

Approaching Charlotte Brontë in the Twenty-First Century

In 1941 Fannie Ratchford complained that although criticism of the Brontës' work showed all signs of being 'exhausted', 'every year brings forth an undiminished quota of volumes colored by the literary or intellectual fad of the moment' (ix-x). Hoping that the early twentieth-century enthusiasm for psychological approaches was finally abating, Ratchford expressed relief that 'we are now emerging from an orgy of Freudian studies and psychoanalyses of Brontë complexes and repressions' (x). Since the 1940s critical developments in Brontë studies have diversified considerably and in the year of Charlotte Brontë's bicentenary we can look back on a voluminous body of criticism. Today most new approaches to Charlotte Brontë's work are broadly historicist, whether they adopt the perspectives of gender studies, postcolonial approaches, disability studies or adaptation studies. New Brontë scholarship is nevertheless haunted, even if only tangentially, by three critical texts published between 1975 and 1985: Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (1975); Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), whose title references Bertha Mason, Rochester's incarcerated and rejected wife in *Jane Eyre*; and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's often reprinted discussion of Bertha as representative of the colonial other in her essay 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', first published in the journal *Critical Inquiry* in 1985. These ground-breaking works of criticism, now considered classics of Marxist (Eagleton), feminist (Gilbert and Gubar) and postcolonial (Spivak) approaches to Charlotte Brontë's work, continue to inform most critical conversations about *Jane Eyre*, a novel which, unsurprisingly given its cultural prominence, continues to dominate Brontë studies today.

In the early 2000s both *Myths of Power* and *The Madwoman in the Attic* were reissued as new editions with new introductions for a new generation of scholars. There was inevitably an element of nostalgia in the republication of texts which had stimulated so many debates, yet were now being supplemented and challenged by other approaches. Undoubtedly, Gilbert and Gubar, Spivak, and Eagleton have each left an important legacy for subsequent scholars in their application of theory to Charlotte Brontë's work. They decisively pushed scholarship beyond the Victorian-inspired tendency to analyse the author as naively writing autobiography thinly disguised as fiction. Indeed, their most important legacy was the

revelation of Charlotte Brontë as a political writer. All of the works I discuss in this survey engage in some way with this legacy, and while most critics have benefited from their insights, many have also exposed their limitations.

Far from being ‘exhausted’, then, as Ratchford suspected, approaches to Charlotte Brontë (along with the rest of her family) have continued to evolve in new directions. Her novels are today being studied for their engagement with topics such as sexuality, slavery, the family, religion, imperialism, material culture, childhood, disability, the body, illness, psychology (rather more complex than the ‘orgy’ of Freudian readings Ratchford singled out for complaint), the gothic, regional identity, education, trading networks, the periodical press, and the law. The abundance and richness of this new criticism undoubtedly contributes to greater insights into Charlotte Brontë’s work and legacy. The following brief, necessarily selective, overview of Charlotte Brontë studies focuses on criticism published in the last decade, most of which is based on or informed by historical research. This work is indebted to earlier historicist readings by Sally Shuttleworth on Victorian psychology (1996); Heather Glen on historical engagement (2002); and Christine Alexander on the juvenilia (1983 and 1987-1991); each has demonstrated Brontë’s extensive reading and engagement with Victorian politics, culture, society and theory.

More recently, Marianne Thormählen also presents Brontë as a writer aware of the major social developments of her time. In *The Brontës and Education* (2007) she demonstrates how their fiction was informed by government policy and practices, the work of educationalists in the early nineteenth century, and the experiences of the sisters themselves as pupils, teachers and governesses. The value of her book is its exposure of the oversimplifying tendencies which presented Brontë as unequivocally a radical feminist. Students of Charlotte Brontë would be wise to heed Thormählen’s point that the author’s:

correspondence and her fiction contain logically inconsistent views, conflicting values and anxious inconclusive probings. The middle-class Tory woman with her roots in Evangelical Christianity could express sentiments and opinions that would have suited a clubbable Whig male of comfortable means and tepid beliefs or an ardent Radical working man. (26)

Highlighting the contradictions of history and people, refusing the temptation to make a neat argument, *The Brontës and Education* not only saturates the alert reader with a vivid sense of the period and its championing of education, but also brings Charlotte Brontë, the reluctant governess who wrote about the plight of teachers, into a new light as a woman well-versed in educational theory.

