

INTRODUCTION

Human Subjects
Reimagining the Brontës for Twenty-First-Century
Scholarship
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What it was, whether beast or human being, one could not, at first sight, tell.

– Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*

[T]hese human nerves would thrill.

– Anne Brontë, ‘Severed and Gone’

The world within I doubly prize.

– Emily Brontë, ‘To Imagination’

When imagination once runs riot where do we stop?

– Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*

What does it mean to be human? What does it mean to be something other than human? Where and how are we to (indeed, ought we at all to) draw the lines? The Brontë novels and poetry are fascinated by what lies at the core – and limits – of the human. Ranging across explorations of the ‘human fallibility’ that separates men and women from Gods (and from each other) – including ‘the whole burden of human egotism’ (*Villette*, p. 197, p. 361); the depths of human suffering and the private solitude of the ‘human heart’ (*Villette*, p. 366); what it means to be degraded to the status of an ‘embruted partner’ or to affirm one’s own ‘free’ human spirit and ‘independent will’, acting above and beyond ‘mere human law’ (*Jane Eyre*, p. 292, p. 253, p. 317); and even what it might mean to exist as an ‘automaton’, ‘a machine in the shape of a human being’ (*Shirley*, p. 334) – Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë each respond to wider scientific, legal, political, theological, literary and cultural concerns in ways that redraw the boundaries of the human for the nineteenth century.

The lines often tenuously dividing humankind and the animal kingdom, mortal and divine, child and adult, and self and other are mapped

by the Brontës through explorations of violence, education, spirituality, and the science and ethics of imagining what it means to be human. The Brontë novels and poetry move between considerations of deficit, cruelty and the social outcast (class, slavery, illegitimacy, young impoverished women) to ideas about human goodness, mercy, morality and community, catching up complex notions about human thought and behaviour, about conscience and consciousness. Throughout this volume's account of the Brontës' creative interrogation of what it means to be human there emerges a strong sense of the importance for twenty-first-century scholarship of a re-evaluation of the Brontës on these terms and at this cultural moment. This collection brings together timely and exciting viewpoints from eminent Brontë scholars and creative practitioners that foreground, for the first time, the link between the role of the imagination and new definitions of the human subject in the nineteenth century. The importance of interpretation and of the reader's active engagement with the text, illuminated most directly by the reflective analysis of Isobel Armstrong, Blake Morrison and the late Barbara Hardy, is pointed up by other chapters' shared concern with the various methodologies and theoretical or historicist perspectives that have shaped critical decoding of references to the human – or less than human – in the Brontës' works since the time of their publication. Readerly complicity (in depictions of violent or 'inhumane' acts) and the valuing of inconsistency emerge as powerful interpretive forces and imaginative tools regarding the deployment of which the authors would have been well aware, actively drawing nineteenth-century and twenty-first-century readers into the vital and ongoing debate about what it means to be human.

Writing in the context of twenty-first-century fiction, Peter Boxall describes the 'dismantling' of the human: 'we are now living through a historical period in which the meaning of the human is radically uncertain – as uncertain, perhaps, as it has ever been'.¹ For Boxall, mid- to late-twentieth-century global political transformations including decolonisation and feminism have led to 'a rejection of enlightenment humanism' – that 'racist humanism', in Jean-Paul Sartre's phrase, and a sexist one – heralding the 'expiry of the western conception of the human'.² Developments in biotechnology and information technology have further disrupted 'the way that we conceive of the spatial, temporal and physical limits of our being'.³ Are we, then, post-human? Jeff Wallace, following Bart Simon in distinguishing between popular (often dystopian futurist) and critical post-humanism, defines the latter – 'a way of *thinking* the human' – as 'a critique, both of an essentializing conception of human

nature, and of human *exceptionalism*.⁴ So far, so good. There is, Wallace asserts, 'a sense that posthumanism might be read back into history as a more tenacious and meaningful idea of the human itself'; on this, he cites Katherine Hayles's claim that 'we have always been posthuman'.⁵ Wallace in one sentence affirms that 'the best current work in critical posthumanism offers itself neither as a transcendence nor as a rejection of humanism, but as part of an ongoing critique of "what it means to be human"', yet in the next figures the 'significance' of humanism as 'residual'.⁶ Andy Mousley, meanwhile, calls precisely for 'a new literary humanism', stating that 'literature's human significance has remained under-theorized' and calling for a reinvigorated recognition that 'literature is one of the places where humanity's grounding values and characteristics are explored, put to the test, "lost-and-re-found" and sometimes lost again. This is not a triumphal humanism, but a humanism nonetheless',⁷ and it is certainly a claim for something more than residual.

