



Charlotte Brontë
Selected Letters

OXFORD WORLD'S CLASSICS



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CHARLOTTE BRONTË was born at Thornton, Yorkshire, in 1816, the third child of Patrick and Maria Brontë. Her father was perpetual curate of Haworth, Yorkshire, from 1820 until his death in 1861. Her mother died in 1821, leaving five daughters and a son. All of the girls except Anne were sent to a clergymen's daughters' boarding school (recalled as Lowood in *Jane Eyre*). The eldest sisters, Maria ('Helen Burns') and Elizabeth, became ill there, were taken home, and died soon after at Haworth. Charlotte was employed as a teacher from 1835 to 1838, was subsequently a governess, and in 1842 went with her sister Emily to study languages in Brussels at the Pensionnat Heger. Both sisters returned to Haworth when their aunt died, but Charlotte went back to the Pensionnat as a teacher in 1843. Her low spirits and her loneliness there were exacerbated by Emily's absence and by her powerful and unrequited feelings for Monsieur Heger. She returned to Haworth in the following year, and in 1846 there appeared *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, the pseudonyms of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*, was rejected by several publishers, and was not published until 1857. *Jane Eyre* was published (under the pseudonym Currer Bell) in 1847 and achieved immediate success. In 1848 Branwell Brontë died, as did Emily before the end of the same year, and Anne in the following summer, so that Charlotte alone survived of the six children. *Shirley* was published in 1849, and *Villette* in 1853, both pseudonymously, although Currer Bell was identified as Charlotte Brontë soon after *Shirley* appeared. In 1854, Charlotte married her father's curate, the Revd A. B. Nicholls, whose passionate attachment to her won her over despite her father's objections. She died in March 1855, a few weeks before her thirty-ninth birthday, probably of complications associated with early pregnancy.

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CHARLOTTE BRONTË

Selected Letters



Edited by

MARGARET SMITH

With a new Introduction by

JANET GEZARI

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CONTENTS

<i>List of Letters</i>	ix
<i>List of Abbreviations and Symbols</i>	xv
<i>Preface</i>	xvii
<i>Introduction</i>	xxv
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	xxxvi
<i>A Chronology of Charlotte Brontë</i>	xxxviii
THE LETTERS	i
<i>Biographical Notes</i>	247
<i>Index</i>	261

This page intentionally left blank

LIST OF LETTERS

1.	To Ellen Nussey 21 July 1832	3
2.	To Ellen Nussey 4 July 1834	4
3.	To Ellen Nussey ?October 1836	6
4.	To Ellen Nussey 5 and 6 December 1836	7
5.	To Robert Southey 16 March 1837	9
6.	To Ellen Nussey 12 March 1839	10
7.	To Emily Jane Brontë 8 June 1839	12
8.	To Ellen Nussey 4 August 1839	14
9.	To Ellen Nussey 24 October 1839	16
10.	To Ellen Nussey 17 March 1840	17
11.	To Ellen Nussey ?7 April 1840	18
12.	To Ellen Nussey ?29 September 1840	20
13.	To Ellen Nussey 20 November 1840	22
14.	To Hartley Coleridge 10 December 1840	25
15.	To Ellen Nussey 3 March 1841	28
16.	To Ellen Nussey 19 July 1841	30
17.	To Ellen Nussey 7 August 1841	32
18.	To Elizabeth Branwell 29 September 1841	33
19.	To Ellen Nussey May 1842	35
20.	To Ellen Nussey ?July 1842	37
21.	To Ellen Nussey 10 November 1842	38
22.	To Ellen Nussey 6 March 1843	39
23.	To Branwell Brontë 1 May 1843	41
24.	To Emily Jane Brontë 2 September 1843	43
25.	To Ellen Nussey 13 October 1843	45
26.	To Ellen Nussey 23 January 1844	46
27.	To Victoire Dubois 18 May 1844	48
28.	To Constantin Heger 24 July 1844	48
29.	To Ellen Nussey ?10 August 1844	53
30.	To Constantin Heger 24 October 1844	54

31.	To Constantin Heger 8 January 1845	56
32.	To Ellen Nussey 24 March 1845	59
33.	To Ellen Nussey 28 June 1845	61
34.	To Ellen Nussey 31 July 1845	62
35.	To Ellen Nussey 4 November 1845	64
36.	To Constantin Heger 18 November 1845	65
37.	To Aylott and Jones 28 January 1846	69
38.	To Margaret Wooler 30 January 1846	70
39.	To Aylott and Jones 6 February 1846	72
40.	To Aylott and Jones 6 April 1846	72
41.	To Aylott and Jones 11 April 1846	73
42.	To Ellen Nussey 17 June 1846	73
43.	To Henry Colburn 4 July 1846	75
44.	To Ellen Nussey 10 July 1846	76
45.	To Ellen Nussey 9 August 1846	77
46.	To Ellen Nussey 26 August 1846	78
47.	To Ellen Nussey 14 October 1846	80
48.	To Ellen Nussey 19 January 1847	81
49.	To Ellen Nussey 1 March 1847	83
50.	To Thomas de Quincey 16 June 1847	84
51.	To Smith, Elder 15 July 1847	85
52.	To Smith, Elder 7 August 1847	85
53.	To Smith, Elder 12 September 1847	86
54.	To Smith, Elder 24 September 1847	87
55.	To Smith, Elder 19 October 1847	88
56.	To W. S. Williams 28 October 1847	88
57.	To G. H. Lewes 6 November 1847	90
58.	To W. S. Williams 10 November 1847	91
59.	To W. S. Williams 14 December 1847	93
60.	To W. S. Williams 21 December 1847	94
61.	To W. S. Williams 31 December 1847	95
62.	To W. S. Williams 4 January 1848	96
63.	To G. H. Lewes 12 January 1848	98
64.	To G. H. Lewes 18 January 1848	100

