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# “What Do the Women Do?”

## The Work of Women in the Fiction of the Brontës

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In the opening moments of *The Brontës of Haworth*, a 1973 BBC miniseries based on Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the viewer watches the little Brontës arrive in Haworth and toddle up the steps of the parsonage for the first time, as the narrator tragically intones that “the family was keeping an appointment with destiny. In thirty-five years time, all those six children would be dead.” I begin my undergraduate seminar on the Brontë sisters with a short clip from *The Brontës of Haworth*, with its sad accounting of “the delicate Brontë sisters” who find “death and immortality” in a “remote” Yorkshire village; however, by way of a contrast, I follow it with a YouTube video, the “Brontë Sister Power Dolls” (1998), which stars fashion doll versions of Anne, Emily, and Charlotte. When an “evil publisher,” voiced by a ten-year-old boy, taunts the sisters with “girls can't write books,” they bombard him with their novels, transform (Transformer-style) into a Brontësaurus, and proceed to destroy an all-male literary club with their “barrier-breaking feminist vision.” Both clips get a laugh, but they also serve a larger purpose. They offer a rudimentary introduction to the interpretative challenges presented by the Brontës: are they, in Terry Eagleton's memorable phrasing, “three weird sisters deposited on the Yorkshire moors, from some metaphysical outer space” (Eagleton 1975: 3) whose uneventful lives and early deaths stand in stark contrast to the high romance of their novels, or are they the feminist heroines of the English canon, whose novels of female empowerment continue to inspire readers?

The story of the Brontës as the ill-fated protagonists of their own lives originates in two early biographical exercises: Charlotte's “Biographical Notice,” which prefaced

the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, and Gaskell's biography of her friend and fellow novelist. Both were written in a defensive mode and are best seen as postmortem attempts to salvage damaged reputations. When the Brontës published *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, and *Jane Eyre* in 1847, they used the pseudonyms of Ellis, Acton, and Currer Bell because, as Charlotte later confessed, "we had the vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice" (C. Brontë 1995: xxvii). But while the pseudonyms may have saved them from experiencing the full force of the critical double standard, whereby men's and women's books were judged differently, it failed to shield them from controversy. For its portrayal of strong emotions, *Wuthering Heights* was charged with coarseness, while Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which appeared in 1848 and offers an unblinking portrait of upper-class debauchery, offended many and prompted the *Athenaeum's* reviewer to characterize the subject matter of the Bell brothers' novels as "disagreeable" (Allot 1974: 251). The most lacerating review of all came at the hands of Elizabeth Rigby in the conservative *Quarterly Review*. She not only proclaimed that the author of *Jane Eyre*, if a woman, must have "long forfeited the society of her own sex" (Allot 1974: 111), but she also accused the Tory-leaning Charlotte of writing a seditious novel that "fostered Chartism and rebellion at home" (109). It is no wonder that, in the year after Anne and Emily's deaths, a grieving Charlotte, now the sole surviving Brontë sibling, tried in her "Bibliographic Notice" to recast the public's impression of the unknown authors of *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* by transforming the "disagreeable" Bell brothers into the tragic Brontë sisters, two "unobtrusive women" who lived and died in perfect seclusion (C. Brontë 1995: xxxii).

After Charlotte's death in 1855, her father asked Gaskell to write a biography that would, in the manner of Charlotte's remembrance of her sisters, wipe the dust off her gravestone and leave her name "free from soil" (C. Brontë 1995: xxxii). Gaskell's biography succeeded beyond the Rev. Brontë's wildest hopes. As Lucasta Miller notes, it continues the mythologization process of the Brontës begun in the "Biographical Notice," but it goes farther by converting Charlotte from a "celebrity" into a "legend" (Miller 2003: 3). *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* remakes its subject into a moral exemplum of Victorian domesticity, a dutiful daughter and loving sister who suffers the deaths of three beloved siblings before finding brief marital happiness in the arms of the Rev. Arthur Bell Nichols. That portrait of Charlotte's private life, however, left unresolved the problem of her unladylike literary ambition and her unconventional heroines, which Gaskell addresses by dividing her into an author and a woman, two roles that are "difficult to be reconciled" (Gaskell 1975: 334) except through the strategic deployment of the ideology of domesticity. By contending that Charlotte could "not hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others" (Gaskell 1975: 334), Gaskell depicts female authorship as an extension of a woman's domestic duties. This move is a disingenuous one, in that Charlotte saw herself as a suffering Romantic genius, not a selfless and self-effacing practitioner of womanly service.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, Gaskell's biography laid to rest the controversy sur-

rounding the sisters and immortalized them as a doomed trio and a suffering sisterhood, whose story would be retold in countless biographies over the next hundred and fifty years.

The modern era of Brontë criticism began in the 1950s, when New Criticism encouraged a return to the novels not to seek out biographical details but to evaluate them as literary texts. Articles appeared exploring, among other things, the Brontës' literary sources, their debt to the eighteenth-century Gothic novel, their investment in the Byronic hero, and their contributions to the development of the Bildungsroman. Two essays from this period, both by Robert Heilman, stand out. "Charlotte Brontë, Reason and the Moon" (1960) and "Charlotte Brontë's 'New' Gothic" (1958) articulate what have become points of departure for any reading of Charlotte's novels: that they script a conflict between "reason-judgment-common sense" and "feeling-imagination-intuition" (Heilman 1960: 288), and that they use Gothic tropes to bring new and intense forms of feeling into the English novel. It was not until the 1970s, however, with the emergence of feminist literary criticism, that there was a resurrection of the transgressive vision of the Brontës – the Brontës as Power Dolls – that had largely disappeared after the publication of Gaskell's biography. Perhaps more than any other text, Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert's *Madwoman in the Attic* (1978) transformed the Brontës into feminist icons. In a daring move, Gilbert and Gubar shifted the reader's attention away from the novels' romantic plots and redefined the works of Charlotte and Emily as narratives of female self-making, or in the case of *Wuthering Heights*, unmaking. So, for example, in *Madwoman's* reading of *Jane Eyre*, the heroine's central confrontation is no longer with the glowering Rochester but with "her own imprisoned 'hunger, rebellion, and rage'" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 339) embodied in the figure of Bertha Mason, Jane's "dark double" (Gilbert and Gubar 1979: 360). Similarly, Gilbert and Gubar's discussion of *Wuthering Heights* transforms Emily's text from a story of star-crossed lovers into a tale of feminist metaphysics by taking to heart Cathy's famous cry, "I am Heathcliff" (E. Brontë 1995: 82). *Madwoman* presents Cathy and Heathcliff as doubles who together form an authentic androgynous self, which is violently fractured as Cathy enters adulthood, a moment signaled in the text by Skulker's disabling bite at Thrushcross Grange. In the wake of Gilbert and Gubar, many feminist readings elaborated upon, in different registers, the imprisoning patriarchal structures that constitute the Brontë universe. The paradigmatic feminist moments became those of escape, real and imagined: Jane gazing from the rooftop of Thornfield, longing for "the busy world, towns, regions full of life" (E. Brontë 1995: 125); the dying Cathy wishing she was on the moors again, "half savage and hardy, and free" (E. Brontë 1995: 124); Helen Huntington declaring "I am free and safe at last!" (A. Brontë 1979: 394) when she flees an abusive husband.