The issue of Brontë's politics is thoughtfully explored in a recent consideration of *Jane Eyre* as representing a 'Tory nation' before the onset of rapid technological change. Ruth Livesey's journal article 'Communicating with *Jane Eyre*: Stagecoach, Mail, and the Tory Nation' (2011), like Thormählen's book, explores Brontë's Tory's sympathies. Detailed research on the history of British transport and communications networks which examines the political opposition between the (Whig) championing of the railways and the (Tory) advocacy of the stage coach, informs Livesey's reading of Jane's journeys via coach in terms of Brontë's engagement with 'a wider Tory concept of the nation in which proximity, interest, custom, and mutual obligation defend against the abstractions of individualism and class' (633). Ian Ward in *Law and the Brontës* (2012) also presents Charlotte Brontë in terms of her 'Tory instincts' (104). Writing from the perspective of a professor of law, he considers Rochester and Bertha in relation to contemporary laws on insanity, while *Shirley* is read as a novel concerned with 'the failure of magistracy, and more particularly the failure of paternal and parochial magistracy' (108). Ward's expert understanding of legal history offers invaluable insights into Charlotte Brontë's interest in the legal debates of her age. Although for literary scholars Ward's chapters may seem loosely organised and his links to the novels sometimes appear tenuous, the book's great strength lies in his revelation of how the legal contexts of the nineteenth century penetrate Brontë's work at every level. He also conveys a sense of the bigger interactions of culture and society when he demonstrates how literary texts 'humanise' the law and 'contribute to the creation of a broader jurisprudential consciousness' (143). Literature, he maintains, by 'fashion[ing] its own reality' throws into relief the social structures and processes which are dehumanised or obscured by the press' (144). Charlotte Brontë, then, is offered up by Ward as a significant voice in history, as well as a major writer of fiction.

Brontë's equally complex relationship to the arts is explored by a number of contributors to Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells's edited collection of essays, *The Brontës and the World of the Arts* (2008). A particularly welcome addition to Brontë studies is the chapter on *Shirley* by Juliette Wells with Ruth A. Solie, 'Shirley's Window on a Musical Society in Transition', which demonstrates how Charlotte Brontë:

responds to and sometimes questions a host of early-Victorian beliefs about music's power and significance, including its supposed capacity to ennoble its genteel practitioners, to sustain and renew family bonds, to intensify Christian devotion, and to uplift the minds of working people. (103)

This essay interestingly links Brontë's representation of music in *Shirley* to issues of gender and nationality. Christine Alexander's chapter 'Educating "The Artist's Eye": Charlotte

Brontë and the Pictorial Image' is wide-ranging in its analyses of the author's drawings and paintings, her love of the fine arts and illustration which originated in childhood, her ambitions to be an artist, and her representations of art and artists in her novels.

The historicist studies I've discussed so far depend upon a painstaking analysis of the historical archive; however not all scholars have been prepared to take the necessary pains. Some potentially worthwhile discussions of Charlotte Brontë's work have unravelled because their arguments are based on historical inaccuracies. Ayşe Çelikkol in *Romances of Free Trade: British Literature, Laissez-faire, and the Global Nineteenth Century* (2011) examines Charlotte Brontë's 'deep interest in free trade debates' in *Shirley* (102). Emphasising the global reach of the novel's free trade rhetoric, Çelikkol refers to Robert Moore, the Yorkshire manufacturer hero of *Shirley*, as lacking 'access to the US cotton-cloth market' (108) and longing for the repeal of the Orders in Council (trade restrictions imposed during the Napoleonic Wars) to ensure that his 'cotton cloth sales will bring enough profit to feed the impoverished workers of the region' (112). Yet Moore is the manager of a *woollen* mill, a representation one would expect from Brontë, living as she did in the centre of Yorkshire's wool producing region. The Yorkshire Luddites, who play a prominent role in the novel, destroyed the power looms that were replacing them in the region's woollen mills. Because Çelikkol reads 'cotton' when Brontë writes 'wool', the chapter's argument is shifted onto tenuous ground and *Shirley*'s locale, which is so thoroughly Yorkshire, oddly comes to resemble its neighbouring county of Lancashire, where the conditions were perfect for cotton manufacture.