65.	To W. S. Williams 28 January 1848	101
66.	To W. S. Williams 11 March 1848	103
67.	To Ellen Nussey 3 May 1848	104
68.	To W. S. Williams 12 May 1848	105
69.	To W. S. Williams 8 July 1848	109
70.	To W. S. Williams 13 July 1848	110
71.	To Ellen Nussey 28 July 1848	111
72.	To W. S. Williams 31 July 1848	112
73.	To W. S. Williams 14 August 1848	115
74.	To W. S. Williams ?early September 1848	118
75.	To W. S. Williams 2 October 1848	120
76.	To W. S. Williams 6 October 1848	121
77.	To W. S. Williams 22 November 1848	123
78.	To Ellen Nussey 23 November 1848	124
79.	To W. S. Williams 7 December 1848	126
80.	To Ellen Nussey 23 December 1848	127
81.	To W. S. Williams 25 December 1848	128
82.	To W. S. Williams ?13 January 1849	129
83.	To George Smith 22 January 1849	131
84.	To W. S. Williams ?10 February 1849	132
85.	To Margaret Wooler 24 March 1849	133
86.	To Ellen Nussey c.12 and 14 May 1849	134
87.	To W. S. Williams 30 May 1849	136
88.	To W. S. Williams 4 June 1849	136
89.	To W. S. Williams 13 June 1849	137
90.	To Ellen Nussey 23 June 1849	139
91.	To W. S. Williams 16 August 1849	140
92.	To W. S. Williams 24 August 1849	142
93.	To ?W. S. Williams 21 September 1849	143
94.	To Ellen Nussey ?24 September 1849	144
95.	To W. S. Williams 1 November 1849	145
96.	To Ellen Nussey 16 November 1849	147
97.	To Elizabeth Gaskell 17 November 1849	148
98.	To Ellen Nussey ?5 December 1849	149

99.	To Revd Patrick Brontë 5 December 1849	150
100.	To Ellen Nussey 9 December 1849	151
101.	To Ellen Nussey 19 December 1849	152
102.	To W. S. Williams 3 January 1850	154
103.	To Ellen Nussey ?28 January 1850	155
104.	To Ellen Nussey ?5 February 1850	156
105.	To George Smith 16 March 1850	157
106.	To W. S. Williams 3 April 1850	158
107.	To W. S. Williams 12 April 1850	161
108.	To W. S. Williams 22 May 1850	162
109.	To Revd Patrick Brontë 4 June 1850	164
110.	To Ellen Nussey 12 June 1850	165
111.	To Ellen Nussey 21 June 1850	167
112.	To W. S. Williams 20 July 1850	168
113.	To Ellen Nussey 26 August 1850	169
114.	To Revd C. C. Southey 26 August 1850	171
115.	To Elizabeth Gaskell 27 August 1850	172
116.	To James Taylor 5 September 1850	174
117.	To W. S. Williams 5 September 1850	176
118.	To W. S. Williams 27 September 1850	177
119.	To George Smith 3 December 1850	178
120.	To Ellen Nussey 18 December 1850	180
121.	To George Smith 7 January 1851	181
122.	To George Smith 5 February 1851	184
123.	To James Taylor 11 February 1851	185
124.	To Ellen Nussey 4 and 5 April 1851	186
125.	To George Smith 12 May 1851	188
126.	To Revd Patrick Brontë 7 June 1851	190
127.	To Ellen Nussey 24 June 1851	191
128.	To George Smith 1 July 1851	193
129.	To George Smith 22 September 1851	194
130.	To James Taylor 15 November 1851	196
131.	To George Smith 14 February 1852	198
132.	To George Smith 11 March 1852	200

133.	To Elizabeth Gaskell 26 April 1852	201
134.	To Ellen Nussey 4 ?May 1852	202
135.	To Revd Patrick Brontë 2 June 1852	203
136.	To Margaret Wooler 23 June 1852	205
137.	To Ellen Nussey 25 August 1852	206
138.	To George Smith 30 October 1852	207
139.	To George Smith 3 November 1852	209
140.	To W. S. Williams 6 November 1852	210
141.	To Ellen Nussey 15 December 1852	211
142.	To Ellen Nussey 18 December 1852	213
143.	To Ellen Nussey 2 January 1853	214
144.	To Ellen Nussey 4 March 1853	215
145.	To George Smith 26 March 1853	217
146.	To Ellen Nussey 6 April 1853	219
147.	To Ellen Nussey 16 May 1853	221
148.	To Ellen Nussey 27 May 1853	222
149.	To Elizabeth Gaskell 18 June 1853	224
150.	To George Smith 3 July 1853	225
151.	To Elizabeth Smith 21 November 1853	226
152.	To George Smith 10 December 1853	227
153.	To Ellen Nussey 11 April 1854	227
154.	To Ellen Nussey 15 April 1854	229
155.	To George Smith 25 April 1854	230
156.	To ?Elizabeth Gaskell ?early June 1854	231
157.	To Ellen Nussey 11 June 1854	232
158.	To Margaret Wooler 10 July 1854	233
159.	To Catherine Wooler 18 July 1854	235
160.	To Margaret Wooler 22 August 1854	236
161.	To Ellen Nussey ?20 October 1854	237
162.	To Ellen Nussey 31 October 1854	239
163.	To Ellen Nussey 7 November 1854	240
164.	To Ellen Nussey 19 January 1855	241
165.	To Laetitia Wheelwright 15 February 1855	242
166.	To Ellen Nussey c.21 February 1855	243

167.	To Amelia Taylor ?late February 1855	244
168.	To Ellen Nussey ?early March 1855	244
169.	Revd A. B. Nicholls to Ellen Nussey 31 March 1855	245

ABBREVIATIONS AND SYMBOLS

Berg	Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations
BL	British Library
Bon	Bonnell Collection, Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth
BPM	Brontë Parsonage Museum, Haworth
BS	Brontë Society
BST	<i>Brontë Society Transactions</i> . References are to volume, part, and page(s).
CB	Charlotte Brontë
CBCircle	Clement K. Shorter, <i>Charlotte Brontë and her Circle</i> (1896)
CBL	<i>The Letters of Charlotte Brontë</i> , ed. Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press); 3 vols., 1995, 2000, 2004
Clarendon	The Clarendon edition of the novels of the Brontës (Oxford), 1969–92
CP	<i>The Letters of Mrs Gaskell</i> , ed. J. A. V. Chapple and Arthur Pollard (Manchester, 1966)
EN	Ellen Nussey
Fitzwilliam	Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
Gaskell <i>Life</i>	E. C. Gaskell, <i>The Life of Charlotte Brontë</i> , 2 vols. (1857)
Gr.	Grolier Collection, Brontë Parsonage Museum
HM	MS in Huntington Library, San Marino, Cali- fornia
Horsfall Turner	See Nussey, below
<i>JE</i>	<i>Jane Eyre</i>
Law-Dixon	MS formerly in the collection of Sir Alfred J. Law, at Honresfeld, Littleborough, Lancs., present location unknown
Lowell, Harvard	Amy Lowell Collection, Harvard University Library