The celebration of the Brontës as unproblematic feminist figures began to be questioned by the 1980s, when postcolonial critics brought their insights to bear on the Brontë texts. Most notably, in "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,"

Gayatri Spivak asserted that Jane's heroic individualism hinges upon the death of Bertha, who in Spivak's reading is no mere Gothic "dark double" but a figure from Great Britain's violent colonial history who is forced to self-immolate "for the glorification of the social mission of the colonizer" (Spivak 1985: 251). Following Spivak's seminal intervention, a host of postcolonial readings appeared, all of which identified and adjudged the Brontës' use of imperial discourses. The postcolonial readings of the novel forcefully situate the Brontës in the context of early Victorian England, with its garden variety racism and its unquestioned assumptions about the civilizing mission of the British empire and the superiority of the colonizers.<sup>2</sup>

My reading too locates the Brontës firmly within the cultural and social terrain of Victorian England. While it calls upon the insights of both feminist and postcolonial critics, it focuses squarely upon the issue of women's work. It does so because middle-class women in the 1830s and 1840s – the decades in which the Brontë sisters reached maturity – found themselves negotiating a set of historical circumstances that narrowed women's occupational choices. In the early decades of the nineteenth century, middle-class women who had been active in their families' enterprises as well as working-class women who had engaged in craft and agricultural production were gradually excluded from paid labor as it was increasingly conceptualized as male.<sup>3</sup> Women were shuffled off to the sphere of home and family, with the expectation that they would live as dependents on their male relations. This new dispensation was especially troubling for the Brontës, who could not rely on their unstable brother or their aging father to provide for them. Necessity drove all three Brontë sisters into governessing, one of the few occupations open to the well-educated daughters of a clergyman.

The governess is a resonant Victorian figure, one who troubled her contemporaries and continues to be an object of study and fascination. For the Victorians she posed ideological problems: as a lady who worked for a living her status was marked by "incongruity" (Peterson 1970: 9), the nature of her work "threatened to collapse the difference" between the public and private spheres (Poovey 1988: 126–127), and she embodied widespread anxieties over a working woman's "social respectability, sexual morality and financial self-reliance" (Hughes 1993: xiii). As a result of the challenges she created, the governess received outsized attention, although her situation within her employer's home "differed very little" from that of a domestic servant (Peterson: 1970 13). In other words, the Brontë sisters, who cycled in and out of governess positions, resembled the vast majority of England's working women, who were also relegated to domestic service positions. Factory girls, seamstresses, and prostitutes (as well as governesses) may hold center stage in the Victorian novel, but the majority of women in nineteenth-century Britain worked as domestic servants.<sup>4</sup> Service was the paradigmatic occupation for Victorian women, and the Brontë novels are populated with women who are servants (the governesses and housekeepers) and those who are treated like servants (the unhappy wives). Indeed, the insight that all women, regardless of class, are servants lies at the heart of the Brontës' feminist understanding of Victorian society. About three-quarters of the way through *Jane Eyre*, when Jane is

wandering homeless and starving before being rescued by the Rivers siblings, she has the following conversation with a working woman she meets:

“What was the chief trade in this place? What did most of the people do?”

“Some were farm labourers; a good deal worked at Mr. Oliver’s needle-factory, and at the foundry.”

“Did Mr. Oliver employ women?”

“Nay; it was men’s work.”

“And what do the women do?”

“I knawn’t,” was the answer. “Some does one thing, and some another. Poor folk mun get on as they can.” (C. Brontë 1996: 366)

Jane’s informant may not know “what do the women do?” but the Brontë sisters had an answer to Jane’s question: they serve. The Brontës use service, and the figure of the servant, to draw attention to the soul-destroying narrowness of Victorian women’s lives and to voice their own desire for greater opportunity, independence, and self-determination.

### *Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey*

*Agnes Grey* and *Wuthering Heights* were published together in one three-volume edition, but even the Victorian reviewers who took note of it found the two tales made for odd bedfellows. While *Agnes Grey* offers a straightforward, subdued account of the hardships of governessing, *Wuthering Heights*, a masterpiece of Victorian Gothic, is an altogether stormier affair. Its doublings of plot and characters, its unreliable narrators and indeterminacies, and its ghostly apparitions challenge the rationalist assumptions embedded in Victorian realism. It is a text that simultaneously invites and resists interpretation, and has a critical history marked by a certain explanatory incoherence.<sup>5</sup> However, for all their generic differences, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* are both tales told by servants whose intimate knowledge of the domestic and affective lives of the families who employ them leads to a dramatic revelation: that the privileged daughters and wives they serve are less foils than doubles. What Nelly Dean (the housekeeper) and Agnes Grey (the governess) disclose in these two novels is not that the rich are different but that rich girls are not that different from the women who serve them.

