

Charlotte Brontë and the Politics of Cloth: The ‘vile rumbling mills’ of Yorkshire

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This essay examines Charlotte Brontë’s engagement with the textile industry from her earliest writings to her 1849 Condition of England novel *Shirley* in order to emphasise the role that Yorkshire and its staple industry played in her writing. Critics have discussed Brontë’s interest in textile production largely in relation to *Shirley*. However, her fascination with cloth manufacturing is evident in many of her Angrian tales and some of her unfinished novels. This essay argues that through her early representations of mills and mill owners Brontë formulated an understanding of political conflict and masculine power which helped to shape her mature writing. This culminates in *Shirley* with her critique of the taboo against educated women entering careers in trade and manufacturing.

KEYWORDS ‘An American Tale’, *Ashworth*, Haworth, mills, politics, textile manufacturing, *Shirley*, *The Moores*, *The Professor*, ‘Something About Arthur’, *Stancliffe’s Hotel*, Yorkshire

In 1837 Robert Southey famously wrote to the young Charlotte Brontë stating his view that ‘Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life’.¹ Yet in *Shirley*, published twelve years later, depicting the West Riding of Yorkshire’s textile industry at the time of the Luddite rebellion, she contemplates an even more prohibited career for genteel Victorian women in the form of textile manufacturing. Woollen textile manufacture, the staple industry of the West Riding, was a phenomenon Brontë was able to observe closely, for Haworth was dominated by mills and the workshops of wool-combers and weavers.² Her fascination with the world of manufacturing is evident in many of her Angrian tales, as well as in some of her unfinished novels, and it is through her early representations of textile production that she

formulates ideas of masculine power. Here the manufacturer is often represented in terms of villainy or gothic excess, an image she significantly modified by the time she wrote her Condition of England novel *Shirley*. The mill owner in this novel, Robert Moore, is represented as an educated man who eventually comes to realise that an aggressive approach to business engenders social hardship and violence, making him a more complex character than his predecessors. In *Shirley*, unlike in her earlier writings, Brontë also contemplates the possibility of educated women working alongside male mill owners; her heroines, Caroline Helstone and Shirley Keeldar, are drawn to the idea of an engagement in the textile industry, which represented a route to wealth and power in nineteenth-century Yorkshire. This essay traces Charlotte Brontë's fascination with textile manufacturing from her earliest writings to *Shirley* in order to show how Yorkshire and its industry played a crucial role in her vision as a writer, enabling her to consider in her mature work the ways in which 'the business of a woman's life' might range beyond Victorian conventions of class and gender.

Yorkshire politics and the 'vile rumbling mills' of Angria

There were approximately thirty textile mills in and around Haworth in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and accordingly the Brontë children's lives were marked by the sights, smells and sounds of cloth manufacture.³ They played on the moors, where sheep grazed; in Haworth's streets the sounds of spinning and weaving from the workers' cottages could be heard; the children would have seen the raw fleeces of sheep hanging in the warehouses of wool-combers, a sight which Branwell Brontë describes powerfully in his story 'The Wool is Rising'.⁴ It was impossible for the children to be unaware of the vital role the textile industry played in the lives of many of Haworth's inhabitants, while the local and national press emphasised the importance of Yorkshire woollen cloth to the nation more generally. Yorkshire was, according to David Hey, 'a much more complex and forward-looking industrial area than its competitors' and thus featured regularly in discussions of the

national economy.⁵ When she was fifteen and a pupil at Roe Head School, Brontë encountered textile manufacturers at closer quarters. Her friends Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor were the daughters and sisters of wealthy woollen manufacturers, and on Brontë's visits to their homes she witnessed the grand style in which successful Yorkshire mill owners lived. Elizabeth Gaskell, in her *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) suggested that Charlotte conceived the ideas for *Shirley* at Roe Head;⁶ certainly the years she spent there coincided with a 'buoyant' period for wool manufacture in the West Riding.⁷ The region's economic prosperity at this time had a significant impact on a manufacturing class whose confidence and political might were rapidly growing.