Nussey	<i>The Story of the Brontës: Their Home, Haunts, Friends and Works. Part Second—Charlotte's Letters</i> (printed for J. Horsfall Turner; Bing-ley, 1885–9) (the suppressed edition)
Parrish Collection, Princeton	Morris L. Parrish Collection of Victorian Novelists, Manuscripts Division, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library
Pforzheimer	Pforzheimer Collection, New York Public Library
Pierpont Morgan	Pierpont Morgan Library, New York
Ray Letters	<i>The Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray</i> , ed. Gordon N. Ray; 4 vols. (1945)
Rylands	John Rylands University Library, Manchester
Rylands MS <i>Life</i>	E. C. Gaskell, manuscript of the <i>Life</i> of CB, in Rylands
SG	Seton-Gordon Collection, Brontë Parsonage Museum
Smith, 'Recollections'	George Smith, 'Recollections of a long and busy life'; typescript in the National Library of Scotland, MSS 23191–2
Taylor Collection, Princeton	Robert H. Taylor Collection, Princeton University
<i>Tenant</i>	Anne Brontë, <i>The Tenant of Wildfell Hall</i>
Texas	The Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin
WH	<i>Wuthering Heights</i>
Widener, Harvard	The Harry Elkins Widener Collection, Harvard University Library
Wise & Symington	<i>The Brontës: Their Lives, Friendships and Correspondence</i> , edited by T. J. Wise and J. A. Symington; 4 vols. (Oxford, 1932)
Symbols	
<>	deleted in MS by author
[]	added by editor
**	placed before and after conjectural readings of phrases deleted by Ellen Nussey

PREFACE

In his introduction to Charlotte Brontë's 'Emma', her never-to-be-completed last work, W. M. Thackeray wrote, 'Who that has known her books has not admired the artist's noble English, the burning love of truth, the bravery, the simplicity, the indignation at wrong, the eager sympathy, the pious love and reverence, the passionate honour, so to speak, of the woman?' Recalling his first meeting with the tiny little authoress, he remembered her 'impetuous honesty'. Many of these qualities are evident too in her letters. And there are others: her passionate truth may be leavened by an unexpected sense of humour or a lively self-mockery, her critiques of the books she read may be wittily acerbic, and her accounts of some of the key episodes in her life, such as her first meeting with her publishers, or Arthur Nicholls's proposal of marriage, are brilliantly dramatic.

At their best Charlotte's letters have the immediacy of good conversation—a quality she relished in those she received. Your letter 'is just written as I wish you to write to me—not a detail too much . . . I imagine your face—voice—presence very plainly when I read your letters', she wrote to Ellen Nussey on 19 January 1847 after sixteen years of close friendship. Most of Charlotte's surviving letters were written to Ellen, whom she had first met at Margaret Wooler's school at Roe Head, Mirfield, in 1831. Charlotte realized Ellen's limitations, but enjoyed her company: 'Just now I am enjoying the treat of my friend Ellen's society,' Charlotte wrote to her publisher's reader, W. S. Williams, on 3 January 1850, 'and she makes me indolent and negligent . . . no new friend, however lofty or profound in intellect . . . could be to me what Ellen is, yet she is no more than a conscientious, observant, calm, well-bred Yorkshire girl. She is without romance—if she attempts to read poetry—or poetic prose aloud—I am irritated and deprive her of the book . . . but she is good—she is true—she is faithful and I love her.' The two friends continued to write freely to each other for the rest of Charlotte's life, save for one serious estrangement from July 1853 until February 1854. This was caused by Ellen's jealousy of the curate Arthur Nicholls, who had usurped her privileged first place in Charlotte's affection. The rift was healed through the mediation of Margaret Wooler, Ellen was the bridesmaid at Charlotte's marriage to Arthur Nicholls on 29 June 1854, and their correspondence continued until early March 1855. After that date Charlotte, already mortally ill, had to ask Nicholls to write on her behalf.

Though we learn comparatively little of Charlotte's intellectual life from her letters to Ellen, they provide much insight into other facets of her personality and experience. In many intimate, spontaneous letters, she shares with Ellen the intense moods of adolescence: at one extreme her despair over her own spiritual crises, at the other her amusement, impatience, or excitement, often expressed with a racy disregard for ladylike reserve, or her fierce indignation at

unworthy or immoral behaviour. We hear of the joyous companionship of the sisters at Haworth parsonage before they separated to suffer the torments of governess-life, and before the agonizing years when first Branwell Brontë, then Emily, then Anne fell ill and died. Ellen is told about the short-lived exhilaration of Charlotte's early months in the Brussels pensionnat, and the later 'dreary weight' of depressing solitude and of distrust of Mme Heger. Understandably the strength of Charlotte's attraction to M. Heger remains concealed; but she gives remarkably candid accounts of her reactions to some of the men who found her attractive or proposed to her: the earnest Revd Henry Nussey in March 1839, the lively Revd David Pryce in August the same year; and later, in 1851, James Taylor, who seems to have drawn back from an outright proposal. From Charlotte's letters to Ellen we learn much about contemporary provincial life: about the difficulties of travel, the novelty of the railways, the friendly exchanges of long visits, the financial crises in households of women; the custom of 'bride-visits', the Whitsuntide celebrations and processions of parishioners, the lectures at mechanics' institutes. Inevitably, we hear too of the frightening prevalence of TB, the ravages of cholera, and the ineffectiveness of contemporary medicines for such diseases.