It is not surprising that Emily would choose a nursemaid-turned-housekeeper to be her primary narrator. Just as her sisters drew on their experiences as governesses in their first novels, Emily found inspiration in her role as the parsonage’s housekeeper.<sup>6</sup> Critics too have connected Emily to Nelly. U. C. Knoepfelmacher usefully argues that Nelly and the Catherine/Heathcliff pairing represent a “divided authorial presence”: Emily is Nelly, the competent woman who manages the household, but also Catherine/Heathcliff, the Brontë “least willing to relinquish the childhood fantasy

world” (Knoepfmacher 1989: 81). Emily divides herself between Nelly and the lovers in order to balance her faith in a “glorious world” that is “incomparably beyond and above” (E. Brontë 1995: 160) with her apprehension that it does not exist after all: Nelly is the novel’s ballast, its reality principle, what keeps Emily’s ghost story grounded in the actual world of turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Yorkshire.

In her role as the central narrator, Nelly has long been a person of interest to critics, who by and large do not trust her because she seems so hostile to the larger-than-life love story being played out by Heathcliff and Catherine. Bruce Robbins in his work on servant narratives attributes these misgivings about Nelly to a widespread anxiety over the power servant narrators wield not only over the narrative but also over the events they narrate (Robbins 1993: 99). Instead of distrusting Nelly, however, my analysis recuperates Nelly’s authority as a narrator and validates her insider’s perspective. As a servant whose life and livelihood depend on her ability to read her masters, Nelly possesses what Carolyn Steedman refers to as “the common psychological perception of subordinates everywhere” (Steedman 2007: 213). Her subaltern status distinguishes her from the upper-class Lockwood, the text’s first and altogether more unreliable narrator. *Wuthering Heights* challenges its readers not to be like Lockwood, locked into a single point of view and unable to imagine other worlds and lives. His limitations are most spectacularly on display in the famous dream sequence, when he cruelly bars the entry of Catherine Earnshaw’s ghost into the Heights, an act that not only reveals his deep-seated fear of women but also his inability to let an alternate reality into his consciousness. Nelly, who quickly takes over the narrative from Lockwood, can seem just as obtuse to the supernatural. Her dismissal of Cathy’s definitive “I am Heathcliff” as “nonsense” (E. Brontë 1995: 82) suggests she does not grasp the text’s latent Romanticism: that the union of Cathy/Heathcliff represents Emily’s belief in a psychic wholeness that is shattered once the child enters a world of adult propriety and property. However, the “I am Heathcliff” moment comes during a long discussion about Catherine’s plan to marry Edgar Linton in order to enable Heathcliff’s upward mobility. So while Nelly fails to understand Cathy’s primal link to Heathcliff, her insistence that Cathy speaks nonsense because she is “ignorant of the duties” (E. Brontë 1995: 82) of a wife has a certain wisdom to it. Having been slapped and pinched, banished and recalled during her years of service at *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly has a keener understanding of power (and what it is like to be mastered) than the spoiled Cathy, and she correctly predicts that, once married, Edgar Linton will not condone Cathy’s continued association with Heathcliff.

The imperious, indulged Cathy discovers too late that Nelly’s prediction is right. Linton is not a pliable master. He forbids Cathy to renew her intimacies with Heathcliff. Heathcliff’s reappearance in the text makes visible Catherine’s subordinate social position as a wife, for as soon as he enters Thrushcross Grange, months after the marriage, the narrative begins to associate Catherine with domestic service: Linton upbraids Cathy for letting the “whole household . . . witness the sight of your welcoming a runaway servant as a brother” (E. Brontë 1995: 95); and Cathy responds by having two tea tables set, one for the Lintons and another “for Heathcliff and myself,

being of the lower orders" (E. Brontë 1995: 95). At this moment, marriage threatens to transform the "headstrong and domineering" (E. Brontë 1995: 127) Catherine into a servant, but Catherine will have none of it: she starves herself to death rather than submit to Linton's mastery.

The oblique connection between service and marriage in Cathy's union with Edgar Linton becomes more explicit in the two marriages that echo and revise it. Isabella Linton as well as Catherine's daughter, Cathy, discover that marriage can be a prison, in which women are condemned to the hard labor of domestic service. After Isabella elopes with Heathcliff, foolishly mistaking him for a romantic hero, she finds herself locked up at Wuthering Heights and expected to perform household chores. She's ill-equipped, and when Nelly visits the Heights, she notices that Isabella and her surroundings have turned slatternly. Nelly reminds Heathcliff, the former servant boy who delights in the role reversal that his marriage has brought about, that Isabella was raised as an only daughter "whom everyone was ready to serve" (E. Brontë 1995: 148). Later in the text, Cathy Linton repeats the mistakes made by her aunt and mother, which is unsurprising given the novel's cyclical rather than progressive vision of history. She too finds herself locked up at the Heights after her marriage to Linton Heathcliff and expected to serve as nursemaid to the dying Linton, even though her cosseted upbringing at the Grange leaves her unprepared for the rigors of nursing. But therein rests the paradox of the novel: pampered daughters become put-upon wives.

The final union of Cathy and Hareton is frequently read as a resolution of the contrary energies swirling through the novel, represented by the two households, and many readers, along with Nelly, look forward to the marriage as a genuinely happy one. However, given the novel's Gothic repetitions, the concluding marriage can also be read not as a resolution but yet another instance of female disinheritance. Under English property law, the heiress Cathy will on marriage forfeit control of both the Grange and the Heights, so that once again a Hareton Earnshaw, whose name and the date 1500 are inscribed over the door to the Heights, will become its master and possessor. It is with the threat of Gothic repetition in mind that we might wish to read the novel's final moments, which offer a glimpse of two couples: Hareton and Cathy returning from a ramble and the ghosts of "Heathcliff and a woman" (E. Brontë 1995: 333) that have been spotted out on the moors by a local shepherd boy. Framed by these two possibilities of fulfillment – of earthly happiness on the one hand and earthly transcendence on the other – is our final vision of Nelly and Joseph. Each receives a tip or a "remembrance" (E. Brontë 1995: 334) from Lockwood as he exits the Heights, which reminds the reader that, at the end of the day, being a servant is Nelly's job, "a way of getting by in the world" (Steedman 2007: 212). Unlike the two Catherine's, who own nothing and earn nothing, the servants at least get wages, and they can quit. Zillah, the servant who earlier had replaced Nelly at the Heights, directly compares the text's servants and wives when she observes to Nelly that Cathy, after the death of Linton Heathcliff, is "as poor as you, or I – poorer – I'll be bound – you're saving – and I'm doing my little" (E. Brontë 1995: 292). In its last

few paragraphs, *Wuthering Heights* suggests that neither romantic love nor the “beyond and above” are safe bets: the only sure thing a woman can count on – even if it is only a “little” thing – is the money she earns, and the satisfaction that comes from it.

