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Charlotte Brontë and the Suffering Sisterhood

by LINDA HUNT

CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S last two books owe a debt to the women writing fiction in her day in a manner that Virginia Woolf would have understood. As Woolf reminds us in *A Room of One's Own*, "masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of the people, so the experience of the mass is behind the single voice."¹ The mass of female novelists who, like Brontë, were writing in the eighteen-forties and fifties have in common with her the understanding that women as a sex are vulnerable and that their lives are full of suffering; in the fiction of these lesser writers, as in Brontë's masterpieces, the life of an unmarried woman is a painful struggle (while marriage does not necessarily bring happiness), and a woman who must earn her own living will find it very hard.

However, both conventional domestic novelists such as Mrs. Marsh-Caldwell, Miss Sewell, Mrs. Stirling and Mrs. Burbury, and writers considered forward-thinking at the time, such as Mrs. Gaskell, Julia Kavanagh and Harriet Martineau, believe that the difficulties of a woman's lot provide opportunities for her moral development and are therefore not to be regretted. The epigraph from Longfellow on the title page of Mrs. Burbury's *Florence Sackville* (1852) would apply just as well to many other novels: "How sublime a thing it is / To suffer and be strong."² Even in Martineau's *Deerbrook* (1839), where the trials of a governess' life are exposed, or in Mrs. Gaskell's *Ruth*, which advocates greater tolerance towards the unwed mother, the plea for reform is undercut by the simultaneous message that women should bear their troubles with resignation and cheerful endurance, losing concern for self in religious faith, philanthropy and involvement in the problems of others. The works of the women who wrote contemporaneously with

This paper was presented to a "Conference on Feminist Research in the Eighties," Fall 1982, at Northern Illinois University.

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (New York and Burlingame: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1957), pp. 68-69.

2. Mrs. Burbury, *Florence Sackville; or Self-Dependence* (New York: Harper, 1852). (Page numbers for all quotes from this novel will be from this edition and will be cited within the text.) Brontë mentions in an 1851 letter that she read this novel and liked it. See *The Shakespeare Head Life and Letters (The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondences)*, ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington [Oxford: Blackwell, 1932], III, 293-94.

Charlotte Brontë functioned as a safety valve for women's frustrations: the solutions did not threaten the status quo. Yet one can see that it would not take a giant step for a writer whose imagination was less constrained by ideology to transmute this shared experience of suffering into feminism.

Charlotte Brontë began to read the work of her female contemporaries only after she had published *Jane Eyre* and become famous.³ *Shirley* and *Villette*, her last two books, reflect Brontë's new acquaintance with women's novels of her own day, and in part they become dialogues with these novels, echoing their concerns but also modifying their conventions by means of irony and realistic contrast as well as by the construction of female personae, narrators whose voices both suggest and subvert the female fictional tradition of the mid-nineteenth century. Thus Brontë transforms the woman's novel into a vehicle for evaluating the assumptions regarding women that her society held.

In typical female fiction of the eighteen-forties and fifties the heroine triumphs by means of fortitude, which for women means "self-regulation"—control over one's own feelings and behavior. In *Shirley* (1849), Caroline Helstone spends a romantic evening with Robert and goes to sleep convinced he loves her. Eagerly seeking his company the next day, she meets with a cold reception. The narrative voice bursts into an emotional disquisition which at first glance seems to belong in a didactic domestic novel or even in an advice manual for women:

A lover masculine, so disappointed, can speak and urge explanation, a lover feminine can say nothing: if she did the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery. Nature would brand such demonstration as a rebellion against her instincts, and would vindictively repay it afterward by the thunderbolt of self-contempt smiting suddenly in secret. Take the matter as you find it: ask no questions; utter no remonstrances: it is your best wisdom. . . . Nature, however, as has been intimated, is an excellent friend in such cases; sealing the lips, interdicting utterance, commanding a placid dissimulation. . . .⁴

