

Killing Charlotte's Angel and the Brontë Myth

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In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Elizabeth Gaskell attempts to weave myth and legend around Charlotte and her surroundings, creating a perfect “Angel in the House” in her image. In doing so, she laid the foundation of what would become the Brontë myth—the vision of death-obsessed, fragile young women living and writing amongst the unforgiving environment of the Yorkshire moors. In fact, Gaskell was originally commissioned by Brontë’s father, Patrick, in an attempt to demythologize Charlotte and repudiate all the “half-truths, misconceptions and downright untruths” (Barker 775) that proliferated after her death. Charlotte had been known as a sharp wit, a domineering sister, and “an avid follower of contemporary politics and current affairs” (Miller 64) to those closest to her in life; however, as news of her death spread, Victorian writers, such as Harriet Martineau, were quick to paint a portrait of her as a “feeble” and “morbidly sensitive” woman who had “the strength of a man, the patience of a hero, and the conscientiousness of a saint” (qtd. in Barker 775). Although Gaskell’s initial purpose was to create an authoritative biography that would “silence the false prophets who had already begun clamoring to tell the dead woman’s story” (Miller 64), Gaskell herself confessed a desire to focus on Charlotte Brontë, “the *friend* the *daughter* the *sister* the *wife*” (qtd. in Barker 784), rather than on Currer Bell, the “unnatural [and] unfeminine” (775) writer of “improper books.” Gaskell fused her skills as a literary novelist with her role of biographer, and as Lucasta Miller notes, her “legacy was to make the public

mistake life for literature” (69). Consequently, by recreating Charlotte as a character in her own biography and by deliberately focusing on her private life and domestic affairs, Gaskell was ironically constructing and fuelling the myth of Charlotte Brontë rather than dispelling it.

Because of Gaskell’s work, Charlotte’s public and private lives became inextricably linked, and, as Virginia Woolf notes in her essay “Haworth, November, 1904,” the parsonage and the sisters had come to “fit like a snail to its shell” (5). Indeed, in the nearly fifty years after the *Life*, Haworth had become a veritable “shrine” (6) where the “Brontë lover” (7) could pay homage to the talented sisters and attempt to share the experience of their tragic lives. Full of natural curiosity, Woolf herself embarks on this journey to Yorkshire with Gaskell’s “gloomy” (6) images in tow. What she finds, however, is not the wild, gothic, and grey portrait that one expects from the pages of the *Life*, but rather “a dingy and commonplace” (6) town full of “houses, built of yellow-brown stone” (6). In fact, Woolf’s objective in traveling to Haworth is to unravel Gaskell’s sentimental mythmaking and shatter the image that she sought to immortalize. Not only does Woolf wonder whether “the house of a great writer or country in which it is set adds something to our understanding of his books” (5), she also doubts the soundness of raising an author to the status of legend, hero, or—in Charlotte’s case—angel. In “Professions for Women,” Woolf describes this angel as the following:

She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. [. . .] Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had an Angel. (278)

Woolf’s states further that “[k]illing the Angel in the House was part of the occupation of a woman writer” (279), and her purpose in this essay, as well as in many of her other

works, is to liberate the Modern writer from the repressive ideal of womanhood embodied in this trope. Indeed, at the end of her pilgrimage to Haworth, Woolf emphasizes the presence of graves at the parsonage, perhaps to remind the reader that in 1904, the “Angel” too is now dead, leaving in its place the literary tradition of “three famous ghosts” (8) to haunt the parsonage and the female writer.

In order to placate the prudish Victorian populous and “protect” Charlotte’s reputation from “malignant falsehoods” and “coarseness of taste” (Jay xiv), in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Gaskell pigeonholes her heroine in the role of an angel, who must passively accept life’s challenges, sacrifice herself for the sake of her siblings, and carefully steer clear of scandal to triumph in the strength and preservation of her moral character. From the start, Gaskell reminds the reader that “Charlotte was motherly friend and guardian” (Gaskell 62) to her two younger sisters and “this loving assumption of duties beyond her years, made her feel considerably older than she really was” (62). Indeed, according to Gaskell, childhood pleasure was foreign to Charlotte who had “no children’s books” (46), “had nothing to eat but potatoes for [. . .] dinner” (41) and spent her leisure hours in the “children’s study” (39) rather than a nursery, further intimating that “childhood was no childhood” (38) for those both burdened and blessed with responsibility and intellect. When Gaskell goes on to describe Charlotte’s physical features, she reinforces the image of Charlotte as mother and angel by emphasizing her “old-fashioned” and “antiquated” nature and reducing her passion and indignation to “a light [which] would shine out, as if some spiritual lamp had been kindled” (74). Gaskell herself wondered “[w]hat would have been [Charlotte’s] translucent grandeur if she had been brought up in a healthy & happy atmosphere” and further implied that a more

compelling story might be told “if [Charlotte] can but give up her craving for keen enjoyment in life...leaving the spaces between most dreary & depressing” (Jay xiii).