A similar level of historical inaccuracy informs Mario Ortiz Robles's reading of *Jane Eyre*, although unlike Çelikkol he eschews a historicist approach. *The Novel as Event* (2010), an interesting and thought-provoking book, actually sets out to expose the limitations of cultural and historicist approaches to Victorian novels. As Robles rightly points out, materialist approaches often focus on representations of objects at the expense of the medium in which readers encounter those objects: that is, language. Robles recommends a critical engagement with the performativity of novels, for 'it is the performative force of language [...] to which we must attend if we wish to understand the historicity of the novel' (12). His chapter on *Jane Eyre*, 'Plotting Jane', opens with a promise to show how the novel's speech-acts make it *do* things in the world and he gives as example the narrative being a performance of 'its own autobiography': *Jane Eyre* 'produces the reality it describes' (40). Robles focuses on the marriage plot, where the central speech-act of the marriage ceremony, Jane and Rochester's utterance of 'I do', is not actually represented by the narrator. Instead, he argues

it is displaced elsewhere in the narrative in those moments when Jane says repeatedly ‘I do’ to Rochester. Robles sees this as an echo of the marriage ceremony that is not represented (45). Yet this argument crumbles when we examine the novel’s historical context, for neither Jane nor Rochester would have said ‘I do’ during the marriage ceremony. In nineteenth-century Britain, marriages in the Church of England demanded the utterance of the words, ‘I will’. These words hold a suggestion of future promise, unlike the present-tense assertion of the American convention of ‘I do’ to perform the wedding ceremony. Thus, Jane’s utterance of ‘I do’ as she asserts herself with Rochester cannot easily be read as an echo of the unperformed marriage ceremony. Robles needed to find instances of the heroine saying ‘I will’ to see if these work as displacements of her marriage vow.

Does it matter that Jane and Rochester say ‘I do’ in Robles’s book, while they (and their creator Charlotte Brontë when she married in 1854) would have actually said ‘I will’? Does it matter that Çelikkol, needing a link to US cotton markets for her argument about global trade, changes the cloth created in Robert Moore’s mill from wool to cotton? I think that it does matter, if only for the reason that such errors fundamentally undermine the central arguments of both authors. If we ignore the details of history and locale which Charlotte Brontë threads through her novels, we are in danger of wasting time on the assumption that our own cultural norms and expectations are universal.

Recent engagements with material culture are much more likely to attend to the specificity of an author’s time and place, and Elaine Freedgood’s approach to *Jane Eyre* is certainly not slipshod when it comes to historical detail. Her chapter on Brontë’s novel in her book *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (2006) focuses on how Jane’s transformation from a victimised slave-figure to the mistress of ‘souvenirs, in the form of mahogany’ furniture originating in Madeira, ‘naturalizes, domesticates, and internalizes the violent histories of deforestation, slavery, and the ecologically and social devastating cultivation of cash crops’ (35). Jane’s furniture, bought with her inherited fortune and usually ignored by critics as merely realist background detail, is highlighted by Freedgood as a ‘sign of ... imperial mastery’ (51). Her argument is that ‘social relations hide in things’ (54), and this approach can be usefully considered alongside Sue Thomas’s book, *Imperialism, Reform and the Making of Englishness in Jane Eyre* (2008). Thomas is also interested in how an analysis of the history of colonialism brings to light readings which have been obscured by the passage of time. She warns her readers that ‘The historical and cultural distance of later readers has [...] rendered aspects of the contemporary worldliness of *Jane Eyre* unintelligible’ (2). Her ‘worlding’ of the novel respects the fact that texts are also events with ‘sensuous

particularity’, and she, like Freedgood, attempts to explain what is ‘cryptic to modern readers or very compressed’ in order to ‘radically reframe understandings’ of the novel and its author (2). Drawing on nineteenth-century discourses of race to complicate readings of Bertha Mason as black (a reading initiated by Spivak), Thomas demonstrates that ‘the category [of] whiteness was mutable’ (51) at this period, and by analysing the reports of slave rebellions and abolitionist arguments available to Charlotte Brontë, Bertha can be read as a representative of decadent white slave owners, not ‘the rebel slave ... but the ineducable despot’ (52-53).

