Staying Calm and Seizing the Iron: Contagion, Fermentation and the Management of the Rabies Threat in Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley*

Rabies erupts in the narrative of Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* (1849) when Shirley Keeldar is suddenly bitten by a previously friendly dog. On being told that the dog, Phoebe, is “raging mad” (426), Shirley runs to the kitchen, grabs an iron, and cauterizes the wound to prevent her infection with rabies.[[1]](#endnote-1) In this action, Shirley seeks to protect herself from shame and pain, but her mortification of the flesh is also a measure to reassert its integrity by blockading it against infection. Kathleen Kete notes “the special dreadfulness of the self-conscious [rabies] patient” (101); those patients’ awareness of shame and loss of control constituted a significant component of the particular terrors of rabies. Newspapers in the 1840s, frequently prefacing lurid accounts with the caveat that they are “shocking to relate,” described individuals dying in “the greatest agony” from this “dreadful malady,” suffering “dreadful convulsions” and “heart-rending” agonies. The *Blackburn Standard* documented in September 1849 a case in which the “deceased died raving, and requiring five or six men to hold him down” (“Dreadful Death”); *Lloyd’s Weekly* told how the same man “requested that if in his ravings he should bite his mother, they would knock his head off the next moment. For some time before his death he barked and gnashed his teeth just like a dog” (“Awful Death”).[[2]](#endnote-2) Whether from cauterization, from strait-jacketing, or from restraint, the management of rabies predicated a need to install or re-instate the barriers and boundaries of the body. This strategy, I shall argue, also brings into sharp relief questions which are implicit throughout *Shirley*, about the ways in which barriers and boundaries might be mobilized or defended as protection against a variety of hazards from fermenting hysteria to incendiarism and rebellion.

Emily Brontë’s bite from a “strange dog, running past, with hanging head and lolling tongue,” after which she too applied an iron to her arm to cauterize the wound (Gaskell, *Life* 214), has traditionally been considered the primary context for the episode in *Shirley*: it is one in a list of parallels between Brontë’s sister and her heroine which she outlined to Elizabeth Gaskell (215), and which biographies such as Juliet Barker’s have both noted and queried (Barker 612; see also Miller 204). Less often noted, however, is that Emily’s bite took place at a time when the rabies threat seemed particularly immediate in the West Riding of Yorkshire. Although there were no reported deaths from the disease in London in the years 1846-53, an overall increase from 1846 occurred nonetheless, due to a rise in figures for Lancashire and the West Riding (Pemberton and Worboys 42-43). Rabies was a local and visible threat, and it was also symbolically potent in relation to the social and political context of those years.

Untrammelled dogs were powerfully emblematic of the rebellious forces of the Chartist movement which Terry Eagleton identifies as “the unspoken subject of *Shirley*” (45). Neil Pemberton and Patrick Worboys have indicated the metaphorical associations between rabid dogs and the criminal classes in the 1830s (25); the veterinary surgeon and author of *On Canine Madness* William Youatt argued in 1830 that an increase in rabies in recent years resulted from “the increasing demoralization of the country” (30), in which the “peasantry” were mingling with “the ruffian and the avowed thief” (31), mistreating and neglecting their dogs to the extent that the animals became rabid. An increased interest in animal welfare in the 1840s often tended to predicate pity, rather than outrage, toward rabid dogs (Pemberton and Worboys 42; Ritvo 133-44): in *Shirley*, natural sympathy for dogs combines with an atavistic fear of their potential to transgress and to violate. These two contexts—rabies and rebellion—occur in historical and geographical proximity to one another, and they directly intersect in *Shirley*.

Brontë’s rabies narrative has yielded little critical attention. Elizabeth Gargano notes that Shirley’s “fears of madness and a frenzied death” form part of her struggle to maintain her “subjective domain” (798), and Beth Torgerson usefully draws attention to contemporary associations of rabies with “hysteria and the need for emotional and sexual repression” (50):[[3]](#endnote-3) both these studies, however, read rabies as a threat relevant specifically to Shirley herself, and as a part of her own character trajectory. More detailed readings of rabies’s rhetorical and literary functions have so far focussed on the disease’s resonance in Gothic texts of the *fin de siècle*. Keridiana Chez and Claire Charlotte McKechnie have, respectively, identified echoes of rabidity in narratives like Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) (Chez), and others including Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) (McKechnie), in which writers seem to engage with and to exploit the symbolic threats entailed in rabies, contributing to late Victorian perceptions of dogs and of the disease*.* Rather than reading rabies in *Shirley* as an incursion of the Gothic into the realist, industrial, text, however,[[4]](#endnote-4) I argue that Brontë’s use of the disease indicates close engagement with a specific aspect of the novel’s “North-of-England … Yorkshire … West-Riding” (289) setting. In what follows, I propose to extend the discussion of rabies in the literary text outwards, from the Gothic to the realist text, and backwards: from the late nineteenth-century to rabies as it was understood in the 1840s; to its appearances in writing of the decade in general; and to its function in *Shirley* in particular.

