Title of Paper: The forging and forgery of identity in G.K. Chesterton’s The Club of Queer Trades and Charlotte Brontë’s Villette

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Abstract: Perhaps one of the most interesting topics in modern society is how someone’s identity comes to be developed and defined. This is not a concept that is exclusive to the 21st century, however, and at the beginning of a fight for women’s rights in the 19th century, literature emerged which cultivated the on-going idea that identity is something that is malleable. This is seen in G.K. Chesterton’s Sherlock Holmes-esque The Club of Queer Trades and Charlotte Brontë’s Villette. In these novels, the reader is introduced to two characters, male and female respectively, who establish for themselves an identity that seems to change and fit whatever suits their needs in the moment. In this paper, I seek to examine how each character both forges their identity, and, through deception, creates a forgery of their identity, questioning how this process carries over into modern society.

Keywords: 19th century; England; Brontë, Charlotte; Chesterton, G.K.; gender studies; gender roles; psychoanalysis; Victorian period; identity; identity formation

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Throughout history, there are several primary questions that nearly everyone has asked at some point, including: What is the meaning of life? What does it mean to be human? What am I doing with my life? Perhaps these questions are reminiscent more of college students in crises than ancient philosophers, but all of these questions are part of a larger, over-arching theme that has been developed and discussed for centuries, namely, that of identity. It is hard to define the word “identity” without using the root word, without saying that it is how one is identified by others or how someone identifies him- or her-self. Nevertheless, identity, or the generally accepted definition of the fact of being who or what someone is, is a concept that has been mulled over and picked apart, struggled with, and both accepted and rejected.

Such is the case in the Victorian period, a period stereotypically identified as a time of strict moral codes, family values, and social justice. When people think of the Victorian period, perhaps they think of the young queen, the improvements of living for the poor, the new movements in art (with the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood), or rich aestheticism and valuing the beautiful, material objects in the world. What is perhaps less commonly acknowledged is the struggle of the poor, the awful working conditions, and the diseases and poverty that wracked the lower class. In fact, one could make an argument that, especially in literature, with the exception of authors like Charles Dickens, not many wanted to broach the issue of the poor in England. Such topics would not sell well with those who could afford to buy books and had the luxury to spend time reading, or those who had had the opportunity to learn how to read. Luxuries and opportunities such as these would have been reserved for those in the upper classes, who had both time and money to indulge themselves in education.
For the most part, then, novels of the time were about men and women who had the luxury of forging their own identity, of traveling and learning, of doing what they wanted to establish an image of themselves for the public eye. This can be seen in both G.K. Chesterton’s *The Club of Queer Trades* and Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*. Interestingly enough, along with this forging of one’s identity also comes the eternal struggle of *forgery* as well. Forgery here refers back to the notion of the public eye. It deals with the issue of how to present oneself in the best light to others, hiding those unsavory habits, memories, and mannerisms which are either distasteful or do not best serve the story being presented. This forgery is found in both novels, lending to the idea that in a society which displayed a value for honesty and truthfulness on the surface level, in order to maintain a façade of good morality, one must inevitably hide parts of the truth from one’s audience in order to conform to the restraints of said society.

The first book that I would like to examine in the development of Victorian identity is Chesterton’s *The Club of Queer Trades*, for the examination of several male characters may prove to be a more realistic portrayal of the forging of one’s identity. The first thing that should be noted about Basil Grant, the main male character, is that the reader is seeing him through the eyes and commentary of the narrator. Since a friend of Basil’s tells the novel, one must dissect what the narrator relates while keeping in mind that the narrator may be slightly biased. That being said, the narrator, Charlie Swinburne, relays right from the very beginning that “[v]ery few people knew anything about Basil… Few people knew him, because, like all poets, he could do without them… He no more felt the need of going out to parties
than he felt the need of altering the sunset clouds” (7). Swinburne notes that Basil was not unsocial, but the array of items found about his abode make him that much more alluring and mysterious: “He was surrounded by a chaos of things that were in odd contrast to the slums around him; old fantastic books, swords, armour – the whole dust-hole of romanticism.” Right after this, Swinburne makes the claim, “And no one but I knew who he was.” With a statement so bold, one might assume that Swinburne would go on to justify that claim, but what follows is merely an account of the end of Basil’s career as a public judge. That being said, the public thought that Basil had lost his wits, while Swinburne makes it clear to the reader that Basil’s senses had not deserted him. Nothing of importance is really revealed about Basil for the remainder of the novel, until the revelation at the end that Basil is indeed a moral judge for the Club of Queer Trades.

