian economics and literary aesthetics, we can see how the commodification of gifts and identities in *Villette* follow economic tides of the time in which in the novel was written.
Analyzing *Villette*’s market through Gagnier’s work offers us Brontë’s purpose behind commodifying relationships and Lucy’s inability to escape her participation in the market.

Overlaid on this unsettling commodification of identity and love, is Lucy’s curious narrative style, in which she claims to be writing a record or history. She implies that her story resides outside of the realm of fiction, and it periodically appears closer to the form of a regimented economic analysis or even a well-kept finance or bank record. This narrative form authorizes the monetary theme. Lucy’s claim to factuality or scientific authenticity in her narration gives the moneyed definition of love a credibility despite how Lucy often breaks it with narrative manipulations. As with the relationship market, New Economic criticism—particularly that of Mary Poovey in *Genres of the Credit Economy*—offers us a way to understand Lucy’s narration in terms of the status of economics and literature as written forms during the time of *Villette*.

As an easy way of introducing the moneyed language of *Villette*, I will first discuss the physical manifestations of the market trope: the objects, property, and people of Brontë’s town. Gifts—of food, jewels, books, flowers, houses, etc.—in *Villette* are exchanged between characters in moneyed language, suggesting that even the most immaterial or non-marketable gift, such as the knowledge that Lucy receives from Paul or letters from Graham, are subject to the same forces of any given goods or services market. We would not typically consider a letter or knowledge exchanged between two possible romancers a market good; however, by commoditizing such non-economic items, Brontë shows us how economic forces have an influence over the most private affairs.
To demonstrate this, bear with me as I explain a way in which an economic force—namely the force of diminishing marginal utility—might be present in the consumption of letters from a beloved. As Deirdre McCloskey tells us in *The Rhetoric of Economics*, economic models are in fact metaphors and are prolific in economic writing. These models may be obvious, such as explicit metaphorical ones like game theory and the invisible hand, as well as less obvious ones such as demand and supply curves, production functions, and business cycles. As such, is it so crazy to make an economic interpretation of Graham’s letters in *Villette* as an analogy to the economic force of diminishing marginal utility? (Well maybe a little crazy, but I beg you to listen anyway.)

Lucy speaks of her excessive perusal of Graham’s letters in this way:

> I had recourse again, and yet again, to the little packet in the case—the five letters. How splendid that month seemed whose skies had beheld the rising of these five stars! ... Reading there somewhat late one evening, and feeling that the power to read was leaving me—for the letters from incessant perusal were losing all sap and significance: my gold was withering to leaves before my eyes, and I was sorrowing over the disillusion—suddenly a quick tripping foot ran up the stairs… (V, 310-311)

Here, Lucy is enlightened to the law of diminishing marginal utility—each reading of the precious letters yields less and less additional pleasure. She even comes to the horrifying realization that the letters have begun to give negative returns. They have not only ceased to give pleasure but now cost her pain. This passage, while much more poetical than a typical analogy used by economists, sounds a lot like one I was told on learning the law of diminishing marginal utility in introductory microeconomics: ‘Jimmy likes pizza. He buys and eats one and is satisfied and happy. He eats pizza again the next day and is again satisfied, but this time a little less so…etc.’
While Brontë may not have had this law in mind when formulating Lucy’s possessive relationship with Graham’s letters, the economic scenario is there. That Lucy repeatedly calls the letters “treasure” (V, 343) and often speaks of them in terms of food (“I suppose animals kept in cages…await their food as I awaited a letter” (V, 310)) allows us to view them from this exaggerated perspective. The consumptive, monetary language permits us to see the letters like a marketable good. Economic workings, like literary tropes in economic writings, inundate Lucy’s dialogue. Moments like this in Villette show us how the physics of economic forces, are present even in the most personal, the most psychological, perhaps the most sexual, realms of life.

While I am likely the first to compare Graham’s letters to the economic force of diminishing marginal utility, I am not the first to realize the socio-economic importance of gifts in Villette. For instance, Janet Tanke notes how the exchange of food between the lovers of Villette marks moments of sexual exchange and awakening.⁴ Speaking of Paul and Lucy’s final moments together, Tanke writes,

Paul and Lucy symbolically consummate their love over a meal in “their” house, a “simple,” satisfying meal….That Lucy can unequivocally say these foods were “what we both liked” underscores the communion of soul mates…foods laden with sexual under-tones—becomes a celebration of passion on earth. (Tanke, 52)

The way Lucy and Paul “consummate” their union over the meal she cooks for Paul is just one example of how an exchange authorizes love. This validation of affection happens often, such as when Lucy repairs her friendship with Graham by pouring his tea

⁴ While Tanke makes intriguing claims concerning the exchange of food and sex in Villette, she fails to account for the other forms of exchange also occurring. Tanke also asserts that Brontë allows Lucy’s escape from female economic disenfranchisement by killing Paul at the end of the novel—stating that he is a fictional incarnation of Brontë’s would-be lover, Constantin Heger. While the connections between Paul and Heger are there, the ambiguous ending does not suggest that Brontë maliciously kills Paul. This oversight on Tanke’s part and her focus on Brontë’s relationship with Heger, leads her to read the novel only in terms of Lucy’s subjugation as a woman—not realizing the larger implication of the image of exchange in the novel.
and again with Paul through the handmade gift of a lavish watch-guard saying, respectively, after each exchange, “[t]hus our quarrel ended” (V, 222) and “[w]e are friends now…till the next time we quarrel” (V, 402). From these examples, romance and affection require some price for their obtainment thereby materializing the emotional connections themselves.

As objects from the private world of romance are made into the goods of the market, so are the private homes of the novel made into the businesses that exchange those goods. Feminist critics have often debated the idea of the “home” in *Villette*, as the plot never seems to find a true home in which Lucy might forge her domestic existence. Several critics contemplate this as Lucy’s resistance to feminine domestic roles; however, this explanation is problematic considering that no other character—such as the ideally domestic woman, Polly, or the motherly Mrs. Bretton—has a purely private home either. Lucy’s final home, for instance, is also her schoolhouse. Instead of a mere refusal of the home in *Villette*, there is merely the collapse of the divide between the business place and the family home. This makes each domestic hearth a business place of market interaction, which is yet another way in which economic forces pervade all levels of life in the novel.

Tim Dolin, in *Mistress of the House*, is one critic who takes the idea of the “home” incorrectly in *Villette*. He claims that Lucy, who despises both the feminine ideal of the non-economic domestic angel as well as the amoral pariah of the propertied business woman, refuses to be the proprietor of her own home nor the angel of another’s. He asserts that Lucy, while attempting to avoid the domestic home and the feminine roles that go with it, sees the moral insolvency in Mme. Beck’s strict management and tactless surveillance equally distasteful. As a solution, Dolin suggests, Lucy attempts to resist
both sides of the property dilemma. As such, Dolin accounts for the perpetually undecided ending of the novel—in which Paul may or may not return to the house he procured for Lucy—as a way for Lucy to remain in property limbo: “[t]he final act of waiting is a triumphant breach of ending and closure which suspends Lucy between what is and is not hers, and between what she is and is not” (Dolin, 65). This “suspension,” as Dolin argues, is “triumphant” because it allows Lucy to escape Victorian ideals of wifely domesticity as well as stigmas attributed to propertied women.

Lucy’s home, however, is not the only ambiguous property. All homes, including no. 7 Faubourg Clotilde, double as places of business: the Rue Fossette is both the home for Mme. Beck and her family, many of her employees, and a number of her students; the Hôtel Crécy serves as the home for Polly and her father; and La Terrasse becomes Graham’s workplace when he brings the Lucy there for medical recovery. Dolin’s argument that the “home” is a threshold Lucy is unwilling to cross is inappropriate. Rather, the money and business of the economic world saturate the homes in Villette. Lucy, far from refusing a home, rather embraces a home-office. She even appears peaceful in her first task in her new school-home, saying, “With what shy joy I accepted my part as hostess, arranged the salver, served the benefactor-guest!” (V, 564). That Paul is both “benefactor” and “guest” shows the collapse of the home and business space. It likewise reveals dual identities of Paul: he is both the economic benefactor as well as the private guest.