I begin by indicating the ways in which rabidity lurks in language and narratives of the 1840s, before distinguishing the medical context for the disease in the 1840s from that which obtained later in the century. I stress here rabies’s place within the contagionist/anticontagionist debate during that decade, and its reframing as a “zymotic disease”—that is, one which spreads by contagion but can be fermented by environment. The potentially “spurious” (imagined) nature of hydrophobia in humans as it was designated in the period, as well as its associations with both miasma and with contagion, imply a threat to Shirley which is both over-determined and, ultimately, indeterminate. The dangers of fermentation and the management of boundaries of all kinds coalesce in Brontë’s discussion of boundaries and blockades: those which inhibit trade, in the case of the Napoleonic wars which rumble in the novel’s background, and those which Brontë insists must be kept intact against insurgents of all kinds in *Shirley*. The rabies narrative, I argue, is a strategy by which Brontë articulates a response to the problem of an insurgent working class: contingently, and limitedly, sympathetic to dogs and to workers, the text nonetheless endorses a repressive stance if necessary.

Recent cultural studies like Pemberton and Worboys’s have amply demonstrated that rabies encapsulated and intersected with many anxieties in the nineteenth century, and that these anxieties were developed and altered in every decade of that century. Central to my argument is the proposition that we might broaden our understanding of the disease’s resonance in the literary text by detaching it from its more seductive Gothic incarnations and engaging with it more comprehensively, so that we might read it as both symbolic of, and inextricably connected to, industrial Britain’s uncertainties about disease, unrest and control.

“RABID POLITICS”: MAD DOGS AND METAPHORS OF RABIDITY

A form of zoonosis, in which diseases appear transmitted from animal to human, and humans seem to take on canine qualities, is powerfully evident in many Gothic narratives later in the nineteenth century: canine-like and “rabid” humans also appear in both Charlotte and Emily Brontë’s own “Gothic” narratives, *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847), in which Bertha Rochester and Catherine Earnshaw respectively display distinctly rabid symptoms even though rabies is clearly not the overt cause of their illness.[[5]](#endnote-5) The undercurrent of rabidity tends to intersect most obviously with tropes of femininity and sexuality in the Gothic narrative; realist texts and correspondence in the 1840s engage with rabidity in distinct and different ways, through their intermittent rhetorical use of the term “rabid,” and their references to “mad dogs.”

Rabies takes its name from the Latin “rabies,” meaning savageness and/or “morbid affection” in dogs (“Rabies,” *OED*): the root of “rabid” is “rabidus,” meaning to be frenzied or mad (“Rabid,” *OED*). The name of the disease, then, reflects the condition of rabidity which sufferers manifest, rather than the other way around. When Charles Dickens, for example, described Major Bagstock made “rabid by gout” (134) in *Dombey and Son* (1848), he was not necessarily alluding to the contemporary anxieties over rabies itself.[[6]](#endnote-6) Often, though, writers refer to “rabid” individuals, mad dogs, and the disease itself in close proximity. Thomas Carlyle does so with noticeable frequency, referring in a letter to John Carlyle in November 1835 to “rabid factions” in the countryand to himself in 1836 as “better now; at worst mournful, not indignant and rabid” (Letter to John A. Carlyle June 1836) as well as frequently applying the adjective to “Radical” politics in his correspondence. Writing to Ralph Waldo Emerson, he refers to rabies as a disease twice in 1841, as though to characterize London at a distance for the American: “June comes; the rabid dogs get muzzled,” he writes in May, and, a month later: “I cannot live all the year round in London, under pain of dying or going rabid” (Letters 21 May 1841; 25 June 1841).

Rabid dogs provide Carlyle with a fertile metaphor when, to an unknown correspondent, he advises in 1849 that “a wise and honourable soul” will never find himself at home in “Authorship,” and still less in “the world,” in which it is:

at present especially, as an abominable kennel of mad dogs that a good man will have to view his co-mates in most professions,—with pity, not with rage, in *silence* generally, yet with a determined resolution to keep apart from *their* downward course, and (with Heaven’s help) by no means to do as they do. (Letter to Unidentified Correspondent, 19 June 1849)

Carlyle’s segue from “Authorship” to “the world” indicates his preoccupation with current events in 1849; everything comes back to the present situation and its intractable difficulties.[[7]](#endnote-7) Carlyle’s vision in this private letter of the “wise and honourable soul” and his response to insurgent hordes offers a revised and muted version of the magisterial “Great Men” of *On Heroes*. The “wise man” finds that factions and rebels are as damned and doomed as “mad dogs,” but, in keeping with contemporary understanding of the impossibility of cure and the danger of infection, he does three key things: he pities the metaphorical dogs; he avoids them; he understands that he can do little but keep silent.

The mobile metaphor of rabies expresses clear parallels between the rabidity of the times and the problem of mad dogs. In Gaskell’s *Mary Barton* (1848), the metaphorical mad dog appears in the same text as, though is less obviously related to, the “rabid politics” produced by “vindictive feeling” in the working classes (83). Early in their friendship, Margaret Jennings shows Mary one of Job Legh’s scorpions in a bottle, and recounts the day that it “gave a jerk, and before [Margaret] could speak it gave another, and in a minute it was as wild as could be, running at [her] like a mad dog” (40). In the context of Job’s studies of “the Linnæan or the Natural system” (38), explained a few pages earlier in the novel, Margaret’s comparison of scorpion to mad dog is an appropriate one. Job’s botanical studies are described to remind Gaskell’s readers that not all Manchester men are Chartist rabble-rousers, but the scorpion’s sudden turn to madness is also a reminder that restrictions and restraint might produce something which looks like rabidity. Gaskell’s references to mad dogs and “rabid politics,” in a novel which Charlotte Brontë felt, in a letter to W.S. Williams in February 1849, “in some measure anticipated both in subject and incident” her own industrial novel, invests those politics with a sense of rabies’s proximate status.