The letters Charlotte wrote to her father show her constant concern for his welfare, her understanding of his interests, and her awareness of his pride in her achievements. Writing from London in June 1850, she describes with wonderful vividness the animals and birds she has seen and heard in the Zoological Gardens, and some of the pictures in the London exhibitions, such as John Martin's 'The Last Man' 'shewing the red sun, fading out of the sky and all the foreground made up of bones and skulls'. In other letters she tells him of her meetings with famous writers, such as Thackeray and Mrs Gaskell, and of seeing 'great lords and ladies'. In June 1851 she evokes for him the strange grandeur of the Crystal Palace, where the 'living tide of people rolls on quietly—with a deep hum like the sea heard from a distance'.

Charlotte's letters to her sister Emily show the close bond of affection between them. From her 'house of bondage' as a governess in the service of the Sidgwicks at Stonegappe, she writes in a brief note: 'Mine bonnie love, I was as glad of your letter as tongue can express,' and in a letter included here, she voices her furious resentment at the injustice of her situation, where complaints about those 'riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs', her pupils, bring only black looks from their mother. Like Emily, when she is away from Haworth, she longs for liberty and home. To Emily also she writes from Mme Heger's school in Brussels, in one letter frankly describing the teachers who 'hate each other like two cats' and in a second, written after her nightmarish experience of silence and solitude during the long vacation, Charlotte describes her 'real confession' in the church of Sainte-Gudule, as well as her determination not to return to the priest who would try to convince her 'of the error and enormity of

being a Protestant'. A confidential letter written on 1 May 1843 from Brussels to her brother Branwell condemns 'the phlegmatic, false inhabitants' of the school—with the 'sole veritable exception' of the 'black Swan Mr Heger'. Branwell had been Charlotte's close collaborator in the endless web of their Angrian saga: their joint creation of fantastically glamorous Byronic heroes, heroines, and villains, embroiled in love and war. She did not know that her brother, now a tutor in the Robinson family at Thorp Green in Yorkshire, was entangling himself, allegedly, in an affair with his employer's wife, which would lead to his disgrace and dismissal.

Yet Charlotte herself had become infatuated with her teacher, M. Constantin Heger, who was happily married to the efficient directress of the Brussels pensionnat, Mme Claire Zoë Heger. Only four of the many letters she wrote to him after her return to England survive. Written in French, the language they had used in his lessons and conversations, they reveal her longing for his assurance of continuing friendship for her. Her last surviving letter to him, written on 18 November 1845, is one of scarcely controlled emotion: when, day after day, the long-awaited letter from her master fails to come, she is in a fever: 'je perds l'appétit et le sommeil—je dépéris'.

Certainly Madame Heger read these too-revealing letters, which were not known in their entirety to the general public until 1913. Mrs Gaskell had incorporated carefully chosen excerpts from them in her life of Charlotte Brontë in 1857, including nothing that would sully her pure image. But on 6 June 1913 the Heger family offered the letters to the British Museum, not to arouse but to quash speculation about the relationship; and the family gave permission for the letters to be published in full in *The Times* for 29 July 1913, with translations and an explanation by the art critic Marion H. Spielmann, who believed that English people would understand that they simply expressed Charlotte's honest admiration and gratitude.

It is fair to assume that none of Charlotte's own family read the letters to Heger during her lifetime, though her father and A. B. Nicholls were to read Mrs Gaskell's excerpts from them in the *Life*. But they could read *Villette* before her death and *The Professor* after it; and one wonders what they made of the master-pupil relationship in those novels—one ending in brief bliss destroyed by the dividing sea, and the other in the wish-fulfilment of perfect marriage.

Charlotte had completed her fair copy of *The Professor* (originally entitled 'The Master') by 27 July 1846, having incorporated in the early chapters material deriving from her juvenile tales. She and Branwell had both exploited the dramatic potential of a complex relationship between two brothers, one violent, materialistic, and cynical, the other cloaking his determination to resist tyranny beneath a cool, taciturn exterior until he breaks out of his servitude and makes his own way in the world. Such breaking out reflected Charlotte's own longing to fulfil herself as a writer. In 1836 she had written to the poet Robert Southey,

enclosing some of her poems and acknowledging her bold ambition to be 'for ever known' as a poetess. Warned by him to put her 'proper duties' as a woman first, and to write 'poetry for its own sake . . . not with a view to celebrity', Charlotte was sincerely grateful for his 'kind & wise advice' and his opinion that her poems were not without merit. In fact few of her poems exceed this modest standard; no one remembers her primarily for her verse. But when Hartley Coleridge, the son of S. T. Coleridge, disparaged the prose tale she sent him in 1840, she was evidently piqued by his discouraging response. No doubt the story she sent him was immature; but despite her acknowledgement that she was obliged for his 'kind and candid letter', her reply, both in its draft form and in her fair copy of 10 December 1840, is couched in a sardonic, flamboyant, hardly respectful style. She mocks the absurdity, real or pretended, of the 'great' novelists, as well as her own literary ambitions. Fortunately for posterity, she and her sisters possessed a creative genius which could not be permanently suppressed or discouraged.

Nevertheless the sisters had to pay for the printing, publication, and advertising of their first book, *Poems* by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, in 1846. Some of Charlotte's letters to the publishers, Aylott & Jones, are included in this selection. Writing as 'C. Brontë' on behalf of 'three persons—relatives' whose 'separate pieces are distinguished by their respective signatures', Charlotte fulfilled the 'Bells' ambition of 'appearing before the public'. The series of letters to Aylott & Jones began on 28 January 1846; and the little volume stole into life on or soon after 22 May that year. Now one of the most sought-after of collectors' volumes, the book achieved a sale of only two copies, though discerning reviews appeared in *The Critic* and *The Athenaeum* on 4 July and in *The Dublin University Magazine* for October 1846; and the authors' autographs were requested by one satisfied purchaser, the songwriter Frederick Enoch.

