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"Refrain from insult as much as you are able": The Polysemous Insults of *Wuthering Heights*

After the original publication of *Wuthering Heights* in 1847, Emily Brontë received mixed criticism for her novel, some of it from unforgiving readers disturbed by the violent images and crude language (Allott 235). Perhaps the crudest and certainly the most recurring words in the text are the many insults that are thrown around by members of the Earnshaw and Linton households. Every character at some point becomes the object of name-calling, especially the social-climber Heathcliff, but while Heathcliff is both the primary target and administer of the insults, the characters use many of the same names—or slight variations—against each other, despite their differences in social mannerisms and even language variations. After a quick search of some of the insults such as *fool*, *knave*, and *villain* in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a reader will discover that these words possess polysemy, or multiple meanings, some of which would have been familiar to the Victorians. While the choice of polysemous insults was perhaps unintentional on Brontë's part, scholars have noted Emily's familiarity with and use of obsolete words and archaic forms (Alexander and Smith 573-82; Inman 1, 3). Additionally, considering the Brontës owned a healthy selection of dictionaries (Alexander and Smith 53), it would not be a stretch to conjecture that Emily was selective when choosing her characters' insults. However, regardless of Brontë's intentionality, the polysemous insults do exist in *Wuthering Heights* and perhaps signify a deeper interrelatedness between the characters,

strengthening the connections of the two houses not just by marriage or similarities in behaviors, but also through words.

Often, the characters of *Wuthering Heights* base their insults on the victim's level of propriety. In the nineteenth century, propriety involved the attributes that distinguished between social classes, such as a person's social etiquette, dress, and education (Mugglestone 138). Social propriety also included a person's speech—the presence or lack of a rough dialect, the extent of one's vocabulary, and one's proper use of words in both syntax and semantics—because it was a marker of one's level of education (Walker 30-1). For the Victorians, especially, according to Phillipps, "language was a principle, precise, pragmatic, and subtle way of defining one's (social) position, or of having it defined by others (qtd. in Walker 31). For the Brontës, their knowledge of proper language and their father's education as a cleric marked them as members of the lower bracket of the middle-class, although Patrick's income was not reflective of that status. However, because of his clerical position in the small industrial village of Haworth, Emily saw the divided social classes both inside and outside of her father's church (Ingham 47), which allowed her to portray these classes through the characters of *Wuthering Heights*.

Despite the novel's isolated setting, Brontë clearly represents each inhabitant of the two houses as a member of a particular Victorian social class: the upper-class Lintons, the middle-class Earnshaws, and the working-class servants Nelly, Joseph, and even Hareton. Every character attempts to adhere to some form of social etiquette, and many characters even recognize when someone behaves counter to his or her propriety. Though the word *propriety* is only used once in the novel during a confrontation between Edgar, Cathy, and the newly well-established Heathcliff (Brontë 120), the characters base their insults on each other's level of propriety, and although they often repeat the same insults despite their different social positions,

Brontë may use words like *fool*, *knave*, and *villain* to reflect the words' different meanings. This paper will cross-examine the listings of *fool*, *knave*, and *villain* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Samuel Johnson's *Dictionary* (1755)—one of the Brontës's various dictionaries (Alexander and Smith 53)—and analyze how the natures of the insulted characters reflect the different definitions.

In *Wuthering Heights*, *fool* is frequently used to degrade the characters' levels of intelligence, but perhaps the one who suffers most from this form of insult is young Hareton. *Fool* in Johnson's 1755 *Dictionary* reads, "1. One whom nature has denied reason; a natural; an idiot 2. [In Scripture.] A wicked man. 3. A term of indignity and reproach. 4. One who counterfeits folly; a buffoon; a jester." Hareton is often dubbed by multiple characters with synonyms of *fool* including *idiot*, *clown*, and *dunce* due to "[h]is deficiencies in speech and understanding" from "his lack of education and illiteracy" (Baldys 55). Therefore, any sense of social propriety for him is essentially nonexistent, and his illiteracy secures his social status as working-class. To those who did not know the boy before Cathy's marriage—Isabella, little Catherine, and Linton—Hareton embodies the *OED*'s definition 4. of *fool*: "One who is deficient in, or destitute of reason or intellect; a weak-minded or idiotic person." Although the last recorded instance for this definition is dated prior to the publication of *Wuthering Heights*, to Isabella, Catherine, and Linton, Hareton is not the victim of an abusive childhood or just a simpleton: he is, according to Baldys, a "born idiot," threatened by "the specter of cognitive disability" (50). *Idiot* in Johnson's *Dictionary* reads, "A fool…one without the powers of reason." Thus, the characters seem to view him as being mentally impaired.