Like Paul, all characters in Villette have a defining economic identity that determines their romantic role in the novel. These identities correlate strongly to market participation—producers, consumers, lenders, borrowers, investors, laborers, buyers, etc.
More often than not, a character’s economic role eclipses their romantic role, emphasizing yet another example of the intrusion of economic forces on the personal world. For instance, Paul is a “benefactor,” a word that resonates with moneyed connotations and defines his monetary support of Lucy and others. While charitable, Paul’s affection for Lucy is reserved. Sometimes it seems like Paul is more often the benefactor and less often the lover. Brontë characterizes Paul with his monetary charity (often depicted as investments), and as a result has little patience when his gifts are repulsed or disused. Take, for example, Lucy’s treatment to Paul’s lent handkerchief:

> For some reason—gladdened, I think, by sudden return of the golden glimmer of childhood, roused by an unwonted renewal of its buoyancy… I fell to playing with the handkerchief as if it were a ball, casting it into the air and catching it as it fell. The game was stopped by another hand than mine—a hand emerging from a paletôt-sleeve and stretched over my shoulder; it caught the extemporized plaything and bore it away with these sullen words: “Je vois bien que vous vous moquez de moi et de mes effets.” (V, 280-81)

Instead of reveling in the only moment Lucy is playful and buoyant throughout the entire plot, Paul, mortified by her use of his handkerchief (lent for the sole purpose of drying tears, not playing catch) removes his loan from her care. Strangely, Paul, in this moment, cares more about the correct use of his “effets,” than his emotional interaction with Lucy, rebuffing her for the impromptu “game.”

Paul’s reaction reveals his economic identity as a sort of investor/lender figure—an identity that becomes crucial in Lucy’s intellectual and fiscal improvements later on in the story. Paul is the provider of Lucy’s capital upon which she builds her future school, and, as such, his interest in her emotional development becomes a monetary investment and little more. This notion is agonizing when Lucy exclaims during Paul’s harsh lessons, “teach me no more. I never asked to be made learned, and you compel me to feel very

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5 ‘I see clearly you are making fun of me and my effects’
profoundly that learning is not happiness” (V, 409). Lucy, however, eventually realizes his investment intentions—improving her worth as both schoolmistress and wife. Upon receiving the school house, no. 7 Foubourg Clotilde, she says, “Now, penetrated with his influence, and living by his affection, having his worth by intellect, and his goodness by heart—I preferred him before all humanity” (V, 569). That Lucy obtains Paul’s love by gaining “worth” through his “influence” shows us how Lucy must accept Paul’s investment before they are united. This notion implies that Lucy, before Paul’s capital investments in her intellect and property, is not worth Paul’s love. This is a result of their class differences. Lucy must be elevated from her “teacher’s place” (V, 203) to that of a school directress to be worthy of a union with Paul.

Paul’s economic identity as an investor—along with the economic identities of other characters—bolsters the theme of the romance/marriage market in Villette, especially as Paul’s union with Lucy is recognized only with a moneyed investment in her self-worth. This sort of monetary-romantic interaction occurs with every couple in the novel, from Ginerva and Alfred to Polly and Graham, thus expanding upon the market trope’s reduction of love to a price. While Paul’s participation in the market is reasonably clear, the roles of other characters, notably Lucy, is not as clear cut. Furthermore, my analysis of romantic identity and market participation is, for now, unrefined. I have not yet defined a system in which romantic and economic roles follow a pattern. It is crucial to do so to understand how Lucy participates differently with Graham and Paul or Graham with Lucy, Ginerva, and Polly. A pattern will also help us understand why and

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6 Gail Turley Houston makes a similar observation saying, “Lucy Snowe awaits his return as vestal virgin in charge of his accounts. She will administer and elarge his investment in her” (Houston, 70). However she reads Lucy’s account-keeping as a mark of sexual virginity in her and Paul’s relationship.
how Lucy’s identity transforms as the plot progresses. I believe that New Economics can help establish such a pattern—particularly the work of Reginia Gagnier.

In *The Insatiability of Human Want*, Regina Gagnier analyzes the parallel changes occurring in economic theory and literary aesthetics throughout the Victorian era, moving from the labor concerns of political economics to the taste focus of the marginal revolution. What I argue is that *Villette*’s market trope, particularly the economic roles of the characters, mimics the theoretical economic changes in the mid-19th century.

*Confusion in Market Society*

Let me first explain New Economics before diving into Gagnier. In recent decades, New Economic critics, in their investigations of economic ideologies of the nineteenth century, revealed to modern readers the historical interplay between literary and economic study. Two of these critics in particular, Reginia Gagnier and Mary Poovey, examine how changes in economic doctrine forced equally important changes in literature and art. Poovey and Gagnier both agree on the dates, or at least the decades, in which the economic and literary transformations occurred. Both Gagnier and Poovey point to the middle decades of the nineteenth century as a crucial point in the parallel histories of literary and economic writings. Throughout these decades, economic and literary writing as forms or genres began to look like what we see today. *Villette*, published in 1853, also has this moment in common.

Gagnier writes that mid-nineteenth century economics saw a theoretical shift from a focus on the labor theory of value and the conditions of production in the face of scarcity to a new focus on the utility theory of value and the consumer, with his freedom of choice in a world of excess. She includes in this discussion the ways in which
aesthetics changed in unison with economics, saying that aesthetics, moved from a moral and productive focus (art is the value of the artist’s work and the conditions of creativity) to one centered on taste (art’s consumption deems it valuable). Gagnier calls this a shift in “Economic Man” (Gagnier, 2) from a producer to a consumer. Gagnier thus makes the argument that economics and aesthetics in the nineteenth century both follow a “narrative” (Gagnier, 1) beginning with the ethical production choices of political economy, which emphasized capital, both physical and intellectual, as the medium of social exchange in a market society. The narrative culminates in the “end of history” (Gagnier, 61) with consumerism. That is, capitalism and its traveling partner, insatiable consumption, produce the epitome of civilization and the end-all be-all of economic growth. Villette is poised in the middle of the narrative, torn between the two ideologies.

Brontë’s novel coincides with Gagnier’s timeline as well as with her insights into the economic and literary aesthetic currents of Victorian society existing at the edge of this huge transformation. Villette, while it works decidedly on economic themes, is confused and ambiguous in terms of whether or not it is loyal to established political economics or is ready to cross over into the self-interested consumerism of the upcoming marginal revolution, especially in terms of the romantic exchanges occurring in the novel.

In keeping with my earlier discussion of economic identities, namely Paul who is an investor in the romance market, Villette’s characters seem to embody positions along the producer-consumer spectrum—positions that determine the way they interact romantically. Ginerva Fanshawe, probably the clearest example, embodies the insatiable

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7 The term Economic Man does not necessarily imply a male gender but is rather a general term denoting “man and woman as producers and consumers, creatures of labor or pain and pleasure, in their pursuit of bread, knowledge, and freedom in market society” (Gagnier, 2).

8 I use Gagnier’s idea of Market Society much more figuratively than economically due to the fact that relationships and interactions among Villette’s characters are representative of market interaction.
consumer. She relishes the privileges and fancy trinkets provided by countless suitors, but disregards the labor value of her many admirers who provide those gifts. Ginevra’s consumerism stands in opposition to productive characters, such as Graham, whose beneficent, progressive concept of growth and concerns of social equality hobbles and overworks them. What makes the opposition of producer and consumer interesting, is that Brontë makes no effort to value one over the other. Each mode is equally flawed. Other characters seem to be ambiguous in their position on the producer-consumer spectrum: Lucy, of course, is one. Lucy is torn perpetually between her ethical, productive work and her awakened consumerist taste that is sparked by Labascour’s art culture, Graham’s letters, and Paul’s lessons and gifts. This results in Lucy’s submission to her defining economic characteristic—the market value of her labor—and her lack of escape from the romance market. The conflict between the producer and consumer outlooks, as well as Lucy’s struggle between the two, explicitly shows the confused state of *Villette’s* economic stance, which highlights the characters’ entrapment in economic roles.

