

REVISED
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Introduction

The Influence of Anxiety

OVER FORTY YEARS AGO, Richard Altick offered this assessment of the situation in which Victorian scholarship found itself:

It takes two to communicate, and we have not yet sufficiently recognized, let alone explore, the crucial problem of the mental equipment, the store of information and established responses, which the Victorian reader brought to his perusal of the latest novel.¹

Building on Altick's observation, eight years later Robert Lee Wolff maintained that "of all the subjects that interested Victorians, and therefore preoccupied their novelists, none...held their attention as much as religion. And of all the subjects none is more obscure to the modern reader."² In 1980, George Landow offered this warning:

Although it is a commonplace that we have lost the intimate knowledge of the Bible that characterized literate people of the last century, we have yet to perceive the full implications of our loss....When we modern readers fail to recognize allusions [to typological interpretations of the Bible]...we deprive many Victorian works of a large part of their context....we under-read and misread many works, and the danger is that the greater the work, the more our ignorance will distort and inevitably reduce it.³

More recently, while echoing and extending these earlier views in her claim that "the major project of analyzing Victorian women writers' reclamation of patriarchally appropriated religions has barely begun," Ruth Jenkins criticizes Landow and others for not recognizing that "many women's spiritual crises and their related writings attribute humanity's apparent falling away from God to a patriarchal appropriation of the sacred, forcing women to become

Christian martyrs under androcentric hegemony.”⁴ Finally, Marianne Thormählen makes the bold assertion that “scholarly analyses of the Brontë novels which fail to take the religious context into account are incomplete,” creating a “vacuum...[that] is easily usurped by anachronistic irrelevancies.” Such “unfamiliarity with this context prevents the scholar/critic from appreciating the breathtaking freedom from prejudice and dogmatic restraint with which all three writers examined Christian doctrine and ethics.”⁵ Taken together, all of these observations should help to convince anyone familiar with the work of Charlotte Brontë that even today critics have not adequately explored the use of the Bible in her novels.

While biblical references are commonplace in Victorian literature, Charlotte Brontë strikes even the casual reader as uncommonly liberal in her use of allusion.⁶ Yet, while the sheer number of references is striking, it is the ways in which this daughter of a conservative, evangelical Anglican clergyman subverts traditional Christian interpretations of the Bible, virtually rewriting many familiar passages to suit her own personal and literary purposes, which require further exploration. What motivated Brontë's rewriting of biblical material, and what did she see as her authority for doing so?⁷

Brontë's treatment of biblical material served two related purposes, one private, the other more public. Lyndall Gordon comments on Brontë's habit of “speak[ing] covertly to specific people through her writing.”⁸ This willingness to use her fiction in an extra-fictional manner is what permits Brontë to develop her new “voice.” In describing Brontë as one of her “honey-mad women,” Patricia Yaeger finds in her writing a strategy for “mak[ing] the dominant discourse into one among many possible modes of speech.”⁹ Yaeger specifically addresses Brontë's use of French to create a climate of multilingualism in order to attack and undermine the hegemony of a male-dominated language system. Her point can be extended to apply to male-dominated traditions of scriptural interpretation as well. Through the new voice she creates, Brontë also creates a new proto-feminist biblical hermeneutic. With few exceptions, women in Victorian England were

given only a limited voice in matters of substance affecting their lives. By appropriating to herself the voice of biblical authority through her fiction, then, Charlotte Brontë was able to script a life for herself that transcended the possibilities available to her in the external, predominately masculine world.¹⁰

Much of the debate over Brontë's radicalism centers on her degree of success in transcending her culture. Gilbert and Gubar suggest that unlike the male Romantics to whom she is akin in so many ways, "Brontë's exclusion from social and economic life precluded her free rejection of it."¹¹ By contrast, Carol Jean Gerster argues that the great novels of the nineteenth century—many written by women—do more than transmit the values of the dominant culture regarding the roles and function of women. She hears in them "a dialogue between dominant and dissenting voices," both necessary for transmitting "the whole of our heritage."¹² Gerster suggests that female novelists increasingly felt a "need to make their position known: some acquiescing to and perpetuating the myth [of woman as a paragon of virtue], some rebelling against it as a limited and repressive view of women."¹³ She identifies Charlotte Brontë as part of this "feminist tradition of dissent."¹⁴ Patricia Yaeger seems to agree when she claims that Brontë "forces her speech to break out of old representations of the feminine and to posit something new."¹⁵ So in attributing revolutionary tendencies to Brontë, I do not discount the social and political conservatism that is so evident in her letters and that appears either implicitly or explicitly to some degree in all of her female protagonists. She engages in a revolution of perception that to a large extent remains unactualized in the details of her own life.