Wool and politics were, as Brontë was aware, inextricably and inescapably part of nineteenth-century Yorkshire life. Michael Baumber's claim is surely wrong when he states that the Brontë sisters 'were not part of Haworth society in any meaningful sense and, except for a little local colouring, their books owed nothing to it'.⁸ In fact the complex politics of the region's textile industry informed Charlotte's childhood understanding of the world and its representation, which is evident in her many stories based on Yorkshire woollen manufacture. While Baumber argues that the Brontë sisters failed to engage in Haworth life, Terry Eagleton concedes that they were deeply affected by local events, situated as they were in 'an era of disruptive social change'; he even suggests they were 'violated' by its political turmoil.⁹ 'Violated' is an inappropriate word to describe Charlotte's feelings, however, for she was both excited and inspired by local political conflicts, many of which were reworked in her representations of political life in Angria.¹⁰ Indeed, we cannot overestimate the impact on her writing of West Riding politics and the character of the manufacturing community. Through her early representations of textile mills, mill owners, and mill workers she conceived a distinctively 'Yorkshire' identity and ideas of masculinity which were adapted in her mature delineations of male characters such as Rochester in *Jane Eyre*.

Yorkshire men involved in manufacturing were usually opposed to the Church and landed interests, and the Brontë family, Tory and Anglican, found themselves in a minority in a county politically dominated by dissenters, Whigs, and Radicals.¹¹ Charlotte Brontë's own position was complicated, however. Like her father, she identified with the views of Tories such as the Duke of Wellington, yet she often 'express[ed] sentiments and opinions that would have suited a clubbable Whig male of comfortable means [...] or an ardent Radical working man', as Marianne Thormählen has argued.¹² These apparently contradictory aspects of her personality may help to explain why she experimented with a multiplicity of subject positions in her writing, most of them male. Even when she abandoned *Angria* she continued to use male narrators in her early work because, as Christine Alexander has suggested, her 'primary model of narrative power was masculine'.¹³ The business disputes and religious debates which flared up among local men were familiar aspects of Charlotte's life. Her father found himself embroiled in long running disputes with wealthy dissenters who objected to paying Church rates.¹⁴ Patrick Brontë was always ready to oppose recalcitrant textile manufacturers in practical ways, such as by bringing about the reinstatement of a local Tory Anglican magistrate who was firm against any infringement of the Factory Act of 1833, which regulated child labour.¹⁵ Much of the social turmoil in Haworth originated in the tensions between dissenting manufacturers and their employees or those upholding the laws privileging the Church of England and landowners, and a discussion of these disputes no doubt featured in conversations in the parsonage. Despite her father's antipathy to manufacturers, Charlotte Brontë was nevertheless fascinated and intrigued by the political debates he engaged in with mill owners, leading her to identify a romance of manufacture in her representations of cloth manufacturing.

As a sharp observer of the wool manufacturing culture of her local region, Charlotte Brontë's interest in the textile business sits oddly and intriguingly with her apparent antipathy

to the ideologies associated with trade. Her interest must have been fuelled by the fact that many of the nearby mill owning families, such as the Greenwoods and the Heatons, were sources of local legends based on family scandals and feuds,¹⁶ and it was well known during the early nineteenth century that the more aggressive woollen manufacturers in Yorkshire ‘had the best chance of survival’.¹⁷ Brontë drew upon local stories of determined men, family businesses, and violent feuds as sources of drama and intrigue, initially as a way of illustrating the political and familial tensions of her Angrian characters, but later as a way of exploring in more realistic settings topics such as masculine identity, sibling rivalry, the character traits of Yorkshire people, and gender relations. In order to explain how she moved from the fantasy realm of Angria towards depictions of the north of England’s wool manufacturing districts, we need to examine the period of the Brontës’ childhood when the nation turned its attention to abuses in mills, the exploitation of child labour, and the tensions between workers and employers, for it was likely that the well-publicised debates on factory legislation of the 1820s and 30s provided inspiration for Charlotte’s use of her local region and its political conflicts.