A close analysis reveals that in spite of the direct address to the female reader, and in spite of the assumption of an intimacy with her personal problems reminiscent of Mrs. Marsh's novels or Mrs. Ellis' tracts, the tone is actually one of anger and bitterness, emotions totally alien to those works. "Nature" is evoked on the side of feminine self-control, but in this evocation one hears almost a parody of the eighteenth century conduct books, often excerpted and anthologized in Brontë's day, which find "Nature" conveniently on the side of social convention. The irony involved in Brontë's reference to Nature becomes highlighted when one compares it with the comment on the next page: "She

3. See Tom Winnifrith, *The Brontës and Their Background* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1973), Chapter Six. See also letters to W. S. Williams, *SHLL*, II, 100, 150.

4. Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*, *Shakespeare Head Brontë*, 19 vols., ed. T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington (Oxford: Shakespeare Head Press, 1931-38), I, 114-115. (All further quotes from Brontë's novels will be taken from this edition and cited within the text.)

[Caroline] had loved without being asked to love—a *natural* [emphasis mine], sometimes an inevitable chance, but big with misery” (I, 116). From the perspective of very traditional conduct books and feminine fiction a woman who loves “first” is both immodest *and* unnatural. A reader steeped in the ideology of womanhood would immediately recognize here in the use of the word “natural” Brontë’s realistic rejection of the old dictums. In the light of this realistic usage the conventional references to “Nature” in the passage quoted above become obviously ironic.

The highly emotional tone is heightened by the imagery in the middle section of the passage under discussion which becomes exaggerated, even baroque:

You expected bread, and you have got a stone; break your teeth on it, and don’t shriek because the nerves are martyred: do not doubt that your mental stomach—if you have such a thing—is strong as an ostrich’s—the stone will digest. You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm. Never mind: in time, after your hand and arm have swelled and quivered long with torture, the squeezed scorpion will die, and you will have learned the great lesson how to endure without a sob. (I, 114)⁵

Melodramatic image is piled upon image, but the effect is emotionally profound rather than sentimental because the outrageous imagery exists in tension with the “sensible” conventionality of the advice if taken literally.

And Brontë is not in fact urging the reader to reject this advice. There are ironic overtones because so much attention is drawn to the excruciating psychic cost of such control, but what choice does the culture offer women, after all, but self-discipline? Caroline herself reasons this way and the narrator approves: “Now, what was she to do?—to give way to her feelings, or to vanquish them—to pursue him, or to turn upon herself? If she is weak, she will try the last expedient—will lose his esteem, and win his adversion; if she has sense, she will be her own governor, and resolve to subdue and bring under guidance the disturbed realm of her emotions” (I, 116). By constructing a persona whose advice echoes the didactic novels and manuals, but whose tone of bitter irony differs markedly, Brontë subtly undermines them. “Self-regulation” is the last resort of desperate women, not a glorious expression of moral transcendence.

A common motif in didactic women’s fiction is “the decline,” for the heroines sometimes falter in their attempts to grapple bravely with the single life. Florence Sackville, in certain respects a Brontë-type heroine (probably influenced by *Jane Eyre*), becomes a successful actress to support herself, her mother and sister. She gets “brain-fever,” partly from

5. Susan Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their book, *The Madwoman in the Attic* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1979), pp. 377–78, also examine this passage, noting that the narrator’s comments are “spoken by the voice of repression,” but that “the assurance that ‘the stone will digest’ or ‘the squeezed scorpion will die’ is contradicted . . . by the images themselves”

exhaustion, partly because she hates her life on the stage, and in part because of thwarted love. However she has previously resolved that "although I might die under suffering, I shall not give up. While I have life I shall strive on" (p. 48). Mrs. Burbury does introduce elements of realism: Florence says, ". . . the knowledge that we can't afford to be sick helps us to shake it off" (p. 120). Actually, however, this common-sense approach is simply veneer for the usual inspirational message and so Florence's resolve to get well "does more toward effecting [her] recovery than all the foreign aid . . . great and skillful as it was" (p. 120).