In addition to effacing any happy childhood memories Charlotte may have had, Gaskell further glosses over Charlotte’s juvenilia, calling it “wild, weird writing” (69). She balances the fury and fervor of Charlotte’s imagination by the reminding the reader that “her description of any real occurrence is [. . .] homely, graphic, and forcible” (69). Gaskell undercuts what passion and pleasure Charlotte may have had in her fits of “delirium” (69) by “counterbalanc[ing]” (70) it with the more practical duties of life at Haworth parsonage. Choosing only to include only a small portion of Charlotte’s early writings, Gaskell strangely dismisses Charlotte’s precociousness and goes on to rationalize that the social deprivation of “life in an isolated village” (70) must have fueled such unrestrained creativity. In fact, Gaskell only begins to unfold Charlotte literary career midway through the biography, where Emily’s, Anne’s, and presumably Charlotte’s poetry seem to materialize out of the ether, and within the space of two chapters, Emily’s fastidiousness has produced *Wuthering Heights*, *Anne Agnes Grey*, and Charlotte has diligently succeeded in writing both *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre*.

Gaskell continues to dismiss Charlotte’s ambition as a writer throughout the first half of her biography. When Charlotte decides to write a letter to the poet laureate Robert Southey to ask his opinion of her poems, the very act suggests initiative. Gaskell, however, turns the episode around to focus instead on his “stringent” (120) reply and Charlotte’s consequent abandonment of “all idea of literary enterprise” (120) in favor of those as governess and teacher. Later, when Charlotte again takes the initiative to publish *The Professor* by suggesting different ways the novel might be published and marketed,

perhaps serving “as an introduction [to a subsequent novel] and accustom the public to the author’s name” (244), Gaskell balances out her heroine’s determination with an episode in which Charlotte naively forgets to include stamps in her letter to her publishers (243).

Because Gaskell’s intends to portray Charlotte as an angel in the house, she devotes the majority of Volume I to Charlotte’s domestic duties, childhood friendships, and roles as teacher and student at the expense of focusing too closely on Charlotte’s development as a writer. However, Charlotte’s own voice belies Gaskell’s purpose, and to the discriminating reader, Charlotte patience is usurped by restlessness, her sacrifice by her disquietude. While Gaskell argues that in order to shelter her sisters from discomfort Charlotte “could have borne much for herself” (Gaskell 155) in the profession of governess, we feel on the very same page her sense of dissatisfaction and displeasure in her current state of imprisonment:

What dismays and haunts me sometimes, is a conviction that have no natural knack for my vocation. If teaching only were requisite, it would be smooth and easy; but it is the living in other people’s houses—the estrangement from one’s real character—the adoption of a cold, rigid, apathetic exterior that is painful [. . .] (155)

Believing herself capable of having a greater “stake in life” (198), Charlotte does not dutifully resign herself to such a fate as governess but actively pursues her project not only to create a school of her own (as Woolf might say) but to become a published writer. However, as this does not fit neatly into Gaskell’s purpose, she continues to subjugate Charlotte’s words with her rhetoric. When Gaskell describes Charlotte as “suffering acutely from every strange and unaccustomed contact” (162) upon her arrival in Belgium, she contradicts Charlotte’s own “strong wish for wings--wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn” (154-155). Rather than lauding

Charlotte's ambition and entrepreneurial spirit in going to Belgium to learn how to manage a school, she instead focuses on the helplessness and fragility Charlotte as the angel clinging to her sister for support.

Charlotte, however, was no "angel" and, in fact, had a kind of prototype room of her own that afforded her a sense of creative power and freedom. Though on occasion she may have had to put away her genius to surreptitiously peel potatoes, Charlotte had no responsibilities towards husband or children, and the greater part of her existence was solitary and quiet, which according to Woolf was the perfect forum for writing. Indeed, it is Gaskell who ideally embraces the angel in the house and consequently colors the perception of her subject. Living amongst society in the more gentrified and populated parts of England, Gaskell was both wife and mother, hostess and humble housekeeper. According to Jay, her life was intricately enmeshed in the social mores of her age. Always a proponent of a bit of good gossip, she was a "woman whose gregariousness and *joie de vivre* transposed themselves into a consuming interest in other lives" (Jay xii). She publicly cherished her domestic role over her literary one and "prided herself upon doing things as other women did them, only better" (Woolf, EG 137). Insofar as her writing *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* mirrored her own philosophy about women and society, Gaskell avows, "One thing is pretty clear, *Women*, must give up living an artist's life, if home duties are to be paramount" (Jay xi). Consequently, when Gaskell begins to elaborate of Charlotte's "life as Currer Bell" (Gaskell 258), she reminds the reader that "the woman" (258) still had her place in the domestic sphere.