Textile mills in the early writing: Milton’s Pandemonium

One of Charlotte Brontë’s earliest engagements with the textile industry is a relatively tame account of a conversation about trade tariffs written when she was thirteen years old in her edition of *Blackwood’s Young Men’s Magazine* dated November 1829. This short dialogue, called ‘An American Tale’, offers a mild beginning to what became an energetic, often gothic-inflected, engagement with mills and mill owners. The tale is based on two American textile manufacturers in a tavern; Scipio Africanus Clarkson, who reads from the *Boston Manufacturer*, discusses trade with his companion Mr Socrates Ricestalk. They consider the recent election of President Andrew Jackson and his views on trade tariffs, the protectionist Clarkson stating that, ‘America is certainly done for. [...] The great capitalist will give up

trade and retire, and the little capitalist will break. If the tariff is repealed, great and little will go together and the whole nation will be bankrupt'.¹⁸ Protectionist trade tariffs and the oversupply of cotton are unlikely topics for a thirteen year-old girl to choose to write about, but 'An American Tale' illustrates Charlotte Brontë's knowledge of, and interest in, opposing positions on free trade, along with her precocious understanding of how politics shapes trading conditions.

This short early tale is, however, atypical. In most of their Angrian stories both Branwell and Charlotte represented textile manufacturers as powerful larger-than-life figures and their mills as grandiose structures. One of Branwell's Angrian mills had 'rooms nearly a mile long and towers a mile high', while Charlotte registered a similar note of excess in her stories, where mills are vast and mill owners act like gothic villains capable of extreme cruelty in their enslavement of populations.¹⁹ This is particularly evident in her tale 'Something about Arthur', written in 1833 when she was sixteen years old and undoubtedly stimulated by the articles on factory reform of the late 1820s and 1830s when Tory periodicals like *Blackwood's* and *Fraser's* frequently likened factory workers to slaves.²⁰ This sort of comparison was widespread, as has been noted by Catherine Gallagher when she writes, 'humanitarian reformers likened factory workers to slaves in order to stress the oppressiveness of the factory system. [...] [A]lertness and diligence were too often maintained by corporal punishment, and the sheer size of many textile mills, with their accompanying impersonality, reminded reformers of the vast plantations worked by indistinguishable slaves'.²¹ Richard Oastler, writing in the *Leeds Mercury* in 1830, a periodical Charlotte Brontë had access to, described Yorkshire's textile mills as 'magazines of British infantile slavery'.²² These debates surface in 'Something about Arthur', Brontë's tale of slavery and rebellion set in a mill. In Angria, as in Yorkshire, mill ownership is a route to great wealth; however, while Yorkshire manufacturers were likely to come from the

middling classes, in Angria most mill owners are from aristocratic backgrounds, being well born younger sons or renegades. An attack against the unscrupulous Lord Caversham's vast woollen mill is the focus of 'Something about Arthur'. The hero is the fifteen year-old Arthur, Marquis of Douro, who, wronged by Lord Caversham, decides to join the workingclass Ned Laury in an attack against his mill. Caversham has imprisoned Laury's father, a poacher, 'and clapped him for life into one of those vile rumbling mills of his', and it is interesting that the reader is encouraged to see the attackers as 'noble' liberators of the oppressed.²³ The rebels' approach to the mill owes much to the poetry of Milton and the conventions of gothic literature:

on emerging from the gloom, [...] Lord Caversham's great mill burst full on their view. It was an immense structure, 100 feet high and two hundred and fifty long. The star-like lamps spangling its vast front and the thunderous roll and incessant crash of its internal machinery, which caused a perceptible trembling of the adjacent ground, produced such sensations in the beholder as Milton's Pandemonium, could it be realised, might inspire. Arthur's eyes kindled as he beheld the huge and lofty edifice [...]. ('SAA', pp. 27–28)

This grandiose image of the textile mill also draws upon accounts of the storming of the Bastille, for thousands of Caversham's prisoner-workers 'rushed forward shouting, screaming, and dancing with delight at finding themselves once more free' ('SAA', p. 30). Brontë's narrator here sides with lawlessness and revolution: Ned's father may be a poacher, but sympathy is with him rather than Lord Caversham. Arthur also steps beyond his class position to lead the workers; adopting the strategies of early trade unionists when he exhorts his fellow rebels to '[b]e valiant, prudent and secret', insisting they take 'an oath of secrecy'

before leading the ‘band of forty men’ into the mill (‘SAA’, pp. 26–27). The rebels search the building and on the upper floors find the workers, ‘where the roll and rattle of machinery proclaimed the presence of the miserable captives whose unceasing labour was ever prolonged ““from morn, till dewy eve; from eve till morn”” (‘SAA’, p, 29). The quotation, again from Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, signifies the degree to which Brontë’s mill imagery has its origins in the poem.²⁴