The interesting thing about Swinburne’s claim that he is the only person who knows Basil is that Basil is quite witty and capable of deception. He hides those things that he does not want anyone else to discover, and his explanations are spotty at best – this is Basil’s prime forgery. For example, in the “The Painful Fall of a Great Reputation”, Basil makes the claim that the man called Wimpole, whom he has never met before, is “the wickedest man in England” (31). By the end of the story, Basil has revealed that Wimpole has actually hired someone else to make him look more intelligent, but he does not reveal how he came to figure out the mystery. This happens again in “The Eccentric Seclusion of the Old Lady”. Basil seems unconcerned that there is a woman locked in a basement, and when he appears to her, she seems to know him quite well. As it is later revealed, Basil knows this woman
because she came to his “unofficial courts of honour” and was convicted, in a manner of speaking, for “breaking off an engagement through backbiting” (132). Throughout the entire book, not once does Basil let on how he has solved the mysteries that eat away at the curiosity of Rupert (his brother) and Swinburne. In this deception, this lie by omission, Basil makes himself seem more intelligent than he really might be, using his cunning nature to clothe himself in lies and make himself appear more mysterious and interesting. In reality, Basil knows each of the gentlemen who are a part of the Club of Queer Trades, and he chooses not to share this information with Rupert or Basil, in order to provide them with some intrigue.

In fact, Basil does a lot of hiding throughout the novel, and not just about his own character. For example, in “The Noticeable Conduct of Professor Chadd”, the reader notes an inconsistency with Basil’s words and his actions. Basil criticizes Chadd, citing, “Your mental processes… always go a little too fast. And they are stated without method” (91). These are interesting words coming from Basil, hypocritical in that he almost never explains to Swinburne why he says or does certain things. Before Basil has even had a chance to examine Chadd after a note from Chadd’s sister stating that Chadd had gone mad, Basil seems curiously calm. He says “placidly” to Swinburne’s question about Chadd’s loss of wits upon their arrival at Chadd’s house, “It would not be extraordinary in the least… if the professor had gone mad. That was not the extraordinary circumstance to which I referred.” Annoyed, Swinburne presses Basil, who replies, “The extraordinary thing… is that he has not gone made from excitement” (96). How did Basil know this before even stepping foot in the house or talking with Chadd?
Basil proceeds to go out into the garden and question Chadd, with no response but maniacal dancing from the latter. Finally, in a grand display of crazy mania, Basil joins the professor in his dance, and “the sun shone down on two madmen instead of one” (101). It is shortly after this that a man from the British Museum who had wished to employ Chadd appears, concerned. As he about to take Chadd’s research grant away from him, sure that his identity is now shifting from clarity and genius to pure insanity, Basil argues that the Museum should still pay Chadd “until he stops dancing” (103). Basil gives no reason other than an impassioned speech about “taking part in a great work” and assisting in “the glory of Europe – in the glory of science” (104). The man from the museum is baffled and slightly outraged at Basil’s suggestion, and finally, Basil reveals how he knows, with perfect clarity, that Chadd is not mad. “It is all my fault,” Basil states. “I argues against him on the score of his famous theory about language – the theory that language was complete in certain individuals and was picked up by others simply by watching them” (106). Chadd set out to prove his point, inventing his own language through the dancing movement of his legs, forging a new identity for himself through the practice of an alternative language. Yet even though Basil had discovered this only after spending a short time with Chadd, he chose to hide this from the others present in order to have control over the situation, to try to force the museum to pay Chadd, and to revel in the fact that he held information to which no one else was privy. His desire for control is one of the primary characters about Basil’s identity that is apparent, and he readily chooses not to divulge his knowledge about certain situations in order to maintain that control.
Towards the end of the novel, as Basil seems unconcerned with the fact that a woman is locked up in a basement, Swinburne comments, “Sometimes I think you play the fool to frighten us” (116). Chillingly – and annoyingly – Basil’s response is one of nonchalance. Swinburne reports, “Basil laughed heartily.” One primary question becomes, then, why does Basil really hide key bits of information away from his closest friends and disregard their curiosities and concerns? Given Basil’s history as a judge, it would appear that perhaps his reticence to full disclosure of his knowledge and power is an issue of control. In fact, control is central to Basil’s entire being and scheme. As a public judge, Basil felt like he couldn’t adequately control the situation. Confined by societal norms and expectations, even a slight deviation from the expected path led to questions of his competency and sanity. So, that being established, the only way for Basil to truly be himself is to break from what society expects him to do. He begins this process in a fabulous display of insanity, when in his last case as a public judge, he bursts into a loud, nonsensical song and promptly retires to a dingy attic in Lambeth (8). In retiring from public life, Basil is no longer a central figure and has, therefore, no need to hold himself accountable to societal expectations.