Brontë herself focusses on literal “mad dogs” as well as on metaphorical rabidity in *The Professor* (1846; 1857). Hunsden accuses Frances of being “rabid” about “that dirty little country called England” (197), and the narrative invokes rabidity in a subtly sustained way as Frances “began to change, just as a grave night-sky changes at the approach of sunrise: first it seemed as if her forehead cleared, then her eyes glittered, her features relaxed and became quite mobile, her subdued complexion grew warm and transparent” (196-97). The embarrassment Hunsden seeks to cause by dismissing her enthusiasm as “rabid” is underpinned by Frances’s gradual “change” here, as her glittering eyes and flushed complexion reference the “singular brightness in the eye of the rabid dog” (Youatt, *The Dog* 138) and draw on visions of the human rabies victim subject to inexorable transformation and “mental excitation” (131).

Rabies itself appears in *The Professor* when Crimsworth shoots dead his son’s mastiff after that dog is bitten by another, “in a rabid state” (220). Victor’s anguish over the death most obviously reflects the Brontëan affection for all canines (Gaskell, *Life* 213-14), but it also refers specifically to contemporary thinking about the treatment of the disease:

He might have been cured—you should have tried—you should have burnt the wound with a hot iron, or covered it with caustic. You gave no time, and now it is too late—he is dead! (220)

Until Louis Pasteur developed a vaccine in 1885,caustic and cauterization were the most common methods of preventive cure for rabies;[[8]](#endnote-8) Brontë’s allusion indicates their widespread use as well as their frequent failure, since Crimsworth and Frances agree that the dog is more effectively dealt by a definitive shot than by preventive burning or the application of caustic, as, in *Shirley*, does Sam Wynne’s keeper when he cries, “I am after Phoebe to shoot her … She is raving mad” (426). Victor’s cries here indicate his childish tendency to place love of an animal over reason, but the warning was regularly made, though less often heeded, that to kill a dog suspected of rabies immediately was not only unkind, but possibly unnecessary (because the dog might not have rabies) and certainly unwise (because once the dog is dead, its rabidity or otherwise is much more difficult to diagnose, meaning that it becomes impossible accurately to assess the level of risk for the individual who has been bitten).[[9]](#endnote-9) *The Professor* is an early indication of Brontë’s mobilization of the multivalent significance of rabies. To be groundlessly, risibly enthused as Frances was, was to risk the epithet “rabid”; the text also reminds us that “rabid” dogs might lurk in any street; rabies can be transmitted in a moment; rabies leads, ineluctably, to death both for dog and for human.

CONTAGION, FERMENTATION, AND SPURIOUS RABIES

The year 1848 was largely characterized by its fractious social and political landscape, but the late 1840s also marked a series of important moments in thinking about the transmission of disease, which themselves often intersected with overtly political issues. Through her rabies narrative in particular, Brontë makes an intervention into this medical conversation as well as into political debatesof the period. 1849 has been called by Allen Conrad Christensen the “high noon” (4) of miasmic thinking, at which contagionist thinking had all but lost ground to anticontagionism: the transmission of diseases had been largely re-framed as caused by environment, rather than by infection from person to person. This “high noon” was arrived at after a growing endorsement of anticontagionist ideas through the decade. Erwin H. Ackerknecht, in 1948, was the first to identify and explore in detail the implications of this pivotal moment, pointing to the conclusions of research by anticontagionists in 1822 on the spread of yellow fever in Barcelona which indicated that this disease could largely be accounted for by reference to sewerage and season. This conclusion led to the end of quarantine law in France, and later strongly influenced British responses to cholera pandemic of 1848-49 (Ackerknecht 10). Like Christensen, Ackerknecht pinpoints those years as definitive, citing Professor E. A. Parkes’s analysis of the London cholera epidemic of 1848 for the General Board of Health, which “practically excluded the contagiosity of cholera” in his report (13). The Board opposed quarantine as a measure against the epidemic in that year, and, increasingly, focus was directed at sanitarian measures to cleanse “filthy” environments in the hopes of preventing disease, rather than at isolating infectious individuals via quarantine or blockades.[[10]](#endnote-10)

Although contagionists and anticontagionists at the extremes of the debate gave strongly opposing accounts of the spread of disease, “contingent contagionists” allowed that contagion might be “*one* possible factor of many” (Ackerknecht 9; emphasis in original) in some diseases. Contingent contagionism placed the larger part of its emphasis on environment, which could be controlled, but was better able to account for diseases which even a strongly anticontagionist perspective had to allow were self-evidently partly accountable for by immediate and physical transmission. Ackerknecht lists “syphilis, gonorrhoea, smallpox, measles and the itch” (9): rabies sits comfortably on such a list.[[11]](#endnote-11) Visibly transmitted from animal to human, rabies was still also frequently associated with the treatment of the dog and the environment in which it existed: Youatt’s sense of the culpability of the working classes in their treatment of dogs in his 1830 text both built on and contributed to perceptions of the disease as connected to “street life, cruelty to dogs, and aggression” (Pemberton and Worboys 6). Mistreatment of dogs was a frequent theme in letters to the press on the subject of rabies,[[12]](#endnote-12) and Shirley comments meaningfully that Sam Wynne “often flogs his pointers cruelly” (426).

