

'We are three sisters...'
The Brontë sisters: from objects of speculation and curiosity in Victorian times to the subjects of a contemporary tourist and cultural phenomenon

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Résumé

'Nous sommes trois sœurs...' : c'est en ces mots que Charlotte, Emily et Anne Brontë ont révélé leurs identités respectives, qu'elles avaient jusque-là tenues secrètes sous le couvert de pseudonymes masculins. Objets de spéculation, puis objets de curiosité, désormais sujets d'admiration, les sœurs Brontë attirent les visiteurs dans leur village de Haworth depuis plus de cent soixante-dix ans. Très tôt, le nom, l'image et les œuvres des sœurs devinrent des objets mis au service de l'industrie touristique et du marketing du «Brontë Country», le pays d'auteur qui porte leur nom. Ils furent, par la suite, incorporés à d'innombrables produits, services et entreprises de la région du sud de la chaîne Pennine, transformant par-là même Haworth en une destination touristique prisée. Cette marchandisation entretient un intérêt pour l'histoire et les lieux de vie de la famille Brontë. Elle a, cependant, altéré la compréhension de l'œuvre des trois sœurs et leur statut de « femmes écrivains ». Toutefois, depuis une vingtaine d'années, les œuvres, la destinée et les paysages des sœurs Brontë font l'objet de réinterprétations et constituent les sujets de créations artistiques et littéraires ainsi que d'initiatives pédagogiques. À l'heure actuelle, les visiteurs, notamment les publics scolaires, sont invités à apprécier les ouvrages littéraires des sœurs Brontë et à s'émerveiller du talent créatif et des traits de caractère qui les ont rendues capables d'écrire et de publier des œuvres d'art d'une intensité durable, à une époque où les femmes étaient contraintes, par des frontières patriarcales, dans la sphère domestique, aussi bien que dans le domaine professionnel et dans la vie sociale.

Mots-clés : Écriture féminine – Émancipation - Tourisme – Commercialisation - Réinterprétation

Abstract

'We are three sisters...', with these words, Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë revealed themselves from behind their male pseudonyms. Objects of speculation, then objects of curiosity, now subjects of admiration, the Brontë sisters have drawn visitors to the Yorkshire Pennine village of Haworth for over a hundred and seventy years. Appropriated and objectified by the tourist industry and marketing agents for what is now known as "Brontë Country", the sisters' names, images and works have been incorporated into countless local products, services and businesses helping turn the "home of the Brontës" into a tourist honeypot. While this commodification has helped fuel a sustained interest in the Brontë family's life story and surroundings it has also distorted understanding of the sisters' achievements. But the last two decades have seen a reappropriation of the Brontës' works, life story and landscapes as the subjects of contemporary artistic and literary creativity and educational initiatives. Current generations of visitors, notably schoolchildren, are invited to appreciate the Brontë sisters' literary works and marvel at the creative gifts and personal traits that allowed them to write and publish such enduringly powerful works of art at a time when women were constrained by patriarchal boundaries in the domestic, professional and social spheres.

Key-words: Women's writing – Emancipation – Tourism – Commodification – Reinterpretation

'We are three sisters...' ' It was with these words, on July 7th 1848, that Charlotte Brontë revealed the true identity of herself and her two sisters, Emily and Anne, from behind the male pseudonyms under which they had been obliged to write and publish.¹

These pioneering women writers, initially the objects of speculation, and then of a somewhat incredulous curiosity, have become the subjects of a tourism phenomenon that is now a major economic driver of the region where they lived. We will see that, while they have become the *object* of a blatant commodification of their names and image, they are also the *subject* of re-appropriation and re-interpretation by numerous artists in many disciplines, who have been inspired by their lives, works and landscapes. Furthermore, we will be looking at how the Brontës' condition as women in Victorian England, and their willingness to challenge the limits imposed on them, are very much a part of their appeal and their relevance to this day.

In 1848, having concealed their real names, and sex, for several years, in order to protect their freedom to write and publish, Charlotte and Anne, the more outgoing of the three sisters, travelled to their London publishers' office, Smith and Elder, to provide ocular proof that the 'Bell brothers', Currer, Ellis and Acton, were indeed three separate persons, were indeed siblings, but were sisters. Their intentions were, first of all, to dispel the confusion about authorship, secondly to take issue with the continuing speculation about their sex and, last but not least, to be able to enjoy the growing popularity of the Bell brothers' novels – even though their reputation was based on what Victorian audiences considered to be scandalous and improper content. July 7th 1848 was thus a momentous occasion in the sisters' lives and careers. It was a stunning revelation that the authors of these powerful and passionate novels should be women. It was all the more surprising that such coarse, rebellious and sexually explicit novels had been penned by the three daughters of an impoverished clergyman from a backwater village on the Yorkshire moors, in their "wild workshops"². And, for many, it was preposterous that a woman, let alone three women, should claim to be a writer and imagine that she might make a living out of it!³

In a Preface added to her second novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, published in 1848, shortly after her trip to London, Anne Brontë sums up the difficulties of being accepted as a woman writer:

1 For more detailed information on this particular event, see Barker, 1995, 557-63.

2 In her Preface to the 1850 edition of Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Brontë referred to her sister's novel having been "hewn in a wild workshop, with simple tools, out of homely materials" (Brontë E. 1847, xxx).