If we are to entertain the thought experiment that we have always been post-human, we ought also to acknowledge traffic in the opposite direction: that the Victorians remain 'close to us', a claim made in 1989 by Charles Taylor in *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* and much reiterated in more recent Victorian Studies scholarship. Like the Victorians, writes Taylor, 'we still instinctively reach for the old vocabularies, the ones we owe' – for better or worse – 'to Enlightenment and Romanticism'; even as, again like the Victorians, we seek to assert our own advancement and 'superiority'.⁸ Rick Rylance's study of *Victorian Psychology and British Culture, 1850–1880* reinforces the notion that we are still, for all our differences, in very real and active conversation with Victorian thinkers and writers at least in the realm of human psychology,⁹ a major arena, as several essays in this volume show, for fruitful discussion of what it means to be human. Post-humanism is a sound framework for interpreting and, through action, shaping our world in so far as it challenges centrist views, exposes the narrowly Western and male (rights of 'man') version of liberal-humanist individualism, and calls into clearer view the subjugation of externalised 'others'. Post-human perspectives, particularly in work influenced by Michel Foucault, Donna Haraway, and Jacques Derrida, have been instrumental in dissolving the distinction between animal and human – and, as Cary Wolfe puts it, 'racist and sexist hierarchies have always been tacitly grounded in the deepest – and often most invisible – hierarchy of all: the ontological divide between human and animal life'.¹⁰ However, as Deborah Denenholz Morse and Martin A. Danahay astutely observe, even the

seemingly radical Derridean meditation on ‘animal autobiography’ and voice extends upon late-nineteenth-century literary and scientific efforts to refigure understandings of the human/animal continuum (such as Anna Sewall’s *Black Beauty* (1877) and Charles Darwin’s *The Expression of the Emotion in Man and Animals* (1872)). Morse and Danahay reiterate the warning sounded by Harriet Ritvo in her ground-breaking *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures in the Victorian Age* (1987): ‘a term like “post-human” carries with it its own assumption and could exemplify “the same kind of wishful thinking that the term ‘late capitalism’ does” if it simply recycles the same old metaphors and clichés’.¹¹

Taken in the wider view, these (‘post-’) terminologies – aiming to assist – can risk making treacherous terrain even slipperier: there is already before us the problem that ‘we need to acknowledge the unknowability of all beings, including human ones’.¹² For historian Joanna Bourke, author of the magisterial *What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (2011), ‘in the end, all we know for certain is that we don’t’.¹³ Bourke concludes her study with a discussion of radical alterity and the need to challenge ‘tyrannical dichotomies such as biology/culture, animal/human, colonizer/ed, and fe/male’, but in such a way that we don’t deny through abstraction the reality of experience or collapse all differences to the point of ‘a radical flattening out of the contours of our world’. For Bourke, avoiding the tendency to ‘invent other creatures (human or animal) in our own image or to use them simply as pawns in our own ideological or material battles’ will point us towards ‘a politics that is as committed to uniqueness of all life forms as much as to the creative, exhilarating desire and struggle for community and communion, authenticity and certainty’. There is, she writes, ‘more – much more – always to come’.¹⁴ Yuval Noah Harari endows this (post-) human forecast with a darker twist: the near-future transformations in human technology, organisation, consciousness and identity will be so profound that the curtain is ‘about to drop on Sapiens history’: the very natures of the theoretical, political and philosophical debates we are engaged in today ‘will in all likelihood disappear along with *Homo Sapiens*’.¹⁵ In Harari’s closing view, ‘despite the astonishing things that humans are capable of doing, we remain unsure of our goals and we seem to be as discontented as ever’. Pause for thought: ‘Is there anything more dangerous than dissatisfied and irresponsible gods who don’t know what they want?’¹⁶

Stepping back from – but keeping in our view – the possibility of bioethics run amok, and of the political and ecological disasters of human making that threaten us daily on so many levels, what can we learn from the writing of the Brontës – other than finding an affirmation (elsewhere in their writing complicated and contradicted) that (in line with Harari’s ‘Afterword’) ‘human nature is perverse’ (*The Professor*, p. 41) or that ‘human natur’, taking it i’ th’ lump, is naught but selfishness’ (*Shirley*, p. 275)? This Introduction identifies three key interlinked areas – science, psychology and education; human rights, ethics and religion; and creativity – where the imagination and the idea of the human intersect in the Brontës’ works. It outlines why a re-evaluation of the Brontës’ works along these lines is important for twenty-first-century scholarship in Victorian studies and literary theory and criticism more broadly.