Gagnier discusses at length how 19th century “Economic Man” transformed from a political economist and ethically productive market participant to a self-interested consumer motivated by his tastes and choices. She emphasizes that the transformation was more than simply a change of theory and economic models. It was an ideological change that affected the behaviors and psyches of the Victorian people, something that revealed itself in the novels of the period. Gagnier even mentions *Villette* as a novel that internalizes the economic atmosphere and conflicts of society:

[The novelists’] view of socioeconomic relations extended considerably beyond that of the political economists, who refused to acknowledge the arena of unpaid work, like much housework and care of dependents, or widespread but illegitimate work, like prostitution. The novelists did not have a limited view of
the economy. To the contrary, even the fiction of greatest psychological depth, like Charlotte Brontë’s Villette (1853), finds economic relations constitutive of the psyche. (Gagnier, 37).

However, “Economic Man” is something more than “constitutive of the psyche” in Villette; he is a physical creation. In this very miniscule point, I disagree with Gagnier. As Brontë’s narration will show us later, when I discuss Mary Poovey’s Genres, the conflicts of “Economic Man,” in market society are more of a creation of human society than a “constitutive” component of it. For now, I will let this matter rest and simply point out what is crucial in Gagnier’s quotation. Brontë’s novel is addressing the ways in which economics is an inseparable part of all elements of life, not just theory or business practice.

Villette develops “Economic Man” in a literal social market; this allows Brontë to include the production and consumption of goods and services of an atypical economic status. Brontë includes in her market model gifts from one lover to another whereas an economist might not even think to include them. Her letters and invitations, watchguards and handkerchiefs, pictures and foods, are the goods exchanged for love in the face of time’s scarcity: “our most fundamental constraint” (Gagnier, 55). Wealth, in Villette, is measured in social—in our case, romantic—well-being (a sort of social quality of life) something achieved through market interaction. Economics, in Villette and Victorian society (in its moment of theoretical transformation) could affect the monetary relations and exchanges in marriage making—threatening that social well-being.

Villette’s characters are Brontë’s “Economic Man” and the engine that allows the economic machine to work. Each character embodies either the producer, the consumer, or both in conflict. The incorrigible Ginevra Fanshawe, the character who most easily and
most succinctly replicates a consumerist, taste-focused outlook, is marked by her self-interest early on:

[H]er liking and disliking, her love and hate, were mere cobweb and gossamer; but she had one thing about her that seemed strong and durable enough, and that was—her selfishness. (V, 96)

That Lucy describes Ginevra as having no “durable” quality other than selfishness is one way that Ginevra is singled out as a consumer and little else; Ginevra is the least dynamic of all of Villette’s main characters, a result of this early description. Ginerva, like Gagnier’s consumer, is the “end of history” and has no reason to change. As her other qualities are “mere cobweb and gossamer;” she is never expected to grow or develop anything other than her desire. Ginevra, fitting with the consumer, is little concerned with her own labor or intellectual capital. She says, upon meeting Lucy, that “M. de Bassompierre—my god-papa, who pays all my school bills—had thrown away all his money. And then in matters of information—in history, geography, arithmetic, and so on, I am quite a baby” (V, 60). To Ginevra, intelligence is only something measured in husband hunting—a viewpoint that leads her to speak critically against Lucy’s “earning a living” (V, 61).

Unlike Lucy, Ginevra despises work or labor of any kind and expends most of her energy in devising ways to convince her caretakers to purchase her dresses: “[a]ll her thoughts turned on this difficulty; her whole soul was occupied with expedients for effecting its solution, It was wonderful to witness the activity of her otherwise indolent mind on this point” (V, 99). Ginevra, as a true consumer, is more concerned with “the wish to shine” in lavish dresses than the value of her mind or even that which her own hand could make. Ginevra is more than just conceited or lazy—her “self-love” (V, 166) is
largely a product of her ability to choose from among “the many admirers” she might have. The men she chooses are a reflection of her “taste” value and she is well aware that others “desire [her] desires” (Gagnier, 51). Standing in front of a mirror, she asks Lucy, “what would you give to be ME?” (V, 166) knowing well the value of her ability to break the hearts of men and drive women to jealousy. In this way, Ginevra embodies the utility theory of value. The utility or pleasure she receives through making her consumptive choices determines her self-worth.

For all of these character flaws caused by her consumerism, Ginevra is strangely exempt from criticism, implying that Lucy, and perhaps Brontë herself, does not hold Ginevra at fault. Lucy, while Ginevra’s biggest critic, often withholds information concerning her faults from Graham and, when he does come to realize her true nature, Lucy suddenly becomes Ginevra’s “advocate,” (V, 260) vouching that her honesty and candidness makes up for her upbringing:

She tells me…that they are poor at home; she always speaks quite candidly on such points: you never find her lying, as these foreigners often lie Her parents have a large family: they occupy such a station and possess such connections as, in their opinion, demand display … have engendered reckless unscrupulousness as to how they obtain the means of sustaining a good appearance … Ginevra, I was certain, was honest enough, with all her giddiness. (V, 260)

As with her earlier recognition of her own worth, Ginevra’s honesty shows how she is apparently exempt from moral criticism due to her economic choices. This observation is in opposition to typical understandings of Ginevra’s character in which she is merely a 19th century counter-example of proper womanly behavior. However, Lucy often accounts for her behavior or refuses to speak poorly of her, suggesting Ginevra is rather venerable versus fully disreputable. Brontë, as opposed to letting a morally poor character come to a bad end, allows Ginevra to be the most prosperous character in the entire story.
Recalling Gagnier’s observations on the economics of the marginal revolution, we get an explanation for Ginevra’s selfishness:

Value depends entirely on utility, and utility depends on the quantity of a commodity in our possession. Economic science is a “hedonic calculus,” a calculus of pleasure and pain; we measure feelings of pleasure and pain by studying our actual decisions, or consumption patterns. … There is no common metric that allows comparison between individuals. If there are no grounds for assessing inequalities in utility, there can be no grounds—no economic grounds—for advocating redistribution (Gagnier, 43).

Simply put, the economists of the marginal revolution and advocates of the utility theory of value did not believe in modeling the “welfare economics” (Gagnier, 43) of political economy, since they did not believe that utility was comparable between people or across social groups. The tastes and consumptive choices of one group, along with the utility received thereof, would not yield the same utility for those choices for another group, and so there is no way to model welfare or equitable division of wealth in a market. This is why, while she notes the differences between herself and Lucy, Ginevra does not try to correct the imbalance, but rather establishes the price of the difference. To these later economists, what mattered in the end was the “‘hedonic calculus.’” This concept, that economics is not a place for a moral standing on inequality of wealth, provides one way conceive why Ginevra is not held accountable for her lack of consideration for the desires or labors of others (particularly of the men who love her), and her focused interest in increasing her own pleasure. Ginevra, representing the consumerist “Economic Man,” asks no moral questions concerning her self-interest, and only concerns herself with her own hedonic balance. That not even Lucy fully discredits her selfishness implies that Ginevra, and the consumer she represents, is neither wrong nor right—we cannot ignore
the fact that Ginevra’s apparent lack of morality, however disliked, might be the right idea.