As the well-educated daughter of a clergyman who turns to teaching when her family suffers financial losses, Agnes Grey is ordinarily discussed in relationship to Charlotte’s governing heroines – Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe – as well as the other governesses who are to be found populating the pages of nineteenth-century British novels. But keeping in mind Peterson’s contention that governesses “differed very little” from domestic servants allows us to recognize the striking similarities between Agnes Grey and Nelly Dean: both serve as surrogate mothers in wealthy families, form close if not intimate bonds with marriageable daughters, and narrate events taking place upstairs from a below-the-stairs perspective. The better-educated Agnes offers a blazing indictment of the subject formations and child-rearing practices that Nelly merely observes, but both servant/narrators expose the unhappy lots of upper-class women who are raised to be mistresses but find themselves treated as servants.

In the first half of *Agnes Grey*, Agnes recounts her experiences as a novice governess and focuses most of her energies on exposing the route boys take to becoming masters. Little Tom Bloomfield, indulged by both parents, is a domestic tyrant-in-training, who progresses from “manfully” whipping his rocking-horse (A. Brontë 1991: 17) and threatening to punch his sister, to full-blown sadism, which leads to the most memorable moment in the book, when Agnes drops a large stone on a nest of baby birds to prevent Tom from torturing them. A pint-size persecutor of small animals, sisters, and governesses, Master Tom is one apple that has not fallen far from the parental tree. His behavior toward the women in his life mirrors his father’s treatment of his wife and servants, which we glimpse in a painful-to-witness lunch scene where Mr. Bloomfield refers to the kitchen staff as “savages” and publically berates his wife for not knowing what kind of fish is on the dinner menu (A. Brontë 1991: 23). Governess, household staff, and wife are treated with equal contempt because – like his son – the father defines his masculinity through the right to absolute and arbitrary rule over a domestic space organized to meet his needs. His maltreatment of his wife and servants is merely an instance of the general family philosophy, ironically articulated by Mrs. Bloomfield in defense of her son’s vicious behavior toward the baby birds, that “the creatures were all created for our convenience” (A. Brontë 1991: 45). As the novel makes clear, Mrs. Bloomfield is also treated as a mere “convenience” created to amuse and serve her husband, and in that sense is identical to Agnes, whom the Bloomfields regard as a “mere upper servant” (A. Brontë 1991: 54).

If Anne uses the Bloomfield family to investigate how little boys become domestic despots, she sends Agnes off to the Murrays, in the second half of the novel, to explore the psychosocial development of privileged daughters. Rosalie, the Murrays’ pretty daughter, has “been suffered from infancy to tyrannize over nurses, governesses, servants” (A. Brontë 1991: 62). Unsurprisingly, Rosalie grows into a cruel young woman, devoid of sympathy and given to toying with suitors in a fashion similar to Tom’s



torture of small animals. At one point in the novel, she shamelessly flirts with the local clergyman just so she can have the pleasure of rejecting his marriage proposal; and her comment that the clergyman was “crushed to the earth by his disappointment” (A. Brontë 1991: 120) encourages the reader to see the parallels between the “crushed” vicar and the mangled birds. As the daughter of a gentry family, Rosalie has been raised with the same expectations of mastery that characterize Tom Bloomfield’s upbringing.

The difference, of course, is that Tom will grow up to be like his father, whereas Rosalie will inevitably decline into a version of Mrs. Bloomfield. Indeed, the novel sketches out that trajectory for us: Rosalie makes an “advantageous” match with a man she believes will “let me have my own way,” only to discover that as a wife she is “a prisoner and a slave” (A. Brontë 1991: 184), expected to serve her spouse’s needs and accede to his demands. Just as Catherine Earnshaw longs to escape marriage and be “wild and savage and free,” so too does the bitterly disappointed Rosalie. “Oh, I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again” (A. Brontë 1991: 184), she tells Agnes shortly after her marriage. In the end, it is Agnes who finds genuine happiness in marriage because, so the text suggests, governesses make ideal wives. Having endured several years in the shadows of the glittering Miss Murray (Mrs. Murray claims that the governess’s role is to live in “obscurity” (A. Brontë 1991: 153)), Agnes has learned to subordinate her own desires and serve others. The novel marries Agnes off to a benevolent clergyman, the Rev. Edward Weston, who proves his worth through his tender care of Agnes’s pet dog. To be sure, the affiliation between Snap, the wire-haired terrier, and Agnes drawn at the novel’s conclusion might make contemporary readers uneasy, but it testifies to Anne’s difficulty in locating an alternate identity for women beyond service. Unable to imagine an escape from servitude, *Agnes Grey* hopes for the next best thing: that women (like animals) find good masters.<sup>7</sup>