In *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History*, Heather Glen makes a strong argument for locating apparently universal themes in the literature of Charlotte Brontë (love, loss, pain, joy) within the deeply specific historical framework of the writer’s imagination.¹⁷ This volume extends Glen’s important work, acknowledging at the outset that recourse to the concept of ‘the human’ could, if superficially applied, counterproductively mask important structural, cultural and aesthetic differences between the Brontës’ actual and fictional worlds and our own. Rather, the volume’s chapters explore, vitally, the ways in which complex questions raised by the problematic idea of the human (and what it meant to be human at a particular time and place in the nineteenth century) were central to the Brontës’ fictional enterprise. The chapters in this volume address, from a range of perspectives and with innovative contextualised close readings, the ways the Brontës’ writing (novels and poetry, juvenilia and essays) influenced and was influenced by wider developing conceptions of the human subject in science, philosophy, political economy, religious thought and other works of literature. Together they provide a thought-provoking and integrated treatment of the role of the imagination in Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontës’ explorations of what it means to be human, and open the way for further re-evaluation of nineteenth-century understandings of the human.

The idea of the human motivated many writers of realist fiction in the nineteenth century and received distinctive and complex treatment within the Brontës’ particular ethical and aesthetic visions. As George Levine eloquently reminds us, Victorian literature is marked by a moral energy, ‘a drive to find a way to move beyond the narrow limits of individual

consciousness into a sympathetic and empathetic relation to others, to the not-self'.¹⁸ For Levine, this concerted campaign to 'thrust the reader into an intimacy with' a broad variety of possibilities of selfhood arises in part in response to troubling questions swirling in the space between scientific endeavour, theology and secularism: (how) is it 'possible to sustain the moral life without religion'?¹⁹ Andrew H. Miller's study of nineteenth-century moral perfectionism affirms that 'the period's literature was inescapably ethical in orientation: ethical in its form, its motivation, its aims, its tonality, its diction, its very style, ethical in ways that remain to be adequately assessed'.²⁰ Neither Levine's *Realism, Ethics and Secularism* nor Miller's *The Burdens of Perfection* deal at length with any of the Brontës' novels. Levine glances over the 'wildly non-human' characters in *Wuthering Heights*, claiming for Heathcliff and 'partially' for Catherine an 'utter incompatibility with realist narrative subjects', rooted in incomprehensibility.²¹ Yet the Brontës' works evince passionate and detailed fascination with human purpose and the ethics of being; human vulnerability; human excess; and existential singularity. Though Levine asserts that 'there's little space in [Victorian realism] for dangerously unknowable forms of life' (such as Heathcliff),²² I am proposing here that the Brontës' capacious and energetic explorations within the realist genre (and including elements of the Gothic) led them to pull back the veil and acknowledge precisely the 'dangerous unknowability' of what it is to be human, even as their imaginative dealings in extremes of violence, affect and degraded or diminished personhood (be it fleeting or life-long degradation) attempted to reach in the dark towards the heart, the source, of the danger (that is, the point of epistemological crisis). As John Bowen rightly observes in his article on the transformations of Romanticism, the Brontës' fiction is so distinctive partly because of the way it engages with the marginal, the excluded, the dispossessed, 'at a time when that great admirer of the Brontës' work, Karl Marx, saw bourgeois and proletarian males as the representative figures of nineteenth-century social life'.²³ Bowen finds close parallels between the Brontës and Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, their contemporary. These range from a central interest in love and desire; a Protestant faith that, sincere, is 'independent-minded to the point of heresy'; an interest in individual conduct (which might include freedom and responsibility); and 'the overwhelming sense of human life being studied with moral choices of world historical import'.²⁴

This volume addresses a gap in existing scholarship by arguing for the centrality of the idea of the human within the works of the Brontës. As this volume hopes to show, the Brontës' investigation and redefinition

of the nature, agency and complex limitations of the human subject was made possible by their fascination with (and exercise of) one central human power: that of the imagination. The vital new understanding of the Brontës, the imagination and the idea of the human offered by this volume opens out to two wider considerations, taken up by a number of the chapters. Firstly, building upon the different ways of reading (theory, history, textual analysis) that make possible original critical appraisals, what are the possibilities for the role of creative imagination in our re-evaluation of the Brontës' works in, and for, the twenty-first century? And secondly, how might a fresh appreciation of the Brontës' textual perspectives on such subjects as violence, childhood, psychology, belief, multiple ways of reading, and the valuing of inconsistency inform our present conceptualisations of what it means to be human?

