

Charlotte Brontë's Challenge: The Masses' Good Knowledge of French in Brontë's *Shirley* vs. Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*¹

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Abstract

In this paper, against the backdrop of elite societies in the first half of the nineteenth century, I will clarify the effect of the masses' good knowledge of French as conveyed and used in *Shirley* (1849), by English novelist Charlotte Brontë² (1816-55), as compared with a similar situation in *Vanity Fair* (1847-48), written by English novelist William Makepeace Thackeray (1811-63). In both novels, a culture from the 1810s that valued knowledge of French by the middle class is embodied. In those days good knowledge of French by the masses impressed in elite circles, but by the 1840s, this effect was lost. Even middle-class Brontë's strong knowledge of French, which native speakers confirmed was excellent, was underestimated by the public. In her novel *Shirley*, Brontë seemingly tried to change the new values of the 1840s back to the old ones of the 1810s, through the medium of the hero of the masses who is a native speaker of French, Robert Gérard Moore. My study intends to provide a way for evaluating Brontë's confrontational attitude to the elite circles of the 1840s, in which upper society did not grant any acceptance to her or to others from her class for her knowledge of French; rather they were dismissive of it and even cavilling.

Key words: the masses' knowledge of French, Brontë and French, Thackeray and French, French and British literature, early nineteenth century middle class

1. Introduction

Charlotte Brontë was born as a clergyman's daughter in Haworth, Yorkshire in the north of England, and her social status was considered to be the middle class; therefore this great author was a part of the masses.

However, in 1832 when she was eighteen, the middle class was admitted to the franchise and to the House of Commons by the First Reform Act³, so that the middle class began to associate themselves with the elite of the upper class, who operated the English government. Given the political and social awareness in the world during her life and times, we can see she certainly experienced a variety of situations and was able to make many observations related to both the masses and the elite⁴ until her death.

In the meantime, she was devoted to brushing up and improving her own knowledge of French. Actually, it is recorded in *Life of Charlotte Brontë* written by English novelist Elizabeth Gaskell (1857: 202), that she had a brilliant talent for French. For this reason, although Brontë put her good knowledge of French to use in the subject matter of *Shirley*, the question arises as to why on earth she wrote this novel against the background of an elite society of the 1810s, on the somewhat frail assumption that this novel would be read and appreciated by her mass audience⁵ of the 1840s. After all, the masses of 1840 had a very different footing in society than did the masses of 1810.

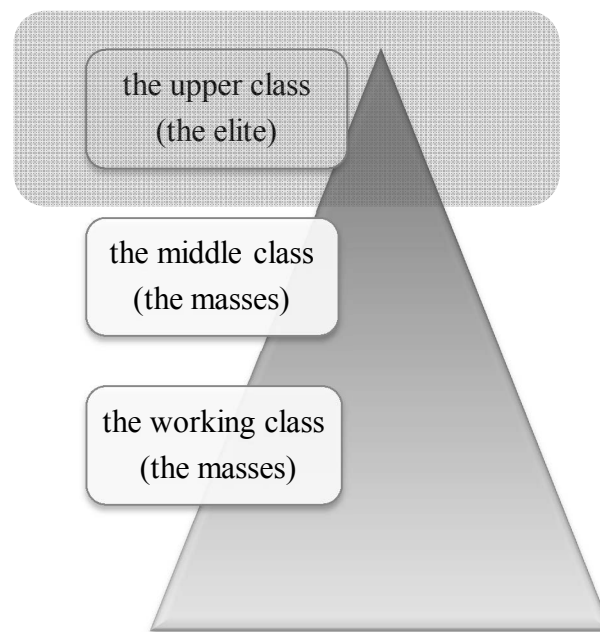
Therefore, in this essay, against the backdrop of elite societies in the first half of the nineteenth century, I will clarify the effect of the masses' good knowledge of French in the 1810s as depicted in *Shirley*, and I will compare these aspects with *Vanity Fair*, written by William Makepeace Thackeray, in which he also described his socio-cultural situation, with an emphasis on knowledge of French. Considering her writing in this spirit of comparison may cast light on Brontë's intention in writing a novel out of keeping for her mass audience of 1840, and to perhaps better identify a cultural viewpoint related to that authorial intent.