In Mrs. Marsh's *Angela* (1847), the governess-heroine who is similarly broken by overwork (significantly the Brontë heroines suffer not from overwork but from lack of activity), and grieved by her altruistic sacrifice of her lover to her best friend, experiences a physical and emotional breakdown which can be categorized as a "decline" in spite of the author's protestations to the contrary ("She was not going into a consumption or a decline . . .").⁶ Mrs. Marsh is attempting to undercut the melodrama here, and again when she assures us that Angela will not die of her grief (these novelists are, after all, "domestic realists" who reject the sensationalism of the romance). Angela responds to her breakdown by crying, "Oh measure my trial to my strength!" (p. 319). While miserable and thin, she is as beautiful as ever, her face showing the "ineffable brightness . . . of one at rest with her own conscience, at ease with her own heart" (p. 507). We are told that "the agony of such a trial is fierce" (p. 539), but the cliché-ridden language does not allow us to experience Angela's anguish. Gradually she regains health by dedicating herself to her "charges" (her orphaned siblings) and comforting their old nurse, so that finally she is able to say that while life was all duty, "she was happy—entirely, if not joyously happy" (p. 408). Through self-sacrifice she finds not joy but "resignation, piety and peace," until finally, of course, all is resolved and she gets her man.

In both *Shirley* and *Villette* Brontë uses the decline convention, but in neither book does the decline have an ennobling effect on the heroine, and in neither case does the heroine recover through her own heroic efforts. In order to avoid making inspirational matter out of women's sufferings Brontë is forced to rely on plot contrivances. Caroline is returned to health through reunion with the mother she has yearned for, and Lucy, after being psychologically shattered by the solitude of the long vacation at Mme. Beck's school, is nursed by her long-lost godmother, Mrs. Bretton. It is characteristic of Brontë to dispense with realism of plot in order to achieve psychological verisimilitude. The inner life is her real subject, and in the case of both Caroline and Lucy, the reunion with a mother or surrogate-mother takes on mythic meaning

6. Mrs. Marsh-Caldwell, *Angela* (London: William Tegg, 1850), p. 545. (Page numbers for all further quotes will be from this edition and will be cited within the text.) In an 1847 letter to W. S. Williams, Brontë says she has not yet read Mrs. Marsh-Caldwell but intends to do so (*SHLL*, II, 150).

since an important theme in both novels is the heroine's relationship with the feminine principle.

Both Caroline and Lucy explicitly fail to recover through their own efforts—and they do try. In what seems in some respects an echo of Mrs. Marsh, when Caroline's health first begins to fail, Brontë makes it pretty clear that the girl will not die:

She was now precisely in that state, when, if her constitution had contained the seeds of consumption, decline, or slow fever, those diseases would have been rapidly developed, and would soon have carried her quietly from the world. People never die of love or grief alone; though some die of inherent maladies which the tortures of those passions prematurely force into destructive action. The sound by nature undergo these tortures, and are racked, shaken, shattered: their beauty and bloom perish, but life remains untouched. . . . they live on; and though they cannot regain youth and gait, they regain strength and serenity. The blossom which the March wind nips, but fails to sweep away, may survive to hang a withered apple on the tree late into autumn. . . . (I, 213)

This passage shows the influence of the didactic women's novel. Most people who suffer mental anguish do recover and may even find peace of mind. But a careful examination also reveals important differences. There is no cant about such recovery being the result of heroic self-discipline. And in fact Brontë also admits that given poor physical health to begin with, extreme grief can hasten death! Thus the reassuring optimism of the women's novel is gone, along with the emphasis on strength of character as the decisive factor. Brontë acknowledges that beauty will most likely be destroyed by suffering (unlike Angela, Caroline loses her looks during her decline), and that the person who survives is apt to be in appearance and spirit "a withered apple." This image is a far cry from the romantic description of Angela "pale and melancholy" but "all harmony, tenderness and peace."

