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ANNE BRONTË'S SHAMEFUL *AGNES GREY*

By Katherine Hallemeier

FOR MUCH OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY, literary criticism tended to be relatively dismissive of Anne Brontë's novels.[1] While recent scholarship has argued for the complexity of gender and class dynamics in *Agnes Grey* (1847), there is little consensus as to what, precisely, those dynamics are. Elizabeth Hollis Berry suggests that Agnes "takes charge of her life" (58), and Maria H. Frawley argues that her narrative is a "significant statement of self-empowerment" (116). Maggie Berg and Dara Rossman Regaignon, however, highlight the continued subjugation of Agnes in the course of her narrative. These scholars' divergent readings demonstrate how Agnes Grey and *Agnes Grey* can be read both as illustrative of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has famously described as the nineteenth century "female individualist" (307), and as instructive of the social strictures that circumscribed this identity. In this essay, I outline how shame works in and through the novel to bridge these opposing readings.

Specifically, I propose that *Agnes Grey* enacts a subtly scathing gender and class critique through its deployment of shame. Grounding my analysis in the theory of shame articulated by the influential American psychologist Silvan Tomkins (1911–1991), I argue that Agnes – a "plain" governess who leaves her family to "try my unknown powers" (Brontë 69; ch. 1), who endures abusive employers, and who finally marries the agreeable Mr. Weston – is predominately shaped by shame, her narrative suffused by it. On the one hand, shame describes Agnes's self-effacing reserve in the face of her contemptuous employers and scrutinizing readers. On the other hand, shame is the means by which Agnes's "self" paradoxically takes centre-stage as that which must be curtained. Shame emerges in the narrative as a source not only of suffering and repression, but also of strength and consolation: it is a means of self-assertion and something to be enjoyed. Agnes, consequently, is frequently strategically ashamed. This strategic shame, in turn, significantly structures her narrative.

Historically, readings of the novel's narrative style have highlighted its directness. Charlotte Brontë's 1850 preface to *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* argues that Ann Brontë felt that "[s]he must be honest; she must not varnish, soften, or conceal" ("Biographical" 19). Scholars have continued to characterize Anne Brontë's style in similar terms, describing it as straightforward, moral, and instructive. Elizabeth Hollis Berry, for example, lauds a "narrative development [that] shows a straightforward approach which accords openly with its plainly stated moral purpose," and which reflects an "intentionally straightforward

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style with iterative images that both entertain and instruct" (69). Jennifer M. Stolpa, while arguing for the boldness of the work's didacticism, suggests that its style is often like a "good sermon" in its clarity, sincerity, and directness (230). Craig A. Bell similarly calls *Agnes Grey* "quiet, restrained, soberly realistic" (3). Terry Eagleton expounds on "the laconic modesty of the whole, the sense of a work attractively reserved in feeling without any loss of candid revelation" (qtd. in Berry 69). This criticism is summed up in Maria H. Frawley's claim that Anne Brontë's "primary aesthetic imperative was to be honest with her subject matter" (5). In all these readings, both *Agnes Grey* and Agnes Grey are implicitly trustworthy.

I argue, however, that Anne Brontë's rhetoric of shame creates a text that is not at all hospitable to readers. In other words, I suggest that there is nothing especially "candid" about Brontë's narrative. Rather, Agnes's embrace of the shame of being both a governess and a woman who writes allows her to limit her candor, while claiming not to do so. Brontë's novel thus redeploys the shame that Agnes feels because of the contempt with which her employers treat her, or with which her readers might: shame becomes the means through which Agnes Grey both asserts her agency and critiques others' contempt. Agnes's efforts to teach her employers and readers shame through the narrative of her shame suggests how Brontë's novel is one that is brazenly – one might say shamelessly – shaming.