3 See Showalter, 1999, 37-72.

I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. (Brontë A. 1848, 5)

Like her preceding novel, *Agnes Grey*, published in 1847, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had been praised "for its abilities", but critics had reproached "the writer" with "a morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal" (Barker, 1995, 564). Despite – or possibly because – of these reviews, Anne's book sold very well. Nevertheless, stung by criticism, Anne was goaded out of her usual reserve and, in her Preface, castigated her reviewers for being "more bitter than just" (Brontë A., 1848, 1). Furthermore, she defended her decision to depict, in graphic terms, debased masculinity and decaying patriarchy in her male protagonist, Arthur Huntingdon. And Acton Bell also took issue with the continuing controversy about her sex. Throughout her short professional life, Anne was eager to take part in the struggle for social recognition and artistic acceptance that all three sisters craved. Unfortunately, she did not live long enough to enjoy fame. She died from tuberculosis in Scarborough, in May 1849, aged 29 – a few months after her sister Emily and her brother Branwell had passed away, also from consumption. Charlotte was left to carry on alone.⁴

The Brontë sisters' career as professional writers spanned just seven short years, between 1846 and 1853. During that time, they produced some of the finest poetry in the English language, and seven outstanding novels, which have become classics of world literature. Brontë literary critic Heather Glen has written that "for them, it seems that, right from childhood, the fictive provided a space within which they could articulate a developing understanding of the society in which they lived." She adds that "if their writings are more self-reflective, more intelligent, than biographical readings have tended to suggest, they are also far more wide-ranging in their intellectual power and reach" (Glen, 2002, 6). It would appear then that the Brontë sisters' writings do not simply speak of the sisters' personal concerns. Rather, they can be seen to reflect, and reflect upon, some of the pressing issues of their day.

4 In her last two novels, *Shirley* (1849) and *Villette* (1853), written after her two sisters' deaths, and also published pseudonymously, Charlotte Brontë, now a famous 'woman writer', seemed, according to Heather Glen "to be continuing that questioning of contemporary assumptions about gender begun in earlier works." The literary critic adds that "some of the themes of Anne Brontë's novels" – *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – are explicitly debated in *Shirley*: the lack of opportunities for women [...], the position of the governess, and also the mismatched woman." (Glen, 2002, 8-9).

One of those issues was the condition of women, a sensitive topic in Victorian times when women were constrained by patriarchal boundaries in the domestic, professional and social spheres.⁵ It was a difficult time for working women in general – let alone women attempting to achieve autonomy and financial independence through literary and artistic creation, only to face male-chauvinistic prejudice and society's intolerance. Other women writers from the same generation as the Brontës similarly had to hide behind male pseudonyms to write and publish.⁶ They also questioned the ideology of their time and resorted to uncompromising social criticism to voice their rebellion and strong sense of injustice. In much the same way as the three Brontë sisters, they had to cope with hostility from those who disapproved of their defiance of social and moral conventions and of their focusing on passionate individualism and female desire.⁷

If these were uneasy times for women in general, the condition of women was an acutely sensitive subject for articulate, creative, but financially deprived women such as Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë. As the daughters of an impoverished but highly educated clergyman of Irish extraction, the three sisters experienced, at first hand, the painful realities of governessing, the drudgeries of teaching, and the plight of single, unconnected, somewhat unattractive women of humble origins, obliged to work for a living. The issues with which they had to grapple in their everyday reality also appear as the main preoccupations of their female protagonists – heroines such as Agnes Grey, Jane Eyre, Helen Huntingdon, Shirley Keeldar and Lucy Snowe. The Brontës, *via* their heroines, engaged these issues time and again through the guiding principles of struggle, perseverance and escape. In Charlotte's eponymous novel in particular, the outspoken Shirley Keeldar longs for a richer life and voices that women of character have every reason to strive to escape the confines of the home and, at the very least, pursue a useful occupation, as reflected in the following dialogue between Shirley and her friend, Caroline Helstone:

'Caroline', demanded Miss Keeldar abruptly, 'don't you wish you had a profession, a trade?'

'I wish it fifty times a day. As it is, I often wonder what I came into the world for. I long to have something absorbing and compulsory to fill my

5 Martha Vicinus portrays the 'perfect lady' of the Victorian ideal as follows: "Once married [...] her social and intellectual growth was confined to the family and close friends. Her status was totally dependent upon the economic position of her father and then her husband. In her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth." (Vicinus, ix)

6 Among whom George Sand and George Eliot. Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) and George Sand (1804-1876) were of the same generation and were keen readers of each other's novels (see Hirsch 1996).

7 Brontë scholar Lucasta Miller observes that Charlotte Brontë "did not come into her own as a novelist until she developed the confidence to base her fiction on her own emotional experience and to enter her creations emphatically rather than hovering voyeuristically outside them. [...] In 1840, Charlotte discovered George Sand, the French writer who had created her own female form of Romanticism in novels which put women's erotic passion centre stage." (Miller, 2001, 9)

head and hands, and to occupy my thoughts.'

'Can labour alone make a human being happy?'

'No; but it can give varieties of pain, and prevent us from breaking our hearts with a single tyrant master-torture. Besides, successful labour has its recompense; a vacant, weary, lonely, hopeless life has none'. (Brontë C., 1849, 171)

Yet, Brontë times were also changing times.⁸ Brontë critic Kate Flint has pointed out that "in the Brontë lifetime, women were entering the literary marketplace in increasing numbers." According to her, "Curren, Ellis and Acton Bell were acutely aware that the subject of the woman writer was one of the issues of the day" (Glen, 2002, 7). In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, the novelist and first Brontë biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell, writing at the time, called the world of fiction a "space of possibility within which women of letters, like the Brontës, could explore and play with the constraints and conditions of their world" (Gaskell, 1857, 319). Literary historian Heather Glen has written that "Woman's relation to literature appears within the Brontë sisters' novels as appropriative, empowering, and subversive" (Glen, 2002, 7-8). After analysing the destiny and guiding principles of each of the sisters' fictional heroines, Glen concludes that "each of the Brontës' novels in a different way interrogates the stereotypes of gender of its time" (Glen, 2002, 8-9).

