Emily Brontë in the Hands of Male Critics

Elaine Showalter in “Women and the Literary Curriculum” has commented briefly on the ways in which sexual bias or sexual prejudice influences our reading of literature. I want to expand on the point, and shall draw my examples of such bias or prejudice from responses to Emily Brontë’s Wuthering Heights. I shall be concerned, first, with contemporary reviews of the novel, then with two modern critical essays that seem to me to typify the biased treatment the novel has received, by no means always, but frequently and continuingly in its 120-year history.

Wuthering Heights recommends itself to such a study, I think, for several reasons. First, there is its greatness—its large suggestivity; the novel appears to be inexhaustible and it will support interpretations of widely varying emphasis. Second, there is the fact of its pseudonymous publication under the name of Ellis Bell in December, 1847, and its second edition three years later, when Charlotte Brontë identified Ellis Bell as her sister Emily. The second edition was accompanied by Charlotte’s famous “Biographical Notice,” which told the reading public in very moving prose of the brief lives and the deaths of both her sisters. Finally, there is Emily Brontë’s reticence. Apart from her poems, her novel, and possibly her Gondal prose narratives—if these survived her, they were later destroyed or lost—she left only a few school essays, a handful of letters and diary fragments.

To a degree unusual, then, for a modern or near-modern writer, she became at her death her admirers, or her detractors. Where she had been silent, they spoke, and, including her sister Charlotte, made of her what they would.

The pseudonyms all the Brontës chose for their joint volume of poems and for their novels were, Charlotte reported, deliberately selected to admit of ambiguous interpretation. They did not wish to choose names avowedly masculine; they would not call themselves, for example, Charles, Edward, and Alfred. On the other hand, as Charlotte wrote afterwards, “We did not like to declare ourselves women, because—without at that time suspecting that our mode of writing and thinking was not what is called ‘feminine’—we had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality, and for their reward, a flattery, which is not true praise.”

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¹Ellis and Acton Bell, Wuthering Heights and Agnes Grey. A new edition revised, with a biographical notice of the authors, a selection from their literary remains, and a preface, by Currer Bell (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1850).

²“Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” Wuthering Heights: An Authoritative
Contemporary reviews of *Wuthering Heights*, all five found in Emily Brontë's writing desk and others as well, referred to Ellis Bell as "he." "He" had written a book which, give or take certain differences of emphasis, was declared to be powerful and original. Although an occasional review acknowledged that it was a story of love, its essential subject was taken to be a representation of cruelty, brutality, violence, of human depravity or wickedness in its most extreme forms. Its lack of moral statement or purpose was taken to be either puzzling or censurable. It was awkwardly constructed. But, even so, in spite of the degree to which the reviewers were, variously, displeased, inclined to melancholy, shocked, pained, anguished, disgusted, and sickened, a number of them allowed the novel to be the work of a promising, possibly a great, new writer.

Most of the reviewers simply assumed without comment that the writer's sex was masculine. Two American reviewers did more: they made much of the novelist's sex and found plain evidence of it in the novel itself. Percy Edwin Whipple, in *The North American Review*, found in *Jane Eyre* the signatures of both a male and a female mind. He supposed that two persons had written it, a brother and a sister. To the sister, he attributed certain "feminine peculiarities": "elaborate descriptions of dress"; "the minutiae of the sick-chamber"; and "various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex." He went on to assert, "It is true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men; but there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate, but which often escape unawares from a female writer" (356).

From the brother, Whipple derived the novel's clarity and firmness of style, all its charm, and its scenes of profanity, violence, and passion. These scenes, he was virtually certain, were written by the same hand that wrote *Wuthering Heights*. Turning to *Wuthering Heights*, Whipple concentrated on the novel's presentation of Heathcliff, whom he found quintessentially bestial, brutal, indeed monstrous. He did allot a few fines to Heathcliff in love, but without mentioning Catherine. He scored the author of *Wuthering Heights* for "coarseness" and for being a "spendthrift of malice and profanity" (358).