What little reassurance is offered by this not very optimistic passage is undercut by what lies ahead for Caroline. She bravely embarks on a disciplined effort to learn how old maids manage to live their lives, but her visits to Miss Mann and Miss Ainley are not comforting. Although Miss Mann devoted her life to nursing sick relatives and supporting them financially and emotionally, she is made fun of by the men of the community (including Caroline's beloved Robert) and is unused to communicating about her own affairs because "no one cared to listen to her." Not only is she unappreciated by the world, but Brontë shows us with harsh honesty that the sorrows of Miss Mann's life have made her rather nasty. She exorcizes her bitterness by "flaying alive certain families of the neighborhood . . . she allowed scarcely anyone to be good; she dissected impartially almost all her acquaintance" (I, 199). Far from finding peace of mind through devotion to her family (like the old maid in Elizabeth Sewell's *The Experience of Life* (1852), Miss Mann must still labour daily to achieve composure: "She scarcely rose as Caroline entered: to avoid excitement was one of Miss Mann's aims in life; she had

been composing herself ever since she came down in the morning and had just attained a certain lethargic state of tranquillity when the visitor's knock at the door startled her, and undid her day's work" (I, 198).

Miss Ainley, the other spinster, has even more strenuously followed the route recommended to old maids by women's fiction, and has been more successful, truly losing concern for self by religion and good works. Brontë admires the Miss Ainleys of the world and chides anyone who would find such a figure ludicrous, but she makes no pretense that such saintliness brings rewards in this world. Caroline resolves to follow Miss Ainley's disciplined example and sets out to regulate her life: "She allotted a certain portion of her time for her various studies, and a certain portion for doing anything Miss Ainley might direct her to do; the remainder was to be spent in exercise; not a moment was to be left for the indulgence of such fevered thoughts as had poisoned last Sunday evening" (I, 204). The narrator admits that these efforts "helped her to stem and keep down anguish": the balms of the circulating library are not lightly rejected. But again there is harsh honesty. Caroline does not achieve sustained peace of mind. Shirley's entry into her life and their blossoming friendship does provide some genuine relief, but when it appears that Shirley and Robert will marry, causing her to lose the *two* people she loves, she succumbs to a decline which almost kills her—despite all her efforts at self-regulation.

Lucy Snowe's self-control breaks down when she is left alone for many weeks in an empty, foreign school, with no company but one servant and a cretin. The imbecile is subsequently removed by a kind aunt. Only Lucy has no one, and she experiences a decline, characterized by despair, insomnia and physical weakness. She speaks directly to the reader accustomed to triumphs of self-regulation:

Religious reader, you will preach to me a long sermon . . . and so will you, moralist, and you, stern sage: you stoic, will frown; you cynic, sneer; you epicure, laugh. Well, each and all, take it your own way. I accept the sermon, frown, sneer, and laugh; perhaps you are all right: and perhaps, circumstanced like me, you would have been like me, wrong. The first month was, indeed, a long, black, heavy month to me. (I, 197)

Lucy's voice in this passage is characteristic. Harshly honest, unheroic, empirical, she is a significant departure from the personae of the narrators in most mid-century women's fiction whose voices exude fervid idealism and moral certainty; those narrators are sure that what is needed is the resolution not to submit to despair. Lucy suggests instead that moral principle may be irrelevant in such a crisis. Morality gives way to psychology, here as elsewhere in *Villette*, although Brontë is as usual tactful about such a break with the tenets of feminine ideology. She eschews didactic rejection of the credo, simply showing that for Lucy fortitude is not always enough.

By using the decline convention so prevalent in women's fiction of her

day but dealing with this kind of breakdown as a psychological problem, Charlotte Brontë moves the novel in the direction of psychological realism but also makes it an instrument of effective protest: if suffering does not lead to moral triumph, then women whose lives are subject to mental and physical anguish have cause for loud complaint.