In this middle ground of contingency, the zymotic model conceived by the epidemiologist William Farr offered a convincing rationale for rabies as well as other disease which remained impossible to explain in purely miasmic or environmental terms.[[13]](#endnote-13) Farr presented the General Register Office his *Report on the Mortality of Cholera in England, 1848-49* following the London outbreak in 1848, and was thus at the centre of the Christensen’s “high noon” of miasmic thinking. Framing cholera largely as a “social phenomenon” (Eyler 80), Farr embraced the idea that improving environment would reduce disease of most kinds. What distinguished his approach from the straightforwardly anticontagionist, however, was his argument for a “zymotic” process in disease. In “Statistical Nosology” (1842), Farr argued for the existence of “zymotic materials” which, like germs, could be spread in the atmosphere by weather, miasma, or both, and which accounted for the reach and the limits of certain diseases (Eyler 83). Zymotic materials contained the seeds of infection, then, but depended upon a process closely resembling fermentation in order to transmit it. The word zymosis in fact comes from the Greek word for fermentation (“Zymosis,” *OED*), though Farr added specificity by using the term adjectivally: “zymosis fermentation” described the process of transmission. In common with epidemics like cholera, typhoid fever, scarlet fever, and typhus (Pemberton and Worboys 40), rabies was reconfigured and re-categorized as a disease which could be fermented by environment (specifically, filthy environment), and then spread by direct infection.[[14]](#endnote-14)

Fermentation becomes a wide-ranging concern in *Shirley* in relation to illness. Caroline’s fever appears when:

some sweet, poisoned breeze, redolent of honey-dew and miasma, had passed into her lungs and veins, and finding there already a fever of mental excitement, and a languor of long conflict and mental sadness, had fanned the spark to flame, and left a well-lit fire behind it. (352)

In other words, the “poison” ferments in the environment it finds, and the “well-lit fire” of the illness is produced. Earlier in the novel, Brontë presents a sustained meditation on this kind of process when Caroline is “in that state, when, if her constitution had contained the seeds of consumption, decline or slow fever, those diseases would have been rapidly developed” (164). But the fermentation model is complicated by a generally ambiguous stance on disease in the novel: Louis attributes his own illness to “miasma, perhaps—malaria,” but Shirley suggests that it may have come from “the sick” (400); and when Mr Wynne senior suggests that the Fieldhead estate and the De Walden estate were delightfully *contagious*” (259; emphasis in original) his malapropism is a hint at a menacing infection from the family, to be revivified when Shirley is bitten by Sam Wynne’s own dog.

Rabies demands particular attention to the possibility of fermentation. The delay between bite and the manifestation of symptoms is an unusual feature of the rabies virus: this delay provoked anxiety less about zymotic fermentation in humans, however, and more about the ways in which the individual himself might mentally ferment the disease. Rabies was so terrible a fate that the smallest chance of having contracted it caused some individuals to fret obsessively over whether or when the “virus” might take hold, and even to persuade their own bodies into echoing its symptoms: “spurious hydrophobia,” thought in the 1830s and 40s to share both symptoms and causes with hysteria, was apparently capable of inspiring full-blown and even fatal fear of water—hydrophobia—and thence death.[[15]](#endnote-15) Brontë leaves open the possibility that Shirley might be at risk from this “pseudo-hydrophobia,” drawing in particular on William Buchan’s writing about rabies in *Domestic Medicine* (1769). This manual was, as the medical historian Charles Rosenberg suggests, perhaps “the most widely read—nonreligious—book in England” for fifty years after its publication (32): it was owned by the Brontës, and its influence in the household, and in Charlotte Brontë’s work, is well-documented.[[16]](#endnote-16) Brontë’s representation of rabies closely resembles Buchan’s:[[17]](#endnote-17) most important in the context of the possibility of Shirley’s “spurious” fears is Buchan’s focus on the ways in which bitten individuals can avoid developing “hydrophobia.” Reading the condition largely as a kind of hysterical manifestation of the fears a bite victim may experience, rather than a symptom of rabies, Buchan recommends that individuals who have been bitten should be kept “as easy and cheerful as possible” (483). Brontë never actually confirms whether Phoebe was rabid or not: Louis Moore and William Farren later “agreed in asserting that the dog was not mad,” but “the groom and the game-keeper affirmed to the contrary; both asserting that, if hers was not a clear case of hydrophobia, there was no such disease” (510). Louis tells Shirley “only what was encouraging” (510), and indeed she does not become ill.

*Shirley* occupies an ambiguous position in relation to contagion and miasma, but most often endorses a broadly zymotic model, in which fermentation both in mind and environment are to be avoided and feared. In relation to rabies, this sense of fermentation is most urgent in relation to the mind rather than to environment, and the emphasis on “calm” made by Louis—and Shirley’s subsequent recovery—invites a reading both of her encounter, and hydrophobia itself, as hysterical. Yet Brontë does not allow an uncomplicated assumption that this is the case: Shirley’s cauterization remains a moment given due weight in the narrative, and suggests the pressing necessities of safeguarding the self and preventing fermentation.

*SHIRLEY* AND THE DEFENCE OF BARRIERS

*Shirley*’s interest in the protection of the body against contagion and ferment extends and becomes a reflection on the regulation of metaphorical diseases: in particular, on the disorderly implications of rebellion. In a letter to W.S. Williams in March 1848, Brontë makes the metaphor clear:

Insurrections and battles are the acute disease of nations, and their tendency is to exhaust by their violence the vital energies of the countries where they occur. That England may be spared the spasms, cramps and frenzy fits now contorting the Continent and threatening Ireland, I earnestly pray.

