

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-76186-4 - The Brontës in Context
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Excerpt
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Introduction

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Like the other volumes in the Literature in Context series, *The Brontës in Context* is intended for present-day readers, academic and general, who want to find out more about the forces and circumstances that shaped literary works which have captivated generations of readers across the globe. The book resembles its fellows in the series in having a tripartite structure organized along the following lines: the initial section focuses on biographical matters; the middle section deals with reception and critical fortunes; and the final section discusses historical and cultural phenomena of particular relevance to the authors and their works.

This volume is a special case, however. First, it deals with three authors, not one; second, the lives of those authors have exerted a peculiar fascination for a century and a half. Outwardly uneventful, these lives are the stuff of legend: three young women, daughters of an impecunious clergyman in a Yorkshire village, developed extraordinary literary talents that gave the world some of the best-loved classics of the modern era – whereupon they all died young, leaving their aged father the sole survivor of a family of eight. With little leisure in which to foster those talents, and no material or cultural advantages to speak of, the Brontë sisters lived far from the intellectual circles of London and other large cities in the British Isles. ‘How could it happen?’ is a question that has been asked by millions over the years.

Without prescribing any one formula, *The Brontës in Context* helps its readers to perceive at least partial answers to that question. Within the covers of one book, a large number of experts form a league of guides to the Brontës in their time. The reader gains insights into the concerns that filled the days of these remarkable young women and found expression in their writing, from household chores to preoccupation with the fortunes of their country and with the ultimate destiny of their own souls. Familiarity with the circumstances that shaped their lives, and with the stuff that nourished their minds and fired their imaginations, brings modern

readers closer to the realities of ‘the Brontë story’. At the same time, such knowledge adds powerful layers of meaning to the experience of reading what they wrote.

To a twenty-first-century academic, the idea that learning about an author’s life makes for a richer understanding of his or her work is far from self-evident. Indeed, the content of the preceding paragraph goes against the grain of much that has come from the field of academic literary study for a long time. Ever since the 1940s, literary criticism as practised in the academy has attempted to demarcate between authorial biography and scholarly discussion of texts; and throughout this time, the uniqueness of the Brontë phenomenon has formed a stubborn challenge against those endeavours. Whatever the topic of a scholarly text on a Brontë-related matter, some aspect or aspects of the Brontës’ lives will be woven into it, in ways and on a scale that does not happen with other writers.¹

Even so, accepting the ubiquitousness of ‘the Brontë story’ and the desirability of factual knowledge about the Brontës in the context of their time does not amount to arguing that any worthwhile critical engagement with their works must rely on such knowledge. First of all, of course, it is important to remember that the Brontë novels are creations of the imagination. As such, they belong to a timeless sphere from which no lively mind, however uninformed, is ever debarred. The fact that most of us who work with the Brontës in the academy today came to their works as adolescents or teenagers, totally ignorant of the books’ historical context, and were ‘hooked’ for life testifies to the imaginative power of the Brontë fiction. Second, every generation will apply its own distinctive perspectives to readings of classic works of literature, seeing them through the lenses of ideological concerns and debates of their own time: that is partly what literature is for, and what keeps the classics alive. General readers have always felt free to do this; and the second half of the twentieth century liberated academic critics from the obligation to prove that a certain critical approach to a literary text was not at odds with what the author might have meant. It was a real liberation which invigorated academic criticism across the board, including the field of Brontë studies.

Nevertheless, freedom – at least in the academic sphere – needs to be exercised with responsibility. *The Brontës in Context* will, it is hoped, help readers steer clear of anachronistic views of the kind that might infringe the integrity of works and writers, for instance by imputing certain values and opinions to them without being in full command of the historical picture. The more people know about the lives and times of the Brontë

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sisters, the less inclined they will be to distort these authors' work by approaching it from the moral high ground of a supposedly more enlightened age. Anybody who has devoted serious work to Brontë material in its historical context will have discovered that he or she has little reason to adopt a censorious attitude to the people of the early nineteenth century, of which the Brontë sisters were part.²

Young scholars who turn to Brontë studies today are in a much better position to do justice to the lives and works of the Brontës than their predecessors, thanks to the fine scholarly work in the field that has appeared during the last few decades. Juliet Barker's splendid biography of the family did away with many old misconceptions, showing the men – including Charlotte's husband Arthur Bell Nicholls – in a more favourable light than had been customary before; Margaret Smith's definitive edition of the Brontë correspondence not only established reliable texts for the first time but provided a wealth of initiated commentary; and Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith's *Oxford Companion to the Brontës* supplied masses of updated and expertly compiled information on all kinds of topics germane to the Brontës and their works.³ Between them, and aided by other excellent studies with a historically contextualizing orientation, they ensured that the ground was cleared of many erroneous notions.