In endeavoring to discuss the shame of Brontë's text, my analysis is indebted to the account of shame developed by Tomkins, whose work on affect has grown in prominence since being edited and collected by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank as *Shame and Its Sisters* (1995). Tomkins's description of shame is useful especially because it highlights the sense of relationality inherent to the feeling: shame, according to Tomkins, is "the incomplete reduction of interest or joy" (134).[2] That is, interest or joy is integral to being ashamed. If I take no interest or joy in someone – if I have no investment in them or do not care what they think of me – then I cannot be shamed by them or for them. Conversely, an individual feels shame whenever she or he encounters "any barrier to further exploration" in her or his relationship with another (134). I prefer Tomkins's conception of shame precisely because Agnes Grey constantly encounters such barriers.

These social barriers, I argue, extend first and foremost from Agnes's occupation as a governess. The mid-nineteenth century governess, as critics have noted in their analyses of the Brontë sisters' fiction, occupied a precarious, liminal position in terms of both gender and class. She was at once a virtuous, middle-class mother-figure "who epitomized the domestic ideal" and a sexualized, working-class woman who potentially "destroyed" this ideal (Poovey 127). As a woman hired as an extension of the middle-class woman's maternal supervision, the governess's "supplementation of maternal child-management meant that she might supersede it, revealing it to be redundant and useless" (Regaignon 88). Agnes's employers, the Bloomfields and Murrays, require Agnes to be a paragon of bourgeois womanly virtue in order to maintain a domestic ideal, even as they paradoxically deny Agnes's equality in order to preserve that same domestic ideal. To them, Agnes is a middle-class lady who is nonetheless hired, a motherly woman who is decidedly not a mother. The result is an intractable barrier between the governess and her employers: Agnes feels ashamed when the Bloomfields and Murrays do not treat her as the virtuous woman she feels she is, and who they depend on her to be.

Notably, before becoming a governess, Agnes is able to avoid shame by behaving modestly. Modesty can be defined as precisely that which "prevents shame" and "wards off disgrace" (Hatch 36), and Agnes emphasizes that the Grey family has, from its very inception,

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valued modest propriety and thereby avoided what she views to be shameful class snobbery. We are told that Mr. Grey is "a clergyman of the north of England," while Mrs. Grey, who marries Mr. Grey "against the wishes of her friends," is "a squire's daughter" (61; ch. 1). Mrs. Grey gives up her fortune to "embellish" her husband's "humble hearth," while Mr. Grey, when faced with a dowry-less marriage, knows "too well" his wife's "superior worth, not to be sensible that she was a valuable fortune in herself" (62; ch. 1). Neither parent is too proud to prioritize wealth before virtuous action. Such behavior naturally extends to their married life. The family hosts "a stately tea-party, now and then, with the principal farmers and tradespeople of the vicinity, just to avoid being stigmatized as too proud to consort with our neighbours" (62; ch. 1). In the social world of the Greys, modesty ensures smooth social relations; it is "a tempering behavior that allows individuals to meet and to come to terms with one another" (Yeazell ix).

Agnes learns from her family that modesty should be an effective affective strategy for avoiding the distressing social disruption experienced as shame. Indeed, just as a wish to avoid social stigmatization leads the family to host their tea parties, so a desire to avoid shame guides Agnes in all of her familial interactions. When the family fortune is sunk along with the vessel in which it was invested, for example, Agnes does not seek to console her dejected sister, because she is "so fearful of being charged with childish frivolity, or stupid insensibility" (65; ch. 1). She is afraid of being shamed by her unruly sentiments. When her parents dismiss her first request to become a governess, "the fear of displeasing my mother or distressing my father's feelings" prevents Agnes from resuming the subject "for several days" (69; ch. 1). In their awareness of potential social shame and their adeptness in warding it off, Agnes's family, as Agnes represents it, is properly modest, and Agnes herself is its most modest member. Agnes, in other words, begins her narrative as a model of the "highly conventional figure" of the "modest woman" who permeates eighteenth and nineteenth century English novels (Yeazell ix).