When little Catherine recounts to Nelly the moment when Hareton reads his name, Nelly scolds her, attempting to correct her opinion of him while also equalizing both Catherine's and

Hareton's levels of intelligence: "had *you* been brought up in his circumstances, would you be less rude? He was as quick and as intelligent a child as ever you were, and I'm hurt that he should be despised now, because that base Heathcliff has treated him so unjustly" (Brontë 263, italics in original). Nelly means that Hareton fits definition 3. of *fool*: "One who is made to appear a fool; one who is imposed on by others; a dupe" (*OED* "fool"). To Nelly, nature has not denied Hareton reason. Instead, the imposer of Hareton's foolishness is the usurper of the Heights, Heathcliff. However, although Heathcliff stunts Hareton's intelligence and forces him into servitude, Heathcliff counters the other characters' degrading names for Hareton by saying, "He has satisfied my expectations — If he were a born fool I should not enjoy it half so much— But he's no fool" (Brontë 232). By the end of the novel, Catherine has taught Hareton to read, and while his "stigma" of idiocy is linguistically administered, it also becomes "linguistically revoked" (Baldys 62).

Many other characters are also prescribed the name *fool*, including Edgar and Isabella, Linton Heathcliff, Hindley, and Joseph, and although they span the social spectrum—from the upper-class to the degraded working-class—they all reflect definition 1.a. of the *OED*: "One deficient in judgement or sense, one who acts or behaves stupidly, a silly person, a simpleton" ("fool"). Whereas Hareton is thought to be completely incompetent, the other foolish characters are often labeled as such due to individual decisions that cause others to question their rationality. Thus, they relate moreso to Johnson's definition 4 of *fool*, "One who counterfeits folly; a buffoon; a jester." Returning to an aforementioned synonym of *fool*, the first use of *idiot* in the novel is used by Heathcliff to describe young Edgar and Isabella during Heathcliff's recounting to Nelly of his and Cathy's espionage at Thrushcross Grange (Brontë 51). As members of the upper-class, the Lintons are well educated, yet their first depiction—foolishly

fight over a puppy—is both laughable and disgusting to young Heathcliff. According to Igham, Heathcliff views the Lintons as "members of an effete race rendered feeble by idleness and self-indulgence" (123). As if an inside joke between Cathy and Heathcliff based off that first depiction, they continue to view the Lintons as "spoiled children," even after Cathy and Edgar's marriage (Brontë 104). The ultimate act that confirms Edgar's foolishness is his proposal to Cathy after she strikes him. Nelly says that Edgar "must either be hopelessly stupid, or a venturesome fool" (84), and Edgar's belief that he can sever Heathcliff and Cathy causes him to remain a fool in Heathcliff's eyes. Isabella is also dubbed *fool* and *silly* multiple times throughout the novel. Her most foolish moment, however, is her decision to run away with Heathcliff. When Nelly learns of their elopement, Mr. Kenneth refers to Isabella as "a real little fool" (137), a phrase that is almost exactly replicated by Nelly to insult Isabella's son Linton (294). However, after the elopement, Isabella seems to become a more rational and less childish character, transforming from "a silly and credulous girl…to a married woman…who flees domestic abuse" (Pike 349). Thus, Isabella escapes not only from Heathcliff but also the name *fool* by fleeing from the Heights, while her brother, Edgar, remains a fool for the rest of his life, at least in Heathcliff's opinion.