Read variously as expressing open pessimism about the rebellion of “dregs” (Rogers 161), fear of the full-blown insanity of unregulated nations (Shuttleworth 48), and a re-figuring of uprising as “hysterical sexual passion” (Schmitt 82), this passage borrows not just from the language of disease but specifically from that which surrounded rabies. Contorted, and exhausting himself from violent fits, spasms and frenzies, the rabies victim is a ready analogue for Brontë’s vision of a diseased and chaotic nation.

Shirley’s cauterization is discussed in appropriately violent and bodily terms, and in marked contrast to the readings of disease as either miasmic or of the mind which proliferate in the novel. The “deep though healed up indentation” (425) bears witness to Phoebe’s snatched bite “so as to draw blood” (426), and to Shirley’s “bor[ing] in well” of “the light scarlet glowing tip” (427) of the iron. The reader is directed to think of the encounter as one of skin, of wounds, and of breached boundaries. Laura Otis has identified a “concept of identity that emerges from cell theory” (3) in the first half of the nineteenth century, which emphasizes the boundaries and “membrane” of the individual; as Alison Bashford has recently observed, in relation to vaccination, concern with membranes was no mere metaphor but came from “an all too real cutaneous introduction of a foreign body into the self” (*Imperial* *Hygiene* 15). Precisely the same might be argued about the relationship between a rabies bite, cauterization and the body. The integrity of the skin membrane accrues increasing significance on both a metaphorical and a literal level, coming to figure as the ultimate indication of the inviolate self. However, Otis’s argument that “penetration of one’s membrane, whether by bacteria or by foreign ideas, represents an insult, a subversion of selfhood” (7) also suggests that Shirley’s encounter might carry a wider symbolic significance: Shirley’s “penetration,” I suggest, invokes broader threats of invasion and disorder.

Rabies’s position on the spectrum of contagionism and anticontagionism strengthens this symbolic connection, sincethe debate between contagionists and anticontagionists was inextricably tied to debates about imperial expansion, trade and protectionism. Ackerknecht observed that “the discussion was never a discussion on contagion alone, but *always on contagion and quarantines*”(9; emphasis in original). To continue, against predominant current opinion, to hold the view that people transmitted disease was to endorse limitations on the movement of individuals and of goods: readings of disease which kept faith in cleanliness and the management of environment could remain confident in theory about such movement. As Bashford and Hooker note, managing contagion “involves establishing ‘cordons sanitaires,’” which may be spatial (quarantine, isolation), or may entail containment within one’s “bounded body” where “skin is the protective barrier and the movement of bodily fluids through that barrier needs heavy regulation” (*Contagion* 9). Youatt had argued that quarantine would effectively “annihilate” rabies in England, but “could never be enforced”; instead, he proposed that a “tax should be laid on every useless dog” in the country (*The Dog* 145). Once a bite has occurred, taxation as a pre-emptive measure becomes a moot point: the shooting of Phoebe, and the instruction that “you had better chain up Tartar” (424), constitute clear spatial barriers to possible contagion, even to the extreme extent of the barrier between life and death for the dog. Shirley’s cauterization is yet another barrier: a containment of her “bounded body,” a safeguard against fermentation, and an attempt to repair her manifest permeability.

*Shirley*’s narrative is driven at a fundamental level by the issue of trade barriers.Brontë transplants questions of trade and industry back to 1811-12, and, once there, presents a simple reason for the strangulated trading environment which produces the conflict between Robert Moore and his workers: the Napoleonic War, and the Orders in Council which halted trade with America, which “used to be [Moore’s] market” and is now cut off (22). Brontë also cites exacerbating causes: “certain inventions in machinery” and “a bad harvest” in particular (26). Her ironic note that it “would not do to stop the process of invention” implies some sympathy for the inevitable suffering, but she is emphatic in her insistence that “the war could not be terminated; efficient relief could not be raised” (27). When Shirley vigorously maintains her own bodily boundaries against contamination from rabies, her action implicitly affirms the validity of contingently contagionist thinking; in that affirmation, Brontë endorses the similarly contingent protective trading environments with which anticontagionists took issue, reassuring her readers that although blockades can be painful in the short term, they must be borne with the kind of stoicism which Shirley shows in her application of the iron to her flesh.

Brontë’s conclusion, in which blockades are lifted so that both the romantic and the industrial narratives can end satisfactorily, is misleading in ways which further indicate her faith in boundaries and barriers. As Philip Rogers has demonstrated, Brontë conflates the lifting of the Orders of Council and Wellington’s Salamanca victory, so that rather than being revoked as a result of “the government’s desire” to enable a freer economy in manufacturing districts and avoid war with America, the Orders’ removal becomes solely attributable to Wellington’s personal triumph (143). Thus, Brontë shows that the removal of barriers neither predicates nor stems from “anti-military, free-trade, pro-reform democratic politics” (144).[[18]](#endnote-18) Rather, blockades need not be feared because their inevitable desuetude only affirms their temporary necessity.