If Gaskell was a woman who "swept manuscripts off the table lest a visitor should think her odd" (Woolf, EG 137), Charlotte was one whose isolation both in her position

as spinster-daughter at Haworth parsonage and at her various governess posts afforded her a sort of mental isolation or “room of her own” that was unknown to her biographer. According to Woolf’s essay *A Room of One’s Own*, this private mental space was necessary for women to think, write, and create literature. Unlike Gaskell, who did not begin her first novel until well into her thirties, Brontë lived the majority of her life without marital social pressures, affording her the time and space necessary to both read and write throughout her adolescence and early womanhood. Though Charlotte laments, “What have I done these last thirty years? Precious little” (Gaskell 240), her profusion of juvenilia, poetry, and the subsequent production and publication of her novels undermine that comment. Furthermore, after the death of her siblings, her “circle of acquaintance[s]” (336) remain small and books and letter-writing become her sustenance. She talks of the boxes of books sent to her through correspondences and confesses that though she sometimes writes in order to receive a letter in turn, she warns Gaskell “*never, on any account to this except when inclination prompts and leisure permits*” (367).

In her essay, *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf writes about state of a woman writer in the 19th century:

If a woman wrote, she would have to write in the common sitting room. And, as Miss Nightingale was so vehemently to complain—“women never have half an hour...that they can call their own”—she was always interrupted [. . .]. It was impossible for a woman to go about alone. She never traveled; she never drove through London in an omnibus or had luncheon in a shop by herself.

(Woolf 70-71)

Living in the more rural and isolated north of England and surrounded by the moors, Charlotte, however, was able to be alone. At home, she could tramp freely about the moors and as governess and teacher, she was socially separated from those she served.

Charlotte writes of the “total seclusion” (Gaskell 187) of her life in Belgium, where she never exchanged a word with anyone (187). Even Gaskell herself conjectures that Charlotte was “shy & silent from the habit of extreme intense solitude” (Jay xii). Furthermore, while Gaskell’s life was not considered an introspective one (xii), Charlotte’s existence was, as her response to Southey’s stringent letter affirms (one might argue rather sarcastically), “[i]n the evenings, I confess, I do think” (Gaskell 119).

Charlotte, in fact, was not the angel in the house that Gaskell envisioned, but rather, one can argue, a proto-feminist role model living in a world of unmarried women. Neither of her sisters ever married nor did her close friends Ellen Nussey and Mary Taylor. Even the maternal figures in Charlotte’s life, her aunt Miss Branwell and her teacher-mentor Miss Wooler, remained single throughout their lives. Charlotte writes to Miss Wooler:

[I]t seems that even ‘a lone woman’ can be happy, as well as cherished wives and proud mothers. I am glad of that. I speculate much on the existence of unmarried and never-to-be-married women now-a-days; and I have already got to the point of considering that there is no more respectable character on this earth than an unmarried woman, who makes her way through life quietly, perseveringly, without support of husband or brother. (Gaskell 219-220)

Although she conceded to the conventions of her age by adopting a pseudonym and concealing her literary aspirations from friend and family, Charlotte resisted marriage time and again, figuratively retaining that room of her own. Believing herself neither beautiful nor wealthy, Charlotte describes marriage as “an imbecility, which I reject with contempt” (188). Perhaps further implying that Brontë was already in possession of a room of her own, Woolf remarks, “One could not but play for a moment with the thought of what might have happened if Charlotte Brontë has possessed say three hundred a year”

(Woolf 73), for although Brontë may have had the creative luxury of isolation and the freedom of the moors at her fingertips, she was still obliged to earn her bread and butter.

Charlotte's rejection of marriage and spousal support further invalidates the image of her as angel in lieu of one as independent free thinker. Crumbling Gaskell's carefully crafted image of a woman who "never had a mind or wish of her own" (Woolf, PW 279), Charlotte writes of married life, "I could not sit all day long making a grave face before my husband. I would laugh, and satirize, and say whatever came into my head first" (127), and indeed she did laugh at and reject several proposals before marrying only after the death of her siblings. Her "fierce" (Gaskell 209) feminist spirit rises up again when she cautions her friend about the trials and tribulations of spinsterhood:

I know that if women wish to escape the stigma of husband-seeking, they must act and look like marble or clay—cold expressionless, bloodless [. . .] do not condemn yourself to live only by halves, because if you showed too much animation some pragmatical thing in breeches might take it into his pate to imagine that you designed to dedicate your life to his inanity. (209)

While Gaskell may have been happily married, Charlotte was happily not.