The remaining two "fools," Hindley and Joseph, ironically, use similar insults against each other. Hindley and Joseph seem at odds when Hindley becomes the new master, forcing Joseph and Nelly to "quarter [themselves] in the back-kitchen" instead of allowing them to remain with the family (Brontë 48). This change only emphasizes their status as working-class. Additionally, Hindley's drunken fits counter the old man's religious beliefs and soil the Earnshaw reputation, as old Mr. Linton remarks after Cathy and Heathcliff have been discovered as spies, "What culpable carelessness in her brother!…I've understood…that he lets her grow up

in absolute heathenism" (53). However, while Hindley and Joseph appear as opposing forces, they both are identified as fools, referring to definition 1.a. from the *OED*: "One deficient in judgement or sense, one who acts or behaves stupidly, a silly person, a simpleton" ("fool"). Neither of them are thought to be "born idiots" like Hareton is: Hindley attends a university, and Joseph can at least read the Bible. However, in their mannerisms, they lack "judgement or sense" (*OED* "fool"). After Heathcliff's disappearance, Hindley asks the shivering Cathy why she stood in the rain; however, Cathy cannot answer because Joseph "catch[es] an opportunity…to thrust in his evil tongue" (Brontë 92). He then proceeds, in his West Riding Yorkshire dialect, to play master and vocalize an unauthorized opinion: "If Aw wur yah, maister, Aw'd just slam t'boards i' their faces all on' em." To this, Hindley calls Joseph "a confounded simpleton" (92). Joseph violates his social class after having "gained influence with the dying Earnshaw and managed to defame Hindley and Cathy before harrying [Hindley] into the grave. His subsequent contributions are limited to harassing tenants and labourers and to tyrannizing over newcomers," like Lockwood (Meier 234). Thus, in Joseph's actions, he is a simpleton, a fool.

As many characters label Hindley as *fool,* so too did the early reviewers of the novel. An 1848 unsigned review from *Atlas* describes Hindley as "the brutal, degraded sot, strong in the desire to work all mischief, but impotent in his degradation" (qtd. in Allott 231). A later unsigned criticism, dated 1851, reads "Hindley Earnshaw is a besotted fool, from whom [the readers] scarce feel pity" (qtd. in Allott 298). Although the Earnshaws are the wealthy middle-class, Hindley tries to establish a greater sense of propriety at the Heights with his wife, Frances. He suggests fixing up a designated parlor and subjects the servants to the kitchen (Brontë 48). He also supports Frances's attempts to make Cathy a lady but mainly for the hope of separating her from Heathcliff (55-6). After Frances's death, Hindley begins his own slow degradation, which

Joseph notes to Nelly. Joseph designates Hindley as *fool* in a depiction of a typical night of gambling following Heathcliff's return to the Heights, which Nelly later recounts to Cathy and Isabella: "This is t' way on't—up at sun-dahn; dice, brandy, cloised shutters und can'le lught till next day, at nooin—then, t' *fooil* gangs banning un' raving tuh his cham'er, makking dacent fowks dig thur fingers i' thur lugs fur varry shaume" (110, emphasis added). Thus, stupid and idle behaviors—even noted by Joseph as foolish—lead Hindley to forget his sense of propriety and, ultimately, forfeit the Heights to Heathcliff.

In that same run-in between Nelly and Joseph, Joseph uses another polysemous word to describe the newly wealthy Heathcliff: "t' fooil gangs banning un' raving tuh his cham'er…un' the *knave*, wah, he carn cahnt his brass, un' ate, un' sleep, un' off tuh his neighbour's tuh gossip wi' t' wife" (Brontë 110, emphasis added). This is the only instance of *knave* in *Wuthering Heights*. It is used strictly for Heathcliff, and Joseph's use of it almost sounds complimentary. However, Johnson's *Dictionary* entry slowly turns depreciative: "1. A boy; male child 2. A servant"—both of which Johnson notes as obsolete—"3. A petty rascal; a scoundrel; a dishonest fellow." *Scoundrel* is often used as an insult to Heathcliff; yet *knave* is an interesting word choice on Brontë's part. With its multiple definitions from the *OED*, *knave* can serve two potential uses, and, ironically, traces of both definitions can be found in the novel, one of which refers back to *fool* in Joseph's passage. Definition 3.a. of *knave* reads, "A dishonest unprincipled man; a cunning unscrupulous rogue; a villain…Often contrasted with *fool*" (*OED* "knave," italics in original). It is obvious that Heathcliff is dishonest and unprincipled, despite his gentlemanly appearance after his return to the Heights, "[b]ut Heathcliff has no real aspirations to gentility for its own sake…his new wealth and acceptability are merely weapons in his vengeful armoury" (Ingham 125). He takes aim at Hindley, first, by returning to the Heights