Two of the guiding principles of the Brontës, and of their heroines, were therefore fighting adversity and finding ways of escape. The escape route they most coveted, from an early age and throughout their brief lives, was a literary career to free themselves from the hardship of teaching in schools or as governesses. Another recurring theme is the idea of "getting on" – in other words of "making one's way in the world". By undertaking the trip all the way to their London publisher's, Charlotte and Anne show us their determination to be given a chance "to rise", to "get on". Heather Glen comments: "this urge to get on was a constant pressing need for the educated children of an impoverished clergyman" (Glen, 2002, 7). According to Brontë critic Rick Rylance, "the ways in which the Brontë sisters' novels explore a whole constellation of issues, raised in early nineteenth-century England, is structured by the rhetoric of "getting on" (Glen, 2002, 7). He further suggests that in Brontë works, as well as in many other English fictions of the day, "questions of character and mobility were [...] bound up with questions of gender. In early nineteenth-century England, a woman was hardly expected to 'get on' in the same way as a man" (7).

8 As Martha Vicinus observes, "The perfect lady, in turn, gave way to the 'perfect woman', or as she is sometimes called, 'the new woman' [...]. Moreover, through a variety of economic and social changes, her sphere of action became greatly enlarged. The new woman worked, sought education and fought for legal and political rights. While few lower class women immediately benefited from the gains made by upper-class women in these fields, the process of change to an ideal more closely modelled on social and psychological reality could not be halted. Emancipation once begun was inexorable." (Vicinus, 1972, ix-x).

Another example of this will to get on, and the obstacles faced as women, comes from Charlotte. At Christmas 1836, "having got tired of the drudgeries of governing and teaching" (Barker, 1995, 246), she decided that she "should attempt to turn her writing skills to good account and, if possible, earn a living from them" (262). She thus wrote to none other than Robert Southey, the poet laureate of the day, sending him some of her poems and requesting his opinion. Interestingly, in her letter she also expressed her desire "to be forever known". Although Southey apparently appreciated Charlotte's work, his reply to her letter was not an encouraging one. He tried to persuade her that "Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life", and that she had better concentrate on womanly and motherly duties:

There is a danger of which I would, with all kindness and all earnestness, warn you. The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind. [...] Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure she will have for it, even as an accomplishment and recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity [...].⁹

As Brontë biographer Juliet Barker remarked: "though ironic in that the poet laureate could earnestly see no worthwhile future for her, except in the traditional roles of wife and mother, for a woman whose novels were later to achieve more lasting fame than his own works, Southey's attitude was a general one in the nineteenth century" (Barker, 1995, 262). A third example is again provided by Charlotte who, five years after the Southey episode, had in mind to open a school in Haworth where she and her sisters would teach languages in addition to more conventional subjects. She was brave enough to consider spending time abroad, in Brussels, to help the sisters master their French. Such are the words she used when requesting financial help from her aunt Branwell to finance the trip:

'Who ever rose in the world without ambition?', asked Charlotte, appealing for her aunt Branwell for money to go to school in Brussels in 1841, so that 'she and her sister Emily might be better equipped to start a school and gain "a footing" in the world'. 'I want us all to get on', Charlotte writes to her friend Mary Taylor. 'I know we have talents and I want them to be turned to account'. (Glen, 2002, 7-8).

A trip to the village of Haworth, where the Brontë family lived and the sisters wrote, provides plenty of evidence that the sisters' name and literary fame today are such that they are being widely used for marketing and commercial purposes. Haworth

is located in the North of England, in the county of West Yorkshire, on the edge of the Bradford-Halifax-Huddersfield conurbation, and close to the boundaries of Lancashire. Built on the slopes of the Pennine foothills, the Brontës' village is surrounded by farmland and wild moors. Following decades of industrial decline in the twentieth century, it would probably have remained an obscure former textile village, had it not been for the illustrious family's name and reputation. Today, Haworth is marketed as "the heart of Brontë Country". Its economic dynamism and cultural life are mainly driven by literary tourism. Together with the surrounding moorland landscapes – an acknowledged source of inspiration for the sisters' writings – there are many physical remnants of the village as it appeared in the Brontës' lifetime. A majority of the stone-built properties on cobbled Main Street, the main tourist artery in Haworth village, are former weavers' cottages, dating back to the late eighteenth and the first half of the nineteenth centuries, the period when the Brontës lived there. At the top of Main Street, there are several heritage places, promoted as "Brontë landmarks": the parish church of Saint Michael and All Angels, where the sisters' father, Patrick Brontë, worked as a clergyman; the graveyard, adjoining the Brontës' home and garden; the Sunday School, which Reverend Brontë had built to educate the children who worked in the textile mills, and where all three sisters taught, and the nearby parsonage, where the Brontë family lived. The parsonage is now officially known as "the Brontë Parsonage Museum". Inside the Brontë museum, and out on moors, across the *Brontë Way*, formal interpretation of the Brontë link is provided by the Brontë Society, Britain's oldest literary association.