### *Jane Eyre*

*Jane Eyre*, the novel Charlotte wrote while *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were making the rounds of the London publishers, benefitted from its belatedness by borrowing from and revising its predecessors. It too features a servant narrator because, like Anne, Charlotte equates governessing with service. But unlike *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre* places the servant’s romantic trials at the center of the narrative’s concerns. It remains one of the most enduring and beloved romances in the English language, and the novel’s success may in part be attributed to its brilliant deployment of both the Gothic and realist idioms as well as the ideological satisfactions of its Cinderella story. *Jane Eyre* offers its readers the romantic thrills and passionate intensity of *Wuthering Heights*, but it domesticates the ferocity of feeling on display in Emily’s novel through the voice of its Agnes Greyish narrator, a sober governess whose irreproachable morality wins her, Pamela-like, the love of her wealthy

master. At the heart of the novel is Thornfield Hall, a Gothic fun-house presided over by Edward Rochester, a Byronically brooding landowner with a dark secret in the form of a mad wife locked up in the attic. The imprisoned wife, the guileless heroine, and the overbearing patriarch are stock figures out of the female Gothic tradition, best exemplified by the novels of Ann Radcliffe.<sup>8</sup> In particular, *Jane Eyre* draws heavily on the Radcliffean trope of the imprisoned wife, also deployed by Emily and Anne, but in *Jane Eyre* the trope turns literal: the captive and caged Bertha Mason serves as a monitory image of everywoman's potential fate in the Brontë universe. However, *Jane Eyre* plans an escape from the Bridewell of marriage for its heroine, without either removing her altogether from erotic exchange (Nelly) or handing her over to a good master (Agnes Grey). Ironically, the escape route Charlotte maps is through service, which she amplifies and ennobles by recasting it as the missionary work that was central to Britain's imperial enterprise.

*Jane Eyre* is a female Bildungsroman in which Jane travels from dispossessed orphanhood to self-possession. She begins the novel by comparing herself to a "rebel slave" (C. Brontë 1996: 19) at war with her cousin John Reed, a Tom Bloomfield tyrant-in-training, and one of the first of many patriarchal figures (Mr. Brocklehurst, Rochester, St. John Rivers) against whom Jane struggles for self-definition and independence. Her uncontrolled anger gets her sent off to Lowood, where – like Oliver Twist in the parish workhouse – Jane experiences the Victorians' casual cruelty toward poor children. Lowood does, however, provide Jane with a useful education: it is where the overemotional and ungovernable child learns self-government and thereby earns the right – later as a governess – to govern others. Significantly, those lessons in self-control do not come from the hypocritical, irascible Rev. Brocklehurst but from two female figures, Helen Burns and Miss Temple, who teach Jane the skills she needs to survive as a subordinate. Helen Burns convinces Jane to abandon her Old Testament commitment to revenge and adopt more Christian notions of forgiveness and patience, while Miss Temple models for Jane how to be outwardly compliant to male authority while remaining inwardly defiant. After eight years at Lowood, Jane grows restless: "I desired liberty; for liberty I gasped; for liberty I uttered a prayer; it seemed scattered on the wind then faintly blowing. I abandoned it and framed a humbler supplication . . . 'grant me at least a new servitude'" (C. Brontë 1996: 99). This move from liberty to servitude is a significant one for Jane, as it marks her mature acceptance that absolute liberty (of the kind Catherine Earnshaw yearns for) is impossible. Jane's acceptance of servitude as a woman's lot, however, sets up the dilemma of her early adult years: how to reconcile her dreams of a fuller life with the workaday reality of servitude: "Women . . . need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do," Jane famously proclaims from the rooftop of Thornfield (C. Brontë 1996: 126). Charlotte locates that "field" for women's efforts in Jane's domestic mission to civilize her future husband, Rochester. She aligns service, the central feature of the unhappy and restrictive marriages in *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, with Britain's imperial project and reconstitutes the Brontë heroine as a servant of God and empire.

To become a missionary, however, Jane must first establish her whiteness, which she does by forming an identity opposite to that of the text's madwoman. While Gilbert and Gubar contend that Bertha embodies Jane's anger and her hidden desire to impede the marriage to Rochester, more recent readings of the novel have focused on Bertha's otherness. A West Indian heiress from a slave-holding family, Bertha is nominally white but persistently figured as black. Her madness, her violence, her lack of control over her appetites (Rochester charges her with being "intemperate and unchaste" (C. Brontë 1996: 345)) are all traits associated by the British with the colonial subject. To be sure, the angry Jane – the "mad cat" and "infantine Guy Fawkes" of the opening chapters – resembles Bertha too, but as Jane matures she acquires the self-control that distances her from Bertha and, in the racial logic of the narrative, produces Jane as the white missionary/servant and Bertha as the colonial other. Unruly passions are "true heathens" (C. Brontë 1996: 230) in this novel, and they are characteristic of foreigners like Bertha as well as Rochester's parade of European mistresses, not of Jane, who repeatedly enacts self-control, notably in the steamy, middle-of-the-night bedroom scene where she flees Rochester's fiery passions that prove more difficult to extinguish than his burning bed. That scene of seduction serves as a prelude to the ultimate test of Jane's mettle, which occurs when, after the aborted marriage ceremony, she resists Rochester's tempting proposal to become his mistress by running away from Thornfield.

In essence, *Jane Eyre* offers its heroine two ways to fulfill the servitude that is a woman's lot: she can either be a man's slave – a form of service *in extremis* – or she can be a missionary. Women like Bertha, Rochester's mistresses, and Blanche Ingram, all of whom are willing to exchange their sexual and emotional services for the financial and social advantages Rochester can offer, are figured as slaves. The prospect of such a mercenary arrangement repulses Jane: when Rochester tries to lavish silks and jewels on her, she feels like a "kept" woman and a "slave," a sentiment that Rochester intensifies when he compares Jane to the "grand Turk's whole seraglio" (C. Brontë 1996: 301). It is at this point that Jane claims an alternate (and undeniable white) identity as a "missionary" who will "preach liberty to them that are enslaved – your harem inmates amongst the rest" (C. Brontë 1996: 302). Moreover, Jane's choice to be a missionary rather than a slave solidifies her connection to her ambitious cousin, St. John Rivers, who escapes the "fetters" and "bondage" (C. Brontë 1996: 405) he associates with his narrow life as a country parson by going out to India on a Christian mission. In his iciness, his ruthless self-repression, his disdain for romantic passion, St. John is the antithesis of Rochester and not the man Jane wishes to marry, but she does adopt his philosophy that "no service degrades which can better our race . . . the more arid and unreclaimed the soil where the Christian labourer's task of tillage is appointed him . . . the higher the honor" (C. Brontë 1996: 396). In lieu of following St. John to India, however, Jane discovers that her "task of tillage" lies closer to home, in a mission to reclaim and "rehumanize" (C. Brontë 1996: 484) Rochester, whose many sins include marrying Bertha for mercenary motives, profiting from the slave economy of Jamaica, hiring mistresses, and attempting bigamy. By redeeming