before visiting Mrs. Cathy Linton at the Grange. By this time, Heathcliff has "rid himself of the handicaps which he [had] heard Catherine describe as the impediments to a union with her: his poverty, his ignorance, and his low social status" (Thormählen 191). However, his focus is first drawn to Hindley because "these handicaps [were] of Hindley's making" (191). Heathcliff secretly plots his revenge, leaving Nelly, Cathy, and Edgar to wonder "why [he is] staying at Wuthering Heights, the house of a man whom he abhors" (Brontë 109). In fact, before Nelly recounts Joseph's words, she provides a contrast for Heathcliff's deceitful, knavish nature: "Honest people don't hide their deeds" (109).

The second meaning of *knave* refers to a moment in which Joseph is not present, yet a connection still exists within the text. Definition 2. of *knave* in the *OED* states, "A male attendant, page, or other servant; (also more generally) a man of low rank or status; a commoner, a peasant. Often contrasted with *knight*" (emphasis in original). Of course, Heathcliff becomes a servant under Hindley's reign at the Heights, and he is aware that Hindley is the cause of his lack of propriety and why it would "declass or de-grade Catherine" to marry him (Ingham 124). However, at the point of Joseph's recounting to Nelly, Heathcliff has made himself a gentleman, so it would be false for him to continue thinking of Heathcliff as a servant. Yet there is another member of the gentry who is the other target of Heathcliff's revenge: Edgar. Thus, if Heathcliff is the *knave*, Edgar then becomes the *knight*.

References to the Middle Ages, such as knights and courtly behavior, became in vogue in the Victorian Era, with historical novels and new adaptations of Arthurian romances trending in popular literature (Dellheim 4). In fact, the Brontës were avid readers of Sir Walter Scott and Alfred Tennyson (Alexander and Smith 444-446, 494), both of whom reinstated medievalism in the Victorian literary culture (Dellheim 4), so the portrayal of Edgar as Cathy's knight would not

be improbable, especially due to his identification as a member of the landowning gentry. In the Middle Ages, knights were members of the lower-aristocracy, serving as designated landholders and professional soldiers of their ruling monarchs or liege lords (Yin 92), and "[f]rom the 13th to the 15th century," these landholding knights formed what would be called the gentry (93). Thus, what separates the gentleman Heathcliff from the gentry-affiliated Edgar is that Heathcliff has yet to acquire the Heights as his own property, while Edgar actually owns land. However, Edgar's "knightly" demeanor is questionable compared to the literary knights. In medieval literature, such as the Arthurian romances, a knight serves not only his lord but also the lord's courtly lady. The knight would show her "the same obedience and loyalty which he owes to his liege lord" (Schwartz), and in *Wuthering Heights,* Cathy is aware of those medieval literary customs.