In today's Haworth, the period houses along Main Street are tea-rooms, pottery and handicraft workshops, antiques shops, second-hand booksellers' and souvenir shops. They sell Brontë trinkets, second-hand Brontë paperbacks, pricey older editions of Brontë novels and collected poems, as well as Brontë postcards and stamps. Tourists can also purchase Brontë toiletries, as well as foodstuffs and home collectibles bearing the Brontë name. These range from Brontë soaps and bath salts, Brontë jams and biscuits, to stationary and tea-towels, featuring portraits of the three sisters with the Parsonage and the moors as a backdrop. Amid the Brontë-branded commodities on offer on Main Street, Haworth visitors can find Brontë-themed sandwiches, cakes and menus in the numerous tea-rooms, bakeries, restaurants and bed-and-breakfasts often named after Brontë family members and the sisters' novels and characters. Few of these goods actually have any connection with the Brontës' writings. There are high-street businesses in Haworth which do not exhibit or hint at any Brontë connection. Nevertheless, these places are all benefiting from the Brontë factor, just by being located in this highly branded village. At the present time, in Haworth and in most of *Brontë Country*, the Brontë 'brand' is incorporated into countless local commodities, businesses and services. Many people in the region make a living from this commodification process, from the objectification of the sisters' name and image, from their iconification – whether

⁹ Robert Southey, Letter to Charlotte Brontë, March 1837 (Barker, 1995, 262).

they are caravan park owners, nursing home providers, hoteliers or estate agents, whether they manufacture or sell chocolates, soaps, carpets, woollen clothes, outdoor equipment or tea towels.

The transformation of the Brontë sisters into cultural icons began with the mysterious identities of Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. The speculation, in the Victorian literary community, as to who these writers were, and how many of them there actually were, turned attention towards the writers rather than their writings. Already towards the end of Charlotte's lifetime, following the publication of her locally-based and socially realistic novel *Shirley* in 1849, Yorkshire residents were beginning to make their way to Haworth in order to feel the remoteness of the place and to catch glimpses of the now famed authoress who lived at the Parsonage. There were also travellers to the Brontës' village coming from further afield – North America in particular – who, in Patsy Stoneman's words, "had read the cheap editions of the Brontë novels produced there in the days before international copyright agreements" (Stoneman, 2002, 218). In Heather Glen's view, visitors from the United States and Canada felt mostly attracted by "the confined space of an early Victorian household and the emotional intimacy of its extraordinarily devoted family" (Glen, 2002, 2). Likewise, Patsy Stoneman stresses the fact that "the link between secluded environment and artistic intensity" of the three sisters "was clear enough to Victorian visitors to Haworth" (Stoneman, 2002, 217).

As a counterpoint, local historian William Mitchell reports that Charlotte, anxious to guard her private self, resented the first literary lion-hunters¹⁰ coming all the way to her village to peep into her home and catch sight of herself and her father on a Sunday service at the church (Mitchell, 1992, 21-23). In a letter written to her lifelong friend Ellen Nussey shortly before she died, the now famous woman of letters expressed reservations about Haworth's nascent tourist activity:

Various folk are beginning to come boring to Haworth on the wise errand of seeing the scenery described in *Jane Eyre* and *Shirley* [...] but our rude hills and rugged neighbourhood will, I doubt not, form a sufficient barrier to the frequent repetition of such visits [...]. (Charlotte Brontë's letter to her friend Ellen Nussey (1850), Mitchell 1992, 3)

In the late 1850s, after Charlotte's death and following the publication of the first biography of the Brontë family by the northern novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell, enterprising villagers in Haworth were already selling Brontë souvenirs and stationary (Miller, 2001, 98). Photographs of Reverend Patrick Brontë and the sisters were available to the increasing number of tourists arriving in Haworth.

¹⁰ As defined by William Howitt in *The Homes and Haunts of the Most Eminent British Poets* (1847), "Lion-hunters" refers to "tourists and idlers being on the lookout for any novelty; in this respect, a literary creature is a fascinating monster". Howitt is quoted by Mitchell (1992, 23).

Relics from the Parsonage were in demand, snippets of Charlotte's handwriting had become prized collectors' items. In her book *The Brontë Myth*, Lucasta Miller reports:

In the aftermath of *The Life [of Charlotte Brontë]*, by Elizabeth Gaskell, published in 1857, Charlotte's father had found himself cutting up her letters into small squares to cope with the demand for samples of her handwriting. (Stoneman, 2002, 101-02)

Elizabeth Gaskell's seminal biography of Charlotte Brontë and her siblings played a major role in the birth of the Brontë family legend, and in the subsequent emergence of Haworth as a literary tourist destination.¹¹ At the time *The Life* was published, Elizabeth Gaskell's own reputation as a realistic novelist was already well established and, in Pamela Corpron Parker's words, she was herself "a promoter, participant, and subject of literary tourism" (Corpron Parker, 2009, 128). The first two chapters of Mrs Gaskell's biography are entirely devoted to a detailed depiction of the geographical and human environment of the Brontës' village, the author drawing on the popular "homes and haunts" sub-genre of literary biography, integrating biographical and geographical information. Elizabeth Gaskell's book thus gave curious-minded residents of Yorkshire, along with people with a literary turn of mind from further afield, the urge to go hotfoot to Haworth to get a feeling for the place where the Brontës had lived and penned their works.