The theme of textile workers’ unrest is present in other stories and novel fragments. Brontë does not adopt a consistent position in relation to the conflict between workers and mill owners. In *Stancliffe’s Hotel* (1838) she depicts textile workers on strike in the city of Zamorna, demonstrating against their employer. When the cavalry arrive on the orders of the imperious Duke of Zamorna, the same Marquis of Douro who as a boy had joined forces with rebels to liberate the slave-workers of Caversham’s mill, ‘the mad mechanics and desperate operatives of Zamorna [...] flew like chaff’, while the wounded are ‘left with shattered limbs, lying on the pavement’; later ‘their blood was washed from the stones, and no signs remained of what had happened’.²⁵ This description may owe something to the Peterloo Massacre, which took place in Manchester in 1819 and reverberated in northerners’ consciousness for decades afterwards.²⁶

Charlotte Brontë returned to the theme of discontented textile workers two years later in her unfinished novel *Ashworth* (1840–41). This story focuses on the activities of Alexander Ashworth, a man of aristocratic birth who closely resembles the Angrian antihero Northangerland. Living in Yorkshire, Ashworth rejects his **upper-class** origins and engages in cattle trading and the selling of fleeces to mill owners, making himself ‘adored’ by the ‘smutty, intelligent mechanics of Manchester and of the West Riding of Yorkshire’ who admire his radicalism, the narrator explaining that he ‘disseminated the poison of his atheistical and republican notions through their mills and combing shops’.²⁷ The story also

features Mr de Cappell, a younger son of a noble family, who works as a textile manufacturer, being ‘one of those merchants who resemble princes. His style of living, his house, his carriage, his horses, and servants might rival a nobleman’s’ (A, p. 42). *Ashworth* may have remained unfinished because Brontë found it impossible to reconcile her Angrian mode of depicting extraordinarily powerful and lawless mill owners in control of vast numbers of slave workers with the realist style she needed to adopt in order to be taken seriously as an author. Brontë’s realism involved depicting what she knew well, whether the experiences of governesses and teachers or her close observations of Yorkshire textile manufacture. Both subjects offered her a way out of the Angrian frameworks she had developed as a child; nevertheless the transition involved **only** a gradual modification of her initial vision, reducing the might of the manufacturer and scaling down his mill to more realistic proportions.

The mills of Everintoyle and ‘the great town of X——’

Charlotte Brontë finally succeeded in pursuing the topic of textile production in a realist mode when she came to write the opening chapters of her first full length novel, *The Professor*.²⁸ The Crimsworth brothers, Edward and William, are forced to make their own way in the world. Sons of a failed mill owner who died when they were young, William is sent to school while his elder brother Edward chooses a manufacturing career in the North, marrying a rich mill owner’s daughter and swiftly becoming the owner of his father’s old mill. When we first see Edward’s mill in ‘the great town of X——’ it is ‘vomiting soot from its long chimney, and quivering through its thick brick walls with the commotion of its iron bowels’ (P, 48), a description which echoes the Miltonic imagery of the Angrian stories but also manages to fit into a realist register. On leaving school, the well-educated, impoverished younger brother William reluctantly goes to work for Edward in his mill but is swiftly reduced to becoming a lowly ‘counting-house clerk in a grey tweed wrapper’ (P, p. 64),

feeling demeaned by a trade in which his hands are ‘soiled with the grease of a wool-warehouse’ (*P*, p. 82). Edward, ‘a fine-looking and powerful man’ (*P*, p. 9), resembles to an extent the ambitious, ruthless mill owners of Angria, although his powers over his brother are limited. The mill scenes of *The Professor*, however, only feature in the first chapters, the rest of the novel focusing on William’s escape to a new life as a teacher in Brussels. Nevertheless, Brontë used the opening of the novel to rework ideas of exploitation and slavery, as well as to convey the significant economic force of Northern textile production and the power of the mill owner which had featured so often in her early writing. Following the publication of *Jane Eyre* in 1847, Charlotte Brontë started work on another novel about textile manufacturing, *The Moores*, which she did not finish. In this story she presents a boastful Yorkshire mill owner, John Henry Moore, whose mill dominates the town of Everintoyle, where ‘[d]imness, noise, and labour brood’.²⁹ *The Moores* focuses on the point of view of its unpleasant male protagonist, giving Brontë another opportunity to explore other perspectives by stepping beyond her class, as well as her sex.³⁰

