

Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will

Morgan Library and Museum, New York City

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"I am no bird, and no net ensnares me. I am a free human being with an independent will, which I now exert to leave you...it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God's feet, equal,—as we are. " Who can forget Jane Eyre furiously taking her stand against Rochester after he railed that she was behaving like a "wild frantic bird" in proto-feminist passages where Jane demanded equal recognition of the sexes in this eponymous novel? For the 200th anniversary of Charlotte Brontë's birth the Morgan Library and Museum presented American viewers for the very first time the bound manuscript of *Jane Eyre*, on loan from the British Library. Accompanying this manuscript is Charlotte's presentation copy of this seminal novel (1847, published under the pseudonym Currer Bell) to her friend Mary Taylor, and also the first American edition (1848). The Morgan has the most extraordinary collection in America of Brontëiana, thanks to J. P. Morgan himself, Mrs. Henry Houston Parnell of Philadelphia, the late Gordon Ray, and other Morgan purchases and gifts. Henry Parnell was a competitor of Morgan's for Brontë materials, and during his lifetime much of his collection went to the U.K.'s Brontë Society and eventually found a home in the Haworth Parsonage Brontë Museum in Leeds, near a wild moor in Yorkshire, where the family moved in 1820.

The exhibition offers a dazzling array of manuscripts, books that features all the Brontës, including sisters Emily and Anne, brother Branwell, and father Patrick. The Brontës were an extraordinary literary family. The father published poetry and essays and lived into his 80s (the mother died in 1821 and two older sisters in 1825). In their youth the three surviving Brontë sisters, Charlotte, Anne, and Emily, produced an extraordinary number of novels, as well as drama, poetry, and other writings. They "published" their books, however, not in print but in a neat, tiny handwriting with title pages and other publishers' devices that imitated the printed page. In 1830 Charlotte wrote out a list of the 22 novels she had finished by the age of 14. She was intensely fascinated and creative in her "bookmaking"; her writings mirrored the printed page but in tiny, minuscule "typeface." Just observe the manuscript "The Poetaster: a Drama by Lord Charles Wellesley," written in 8-12 June 1830 and measuring only 5 x 3 centimeters including title-page borders.

Not only did they write and "publish" at a young age, but their creativity was informed with

indefatigable reading. The exhibit features books they read, many inscribed and/or with marginal annotations, and correspondence about reading. For example, they read Milton, Shakespeare, Walter Scott, Byron (think of Rochester), *Blackwood's Magazine* and newspapers. One of Charlotte's favorite books was Thomas Bewick's *History of Birds* (1804), from which the "Razor Billed Auk" makes an appearance in *Jane Eyre*. Branwell also wrote voluminously about his fantasy world of Angria, just as his sisters wrote about their Gondal, all in the same minuscule script. He did not achieve the same literary fame as his siblings. The exhibition does, however, include Branwell's portrait of his sisters on which he tellingly painted over his own image. He died before knowing of the publication (in type) of his sisters' famous novels. Given the sensibilities of their time, the Brontë sisters published under a male pseudonym Currer Bell (*Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Agnes Grey*, for example). The exhibit features a dazzling array of first and other editions of all the Brontë novels.

The "author" Currer Bell's name could be gender ambiguous, but after *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* became bestsellers at home and in America, the reading and publishing world exhibited intense curiosity about the author, most assuming she was a man. In 1848 the Brontë sisters boarded a train to London and arrived at Charlotte's publisher, Smith, Elder, & Co., to reveal not only their sex, but that the novels were written by the sisters, not one person. After the revelation a relieved Charlotte wrote a letter to William S. Williams of Smith's firm, stating that she must be taken for "what I am, neither more nor less." She continued that she had removed "any false expectations [that] may have arisen under the idea that "Currer Bell" had a just claim to the masculine cognomen, he perhaps, somewhat presumptuously, adopted - that was, in short, of the "nobler sex.""

The exhibit traces Charlotte's legacy, especially after her death in 1855 and the publication of Elizabeth Mary Gaskell's biography her. Charlotte was already famous, but Gaskell's book made her a popular sensation. The Morgan show traces her literary influence and also discusses the many film and television adaptations based on Charlotte's work.

The exhibition is accompanied by the excellent catalogue, *The Brontës: A Family Writes*, by Christine Nelson. The Morgan has given us an extraordinary explication of reading, writing, and publishing in nineteenth-century England. And of course - CELEBRITY!

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