The debunking of myths is a satisfying pastime, but those who indulge in it should be wary of laying the foundations of new ones. An idea which has the potential of becoming a new 'Brontë myth' is the notion that Charlotte Brontë deliberately concocted misleading images of her sisters and their work for selfish purposes, and that Elizabeth Gaskell later became an accomplice in a project whose fundamental object was to glorify Charlotte Brontë, partly at her sisters' expense. It is easy to see how this idea could take root: important works on the Brontës published in the 1990s and 2000s showed that both Charlotte and Gaskell were at pains to mitigate the feeling that Emily's and Anne's work, especially *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was tainted by 'coarseness'.⁴ By romanticizing Emily as an unschooled creature of the wild moors and representing Anne as the victim of an earnest but misguided ambition to turn vulnerable youth away from sin and error, both women certainly made the younger Brontë sisters look less complex and serious in their artistry than present-day scholars can see that they were.

Making Charlotte into some kind of villain owing to her desire to make the Brontë phenomenon acceptable to the reading public of the mid

nineteenth century seems unwarranted, however. Most solitary victims of repeated bereavement would want posterity to think kindly of their dead loved ones; and if that excuse is felt to be insufficient, another circumstance may give Charlotte's critics pause: if it had not been for her iron determination to 'get on', the world would never have known anything about the Brontës of Haworth. Being the 'doer' of the family is sometimes an ungrateful role. Alone among the siblings, Charlotte Brontë had inherited her father's dogged ambition, and it carried her through difficulties and disappointments which would have caused lesser spirits to despair. This was the woman to whom Elizabeth Gaskell paid tribute in ways that secured a prominent place for the name of Brontë in the literary landscape of the mid nineteenth century. Whatever strictures anyone might wish to subject them to in a very different age, admiration for Charlotte Brontë's indomitable courage and what it enabled her to do for generations of enthusiastic readers prompts a desire to see her name 'free from soil'.⁵

Another misleading notion which has attained semi-mythical status over the decades is the belief, often encountered in popular writing on the Brontës, that the works of the Brontë sisters are expressions of a rebellious attitude to Victorian values. There is plenty of rebelliousness in them, to be sure; but to begin with, not every rebel in the Brontë fiction is valorized, and then, the main action in every single Brontë novel is set in a pre-Victorian historical period. Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* may serve to illustrate both points: Arthur Huntingdon rebels against the domestic atmosphere whose tone is set by his wife Helen's moral superiority, with terrible results for all concerned; and Anne set the action of that novel in the time before the first Infant Custody Act, thus precluding even a hint of possible mitigation as regards Helen's dreadful position in the eyes of the law (see Chapters 35 and 38 below).

What successful rebels in the Brontë novels turn against is tyranny, not social convention as such. Young Jane Eyre challenges the Reeds, mother and son, because they oppress her, and later Jane refuses to yield to pressure from Mr Rochester as well as from her cousin St John; in all contexts she is motivated by a longing for freedom from improper personal restraint, not by ideological disapproval of notions prevalent in her time. Even Caroline Helstone's impassioned plea to the 'fathers of England' to allow their daughters the fulfilment of useful occupation (*Shirley*, II.xi.330) is, first and foremost, the expression of a yearning for freedom to improve oneself while carving out a life of one's own. In promoting the desire to accomplish something worthwhile, for women as

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well as for men, the Brontë novels are in fact in tune with, rather than oppositional to, strong social and political currents in early Victorian Britain.

The Brontës in Context appears at a point in time when Brontë experts have long tried to correct the impression that the three surviving Brontë sisters were dreamy geniuses isolated on their faraway moors. Instead, scholars have endeavoured to present them as early nineteenth-century intellectuals with a keen interest in what was happening in the world, in the arts, in politics at home and abroad, in philosophy and religion, and at all levels of society – and with very decided professional ambitions. Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë were women of their time, and readers of this volume will become aware of the degree to which their writings show it. Those writings were themselves part of that time, tapping into its concerns and generally contributing to the mid-nineteenth-century *Zeitgeist*.

A consecutive reading of the volume will go some distance towards clarifying the extent to which the Brontë works were part of the period in which they were written, but not all readers will wish to undertake such a reading. For those who consult the book in pursuit of information on a particular topic or topics, it is inconvenient to have to look up chapters which are not of immediate relevance. With the interests of such readers in mind, a limited element of repetition has been allowed; for instance, Charlotte Brontë's account of her discovery of her sister Emily's poems is quoted more than once. For similar reasons, the section called 'Further reading' mentions some critical works on several occasions: the reader interested in a particular chapter will hence find bibliographical guidance under the corresponding chapter number and not have to scour the entire section in pursuit of pertinent works.