Across each of the chapters, a timely preoccupation with delineating new ways of evaluating the Brontës' works, and their nineteenth-century literary and cultural contexts, emerges. In drawing together path-breaking research in the field and giving new emphasis to understandings of the human in the early- to mid-nineteenth century, this volume provides a thorough and structured review of the science, ethics, and aesthetics of what it means to be human in the context of the Brontës. *The Brontës and the Idea of the Human: Science, Ethics, and the Victorian Imagination* encompasses close readings and historical and theoretical analyses of the novels, poetry and juvenilia, investigating human nature, human rights, human behaviour, and, most importantly, and central to each of these areas, human imagination.

Current and developing interest in the idea of the human (as understood at different historical junctures and at the present moment) is reflected in such overarching titles as *Humanity 2.0: What it Means to be Human Past, Present and Future* (Steve Fuller, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), *Beyond Human: From Animality to Transhumanism* (edited by Charlie Blake, Claire Molloy and Steven Shakespeare, Continuum, 2012), and, as already discussed, *Literature and the Human: Theory, Criticism, Practice* (Andy Mousley, Routledge, 2013), and *What it Means to be Human: Reflections from 1791 to the Present* (Joanna Bourke, Virago, 2011), as well as works ranging from Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1958) to Kate Soper's *What is Nature? Culture, Politics and the Non-Human* (Blackwell, 1995) and Giorgio Agamben's *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1995; Daniel Heller-Roazen, trans., Stanford University Press, 1998). What makes this volume distinctive is its specific historical focus on the nineteenth

century and its foregrounding of the concept of imagination. The focus on the works and cultural context of the Brontës allows for an original and detailed examination of how three writers of fiction and their milieu were confronting issues about what it meant to be human before Darwinian theory took firm hold.

Ideas about post-Brontëan biological identity are taken up in such works as Cannon Schmitt's *Darwin and the Memory of the Human: Evolution, Savages, and South America*. For Schmitt, late-nineteenth-century engagement with Darwinian theory resulted in 'the invention of a new and enduring human subject': the modern 'human-as-animal'. Memory, a human technology, 'enabled the invention of the human as natural'.²⁵ This idea meshes in interesting ways with Gillian Beer's reflections on the belief of geologist Charles Lyell – friend of Darwin and contributor to his thinking on evolution – that 'the power to re-imagine the remote past was the characterizing property of human reason': a narrative of the past not only physical, of volcanic action and deep time, but cultural, with classical reference for Lyell forming 'a bridge back towards the earliest reaches of human civilisation'.²⁶ Ideas about civilised sociality and savage natures – bound up in destructive ideologies of race and colonial plunder – fuelled fears about the capacity for human degeneration (on individual and broader scales) at the Victorian fin de siècle in ways that have been well documented.²⁷ But how was human memory, and human creatureliness, figured by the Brontës? As Laura Brown's *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Imagination* attests, 'literary animals have inspired modes of thought that question conventional hierarchies' since the eighteenth century, and – moving beyond their use as metaphors for human needs and aspirations – have given rise to animal rights discussions, the founding of the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in 1824, and the anti-vivisection movement.²⁸ In addition to Morse and Danahay's *Victorian Animal Dreams* (2007), a second collection of essays on *Animals in Victorian Literature and Culture* (Laurence W. Mazzeno and Ronald D. Morrison, eds., 2017) traces some of these shifting boundaries and viewpoints, with earlier work by Barbara Munson Goff, Ivan Kreilkamp and others contributing to discussions of the Brontës' writing within the interdisciplinary field of animal studies.²⁹

In the Brontës' writing, boundaries between the human animal, the non-human animal and even the shapes through which humans conceive of the spiritual and supernatural realms are often blurred and often also connected with powers of memory and story-telling, gendered