2. Elite Societies

2.1 What the English Government Had Considered Important

In England of the second half of the eighteenth century, during the progression of the Industrial Revolution, the upper class constituted the elite in all aspects, with the middle class and the working class viewed as a clump lower down, as shown in *figure 1*.

Figure 1.



As the chart above shows, the upper class was the elite; they also had steered the public to prosperity even while England carried on wars against France:

. . . the Seven Years' War (1756-63), in particular, cut off British access to the Continent. From 1763 until the French Revolution, however, the number of people crossing the Channel increased dramatically, with only a brief decline in the late 1770s and early 1780s, when France and Britain were once again at war. (Withey, 1997: 6)

However, in contradiction to the violence of these collisions with France, the English

government also had requested elite boys and young men to join in grand tours of the continent in order for England to better reach the levels of high civilization of more aesthetically advanced nations, such as France and Italy. Therefore there were a few thousands upper class boys and their tutors from England in France even then, during the wars, making their grand tours. Consequently, on the whole, although the wars had come about between England and France, it becomes clear that at this same time social intercourse with the French was ironically for the elite in England.

Nevertheless, the ex-director of University of California Press Lynne Withey (1997: 7) points out that French culture was not quite as important as Italian culture for them:

While the French capital remained an essential part of the grand tourist's itinerary, Italy was its heart. For Western Europeans, Italy was the source of all that was important in their culture, both ancient and modern: home of the Romans, whose language formed the core of upper-class British education and whose government and art remained models for emulation, and of the great Renaissance artists, considered by the British to be the finest exemplars of modern aesthetic taste. (1997: 7)

In consequence, so far as the self-perceived "rank" of England in its government's eyes was concerned, Italian rather than French was seen as the best model in branches of learning since the Renaissance.

2.2 The Changing Times

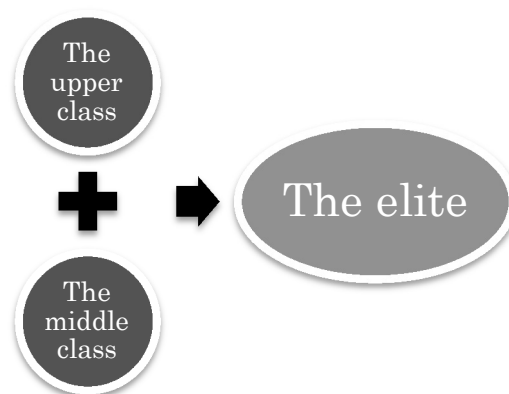
However, the English had been exposed to French threats stemming from the French Revolution (1789-99) since the late 1780s, and the French general and Emperor Napoléon Bonaparte extended his power to much of Europe. Therefore the situation mentioned above was now different from what it used to be because the entire European upper class quickly

came to consider France as the most advanced nation of Europe. As French started to be looked up to as a universal language, it was natural for many from various nations to command a wide-ranging knowledge of French. In this atmosphere, the English upper circles were also expected to demonstrate their good knowledge of French, and they respected the French language more than Italian, even though Italian culture as a whole was perceived more highly.

In England, the middle class and the working class had been traditionally seen as the masses. As the nineteenth century opened, they concentrated their energy into starting various mass movements designed to improve their plight, such as Luddism⁶, and perhaps as a part of this they wanted to deepen their knowledge of French if they had time or money to spare, thus becoming more like the elite in this increasingly important way.

In 1832, the First Reform Act was enacted. By this law, only the middle class (not the working class) were permitted to take the lead in politics with the elite of the upper class and to play a lively part in society with them, as shown in *figure 2*.