During the most heated fight between Cathy, Heathcliff, and Edgar, Edgar recoils "with a nervous trembling" due to an overwhelming "mingled anguish and humiliation" (Brontë 121). Immediately before, Cathy had insulted both him and her childhood lover, rebuking "one's weak nature"—Edgar's—"and the other's bad one"—Heathcliff; to her, the former is stupid because he is weak, while the latter is absurd because he is tempting the fight (121). Disgusted by her husband's cowardice, Cathy unleashes her knowledge of medieval romance and asserts her and her husband's status as ruined due to the overpowering Heathcliff: "In old days this would win you knighthood! We are vanquished!" (121). She views this confrontation as a battle between two men fighting for knighthood and for her honor. In medieval tradition, if a knight coward in battle, he would shame his king, but in medieval romance, if the knight disobeyed his queen, he could be banished from her presence as Lancelot is from Guenivere in Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'arthur*. In this encounter, Edgar fails to obey his queen, Cathy, yet in the Victorian

society, Edgar is not at fault. As the master of the Grange, he is also master over his wife, so instead of Edgar obeying her, Cathy should respect him by promoting his sense of propriety rather than insult him (Mugglestone 154). However, because of Cathy's temperament and outspokenness, Edgar often serves her, which is metaphorically noted by Nelly: "It was not the thorn [Cathy] bending to the honeysuckles [Edgar and Isabella], but the honeysuckles embracing the thorn. There were no mutual concessions: one stood erect, and the others yielded" (Brontë 97). However, in this episode between Edgar and Heathcliff, Edgar bends to Heathcliff, not Cathy, and surrenders his knighthood to the knave by trembling under the emotional strain and humiliation.

With this surrendering, it appears as if Heathcliff and Edgar have switched roles, Heathcliff the faithful knight and Edgar the serving knave (*OED* def. 2). Yet regardless of his status as knave or knight, Heathcliff always serves as Cathy's courtly lover, for "[h]owever outrageously she treats him, she can trust…that he can be recalled to a kneeling position before her" (Wilson 52). Heathcliff's kneeling is not the passive bending of Edgar, for Edgar's, according to Nelly, "had a deep-rooted fear of ruffling her humour" (Brontë 97). However, in this argument between her two lovers, Cathy's view of Edgar is wrong. As her husband, Edgar is neither her servant nor her suitor-knight, but instead her king; in fact, he possibly reflects the medieval warrior king, although he tends to refrain from physical aggression. With this in mind, Edgar is the embodiment of two of the three pillars of the knightly code: aristocracy and Christian ideology. What Cathy fails to see in her husband and tends to mock, especially in this encounter, is his masculine identity (Wilson 52-3), which is the third pillar—military prowess. However, after the courtly lovers agitate Edgar enough, "Edgar proves that he is neither 'sucking leveret' nor 'milk-blooded coward' by answering Heathcliff's provocation with 'a blow that

would have leveled a slighter man'" (Bronte 122 qtd. in Leung 18); thus, Edgar displays knightly prowess by both defending himself and his lady. He further establishes himself as warrior king by returning with "gardeners and coachman" (Bronte 122) "to confront Heathcliff rather than draw[ing] out" (Leung 18).

In the novel, the different definitions of *knave* create a spectrum of the head masculine figures, and the continuum is created after both Cathy and Hindley's deaths. It is after Cathy's death that Nelly begins to compare Edgar's grieving patterns to those of Hindley after Frances's death. Nelly remembers Hindley's drunken foolishness that followed his wife's death—"Hindley, with apparently the stronger head, has shown himself sadly the worse and the weaker man"—but Edgar remains the faithful Christian knight who seeks solace from God (Brontë 196). Both Edgar and Heathcliff mourn the same loss, yet they grieve differently based on their position in the *knave* spectrum. If Hindley grieved like a fool—one contrast with *knave*—and Edgar behaved as a knight—the other contrast with *knave*—then both men serve as opposite ends of the spectrum, and the knave Heathcliff serves in the middle position. Thus, in his loss of Cathy, Heathcliff's mournful mannerism is knavish—"dishonest unprincipled man; a cunning unscrupulous rogue" (*OED* "knave" 3.a.). Heathcliff wallows in his grief, which only fuels his revenge; thus, Heathcliff becomes the villain (*OED* "knave" 3.a.) against Edgar's house.