Once Agnes leaves the shelter of her family for the contemptuous Murrays and Bloomfields, however, modest action does nothing to prevent Agnes from feeling ashamed: as a governess, Agnes suffers shame more or less daily, despite (and, indeed, because of) her highly developed sense of modest propriety. When her first employer Mrs. Bloomfield initially greets her, for example, Agnes finds herself ineffectually struggling with a meal of beefsteak because of her cold hands: "Sensible that the awful lady was a spectator to the whole transaction, I at last desperately grasped the knife and fork in my fists, like a child of two years old . . . but this needed some apology" (75; ch. 2). Mrs. Bloomfield's gaze, Agnes's awareness of that gaze, and Agnes's consequent fear of seeming "impolite" ensure that this first encounter with her new employer is thoroughly shaming (74; ch. 2) – Agnes is reduced to a "feeble attempt at a laugh" (75; ch. 2). Yet, this shame-filled meal is both a foretaste and metaphor for future experience.

For, in her relations with the Bloomfield children, Agnes proves equally inept at a task she felt well-suited to handle. Precisely because she, and not the children, is a locus of shame, Agnes has no end of trouble with young Tom and Mary Ann Bloomfield. "Neither the one nor the other knew what it was to feel any degree of shame-facedness, or even common modesty," Agnes laments (106; ch. 5). "I tried to deter them from tormenting the guests; and by reproaching their unmannerly conduct, to make them ashamed to repeat it. But they knew no shame – they scorned authority which had no terrors to back it" (107; ch. 5). The children, like the meat, resist Agnes's attempts to master them, while the Bloomfield parents

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look on with contempt, and Agnes feels shamefully ineffectual. Nor do things improve in Agnes's second post at the Murrays'. The teenaged Rosalie Murray manifests the class pride embodied by her mother, Mrs. Murray; she "seldom lost sight, for above half an hour at a time, of the fact of my being a hireling, and a poor curate's daughter" (121; ch. 7). Though Agnes's father is – like Mr. Bloomfield – a professional, and Agnes's mother is – like Mrs. Murray – an aristocrat, the loss of the Grey family fortune that leads Agnes to seek out a position as a governess effectively enables both the Bloomsfields and Murrays to treat Agnes as socially inferior. Agnes's shame-filled narrative marks her intractable subjugation as a governess.

A return to Tomkins' account of shame, however, suggests that the text's proliferating shame can also be read in terms of Agnes's sense of frustrated equality. Agnes's shame is particularly notable because it contrasts so markedly with her employer's efforts to consistently treat Agnes with contempt and thus deny any mutual dependency. Tomkins explains the different affective positions thusly:

> Whenever an individual, a class, or a nation wishes to maintain a hierarchical relationship, or to maintain aloofness, it will have resort to contempt of the other. . . . In a democratic society, contempt will often be replaced by empathic shame, in which the critic hangs his head in shame at what the other has done. (139)

Tomkins's analysis allows us to read shame as an assertion of Agnes's sense that she is *at least* the equal of the Bloomfields and the Murrays, in terms of both her moral and feminine propriety. Indeed, Agnes structures her narrative so that she is eminently civilized in comparison to her employers, who, she implies, are clearly aware of her distress but barbarously refuse to mitigate it. Agnes argues that her "feelings, habits, capacities" – what I have characterized as her modesty and shame – distinguish her as being like "one civilized man . . . amid a race of intractable savages" (Brontë 155; ch. 11). Agnes strives to imbue her pupils with these same feelings, habits, and capacities. As Agnes puts it, she hopes to make her charges "more humanized" (91; ch. 3). In this case, humane behavior is largely a matter of learning the shamefulness of unjustified contempt.