Rochester, Jane enacts the role of missionary that had already been prepared for her by the Victorian ideology of domesticity, which figured women as moral missionaries within the home, but she also elevates that role by equating it with St. John's mission to India. The second proposal scene, which notably lacks the egalitarian rhetoric of the first, underscores Jane's identity as a powerful missionary figure. Rochester not only looks to Jane as someone who will both "wait" on him and "lead" him; he also anticipates a married life in which Jane's "soft ministry will be a perpetual joy" (C. Brontë 1996: 494). In this way, the conclusion to *Jane Eyre* boldly revises that of *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte's does not reward her heroine with someone like the Rev. Edward Weston but rather transforms her heroine into a female version of the good minister. *Jane Eyre* escapes mastery by refusing any master but God.<sup>9</sup>

### *Tenant of Wildfell Hall, Shirley, and Villette*

The last three novels the Brontës published (Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Charlotte's *Shirley* and *Villette*) shift the focus from marriage to the dilemma facing unmarried women much like the Brontë sisters themselves. "Single women should have more to do" (C. Brontë 1974: 376–377), the heroine of *Shirley* declares, and that "more to do" means more than being a servant or a governess. *Shirley* is a sustained meditation on female employment, while *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Villette* boldly venture into new fictional territory to represent women who achieve success through their work as professionals.

The earliest of the last three novels, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* presents one of the first literary portrayals of a professional woman artist and thereby constructs an identity for its heroine, Helen Huntingdon, as something other than an upper servant.<sup>10</sup> The novel "has been singled out most frequently for two elements," Tess O'Toole observes:

- (1) its unusually complicated framing device (Gilbert Markham's epistolary account of his relationship with Helen Huntingdon surrounds her much lengthier diary account of her first marriage and flight from her husband) and (2) its strikingly frank and detailed description of a woman's experience in an abusive marriage. (O'Toole 1999: 715)

A focus on both these elements, the frame and the marriage, allows us to see how thoroughly Anne engages in a dialogue with her sisters' texts. The frame narrative and plot (a mysterious tenant with an unknown past disrupts a small community) recalls *Wuthering Heights*, while the diary at the center of the novel revises *Jane Eyre* and rejects that novel's claim that women can wield moral influence over their husbands. *Tenant's* Rochester figure is a spoiled man-child named Arthur Huntingdon, and he marries a woman who believes she can save "him from the consequences of his early errors" and place him on "the path of virtue" (A. Brontë 1979: 167). A few years of marital discord, during which Arthur refuses to be a good sport and submit to his

wife's civilizing mission, soon disabuse his wife of this notion. Like Rosalie Murray, Helen Huntingdon discovers that she is nothing but a slave and a prisoner trapped in a marriage to an unreformed rake who expects his wife to serve him – to “wait upon” him and “minister to his comfort” (A. Brontë 1979: 257) – and to leave his imperiled soul alone.

While *Agnes Grey* cannot imagine a way out for Rosalie, Helen's ability to sell her paintings – to turn professional artist – enables her to flee her unhappy union. Economic self-sufficiency, without the infantilizing bonds of service, licenses the heroine to live an independent life as a single mother once she leaves Arthur. To be sure, the unconventional vision that Anne offers her readers, of marital breakdown and a woman's salvation in the marketplace, is enclosed within a frame narrative that begins and ends with Helen's second marriage. The question of how to read Anne's act of narrative enclosure is a tricky one: does the frame narrative contain the heroine's rebellion against Victorian norms, or does it challenge and destabilize the heroine's reportedly happy second marriage through parallels to the first? Gilbert Markham does behave badly and in ways that disturbingly resemble Arthur. But the novel holds out the possibility that Helen's diary, which she gives Gilbert to explain her mysterious residency at Wildfell Hall, brings about the moral reformation of Gilbert. In *Tenant*, female aesthetic productions – rather than the woman herself – possess the power of moral suasion.<sup>11</sup> Anne rewrites the end of *Jane Eyre* by channeling the missionary drive of Jane away from the wife and toward her artistic productions, thereby legitimizing (by moralizing) a woman's professional activity.

This link between service and the professional woman writer is made explicit in Anne's preface to the second edition of *Tenant*. She defends her novel against accusations of indelicacy – the novel represents, in Anne's own words, “vice and vicious characters” (A. Brontë 1979: 30) – by comparing herself to a housemaid: “she who undertakes the cleansing of a careless bachelor's apartment will be liable to more abuse for the dust she raises, than commendation for the clearance she effects” (A. Brontë 1979: 29). Anne's ethical cleansing is a variation on Gaskell's theme that the woman writer must not “hide her gift in a napkin; it was meant for the use and service of others.” Like Gaskell and other mid-Victorian feminists, Anne deploys the image of female service to propel women into professional lives.

If *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* sandwiches the heroine's working career between two marriages, *Shirley* justifies Caroline Helstone's desire for work by situating her within a stalled marriage plot. Written in a third-person voice that Charlotte wields awkwardly, *Shirley* is a historical novel set in Yorkshire during the Luddite riots of the early nineteenth century, in which weavers clashed with mill-owners over the introduction of machinery. Despite its historical setting, *Shirley* is usually grouped with other condition-of-England novels written during the turbulent mid-century years of industrial unrest, such as Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and Charles Dickens's *Hard Times*. Like Gaskell, Charlotte introduces feminist concerns into the condition-of-England novel by paralleling the plight of male workers and middle-class women; for just as unemployment, brought about by the introduction of new machinery, devastates the

novel's working-class men and the communities they inhabit, so too does unemployment nearly kill off Caroline Helstone, who has nothing to do and no marital prospects because the man she loves is too preoccupied with his economic survival to propose. Brontë links Caroline to the unemployed workers through their shared inactivity and hunger: the out-of-work weavers and their families starve, while Caroline slowly wastes away without any "scope and work" (C. Brontë 1974: 379). Caroline's unemployment becomes for her an existential crisis: "I shall never marry. What was I created for, I wonder?" (C. Brontë 1974: 190). Service to family and community is the unsatisfying answer given to Caroline, who tries but fails to cure her deep sense of purposelessness by playing Lady Bountiful.