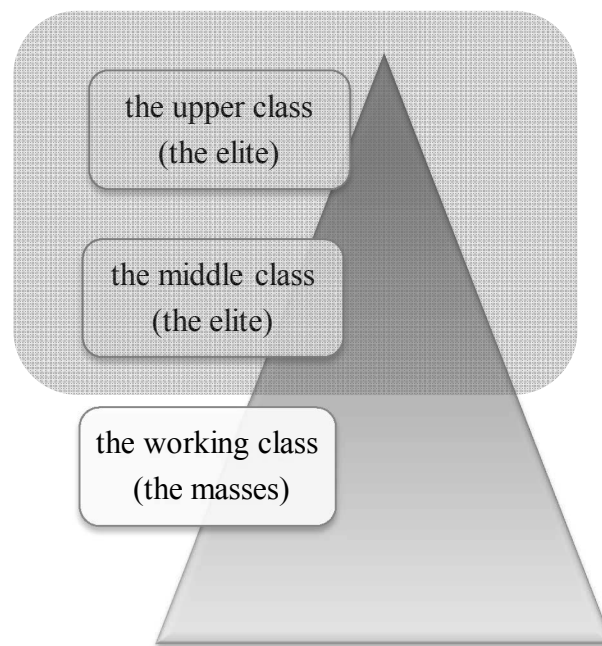
Figure 2.



Therefore, as this chart shows, that the upper class and the middle class functioned as the elite and the working class stayed lower as the bottom mass. *Figure 3* illustrates the process of change, showing that the amount of territory allowed to the humble masses in

society was now smaller than before due to certain types of merging between upper and middle class.

Figure 3.



As a result, the working class staged a mass movement called Chartism⁷, seeking the same political and social rights as the middle class was achieving, only on a larger scale. Considering that the movement continued to grow for twenty years from 1838 to 1858, the iron will and strength to carry on with this fight to improve their political and social positions must have been very strong indeed. The gap between the middle class and the working class had widened since 1832, so it can be said that discrimination against the masses must have been quite remarkable.

In the next section, against the background of such an elite and segmented society in the first half of the nineteenth century, we will examine the influence of the masses' good knowledge of French depicted in upper-class⁸ Thackeray's *Vanity Fair*.

3. The Masses' Good Knowledge of French in *Vanity Fair*

In Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*, even in the 1810s the upper class enjoyed a culture that took pleasure in referring to food on English tables by French names, similar to the nobility of the middle period (Thackeray, 1847-48: 87). What is more, Thackeray had the headmaster of a public school,⁹ the Swishtail Seminary, reward a boy named William Dobbin for achieving the highest French test score by giving him a French book for first prize, not only in front of all the boys but also their parents. In such details, along with depicting the overall social climate of the elite of the 1840s, he also specifically depicted the good old days of the 1810s when the French language had been very respected and welcomed by the elite or upper class. It can be said that he tried to please his elite audience by describing these scenes in a way that they might become again more popular among them.

On the other side of the social structure, the heroine in Thackeray's novel is Rebecca Sharp of the working class, that is to say, of the masses. Her father, who was an artist in debt, married a French dancer. Her mother, who had taught her French, died young, and then her father died, too. Although Rebecca at age seventeen should go to the workhouse, she is nevertheless employed teaching French to the young ladies at the school Chiswick Mall by the headmistress Miss Barbara Pinkerton:

Rebecca . . . spoke French with purity and Parisian accent. It was in those days rather a rare accomplishment, and led to her engagement with the orthodox Miss Pinkerton. (Thackeray, 1847-48: 17-8)

In return for Rebecca's work, she could live with the girls at the school, and she was paid a few pounds a year by Miss Pinkerton. On top of that, when Rebecca was off, she was able to attend any classes she liked. At this point in the novel, we can understand that she was treated well by Miss Pinkerton.

However, while at school, except for Rebecca's friend Miss Amelia Sedley (who has for her older brother Mr Joseph Sedley of the elite) no one gave gentle words to Rebecca. Therefore she becomes disgusted by her job teaching the young ladies French and sharing her own good knowledge, and she becomes filled with hate for Miss Pinkerton who had given her this work.

As a result Rebecca decides to quit her job in order to obtain a new post as a governess to the daughters of a baronet, Sir Pitt Crawley. When she goes to make her goodbyes to Miss Pinkerton, who does not know French, she coyly ventures to speak to Miss Pinkerton in French, 'Mademoiselle, je viens vous faire mes adieux.' (Thackeray, 1847-48: 13). Miss Pinkerton bites her lips and replies to her in English, 'Miss Sharp, I wish you a good-morning.' (Thackeray, 1847-48: 13).