expectations, and the language of rights. Jane Eyre is at pains to move beyond a gendered discussion of the needs and feelings of ‘men’ and ‘women’ towards the true equality she sees as residing within the more capacious category of the ‘human’ in her famous rumination on factors constraining the lives of women in the nineteenth century: ‘human beings...must have action’ (*JE*, p. 109).³⁰ No more is she willing to acquiesce to being positioned in Rochester’s (presciently envisaged) ‘Harem’ (p. 269) – a slavery of sorts – than does she wish to be ensnared, as she knows so many women to be, by the trappings of domesticity, a caged ‘bird’ (p. 253). When Jane flees the bounds of human society, the maternal moon assumes a ‘white human form’ (p. 319); Mrs Reed’s deathbed reminiscence reveals her struggle to comprehend the materially powerless child Jane’s disturbing inner strength, transmuting her to a male-speaking non-human entity: ‘I felt fear, as if an animal that I had struck or pushed had looked up at me with human eyes and cursed me in a man’s voice’ (p. 239). Rochester asks Jane whether she is ‘altogether a human being’ when they are reunited (p. 436), calling her a ‘malicious elf’, ‘changeling’, ‘fairy-born and human-bred’ (p. 274, p. 438) when she does not submit entirely to his assumed mastery. Despite Nelly’s protestations in *Wuthering Heights* – ‘Hush! Hush! He’s a human being’ (*WH*, p. 152) – Heathcliff is seen variously as brutal monster, fiend and ghoul, ‘preter-human’ (p. 157) in a vengeance that through its very reasoned and grimly calculating control seems to push beyond the usual extremities of human passion and mourning. Depictions of humans as non-human shock the reader into considerations of stark social realities concerning disability and mental illness. We witness the horrifying falling-short of both physical care and emotional compassion for the vulnerable, and in these failures of recognition and adequate provision we are (particularly in the first-person fictional autobiographical form) implicated, complicit. For Lucy Snowe in *Villette*, caring for the ‘crétin’ was ‘more like being prisoned with some strange tameless animal, than associating with a human being’ (*V*, p. 157); in *Jane Eyre* the suffering first wife has been so grossly mistreated by Rochester and perhaps also the narrative that she has been stripped of voice, memory and identity. Bertha Mason, a growling, bellowing ‘it’, seems to the stunned Jane no longer a woman but a ‘clothed hyena’ – caged in a room without a window – who can only rise up, scratch, bite, gaze ‘wildly’ at her visitors and stand ‘tall on its hind feet’ (*JE*, p. 293).

The Brontës’ interest in the idea of the human extends beyond illustrating or troubling the divisions between human, animal and

divine – whether based on speech and language (Aristotle), thought (René Descartes), rationality (Immanuel Kant), fallibility – to a deep-set interest in understanding the functioning of language, thought, fallibility: the workings of body and mind, text and self. For all the slippage, and uncertainty, about soul, mind, bodily frame, and human ability and limitation that we find in their works, there is an emphasis on what might constitute basic human needs: being ‘a human being’ and having ‘a human being’s wants’: food, water, shelter, affective community. There is, as I’ve suggested, an abiding interest in, to borrow Jane Eyre’s phrase, ‘what human beings do instinctively when they are driven to utter extremity’ (for the governess, as for Helen Burns, that is to turn to God and prayer; in other of the novels and poems, different instincts emerge). There is also an emphasis on the human causes of – and failures to alleviate – human suffering. In the sketch Lucy Snowe prepares for those who seek to judge her, but not to provide assistance:

‘Human Justice’ rushed before me in novel guise, a red, random beldame with arms akimbo. I saw her in her house, the den of confusion: servants called to her for orders or help which she did not give; beggars stood at her door waiting and starving unnoticed; a swarm of children, sick and quarrelsome, crawled round her feet, and yelled in her ears appeals for notice, sympathy, cure, redress. The honest woman cared for none of these things. She had a warm seat of her own by the fire, she had her own solace in a short black pipe, and a bottle of Mrs. Sweeny’s soothing syrup; she smoked and she sipped, and she enjoyed her paradise; and whenever a cry of the suffering souls about her pierced her ears too keenly – my jolly dame seized the poker or the hearth-brush: if the offender was weak, wronged, and sickly, she effectually settled him: if he was strong, lively, and violent, she only menaced, then plunged her hand in her deep pouch, and flung a liberal shower of sugar-plums. (V, p. 402)

Crucially, as Lucy’s provocative and sardonic thought-piece on injustice demonstrates, the Brontës’ exploration of what it meant to be human was largely conducted in terms of the powers of the imagination. This volume offers a re-evaluation of those understandings of the mind, memory, affect, and imagination that were emerging in the early- to mid-nineteenth century and shaping cultural conceptions of the human subject and the ethical self. In *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2008), William Cohen suggests that Victorian writers answered the question ‘what does it mean to be human?’ in terms of material existence: that what is human is nothing more or less than the human body itself.³¹ This states the case for the body too strongly, smoothing over the rich complexities of Victorian positions on the mind, definitions of the soul, and the crisis of faith. The writers of *The Brontës and the Idea of the*