Ginevra, despite some minor setbacks, is the most socially mobile and most successful of all of Villette’s characters. Regardless of her self-described, poor upbringing, Ginevra is able to ascend the social ladder easily—without an identity change like the Homes experience or without feelings of ineptitude like Lucy endures. A world traveler, Ginevra manages to cover, alone, the most geographical space of any of the other female characters, a characteristic shown in her introduction:

“Do you like travelling alone?”
“Bah! I care nothing about it. I have crossed the Channel ten times alone; but then I take care never to be long alone: I always make friends.” (V, 59)

The ease at which Ginevra travels and “make[s] friends” is a result of her consumerist impulses that send her, from one moment to the next, into another’s arms or into another country. Her fate in the novel reflects this; Ginevra elopes with Colonel Alfred de Hamal saying, “I am off, you see—gone like a shot. Alfred and I intended to be married in this way almost from the first…Alfred has too much spirit… and so have I” (V, 548). Despite the shame that might come with such an elopement, Ginevra is none the worse for it, she returns once more, “blooming and beautiful: her curls were longer, her cheeks rosier than ever” (V, 551). She likewise returns a countess and with “her portion” from uncle de Bassompierre, and Lucy is inclined to say of Ginevra: “In some shape…she was pretty sure to obtain her will, and so she got on—fighting the battle of life by proxy and, on the whole, suffering as little as any human being I have ever known” (V, 553). From this, we see that the more Ginevra consumes and indulges her desires and fancies, the more wealth she obtains. Ginevra’s “hedonic calculus” always equates in her favor the more
she indulges her desires. By placing value on her choices over the wellbeing of others, the more valuable she becomes. From the daughter of a captain to a countess, Ginevra is the most socially wealthy and mobile of any other character. Ginevra makes herself all the better for her disinterest in the moral issues of the social market and for indulging in her desires.

The only indication that Ginevra—as the successful Consumer—may not be the answer in market society is Brontë’s ability to paint Ginevra as an unlikeable character, because her irreligious form of husband hunting is so unsavory to Brontë’s contemporary readership. This contradiction in Ginevra’s character is poignant, for, regardless of the audience’s distaste for her, we cannot help but notice how she is the best social climber of the novel and, as Lucy remarks, likely the happiest. While purporting the benefits of a consumerist outlook, Brontë uses Ginevra’s coquettishness to show how amoral this self-indulgence with no sense of economic equality might be.

Dr. John Graham Bretton stands in opposition to Ginevra on the production side of the economic spectrum. Brontë establishes Graham as one of the novel’s primary gift givers. This shows his economic standing is not that of a consumer but rather a producer: his role is to make and to sell, not to buy and consume. In return for his gifts, his price is love and affection—possibly even sexual intimacy—from the women on whom he dotes. An early scene with Polly in Bretton displays his role:

“Now will you have [the picture]?” he asked, as she stood before him.
“Please.”
“But I shall want payment.”
“How much?”
“A kiss.” (V, 21)
Here Graham unsuccessfully sells his affection, as Polly believes his price too high. When Graham attempts to “kiss the hand” instead, Polly strikes him with a “miniature fist, and dealt him payment in a small coin that was not kisses” (V, 21). Graham’s price is also too high for Ginevra who, knowing well “every jewel its price,” appears not to value his expensive gifts or to give “some return” in exchange (V, 224-25). Graham, rebuffed, is forced to accept the most minimal offer—“she did me a favour in accepting” (V, 224)—which, according to Lucy makes him “a slave” (V, 220). Early socialist theorists worried that the labor theory of value implied that laborers were undervalued by mass production. A laborer, who owns no capital, is worth only the cost of his labor. This means that if Graham cannot receive payment for his gifts and production, his value in market society is nil and he is little more than a slave.

Graham’s slavery, his inability to receive the correct payment for his work, develops another contrast with Ginevra the consumer. Unlike Ginevra, who is highly mobile, Graham’s production hobbles his social mobility. Graham’s descriptions throughout are plagued by vocabulary implying overwork, which implies that his work keeps him from his relationships. When young Polly desires to see him, she is told he is “busy with his school friends” (V, 280). His mother accounts for his lack of visits to Lucy with how Graham, as Villette’s favorite doctor, is “so much sought after, so much engaged” (V, 315). While he is depicted as “a man of luck—a man of success” (V, 369), he is pursued by “business” (20), “overwork (25), and “rivals” (172) and never appears to ask for more. He never appears interested in the wealth that Polly’s inheritance would provide—in fact, it is her money that keeps him from asking for her hand for some time.

Graham’s inability to make or be something for which he may ask a high price combined

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9 See Gagnier’s discussion on John Stuart Mill and Karl Marx (Gagnier, 27-40)
with his overwork withholds—though never full disables—him from a loving and profitable marriage.

Regardless of his overwork and social restriction in market society, Graham is one of the most benevolent and perhaps the most loved characters of *Villette*—a point which allows us, yet again, to compare him to Ginevra. Unlike the “Economic Man” as consumer, the producer concerns himself not just with the market machine, but also with the problems of wealth distribution and the conditions of labor. Concerning themselves with “progress” (Gagnier, 20) as opposed to the “end of history”, the political economists prior to the second half of the 19th century felt that growth in economic wealth was unequal among individuals: “[the great body of the people] have no choice but to become drudges in the division of labor that produces for self-interested ‘undertakers’ (entrepreneurs) the great profit that is the wealth of nations” (Gagnier, 24). Division of labor, free trade, and “rational self-interest” (Gagnier, 27), each of which work toward a free market, can exacerbate class divisions: while the wealth of the nation is growing, the poor remain so. As such, the political economists and their socialist cousins considered division of labor, self-interest, and the wealth of nations as merely one stage in human history. Poverty and economic inequality are givens until future economic growth naturally provides equality.¹⁰ For this reason, the political economists, as opposed to the neo-classical economists, concerned themselves with welfare and correcting the inequalities of the economic marketplace without interfering with self-interest and free market.

Knowing this, we return to Graham Bretton and his charity as described by Lucy:

¹⁰ Most, but not all, political economists, such as Adam Smith himself, believed that equality would never happen—as perfectly free trade would likely never occur do to unending international conflict—, an impossibility that didn’t detract from the goal of providing that equality. (Gagnier, 3)
I found, on accompanying him to the Basse-Ville—the poor and crowded quarter of the city—that his errands there were as much those of the philanthropist as the physician. I understood presently that—cheerfully, habitually, and in single-minded unconsciousness of any special merit distinguishing his deeds—he was achieving, amongst a very wretched population, a world of active good. (V, 228)

That Graham seeks to help the poor with little mind to “any special merit distinguishing his deeds,” implies that Graham’s “active good” conflicts with his own self-interest as a doctor—as a producer. Lucy calls Graham’s conflict between benevolence and self-interestedness “a seeming contradiction in the two views which have been given of Graham Bretton—the public and private…[i]n the first, the public, he is shown oblivious of self…[i]n the second, the fireside picture, there is expressed consciousness of what he has and what he is” (V, 229). This “seeming contradiction” strongly recalls Marx, who, as paraphrased by Gagnier, remarked that “the early political economists wavered between positing a self-interested, maximizing, work-shy “human nature” and positing social types derived from their socioeconomic status” (Gagnier, 27). Graham, both the “philanthropist” and the “physician,” is conflicted between his political economic goals to the greater good and to self-interest in obtaining wealth and a happy marriage. This dilemma makes him a dynamic, progressive character, unlike the “end of history” Ginevra, who is admonished for her lack of altruism but is much more successful.

These two characters, the consumer and the producer, together display the ways in which the society of Villette is divided between the old welfare and work of political economy and the new tastes and consumerism of neo-classical economics. Graham, never forgetting work and social position, is “not the man who, in appreciating the gem, could forget its setting” (V, 429), while Ginevra, knows “every jewel it’s price.” The opposition between Graham’s production and Ginevra’s consumption remarks on the mid-nineteenth
century’s transition from a dialogue concerning the labor theory of value to the utility theory of value. Both the old and new motivations are equally correct and equally flawed.