On 6 April 1846, about six weeks before the poems appeared, Charlotte had written to Aylott & Jones to ask whether they would also publish 'a work of fiction—consisting of three distinct and unconnected tales'. The Bells did not intend 'to publish these tales on their own account', Charlotte declared. They could hardly have afforded to do so. The three tales were Charlotte's *The Professor*, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, and Anne's *Agnes Grey*. Charlotte's later statement in her 'Biographical Notice' of her sisters was misleading: they did not set to work on the stories when the *Poems* failed to sell as they had hoped; it is likely that all three novels had been at least begun before April 1846. Though Aylott & Jones refused to publish the novels, they advised the 'Bells' to try other publishers. None of these agreed to publish *The Professor*, but in 1847 Thomas Cautley Newby accepted, and published, after months of delay, the other two novels. In the event, *Jane Eyre*, which Charlotte began to write in August 1846 and completed in August 1847, was the first to be published, on 19 October 1847. On 15 July that year Charlotte had sent *The Professor* to 'one publishing house

more', the firm of Smith, Elder & Co. Instead of 'two hard hopeless lines' of refusal, Charlotte received a courteous letter discussing its merits and demerits, and adding that 'a work in three volumes would meet with careful attention'. *Jane Eyre* was dispatched from Keighley station on 24 August. The young publisher George Smith recalled that his reader, William Smith Williams, recommended the novel to him, and that he was unable to put it down. He finished reading the MS before he went to bed that night.

Most of Charlotte's early letters to Smith, Elder & Co. are short, businesslike, and formal; but on 4 October 1847 she wrote directly to William Smith Williams, thanking him for his kind counsel and encouragement, and modestly warning him against 'forming too favourable an idea' of her powers. He was to become one of her most valued correspondents, especially after she and her sister Anne met him personally in London in July 1848, a 'pale, mild, stooping man', quiet and sincere in his attentions to the two shy country visitors. He proved to be knowledgeable and discriminating about art as well as literature, and he helped to choose the books that the firm sent as loans or gifts to Charlotte and her family. She responded with gratitude, and with careful critiques of the books for which he sought her opinion, and much appreciation of the loan of twenty engravings from paintings in Robert Vernon's great collection. He in turn valued her advice on the possible careers for some of his eight children, especially for his daughters Ellen and Louisa, who were to become governesses. He responded with delicate and sympathetic understanding to her anxieties about her sisters' and brother's illnesses, and to her intense grief after their deaths.

The publication of *Shirley* on 26 October 1849 was followed by a long delay in completing her next novel, *Villette*, and her friendly correspondence with Williams seems to have dwindled. Perhaps he was discouraged by Charlotte's rather dismissive attitude to some of the books he sent her at this period. In 1852 only four letters to him survive before her curt note of 26 October that year. It begins, 'In sending a return box of books to Cornhill—I take the opportunity of enclosing 2 Vols of MS [of *Villette*].' There are no thanks for the books, and the last sentence is distantly cool. Happily, there is a partial revival of the old friendly relationship in a letter of 6 November, thanking Williams for his 'kind letter with its candid and able commentary on "*Villette*"', and in the first half of 1853 the courteous and sympathetic friendliness is restored. Her last surviving letter to Williams was written on 6 December 1853, when she had heard that the head of the firm, George Smith, was engaged to be married. Charlotte's brief, desolate note to Williams ends: 'Do not trouble yourself to select or send any more books. These courtesies must cease some day—and I would rather give them up than wear them out. Believe me yours sincerely C. Brontë.'

Charlotte first met George Smith in July 1848 when she and Anne had travelled overnight to London to prove the separate identity of the brothers Bell; for T. C. Newby had told an American publisher that he and not Smith, Elder would

be publishing 'Currer Bell's' next novel. Newby had assured George Smith that 'to the best of his belief' all three Bells were one writer. Charlotte and Anne convinced the astonished George Smith that Newby had lied. Smith's natural reaction was the wish to make a show of his best-selling author. Charlotte's resistance to this, and her excitement and exhaustion, gave her 'a thundering head-ache & harassing sickness'. Thus she did not at first like her young and handsome publisher. A better understanding and warm friendship developed after she had stayed with Smith, his mother, and his sisters in December 1849. There were to be other friendly visits, companionable outings in London, and an exhilarating stay in Edinburgh. From mid-1850 Smith became Charlotte's principal London correspondent. The brief business letters she had previously written to him gave place to their friendly correspondence of late 1850, followed by twenty-four long, candid, often affectionately teasing or cheerfully satirical letters in 1851. There were fewer letters in 1852, though the friendship continued; and then a marked falling off in their correspondence from the spring of 1853, caused in part by the long strain of overwork on Smith's part as the firm expanded its banking and export business. Charlotte could not know that Smith was also more happily preoccupied with the beautiful Elizabeth Blakeway, whom he first met in April 1853. On 10 December 1853 Charlotte wrote a curt, contorted letter of congratulation to him on his engagement to Elizabeth. She wrote more warmly to him on 25 April 1854, when she had received his congratulations on her engagement to Arthur Nicholls.

Smith, Elder's managing clerk James Taylor also became one of Charlotte's correspondents. In February 1849 he had sent a candid critique of the first volume of *Shirley*. He helped to choose books sent to her by the firm, began to lend her copies of the critical journal, *The Athenaeum*, and on 8 September 1849 collected the manuscript of *Shirley* from Haworth. In December 1849, observing that he controlled the firm's clerks with his 'iron will', she suspected him of being 'rigid, despotic and self-willed'. However, in September 1850 he regained her good opinion by sending her a copy of the *Palladium* article in which Sydney Dobell had discerned the 'stamp of genius' in *Wuthering Heights*. On his farewell visit to Haworth before he left to establish a branch of the Smith, Elder firm in India, he seemed on the point of proposing marriage, but departed with no definite avowal. Two letters from India were followed by total silence on his part; and despite her recoil from his physical presence during the visit, she suffered the pain of 'absolute uncertainty' about his intentions. In July 1852 she wrote miserably to Ellen that 'All is silent as the grave.' Twelve or possibly thirteen letters to him from Charlotte survive. Careful rather than cordial, they offer opinions on the books he sent her, and on such subjects as Harriet Martineau's 'atheism', which they both deplored. Her last letter to him, dated 15 November 1851, eloquently conveys her horrified, fascinated reaction to the French actress Rachel's performance, 'wilder and worse' than human nature, showing 'the feelings and fury of a fiend'.

Charlotte's letters to fellow-authors are of particular interest, for they often reveal either directly or by implication her own literary creed. George Henry Lewes's criticism of the melodramatic elements in *Jane Eyre* and his praise of Jane Austen provoked her to a spirited declaration that Austen might be 'sensible, real (more *real* than *true*)', but without the divine gift of poetry she could not be great. Yet Charlotte recognized Austen's exquisite adaptation of 'means to her end', and distinguished it from the 'windy wordiness' to be found in the work of Eliza Lynn or Bulwer Lytton—or indeed in Lewes's own flamboyant novel, *Rose, Blanche, and Violet*, and his pretentious play, *The Noble Heart*.