After that, while the carriage takes Rebecca and Miss Amelia away from the school, Rebecca says to Amelia, '[T]hat talking French to Miss Pinkerton was capital fun, wasn't it? She doesn't know a word of French, and was too proud to confess it. I believe it was that which made her part with me; and so thank heaven for French.' (Thackeray, 1847-48: 16). Because of her good knowledge of French, Rebecca considers herself to be a useful talented person for society, and Rebecca cries out, '*Vive la France! Vive l'Empereur! Vive Bonaparte!*'¹⁰ (Thackeray, 1847-48: 16).

Furthermore on another day she notes '... what a *distinguee* girl she was—how she could speak French better than the Governor-General's lady herself—and what a sensation she would make at the Calcutta balls.' (Thackeray, 1847-48: 44) by Joseph.

Then she actually is treated as the bell of London society by means of her good knowledge of French.

Accordingly, in the way that Thackeray expresses the value of the masses' good knowledge of French towards being respected by the elite in *Vanity Fair*, we can discern and postulate that the masses' good knowledge of French in the 1810s was effective in

manipulating viewpoints by the elite society towards the mass to a more positive perception, at least for those in the mass who spoke French capably.

4. Brontë's Good Knowledge of French

Actually, before 1832, although middle-class Brontë had herself been one of the masses, she had always been interested in French even as a child. She taught herself the language at her father's Parsonage, and at the age of fifteen, she entered a girl's boarding school at Roe Head. The headmistress, Miss Margaret Wooler, was extremely enthusiastic in teaching French to the girls. Brontë studied it as intensively as possible:

We know that Miss Wooler's was a happy school, but of its curriculum we can only reconstruct an outline. French was important, and here Charlotte had a head start as she had been fascinated by the language early and was a reasonable French scholar before going to Roe Head. (Whitehead, 1993: 6)

After Brontë left school at the age of sixteen, she enjoyed corresponding with her good friend Ellen Nussey in French for a while, and in her twenties, she decided to study abroad in Belgium because she wanted to advance her knowledge of French as was required as a lady.

In Belgium, she went to school, *pensionnat*¹¹ of Madame Héger, kept by Madame Claire Zoë Héger, in order to learn French from her husband Monsieur¹² Constantin Georges Héger. There, Brontë took M. Héger's class, and his instruction helped develop her knowledge of French. Therefore, two years later, she left school with honours, and M. Héger presented her with a special diploma:

M. Héger gave her a kind of diploma, dated from, and sealed with the seal of the Athénée Royal de Bruxelles, certifying that she was perfectly capable of teaching the

French language, having well studied the grammar and composition thereof, and, moreover, having prepared herself for teaching by studying and practicing the best methods of instruction. This certificate is dated December 29th, 1843 . . . (Gaskell, 1857: 211)

After returning to England, Brontë had attempted to maintain her knowledge of French by constantly brushing up on it and improving to an extent that native speakers of French vouched for its excellence. She wrote to M. Héger in French, and she frequently spoke to native speakers of French.

Then as Brontë became a novelist, she wrote a partial manuscript of *Shirley* in French, under the male pen name of Currer Bell¹³. However, because there was a risk that her good knowledge of ‘French in *Shirley* might be caviled . . .’ (649)¹⁴ by the reviewers, she sought out assistance from George Smith, head of a top publishing in London, Smith, Elder and Company. Smith instructed her to rewrite *Shirley*, originally written in French, into English.