For this reason, the various other characters of Villette, predominantly Lucy Snowe, are economically confused and conflicted between these two modes. Lucy, who wants to remain loyal to political economics, is tempted, through a social-sexual awakening, to embrace the new consumerism. Prior to her awakening, speaking of her appointment as Mme. Beck’s English teacher, Lucy states:

> My time was now well and profitably filled up. What with teaching others and studying closely myself, I had hardly a spare moment. It was pleasant. I felt I was getting on; not lying the stagnant prey of mould and rust, but polishing my faculties and whetting them to a keen edge with constant use. Experience of a certain kind lay before me, on no narrow scale. (V, 92)

Through “profitable” work, Lucy here, like any good entrepreneur, obtains capital—“polishing my faculties”—upon which she will eventually build her own career as a school mistress in the future. What is more important is that like Graham, she is overworked: “Madame raised my salary; but she got thrice the work out of me she had extracted from Mr. Wilson, at half the expense” (V, 91). Lucy is a producer to the core, so much so that work quiets and soothes her, whereas leisure and lack of requirement torment her. Her lack of employment during “The Long Vacation” partly leads her to madness in that chapter:

> My spirits had long been gradually sinking; now that the prop of employment was withdrawn, they went down fast….When I had full leisure to look at life as life must be looked on by such as me, I found it but a hopeless desert. (V, 179)

The torment that comes with leisure is emblematic of Lucy’s conflict with consumerism, but avoiding that leisure and remaining productive has its drawbacks, for it denies Lucy the time or pleasure to experience anything else. Additionally, unlike Graham, Lucy is
not motivated by charity. She expresses immense displeasure taking care of the “cretin”
during the school vacation, saying the “hapless creature had been at times a heavy
charge…[depriving] me often of the power and inclination to swallow a meal” (*V*, 180-
81).

It is not until her time at La Terrasse with the Brettons and her exploration of
Villette’s culture that she begins to expand her consumption and aesthetic taste. On her
solitary explorations of the art galleries, Lucy explains, “I was happy; happy not always
in admiring, but in examining, questioning, and forming conclusions” (*V*, 230). Here,
exploring the world of aesthetic choices, Lucy begins to “refine” her “taste” (*V*, 230) and
“[sinks] supine into a luxury of calm before ninety-nine out of a hundred of the exhibited
frames” (*V*, 230). But the producer recalls her from this “luxury” of choice before the
repining Cleopatra, spurring her to criticize the “gypsy queen[’s]” (*V*, 232) excessive
consumption and dearth of work or concern: “she ought to have been standing, or at least
sitting bolt upright. She had no business to lounge away the noon on a sofa” (*V*, 232). Just
before Lucy snaps back, she accepts the idea that she can make a choice in the marriage
market. She begins to believe that she can experience desire—both consumptively and
sexually.

Her conflict continues over her consumption of Graham’s letters which she calls
“treasure” (*V* 278) on more than one occasion. To her own admission, she is conflicted
between “two masters”—between “Feeling” and “Reason” (*V*, 294) which I read as
similar to this conflict between consumption and production. On one hand, Lucy desires
to indulge in the letters’ “elixir” and “divine vintage: a draught which Hebe might fill,
and the very gods approve” (*V*, 294). She wants to forget the class divisions between
herself and Graham—“According to [Reason], I was born only to work for a piece of bead” (V, 266)—and embrace love and affection as her nourishment. Quickly however, Lucy finds that to “live on letters only” (V, 294) is problematic. Lucy’s “Reason” knows well that the letters are like “feast[ing] on my crust from Barmecides loaf. It did not nourish me: I pined on it, and got as thin as a shadow” (V, 311). Unlike Ginevra, Lucy is unable to ignore class and survive wholly on what is given to her, and unlike Graham she cannot give with no hope of return: “nobody ever launches into Love unless he has seen or dreamed the rising of Hope’s star” (V, 294). To end the conflict, she again sides with Production and buries the letters in the garden, so that she, or any prying eyes, may never “taste” (V, 283) them again. Thus refusing consumption, Lucy tries to bury her awakened appetite with the letters, feeling that her life is made for work, not desire.

Despite the burial, Lucy’s temptations toward consumption continue in the form of Paul and his gifts. It seems Paul, as opposed to art galleries or the productive Graham, is Lucy’s strongest tempter—pointedly, Brontë frequently depicts Paul as a snake who, like the serpent to Eve, “hisses” into her ear, often provoking her to passion (Tanke, 50):

“Petite chatte, doucerette, coquette!” silibated the sudden boa-constrictor;
“vous avez l’air bien triste, soumise, rêveuse, mais vous ne l’êtes pas: c’est moi qui vous le dis: Saubage! La flamme à l’âme, le clair aux yeux!”
“Oui; j’ai la flamme à l’âme, et je dois l’avoir!” retorted I, turning in just wrath; but Professor Emanuel had hissed his insult and was gone. (V, 368, my emphasis) 11

Paul, unlike Graham, notices Lucy’s desires (her “soul is aflame”) and seeks to indulge them with gifts of books and sweets: “[b]etween a sallow dictionary and worn-out grammar would magically grow a fresh and interesting new work, or a classic, mellow and sweet in its ripe age” (V, 398). In fruit-like diction, Paul’s gifts further awaken and

11 “You soft little kittenish coquette… you seem sad, submissive, dreamy, but you are not; it’s me who is saying to you: Savage! The fire of the soul, the light of the eyes!”
“Yes; my soul is aflame, and I must have one!”
refine Lucy’s artistic taste—a goal shared by the aesthetic Man of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, who, like the consumer, concerns himself with taste among a multitude of choices. Knowing this we almost hear Paul speaking when Gagnier explains the motive of late 19\textsuperscript{th} century aesthetics:

Mill claimed that “commercial money-getting” caused Britain, unlike Europe, to undervalue the arts….An aesthetic education was needed that would inspire exalted feelings and the kind of idealism that would lift the British toward richer lives and more harmonious whole than “the business of getting on” had to that point allowed. (V, 10-11)

Tempting Lucy with consumption of knowledge, love, and sex, Paul transforms Lucy further and further into the consumer, teaching her to taste and choose as opposed to merely work. When he takes on the task of giving Lucy lessons, she finds her “faculties [beginning] to struggle themselves free” (V, 408) under his instruction. While Paul fights Lucy’s new “unfeminine knowledge” (V, 408), he provokes her to consume only more: “when M. Paul sneered at me, I wanted to possess them more fully” (V, 408). Here Lucy exhibits a brand new urge to indulge her desires.

Thus transformed, Lucy is primed to take from Paul the largest gift of the novel, the schoolhouse for which Lucy is to be the directress. However, in accepting the gift, Lucy pledges not a price, but work and makes herself the “steward” of his property, despite the fact it is her name on the contract: “I promised to do all he told me. I promised to work hard and willingly. ‘I will be your faithful steward,’ I said; ‘I trust at your coming the account will be ready’” (V, 564). When the moment is hers to be the consumer, to accept the gift as such, she accepts a career in its place—instead of accepting the gift and reveling in the love that gave it, she promises to have the account
“ready” for his return. Despite her transformation, she remains torn between the producer and the consumer.

Lucy’s conflict reflects the way in which mid-century Victorians neither fully distrusted nor embraced either economic theory of value. Balanced between the movements that Gagnier outlines, the novel reflects ambiguity between producer and consumer. Just as Lucy struggles over the value of her work versus the value of her desire, mid-century Victorians found themselves equally unsure with either the labor theory of value or with the utility theory of value. Questions of value in Villette’s market society and in the larger Victorian world as a whole, have implications beyond what determines price. Value in market society is, as Gagnier points out, a dialogue concerning the individual: his class and labor, his pains and pleasures (Gagnier, 1-2). This means that value is more important to the individual, due to its implications on self-worth. Accepting a monetary price for anything puts an explicit and not wholly natural value on one’s self—a notion that does not sit well with the average person. The conflict between the producer and consumer in Villette reflects a society attempting to come to terms with varying systems of economic value and the way those systems have implications in everyday social interaction and self-hood.

To return to the idea of the marriage or romance market, in which the economic identity of a character determines their romantic interaction and personal value as it is traded in a market of love, we find that the economic forces in marriage, romance, and sex while clearly struggled with, are inescapable. That Lucy cannot choose between production and consumption and is driven, in the end, to accept the schoolhouse as Paul’s “steward” and employee, shows how Lucy, while she might choose between different
theories of value, cannot escape her price altogether. Her romantic identity is priced at a market value in either case. Similarly, even as Graham and Ginevra embrace the labor theory of value and the utility theory of value respectively, neither is proven to belong to the correct school—Ginevra is socially successful but universally disliked for her lack of morality and Graham while universally loved is hindered by overwork and social concerns. As such, Villette’s characters seem to struggle against their own economic, moneyed identities but yet are unable to escape their participation in Villette’s love economy, their identities are unavoidably determined by the market price. As neither system can remedy this affliction, Villette questions systems of value in general, which is a notion further developed in Villette’s narration.