Though we have only one manuscript letter from Charlotte to Harriet Martineau, there are copies of several others, and numerous letters to other correspondents about Martineau. Together they depict a relationship which began with mutual appreciation and respect, warmed into positive liking when Charlotte stayed with the older writer for a week in December 1850, then declined with Martineau's public admission of what seemed an atheistic philosophy. The friendship came to an abrupt end on Charlotte's part when Martineau alleged in a private letter and in a *Daily News* review of *Villette*, that all the female characters were full of 'one thought—love. . . . It is not thus in real life.' Charlotte never forgave her.

Regrettably, Charlotte's letters to Thackeray have not come to light. We may guess that they mingled praise for the writer she had called the 'first social regenerator of the day' with some sharp questioning of his opinions on such writers as Fielding, whom she considered immoral. In writing about Thackeray to George Smith, she emphatically deplored his literary sins, his procrastination, and his unfair presentation of women. Thackeray admitted that he deserved some of her criticism: 'I don't care a straw for a "triumph". Pooh!—nor for my art enough,' he wrote to Mary Holmes on 25 February 1852.

Charlotte's correspondence with Elizabeth Gaskell reveals much about the personality of both writers. Some forty letters survive, the first written on 17 November 1849, before they had met each other, and the last on 30 September 1854, when the newly married Charlotte warmly invited Mrs Gaskell to visit Haworth again, and to meet her husband. There had been an immediate rapport between the two authors when they met as guests of Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth at Briery Close, near Lake Windermere in the Lake District in August 1850. Gaskell, socially accomplished and at ease, well-read, and the author of *Mary Barton*, was sensitive and sympathetic to the normally shy Charlotte, and to her tragic family circumstances. Charlotte appreciated Mrs Gaskell's talent, shared her love for Wordsworth's poetry, and praised her 'cheerful, pleasing and cordial manners and . . . kind and good heart'. Their mutual liking was strengthened by Charlotte's three visits to the Gaskells' home in Manchester. Her letters reveal their general 'concord of opinion' on contemporary events and concerns. Above all, they give a unique insight into Charlotte's relationship

with her future biographer. Acutely distressed by Charlotte's death, Mrs Gaskell wrote to the Haworth stationer, John Greenwood, on 12 April 1855, 'Strangers might know her by her great fame, but we loved her dearly for her goodness, truth, and kindness . . . I loved her dearly, more than I think she knew.'

Letters to others who had known and loved Charlotte for many years have been included. Margaret Wooler, her teacher at Roe Head school, had become a friend in whom she could confide. When Charlotte was feeling the weight of solitude, she wondered at Miss Wooler's endurance of a similar fate 'with a serene spirit and an unsoured disposition', and was grateful for her kind wish for a reconciliation with Ellen Nussey. The reconciliation achieved, it was to Ellen Nussey and two other trusted friends that Charlotte's last letters were written: Ellen's friend Amelia Ringrose Taylor, and Laetitia Wheelwright, whom Charlotte had first met in Brussels. The letters are infinitely touching in their affectionate concern for others even while she herself was suffering 'sickness with scarce a reprieve', and in her praise of her husband's kind companionship and tenderest nursing.

INTRODUCTION

'Dangerous as lucifer matches.' This is how Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte Brontë's husband for the last nine months of her life, described her letters (?20 October 1854). He asked Ellen Nussey, Brontë's friend since schooldays and her most frequent correspondent, to promise that she would burn any she received. 'Men don't seem to understand making letters a vehicle of communication—they always seem to think us incautious,' Brontë wrote to Ellen. She was amused rather than outraged, and Nicholls got his promise. Ellen exacted a promise in turn from Nicholls. She agreed to destroy any letters her friend would in future send her in return for his pledge not to censure what Brontë wrote. Ellen did not keep her promise, preserving almost four hundred letters from Brontë and expunging only a few passages when publication was in view.

All biographies of Charlotte Brontë, beginning with Elizabeth Gaskell's classic and authorized life, rely on her letters. They are still our most direct source of information about the lives of the Brontës and our closest approach to the woman whose closing signature was C Brontë, then Currer Bell or C Bell, and finally C B Nicholls. Brontë was fortunate in her friendships, and the letters show us what fine company she could be. Like the novels, they are full of acute observations, pithy character sketches, and passionate convictions. By evoking congenial companionship across distances, they remind us of how profoundly Brontë needed it. This is the keynote of Gaskell's biography, which takes a passage from 'Aurora Leigh' as its epigraph:

O my God,
—Thou hast knowledge, only Thou,
How dreary 'tis for women to sit still
On winter nights by solitary fires
And hear the nations praising them far off.

As herself a celebrated novelist as well as a wife and mother, Gaskell was well situated to appreciate the ways in which fame could amplify solitude. No wonder Brontë accepted Nicholls's proposal of marriage without having begun by desiring it, and despite her father's opposition to it.

Nicholls's sensitivity about his wife's letters and his proprietary view of them were standard in the period. Letters were private, and the opinions and judgments expressed in them were not meant for public distribution. 'There is something peculiarly revolting in the bare idea of those communications being laid open to the public gaze, which were intended only for the eye of a confidential & sympathizing friend,' Margaret Wooler reassured Nicholls, when he worried about indiscretions in the letters Brontë had sent her before her

marriage.¹ What then could justify their publication? Nicholls was adamant about not publishing anything that would detract from his wife's reputation. Like Tennyson, when the idea of publishing Arthur Henry Hallam's letters was mooted, he would have said, 'I of all living men should be allowed a voice in this matter.'²

So far as Nicholls was concerned, quite a bit of what Brontë had written or would write seemed likely to detract from her reputation. When she read him the fragment now known as 'Emma', the beginning of a novel she was writing after *Villette*, he was discouraging: 'The Critics will accuse you of repetition, as you have again introduced a school.'³ But Brontë was well acquainted with Nicholls's limitations before she married him. He had been her father's curate for eight years, and she was not only an astute judge of character but a woman without illusions about herself or her friends. Nicholls won her by loving her better, and more passionately, than anyone had. She had written to Ellen before the marriage that she believed him to be 'conscientious' and 'high-principled' and was determined not to 'yield to regrets—that fine talents, congenial tastes and thoughts are not added . . .' (11 April 1854). After the marriage, in the letter Nicholls found so dangerous, she remarks that he 'is impatient for his walk' and that she is 'obliged to scrawl hurriedly' (?20 October 1854). Her marriage left her less time for writing, novels as well as letters. Is her enthusiastic assertion of her own authority in the very next passage—'When I go to Brookroyd if I hear Mr. C— or anybody else say anything to the disparagement of single women I shall go off like a bomb-shell'—unrelated to constraints she felt but didn't object to as a happily married woman?