George Washington Peck, in *The American Review*, did not overtly theorize on the sex of the author of *Wuthering Heights*. He assumed it to be masculine, then elaborated on the assumption in a rush of comparisons. The novel's language might be that of a Yorkshire farmer or a boatman or of frequenters of "bar-rooms and steamboat saloons." He

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 cautioned young ladies against imitating it, lest American social assemblies come to resemble certain scenes in Tammany Hall. The novel's author Peck likened to a "rough sailor [with] a powerful imagination" (573). He is like a friend of whom one is fond and yet by whom one is continually embarrassed. He is not a gentleman. He would embarrass you with his gafferies whether you were walking down Broadway with him or across the fields of Staten Island or dropping into a shop or store anywhere. Among his eccentricities or faults is a disposition to believe that he understands women. But he does not understand them. He cannot see them as they are. He can only see them as he is, and then, just slightly, refine them.

There are not so many reviews of the second edition of Wuthering Heights. But there are enough, I think, to show that once the work of Ellis Bell was identified as the work of a woman, critical responses to it changed. Where the novel had been called again and again "original" in 1847 and 1848, the review in the Atheneum in 1850 began by firmly placing it in a familiar class, and that class was not in the central line of literature. The review in the Atheneum began by categorizing Wuthering Heights as a work of "female genius and female authorship." The reviewer was really not surprised to learn that Jane Eyre and its "sister-novels" were all written by women. The nature of the novels themselves, together with "instinct or divination," had already led the reviewer to that conclusion, which was now simply confirmed by Charlotte Brontë's "Biographical Notice." The review quotes a great deal from the "Notice": Charlotte's description of the isolation of Haworth, her discovery of Emily's poems, the silence that greeted their publication in Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, and the deaths of both Emily and Anne. It is on Emily Brontë's life that the review spends most of its 2,000 words. References to Wuthering Heights are late and few, and then it is grouped not only with Jane Eyre but also with Agnes Grey. All three are "characteristic tales"—characteristic of the Bell, that is to say the Brontë, sisters, and, more generally, of tales women write. A single sentence is given to Wuthering Heights alone: "To those whose experience of men and manners is neither extensive nor various, the construction of a self-consistent monster is easier than the delineation of an imperfect or inconsistent reality. . . ." The review ends there, repeating still another time its classification of the novel. Wuthering Heights, with its "Biographical Notice," is a "more than usually interesting contribution to the history of female authorship in England."

I don't mean to suggest that this is the first time a reviewer for the Atheneum was ever condescending; the particular terms of the condescension are my point. Emily Brontë the novelist is reduced to Emily Brontë the person, whose fiction in turn is seen to be limited by the experimental limitation of the life. Wuthering Heights is an addition to the "history of female authorship in England."


The Atheneum, Dec. 28, 1850. All quotations are from pp. 1368-69.
There are other consequences that attend the knowledge or the presumption that Ellis Bell is not a man but a woman. Sydney Dobell published a long essay titled “Currier Bell” in the *Palladium* three months before he could have known on Charlotte’s authority that her sister had written *Wuthering Heights*. But he already “knew” from the intrinsic nature of *Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, Agnes Grey*, and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that they were written by women; indeed, he thought them written by the same woman. Approaching *Wuthering Heights* with that conviction, he stressed the youthfulness of its author. And he likened her to a little bird fluttering its wings against the bars of its cage, only to sink at the last exhausted. Later, when it had more practice writing novels, it would fly freely into the heavens. Dobell stressed also the “involuntary art” of the novel. (Whipple, you may remember, had said that female authors sometimes wrote well “unawares.”) Finally, Dobell saw the novel primarily as a love story, and for the first time made the heroine Catherine the major focus of interest, but only insofar as she was in love. With Heathcliff, Dobell contended, the “authorress” was less successful.

It is clear, I hope, in these instances (and the same can be argued of other contemporary responses) that there is a considerable correlation between what readers assume or know the sex of the writer to be and what they actually see, or neglect to see, in “his” or her work. *Wuthering Heights* is one book to Percy Edwin Whipple and George Washington Peck, who quarrel strenuously with its “morals” and its taste, but another to the reviewer for the *Athenæum*, who puts it calmly in its place and discourses on the life of the clergyman’s daughter who wrote it. And Peck’s rough sailor is born anew as Dobell’s piteous bird with wings too young to fly.