Lucy’s Economic Narration

I will now examine Lucy Snowe’s curious narrative style in terms of the way in which it builds on the economic tropes of the novel. Lucy Snowe’s narration is undeniably unreliable—she continually manipulates, misdirects, and withholds information from her readers—and I am far from the first to attempt to understand its generic ramifications. Monica F. Cohen notes the narratively exclusive “game” that Lucy appears to play with her readers:

[W]e can think of Villette as a novel which institutes the reader-text relationship as a game: although the obtrusiveness of its narrational mechanisms forces the reader, in his exclusion, to feel self-conscious, it is a self-consciousness that works to make the whole process of reading game-like. (Cohen, 65).

“[S]elf-conscious” is certainly one way to put it—I would probably say something like goaded or possibly harassed (particularly on the second or third reading). Lucy Snowe has an almost intolerable tendency to torment her readers by delaying action (Cohen calls
it “slow motion” (Cohen, 64)), denying information, and disguising characters. Lucy all
the while attests that she narrates the story accurately, telling her readers that they would
rather not know certain bits of information by way of remaining truthful: “My reader, I
know, is one who would not thank me for an elaborate reproduction of poetic first
impressions” (V, 49). Lucy’s narrative style conflicts with our ideas of economic
report—we would expect that a narrator of an economic text to be more reliable and
candid.

Regardless of Lucy’s manipulation of the plot, she does manage to transcend the
genre of a typical “marriage plot” or Victorian romance by applying an economic
dialogue. With such a strong focus on money, economics, class, labor, etc., Lucy’s
narration cannot help but exist outside the definitive realm of a fictional romance plot,
possibly even outside the realm of novel. Writing that Villette has a “multiplicity of
discourses” (Dolin, 54), Tim Dolin claims that Villette’s genre rests somewhere between
romance and realism, and that Brontë’s desire to remain outside of boundaries turns Lucy
Snowe into an “unwriteable self” (Dolin, 59):

In the episodic structure of Villette, the expressive space between marks a
resistance not merely to plot but to genre itself…She lapses from ‘faithful
narrator’ not to ‘partial eulogist’ but to a narrator who is wary of the foreclosures
of genre itself—the oppressiveness of classification and distinction. (Dolin, 59).

While this is a fine explanation for Lucy’s narration, I disagree with Dolin that Brontë is
merely choosing to defy or resist boundaries, whether generically or gendered. Rather, I
believe that Brontë is attempting to experiment with genre boundaries by merging the
love and marriage with the language of money and economics. As you may guess from

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12 Lucy Snowe’s form of narration is often similar to Lockwood’s in Emily (Charlotte’s younger sister)
Brontë’s Wuthering Heights (1847). Lockwood often chooses to condense Nelly’s tales or leave details out
altogether as they are boring or otherwise not worthy of complete narration.
my outrageous discussion concerning Lucy’s Law of Diminishing Marginal Utility, I think of *Villette* as a novel built on an economic model. Gail Turley Houston makes a similar argument, saying that Lucy’s narration is similar to a fiscal record, check book, or bank record due to Lucy’s (and Brontë’s) need to survive and avoid fiscal panic and debt. Lucy “[keeps] accounts in order to ‘check’ herself against desiring too much” (Houston, 61), and because she is “[s]crupulously aware of the ‘signs and tokens’ of the complicated world in which she dwells, Miss Snowe juggles a range of economic, social, and personal needs by ‘taking notice’” (Houston, 63) of financial gains and losses, incomes and costs. Where Houston’s argument disagrees with mine is that Houston does not take Lucy’s accounting as an investigation into the system of bookkeeping itself. I believe that economics in *Villette* investigates the disturbing commodification of identity in the romance market, calling to question the systems that define what is valuable both economically and socially. Brontë then employs Lucy’s narrative manipulation of the economic theme to question, not just the systems of value, but also the genres—economic and literary—that explain those systems. To explain this view, I again turn to another New Economic critic, Mary Poovey, whose work offers insights into the economic and literary genres during the time in which Brontë was writing *Villette*.

“*Mediating Value*” and Lucy’s Narrative Truth

The conflict over value and how to define it plagued both economics and what Poovey calls “imaginative writings” in the 19th century, so much so that it put the two genres in contention. Mary Poovey discusses the growing divide between imaginative and economic writings over value in *Genres of the Credit Economy*. Like Gagnier,

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13 Poovey uses the term “imaginative writings” (p.15) to refer to a range of literary writings from creative non-fiction to novels and poetry.
Poovey points to the middle of the 19th century as the era finalizing the separation of the two genres—which again places *Villette*, written in this same moment with similar questions of value, at the precipice of change. *Villette*, not only embodies market society in a fictionalized form but questions concepts of value as they are defined in both economic and imaginative writings. In this way, *Villette* straddles the emerging fault-line between the genres of economics and literature that Poovey outlines.

The division between genres began with an angst over monetary systems in which “intrinsically valuable” (Poovey, 57) forms of money, such as gold coins, began to be replaced, not always successfully, with more abstract forms, such as bills of exchange, bank paper, and checks, which were not grounded in physical value.14 The idea of credit and checks, and so forth, while becoming increasingly “naturalize[d]” (Poovey, 46) and “neutralized” (Poovey, 89) in the 19th century, incited anxiety over what money’s representation really meant:

> Even though paper money was useful, then, in extending credit to a nation…the very properties that made paper attractive threatened to exacerbate the theoretical problem that always haunted coins, for the ease at which paper could be printed meant that there was no necessary relationship between a monetary token and what it claimed to represent. (Poovey, 62)

The lack of “relationship” between abstract monetary forms instigated a dilemma—especially when counterfeiting became an issue—over what constituted real and fictional money value and what value, as an abstract concept, really is.

These emergent money forms, in combination with a larger degree of printed information regarding stocks, market prices, etc. and a boom in print in general put stress on the definition of value. For the post-mercantilist and political economic writers, it was crucial to ground their written work in fact to convince a public lacking trust in the

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14 For a full description of these forms see Poovey p. 35-55.
naturalization of the credit economy. This trend has continued in economics up to the present where it is a largely mathematical discipline. This fact requirement was largely a result of economic disasters and bank failures, such as the crash of the Bank of England in 1847, which was precipitated by over-speculation, causing widespread distrust in paper money distributed by banks (Housten, 49). Such distrust in fiscal records and monetary forms thus sparked a call for truthful, de-fictionalized economic report and representation (Poovey, 83). Interestingly, economic writers had to make “abstractions” (Poovey, 89) in order to maintain their reliability. They employed literary devices like analogies in order to help explain the systems at work to laymen, subtly undermining their fiction-free intentions.15

Meanwhile, for the imaginative writers, mass printing and the commodification of their work instigated them to define the value of their writing in terms of its artistic nature and less by what a book or volume would sell for in the marketplace. As a result, they began to claim fiction as an elevated form over non-fictions and semi-fictions (secret histories, satirical writing, epistolary writing, etc.) that were common in the 18th century and earlier. The imaginative writers avoided controversy over monetary value and claimed that the value of their work emanated from their “privileged imaginative engagement, interpretation, and evaluation” (Poovey, 85). That is, they explicitly wrote with little to no factual references while maintaining their ability to interpret and evaluate the social experience, economic and otherwise, and so maintained their socio-cultural value.

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15 Deirdre McCloskey goes through the devices used by economic writers in detail in The Rhetoric of Economics (1985)
Brontë manages to combine the economic and imaginative genres through manipulation of her narrative form. That is, she plays with fictionality and factuality in the novel’s narration, which explains why Lucy often withholds, deliberately, certain narrative details crucial to the plot’s understanding and frequently asks the reader to fill in the holes with their own ideas of what happened. This, I argue, exemplifies Poovey’s conflict over “fact and fiction” (Poovey, 79) that initiated the rift between economic and literary studies. As Brontë wrote Villette when the two genres really began to polarize, the text lingers in uncertainty concerning what is rational, economic fact and what is imagined, literary, fiction. Lucy’s narration, by existing between these two opposites, manipulates the reader’s expectations to the point where the reader, frustrated by a lack of information, cannot determine the value—factual or fictional—of the text.