This necessity takes on particular urgency in relation to rebels and rioters. Shirley’s resistance takes place on a more local and immediate level than Robert Moore’s defence of his mill, but her position consciously echoes, emulates, and ultimately re-frames Moore’s. When Shirley decides that “the Briarfield poor are badly off” and “must be helped” (224), she does so explicitly in order pre-emptively to quell rebellion; after the speech below, Caroline remarks that “You talk like Robert,” and Shirley agrees that she “feel[s] like Robert, only more fierily” (225). Shirley’s rationale for her charitable intentions invokes themes of boundaries and invasion:

I must give more, or, I tell you, my brother’s blood will some day be crying to Heaven against me. For, after all if political incendiaries come here to kindle conflagration in the neighbourhood, and my property is attacked, I shall defend it like a tigress—I know I shall. (225)

Shirley posits an emollient measure for the seething, fermenting, zymotic, resentment felt by “the poor,” in the hopes that it might obviate the need for more repressive defence.[[19]](#endnote-19) Her fear that if she does not mitigate this threat, resentment will become rebellion also raises questions about responsibility. In the original passage from Genesis from which the reference comes, “my brother’s blood” refers to Abel’s blood, and immediately follows Cain’s guilty question: “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (*The Bible*, Gen. 4.10). This question, which lingers invisibly but inevitably behind the reference to Cain and Abel, is a significant one for Shirley. Tacitly, she asks here: what is my responsibility to my fellow man? I might not slay him in anger, but am I still culpable if I do not help him enough to prevent an incendiary uprising? Such pacific charity is borne from an impulse comparable to that which prompts Shirley to offer “half an oat-cake to Mr. Sam’s favourite pointers” (261) when she is attacked with pangs of conscience at her behaviour to Wynne. The pointer may have been Phoebe herself, or another dog: Shirley’s eventual bite certainly suggests the limits of her attempts to contain threat through conciliation.

“Keeping” becomes an overt concern, having lurked throughout the novel, in Shirley’s notorious statement that “I am glad I know my keeper, and am used to him. Only his voice will I follow; only his hand shall manage me; only at his feet will I repose” (522). Effective “keeping” frequently entails not the repression but the adoption of animal attributes. Shirley’s proposed resistance is most striking as an instance of her class status: she will “turn against them as an aristocrat” (225). But just as important is her alternative representation of her defence as “like a tigress”: the animal-human distinction is here blurred so that Shirley takes on the defensive qualities of the tiger in her “impulses to resist and to quell” (225). Humans and animals share characteristics throughout: Robert is “a puppy” who “crosses and obscures the disk” which Shirley wants “always to keep clear” (221). Brontë rejects the crasser possibility of Shirley being brought low by a male dog who might be acting as some kind of straightforward narrative amanuensis for the owner and thwarted suitor Sam Wynne, but Shirley herself conflates the two when her consolation of Wynne’s dog stands in for apology to Wynne himself. Louis Moore comes to adopt the role of Tartar, Shirley’s “pet and favourite” (523), “as much like him as a man can be like a dog” (519): she is the “kept” leopardess tamed by his hand, rather than the defending tigress imagined earlier. At the end of the novel, rabidity has been reframed: the dogs left alive are Shirley’s pet and, according to the terms of their intimate language, her husband. In working through the threats of the rabid dog, both symbolic and literal, to reach this point, *Shirley* endorses and affirms a return to managed order.

CONCLUSION

By suggesting that Sam’s dog might be consoled on his behalf, that Louis is “like Tartar” (523)—a dog who has the capacity to cause fear in foolish curates but who is eminently tameable—and that Robert’s persistence is simply “puppyish” and therefore risibly inoffensive, Brontë reminds her readers at once that not all dogs are rabid, just as not all rebels must become dangerous, if the zymotic fermenting of their resentment is abated. Where Gaskell showed in *Mary Barton* that desperation, hunger, and perceived injustice turns a man like John Barton into “a Chartist, a Communist, all that is commonly called wild and visionary” (165), Brontë hopes rather that contingently contagious rebellion might be quashed through a charity whose limits are clearly delineated. Such are the “rabid politics” of *Shirley*: fermented, uncertain, exacerbated by ill-treatment but, if necessary, to be quelled as definitively as Victor Henri’s dog or Phoebe. In line with Buchan, with the nascent interest in animal welfare of the 1840s, and with her own love of animals, Brontë suggests that dogs should not be shot, any more than rioters; blockades of all kinds must and will be removed when the aggravating circumstances are over, but *in extremis*, all sensible measures should be taken to safeguard self and nation.

Rabies was a powerful and terrifying threat during the 1840s, if “more feared than seen” (Ritvo 168), nonetheless feared to an extent which accounts for and justifies its lurking presence in writing during that decade. By understanding rabies’s complex relationship to contagionist and anticontagionist thinking in 1848-49, we see Brontë’s representation of a menacingly over-determined threat to Shirley, which holds out the possibility of management in a number of different forms. Taking into account the specific contexts of contemporary responses to the period of delay in the virus means that readings both of “fermentation” and “spuriousness” become sharpened and reveal connections to one another. Through the novel’s allusion to the possibility of “spurious rabies,” Brontë offers a vision of women under threat from diseases which men can reframe, but the vexed nature of fermentation in rabies more broadly calls into question individuals’ responsibility to stay well, to protect their property, and to defend their boundaries.

Though twentieth and twenty-first century representations of rabies in narrative and in film have tended to follow the model of the *fin de siècle* narratives, recruiting the disease’s Gothic possibilities to articulate political and nationalist anxieties,[[20]](#endnote-20) it is important to distinguish the ways in which writers of the 1840s, also intensely concerned with the social and political context in which they were writing, engaged with rabies. In paying close attention to Brontë’s recruitment of this disease and its implications, I hope to have uncovered a picture of other Victorians who saw in the disease an effective analogue for their own anxieties. Detaching rabies from its later Gothic incarnations enables us to see the close connections between anxieties about contagion, environment, rebellion, and the possibility of isolationist strategies which Brontë and others would have understood as being intrinsically bound up in the disease.