Ellen has importantly shaped our narrative of Brontë's life and our sense of who Brontë was by keeping the letters her friend wrote to her between 1832, when Brontë was sixteen, and 1855, when she died, three weeks short of her thirty-ninth birthday. The portrait is clear enough yet partial, if only because different audiences elicit different performances. Brontë's description of Ellen—'good', 'faithful', and 'observant' but entirely 'without romance' (3 January 1850)—also describes the letters she wrote to her. Brontë's other longtime friend and regular correspondent, Mary Taylor, was very different from Ellen, but she destroyed all but one of Brontë's letters to her. The author of a novel (published long after Brontë's death) as well as a series of articles on the economic condition of women, Mary did not lack romance or the force of

¹ Quoted in Juliet Barker, *The Brontës* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1994), 779.

² *The Letters of Arthur Henry Hallam*, ed. Jack Kolb (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1981), 14.

³ Nicholls gives this account of the episode in a letter to George Smith, quoted in Charlotte Brontë, *The Professor*, ed. Margaret Smith and Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), 303.

personality to write combatively to Brontë about her political views and her artistic and life choices. Letters from Mary, together with the letters Brontë certainly would have written to Anne, Emily, and Branwell during periods of separation, would have shown us a different Brontë. The eight letters to Emily that have survived provide insights into her heart and mind vastly different from those provided by her letters to Ellen.

From Upperwood House, where Brontë worked briefly as a governess, one of her letters to Ellen precisely registers the difference between her connections to Ellen and Mary. Mary had preceded Brontë to the Continent and urged her to follow, as she would a year later, gaining the experience required to write *The Professor* and *Villette*:

Mary's letter spoke of some of the pictures & cathedrals she had seen—pictures the most exquisite—& cathedrals the most venerable—I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter—such a vehement impatience of restraint & steady work—such a strong wish for wings—wings such as wealth can furnish—such an urgent thirst to see—to know—to learn—something internal seemed to expand boldly for a minute—I was tantalized with the consciousness of faculties unexercised—then all collapsed and I despaired.

Characteristically, she follows this outburst with an apology to Ellen:

My dear Nell—I would hardly make that confession to any one but yourself—and to you rather in a letter than 'viva voce'—these rebellious & absurd emotions were only momentary—I quelled them in five minutes . . . (7 August 1841)

When *Jane Eyre* was published, Brontë refused to acknowledge her authorship of the novel to Ellen. Indeed, she required her friend to certify that she was not '“publishing”'—(humbug!) Whoever has said it—if any one has, which I doubt—is no friend of mine. Though twenty books were ascribed to me, I should own none' (3 May 1848). Yet Brontë made a full disclosure of her authorship to Mary and sent *Jane Eyre* to her in New Zealand, where she had emigrated in pursuit of independence and acceptable employment. In a letter written to Brontë after the publication of *Shirley*, Mary takes her friend to task for the views of working women expressed in her novel:

I have seen some extracts from *Shirley* in which you talk of women working. And this first duty, this great necessity you seem to think that some women may indulge in—if they give up marriage & don't make themselves too disagreeable to the other sex. You are a coward & a traitor.⁴

Although we can only regret the loss of Brontë's letters to her bolder and more imaginative correspondents, her letters to Ellen are a woman's letters

⁴ *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë*, ed. Margaret Smith, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), ii, 392.

written in the context of an enduring and supportive friendship. Moreover, they are written by a particular woman who prized honesty and openness above all else. [R]ather in a letter than “viva voce”. . . .’ Brontë’s letters, and especially her letters to Ellen, include confidences and confessions that she had no opportunity and less willingness to express in speech. Her talk could be lively, so long as she was at home or among friends, but writing gave her the freedom to be lively while examining herself and her circumstances in a way that conversation could not. Besides, written language was for her, as for Lucy Snowe, always ‘the medium of better utterance than faltering lips can achieve’.⁵ Like the novels, Brontë’s letters bear ample witness to her claim that she had ‘something of my own to say, and a way of my own to say it in’ (?early September 1848).

What can the letters tell us about the times in which she lived and the novels she wrote? Although they are—like Brontë’s first attempt at a novel—‘deficient in “startling incident” and “thrilling excitement”’ (6 November 1847)—they show us what the life of an ambitious, talented, and conscientious single woman was like in the middle of the nineteenth century. By the time she was twenty-one, this single woman had received (and refused) two proposals of marriage, one from Ellen’s brother Henry, a curate looking for a suitable wife on the rebound, and the other from David Pryce, a lively Irish curate with whom Brontë certainly flirted. She had taken a month-long vacation at the seaside with her best friend, taught in a school, and tried out governessing in two houses. She had written a great deal of fiction and poetry, and sent some of her poems to Robert Southey, the Poet Laureate, asking his opinion of them and declaring her wish ‘to be forever known’ as a poet.⁶

It was kind of Southey to reply, though it was unkind of him to exclude her from the company of those who were free to dedicate themselves to art. Brontë responded that she found his advice—‘Literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life: & it ought not to be’—‘kind, and wise’ and promised to ‘suppress’ any wish to see her name in print. ‘I have endeavoured not only attentively to observe all the duties a woman ought to fulfil, but to feel deeply interested in them’, she tells him (16 March 1837). This acknowledgement of how dull she found ‘the business of a woman’s life’ anticipates Jane Eyre’s famous protest: women ‘feel just as men feel,’ ‘need exercise for their faculties and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do,’ and ‘suffer from too rigid a restraint . . . precisely as men would suffer . . .’.⁷ Virginia Woolf cited Jane

⁵ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten and Margaret Smith (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 327.