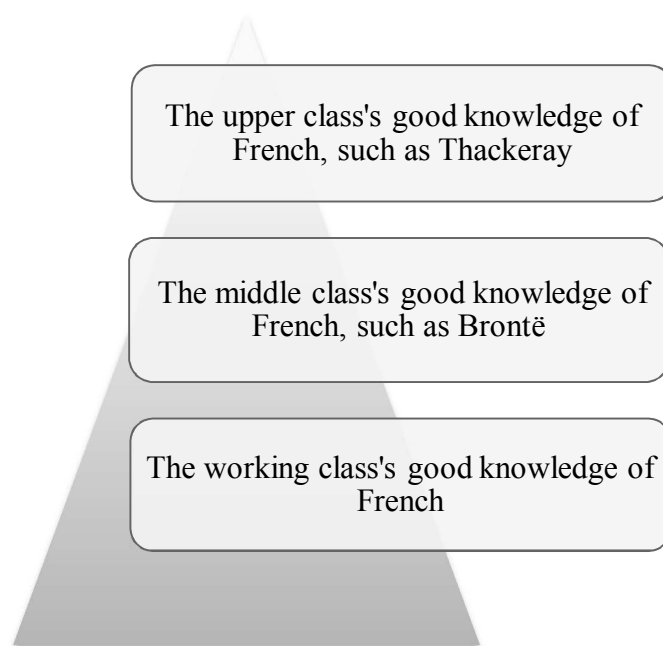
As a partial explanation of this phenomenon, English novelist Virginia Woolf (1939: 9) later claimed that English novelists writing in those times were exposed to great danger by the reviewers:

The reviewer was a louse; his bite was contemptible; yet his bite was painful. His bite injured vanity; it injured reputation; it injured sales. Undoubtedly, in the nineteenth century, the reviewer was a formidable insect; he had considerable power over the author’s sensibility; and upon the public taste. He could hurt the author; he could persuade the public either to buy or to refrain from buying. (1939: 9)

As to the reason for why Smith instructed Brontë to rewrite the French *Shirley* into English, he would certainly have tried to prevent risking that she would no longer play an

active part as a novelist with the public if her good knowledge of French in *Shirley* were cavilled in small pieces by reviewers. This was not going to be the case for upper class Thackeray, whose good knowledge of French in *Vanity Fair* was not going to be subject to ridicule since he was solidly upper class. Therefore, this touches the core of a problem for Brontë, that even her good knowledge of French, as attested to by speakers of French, still was not enough to bring her into full acceptance in her society's upper elite at this time, similar to the character of Rebecca in *Vanity Fair*. This partial rejection by society or difficulty in climbing to its highest levels was in contradiction to the new opening up in some ways of top elite levels to the middle class, as shown in *figure 4*.

Figure 4.



In this way we see that middle-class Brontë's good knowledge of French was ranked lower than Thackeray's, so that it can be seen in at least this example that someone from the masses of the 1840s had great difficulty being fully accepted into society by way of quality French alone. Therefore, we can grasp that good knowledge of French for anyone from the

masses had in the 1840s lost its magical effect to lead individuals from the masses into acceptance within the elite as had been the case in the 1810s, and which Thackeray had written about.

Against the backdrop of the elite society of the 1840s, Thackeray would have written *Vanity Fair* to please the elite audience, but Brontë wrote the manuscript of *Shirley* for her own class audience to read. In this contrast, while Smith instructed her to translate the French within the novel into English, she did not follow his instruction. As a result, we can see that she bravely dared to write in French partly due to the fact that she was writing of a Belgian hero from the Belgian working class, namely, Robert Gérard Moore, who is a native speaker of French, against the background of an elite society in Yorkshire of the 1810s.

Lastly, I wish to examine the friendly feeling between this Belgian character, Robert, and the elite of the upper class as expressed in *Shirley*.

5. The Effect of Robert's Good Knowledge of French Intended in *Shirley*

In *Shirley*, Robert's father was an English merchant and married a Belgian woman, but his factory went bankrupt under the influence of the French Revolution. Now although Robert was left only debts and destitution by his father, he is trying to rebuild a factory of his father's in Yorkshire, receiving support from the upper crust Mr Hiram Yorke. Mr Yorke is one of the most influential men in this district. In fact, Mr Yorke received a very elite education, such as being part of the 'ground tourss' (Brontë, 1849: 48). Mr Yorke from Yorkshire speaks French quite well enough to have good conversations with Robert.

One day, Robert introduces labour-saving textile machinery into his factory, and he tries to protect it from the Luddites who plan to riot and destroy it. Therefore, he asks another member of the elite, Mr Matthewson Helston, to help him. Mr Yorke complains to Robert about this in French, saying '*mauvaise tête!*'¹⁵ (43), and Robert also replies in French. Then, they start quarrelling:

‘Mauvaise tête vous-même; je ne fais que mon devoir: quant à vos lourdauds de paysans, je m’en moque!’