Miss Sewell's *The Experience of Life* has been compared with *Villette* by more than one critic. Both novels are about spinsters who struggle against despair and learn from experience; both heroines see themselves as obscure, drab women not destined for ordinary routes to happiness. Miss Sewell's Sally devotes her life to her "darling" sister Hester and her nieces and nephews. Lucy does not have this option since she has no family at all. Her satisfactions come not from self-sacrifice but from a sense of competence at her work (teaching) and from slowly learning how to make emotional contact with people. If Charlotte Brontë had this novel in mind when she wrote *Villette*, which is possible since it appeared the previous year, she is once again using parallel and contrast in order to adapt the concerns and techniques of conventional women's fiction to her own purposes.

Brontë also uses her symbolic imagination to reject again the idea that happiness is in the hands of the individual, the product of strength of will. Self-mastery is, of course, the lesson Miss Sewell's heroine learns from life, and she articulates this idea using a metaphor which Brontë may have picked up on: "There has been no must be miserable. The must, if I believe it to exist, was of my own creation—a *phantom* which had only to be rightly confronted, and it vanished"⁷ (emphasis mine). Lucy Snowe is also haunted by a phantom which makes her miserable: the mysterious non-spectre who recurrently appears at Mme. Beck's school. Giving symbolic life to a tired Gothic convention, Brontë has Lucy's nun represent sexlessness, loneliness, lovelessness—the death-in-life that she fears will be her fate. Yet Dr. John is wrong in his conviction that the "apparition" is a creation of her own brain. Brontë does not allow the nun-spectre to be an invention of Lucy's turbulent psyche. As in much eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, the phenomenon which seems to be supernatural turns out to be a mechanical contrivance deliberately created for purposes of trickery. However, Brontë gives the Gothic mode a new twist by infusing the ordinary reality behind what had appeared to be supernatural with symbolic meaning. The nun is an effigy created for Lucy's torment by mercenary Genevra Fanshawe and her foppish lover, the Comte de Hamal, characters who represent society at its most artificial. The fact that Lucy has been plagued by a fabrication of such people indicates that her misery does not come from within herself. She cannot make it vanish by denying its existence. It is the result of a social order which sentences unmarried women to a life of

7. Elizabeth Missing Sewell, *The Experience of Life* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), p. 545.

celibacy and self-abnegation. Only if Lucy resigns herself to a denial of erotic emotion can she face the phantom with relative calm; thus when the nun appears while she is in the act of burying Dr. John's letters Lucy walks forward, attempting to touch her and speak to her. She need not be terrified if she accepts for herself what the nun represents.

But Lucy ultimately does not accept sexlessness, loneliness and lovelessness and so angry confrontation of the phantom is essential. After various encounters in which she succumbs to panic, Lucy finally finds the nun in her own bed. She does not scream or swoon. Instead,

. . . I defied spectra. In a moment, without exclamation, I had rushed on the haunted couch; nothing leaped out, or sprung, or stirred; all the movement was mine, so was all the life, the reality, the substance, the force; as my instinct felt. I tore her up—the incubus! I held her on high—the goblin! I shook her loose—the mystery! And down she fell—down all around me—down in shreds and fragments—and I trod upon her. (II, 282)

Lucy's mastery of her fear enables her to expose the "spectre" for the artifice that it is, but her assault cannot make it vanish. She is left holding "a long bolster dressed in a long black stole, and artfully invested with a white veil." At the end of the novel Lucy's courageous confrontation with life has allowed her to experience love and get herself set up as mistress of her own school, but the ambivalent ending leaves open the distinct possibility that she will never experience total personal fulfillment. If Paul Emmanuel is not alive to marry her she will still have to combat celibacy and loneliness with self-discipline. The problem lies fundamentally with the external world which at best allows only limited satisfactions to single women. Fortitude is better than nothing, but Brontë wants the reader to know it is not enough.