Sexual prejudice continues to affect readers’ responses to *Wuthering Heights* and to its author. In his well-known essay “Fiction and the ‘Analogue Matrix,’” Mark Schorer remarks that Emily Brontë set out to write one kind of novel and in fact wrote another, that she began “by wishing to instruct her narrator, the dandy, Lockwood, in the nature of a grand passion,” but finished by “instructing herself in the vanity of human wishes.” Writing the novel was a “moral

6 “Currier Bell,” *Palladium*, I (1850). Reprinted in *Life and Letters of Sydney Dobell*, ed. E. Jolly (London, 1878), I, 163-186 and in *BST*, V (1918), 210-236. Additional reviews of the second edition consulted are the following: *The Eclectic Review*, XCIII (1851), 222-227; *The Examiner*, Dec. 21, 1850, 813; *The Leader*, Dec. 28, 1850, 953; *The North American Review*, LXXXV (1857), 293-329. The last review, later than the others, appeared in response to Mrs. Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. It implies an apology for the first *North American* review of *Wuthering Heights*. Knowing the lives of the Brontës, the 1857 reviewer finds *Wuthering Heights* peculiar, but he also finds the novel easy to dismiss—its peculiarity or strangeness mirrors the “distorted fancy” of the writer’s life, lived in isolation and deprivation. The novel lies outside normal human experience; it would be inappropriate to bring moral judgment to bear on it. Virtually the same attitude is taken by the reviewer in *The Eclectic Review*. The review in *The Leader*, by G. H. Lewes, is probably the best of the contemporary ones. Still, it would not be difficult to trace in it the operation of sexual prejudice, although the argument would, I think, take more space than I have allotted to any single review here. Charlotte Brontë was quite alert to Lewes’s bias, as she revealed in a letter to him dated Nov. 1, 1849. Allan R. Brick gives excerpts from the *Leader* review and comments revealingly on Charlotte Brontë’s attitude toward it and toward other early reviews in “Lewes’s Review of *Wuthering Heights*,” *NCF*, XIV (1960), 355-359.

teething" for the novelist: "Lockwood is instructed in the nature of a grand passion, but he and Emily Brontë together are instructed in its final fruits: even roaring fires end in a bed of ashes. Her metaphors instruct her, and her verbs" (p. 90).

Now, according to Schorer, this is what Emily Brontë learned that she did not know before: she learned that man dies, that the world lasts longer than he does, that fires once lit sometime burn out, that rain is followed by shine, and storm by calm. None of these facts is hard to come by; most children learn them without setting pen to a single extended original composition, and, probably, Emily Brontë was 27 when she began *Wuthering Heights*. The critic has attributed to the novelist an extraordinary degree of naiveté. Ignorant of life and of nature, she was, he has also supposed, preoccupied by love and dazzled by its power. Again, it was only when she wrote her novel that she was instructed in love's limitations. Finally, Schorer claims, the composition of the novel did not proceed under the novelist's conscious control. To repeat his argument here, "Her metaphors instruct her, and her verbs"; "[her] verbs demand exhaustion, just as [her] metaphors demand rest" (90). With the personification of these grammatical components, the act of composition is figuratively denied to the novelist. Emily Brontë began writing *Wuthering Heights*, but it finished itself.

Schorer's suppositions about the writing of *Wuthering Heights* and the education of Emily Brontë remain just that—suppositions. He does not work to substantiate them. He has tacitly assumed that he has to do with "female genius and female authorship." He provides a twentieth-century version of Sydney Dobell's portrait of its author as a young woman who is concerned with love and writes with "art" involuntarily. Indeed, when Schorer attributes the novel's successful issue to its verbs and its adjectives, he offers a twentieth-century equivalent to one of the oldest of the Brontë myths—that Emily Brontë did not write *Wuthering Heights* at all, that its author was Branwell Brontë.8

While Mark Schorer sees *Wuthering Heights* as fortuitously successful, Thomas Moser sees it as an imperfectly controlled work, sometimes more, sometimes less, accomplished esthetically. The article in which he sets forth his convictions is titled: "What is the Matter with Emily Jane? Conflicting Impulses in *Wuthering Heights*."9 The title alludes, of course, to A. A. Milne's poem, "Rice Pudding":

*What is the matter with Mary Jane?*
*She's perfectly well and she hasn't a pain*
*And it's lovely rice pudding for dinner again!*

*What is the matter with Mary Jane?*

Moser's title betokens, *I think*, affection. But it also signifies condescension. The paternal or avuncular critic will not only read the novel; he will solve the personal mystery: what *was* the matter with Emily Jane?