The final polysemous insult is *villain*, which is typically reserved for Heathcliff. Although Heathcliff's diabolical nature and revengeful scheme have yet to be established, Heathcliff is first labeled *villain* during his youth after he and Cathy are caught snooping around at the Grange. Strangely enough, his first accuser is not someone who is familiar with his character but instead is old Mr. Linton, Edgar's father, and ironically, his comment about Heathcliff is quite villainous in nature: "Don't be afraid, it is but a boy—yet, the *villain* scowls

so plainly in his face, would it not be a kindness to the country to hang him at once, before he shows his nature in acts, as well as features?" (Brontë 52, emphasis added). This use of *villain* may align with Johnson's *Dictionary*; however, no entry appears for the word in the original edition. Instead, the 1827 edition must be consulted for *villain*: "One who held by a base tenure; a servant; a wicked wretch" (Johnson "villain"). At this point in the novel, Hindley is master of the Heights, for moments later Mr. Linton critiques Hindley's disciplinary techniques, or lack thereof (53). In this instance, there is no doubt that under Hindley's ruling thumb, Heathcliff is the form of a villain: base in mannerisms and intellect, as Hindley has ended his tutoring sessions with Cathy; a servant in actions that Hindley makes him perform; and a wretch in demeanor, as Hindley has made Heathcliff miserable, first, by taking away any chance that Heathcliff had at an inheritance following Mr. Earnshaw's death and, second, by attempting to separate Heathcliff and Cathy. Thus, Heathcliff's description as a miserable, pitiful low born (villain) is accurate, although he has done nothing thus far that calls for the hanging that Mr. Linton suggests. Furthermore, after Cathy's stay at the Grange, Heathcliff slowly becomes "wicked" and "increasingly brutish" due to both Hindley's rough treatment of him and Cathy's transformation into an unrecognizable young lady (Gilbert and Gubar 296).

Johnson's definition aligns with the original meaning of *villain* that is listed in the *OED*: "a low born base-minded rustic; a man of ignoble ideas or instincts" ("villain" def. 1.a., first half). This *villain* is young Heathcliff due to Hindley's successful attempt to reestablish Heathcliff's original status as the orphaned *knave* who was picked off the streets of Liverpool. Yet old Mr. Linton prescribes to Heathcliff what is essentially a criminal's death, which corresponds with the latter half of def. 1.a. of *villain*: "in later use, an unprincipled or depraved scoundrel; a man naturally disposed to base or criminal actions, or deeply involved in the

commission of disgraceful crimes" (*OED* "villain"). It is as if Edgar's father is foreshadowing Heathcliff's developing brutish disposition, which in turn "foreshadow[s] his eventual soullessness" (Gilbert and Gubar 296). Heathcliff's character changes from the miserable, "low born base-minded" villain to the "unprincipled," revengeful villain of the novel, the antagonist "whose evil motives [and] actions" dictate the course of the plot (*OED* "villain" def. 1.a., def. 1.d.). And the insult itself alters from a denotation of Heathcliff's lack of propriety to the literary device *villain*, which was coined around the beginning of the 1800s (*OED* def.1.d).

Heathcliff is identified as the narrative's villain, "the character…[with] evil motives or actions" (*OED* def. 1.d.), by Hindley (Brontë 145, 188), Edgar (154), Isabella (189), and Nelly (246, 285). Although scholars try to justify Heathcliff's behaviors by portraying him as a hero of a sorts, such as a combatant of oppressive patriarchal society (Gilbert and Gubar 296), according to Leung, these scholars often "forget that the negative side of Heathcliffian revolution is violence, destruction, social chaos, and another kind of inhumanity" (13). These are the traits of a villain, the disrupter of a plot, and these traits—violence, destruction, social chaos—along with the description of "soulless" (Gilbert and Gubar 296) identify Heathcliff with perhaps the most famous and certainly the most damnable villain of all time, Satan (296-8). Thus it is logical that on numerous occasions Heathcliff is renamed "devil," "fiend," "imp of Satan," and "hellish villain" by multiple characters. After initiating his revenge, he preys on the innocent (Leung 13, note 13)—Hareton, young Catherine, Linton, and even Isabella—to further his usurpation of both the Heights and the Grange. However, just as Satan's destructive plot is destined for failure, so, too, is Heathcliff's plan, and scholars have noted that his demise may be twofold: it may come by both the union of Hareton and Cathy and "[Heathcliff's] own despairing desire for his vanished 'soul'" (Gilbert & Gubar 298). This soul-searching occurs near his end when