The importance of ‘things’ in Brontë’s work has been emphasised by Jonathan Shears and Jen Harrison in a richly detailed essay, ‘The Ideas in Thing Town: *Villette*, Art and Moveable Objects’, in their edited collection, *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians: From Commodities to Oddities* (2013). They explore how *Villette* highlights the anxious instability of material culture by analysing the apparently uncanny, defamiliarising movability of objects in Lucy Snowe’s world. Another writer who focuses on the work of ‘things’ is Deborah Lutz in *The Brontë Cabinet* (2015), a book which successfully straddles academic writing and popular biography. It contains nine chapters each based on a specific object associated with the Brontës’ lives, including the tiny books containing the juvenilia, desks, pets, walking sticks and letters. Lutz:

place[s] each object in its cultural setting and in the moments of everyday lives of the Brontës. [...] Through the ‘eyes’ of thread, paper, wood, jet, hair, bone, brass, fur, frond, leather, velvet, and ash, new corners and even rooms of these Victorian women’s lives light up for us (xxiv-xxv).

Succumbing to the desire to fetishise the loved author’s possessions, Lutz offers fascinating insights into the relationship between objects used by Charlotte Brontë, such as her portable desk, and her fiction. In *Shirley*, for example, the hidden compartments of her own desk may have inspired Charlotte to ‘eroticize[] the contents of her character Shirley’s desk’ in the scene where Louis, finding his lover’s desk open, gazes within and reads her character (165).

The complexity of fetishism features strongly in Sharon Marcus’s work. Hers is a major voice in queer studies today, and her book *Between Women: Friendship, Desire, and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) examines both *Shirley* and *Villette* in terms of the social construction of sexuality and feminine identity in the Victorian period. *Between Women* proposes the argument that in the Victorian novel female friendship was represented as necessary, for the close bonds between women facilitated marriage, allowing a rehearsal of desire and affection before a wedding took place. Marcus thus interprets the friendship

between Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar in *Shirley* as facilitating the shy Caroline's marriage to Robert Moore, for it is the 'masculine' Shirley who first teaches her the strength 'to express emotion' (99). This novel, Marcus argues, 'rates female friendship higher than sexual love' (97-98). By contrast, *Villette* reveals that Brontë grew tired of the 'plot of female amity', choosing instead to depict a heroine who sees female friends as rivals, 'as obstacles rather than conduits to marriage' (107). Marcus argues that 'nothing seemed more odd to Victorian readers' than female rivalry, for it is through amity that women help each other towards marriage (106). Nevertheless, Lucy's 'passion for femininity' (107: Marcus's emphasis), evident in her 'ambivalent' relationship with Ginevra Fanshawe (103), and her pleasure in partially cross-dressing and flirting with Ginevra in the school play, renders her a particularly atypical Victorian heroine. *Shirley*, on the other hand, usually considered an oddity in Brontë's oeuvre (a novel which John Plotz has argued 'is something of a freak' (2000: 191)) becomes for Marcus a typical Victorian account of the high social value placed on female friendship. My own essay, 'Charlotte Brontë's Frocks and *Shirley's* Queer Textiles' (2013), is indebted to Marcus's work in its exploration of the relationship between clothing, textile work and gender in *Shirley*. These themes are linked to Brontë's own experience of the metaphorical cross-dressing involved in the 'daily transition between petticoats and breeches involved in being Charlotte Brontë, her father's housekeeper, and Currer Bell, the famous author' (153). The chapter also demonstrates the tensions in *Shirley* 'between the capitalist enterprise in wool manufacture and the needlework done by women at home' (150).

Gender switching is the focus of William A. Cohen's complex discussion of *The Professor* in his *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009). He identifies the novel's 'most remarkable feature' as its use of the first-person male narrator, which 'supplies Brontë the opportunity to imagine being a man, and in particular to speculate about how it feels to inhabit a male body' (41). Cohen doesn't, however, trace back this male identification to Brontë's juvenilia, where she commonly wrote from a male viewpoint. Nevertheless it is refreshing to read a detailed analysis of a novel that has generally been little-discussed; he asserts that *The Professor* is an unusually 'dramatic staging of the relation between the interior subject and the body' (40), thus emphasising the novel's wider significance in Victorian literary culture.