To wit, as shamed as she is by her employers, Agnes also feels shame *for* them. After a dinner at which the Bloomfields discuss the texture of mutton, the cut of beef, and the type of fish served, Agnes notes that she "never felt so ashamed and uncomfortable in my life for anything that was not my own fault" (84; ch. 3). Norbert Elias notes in *The Civilizing Process* (1939) that, "with the slow rise of the bourgeois classes, in whom the pacification and the generation of inner constraints by the very nature of their social functions is far more complete and binding, the cutting up of dead animals is pushed back further behind the scenes of social life" (420). Agnes, it seems, is shamed by her employers' shamelessness in discussing "dead animals" at the table. Similarly, at the home of her second employers, the Murrays, Agnes feels ashamed of her charge Rosalie's delight in listing her "conquests." "Oh Miss Murray!" Agnes exclaims aghast, "you don't mean to say that such a thing could really give you pleasure!" (135; ch. 9). When Rosalie's sister swears, Agnes expresses regret at its continuance: "I'm sorry to hear, Miss Matilda, that you've not got rid of that shocking habit yet" (133; ch. 9). Agnes's presence at Wellwood mansion and Horton Lodge excites the Bloomfields' and Murrays' contempt for a social inferior – that same contempt,

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however, is counteracted by Agnes's shame for her employers' shameless contemptuousness of "common modesty" (106; ch. 5).

While contempt is meant to keep Agnes in her "place," Agnes's consequent shame continually risks shaming in turn the Bloomfields and the Murrays. Both families are to some degree aware of this risk. Their governess, after all, takes every opportunity to remind her employers and her charges of their shameful shamelessness. For example, when Agnes takes her weekly walk home from church with the Murrays and their friends, her "companions" carefully and completely ignore her presence: "If their eyes, in speaking, chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy – as if they either did not see me, or were very desirous to make it appear so" (162; ch. 13). Agnes keenly feels the humiliation of this treatment, precisely because she is confident that they do see her. What is more, she takes care that *her* pace and gaze reflect this confidence, thereby signaling her awareness of, and the injustice of, her treatment:

> In truth, I considered myself pretty nearly as good as the best of them, and wished them to know that I did so, and not to imagine that I looked upon myself as a mere domestic, who knew her own place too well to walk beside such fine ladies and gentlemen as they were. . . . Thus – I am almost ashamed to confess it – but indeed I gave myself no little trouble in my endeavours (if I did keep up with them) to appear perfectly unconscious or regardless of their presence, as if I were wholly absorbed in my own reflections. (162; ch. 13)

Agnes's account of the walk reveals a consciousness that, despite the fact that the group is in fact "desirous" of not seeing her, she does indeed "appear" to them. Agnes is clearly not a "mere domestic" who can be *easily* ignored (114; ch. 6). Rosalie notes later in the narrative that she never "care[s] about the footmen; they're mere automatons" (233; ch. 22). In relation to Agnes, however, carelessness must be willed, and it varies depending on the social context. If Rosalie never cares about the footmen, she sometimes cares about Agnes – although she is careful not to show such concern in front of her social peers. Quite the opposite: Agnes must be carefully and deliberately ignored, or else one risks the governess reminding one of one's own pretensions. Such deliberate snubbing, of course, only enhances Agnes's shaming shame.

Given that shame emerges as a means by which Agnes asserts the humanity her employers deny her in their contempt, it is not something that she seeks to escape. On the contrary, one feels as the narrative goes on that Agnes rather enjoys shame – that she seeks it out precisely because it distinguishes her from the employers she never admits she loathes. In a typical description of her exchanges with the Murray children, Agnes juxtaposes her own "empathetic shame" to the carelessness of her charges: "Often they would do their lessons in the open air, which I had nothing to say against, except that I frequently caught cold by sitting on the damp grass . . . surely, they might have been taught some consideration for others" (128; ch. 7). The children's carelessness of their governess is, Agnes implies, clearly shameful. Yet, "rather than trouble them" for her own "convenience," Agnes foregrounds her great concern for others' feelings (128; ch. 7) – she makes it clear that she is not shamelessly inconsiderate of others' comfort and thereby shames the children.