Heathcliff confides in Nelly that he senses "a strange change approaching" (Brontë 340). His long drive for destruction is reaching its end, and as he watches Hareton and Catherine's relationship strengthen, Heathcliff becomes weaker: "I have lost the faculty of enjoying their destruction, and I am too idle to destroy for nothing" (340). In his death, Heathcliff smiles with eyes opened, a sight that is unsettling to Nelly (353-4), and while some scholars view Nelly's reaction as a natural due to the corpse's ominous fixed appearance, other scholars see her cowardly reaction as a confession of her own, as if Heathcliff's sneering face is him calling out an unnamed villain (Hafley 214).

In the original reviews of *Wuthering Heights,* Nelly's character was never questioned or debased, unlike the other characters; she was viewed as "hav[ing] been put into the novel to help Emily Brontë disavow such uniformly dark intentions" (Gilbert and Gubar 289). In fact, in her Editor's Preface to the 1850 edition, Charlotte Brontë labeled Nelly as "a specimen of true benevolence and homely fidelity" (qtd. in Gezari 443). This belief reigned true until 1958 when James Hafley accused Ellen Dean of being "the villain of the piece, one of the consummate villains in English literature" (199). In this case, Hafley's use of *villain* means, "The character…whose evil motives or actions form an important element in the plot" (*OED* def. 1.d.).

In the novel, Nelly is never labeled as such, yet she does acquire her share of insults, some unforgiving, including "withered hag" (Brontë 129), Cathy's "hidden enemy" (135), "traitor" (135), and "cruel wretch" (241); however, the insult of *villain* is heaped upon Nelly by an outside force. While *villain* may be the harshest name for her, "the old family retainer…representing…the conventions of the humblest moralism" (Schorer qtd in Hafley 200), it may be the most accurate, for she possesses more control over the plot than a person of her social status should. As a servant, she is both disrespectful and disobedient toward her superiors,

"ignoring their requests or showing a lack of concern for them" (Tytler 47). Her behavior may be because she views herself as a member of both households—the Earnshaws, followed by the Lintons—instead of a working-class adjunct (Hafley 202). Perhaps Nelly's greatest influence on the plot—her most cruel act of villainy—occurs during the famous confession scene, in which she purposefully fails to inform Cathy that Heathcliff was listening to their conversation and had left his post at the bench (Brontë 86). Indeed, the remainder of Heathcliff and Cathy's story hinges on this moment, and ultimately their tragic relationship affects the rest of the characters. However, "[Nelly] seems strangely unmoved by the sufferings of the two 'lovers' whom she has known since childhood" (Thormählen 184). Throughout the rest of the novel, she continues to display her villainy by disobeying her superiors as well as bending the truth. Perhaps her second greatest plot spoil is when "[she] keeps to herself Cathy's warning that she is dying, and even deliberately antagonizes her…by creating a false impression of Edgar's response to the situation" (Hafley 208). In this instance, Nelly has prolonged her mistress's illness, but instead of lamenting her actions—or lack thereof—she quietly asserts, "Far better that [Cathy] should be dead, than lingering a burden, and a misery-maker to all about her" (Brontë 174-5). In this case, Nelly is not just Cathy's "hidden enemy" but also Edgar's and Heathcliff's, for Nelly becomes the author of both men's grief. The words Nelly once used against Heathcliff's secret behaviors can now be used against hers: "Honest people don't hide their deeds" (109).

Another sign of Nelly's villainy could be that she is, in fact, the initiator of the cycle of insults, aside from Lockwood's few remarks at the beginning. Because Nelly narrates most of the story, she is allowed to insert more insults after-the-fact without anyone contesting her words; thus, just as Heathcliff influences the other characters and controls the plot, Nelly can manipulate both Lockwood's and the reader's opinions of the characters, especially Heathcliff,

before completing the full narrative. At times, it is hard to determine which of Nelly's insults lay outside the narrative in her recounting to Lockwood and which ones may have slipped during the events of the actual story. Her first comment concerning Heathcliff's history, "It's a cuckoo's" (Brontë 36), is an after-the-fact comment; however, her second insult of Heathcliff—if one considers *cuckoo* to be an insult—is not as easily determined.