Two of the women found in the novel are also interesting to examine from the perspective of the formation of identity, especially when it comes to the differing societal expectations placed upon women. While there are other women mentioned in the novel, the first are the men disguised as women in “The Awful Reason of the Vicar’s Visit” and Professor Chadd’s sisters in “The Noticeable Fall of Professor Chadd”. Although it may prove useful to examine just why the men in the first story choose to dress and behave as they do in order to understand male concepts of Victorian women, a close reading of the circumstances would be required to perform such a task.
The Victorian ideal Victorian woman, in some senses. The first woman that the reader meets is an actress by the name of Miss Jameson. It is not revealed until the end of the chapter that she is an actress, but she does play her part quite admirably. When Major Brown first meets her, she is faced towards a window and refuses to turn her head until the clock has chimed six times to mark the six-o’-clock hour because, as she tells Major Brown, “every afternoon till the stroke of six I must keep my face turned to the street” (14). This act, even if it is part of the charade, is never explained, leaving the reader to wonder just why she must keep her faced turned to the street. Regardless of the reasons, she does as she is told without question. Next, she is posed as the damsel in distress, for she cries out, “It is the end… it may be death for both of us.” Major Brown, agitated that a murderer is taunting them, rushes after the voice of the man in order to both solve the mystery and protect this beautiful, seemingly innocent lady. His efforts are rewarded, in the end, by his marriage to Miss Jameson. When questioned about this marriage, she replies quietly (fitting in with the idea that women are meek and only speak when spoken to) that “she had met scores of men who acted splendidly in the charades provided for them by Northover, but that she had only met one man who went down into a coal-cellar when he really thought it contained a murderer” (28). Interestingly enough, though Miss Jameson’s character is essentially forged for her (by Northover), Major Brown, though manly and courageous enough to chase after a potential murderer, is described as “full of feminine unselfishness”.

It is this feminine unselfishness that is found in the old lady that Rupert and Charlie happen upon in the last chapter. She is confined in a basement, and they hear her begging to be released. Thinking that she is in danger, the break into the house
and eventually end up making their way down to her. Once they have located her, they offer to assist her in leaving the house. Much to their surprise, she refuses. Having willingly brought herself to the moral court over which Basil reigns, she has accepted her judgment – to be confined to the cellar – without complaint. Indeed, although she has been begging to be set free, she refuses to leave, saying, “I have some sense of honour for all that” (126). She greets Basil, her judge, with gracefulness, offering him “a sort of old-fashioned curtsy or reverence” (128). Basil, the commanding gentleman, releases her of her sentence, citing her loyalty (129). She comments, “I have never complained of your injustice… I need scarcely say what I think of your generosity”, and just like that, she walks out of the room, free and grateful towards the man who had sentenced her to confinement in the first place. Her lack of grudge against Basil suggests that she is also a prime example of what a lady was expected to be in the Victorian period; punished for her moral crimes against her male fiancée, she is charged and subject to live alone in a dark room until she has learned her lesson to respect the male figures in her life. Even the two people charged with keeping her are male, providing strong male guidance in her punishment. Thus, her depicted identity, her expected meekness and respect for men, is forged through her keeping by male figures.