Whatever impulse sends a reader to this book, the editor and contributors hope that he or she will find it both stimulating and helpful. If it inspires further scholarly efforts to elucidate ways in which the Brontës' life stories and works interact with their time – and there is plenty of work still to be done along those lines – that will be the happiest of outcomes.

NOTES

- 1 For that reason, the first section of this book, unlike other volumes in the Literature in Context series, is not called 'Lives and works'. It would have been misleading to suggest that the second and third sections do not constantly engage with the lives and works of the Brontës, although the topics were not chosen with biographical elucidation in mind.

- 2 On the dangers of patronizing the people of the past, see the introduction to my *The Brontës and Education* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), esp. pp. 2–3.
- 3 See the beginning of the ‘Further reading’ section at the back of this book. Robert and Louise Barnard’s *A Brontë Encyclopedia* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) is a useful and readable complement to the *Oxford Companion*.
- 4 See, for instance, Lucasta Miller’s *The Brontë Myth* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001).
- 5 The last sentence of Charlotte’s ‘Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell’ runs, ‘This notice has been written, because I felt it a sacred duty to wipe the dust off their gravestones, and leave their dear names free from soil.’ Quoted from Smith, *Letters*, vol. II, p. 747.

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PART I

Places, persons and publishing

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CHAPTER I

*Haworth in the time of the Brontës**Michael Baumber*

Haworth is a moorland village in the hills known as the Pennines, in the West Riding of Yorkshire in northern England, about nine miles west of Bradford and eight miles north of Halifax. The Halifax area has a long history as a major centre for the production of textiles even before the Industrial Revolution. Haworth belongs to that area, and both before and after the forty years that the Revd Patrick Brontë spent there as its parish priest, the manufacture of worsted cloth played a vital role in the lives of its people.¹

When Patrick Brontë first became perpetual curate of Haworth in 1820, the village was nowhere near as extensive as it is today.² If you had approached it from Keighley, the road would have left the Halifax turnpike (a toll road) at Cross Roads and plunged down the hill to the Bridgehouse beck through fields with a scattering of farmhouses.³ The Worth valley railway was not built until after Brontë's death. What we call Haworth Brow, with its rows of late nineteenth-century terraces, did not exist, nor did the housing down the present Mytholmes Lane. As the road crossed the beck near the present railway station, you would have seen a corn mill. Your route would then have followed the present Belle Isle road, and you would not have come to the village proper until you had laboured up the other side of the valley to Hall Green at the bottom of the present Main Street. Main Street itself was cobbled, as it still is, and was another stiff climb. Today the lower part is flanked by houses of various styles, but then there would have been seventeenth-century stone cottages on the left-hand side, some of them still farms. On the other side, where the school and park are now, you would have seen fields, because there were no houses at all below Butt Lane. At the top were the church and the parsonage (see Figure 1), the Wesleyan Methodist and Baptist chapels and Townend Farm. There were more cottages in and around the triangle formed by West Lane, Changeate and North Street, one or two general shops and five inns – the Black Bull, the King's Arms, the White



1 Haworth Old Church, Sunday School and Parsonage, photographed before 1878

Lion, the Cross and the Fleece – with a sixth, the Sun, in West Lane. Much of the old open fields had been enclosed, but on the Worth valley side of West Lane the old town field still remained with its separate strips.

It was therefore quite possible for incurious visitors to see 1820s Haworth as an isolated rural village, and what they thought of it might well have depended on the weather, as the houses were made of millstone grit which water turned black. Ellen Nussey cherished memories of delightful summer rambles on the moors with the Brontë sisters; but Bessie Parkes remembered a ‘dreary, black-looking village’ and a parsonage ‘without a single tree to shield it from the chill wind’, and Mrs Gaskell, who painted a picture of a dismal backwater, came on ‘a dull, drizzly, India-inky day’ with a leaden sky.⁴

Yet sharp eyes would have noticed that many of the upper storeys of the cottages were occupied by handlooms. Those energetic enough to walk out of the village into the countryside would have found farmhouses (often with attached cottages) at frequent intervals, all of which contained handlooms, as few of the inhabitants could do more than scratch a living from agriculture. The cloth being made was worsted, so they would have contained combers as well as weavers.

Formerly women would have been found spinning the yarn as well, but by 1820 most spinning was done in factories. They were powered by water