Service is the answer given to Caroline because all the women who inhabit *Shirley* are servants. The novel's opening scene, in which three greedy curates eat up everything like a plague of "locusts" (C. Brontë 1974: 42) while behaving with great incivility to the landlady who has prepared and served the meal, encapsulates the novel's fundamental social dynamic: this is an unjust world where women cook and keep house while the privileged men they serve are blithely unaware of the scarcity caused by male overindulgence. The figure of the female servant haunts the women of *Shirley* to such a degree that the visionary Shirley Keeldar, the wealthy heiress who befriends Caroline, tries to exorcise her ghost. In her much-cited critique of Milton's Eve, Shirley asserts that "It was his cook he saw; or it was Mrs. Gill [Shirley's housekeeper], as I have seen her . . . preparing a cold collation for the rectors" (C. Brontë 1974: 315). By reimagining the first woman as a Titan, Shirley engages in bold feminist myth-making to counter the prevailing understanding of women's subsidiary role in British culture. Nonetheless, the text's turn to myth, despite its stated commitment to give the reader "something real, cool, and solid" (C. Brontë 1974: 39), attests to Brontë's acknowledgment of realism's limits. Only by resorting to myth can the text represent an alternative, non-patriarchal version of female identity because the actual women who inhabit the novel are either Miltonic Eves – cooks, housekeepers, and servants – or the fettered wives who populate all the Brontës' novels. When Caroline engages in the Woolfian act of thinking back through her mother, she discovers that her own mother has been both an unhappy governess living a "solitary, constrained, joyless, toilsome" life existence (C. Brontë 1974: 363) and a miserable wife in "bondage" (C. Brontë 1974: 414) to a drunkard, from whom she separates and returns to governessing. Representing the past and present in such dismal terms, the novel has nowhere to turn but to Shirley's visionary imagination.

Caroline and Shirley see Milton's cook wherever they go, while the heroine of *Villette*, Charlotte's return to a first-person, Gothic narrative, repeatedly encounters the terrifying apparition of a ghostly nun. Rumored to have been "buried alive, for some sin against her vow" (C. Brontë 1979: 173) during the Middle Ages, the nun is Charlotte's last attempt to represent the horrors of female servitude. Borrowed both from Gothic fiction as well as the anti-Catholic rhetoric that flourished at mid-century, the nun symbolizes Lucy Snowe's fear that her own existence (as a nursery maid turned

teacher in a continental school) is nun-like because it is marked by a deep repression of desire and a cloistered existence in which conventual “penance, self-denial and difficult hard works” fill up her days (C. Brontë 1979: 234). The victim of an unspecified calamity, Lucy discovers early on that the limited opportunities available to a distressed gentlewoman like herself preclude the possibility of personal happiness and satisfaction: she must live without – without love, without independence, without a wider knowledge and participation in the world. As Lucy moves through the female spaces that define the novel’s landscape, she traverses all the modes of female service – from lady’s companion, to nursery maid, to teacher. Only at the very end does she – like Helen Huntingdon – claim a professional identity by becoming the successful proprietor of a *pensionnat*. *Villette*, however, hardly reads like a female Horatio Alger story because the novel records the psychic distress resulting from Lucy’s dependent, subordinate, and isolated social position. In other words, it maps out the subjectivity of female servitude.

Lucy Snowe is no plucky and resilient Jane Eyre. While readers admire and celebrate Jane’s triumphant self-assertion, Lucy is a “figure whose psychological stability is permanently in question” (Shuttleworth 1996: 219). Charlotte’s long-standing interest in psychology takes center stage in *Villette*, but the novel suggests that Lucy’s instability is less a character quirk than a condition engendered by the social demands of servitude. Lucy represses her desire for all the things a life in service denies her, and this results in a subjectivity that is divided and represented as self-harming. In one of the most dramatic images in the novel, Lucy calls on the biblical story of Jael and Sisera to enact the conflict between her reason and her desire. However, while Jael successfully kills Sisera by driving a nail through his head, Lucy’s reason can only stun (but not kill) her longings for a life filled with more than “penance, self-denial and difficult hard works.”

Lucy’s odd and at-odds self is merely an extreme version of the normative femininity represented in the novel by Polly Home, the dotingly domestic daughter/wife who lives only to “look after someone” (C. Brontë 1979: 80). If all women are servants, as the Brontë texts suggest, then all women are also at war with their own desires and wounded by the need to continually repress them. Polly certainly shows traces of damage. As a child, she wields a sewing needle as a “perverse weapon” that inflicts hurt on its user: a “track of minute red dots” (C. Brontë 1979: 73) testifies to Polly’s self-torture in the cause of a handkerchief for papa. These “red dots,” like Lucy’s “bleeding temples” (C. Brontë 1979: 176), are indices that Victorian femininity produces a masochistic subjectivity as the norm. It is no wonder that Lucy rejects the domestic ideal embodied by Pauline, her godmother Mrs. Bretton, and the insipid figures pictured in *La Vie d’une Femme*. Lucy also dismisses the cloistered existence represented by the buried nun in the garden; however, while repudiating these approved models of femininity, she never appears tempted to embrace their opposite, epitomized by the Cleopatra portrait that Lucy coolly appraises. When presented with this narrow range of female types available to mid-Victorian women, Lucy opts for something altogether new and writes a “heretic narrative” (C. Brontë 1979: 235) that

does not end in marriage, do-gooding celibacy, or death and disgrace. Rather, Lucy's narrative ends with work. Lucy finds and loses love in the form of M. Paul, a fellow teacher who endows Lucy with the means of independence but whose death on the high seas, in another mysterious shipwreck, seems to suggest that Brontë could not imagine a woman's life that combined work and love. So Lucy concludes the novel resembling no one so much as Madame Beck, the widowed proprietor of the Pensionnat Beck, whose administrative genius Lucy presumably imitates in the rival school she establishes.