What is more, Agnes deepens her portrayal of her own shameful weaknesses – and so of her own virtue – by blaming herself for the Murrays' carelessness: "But I must not blame them for what was, perhaps, my own fault; for I never made any particular objections to

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sitting where they pleased, foolishly choosing to risk the consequences" (128; ch. 7). Or, one page later: "Sometimes, I thought myself a precious fool for caring so much about them, and feared I must be sadly wanting in Christian humility. . . . But, with time and patience, matters began to be slightly ameliorated" (129; ch. 7). Faced with shameless employers who shame her, Agnes retaliates through her narrative by embracing her shame. By feeling and expressing shame while those around her do not, Agnes proclaims that she is more virtuous, more humane, than they are. Indeed, powerless to do anything else, Agnes admits to succumbing to a "*mauvaise honte*," or false shame or modesty (113; ch. 6) – she acts ashamed even if she does not feel ashamed. By *acting as though* she were ashamed by her employers' behavior, Agnes manufactures another instance of *their* shaming behavior. In the process, she pre-empts her own shame. Of course, by admitting to a propensity for *mauvaise honte*, Agnes displays her shame still more: after all, for Agnes, false shame is shameful.

Agnes, then, goes from being a modest woman to being a shame-filled woman. In effect, as her attempts to avoid shame repeatedly fail, Agnes develops what Tomkins has called a "shame theory." Shame theory for Tomkins, like any affect theory, is defined as "a simplified and powerful summary of a larger set of affect experiences" (165). An individual develops an affect theory as a range of experience is viewed through the lens of a particular affect. Importantly for Tomkins, a strong affect theory – such that a particular affect is ever-present across a diffuse range of experience – develops only when the theory is ineffective. Tomkins clarifies through the example of fear of automobiles. If looking both ways before an individual crosses the street means that she effectively avoids being frightened by trucks, then her "fear theory" will be relatively weak. If, however,

> the individual cannot find the rules whereby he can cross the street without feeling anxious, then his avoidance strategies will necessarily become more and more diffuse. Under these conditions the individual might be forced, first to avoid all busy streets and then to go out only late at night when traffic was light; finally, he would remain inside, and if his house were to be hit by a car, he would have to seek refuge in a deeper shelter. (Tomkins 169)

Affect theories, then, "must be effective to be weak" (168). In Agnes's case, her occupation ensures that she cannot effectively avoid shame.

Thus, as Agnes works ever-harder to avoid shame, she simultaneously comes to see opportunities for shame: "Although shame theory provides avoidance techniques, it is also one of the major sources of the experience of shame, since it provides a shame interpretation of a large number of situations" (Tomkins 165). Like the individual who becomes increasingly wary after multiple unfortunate vehicular encounters, Agnes becomes increasingly wary after multiple unfortunate social encounters. As a consequence, she sees the potential for shame in "a large number of situations" and retreats, so to speak, into deeper and deeper shelters: "The individual's affect theory enables him to act *as if* he were afraid or ashamed so that he need not in fact become afraid or ashamed" (Tomkins 167). Thus, this retreat functions as a self-defense of sorts. In Agnes's case, as we have seen, her *mauvaise honte* also works as an attack.

Agnes Grey's ashamed self-presentation, then, is anything but straightforward. In one respect, it can be read as a sign of Agnes's self-effacing attempts to do what she believes to be honest and good, to live up to "early Victorian ideas of female propriety" that included "behavioral patterns of docility, evasion, and accommodation – patterns we might take as

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behavioral equivalents of silence" (Stout 10). As Jennifer C. Manion argues, "we often regard a tendency to feel shame as indicating vulnerability to and powerlessness in response to negative judgments others make of us" (23). This shame, Manion notes, has been, from Aristotle through Freud, conventionally associated with femininity (22). Following Cheshire Calhoun's work on moral shame, one might add that shame can be understood to mark, if not agreement with others' negative judgments, then at least a continued interest on the part of the shamed in practicing morality within a shared society (145). Agnes's shame can certainly be read as indicative of her imbrication in oppressive social valuations of women.