Patsy Stoneman has observed that Elizabeth Gaskell skilfully placed centre-stage the exceptional context in which three extraordinary women writers, who happened to be siblings, had spent their lives and produced their literary works (Stoneman, 2002, 225-31). Writing at the same time as Mrs Gaskell, literary historian Thomas Wemyss Reid accounted for the religious and fetishist turn that literary tourism was taking in Haworth, in the second half of the nineteenth century, along these lines: "*The Life* was the book that launched a thousand tourists to Haworth. The literary lion-hunter aspired 'to do' Haworth: that is, to physically inhabit the existential place of the author – to 'see', 'stand', and 'hear' the remaining relics of the Brontës." (Corpron Parker, 2009, 130)

In an article entitled "Elizabeth Gaskell and Literary Tourism" (Corpron Parker, 2009) the American literary critic Pamela Corpron Parker has developed an analysis which, to some extent, is in keeping with both Stoneman's and Reid's perspectives. In addition to reiterating the fact that *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* had prompted early literary tourism in Haworth, she states that the book was also "one of the first book-

¹¹ In Pamela Corpron Parker's words: "As the author of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, (1857), Gaskell in particular legitimated literary tourism as a cultural practice and created some of the central myths surrounding the British Woman of Letters." (Corpron Parker, 2009, 128)

length portraits of the British woman of letters” ever to have been published.¹² Mrs Gaskell’s biography therefore contributed to putting the three women of letters from Haworth in context. Furthermore, by blending fact and fiction, *The Life* also paved the way to Haworth becoming a mythical place, revered by early literary travellers and tourists alike. It subsequently contributed to turning Haworth into a major literary destination while establishing the reputation of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters as canonical women writers. Pamela Corpron Parker underlines the fact that the rise of Charlotte and her sisters’ reputation as women of letters, and their being placed in the tourist limelight, was largely due to another woman writer. A number of publications on the history of literary tourism¹³ tell us that what was happening in Haworth, at the time when Gaskell’s biography of Charlotte Brontë came out, was part of a rising and more widespread phenomenon. Nascent Brontë tourism was mirrored by the emergence of literary tourism nationwide and, more particularly, by the development of literary tourism associated with the female literary personality. The process was fuelled by the emergence of mass publication, mass readership and mass transport. It was also favoured by the Victorian cult of artistic genius pervading Britain in the late nineteenth century. As explained by Corpron Parker:

In the expanding consumer culture of Victorian Britain, successful female authors became marketable literary personalities. The popular presses eagerly supplied a growing number of memoirs, guidebooks, periodicals, and maps focussing on Britain’s literary heritage. Then, as now, the national heritage industry, particularly literary tourism, augmented the popular and critical reputations of British writers such as Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell. (Corpron Parker, 2009, 128)

Writing in the late 1860s, Haworth local historian, William Cooke, had been observing the Brontë-driven tourist phenomenon taking hold of the three sisters’ village. He was able to speak of places in Haworth “made sacred through the habitual presence of gifted beings” (Stoneman, 2002, 218). A century and a half later, based on an analysis of various depictions and accounts of Haworth by literary travellers in the last decades of the nineteenth century, Brontë scholar Patsy Stoneman reports that “already in the 1860s the visitors’ book in Haworth Church contained names from all quarters of the globe” and that, “by the 1890s, the notion of Haworth as a ‘literary shrine’ was well established” (Stoneman, 2002, 218).

12 In Pamela Corpron Parker’s words: “Gaskell’s *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* arguably represents the pinnacle of the ‘homes and haunts’ genre as well as being one of the first book-length portraits of the British woman of letters. Gaskell herself would become the subject of such writings.” (Corpron Parker, 2009, 129)

13 Watson 2006, Watson 2009, Buzard 1993, Robinson and Andersen 2002.

Charlotte Brontë herself started the Brontë legend, the Brontë myth. She was the first to begin the appropriation of her sisters, when she edited their novels, wrote the Biographical Notices of Ellis and Acton Bell, and prefaced Emily’s *Wuthering Heights*. Even though her initial concern was to allay bad feelings and criticism about the immoral tone of Emily’s and Anne’s writings, and the less acceptable aspects of their fictions, it turned out, according to Lucasta Miller, that Charlotte acted as “her own mythologiser” (Miller, 2001, 2), crafting two distinct and conflicting myths in the process.¹⁴ Miller underlines that Charlotte first invented the myth of female creation in order “to protect her anonymity and her sisters” (21). This myth subsequently served, in Miller’s words, “to preserve her private self” (16). It was embodied, in her writings, by her autobiographical heroines Jane Eyre¹⁵ and Lucy Snowe, who had forged their own sense of self-assertion and independence in conflict with their social and cultural environment. Lucasta Miller goes on to emphasise that, at the time when she first met Elizabeth Gaskell, in the early 1850s, Reverend Brontë’s eldest and only remaining daughter forged another myth, which was eventually to inspire the saintly heroine in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Patrick Brontë’s daughter was accordingly presented as a martyr to duty towards her father, and the patriarchal system in which she lived, as well as a model of Victorian femininity. Miller holds the view that the second myth was designed to deflect attention from the first, given that, once Charlotte had achieved fame and recognition, she was nonetheless intent on preserving her private self by defending the freedom of “walking invisible”.¹⁶

Over the years, the Brontë myth was to pervade the realms of popular culture and in the process evolve into a variety of forms, among which iconification, commodification and merchandising, as we can see in today’s Haworth. The Brontë myth is sustained, to this day, by the process of intertextuality. According to Lucasta Miller:

Since 1857, when Elizabeth Gaskell published her famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë*, hardly a year has gone by without some form of biographical material on the Brontës appearing – from articles in newspapers to full-length lives, from images on tea-towels to plays, films and novelisations. Like *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, the tragic story of the Brontë family has been told and retold time and again in endless new configurations. (Miller, 2001, ix-x)

14 In Lucasta Miller’s words: “Both had their elements of truth in aspects of Charlotte Brontë’s private character, but both were imaginative constructs, consciously developed.” (Miller, 2001, 2)

15 According to Lucasta Miller: “Charlotte Brontë’s real achievement in *Jane Eyre* was to create a different kind of myth: a positive concept of the emerging female self in a society whose predominant models of middle-class femininity were self-denying, dutiful and passion-free.” (Miller, 2001, 14)