Voicing the views of male manufacturers highlights Brontë’s understanding of the class and gender codes which allowed men of the middling classes to find opportunities in trade and manufacturing, yet excluded all educated women.³¹ Her determination to write about men involved in textile manufacturing is evident from the repeated references to mills and the false starts she made in writing stories about mill owners. This preoccupation illuminates an aspect of her writing which has received little attention. In *Shirley* her profound interest in, and enthusiasm for, the topics of politics and manufacturing had its freest reign. It is narrated in the third person, offering Brontë a way of voicing matters outside of the circumscribed lives of most women of her class. Unlike her other stories of textile manufacturing, *Shirley* raises the possibility of educated women working alongside mill owners in their counting houses, for as well as examining the social problems brought about

by industrialisation, it also gives Brontë an opportunity to reflect on the topic of what the business of a woman's life might be. *Shirley* makes the feminist point, albeit obliquely, that women's business could be linked to trade and manufacture.

'My mill is my castle': *Shirley*

Shirley, then, is Charlotte Brontë's only novel to depict manufacturers extensively in a realistic light; they are neither villains nor dashing heroes. As Tim Dolin argues, the novel 'draws upon and furthers a growing tradition of radical northern provincial fiction, its first chapter emphasises a strong sense of place'.³² The narrator explains that the story concerns a twenty mile radius in the West Riding of Yorkshire, while the themes of conflict, politics, manufacturing and religion are foregrounded at the outset.³³ Brontë focuses on Luddite attacks against the new frames bought by Robert Moore to improve production at his mill. An immigrant from Belgium, Moore is first seen 'sit[ting] in [his] counting-house', which functions in the novel primarily as a fiercely guarded male only space; indeed, he feels most at home in the 'huge black mill' with 'its great sooty flank', exclaiming, 'My mill is my castle' (*S*, p. 13). A bachelor residence, castle, and fortress, as much as a workplace, the mill is where Moore 'often spend[s] the evening and sup[s] here alone, and sleep[s] with Joe Scott' (*S*, p. 23). Yet Brontë is at pains to show that the exclusion of women from the counting house is a problem, both for able women in search of a career and for men whose isolation from their workforce leads to a loss of perspective on what constitutes a whole community.

Despite *Shirley*'s realism, however, Brontë's early vision of the mill owner as a hyper-masculine figure does not completely disappear. When faced with a Luddite attack, Moore acts like a military leader: he 'fortified and garrisoned his mill, which in itself was a strong building: [...] an organized, resolute defence was what [the Luddites] never dreamed of encountering' (*S*, p. 291). Moore's military tactics, while appropriate to the heightened

world of Angria, are criticised in this novel as excessive, for the narrator's description of the aftermath of the attack against the mill focuses on the human cost of the conflict:

The mill yawned all ruinous with unglazed frames; the yard was thickly bestrewn with stones and brickbats, and, close under the mill, with the glittering fragments of the shattered windows; muskets and other weapons lay here and there; more than one deep crimson stain was visible on the gravel: a human body lay quiet on its face near the gates; and five or six wounded men writhed and moaned in the bloody dust. (*S*, p. 292)

Moore's victory encourages him to seek out and punish the leaders of the attack, which he 'hunted like any sleuth-hound; and well he liked the occupation: its excitement was of a kind pleasant to his nature: he liked it better than making cloth' (*S*, p. 322). Moore, frustrated by the thought that he has pursued the wrong career, prefers 'the policeman's quest' to his work in 'the steam of the dye-houses' (*S*, p. 322). Cloth manufacture is consistently represented as economically important, but dull work for men. Women, on the other hand, the narrator suggests, with their knowledge of fabric as consumers and needle workers, are presented as more suited for roles in the manufacture of cloth. This is emphasised when Shirley and Caroline admire 'Solomon's virtuous woman' in the Bible, she is 'a manufacturer — she made fine linen and sold it: she was an agriculturalist — she bought estates and planted vineyards' (*S*, p. 330). The notion of the value of an industrious woman underpins *Shirley's* message about women's capacities for productive labour.