Despite some valuable discussions of *The Professor*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*, *Jane Eyre* continues to dominate critical accounts of Brontë's work, although interestingly the figure of Bertha Mason has increasingly been shifted into the foreground. This tendency is evident in

one of the most thought-provoking contributions to Charlotte Brontë studies in recent years, *The Madwoman and the Blind Man: Jane Eyre, Discourse, Disability* (2012) edited by Bolt, Rodas and Donaldson, which presents among its eight chapters some thoughtful discussions of Bertha Mason's 'madness'. The title of this edited collection, of course, echoes Gilbert and Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic*, and many of its chapters are in dialogue with the earlier book. *The Madwoman and the Blind Man* constitutes an important step in disability studies, paving the way for new readings of other Victorian novels. It is interesting that the editors chose to focus exclusively on *Jane Eyre*, particularly as Brontë's other novels engage with disability and illness. Yet the advantage of reading one text through the lens of disability studies is that the contributors are able to demonstrate better the plurality and complexity of an approach which has wide ranging significance, exposing long-held cultural assumptions that read disability only as a problem. Additionally, by choosing what the editors proclaim as 'one of the most widely read and widely written about novels in the English language' (1), they are able to highlight some of the oversights of previous interpretations. Interestingly, some of the chapters celebrate Charlotte Brontë's radical depictions of disability, while others point out her limitations.

In their introduction the editors take issue with those critics who have read disability in *Jane Eyre* 'in almost purely symbolic terms' rather than as a 'complex identity position' (2). For many readers, Rochester's accident, in which he loses an eye and a hand, as well as his loss of sight in the remaining eye, is a cautionary tale, a 'punishment' for his arrogance towards women, or, as Gilbert and Gubar argued, a symbolic castration. The editors of *The Madwoman and the Blindman* point out that *Jane Eyre* appeared 'at a time of radical transformation in the way Victorian bodies and minds were conceptualized' (4), and they indicate the shaky foundations of those feminist interpretations of the novel which propose that Rochester's injuries are a necessary 'punishment' for his treatment of women.

David Bolt's chapter, 'The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Ocularcentrism, and *Jane Eyre*', highlights Brontë's limited view of disability, arguing that she accepts patriarchal myths of sight and blindness too readily. He points out that she:

portrays someone who has visual impairment but takes into account only the experience of people who do not have visual impairments. The result is a diminished character who augments the status of the sighted protagonist. (49-50)

Martha Stoddart Holmes, on the other hand, in her chapter 'Visions of Rochester: Screening Desire and Disability in *Jane Eyre*', reads the novel as more ambiguous. She focuses on its screen adaptations, finding many film versions of *Jane Eyre* 'progressive' in that they

‘grapple, consciously or otherwise, with deeply engraved social fears and values regarding disability and desire’ (151). While Bolt sees Brontë as failing to represent adequately the experience of disabled people, Stoddard Holmes sees her as refusing the view ‘that disabled people are not sexual people’, unlike some critics and filmmakers who have tended to assume ‘that sex and disability are mutually exclusive spheres’(154). Brontë opens up a ‘progressive conversation about a changed body’ in her representation of Rochester’s loss of an eye and a hand (162). Some screen adaptations are equally radical in making Rochester disabled and attractive, thus ‘invit[ing] us to reconsider desire ... within a broader aesthetic than that defined by conventional faces, ordinary vision, and upright posture’ (174). While some film critics have objected to adaptations making Rochester ‘too sexual to be disabled’ (173), Stoddard Holmes exposes their limitations in failing to see the offensiveness of their assumptions about normative and disabled bodies.

Alongside historicist approaches to Charlotte Brontë are many worthwhile new studies exploring her afterlife in terms of screen adaptations, the reception histories of her novels, the heritage industry’s creation of ‘Brontë Country’, and the evolution of critical approaches to her work. Key earlier works are Patsy Stoneman’s *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (1996) and Lucasta Miller’s *The Brontë Myth* (2001). More recently Cora Kaplan in *Victoriana: Histories, Fictions, Criticism* (2007) presents an insightful chapter on the development of critical responses to *Jane Eyre*. Kaplan argues that critics have allowed ‘present anxieties about the late twentieth-century politics of feminist cultural analysis to become displaced onto the historical text’ (25), an approach which has led to Brontë’s novel functioning as a controversial and contested site through which is developed a ‘bulging archive’ of ‘creative reminiscences’ (which Kaplan terms ‘Victoriana’) in the form of contemporary ‘*Jane Eyre* spin-offs: imitation, prequel, sequel, adaptation and pastiche’ (31). Similar constructive ways of thinking about Brontë’s legacy have resulted in discussions of the numerous film adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, including Margarete Rubik and Elke Mettinge-Scartmann’s edited collection *A Breath of Fresh Eyre: Intertextual and Intermedial Reworkings of Jane Eyre* (2007); Liora Brosh, *Screening Novel Women: From British Domestic Fiction to Film* (2008); and Heta Pyrhönen, *Bluebeard Gothic: Jane Eyre and Her Progeny* (2010). However, the issue of why there have been so many film versions of *Jane Eyre* and hardly any of Brontë’s other novels still needs to be satisfactorily explained. Studies of neo-Victorian rewritings of Brontë’s work constitute a burgeoning area and Andrea Kirchknopf has an exemplary chapter in her book, *Rewriting the Victorians: Modes of Literary Engagement with the 19th Century* (2013). Her