For women, there is an added layer of deception that is born, for a woman trying to create and solidify her own identity away from male influences was unheard of at the time. A woman had many qualities that she needed to display and practice, not the least of which was obedience. It is for this reason that Villette’s main character, Lucy
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Snowe, must leave in England in order to “find herself” and discover who she really is, to live more freely.

Lucy must establish her own identity since she lacks familial ties, but in forming her own recognition of self, she must subject herself to the constraints laid upon women by society. In removing herself from Victorian England, she allowing herself more freedom to establish her own identity. Readers will note that although she is faced with strong male characters that wish to establish an identity for her (read: M. Paul Emanuel), the head of the school is, in fact, a woman who makes her own choices and is quite commanding.

One scholar makes the point, however, that in creating her own sense of self, Lucy must become like a man in order to find such freedom. In her essay on self-identity in Villette, Laura Ciolkowski draws the reader’s attention to the scene at the art gallery, wherein M. Paul drags Lucy away from the Cleopatra painting, fuming, “How dare you, a young person, sit coolly down, with the self-possession of a garçon, and look at that picture?” (188). M. Paul’s word choice here is quite interesting, for the use of the word garçon refers to Lucy as a “boy” or “young man”. Although the term has come to have a more modern definition of “waiter”, in the Victorian period, the term still would have been used to identify the age and gender of a person in France. The use of this term brings up the idea that in taking in the Cleopatra painting, Lucy has adopted the uninhibited male gaze. Ciolkowski points out the awkwardness of the following scene.

Lucy is placed in a seat on the side of the gallery and instructed by M. Paul to gaze instead upon four laid (ugly) paintings depicting ‘La vie d’une femme’ (The life
of a woman). In this moment, Ciolkowski writes, “Lucy’s audacious vision, refigured and momentarily contained by the disciplinary gaze of M. Paul, splinters into a series of uncomfortable indeterminacies in which Lucy, a ‘woman’ who sees like a ‘man,’ gazes at a ‘man,’ Colonel de Hamal, who looks like a ‘woman’” (222). Lucy appropriates the male gaze, admiring de Hamal without his knowledge, calling attention to his figure, his manners, his every action, which she watches so closely, “so absorbed in divining his character by his looks and movements” (191).

In doing this, Lucy moves past the confines of women and becomes the masculine character that is brash enough to face M. Paul and question him on why it is appropriate for men and married women to view the Cleopatra. This question, however, is never answered, leaving Lucy to her masculine contemplations of the women in the paintings around her. As M. Paul “looked at the picture himself quite at his ease and for a very long while” (189), Lucy critically examines the paintings that M. Paul has set her in front of, finding fault in every one – the first she deems “the image of a most villainous little precocious hypocrite”, while another she finds “like an unwholesome full moon” (188). In her critique of her fellow women, Lucy finds them all “insincere, ill-humoured, bloodless, brainless nonentities” and so she averts her eyes and discards M. Paul’s wish for her life, still struggling to forge her own identity, showing her power as a woman.