The true subject of *Wuthering Heights*, Moser contends, is Heathcliff's "magical sexual power" (16). This is the power that moves the world, and Emily Brontë writes well when she passionately celebrates it. This is to say that she writes well in roughly the first half of the novel. To quote from Moser, "The authentic Emily Brontë who wrote the masterpiece

8Irene Cooper Willis disposes of this myth and gives its history in *The Authorship of "Wuthering Heights"* (London: Hogarth, 1936); she summarizes her book under the same title in *Trollopian*, II (1947), 157-168.

we return to is the creator of Heathcliff, vibrating with energy, and Cathy, scorning the pusillanimous Edgar to cry across the moors to her demon lover” (19).

As Emily Brontë turns to her second generation of characters, the place Wuthering Heights, and with it the novel, undergo what Moser terms “feminization” (15). “Feminization” is accompanied by a falling off in the novelist’s artistry. For prominent example, Moser cites the figure of Cathy Linton, later Heathcliff. Cathy does not love Heathcliff; she is impervious to his magical sexual power. Far from crying to him across the moors, she scolds him in Wuthering Heights’s equivalent of the family room. In Moser’s words, “[Cathy] plays either the little heroine of Victorian stage melodrama spurning the cruel villain or the embattled champion of woman’s rights castigating the dissolute male” (14). In other words, Cathy protests when she is married against her will, deprived of her property, and struck, left and right, on both sides of the head. As Cathy comes to love Hareton and verges on marriage with him, Moser argues further, Wuthering Heights becomes no better than a piece of slick fiction in the ladies’ magazines. Hareton allows Catherine to deprive him of his masculinity; he permits the heroine to teach him to read. At its end, to quote Moser again, Wuthering Heights is “simply a superficial stereotyped tale of feminine longings” (15).

In this account, the novel has indeed become stereotypical. But, I would argue, the stereotypes are imposed from without rather than dramatized within the novel itself. Or at least they are not dramatized in the novel sentimentally and uncritically. Moser has approached Wuthering Heights with the idea that what is masculine is natural, unrestrained, energetically or vibrantly sexual, fearless, and forceful to the point of violence. And what is masculine is desirable and admirable, just as what is feminine is undesirable, even contemptible. What is feminine is inhibited, inhibiting, timid, conventional, and censorious. The novel is a masterpiece when it appears to celebrate this idea of masculinity; it is trash when it does not.

What was the matter with Emily Jane? Moser links his criticism of the novel to his idea of the life of the novelist and writes: “As the novel loses its force, the reader’s mind inevitably wanders away from the work of art to its creator, the intense, inhibited spinster of Haworth” (15). Here, the clergyman’s daughter of limited experience who appeared in the Athenæum review reappears in a post-Freudian re-creation: a sexually deprived and frustrated old maid. In line with this stereotype, Moser supposes that Emily Brontë did not “consciously accept” her true subject, that is to say, Heathcliff’s magical sexual power (2). Probably, she “tried to disguise the truth from herself” (4); probably, she did not admit to herself what she was writing about. But, consciously or not, the intense, inhibited spinster of Haworth rejected her subject at her novel’s end; the implication is that she lost her nerve.

I should like to argue, as others have done, that Wuthering Heights is a consistently controlled work; that Emily Brontë wrote it—it did not write itself; that there is no evidence whatsoever that the novelist took fright before her subject; and, finally, that Wuthering Heights reveals a sophisticated awareness of the very kinds of sexual prejudice that have so often interfered with the understanding of it. (I have mentioned essays by Schorer and Moser; if space would allow, I could go on—to essays by Lord David
Cecil, Richard Chase, Elliott Gose, Albert Guerard, James Hafley, Harry Levin, C. Day Lewis, Wade Thompson, and even Arnold Kettle, and the list would still not be complete.10 The true subject of *Wuthering Heights*, I take to be freedom, or at least the will to freedom.