*‘En revanche, mon garçon, nos lourdauds de paysans se moqueront de toi; sois en certain,’*¹⁶ replied Yorke, speaking with nearly as pure a French accent as Gérard Moore.

‘C’est bon! C’est bon! Et puisque cela m’est égal, que mes amis ne s’en inquiètent pas.’

‘Tes amis! Où sont-ils, tes amis?’

*‘Je fais écho, où sont-ils? et je suis fort aise que l’écho seul y répond. Au diable les amis! Je me souviens encore du moment où mon père et mes oncles Gérard appellèrent autour d’eux leurs amis, et Dieu sait si les amis se sont empressés d’accourir à leur secours! Tenez, M. Yorke, ce mot, ami, m’irrite trop; ne m’en parlez plus.’*¹⁷ (43)

In this way Robert has a quarrel on an equal footing with Mr. Yorke. In addition to this, when Robert makes conversations in French with the heroine, Helston’s adopted daughter Miss Caroline Helstone, he connects with her in a language-equalized way that extends beyond class differences. Hence as Robert gains social life access similar to Rebecca Sharp in *Vanity Fair*, and on an equal footing with the elite through using his good knowledge of French, the English culture of the 1810s that saw the masses’ good knowledge of French transform social structures was effective in shifting the character Robert to upward mobility in *Shirley*, as described and written by Brontë.

Additionally, Brontë assumed that her novel would be read by the masses, and was showing off her good knowledge of French in *Shirley* against the backdrop of the elite society of the 1810s, when that knowledge of French still contained its highest power for breaking

through social structures. The masses during Brontë's actual time might still receive cultural encouragement from such a novel.

After publication of this novel, Brontë was delighted that it won popularity among the people including the masses in Haworth:

The Haworth people have been making great fools of themselves about "Shirley," they have taken it in an enthusiastic light. When they got the volumes at the Mechanics' Institute, all the members wanted them. They cast lots for the whole three, and whoever got a volume was only allowed to keep it two days, and was to be fined a shilling per diem for longer detention. (2000: 346)

Besides the 'theme was popular in Yorkshire, and all the little details of place and of the type of life, as well as the typical regional characters, were revelled in.' (Whitehead, 1993: 159).

Thus considering that her audiences, which included the masses in Yorkshire, were able to read this novel, we can see that not only the elite but also the masses enjoyed understanding Brontë's French, well written in *Shirley* at a level that native speakers of French affirmed for its excellence.

Therefore, from the various relationships in *Shirley*, such as between Robert from the masses and the elite Mr Yorke, Mr Helston and Miss Caroline, it can be seen that Brontë effectively tried to break down and implicitly criticize the values that disallowed masses' good knowledge of French as a barrier breaker into elite society by the 1840s. By bravely writing this novel even though the values and rules were changing, she perhaps was choosing to be treated in her knowledge of French on equal terms with Thackeray's, and to deliberately pursue the aims of her novel even though the times were shifting.

As a result Robert's French written in *Shirley* by Charlotte Brontë shows her

courageous and confrontational attitude to the elite society of the 1840s.

6. Conclusion

Finally, as I have analysed the masses' good knowledge of French in *Shirley*, it is clear that Brontë was looking for a new society in which all the people could use their good knowledge of French. In fact, there was a possibility that the middle class knowledge of French would, as was the case with Brontë's own French, be underestimated in the elite society of the 1840s, unlike in the 1810s. In this way the 1810s may have been more progressive than the 1840s. Therefore, even though many members of the masses had learned French very well by the 1840s, likely thinking it would advance them (as it would have in the 1810s), it can be said that their good knowledge of French tended increasingly not to be accepted or useful in public. Assuming that *Shirley* would be read by her mass audience, against the historical background of the elite society in Yorkshire of the 1810s, Brontë portrayed the life style of a native speaker of French in which that character, Robert, actually could be on equal footing with the elite by virtue of his knowledge. Brontë effectively attempted to show that many members of the masses in the 1840s, who had bought into knowledge of French as a ticket to cultural ascendancy as it had been in the 1810s, were quite capable of reading French and understanding Robert's French. Brontë in effect attempted to bring forward again an awareness of the knowledge of the masses in the 1840s, their cultural skills in language, perhaps hoping to challenge the closing window for upward mobility. In other words, she sought a change of values for the masses that came closer to the 1810s than the newer, more closed off situation of the 1840s. Brontë asserted the value of non-biased cultural views, so that society might better regard the masses' good knowledge of French equally and fairly. This reflects Brontë's belief about impartiality as expressed in *Shirley*; Charlotte Brontë 'depicted the corner of Yorkshire where she lived and what little she had

seen of human society.’ (Montégut, 1973: 133), but we may realize from this study that she did much more than that.