Brontë's suggestion that women could be employed in running a textile business was not a fanciful idea. Some women of the early nineteenth century held responsible roles in industry, including textile manufacture. The historian Hannah Barker has shown that during

this period businesswomen were often ‘central characters in a story of unprecedented social and economic transformation’, particularly in the northern industrial towns and cities.³⁴ When Brontë researched the local newspapers of the 1810s to find information about the Luddite activities for *Shirley*, she probably saw advertisements indicating women’s involvement in business, including textile manufacturing.³⁵ Yet Caroline, despite her longing to engage in productive labour, does not manage to break through the boundaries of class and gender which restrict her, for *Shirley* only raises the possibility of business careers for educated women, rather than represents it.

Nevertheless, Caroline repeatedly imagines herself as a manufacturer as she attempts to understand Robert Moore’s obsession with his textile mill. She thinks about

the mystery of ‘business’, [she] tried to comprehend more about it than had ever been told her – to understand its perplexities, liabilities, duties, exactions; endeavoured to realize the state of mind of a ‘man of business’, to enter into it, feel what he could feel, aspire to what he would aspire. (*S*, p. 147)

Caroline spends much of the novel seeking a meaningful occupation, asking, ‘Where is my place in the world?’ (*S*, p. 149). She also objects to her economic vulnerability, complaining, ‘I am making no money — earning nothing’ (*S*, p. 61). Similarly, Shirley is also attracted to this ‘mysterious’ masculine world, but unlike her friend Caroline she is a wealthy landowner who does not need to labour to gain money. She exclaims to Moore: ‘Business! Really the word makes me conscious I am indeed no longer a girl, but quite a woman, and something more. I am an esquire [...] I hold a man’s position: it is enough to inspire me with a touch of manhood’ (*S*, p. 172). While this can be read as a humorous comment on Shirley’s unusual situation as a manufacturer’s landlord, Brontë also suggests that women’s interest in the

world of business involves a rethinking of gender roles. Indeed, Caroline would like to switch sex if this would enable her to be employed as Moore's clerk and learn the financial aspects of wool production: 'she would wish nature had made her a boy instead of a girl, that she might ask Robert to let her be his clerk' (*S*, p. 65). Recognising the inaccessibility of the male world of the mill for one of her sex and class, she tells Robert:

'I should like an occupation; and if I were a boy, it would not be so difficult to find one. I see such an easy, pleasant way of learning a business, and making my way in life. [...] I could be apprenticed to your trade — the cloth-trade. I could learn it of you, as we are distant relations. I would do the counting-house work, keep the books, and write the letters, while you went to market. (*S*, p. 61)

Clerical work, unlike trading in the marketplace, is performed indoors and was considered appropriately feminine labour in the late Victorian period; however, in the 1840s female clerks were extremely uncommon, as Charlotte Brontë knew. Caroline Helstone is thus unable to fulfil her ambition in a realist novel that purports to be as 'unromantic as Monday morning' (*S*, p. 5). Nevertheless, she thinks rationally about having a profession or trade 'fifty times a day' (*S*, p. 193), *Shirley* thus serving to promote the idea that her wish should be granted.

Charlotte Brontë envisages a workplace shared by men and women when she allows Caroline a presence in Hollows Mill, albeit a ghostly one. Caroline's position as an outsider is disrupted by an uncanny moment when Robert thinks he sees Caroline working inside his mill and tells her:

I shall see you in my very mill in broad daylight: indeed, I have seen you there once. But a week ago, I was standing at the top of one of my long rooms, girls were working at the other end, and amongst half a dozen of them, moving to and fro, *I seemed to see a figure resembling yours*. It was some effect of doubtful light or shade, or of dazzling sunbeam. I walked up to this group; what I sought had glided away: I found myself between two buxom lasses in pinafores. (*S*, p. 215: emphasis added)

Apart from this episode, the working-class women in Moore's mill remain largely invisible, Caroline's alignment with these female workers is seen by Moore only as a weird trick of the light, an uncanny doubling he dismisses as absurd. However, for a brief moment the reader is allowed to see Caroline at work alongside other women in the mill. When Caroline states, 'I shall not follow you into your mill, Robert, unless you call me there' (*S*, p. 215), her seemingly conventional response appears to reinforce the status quo, but it can also be read as a challenge. She might have said, 'I shall not follow you into your mill, Robert', without the proviso, 'unless you call me there'. This phrase indicates her willingness to enter the workplace once social convention accepts middle-class women's desire to enjoy a broader range of employment opportunities.