Recall for a moment the Gondal poems and the prose epic that Fannie Ratchford has surmised once surrounded them.11 In the poems and the epic, the dominant figure is the heroine, Augusta Geraldine Almeda, Princess of Alcona, and later Queen of Gondal. She is born a "smiling child," a "glorious child." She grows up independent, ambitious, adventurous both in love and politics. Her lovers are many; she succeeds in time to the throne. When she dies, it is by assassination, and not before a good fight with her adversary, whose blood marks a trail for pursuit across moors and into mountains. There, I would argue, in the epic Emily Brontë began when she was 14, are the "feminine longings" Moser thinks he finds at the conclusion of *Wuthering Heights*. They are certainly not longings for a close and clean-swept domesticity. Rather, I think, they are common youthful longings—for a life of love and adventure; for freedom to feel and to act. And to die grandly, or grandiosely, as the sun goes down.

Catherine Earnshaw is the realistically rendered successor to Gondal’s Queen. Realistically rendered, hers is a story not of freedom enjoyed but of freedom lost. Even in her childhood, when she is "hardy" and "free," voices command Catherine constantly—to say her prayers, to obey, be neat, humble, dutiful, industrious, kind. The voices try to shape her into a useful, domestic article—the angel in the house. This is an idea of womanhood introduced in the opening pages of the novel by Lockwood. He addresses Cathy Linton or Heathcliff as "amiable lady"; he refers to her as "the presiding genius over . . . home and heart" and as a "beneficent fairy"; he is certain that "with that face" she cannot help being good-hearted. His assumptions are, of course, part of Lockwood’s folly; he sees—not Cathy—but a type his culture has conditioned him to expect.

Catherine Earnshaw’s visit to Thrushcross Grange initiates her into society or civilization, as Dorothy Van Ghent has argued most persuasively.12 Catherine does not become the angel in the house; "heaven" never was her home. With her new clothes, she puts on the pattern of the fashionable young lady. Flattered, waited upon, beguiled with presents, she becomes vain of her appearance, restrains the way she moves and speaks. Henceforth, she is "Miss Catherine," a "beauty," a "lady," a "bright, graceful damsel." The

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11 Gondal’s Queen: A Novel in Verse by Emily Jane Brontë (Austin, Texas, 1955).

great lyric passages in the first half of the novel celebrate the condition of freedom Catherine is just about to lose, or, after her marriage, has irrevocably lost. When she says, "[Heathcliff's] more myself than I am," she signifies, for one thing, that she is about to betray her best self, her most authentic self, to become "the greatest woman of the neighbourhood," but that he remains at large—in the condition of liberty they both knew as children.

Realistically rendered, a hero, not a heroine—Heathcliff, not Augusta Geraldine Almeda—enjoys freedom in Wuthering Heights. Heathcliff knows love and travels somewhere to unknown adventure; Thrushcross Grange and Hindley and his wife have not socialized him. And yet, his freedom is useless to him alone. With Catherine lost to him twice, through marriage, then death, he finds himself compelled from within to enact a role that bears relationship to her fate. He plays out to the most extreme degree a role complementary to hers: master, tyrant, oppressor—I quote the terms from the novel. He exercises to the most extreme degree his patriarchal privilege. Hareton, he says, is mine. Linton, he says, is mine. Cathy Linton is mine. They are his possessions, no less than Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. He reifes them one by one and adds them to his inventory of revengeful acquisition.

The great lyric passages of the novel's second half celebrate his longing for Catherine Earnshaw, who is free now. And they celebrate his impending release from his own bondage.

The end of the novel, far from dramatizing Hareton's oppression by the younger Catherine, renders the liberation of both of them. They are both, to begin with, imprisoned, Hareton in his boorishness, but Cathy no less in another way. She is kept ignorant of the past as Hareton is. And she is confined, first in the house and park of Thrushcross Grange, later more severely in the house and garden at Wuthering Heights. She is her father's and Nelly's "love," "darling," "queen," and "angel." She is Heathcliff's "dutiful daughter," or would be if he could work entirely his will with her.

Together, Catherine and Hareton are "companions" and "sworn allies." Theirs is a happy and successful win over mastery, tyranny, oppression. Even Nelly ceases to scold, as they venture in intimacy beyond her caution. The novel presents tragedy, to be sure, but the end is comedy, with society reconstituted in the new generation—youthful, loving, and free.

Emily Brontë, I think, already knew what my colleagues and I are up to in these pages. I quote Charlotte again: "We had a vague impression that authoresses are liable to be looked on with prejudice; we had noticed how critics sometimes use for their chastisement the weapon of personality..."