16 In Lucasta Miller’s words: “Charlotte Brontë had always been secretive towards her writing, but she now had every reason to fear notoriety and to cling to ‘the advantage of being able to walk invisible’.” (Miller, 2001, 16)

What literary biographer Michael Benton has called a “blurring of fact and fiction”¹⁷ and what Brontë scholar, Patsy Stoneman, has referred to as an “indeterminacy of boundary between fact and fiction” (Stoneman, 2002, 216), in both Charlotte’s Preface to *Wuthering Heights* and Elizabeth Gaskell’s biography, began a long-lasting process of mythologising the three sisters that has given rise to the tourist developments and the objectification of the Brontë sisters’ name and fame that we can observe in present-day Haworth. By the 1890s, there was a talk in Haworth of what Lucasta Miller has called a “Brontë epidemic”, due to the huge increase in the number of tourists, from around two hundred a year in the late 1850s to ten thousand a year by the mid 1890s (Miller, 2001, 101-104). Haworth’s tourist phenomenon was further propelled by the foundation of the Brontë Society in 1893 and by the opening of the first Brontë museum above the Yorkshire *Penny Bank*, at the top of *Main Street*, two years later. Lucasta Miller holds the view that the combination of Charlotte Brontë’s mythologising of her family and Elizabeth Gaskell’s myth-making gradually turned Haworth into a place of Brontë pilgrimage. She reports that, from the mid-nineteenth century to the first decade of the twentieth century, Charlotte would be perceived as an appealing saint and Haworth as an identifiable shrine, remarking that: “The almost religious awe in which she was held soon came to be focussed on the place where she had spent nearly all her life and a fully-fledged cult developed, complete with pilgrims and relics” (Miller, 2001, 98).

In 1904 one Brontë tourist, Virginia Woolf, pointed out that this appropriation, this commodification, this packaging of the Brontës for tourist purposes, was deflecting attention away from the Brontës as *writers* and from their works as *texts*:

The [Brontë] museum is certainly rather a pallid and inanimate collection of objects. [...] We must be grateful for the care which has preserved much that is, under any circumstances, of deep interest. Here are many autograph letters, pencil drawings, and other documents. But the most touching case – so touching that one hardly feels reverent in one’s gaze – is that which contains the little personal relics of the dead woman. The natural fate of such things is to die before the body that wore them, and because these, trifling and transient though they are, have survived, Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. (Woolf, 1904, 2-3)¹⁸

As related by Virginia Woolf, what appeared at first sight as a blatant appropriation and iconification of the Brontë sisters’ name, fame, and personal belongings is yet another way of putting the woman writer in the limelight. This promotion is often

performed by placing more emphasis on the dead woman than on the writer as such, as dictated by the imperatives of promoting heritage to a wider audience. In actual fact, alongside the commercial appropriation and commodification of the Brontë sisters in today’s Haworth, there appears to have always been a long-lasting dynamic cultural activity, based around their life story, writings and landscapes, which has endorsed and guaranteed the text – that is to say the original and the authentic. This enduring process has contributed to turning the three sisters into the subjects of a tourism phenomenon that is now a major economic driver of the region where they lived.

Brontë-based cultural and tourist dynamism means constantly putting the Brontë text in context. The approach is, in many ways, similar to what Elizabeth Gaskell did in her *Life*, with respect to Charlotte, one century and a half ago. That is to say that, by locating Charlotte in Haworth, the Brontës’ first biographer created a more coherent portrait of the woman writer as a cultural icon. And, in so doing, Gaskell contributed, in Pamela Corpron Parker’s words, to “the promotion of the Woman’s question” (Corpron Parker, 2009, 131). Mrs Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë* therefore performs what the feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty has called a “politics of location”, in which a “woman’s place – that is to say her home, her landscape, her region, and her national identity” provide her with “historical, geographical, cultural, psychic, and imaginative boundaries for the construction of her political self-definition” (Talpade Mohanty, 2003, 106-23). Corpron Parker holds the view that this notion of a woman’s place – as a particular geographical region, home or social position – thus converges, in her words, “with placing or locating a woman within a specific historical, professional, and familial context” (Corpron Parker, 2009, 131). Over the years, this process has, in many ways, contributed to making Haworth the place that it now is: a literary destination combining text and context together with the woman’s issue and the life story of three exceptional creative artists, within the wider frame of Brontë-associated heritage tourism across the region of West Yorkshire. Corpron Parker also emphasises that “Elizabeth Gaskell’s contributions to nineteenth-century literary biography and tourism thus disclosed her insistent engagement with the Woman’s Question – the Victorians’ unresolved debate regarding women’s vocation or place in British culture”, that “the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres located women as private, familial, spiritual and peripheral to the rough-and-ready world of economic, political and cultural production inhabited by men”, and that “middle and upper-class women’s gentility and femininity rested upon assumptions of their financial and emotional dependence, as well as their separation from ongoing remunerated labour.” Corpron Parker concludes that “visiting a woman writer’s home and environs collapsed those boundaries between her domestic and professional identities and therefore disrupted complexly gendered notions of woman’s vocation” (Corpron Parker, 2009, 131-132).

¹⁷ And which he subsequently theorised into a paradigm (Benton, 2009, 208-212).

¹⁸ Regarding Virginia Woolf’s first trip to Haworth, see also Miller 2001, 102.