In a more important respect, however, Agnes's shame is neither self-effacing nor stereotypically feminine. On the contrary, it is a means for a kind of self-assertion that Steve Connor, drawing on Gilles Deleuze, has associated with masculine writing. In "The Shame of Being a Man," Connor argues that "inhabiting shame gives one the power to exhibit it" (215). As such, shame contains "possibilities of glory" that have been particularly mined by male authors (225): "There is a strong male tradition of attempting to write the weakness of shame . . . while women writers . . . have seen their task as the much more urgent one of writing themselves out of shame rather than into it" (227). Contrary to Connor's sweeping claims, Agnes Grey, I would argue, inhabits her shame. She claims it and glories in it, because it is the means by which she asserts her worth in the face of employers who would treat her as less-than-human. The shame Agnes feels herself, the shame she feels on behalf of her employers, the shame she feels for feeling ashamed on behalf of her employers: this shame is as oppositional and self-interested as it is submissive and self-effacing.

Indeed, one might argue that, paradoxically, Agnes clings to her shame shamelessly. Certainly, Agnes is not modest in her claims to shame. On the contrary, shame becomes the means by which she makes herself central to her own story. Ruth Bernard Yeazell argues of the modest heroine that "both in the forward movement of the plot and in the persons who surround a heroine, novels could accommodate the aggressive energies and desires that her modesty might superficially appear to deny" (ix). In this version of the modest feminine narrator, the heroine's desires are displaced. Anne Brontë's foregrounding and multiplication of Agnes's shame, however, renders *Agnes* the epicenter of the "aggressive energies and desires" in her narrative. Moreover, shame is the means through which the author-narrator aggressively strives to achieve these desires. Specifically, for Brontë's governess, shame is an important pedagogical tool with which she attempts to teach not just the children under her care, but also her readers. Agnes writes shame to teach shame, and it is a style of instruction that is not entirely candid, and not entirely modest.

From the very first paragraph, Agnes explicitly and famously declares her own candor and modesty: "Shielded by my own obscurity, and by the lapse of years, and a few fictitious names, I do not fear to venture, and will candidly lay before the public what I would not disclose to the most intimate friend" (61; ch. 1). Our narrator, it is clear, writes "candidly" only on the condition of her "obscurity": she is, at first glance, all modest deference. Agnes goes on to repeatedly proclaim a "fear of trespassing too much upon the reader's patience" (93; ch. 4); she would not "bestow *all* my tediousness upon the reader" (118; ch. 7). The inclusion of tedious detail, after all, might result in a "malediction against the prolixity of the writer" (93; ch. 4). The reader, who is always addressed with masculine pronouns, might initially be flattered (or relieved) that his narrator prioritizes his amusement and edification before her own tendency to prolixity, lest he judge her poorly and shame her. As the narrative progresses, however, the reader might find himself disturbed by his narrator's

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constant demurrals. Agnes's protestations begin to imply that the narrative is, despite her best efforts, quite shameful. At the same time, her rhetoric of self-effacement reveals itself more clearly as simultaneously functioning as a rhetoric of self-empowerment. Agnes's repeated apologies for the work's "tediousness" – which are arguably the only part of the narrative that approaches the tedious – suggest a *mauvaise honte* that ultimately prioritizes the narrator's interests before her readers'.