Feminist critics have sometimes found *Shirley* an unsatisfactory novel because it fails to provide its heroines with anything other than marriage to the Moore brothers. John Plotz believes that the novel offers an 'uncomfortable compromise when it comes to merge its vigorous industrial plot with its scattered romantic intentions. Marrying Robert Moore is marrying into a job'.³⁶ Yet this is an ideal sort of marriage for Charlotte Brontë: in her next novel *Villette* Lucy Snowe contemplates marriage to Monsieur Paul as 'marrying into' a school. However, while the teaching profession offered an uncontroversial opening to middle-class women, they did not find it so easy to become part of a 'vigorous industrial

plot', a point which Brontë emphasises in *Shirley*. Constance Harsh argues that 'Nothing has been achieved in the course of the novel — except the exposure of the heroine's powerlessness',³⁷ but this is too reductive, for what has been achieved is an emphasis on the heroine's dreams of inclusion in the industrial project, a dream which is not presented as eccentric or freakish but as a reasonable request on the part of a woman who is not exceptional or rebellious. The message Brontë conveys is that many women harbour desires to work in areas which have the potential to lead to wealth and influence. When the narrator directly addresses the 'Men of Yorkshire!' to 'give [women] a field in which their faculties may be exercised and grow', there is an explicit demand that work in public life be open to women like Caroline Helstone.³⁷

Shirley is the culmination of Charlotte Brontë's reflections on textile manufacturing, the role of businessmen and tradesmen, and women's need to labour in a wider range of roles. As we have seen, the teenaged Brontë adopted a male narrative voice to depict textile manufacture as an exciting arena through which masculine power struggles were played out. The fact that she returned repeatedly to this theme throughout her career suggests its strong fascination for her. *Shirley* added a new dimension to Charlotte Brontë's mill stories, offering her the opportunity to ask why women of her class group were excluded from trade and manufacturing when many women, like Caroline, sought more economic opportunities and a few wealthy women, like Shirley, could even become mill owners. At one point, Shirley states to the Tory clergyman Mr Helstone that she 'like[s] that romantic Hollow' which holds her textile mill; Helstone asks, 'Romantic — with a mill in it? [...] And the trade? The cloth — the greasy wool — the polluting dyeing vats? [...] You have no mercantile blood in your veins: why are you so fond of trade?' She responds by reminding him of her position: 'Because I am a mill-owner, of course. Half my income comes from the work in that Hollow' (*S*, pp. 173–74). Not all women could own a mill, as the novel makes clear; however

Charlotte Brontë emphasises that those women who wish they had ‘a profession — a trade’ (S, p. 193) should be given the opportunity to pursue one.

Notes

¹ 12 March 1837, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, 3 vols, ed. by Margaret Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995–2004), I, 166–67.

² Phyllis Bentley, *The Brontës* (London: Arthur Barker, 1966), p. 15.

³ For a map of textile mills in Haworth see Michael Baumber, *A History of Haworth from the Earliest Times* (Lancaster: Carnegie Publishing, 2009), p. 98.

⁴ Branwell Brontë, ‘The Wool is Rising’ (1834), in *The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë*, 3 vols, ed. by Victor A. Neufeldt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1999), II, 24–91.

⁵ David G. Hey, *Yorkshire from A. D. 1000* (London: Longmans, 1986), p. 232.

⁶ Elizabeth Gaskell, *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. by Angus Easson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 76–93.

⁷ Pat Hudson, *The Genesis of Industrial Capital: The West Riding Wool Textile Industry, 1750–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 111.

⁸ *History of Haworth*, p. 146.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Myths of Power: A Marxist Study of the Brontës* (London: Macmillan, 1975), p. 7.

¹⁰ See Christine Alexander, ‘Readers and Writers: *Blackwood’s* and the Brontës’, *Gaskell Society Journal*, 8 (1994), 64.

¹¹ David Gent, ‘The Politics of Disinterest: The Whigs and the Liberal Party in the West Riding of Yorkshire, 1830–1850’, *Northern History*, 49.2 (2012), 305.