Lucy’s narrative manipulation manifests in three crucial ways. The first is her unusual regulation of time in her novel. Lucy, contrary to her obsessive attention to time, often leaves the most crucial events of the narrative short and unaccounted for. The second mode, related to the first, involves Lucy’s refusal to depict her experiences in the novel completely, often claiming an inability to relate the experience accurately or asking the reader to infer what might have happened or how she might have felt. The third manner in which Lucy manipulates the reader’s expectations is her deliberate disguise of characters, including herself. These three modes allow Lucy to manipulate what the reader believes is the true (factual) version of Lucy’s personal history.

Lucy’s refusal to depict periods in her life defies the readers’ expectations of an accurate record; and while Lucy tempts us with the facts of her life, we are continually disappointed by a lack of information. Lucy plays with the reader’s sense of time to
exacerbate this. Time in Villette is oppressive and relative, as in the case of Mrs. Marchmont and her “twelve months of bliss” with her fiancé and “thirty years of sorrow” (V 43) after his death. Lucy, feeling the lack of time before she runs out of money in London, hears the bells of St. Paul’s and notes their influence:

“A deep, low, mighty, tone swung through the night. At first I knew it not; but it was uttered twelve times, and at the twelfth colossal hum and trembling knell, I said, “I lie in the shadow of St. Paul’s.” (V, 51)

Lucy recognizes that any good narration, like any good economic model, requires inclusion of the variable of time; this requirement seems to frame her narrative in “shadow” and ominous “knell[s].” However, despite the dominion of time over Lucy and the other characters, Lucy manages to trick our sense of it by taking some of the most important periods of the novel and compacting them. Her compression of time is most poignant when speaking of her past and, in particular, her loss of family, friends, and wealth. While this may be the most crucial element to understanding Lucy’s psyche throughout the novel, it is the one detail she never offers us. Instead, she relates entire period in her life in less than a page:

I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass. … However, it cannot be concealed that, in that case, I must somehow have fallen over-board, or that there must have been a wreck at last. I too well remember a time—a long time—of cold, of danger, of confusion. To this hour, when I have the nightmare … I even know there was a storm, and that not of one hour nor one day. For many days and nights neither sun nor stars appeared…all hope that we should be saved was taken away. In fine, the ship was lost, the crew perished. (V, 37-38)

While the reader can infer a lot from this passage—we imagine massive debts, family feuds, or perhaps some tragedy so traumatic that Lucy’s memory fails—“eight years,” especially years in which “cold,” “danger,” and “confusion” rule, is a long time to gloss over in metaphor. The reader might not notice Lucy’s lack of detail here, if it weren’t for
the fact that Lucy’s loss of family is made a topic on more than one occasion later on, like when Polly innocently remarks, “[b]ut poor Lucy! I thought she was a rich lady, and had rich friends” (V, 331), or when Lucy responds, to Mme. Beck’s inquiry into her references for hire, that she has “none” (V, 73). The dearth of explanation for such an important time is not fitting for an accurate history nor does it suit the readers’ narrative expectations—we could plausibly anticipate her history to be revealed eventually, but we are never granted that information.

Manipulation of time is just one way that Lucy denies the reader their narrative expectations. Often, even in lieu, of relating events herself, Lucy turns to the imagination of the reader to fill in the missing elements. In the Flaubourg Clotilde with Paul, she writes that her reaction to Paul’s gift cannot be repeated because, “[c]ertain junctures of our lives must always be difficult of recall to memory” (V, 562). While this notion is not untruthful, this refusal to relate such an emotional point in the narrative is more than loss of memory, it is deliberate withholding—as the narrative is fictional, it is unreasonable for the narrator to claim a loss of memory. Moments like this occur throughout the narrative—moments where Lucy refuses to relate an emotional reaction or experience due to her claim of narrative impotence: “of an artistic temperament, I deny that I am” (V, 67).

The novel’s ambiguous ending is the obvious and most important example of this. Instead of decidedly relating Paul’s demise or his miraculous survival, Lucy—again in a storm metaphor (Brontë’s favorite when she decides to infuriate her readers)—stops her narration and says:

Here pause: pause at once. There is enough said. Trouble no quiet, kind heart; leave sunny imaginations hope. Let it be theirs to conceive the delight of joy born
again fresh out of great terror, the rapture of rescue from peril, the wondrous reprieve from dread, the fruition of return. Let them picture union and a happy succeeding life. (V, 573)

Here, Lucy throws out both fact and fiction in the same dumpster. By asking the reader to sew their own ending onto an already patchy narrative, Lucy cruelly attacks the reader’s idea of a valuable novel, especially that of a marriage novel. She first manipulates the reader’s expectations regarding her past to the point where they begin to distrust those expectations, and then cruelly requires them for the novel’s ending.

As if this were not enough, Lucy continually disguises characters, such as Graham, Polly and Mr. Home, Paul, and even herself as yet another method of confusing her readership. Just as Alfred’s nun costume incites Lucy to question her sanity, Lucy’s disguises makes the reader question their own reading. Disguise, as Lucy uses it, often denotes a change in social status for certain characters, such as Mr. Home and Polly—who through inheritance become the Count de Bassompierre and the “little” Countess de Bassompierre—as well as Graham Bretton, who through a loss of money must rely on his profession, and thus is disguised as Dr. John. On rereading the novel, the reader might note how frequently Lucy teases us with those disguises. Dr. John is even further disguised as Ginevra’s loving suitor, Isadore, and there are a multitude of references to the Count de Bassompierre long before he and his daughter reenter the plot. Lucy additionally admits to recognizing Dr. John in his self-titled chapter (chapter 10), but does not say who or what she recognized until a good hundred pages later in chapter 16. When Lucy admits to recognizing Dr. John as Graham long before the reader, her tone is nonchalant, even possibly mocking of the reader’s inability to recognize him as quickly as she:
I ascertained his identity scarcely with surprise….The discovery was not of to-
day, its dawn had penetrated my perceptions long since….I found him out soon. I 
first recognized him on that occasion, noted several chapters back….To say
anything on the subject, to hint at my discovery, had not suited my habits of 
thought, or assimilated with my system of feelings. On the contrary, I had 
preferred to keep the matter to myself. (V, 202-3)

While it is all well and good that Lucy chooses not to reveal herself to Dr. John, it is 
another thing that she keep the detail from the readers, and it thus suggests the possibility 
that Lucy is keeping other pertinent information to herself.

Lucy’s secrecy is epitomized when it comes to her own characterization as the 
narrator and heroine of the novel. There is a reason why Villette is not titled after the 
main character, unlike Brontë’s other novels. It is a reminder that we might never know 
who Lucy Snowe is. In addition to her lack of past I mentioned earlier, Lucy frequently 
references her own disguise, as in this famous passage:

“Who are you, Miss Snowe?” [Ginevra] inquired, in a tone of undisguised and 
unsophisticated curiosity as made me laugh in my turn…”Wonderful!” I agreed, 
much amused at her mystification, “Who am I indeed? Perhaps a personage in 
disguise” (V, 356)

And it is not just Ginevra—who rarely calls Lucy by her name, but rather others such as 
“Old Crusty” (V, 100) and “Timon” (270)—who “marvels” at Lucy’s “manufacture” (V 
357) and her meteoric rise in society. Even Polly searches for a “way of accounting for 
[her] eccentricity” (V, 330), and Paul often suspects that Lucy knows more than she lets 
on. He spends a considerable amount of time in “chronic suspicion” (V, 410) that Lucy 
secretly knows Greek and Latin and tries to trick Lucy into using the languages.