For example, when Agnes refuses to give details about a pretty speech of Mr. Weston's, she does so based on familiar grounds concerning the reader's comfort. At the same time, her titillating non-account ensures that the reader will be distinctly uncomfortable with Agnes's editing:

> I have omitted to give a detail of his words, from a notion that they would not interest the reader as they did me, and not because I have forgotten them. No; I remember them well; for I thought them over and over again in the course of that day and many succeeding ones, I know not how often, and recalled every flash of his quick, brown eye, and every gleam of his pleasant, but too transient smile. Such a confession will look very absurd, I fear – but no matter – I have written it; and they that read it will not know the writer. (175; ch. 14)

Agnes begins and ends this passage characteristically shame-faced: she is embarrassed by what she has not written and by what she has written. The very passage that proclaims Agnes's vulnerability to a reader's judgments, however, also reminds the reader that Agnes is constructing her own narrative. Agnes invokes her shame in order to justify withholding what her (limited) confession makes clear is most important to her to keep private: the exact content of Weston's "few brief but very sensible remarks" (174; ch. 14).

What is more, should the reader find "himself" wanting to know more about Mr. Weston's proposal – that is, should the reader judge Agnes's narrative in a negative light – the appropriate response, in the terms of the narrative, is shame. Agnes's suggestion that the details "should not interest the reader as they did me" is all concerned deference, except that it is also a declarative. Her ashamed utterance that "such a confession will look very absurd" is similarly assertive. Agnes presumes that the reader ought to share her modest propriety – much as she presumes that the Bloomfield and Murray children ought to share it. And if readers have (shamefully) not considered that their desire to know everything that Mr. Weston said is shameful, or if they have not presumed to think that Agnes's recollections of the proposal are shameful, then the narrator is there to shame them – and to teach them – with explicit references to their thoughtlessness.

Shame, then, prompts self-reflexivity on the part of Agnes, while also extending that self-reflexivity to the reader.[3] In the burgeoning field of shame studies, such self-reflexivity generated by the writing and reading of shame is largely celebrated. Pre-eminent shame theorist Elspeth Probyn argues that "writing shame is a visceral reminder to be true to interest, to be honest about why or how certain things are of interest" (132). Deborah Martinsen, in a book-length study on shame in the work of Dostoevsky, similarly highlights the self-questioning prompted by shame, although she focuses on the reader: "Portrayed shame . . . disrupts readers' sense of personal inviolability. . . . It disorients and rouses self-consciousness in the shamed person and witnesses alike" (16). Certainly, *Agnes Grey* attests to the self-questioning and vulnerability borne of shame. At the same time, however, it dramatizes the way in which this self-consciousness can be limited by the experience of

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shame itself. That is, *Agnes Grey* suggests that shame inhibits self-reflexivity about shame and the propagation of shame. Shame, in this novel, is potentially as dissembling as it is honest.

In Brontë's *Agnes Grey*, Agnes's daily shaming as a governess paradoxically leads the protagonist to seek further opportunities for feeling shame or anticipating shame, whether in herself or others. If the narrator is at times critical of both her shame and her false shame, she responds with more shame, because it is through shame that she is able to assert her humanity. The very ubiquity of Agnes's shame, then, highlights the limits of her self-reflexivity: she does not unabashedly question her tendency to respond to shame with more shame, precisely because to do so would be shameless. As such, Agnes, is not at all candid about the pleasures and agency that self-effacement affords. As a consequence, *Agnes Grey* clearly and directly suggests the power that can inhere to the rhetorical embrace of shame.

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NOTES

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1. For an overview of criticism that is relatively dismissive of Anne Brontë's novels, see Stolpa, "Preaching to the Clergy," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 31.1 (2003).
2. It is worth noting that, for Tomkins, the affect that he terms "shame-humiliation" is one that underlies experiences of "shyness, shame, and guilt" alike (134), as well as one which can be experienced as a form of "alienation, as a rejection, as a defeat, as intolerable loneliness, [or] as a poignant bitter-sweet longing" (153). This is not to say, as Tomkins clarifies, "that shyness in the presence of a stranger, shame at a failure to cope successfully with a challenge, and guilt for an immorality are the same experience. Quite clearly they are not" (134). Yet, for Tomkins, shame-humiliation is "a component of each of these total experiences" (134). My discussion of shame adheres to Tomkins's broad use of the term.
3. Tomkins summarizes: "Shame is the most reflexive of affects" (136).

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