Charlotte Brontë, then, recognizes some usefulness in feminine self-discipline, but she rejects more thoroughly another central ideal of the female novel: tranquillity. Women's fiction of the eighteen-forties and fifties assumes the goal of life is "tranquillity," "serenity," "repose," "peace"—the synonyms spring off the pages. Brontë's sister novelists sing the virtues of the uneventful life. In *Fanny Hervey* (1849), Mrs. Stirling asserts: "Of individual families, as well as of nations, it may truly be said 'heureux le peuple dont l'histoire s'ennuie.'" She goes on to assure us, in regard to Fanny's parents, that "ten or twelve years of their marriage" passed "as happy as uneventfully . . . the history of one day might almost serve as the history of every one" (p. 28). The Herveys' union is described in static pastoral and domestic images. Unfortunately for her, young Fanny is "all for grand excitement and overwhelming sensations" (p. 37), but in the end, after various misadventures, with the help of her clergyman mentor and husband-to-be, she learns that happiness lies in stasis.

8. Mrs. Stirling, *Fanny Hervey; or The Mother's Choice* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1849), p. 28. Brontë mentions in an 1850 letter that she has read this novel—and implies that she disliked it (*SHLL*, III, 39).

Mrs. Burbury's Florence Sackville, also an adventurous spirit in her early youth, learns to value repose after the vicissitudes of her life and comments: "My friends have always generally been among the aged. There is something in their wise and passionless calmness that has always been inexpressibly delightful to me . . ." (pp. 45-46). Stylistically, Victorian women writers reveal how highly they value repose by depicting happiness through scenes presented in detail but without motion.⁹ Of course these writers are giving affirmative expression to the cultural experience of their middle class female audience. Most women were forced to lead quiet, restricted lives and so a virtue is made of necessity.

Brontë refuses to do this although she acknowledges that women's lives are supposed to be serene. Lucy Snowe says about her life after leaving Bretton: ". . . I will permit the reader to picture me, for the next eight years, as a bark slumbering through halcyon weather, in a harbour still as glass. . . . A great many women and girls are supposed to pass their lives something in this fashion; why not I with the rest?" (I, 39). Lucy refuses to provide the literal details of the "danger" and "contention" of her actual experience during those years, relying only on metaphors involving storms and shipwrecks. But Brontë does not *want* a life "still as glass" for her heroine. While Lucy may find temporary respite with the aged Miss Marchmont, rather than being attracted, like Florence Sackville, to "passionless calmness," she admires Miss Marchmont's character because of "the power of her passions . . . the truth of her feelings." And Lucy herself is grateful that she is forced to leave this quiet haven: "It seemed I must be stimulated into action. I must be goaded, driven, stung, forced to energy. . . . I had wanted to compromise with Fate: to escape occasional great agonies by submitting to a whole life of privation and small pains. . . . Providence [would not] sanction this shrinking sloth and cowardly indolence" (I, 43). She goes alone to London with no idea of what the future will offer. Wandering all over the city, she discovers a taste for excitement: "Elation and pleasure were in my heart: to walk alone in London seemed of itself an adventure. . . . Prodigious was the amount of life I lived that morning" (I, 56). Searching for the vessel in which she will emigrate to Labassecour, Lucy finds herself in a rowboat in the middle of the Channel, surrounded by rough men uttering oaths: "I asked myself if I was wretched or terrified. I was neither. Often in my life have I been far more so under comparatively safe circumstances. 'How is this?' said I. 'Methinks I am animated and alert, instead of being depressed and apprehensive!' I could not tell how it was" (I, 59).