After Mr. Earnshaw unveiled the orphan from Liverpool, Nelly recalls to Mr. Lockwood, "I had a peep at a dirty, ragged, black-haired child…*it* only stared round…Mrs. Earnshaw was ready to fling *it* out of doors" (Brontë 38, emphasis added). Of course at this point, Lockwood knows that the dark-haired child is his new landlord, Heathcliff, yet Nelly seems fixated on referring to him as a demeaning, impersonal *it*. According to Johnson's 1827 *Dictionary*, *it* is "sometimes applied familiarly, ludicrously, or rudely to persons" ("it"). She remembers *it* as being the chosen word of Mr. Earnshaw when he addressed his wife, "you must e'en take *it* as a gift of God; though *it's* as dark almost as if *it* came from the devil" (Brontë 38, emphasis added), yet Lockwood and the reader immediately learn that Nelly did not see Heathcliff as "a gift of God": instead, she left Heathcliff on the stairs, shared in Hindley's hatred of him, and pinched him while Hindley administered blows (39). As for her fixation on the word *it*, because "[Nelly] had begun life by considering herself as on a par with the Earnshaws" (Hafley 202), it would not seem a stretch for her to have referred to Heathcliff as *it* during their childhood, especially since his arrival "was a threat to her position" as an equal to the Earnshaw children (202).

In fact, *it* substitutes for characters on two other occasions in the novel, both instances occurring between a father and son. In chapter 9, after Nelly attempts to hide Hareton from "vociferating" Hindley by stowing him in the kitchen cupboard, Hindley exclaims, "There, I've found *it* out at last!" (Brontë 78, emphasis added), and much later before Heathcliff sees Linton,

his "property," for the first time, he addresses Nelly, "You've brought *it*, have you? Let us see what we can make of *it*" (220, emphasis added). Heathcliff continues to use *it* after meeting his son, "I'll pit [Hareton] against that paltry creature [Linton], unless *it* bestir *itself* briskly. We calculate *it* will scarcely last till *it* is eighteen" (231, emphasis added). The descriptor, then, becomes reminiscent of Heathcliff's introduction to the Heights, an event—and apparently a word—which Nelly cannot forget. Perhaps Nelly even taught Heathcliff to use *it* in a demeaning manner by using the word herself against him, but Lockwood may not register this teaching. Instead, Nelly can prey on both Lockwood's and the reader's innocence. According to Hafley, "Since Nelly herself is telling the story to Lockwood—it is her crowning act of villainy, and Lockwood's acceptance of it at face value is the ultimate comment upon his innocence—she will of course tell it so as to present herself in the genteel and upright role she fancies" (204). Thus, by labeling Nelly as *villain*, Hafley links her to Heathcliff, the initiator of most insults, and the two appear villainous in their abilities to control people through both actions and words.

While the use of polysemous insults may be unintentional on Emily Brontë's part, they are ever-present in *Wuthering Heights.* Although Brontë's characters possess varying degrees of literacy and social propriety, they often use the same terms to debase each other, and the multiple meanings of these insults like *fool*, *knave*, and *villain* serve to further accentuate the interrelatedness between the members of the novel's two households. While *fool* levels out the characters' intelligences and emphasizes their individual poor choices that dictate the course of the plot, the multiple meanings of *knave* illustrate the state of Heathcliff's relationships with both his enemy Hindley and his rival Edgar. Whereas *villain* is usually thought to strictly be observed for Heathcliff, scholars have shown that Nelly, too, has the ability to manipulate characters and influence the plot. Whatever the case, the insults are vital to the text of *Wuthering Heights*, and

without them, the novel would lack both passion and aggression. These two, of course, are the most famous and fundamental emotions that comprise the story of Cathy and Heathcliff.

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