Lucy’s disguise, in combination with her manipulation of narrative, does more 
than simply frustrate her readers. In challenging the expectations of the narrative, Brontë 
challenges the bounds of her genre. It seems that Brontë, purposefully or not, is equally
dissatisfied with adhering to the fiction-only narrative of a conventional 19th century marriage plot novel, and the factual trappings of an economic history, which is why her narrator plays with the idea of a true personal history. Rather, Lucy writes herself outside of either fact or fiction. Moreover, Villette is not a throwback to secret histories of the previous era, but something else entirely. Brontë chooses to attack the expectations of narration, both factual and fictional, as well as what it means to represent.

In Genres, Poovey frequently discusses how the new credit economy wanted a solution to the “problematic of representation” (Poovey, 62) or how systems of value were increasingly unfamiliar to the “intrinsic value” they should represent. During the times of economic struggle, when paper money and other credit instruments were revealed as fictions of value, people desired an understandable connection between value and monetary representation. This necessitated a reconciliation between value and what represented value. Economic and imaginative writings had different ideas on how to perform this reconciliation, which instigated the fact-fiction break and the separate, “mediating value,” methods they used. Both imaginative writers and economists wanted their readers to understand what was valuable and why—especially when real value (like gold coins) were not part of that value. Brontë takes the problematic of representation further than Poovey. Instead of following the cue of other “imaginative” writers and writing a fiction to represent real issues, or even writing a factual record, like the economic theorists, to ground money, Brontë takes written attempts to understand value as fictions, something created for self-consolation.

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16 Poovey mentions Eliza Haywood’s The Secret History of the Present Intrigues of the Court of Caramania (1727) and others which used “quasi-fictional, quasi-factual figures” p.84
17 Value “mediation” as Poovey uses the term, refers to the goal of grounding the abstract idea of value with real, intrinsic value.
This is why Lucy asks us to imagine our own “happy succeeding life” for Lucy; regardless if our desire for a happy ending is the factual or the fictional ending of Villette, we come away from the novel knowing, with absolute clarity, that all 573 pages are a fiction of our own creation. Lucy exploits our narrative expectations so we realize how much of our own imagination is already embedded in the narrative—we want a happy ending because we write it that way. To put this in Poovey’s terms, the methods economists and imaginative writers used to mediate value are fictions of mediation, with their own problematic of representation. They manage to mediate value, because their readers expect them too. Simply put, the methods through which economic and imaginative writers used to ground abstract ideas of value (such as money or the social value of marriage) are merely devices through which we rationalize the abstract idea of value.

My earlier disagreement with Gagnier now makes some sense. As Villette’s conflict over its loyalty to the productive or consumptive Economic Man shows us, the transformation in theoretical economics is, using Gagnier’s own word, merely a “narrative” (Gagnier, 1). Narratives are subject to the same flaws of representation seen in credit systems and paper money and in the mediating genres that try to correct the problematic of representation of money. Villette’s inability to embrace either political economics or neo-classical economics is a result of the fact that both are a fiction of value, both equally flawed. In Villette, Brontë stumbles on an undercurrent of dissatisfaction concerning all systems of value created by the people themselves—the systems that explain and represent value, perhaps the illusive idea of ‘value’ itself, are prisons of our own making.
Love and Money: Answered

Perhaps the most important tool that allows Brontë to make such a statement on value in love and economics as well as the genres that ground those values is (simply) timing. The years in which Brontë wrote *Villette* were saturated with economic uncertainty, both in terms of monetary instability (especially around the Bank of England’s 1847 failure) and of changes in economic theory from Political Economy of the late 18th century leading into the Marginal Revolution and Neo-Classical Economics of the late 19th century.18

*Villette* was also concurrent with the divide, which Poovey describes, over what constituted factually informative economic writing versus fictively esteemed literary writing. The uncertainty developed over the meaning of value (remember of course that I am speaking of “value” as a general term with multiple delineations) and how to ground or naturalize that abstract concept. Both of these concerns show up as conflicts in *Villette*. In this novel, Brontë discerns a mood of insecurity over value and the systems that define value—like the system of economics or the system of social interaction. Moreover, Brontë, while harshly revealing the flaws of definitions of value, does not attempt to mollify these uncertainties.

Brontë accomplishes this, as we have seen, first through her market trope. By fusing the romantic interactions of the novel with moneyed language, Brontë suggests that the forces of economics unavoidably regulate marriage, romance, and sex. This implies that even the most private interactions, have market participants, costs, and

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18 Brontë wrote *Villette* largely between 1848 and 1853 when it was published. Heather Glen, in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* also comments that Brontë was influenced by the rising mid-class and accessible luxury of the 1850s, during which Brontë gained wealth and social connection beyond what she had ever known all while struggling to cope with the deaths of her three siblings in the years preceding *Villette*. (Glen, 135-145).
prices—as in how Graham attempts to buy Ginevra’s affections with pieces of jewelry—thereby commodifying things like romance and marriage. This commodification also affects identity. Brontë uses economic roles to determine how her characters romantically interact, which effectively prices their identity. This take on the romantic plot in *Villette* rules out feminist interpretations, which claim that Lucy attempts escape from her feminine, non-economic role. The market trope in the novel serves to show how Lucy rather embraces her economic role despite its implications for her self-worth and that no one can separate from their economic role.

Notions of economic identity are also ambiguous and conflicted in the novel, according to my analysis of *Villette* in terms of Gagnier’s work. Just as economic theory was divided between discourses of Economic Man as producer or as consumer in the middle of the century, Brontë’s characters show how neither socially conscious production nor taste-focused consumption are appealing economic goals in the romance market. This reveals how Brontë remained unfixed in her loyalty either to the ideas of Political Economy or Neo-Classical Economics. The commodification of romance and identity and the conflict between old and new economic theories suggest that Brontë that believed the infusion of economic value into the private world was unavoidable, imperfect, and possibly even oppressive.

Brontë’s inclusion of an economic theme changes her novel’s perceived genre. *Villette* extends beyond a mere romance or marriage novel as it merges with economic text, thereby altering its genre. Brontë additionally uses narration to undermine her readers’ expectations in order to question what makes a text—be it economic or imaginative—informationally or culturally valuable. Lucy Snowe’s narration merges the
fact/fiction dichotomy through its deliberate manipulation of time, information, and disguise, forcing her readers to recognize how fictional the narrative really is, despite Lucy’s declarations that she is giving an accurate history of her life. Lucy baits her readers with information she never fully offers and so shows her readers how the novel is a creation of their own expectations; this is why Lucy asks the reader to input their own happy ending. By suggesting that the value of a text rests in the reader’s expectations, Brontë claims that systems—such as economic or imaginative texts—that attempt to ground value in an intrinsic equivalent are only successful because the reader wants the text to substantiate the intangible concept of value.

This notion, that the systems through which value is reconciled into a concrete concept, are in themselves mere fictions, can (believe it or not) help us answer the questions I asked at the beginning of this paper. Does the pervasive language of economic cause us to define love and marriage in monetary terms? The answer is yes. Economics is a system that attempts to reconcile abstract ideas of social value—such as the emotional value of love or the moral value of marriage—with tangible concepts like paper money. The problem, of course, is that money is itself intangible, especially when money—like paper bills or credit—is no longer intrinsically valuable. Further, economic writing, the system used to understand money systems, is also a fiction. The second question—‘Is romance, like money, just an artificial system designed for social cooperation and placation?’—also has an answer. It is, again, yes; Brontë’s economic trope shows us, through the commodification of romance and marriage, that the systems of romance, courtships, marriage, etc. are designed around rules of interaction. To maintain her friendship with Paul, she must offer a gift of reconcilement, the watch-
guard. Again, however, the ‘rules of interaction’ are not physical forces, but man-made concepts of social interaction. The answer, finally, to the third question, ‘are love and money separable?’, is no. Brontë offers no option for her characters to escape from either commodification or the fallible system, which creates that commodification. Systems that define concepts like money and love in the concrete are likewise abstract, and so we find that, in *Villette*, without money we cannot define love. This unsettling concept is at the heart of *Villette*’s importance. Brontë, while not offering a solution to the problem of defining what *is* valuable in love or money, sparks an awareness that the systems we’ve created to try to define it are fictions of placation in the face of abstraction.

**Works Cited**


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