In recent times, a number of attempts have been made to counterbalance the distorting effects of the iconification and objectification of the three sisters, and the commodification of 'everything Brontë'. This rebalancing is being achieved through a re-appropriation of the Brontë heritage, placing more emphasis on the importance of their writings. Renewing and recreating the Brontës' original texts has been performed through a variety of artistic works, stage adaptations, contemporary fictions and television dramas and documentaries. In Haworth village, in particular, the Brontë Society has initiated a number of cultural projects embracing modern visual arts, educational visits and writing workshops. Many of these lay emphasis on graphic and artistic representations of the Victorian woman and female artist, on the context of the Brontës' living and writing experiences and, more generally, on the condition of England in their lifetime.¹⁹ Stress is also laid on creative writing, drama sessions and visual arts workshops for primary and secondary-school students in the British Isles and school groups from the Continent. Brontë-inspired cultural events in Haworth and Brontë Country are based on, or inspired by, Brontë plots and Brontë fictional characters, along with the three sisters' literary geography and existing Brontëan landscapes which tourists can visualise and ramble through. Currently, more challenging and imaginative approaches to the Brontë works, lives and landscapes are being emphasised, such as landscape art works, weather paintings, graphic novels, sound effects, together with novelistic rewritings, poetic imitations and adaptations for the stage with a modern-day turn.²⁰ Their purpose is to establish relevant links between Brontë times and the present day. Another objective is to set up a comprehensive network between various Brontë-related places of historical, natural and architectural interest along the *Brontë Way*²¹ – spanning the counties of West Yorkshire and Lancashire, to the West – and further East, in the Huddersfield area, across *Shirley Country*, named after Charlotte's novel published in 1849. These landscapes and landmark places can thus be explored, on foot or even virtually, by today's visitors.

19 See <https://www.bronte.org.uk/whats-on/news>

In particular, at the Brontë Parsonage Museum, the Contemporary arts programme celebrating the Brontës' creative legacy through artistic reinterpretations and the Education service organising guided visits, talks and workshops in history, literature and drama.

20 See <https://www.bronte.org.uk/whats-on/news>

In particular Past events and News.

21 The *Brontë Way* is a 45-mile walk combining many associations with the Brontë family. The route starts from Oakwell Hall, near Birstall, in West Yorkshire, which Charlotte Brontë used in her novel *Shirley* as her heroine's residence under the fictional name of 'Fieldhead manor'. To the west of Haworth Moor, the itinerary crosses the Pennines and stretches all the way to Gawthorpe Hall, near Padiham, in Lancashire, which is Mr Rochester's house, Ferndean Manor, in *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte's best-known novel.

The original *Brontë Way* was devised in 1985 as a simple 9-mile walk between Wycoller and Haworth and was promoted largely by Lancashire County Council. It was only later that the Brontë theme was developed to incorporate a set of buildings and locations with strong Brontë associations, like the small town of Thornton, where the three sisters were born and spent their early years.

See <http://www.bronte-country.com/bronte-way.html>

In order to understand some of the forms that contemporary re-appropriation of the Brontës' lives and works can take through re-interpretation, we can take two examples. Firstly, a graphic novel based on Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and, secondly, a book of verse inspired by the Brontës' living and creative spaces. The first example comes from 2006, when a regionally-based writer from Bradford, Adam Strickson, published a graphic novel of *Wuthering Heights* in association with a black graphic artist, Siku. Many people may feel this sort of work to be a distortion, a simplistic reduction of the original text. But abridging the original text does not necessarily diminish its dramatic density as long as it retains the various stages in the plot, which is the case here. And yet, the treatment given to the original *Wuthering Heights*, the fact that it disappears behind narrative summaries and minimal texts condensed to fit into speech bubbles, might appear as heresy to many Brontë readers, not least literary scholars. It can be hoped that such a graphic work can successfully appeal to certain categories of Brontë audiences, especially the younger generations, also that it may allow some readers to approach the original story in a visual way, which they might not otherwise do. A work of this kind can act as a first contact, and incite a section of the graphic novel audience to read the original text.

The second example is from poetess Katrina Naomi who, during the winter of 2010, became the Brontë Parsonage Museum's first writer-in-residence. As such, she was "offered access to the collections and the space" of the Parsonage "to respond to the Brontës in her own words" (Holmes 2010). According to Jenna Holmes, the Brontë Parsonage Museum's Arts Officer, "the resulting collection, *Charlotte Brontë's Corset*, is sensitive, sometimes provocative, its non-reverential tone wry and refreshing. Katrina's almost 'forensic' examination of the Brontë relics explores them through new eyes, challenging our over-familiarity with the Brontë myth" (Holmes 2010). Reading *Charlotte Brontë's Corset* therefore invites us to re-examine the family story and living spaces in a current-day context. In a poem entitled "Charlotte Brontë's Corset", which has given its name to the book of verse, Katrina Naomi speaks to Charlotte and apologises for intruding into her privacy in these words:

I'm sorry Charlotte for this disservice.
Of course your corset is discoloured,
These padded cups no longer coral pink.
Strips of whale plunge the depths
of your bodice, the slightly rusty metal
strip grips from breastbone to wasp-waist.
I feel like a tabloid reporter, sniffing around
The armholes of your life. (Naomi, 2010, 10)

As writer-in-residence, Katrina Naomi was also "drawn to the present life of the Parsonage" (Holmes 2010). Some of her poems show a very idiosyncratic take on

the subject by re-appropriating and “vividly re-imagining life behind the scenes of a museum dedicated to literary genius” (Holmes 2010), as can be seen in the first stanza of a poem entitled “Before Opening Time at the Brontë Parsonage Museum”:

The clock ticks at the hours of housework.
The Dyson sucks up what remains
of those sisters. I sit by two fire extinguishers,
obnoxious in their red jackets, the stone
stair eats at the fat of my buttocks.
The cash is set for the day, picture frames
dusted. A computer's blue eye is constant,
like a ship homing for harbour. (Naomi, 2010, 18)

Again, the tone is less than respectful, and the anachronistic details make one feel slightly uncomfortable. As Jenna Holmes underlines, “The Brontë sisters were pioneering writers, their issues radical, their works sometimes shocking and their influence on contemporary literature and arts is profound” (Holmes 2010). Through their creative talent and their determination to go beyond the set roles that Victorian society would have them play, the Brontë sisters have left a rich heritage. They gave evidence that the boundaries which constrained women of their time could be overcome – both within and beyond the fictional space. Emancipated through writing, they were therefore able to create an enduring literary legacy. Their life story has reached the status of myth. It has itself become a major source of interest and inspiration, just as much as their novels – generating and sustaining economic and cultural activity through tourism and inspiring successive generations of writers, artists and film directors.

In Haworth, the homage paid to the Brontës continues – even if the trappings of tourism give it a very commercial nature at first sight. Across *Brontë Country* and beyond, the three sisters have become both objects and subjects of literary tourism. And Haworth, in the process, has become a site of cultural and commercial significance. The discrepancy between the thriving tourist industry that has been built up around the Brontës, and the reality of their lives and works, keeps being questioned by Brontë critics and Brontë re-interpreters alike. Furthermore, the gender battle in which the Brontë sisters were immersed in their lifetime is not over. The issues with which they grappled may have mutated, in line with ideological, social and cultural changes from one generation to the next, but they can still be found today. In addition to the Brontë novels' enduring power, as Brontë scholar Lucasta Miller points out, the Brontë sisters' legacy has been sustained because their works and life story alike have had the ability “to mutate and regenerate over time through the never-ending process of myth-making” (Miller, 2001, xi). Miller examines how the three Brontë sisters have been present, posthumously, on the battleground of feminine emancipation and the struggle for gender equality to the

present day, defining a timeline spanning a century and a half. In the second half of the nineteenth century, following the publication of the first biographies and apocryphal accounts of the sisters' lives, they were revered as saintly icons of female suffering under patriarchal authority, male-chauvinistic prejudice and a corseted society, the initial hostility to what was considered improper writings giving way to admiration and sustained interest. Subsequently, Miller identifies a radical change taking place in the early years of the twentieth century – more precisely at the time of the Suffragette demonstrations, and even more so after the start of the women's emancipation movement in the aftermath of the First World War. She holds the view that, at the time, the sisters were turned into apostles of women's emancipation through education and work. Charlotte, in particular, was treated as a figurehead, remembered as the one who, after her sisters' deaths, set herself to vindicate them in the face of hostile criticism. Miller goes on to stress that the three sisters' complexity as individuals and writers was often sacrificed to ideology and that, by the 1960s, Charlotte had started being used as a figurehead before being taken up by the women's Liberation Movement in the 1970s. As Martha Vicinus warned at that time, “the feminine stereotypes women struggled against a hundred years ago, but only partially defeated, [...] should serve as a reminder not only of the distance women have travelled, but of the miles yet to go” (Vicinus, 1972, xv).

The Brontës survive through the power they still exert over audiences who identify with the universal themes they developed in their writings, through their grip over our imagination and through their dissemination into popular culture. Three concluding quotations illustrate the breadth of the enduring Brontë legacy. The first one is taken from a publication by Joolz Denby, a Bradford-born author who took part in the Radical Brontë Festival, organised by Bradford National Museum of Film, Television and Photography in September 2006. In a chronicle entitled “The Things I hate about the Brontës”, she compares “the artistic versus touristic Brontës”²², attempting to save the Brontës and their literary achievements from layers of commodification and iconification and decades of distortion:

No-one now seems to fully realise the terrible personal suffering endured by these incredibly brave and resourceful women and what an incredible story it is in itself that they managed to bring their work to the public. They battled against the scourge of tuberculosis – a cruel and terrifying disease that laid waste to most of the women in the family, leading to the impression that for every book that was published, one of the sisters died. [...] Except for Charlotte's tragic late marriage, they never formed lasting relationships with partners – no love, no romance, no sex-life, no companionship. Their lives were, by anyone's standards, horrible. But they wrote like fiery angels and left a legacy so brilliant it is admired all over the world. (Denby, 2006, 2)

22 The title of the first debate in the 10-day festival.

The second is an extract from an academic work published in 1978 by feminist writer Helen Moglen:

In our families, in our society, in our political and sexual lives, we are still the victims of the patriarchal forces which protect our economic structures. We continue to re-enact our roles in the romantic mythology which embodies and validates that persuasive power. And as we too strive for autonomous definition we see ourselves reflected in different aspects of the Brontë struggle. (Moglen, 1978, 160)

The third quotation comes from Andrew MacCarthy, a former Director of the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth:

Writers' lives tend to be as fascinating to us as their fictions, even when there is relatively little biographical information available. In fact, the less we know the more fascinated we become. Certainly, the Brontës have exerted an extraordinarily powerful hold over our collective imagination for more than 150 years now. Generations of readers, writers and artists have been absorbed and inspired by them and they have permeated our cultural landscape, at every level. We are the Brontës. (MacCarthy, 2010, 4)

Joolz Denby and Helen Moglen remind us of the Brontë sisters' groundbreaking struggle to assert themselves as women writers in the early nineteenth century. Both Joolz Denby and Andrew MacCarthy point to the lasting cultural impact of the Brontë sisters, their very strong power of identification, and their continuing presence, however subliminal, in our lives.

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