To locate this concern with the creation and presentation of a self in a broader context, we can view it as part of the general Romantic tendency toward introspection, nourished by a more specific and persistent tradition (especially within pietistic branches of Christianity) of minute self-examination.¹⁶ Its roots go back to the ancient tradition of spiritual autobiography, made a significant part of British literature by the Puritans. Assuming that "every experience has its biblical analogue,"¹⁷ the spiritual autobiographer feels he can discern the pattern of his own life in the Bible.¹⁸

The search for parallels between one's life and the well-established models for righteousness outlined in the biblical stories provides the devout a means for legitimating their own life patterns.

This method of scriptural interpretation, called typology, practiced by Christians for centuries, began with New Testament writers, who saw in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus the fulfillment of persons and events that had been prefigured in the Old Testament. But Puritan spiritual biographers viewed the Bible in an even more open-ended fashion than the classical typologists did, claims Sacvan Bercovitch. "Every Puritan biographer wrote, in one degree or another, as though he were bringing the scriptures up to date through his subject's life."¹⁹ Bercovitch's Puritans discovered (or created?) in their own lives new antitypes in which the biblical types find their fulfillment.²⁰

This approach closely resembles what we find Charlotte Brontë doing in her novels. Heather Henderson echoes Bercovitch when she claims that "the use of typology...places [*Jane Eyre*] in the tradition of spiritual autobiography....The search for salvation is presented typologically, just as in 'real' spiritual autobiographies."²¹ She goes on, though, to recall Linda Peterson's claim that "social and generic prohibitions prevented nineteenth-century women from writing spiritual autobiography...precisely by its reliance on Biblical typology to interpret one's life."²² Brontë, however, not only engages freely in biblical hermeneutics, but also portrays her female protagonists Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe doing so in their fictional autobiographies. From this point of view, what seems to be at stake for Brontë is a woman's right, following the precedent of earlier spiritual autobiographers, to take the scriptures in hand and interpret them in ways that are personally meaningful, even if that means altering or abandoning the conventionally "male" interpretations of that precedent tradition.²³ This movement on Brontë's part is not inconsistent with what Henderson identifies as "a gradual progression towards a freer handling of traditional typological motifs and structures and towards a more evident degree of fictiveness."²⁴

To claim this power of self-determination, Brontë would need to enter the male-dominated world and, if possible, wrest power

away from those who wield it and wish to retain it. Opinions vary widely as to her degree of success. Margaret Blom argues that, “despite the shrewdness of her perception of the causes and consequences of female repression, Brontë is no revolutionary. Her attitudes toward the cultural patterns she analyzes are ambivalent, and this ambivalence creates the tone of agony and frustration so typical of her work.”²⁵ Blom’s insight into Brontë’s ambivalence highlights the risk of absorption she was taking in using the Bible so extensively in her work. Gilbert and Gubar argue that by “internaliz[ing] the destructive strictures of patriarchy” (e.g. the separation of home and office, with the woman cast in the role of “angel of the hearth”; the cult of the mother; the Madonna/whore paradox) Victorian women effectively ensured their continued entrapment in the status quo.²⁶ Carolyn Williams writes in partial support of this view when she claims that “the integrity of her [i.e. Jane’s] text almost dissolves into the tradition she [i.e. Brontë] is writing (perforce) within and (by design) against.”²⁷ She goes on to describe Jane’s strategy as “us[ing] the patrilineal structure of tradition and its systematics of voice to write herself into the chain, without losing the radical position she would like to construct as its last link.”²⁸ We might also recall the feigned submissiveness in Brontë’s reply to Poet Laureate Robert Southey’s admonitions against women writing professionally. In her biography, Lyndall Gordon discusses the complex range of Brontë’s responses to Southey’s chauvinism. She balances two alternative selves, the writer and the dutiful daughter, as she challenges the “influence” of this strong precursor. Gordon likens this duality to Brontë’s two widely divergent styles of writing: “a play of legitimate utterance versus secret script.”²⁹ In the final chapter of *Honey-Mad Women*, Patricia Yaeger recalls Laura’s rescue of Lizzie in “Goblin Market” when she speaks of her own reveling as having “had to do with goblin merchant men” (i.e. male literary theorists).³⁰ One might ponder the extent to which the same is true of Brontë. Did she have to “dabble” with traditional male interpretations of scripture first—enter their domain—before she could redeem them and, thereby, be emancipated from society’s restrictions? Yaeger finally questions whether any significant emancipation is possible, or whether