A study examining the history and figures of Cleopatra and Vashti may prove even more fruitful in discerning the power of women, but for now, examining their contexts only within the novel itself lends to understanding the formation of identity conducted by women. When Lucy views the painting of Cleopatra, her critique is less
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romanticised than one might expect. Before M. Paul even appears in the chapter, Lucy has already judged Cleopatra to be indulgent, for she is “extremely well fed”, lazy and a bit useless, for she is “half-reclined on a couch: why, it would be difficult to say… she ought to have been standing, or at least sitting bolt upright”, and untidy, for “pots and pans… were rolled here and there on the foreground” (186-7). The reader-viewer also gets the impression that this Cleopatra is passive, although strong, for she is not shown in movement, but rather, she is content in her stasis. Painted by a man, this version of Cleopatra does not evoke the images of a strong-willed, Hellenistic, powerful pharaoh of Ancient Egypt. The queen ruler of past times has been replaced with a scantily clad woman who is subject to those who would view her. For this reason, her likeness is allowed to be hung up and displayed for the pleasure of those who would look upon her. She is, in fact, in stark contrast to the queen Vashti, who appears only a few short chapters later.

The Vashti episode is, to say the least, quite volatile. Vashti herself is deemed by Lucy to be “something neither of woman nor of man” (240). Unlike the passive painting of Cleopatra, Vashti is active; even though “she was but a frail creature” with “feeble strength”, she exercised her right as a strong woman to be defiant, neither giving in nor giving ground in the war waged against her. Lucy observes, “Suffering had struck that stage empress; and she stood before her audience neither yielding to, nor enduring, nor in finite measure, resenting it: she stood locked in struggle, rigid in resistance.” Though history and the play both document her as wicked, Lucy also
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draws attention to the fact that “[h]er hair, flying loose in revel or war, is still an angel’s hair, and glorious under a halo” (241).^2

Vashti’s powerful glory, however, is short-lived. She has fought bravely, establishing herself as a force to be reckoned with. And in her most intense moment of self-acceptance and defiance, as the action swells to an almost unbearable climax, as she engages in her final fight, her phoenix-like rise is cut short by a literal fire in the theatre, stealing away her chance to cement her identity as a strong and mighty ruler. Her struggle with death is largely ignored as the flames begin to consume the theatre; the fire silences her defiance and rejection of the male construction for the female identity. Vashti is not allowed to reach her full potential, and just when things are about to make sense and forge her identity, the fire comes and reshapes it, re-forges it, throwing the scene into a “blind, selfish, cruel chaos” (243). As a final blow, when asked for his opinion on Vashti, Graham “judged her a woman, not an artist: it was a branding judgment” (242). Her gender is inescapable, even as (or perhaps especially because) she rejects traditional gender roles in order to ascend to her place as a leading lady.

In terms of leading ladies, one must return to Lucy Snowe in order to understand the struggle of women to forge their own identity. The problem with Lucy as the narrator, however, is that she is largely unreliable. Perhaps in forging her own identity, she establishes her very self as a forgery. Much like Basil Grant, not much is known about Lucy’s past. In fact, it is not until chapter two that Lucy even reveals her

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^2 Hair in itself is an interesting part of the female identity throughout the whole of history, and here it should be noted that Vashti is in direct contrast to the ‘Mariée’ painting that Lucy observed while in the art gallery, where the woman is clothed “with a long white veil” (188).
name. Of course, the reader is introduced first to the Brettons, with whom Lucy stayed “about twice a year” (1). The Bretton household consisted of Mrs. Bretton, Lucy’s godmother, and her son, Graham. Lucy, being the deceptive narrator that she is, gives the reader no information about her immediately family, citing instead that at the beginning of the novel, “I was staying at Bretton; my godmother having come in person to claim me of the kinsfolk with whom was at that time fixed my permanent residence” (1-2). She makes no further note of her family until she once again departs from the Brettons, “to return to the bosom of [her] kindred” (29). She alludes to the fact that trouble befalls her family, but she makes no mention of specifics, choosing instead to move quickly on to her recollection of her next job. Once the woman that Lucy is caring for dies, Lucy sets forth to London to find prospects. She discovers none, although she obviously comes from a privileged family, for she is able to stay at an inn and still have a bit of funds with which to travel and wile away her time in the city.