The events in *Villette* are loosely based on Charlotte's real-life adventures at the Pensionnat Heger in Brussels, where she went in 1842 accompanied by Emily, to polish her French and pick up a smattering of Italian and German, with the aim of returning to England and opening a school of her own. Indeed, when Charlotte returned to Haworth a few years later (after having fallen unhappily in love with the married M. Heger), she won her sisters over to the idea of housing the "Misses Brontë's Establishment" for the education of young ladies in the Haworth parsonage. Circulars were printed up and duly sent around to the Brontës' acquaintances, but no one came forward with a daughter for the sisters to educate. Relieved by the failure of the scheme, Charlotte and her sisters redirected their ambitions from teaching to writing. By becoming successful authors – as they did with quick dispatch – the Brontës found the one profession wide open to middle-class women in the mid-nineteenth century. Professional authorship became their escape from the drudgery of governessing and the harassments of genteel poverty, from the years spent struggling with recalcitrant children in Victorian schoolrooms and taking orders from difficult-to-please employers, all because they had to earn a living.<sup>12</sup> The frustrations with a woman's lot that spill out from the pages of their novels are hardly unique to them, for as Catherine Hall notes, the contraction of work in the early 1800s led to "the demand in the 1850s for more training and employment for middle-class women" and thus propelled England's "first organized feminist movement" (Hall 1992: 175) into being. The sisters' novels transmit the experiences of countless middle-class ladies, although those experiences are made into something rich and strange through the transformative power of the Brontës' imaginations. Nevertheless, it is by giving voice to one of the central concerns of their generation – "what do the women do?" – that the three sisters achieved, as the narrator of *The Brontës of Haworth* would have it, their "appointment with destiny."

#### NOTES

- 1 See Deirdre D'Alberty's "Bookmaking Out of the Remains of the Dead" (1995) for a discussion of Gaskell's and Brontë's different understandings of female authorship as well as an elaboration of the importance of womanly service to Gaskell and other nineteenth-century women writers.
- 2 Charlotte's work has been of particular interest to critics exploring the intersections of literature and British imperialism. In addi-



- tion to Spivak, see also Suvendrini Perera's *Reaches of Empire* (1991), Deirdre David's *Rule Britannia* (1995), Susan Meyer's *Imperialism at Home* (1996), and Jenny Sharp's *Allegories of Empire* (1993). For a discussion of *Wuthering Heights* in the context of the Irish Famine, see Terry Eagleton's *Heatbcliff and the Great Hunger* (1995), and for an exploration of the slave trade in that novel, see Maja-Lisa von Sneidern, "Wuthering Heights and the Liverpool Slave Trade" (1995).
- 3 Catherine Hall maps out the exclusion of middle-class women from the world of work in the first decades of the nineteenth century in *White, Male, and Middle-Class*. See the chapter entitled "Strains in the 'Firm of Wife, Children and Friends': middle-class women and employment in early nineteenth-century England." Deborah Valenze in *The First Industrial Woman* (1995) details the increasing exclusion of working-class women from waged labor at the same time.
  - 4 See chapter 9 of Valenze for a discussion of the importance of domestic service for nineteenth-century working-class women. Edged out of other occupations, working-class women turned to service in large numbers, and it became "the largest single category of employment of women" (Valenze 1995: 156).
  - 5 See J. Hillis Miller's essay on *Wuthering Heights* in *Fiction and Repetition* for a useful summary of critical approaches to the novel, including Lord David Cecil's reading of it as a "conflict between two cosmological forces, storm and calm"; Dorothy Van Ghent's examination of the "doors and windows in the novel"; C.P. Sanger's elucidation of "Brontë's accurate knowledge of the laws of private property in Yorkshire"; and Thomas Moser's Freudian reading of the text "as a thinly disguised sexual drama displaced and condensed." To Miller's list one could add Marxist readings, queer readings, biographical readings, feminist readings, and postcolonial readings, but one would still be faced with, as Miller notes, a "degree of incoherence among the various explanations" (Miller 1982: 50).
  - 6 In her biography of the Brontës, Juliet Barker notes that Emily was a capable housekeeper who preferred kitchen work to teaching, and after her brief adventures in governessing, she stayed home, ran the parsonage, and looked after her father. If the sisters' projected school had ever materialized, she was to do the housekeeping while Charlotte and Anne instructed the students (Barker 1994).
  - 7 For a discussion of the parallels between women and animals in Anne's novel, see Maggie Berg's "'Hapless Dependents': Women and Animals in *Agnes Grey*" (2002).
  - 8 See, for example, Donna Heiland's *Gothic and Gender: An Introduction* (2004).
  - 9 For a detailed discussion of Jane as domestic missionary, see my "Jane Eyre, Anna Leonowens, and the White Woman's Burden: Governesses, Missionaries, and Maternal Imperialists in Mid-Victorian Britain" (1996).
  - 10 See Antonio Losano's "The Professionalization of the Woman Artist in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," which contends that Helen's "adult artistic activity hints at the emergent potential for professional female identity" (Losano 2003: 17).
  - 11 This insight arises from Losano's contention that *Tenant* explores the problem of the female visual artist becoming, through the male gaze, the eroticized art object, which the female author escapes because writing is "something apart from the body" (Losano 2003: 39).
  - 12 Anne and Emily died shortly after their novels appeared in print, but Charlotte published three novels with Smith and Elder before her death in 1855, earning about five-hundred pounds per novel (Barker 1994: 527). Those £1500 were far in excess of the £40 per annum Anne was paid as the governess at Thorpe Green in the early 1840s and the £20 per annum that Charlotte received as a governess in the Whites' household in 1841 (Barker 1994: 351). So while publishing did not make Charlotte rich, it was much more remunerative than governessing and allowed her to live and work at home.

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