persuasive reading of the ‘adaptive chain’ (107) linking *Jane Eyre*, Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) and D.M. Thomas’s *Charlotte* (2000) demonstrates the complexity of the novel’s cultural legacy.

The theatre has had an even longer history of adapting Charlotte Brontë’s life and work, as Stoneman’s *Jane Eyre on Stage, 1848-1898* (2007), an edition of eight plays based on the novel, and Benjamin Poore’s *Heritage, Nostalgia and Modern British Theatre: Staging the Victorians* (2012) indicate. Poore’s chapter, ‘Staging the Brontës’ considers how stage adaptations and biodramas blur the distinction between the author and her heroines, often undermining Charlotte Brontë’s achievements as they offer up ‘a proliferation of Charlotte-as-Lucy, Charlotte-as-Jane, Jane-as-Charlotte, novel as autobiography hybrids’ (128). Discussing a range of contemporary stage versions of *Jane Eyre*, Poore sees them as under the influence of earlier feminist and postcolonial readings of the novel which saw Bertha as Jane’s double and/ or the colonised other: he explains that ‘Jane Eyre is no longer considered sufficiently sympathetic alone, without the presence of Bertha’ (144). While this might seem a radical move on the part of adaptors, Poore argues that this view is illusory, for Bertha is merely ‘reduced’ in these adaptations to becoming ‘a permanent Edward Hyde’ to Jane’s Dr Jekyll (138). Poore has also written a valuable chapter on the stage versions of *Villette* which will appear in the forthcoming book, *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* (2016), edited by Amber K. Regis and myself. This collection also contains chapters on film adaptations, biodramas, poetry, feminist legacies, literary tourism, as well as the influence of Brontë’s work on subsequent writers. Of particular significance is Anna Barton’s chapter on Charlotte Brontë’s poetry. Too many critics have dismissed her poetry as insignificant, and Barton’s reassessment of its importance to Brontë’s fiction offers an important addition to Brontë studies.

Finally, for those new to Charlotte Brontë studies, there are three indispensable books, Patsy Stoneman’s *Charlotte Brontë* (2013) in the ‘Writers and Their Work’ series, Patricia Ingham’s *The Brontës* (2006) and Marianne Thormählen’s edited book, *The Brontës in Context* (2012). Stoneman weaves details of Brontë’s life with perceptive readings of all her works, including the juvenilia and correspondence, in a short book which is accessible to undergraduates. Ingham’s lively study of the life, work and legacy of the sisters also offers a good introduction to Charlotte Brontë and is available as an affordable paperback. *The Brontës in Context* is equally accessible to students, offering forty-two very short chapters each introducing key topics associated with Brontë studies today, including religion, education, politics, biography, dress and adaptations. Charlotte Brontë studies would be

seriously impoverished without *Brontë Studies*, the journal of the Brontë Society, which has been around for over a hundred years and offers its readers a broad range of lively scholarly and factual articles covering virtually all aspects of the Brontës' lives and works.

Future critical trends in Charlotte Brontë studies will, I am sure, continue to emerge to enrich our understanding of this fascinating author. *Jane Eyre* has consistently been part of the undergraduate curriculum for decades, and is renowned as being a major Victorian novel loved by general readers. However, it is to be hoped that future academic studies will give more weight to *The Professor*, *Shirley*, *Villette*, the poetry and the juvenilia than has hitherto been the case. The time has come when *Jane Eyre*'s dominance in Charlotte Brontë studies needs to be challenged.

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