Because Lucy hides the information about her family and means from the reader, it is impossible to trust that she will reveal all of the events that transpire as she progresses on her journey of self-discovery. That being said, once the reader has just started to trust Lucy and her narration skills, Lucy once again destroys that trust with the revelation that Dr. John is actually John Graham Bretton. This is perhaps her greatest deception, for she hides her knowledge from both Graham and the reader for almost six eventful chapters. Towards the end of chapter ten, Lucy studiously scrutinizes Dr. John in the garden, and when Dr. John confronts her about her gaze, she replies with silence, saying to the reader:
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I was confounded, as the reader may suppose, yet not with an irrecoverable confusion, being conscious that it was from no emotion of incautious admiration, nor yet in spirit of unjustifiable inquisitiveness, that I had incurred this reproof. I might have cleared myself on the spot, but would not. (88)

This admission leaves the reader to wonder how Lucy may have cleared herself, but she does not divulge, leaving the reader to ponder various answers, unsatisfied. Six chapters later, after Lucy has suffered a mental break and ended up at the Brettons’ new house, Lucy reveals that she “readily found out Mr Graham Bretton, some months ago” (163) and goes on to ask him “whether he remembered the circumstances of my once looking at him very fixedly” (164), letting both Graham and the reader know that it was in that moment in the garden that Lucy made her discovery and chose to withhold it. Because of this, even though Graham and Lucy fall back into a sort of friendship, one must wonder whether Graham feels as betrayed as the reader, for her never reveals his feelings on the matter.

However, unreliability aside, Lucy must be admired for the way she goes about forging her desired identity. Despite the fact that she leaves England and doesn’t understand a word of French, circumstances are kind to her, leading her to meet Graham, who sends her on her way to the school that she set forth to work at, which she finds by happenstance (after getting quite lost). She is immediately granted a position as nanny for the children of the head of the school, and this allows her to learn French well enough that suddenly, she is thrust into a classroom and commanded to teach. This is, in some senses, what Lucy had hoped to do from the beginning, and although she appears reticent at first, she soon finds control in the
classroom and establishes herself as a teacher. Although M. Paul has his doubts about her abilities, once she has proved herself and helped him with his play fiasco, learning the lines in just a day, she gains his (silent) respect. It is for this reason, perhaps, that the pair are destined to be a couple by the end, for she has risen in status enough to make an acceptable wife for him, and he has come to understand her position enough to accept the fact that she will continue to defy the restraints placed against women at the time.

In fact, by the end of the novel, Lucy has established a firm, desirable identity for herself: she is a teacher, making a decent sum of money, gifted with a sum of money from the family of the woman she cared for before she departed from England, in love, and the quality of the students that arrive at her school become better and better (460). Though she struggles with some of the restraints placed upon her as a woman, she manages to live a decent life and end on a somewhat happy note, although it must be noted that she chooses to withhold any mention of sadness or heartbreak at the end, so as to let the reader “picture union and a happy succeeding life” (462).

What one finds in both *Villette* and *The Club of Queer Trades* is simply this: resolution. Events always come together for the good of those involved in the novels. For Basil, though his identity has already been forged before the novel takes place, the forgery that Swinburne and Rupert interact with is resolved, uncovered, and confronted by the end, and all of Basil’s activities suddenly make sense. For Lucy, the entire novel consists of her recognition and defiance of the restraints placed upon
Victorian women, and so she sets out to place herself in a better situation that allows her more freedom to be who she really wants to be.

Perhaps what these two stories most have in common is the realization that no one, even in modern society, is without secrets. People always have had, and will continue to have, parts of themselves which they wish not to be revealed to the public eye. In forming an identity as a human being, there will likely always be a forgery that settles at the forefront of someone’s public persona, allowing him or her to appear one way when he or she may feel or desire to act in another. But how can one identify a forgery in order to completely understand someone’s true identity? In these novels, both Basil and Lucy present the answer: there is no way to uncover a forgery in someone’s identity unless that person reveals it themselves, and in establishing secrets, the mystery and intrigue that drives human interest is continued.
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