1. *Notes*

 . In the interests of consistency, I emulate Keridiana Chez’s decision, in her recent discussion of rabies in *Dracula*, to use “rabies” to refer to the disease as manifested in both humans and animals in this essay, although in the nineteenth century “hydrophobia” was usually used to describe the disease (or its symptoms) in humans, and “rabies” and “hydrophobia” were both, on occasion, used in reference to its appearance in animals (Chez n.5 89). The exception is where I discuss “spurious” or “hysterical” hydrophobia, where the specificity of the latter term is important. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . This is a small sample: newspapers very regularly reported “dreadful,” “awful,” or “shocking” deaths from hydrophobia throughout the nineteenth century and particularly in the 1830s and 40s, in articles on which Harriet Ritvo and Neil Pemberton and Patrick Worboys all draw closely in their studies of rabies. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . The ravings and spasms of the rabies victims have often invited sexual associations, discussed in detail by Kete (104): later in the century, George Fleming observed briskly that “satyriasis has been noted in men affected by hydrophobia”, and that “cases [of satyriasis] are by no means rare nowadays” whilst “nymphomania has also been sometimes witnessed in women suffering from the disease” (253-54). This was not a peculiarly Victorian association: rabies can indeed produce both satyriasis and nymphomania, as well as, in rare cases, “priapism with spontaneous orgasms” (Cox et al. 371). There is not space here fully to explore the symbolically sexual nature of the threat posed to Shirley, but it is clearly an unspoken aspect of her fears: she asks Louis to administer laudanum her rather than leave her to thrash on the bed, and advises him, in particular to “take care” if she does succumb to the virus (429). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Lucy Sheehan makes a powerful argument for Gothic modes of narration in the industrial novel as reflecting the “fundamental instability of industrial England,” and notes the appearance in industrial novels of Gothic elements (in *Shirley*, she points to “ghostly nuns”) (35). Sheehan’s argument about *Mary Barton* illustrates the ways in which Gaskell’s use of the Gothic enables her representation of the “ghastliness” of suffering. However, to read rabies in *Shirley* as part of a “Gothic mode” would be to risk detaching it from its strongly contemporary resonance, and forming a partial and reductive reading of its significance. Whilst I acknowledge the Gothic potential of the disease in other texts, I argue that its appearance in *Shirley* is markedly a part of a realist, rather than a Gothic, mode. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Pemberton and Worboys discuss the ways in which *Wuthering Heights* makes rabies “implicit in the text as wild dogs and rabid symptoms loom large throughout” (56), and Bill Wasik and Monica Murphy, in their text aimed at a more popular market, argue that the quasi-rabid characters in both texts place *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* “squarely in the nineteenth-century genre of monster tales” (102-05). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. . See Pemberton and Worboys (7-8) for a longer list of Victorians making rhetorical use of the term “rabid.” My discussion here focusses on its intersection with politics and unrest in the 1840s, but George Eliot, for example, alludes to the humiliation inherent in contracting the disease when in *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), when Mr Glegg accuses Mrs Glegg of “biting and snapping like a mad dog” (125) in the heat of an argument. This is clearly an insult designed to humiliate, and Mrs Glegg feels it as such: “as to my being like a mad dog, it’s well if you’re not cried shame on by the county for your treatment of me,” she replies before leaving the room. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. . As Pam Morris has argued, Carlyle’s *On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic* (1840), and its early intervention into debates continuing through the 1840s about the need or even the possibility of the “hero” who might navigate Britain through the period, was influential in Brontë’s “intervention into the national debate on leadership” (Morris 292) in *Shirley*. Brontë’s perspective both on the disease, and on “the world,” clearly shares certain traits with Carlyle’s as it is expressed in this letter, suggesting a parallel between the ways in which writers engage with mad dogs and their response to leadership and governance more broadly. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. . K. Codell Carter’s is probably the most useful and wide-ranging study of attempted treatments for the disease during the century: he notes that “most nineteenth-century physicians who wrote on the treatment of rabies recommended that wounds be cauterized immediately,” whether the cauterization be chemical, with the use of caustic, or physical, with the use of irons, oil or even gunpowder (68-69). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. . William Buchan, a key source for Brontë’s understanding of the disease, argued that rather than kill the dog, “we should do all in our power to keep him alive,” in order to find out whether the threat was real (478). Later in the century, George Fleming also argued that “a dog suspected of or attacked by rabies” should be kept alive: “it is well not to kill it immediately, but keep it securely confined and under close surveillance, so as to be able to verify whether the suspicions are confirmed, which will not be long; if they are affirmed, then the creature must be killed and buried” (381). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. . Contagionist thinking, and metaphors of contagion, have attracted increasing and inter-disciplinary attention since the beginning of the twenty-first century, as Peta Mitchell outlines in her recent study, *Contagious Metaphor* (11-12), which itself exemplifies this movement. Bashford and Hooker’s edited collection, in particular, presents a wide-ranging cultural history of contagion. For more on the miasma/contagion debate in the late 1840s, see Elaine Freedgood, who discusses the management of risk from atmosphere as undertaken by key individuals like Florence Nightingale and Edwin Chadwick; and Peter Baldwin and Antony S. Wohl, who also develop the implications of the moment identified by Ackerknecht. Contagion, and Brontë’s engagement with it in all her novels, is a fertile seam for analysis which space prevents my discussing in more detail here. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. .The tension between environment and contagion as causative in specific relation to rabies is encapsulated in Fleming’s later reflection that “we are almost forced to accept the conclusion that there exists a special miasm capable of provoking the disease when acting on animals naturally irritable or vicious, or in a morbid condition. Or we might conclude that the spontaneous disease depends upon several causes in combination … though what they are, or how they operate, we confess we know not” (121). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. . A letter to *The Morning Post* in 1829, for example, stated confidently that “[i]t is well known to practitioners in the disease of dogs that this dreadful malady proceeds from the savage custom of dog-fighting” (“L.G.”). Fleming, Youatt and Buchan all discuss the possibility of rabies as in some cases provoked by diet or treatment of the dog. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. . Farr’s name is echoed, presumably coincidentally, in *Shirley*’s most honourable and reflective worker, William Farren. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. . Zymotic theory was not, however, universally embraced: an article in the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1849 gives an extract from the Registrar-General’s recent report on those diseases, and argues that the Registrar-General has “jumped too hastily to his conclusions.” There was no hydrophobia in Constantinople, which has a hotter climate than England, because, the writer argues, Turkish dogs had access to clean water. Likewise, cholera is not confined to filthy atmospheres: it can occur in “very salubrious situations.” The centre of the argument is that the Board of Health have spent so much “zeal and energy” to “establishing their favourite zymotic theory” that they are actually neglecting to investigate and find a “proper mode of treatment” for the diseases in question (“Hydrophobia and Cholera”). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. . Pemberton and Worboys describe “more interest in spurious or hysterical hydrophobia” in the years after 1834, particularly from physicians John Elliotson and, in 1836, Francis Eagle, a London surgeon who “argued there was a shared identity between hydrophobia and hysteria” (61). The idea remained in currency and in evidence throughout the 1840s: Youatt believed that “the disease hydrophobia, produced in man” was very often “the melancholy, and often fatal, result of panic, fear, and of the disordered state of the imagination” (*The Dog* 145); an article, bemused in tone, in *The York Herald* in 1848, describes a patient who apparently manifested all the known signs of the disease but was cured by the application of morphia, suggesting that a virus had never been present and thus that the patient was solely hysterical rather than hydrophobic (“A Case Simulating Hydrophobia”). [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. . Janis McLaren Caldwell and Sally Shuttleworth both note the significance of William Buchan’s *Domestic Medicine* to nineteenth-century thinking about disease, and specifically to the Brontës’ reading of the body and its disturbances. With Thomas Graham’s *Modern Domestic Medicine* (1826), Buchan’s was assessed by Patrick Brontë as among the best of its kind available, and copies of both were kept for reference in the parsonage (Caldwell 70; Shuttleworth 79). George Fleming’s later text, *Rabies and Hydrophobia* (1872) is more frequently cited in rabies studies (Chez; McKechnie; Ritvo). Fleming’s “language replete with Gothic imagery” of “‘dread,” ‘pain,” and “terror’” (McKechnie 7) forms part of, and influences, the later nineteenth-century vision of the disease, but it is important to differentiate between this kind of representation and that in Buchan’s text of a more pragmatic and holistic approach. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. . Buchan describes how the person bitten experiences sleep “unquiet with frightful dreams … he sighs, looks dull, and loves solitude” (479); after the bite, “a strange quietude settle[s] over [Shirley’s] look” (415), she is found in her chamber “pale, very thoughtful, almost sad”, and seeks “that wilder solitude which lies out of doors” (416). Buchan also discusses the common practice of abandoning, bleeding, or “suffocat[ing]” sufferers “between mattresses or feather beds”: “[t]his conduct certainly deserves the severest punishment!” (484), he scolds. This is the fate Shirley fears when she tells Louis that “if the worst happens, they will smother” her: “they will – they always do” (429). [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. . Ayşe Çelikkol, like Rogers, draws attention to Brontë’s attack on the free trade advocates of the 1840s, the “Men of Manchester” (533) like William Cobden, and argues that “free trade rhetoric” is rendered “suspect” in *Shirley*. For Çelikkol, this rendering is achieved through the final troubling imbalances in the marriage plots: I would argue that these very imbalances also echo and refract the rabies narrative in the novel. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. . Brontë argued for a similar approach to the Chartists in a letter to W.S. Williams on 20th April, 1848, suggesting that the time was right to “examine carefully the cause of their complaint and make such concessions as justice and humanity dictate. If the government would do so, how much good might be done by the removal of ill-feelings, the substitution of mutual kindness in its place?” This essentially paternalistic recommendation carefully places blame and responsibility on both sides, suggesting that both government and Chartists must lay aside “ill-feelings” in favour of “mutual kindness.” [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. . 1970s’ English anxieties about the nascent EEC were often figured in relation to the threat of a return of rabies to the country; in the 1990s, resistance to the Channel Tunnel from Kent to France also frequently took the form of warnings of the return of the disease (see Pemberton and Worboys 173-94). On a less overtly political level, the zombie seems to have replaced the vampire as the monstrous form whose behaviour and infectivity most obviously draws on the narrative of the rabies virus in both British and American film and television.

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