*This essay is amended, developed, and expanded from the presentation delivered at the 43th Conference of Japan Society of English Usage and Style, at Musashi University, Musashi, Japan on the 29th of June, 2014.

Footnotes

¹ This paper will delete the subtitle, *a Novel Without a Hero* since *Vanity Fair* is more common and familiar to readers.

² Charlotte Brontë had younger sisters, Emily and Anne, who were English female novelists. However, in this paper, I treat Charlotte Brontë’s name as simply Brontë, and I make reference by first name to her other family members in order to distinguish them.

³ Until the 1830s, Britain’s elections were neither representative nor balanced, but the Reform Act of 1832 increased the electorate from around 366,000 to 650,000 which was dominated by adult males of the middle classes and upper classes in England and Wales. In those days, because of a male-dominated society, classes from a given householder’s males who changed classes were joined by the wife and daughters. As a result, after 1832, males and women of the middle classes joined upper circles.

⁴ Brontë’s father, Patrick Brontë had graduated from an elite university, Cambridge University. Similarly, she herself flourished in the reign of Queen Victoria, and she married the elite curate Arthur Bell Nicholls, who left Trinity College, Dublin.

⁵ Brontë was going to make the social movement theme of this novel Chartism (1838-58), but because it might make the working classes sad, she changed the social movement theme to Luddism (1811-16). We can surmise from this change that part of Brontë’s aim in writing *Shirley* was to encourage the working classes to read and not be

discouraged.

⁶ Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution, the working classes had busily broken machines for six years from 1811 to 1817, in order to regain their handwork.

⁷ The working classes began to claim the same social and political rights as the middle classes, so that the working classes launched a campaign, Chartism against the government in 1838. Since then, the movement had flourished, but in the end, it died away by 1858 because the government suppressed the revolt.

⁸ Thackeray's father Richmond Thackeray, had worked for the East India Company. Moreover, he was educated at public school, specifically the Charterhouse School, and he later entered Trinity College, Cambridge.

⁹ These schools are known as top educational facilities, and they have produced a large number of the elite in our own time as well as in Brontë's days.

¹⁰ In this essay, French words are highlighted in italics. An English translation of this dialogue is as follows: 'Vive la France! Long live the Emperor! Vive Bonaparte!'

¹¹ This means a boarding school in English.

¹² In this essay, Monsieur is abbreviated to M.

¹³ Brontë adapted the male pen name Currer Bell because there still was a tendency for female novelists not to be accepted in the world. The English audience believed that Currer Bell was a man.

¹⁴ All quotations here from *Shirley* are cited from a recent Penguin edition (England: Penguin Classics, 2006), 43-649. Consequently, only the page is indicated in parentheses.

¹⁵ An English translation of this dialogue is 'Miserable head!' See *Shirley*, p. 625.

¹⁶ An English translation of this dialogue is as follows: 'Miserable head yourself; I'm only doing my duty; as for your oafish peasants, I couldn't care less!' 'On the contrary, my boy, have no doubt that it is the peasants who couldn't care less about you.' See *Shirley*, p. 625.

¹⁷ An English translation of this dialogue is as follows: ‘All right! all right! Since I don’t care, may my friends not worry themselves.’ ‘Your friends! Where are your friends?’ ‘I echo, where are they? I am at ease that only the echo answers. Go to hell, my friends! I still remember the moment my father and my Gérard uncles called their friends to them and God knows if his friends hastily made their way to help him! Here, Mr Yorke, this word—friend—irritates me; please do not talk of it anymore.’ See *Shirley*, p. 625.

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