¹² Marianne Thormählen, *The Brontës and Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 26.

¹³ ‘Readers and Writers’, p. 65.

¹⁴ Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Phoenix, 1995), p. 240.

¹⁵ *The Brontës*, pp. 265–66.

¹⁶ *The Brontës*, p. 241.

¹⁷ Hudson, p. 163.

¹⁸ Charlotte Brontë, ‘An American Tale’, *An Edition of the Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* [hereafter EWW], 2 vols, ed. by Christine Alexander (Oxford: Blackwell for the Shakespeare Head Press, 1987–1991), I (1987), 84.

¹⁹ Branwell Brontë, ‘Letters from an Englishman’ (1830), in *The Works of Patrick Branwell Brontë*, 3 vols, ed. by Victor A. Neufeldt (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1997), I, 119.

²⁰ See Julia Sun-Joo Lee, *The American Slave Narrative and the Victorian Novel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

²¹ Catherine Gallagher, *The Industrial Reformation of English Fiction: Social Discourse and Narrative Form, 1832–1867* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 11.

²² Quoted in Hey, p. 256.

²³ Charlotte Brontë, ‘Something About Arthur’, *EEW*, II (1991), 26. Hereafter referred to as ‘SAA’ in parentheses in text.

²⁴ For details of Milton’s influence on Brontë see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), [pp. 311-335] {please provide the full spread of page numbers of this chapter} pp. 313–14.

²⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Stancliffe’s Hotel*, in *Tales of Angria* (London: Penguin, 2010), [pp. 69-136] p. 126. {Is 2006 the correct publication date? I’ve double checked – it’s actually 2010} {Also, please provide the full spread of page numbers of the text *Stancliffe’s Hotel*}

²⁶ See James K. Chandler, *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

²⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Ashworth*, in *Unfinished Novels*, ed. by Tom Winnifrith (Stroud: Alan Sutton, 1995) [pp. 18-62] p. 34. Hereafter referred to as *A* in parentheses in text. {please provide the full spread of page numbers of the text *Ashworth*}

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor* (written 1845–46, published 1857), ed. by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). Hereafter referred to as *P* in parentheses in the text.

²⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *The Moores*, in *Unfinished Novels*, [pp. 63-93] p. 66. {please provide the full spread of page numbers of the text *The Moores*}

³⁰ Carl Plasa has suggested that Charlotte Brontë adopted a male position in order to treat ‘topics traditionally associated with male authors – travel and adventure, war and violence’, *Charlotte Brontë* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 5.

³¹ See Deborah Wynne ‘Charlotte Brontë’s Frocks and *Shirley*’s Queer Textiles’ in *Literary Bric-à-Brac and the Victorians*, ed. by Jonathon Shears and Jen Harrison (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 147–63. The superscript number has been added to p. 10 in the appropriate place. {I could not find any superscript number 31 in the text of the article and I could not figure out to which sentence it might belong. Should it be omitted? If not, let me know where to place the 31 }

³² Tim Dolin, ‘Fictional Territory and a Woman’s Place: Regional and Sexual Difference in *Shirley*’, *ELH*, 61 (Spring 1995), p. 200.

³³ Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, ed. by Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 5–6; hereafter referred to as *S* in parentheses in the text.

³⁴ Hannah Barker, *The Business of Women: Female Enterprise and Urban Development in Northern England, 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 3.

³⁵ Herbert J. Rosengarten, ‘Charlotte Brontë’s *Shirley* and the *Leeds Mercury*’, *SEL* 16 (1976), pp. 591–93.

³⁶ John Plotz, *The Crowd: British Literature and Public Politics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), p. 185.

³⁷ Constance Harsh, *Subversive Heroines: Feminist Resolutions of Social Crisis in the Condition-of-England Novel* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), p. 116.

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Deborah Wynne is Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of Chester. She is the author of *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (Ashgate, 2010) and *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001). Most recently she has co-edited *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* with Amber K. Regis (Manchester University Press, 2017). She is currently working on an examination of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell and the textile industries of Yorkshire and Lancashire. She is the Director of the *Textile Stories* public engagement project, which explores contemporary and historical textile cultures. The most recent event Deborah organised was ‘The Story of Silk’, held at Macclesfield Silk Museum in 2017.

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