It is small wonder that Lucy is bemused by her own reactions. Char-

9. See Veneta Colby's *Yesterday's Women: Domestic Realism in the English Novel* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1974), pp. 8-25, for a discussion of the static nature of descriptions, particularly of domestic interiors in nineteenth-century novels, especially those by women.

lotte Brontë's rejection of tranquillity as an ideal is an enormously significant departure from the values of the female novel, and from what was considered natural to women by her society.¹⁰ Female reviewers, in particular, had trouble with this aspect of her work. The woman reviewer in the *Christian Remembrancer* remarks: "A restless heart and vagrant imagination, though owned by woman, can have no sympathy or true insight into the truly feminine nature."¹¹ Harriet Martineau also expressed concern about this aspect of Brontë's art in her review of *Villette*: "there is an absence of introspection, an unconsciousness, a repose in women's lives—unless under peculiarly unfortunate circumstances—of which we find no admission in this book. . . ."¹² This observation is particularly interesting because it is coupled with her objections to the emphasis on love in *Villette*, an objection which she reiterated in a letter to Brontë: "I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it."¹³ The fact that Martineau links her remarks on the "repose" of women's lives with her dislike of Brontë's treatment of love suggests at least an unconscious awareness that Charlotte Brontë's rejection of repose as an ideal implies an acceptance of female sexuality totally alien to Victorian assumptions about women.

Feminist criticism of the last decade has illuminated the work of Charlotte Brontë, restoring Brontë to her rightful position as one of the great literary artists of the nineteenth century. Susan Gubar and Sandra Gilbert in their important critical study of nineteenth-century literature by women, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, use Brontë's work as a paradigm for the subversive strategies a woman writer had to develop if she was to triumph creatively over the constrictions of the male-dominated literary culture. While Gubar and Gilbert as well as other recent scholars recognize the existence of a female literary subculture,¹⁴ they have not attempted to chart the precise nature of the relationship between the masterpieces of Charlotte Brontë and the works of writers who, admittedly, were mired in formulaic plots, stereotyped heroines, and sentimental themes.¹⁵

In order to appreciate the contributions of female writers who did not, on the whole, transcend the stifling aspects of their cultural milieu,

10. Jane Eyre's rejection of tranquillity is relevant here. See *Jane Eyre*, I, 138–39. It is interesting to compare Brontë with her friend Mrs. Gaskell in regard to women's reaction to excitement. In *Mary Barton* (1848), Mary is so physically and mentally exhausted by the excitement of pursuing Will in a rowboat to keep him from leaving for sea before he can be a witness in Jem's trial that she lies in a stupor for many weeks.

11. Anne Mozely, rpt. in Miriam Allot, ed., *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974), p. 208.

12. Harriet Martineau, review of *Villette*, *Daily News*, III (February 1853), p. 2; rpt. in Allot, p. 173.

13. *SHLL*, IV, 41.

14. See Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977), for the most elaborate development of this idea.

15. See Robert Colby, *Fiction With a Purpose* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 178–212, and Harriet Bjork, *Language of Truth: Charlotte Brontë, The Woman Question and the Novel* (Lund: C. W. K. Gleerup, 1974), for other discussions of the relationship between Brontë's work and the female literary tradition of her period. Colby's study is often wrong-headed; Bjork's is useful, though marred by a prose style so problematic that the book is almost unreadable.

it is essential to realize that the literature these women produced may have been weakened by the constrictions placed upon their imaginations, but it was far from barren. The women who wrote in Charlotte Brontë's period may encourage and even promulgate feminine pieties rather than feminist protest, but, like her, they used the genre of the novel to express their profound understanding that women suffered, creating a literary heritage which nourished the genius of Charlotte Brontë, albeit often in a dialectical manner, just as their predecessors had provided nourishment for Jane Austen's imagination.

The close but critical relationship that Brontë came to have with the woman's novel of her day allowed her to use its themes and conventions to explore with depth and complexity the problem of women's role in nineteenth-century society, a problem which encompassed the cultural myths that encouraged women to be stoic in their suffering. The tradition of female fiction Charlotte Brontë encountered when she began, rather late in life, to read the work of her female contemporaries was not one she had to free herself from: in fact, it made her achievement in *Shirley* and *Villette* possible.

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