It is Gaskell, not Charlotte, however, who survives, and as Woolf explains in her essay "Haworth, November, 1904," because of her early death that "one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer" (Woolf 7). The simple fact of her own life's longevity helped Gaskell transform Charlotte into the angel, one who Woolf professes to kill fifty years later. From the very first sentence, Woolf de-legitimizes Gaskell's canonization of Charlotte's home and history, echoing the pessimism and skepticism of the Modernist age. She questions "whether pilgrimages to the shrines of famous men ought not to be condemned as sentimental journeys" (5), and leaving her question unanswered, opens a discourse on Britain's deification of its most cherished heroes. Woolf cautions against the public's inclination to journey to the various

birthplaces of their favorite writers, as if they were pilgrims going to a “shrine at which...to do homage” (6), and though Woolf admits that, “The *Life*, by Mrs. Gaskell, gives you the impression that Haworth and the Brontës are somehow inextricably mixed” (5), she subtly chastises Gaskell for impressing so forcefully in our minds a vision of what to expect.

In her essay, Woolf further emphasizes and criticizes the trappings of Gaskell’s mythmaking by evoking the trappings of bridal imagery. On the road to Haworth, she compares the moors to a “wedding cake,” the earth to a bride “in its virgin snow,” and imagines Charlotte trudging off to Keighly for her “wedding gown” (6). Just as Charlotte rejected marriage, so too would she have felt constrained and imprisoned by the sentimentality Gaskell has weaved around her. Indeed, when read against each other, Woolf satire of Gaskell’s description is quite obvious. Gaskell writes of the way towards Haworth:

I left Keighly in a car for Haworth, four miles off—four tough, steep, scrambling miles, the road winding between the wave-like hills that rose and fell on every side of the horizon, with a long illimitable sinuous look, as if they were a part of the line of the Great Serpent, which the Norse legend says girdles the world. The day was lead-coloured [. . .]. (Gaskell 410)

The passage runs rampant with mythical allusions and dark, damp weather, creating for its reader the image of a sacred, distant, and depressing place. Woolf pokes fun at this description and in so doing, chips away at the myth.

It was rash to wait on fine weather, and it was also cowardly. I understand that the sun very seldom shone on the Brontë family, and if we chose a really fine day we should have to make allowance for the fact that fifty years ago there were few fine days at Haworth, and that we were [. . .] rubbing out half the shadows in the picture. (Woolf 6)

Just as sunny days were not unknown in Yorkshire, neither was Charlotte’s life as uniformly patient and morally singular as we might think.

Finally, Woolf warns against the preconceptions that mark the “sympathetic imagination” (6) of a Brontë lover when she writes the following:

Our excitement as we neared Haworth had in it an element of suspense that was really painful, as though we were to meet some long-separated friend, who might have changed in the interval—so clear an image of Haworth had we from print and picture. (6)

As I have argued above, Charlotte’s life was one of freedom from marital duties and a harbinger of feminism and socio-economic liberation for women. By bringing Gaskell’s images of Charlotte Brontë with us on the journey to Haworth fifty or a hundred years later, we are imposing a one-dimensional view of her (as angel) and repudiating her importance as writer and literary foremother.

“[I]t seemed to be all graves—gravestones stood ranked all around” (7) writes Woolf. Because “the circumference of [Brontë’s] life was very narrow” (8), the life of Charlotte Brontë seems to be “entombed” (Gaskell 345) at Haworth parsonage, and what remains when Woolf visits is but a “mausoleum” (Haworth 7) of her fragile, little, personal things. Although Charlotte herself complained, “I wish critics would judge me as an *author*, not as a woman” (Gaskell 315), Gaskell’s biography reminds us that she *was* a woman. Her legacy, however, need not be a negative one of Victorian domestic passivity but rather a victorious example of an emerging yet nascent female literary tradition, and in writing Charlotte’s biography, Gaskell herself participates in this tradition and contributes to its canon. When Woolf muses “how far surroundings radically affect people’s minds” (Haworth 5), Charlotte’s comments on Austen echo like ghosts restless in their slumber, “I should hardly like to live with ladies and gentlemen, in their elegant but confined houses” who had “no fresh air, no blue hill, no bonny beck”

(Gaskell 261). Indeed, Yorkshire, the moors, and Haworth were Charlotte's room of her own.

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