⁶ Brontë’s first letter to Southey has not been located, but he quotes her in his reply (*CBL*, i, 165–7).

⁷ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Jane Jack and Margaret Smith (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969), 132–3.

Eyre's complaint in support of her claim that Brontë's indignation kept her from expressing a genius even greater than Jane Austen's.⁸

Brontë's reply to Southey expressed chagrin and humility, but she continued to write both poetry and fiction, and it was she who urged her sisters to join her in getting their names into print nine years later when they published a book of their poems at their own expense. All the same, her letters demonstrate how well she understood what Southey meant. They catalogue not only the obstacles to her ambition and her habitual suppression of her restless longing for a larger scope for the life of her mind and imagination but the huge double bind that restrained her and other Victorian women. She longed for a wider experience and wanted to be active and earning money—like her brother Branwell—yet she felt bound to stay at home with her widowed father.

Her obligation to her father did not, fortunately, keep her from continuing her education in Brussels, with a view to preparing herself to open a school with her sisters, but it helped her to refuse a highly paid teaching position in a large school in Manchester when she returned. The daughter's bind casts a new light on the Victorian widower's usual effort to marry again. Perhaps if Patrick Brontë had been successful in remarrying, or if the children's aunt had not died while Emily and Charlotte were at school in Brussels, Charlotte would have sought work away from Haworth. That work would have been teaching. Had she undertaken it, she might not have become a novelist. So long as she was committed to keeping her father's house and caring for him, only her imagination was free to wander. *Jane Eyre's* cosmic vehemence and single-minded dedication to dissecting the heart in its heroine's heaving breast owe everything to this combination of imaginative freedom and daily constraints.

Brontë shared both the freedom and the constraints with her sisters, and especially with Emily, until their deaths. In the single year between October 1847 and October 1848 Charlotte published *Jane Eyre*, *Emily Wuthering Heights*, and Anne both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Branwell's death at the end of September of that year was followed by Emily's, and then Anne's, so that by spring of 1849 Charlotte was the only one left. Brontë's letters give us our closest view of what life in the Parsonage was like in those exciting and terrible times. One of them was written after her return from Scarborough, where she had gone with Anne in the hope that the sea air would improve Anne's chances of recovery from consumption. Their time in Scarborough was very short, and Brontë buried her sister there. The letter to Ellen, who had accompanied them, describes her return to Haworth by noting the reaction of Anne's spaniel Flossy and Emily's mastiff Keeper. "The dogs seemed in strange ecstasy. I am certain they regarded me as the harbingers of others—the dumb

⁸ *A Room of One's Own* (New York, Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc., 1929, rpt. 1957), 71–3.

creatures thought that as I was returned—those who had been so long absent were not far behind’ (23 June 1849).

Brontë’s freedom of movement, at least intermittent movement, increased dramatically after *Jane Eyre* made her a celebrity. At the age of thirty-one, she found herself with a new set of acquaintances and friends in the great world beyond Haworth. The letters to Ellen are now joined by letters to her publisher, George Smith; to his reader, W. S. Williams; to G. H. Lewes, who had reviewed *Jane Eyre*; to James Taylor, a member of her publisher’s firm, who also courted her with a view to marriage; and to Elizabeth Gaskell. There were five trips to London, each one more ambitious than the last, all described in letters to both Ellen and her father. Brontë had dinner with Thackeray, who first pleased her by shaking hands and then offended her by boasting at the Garrick Club that he had been dining with ‘Jane Eyre’. There were opportunities, indeed urgings, to meet interesting people, go to the opera at Covent Garden, watch Macready in *Macbeth* and Rachel (the woman Fanny Kemble called ‘the most incomparable dramatic artist I ever saw’⁹) in two plays, admire the pictures in the National Gallery and some Turners in a private collection, pay two visits to the Crystal Palace, visit a phrenologist with George Smith, and attend most of Thackeray’s lectures on ‘The English Humourists of the Eighteenth Century’.

London social life was a particular challenge for someone who described herself as having ‘an unamiable want of sociability’.¹⁰ Perhaps this conclusion—based on her experience as a governess and confirmed by her sojourn in Brussels—came to be adjusted in view of her changed circumstances as a celebrated writer. As Currer Bell, she was treated with respect, politeness, and, especially, attention. As Currer Bell, she felt free for the first time to express herself with the trenchancy previously displayed only within the walls of the Parsonage and in her correspondence.

Brontë reminded G. H. Lewes, who had advised her ‘not to stray far from the ground of experience’, that ‘the real experience of each individual’ was ‘very limited’ (6 November 1847). Novels were dictated by imagination. But the importance of Brontë’s ‘real experience’ at this time in her life goes beyond its being a basis for important scenes in *Villette* or providing her with a whole new set of historical originals out of whom she could fashion fictional characters. Characters in *Jane Eyre* have the quality of elemental forces that do Jane good or harm. Characters in *Villette* are more mixed, and we see them thinking, acting, and talking in a range of different circumstances and relations. Their effect on the novel’s heroine, Lucy Snowe, is also mixed and often at odds with their intentions. The action of *Jane Eyre* moves from setting to setting—Gateshead,

⁹ Frances Ann Kemble, *Records of Later Life* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1982), 244.

¹⁰ *CBL*, i, 320.

Lowood, Thornfield, Moor House, Ferndean—while the action of *Villette* takes place almost entirely in one setting, yet the later novel is more worldly, its cast of characters more diverse, and its interest in the various forms of bourgeois life and relationship much more wide-ranging.

Brontë's letters to and about George Smith, the model for Graham Bretton aka Dr John, tell us as much about the differences between lived and imagined life as they do about any similarities. In the life as revealed by the letters, Brontë is a new kind of literary lion, and George Smith is her proud handler, eager to display London to her and her to London. He is also a handsome, younger bachelor, and the prosperous and well-connected head of a firm and a family of women. In the novel, Graham Bretton is the handsome only child of a devoted mother, older than Lucy and dedicated to restoring his family's fortune through his medical practice. Graham Bretton hardly sees Lucy, but George Smith approved of Brontë, and she warmed to his appreciation. The difference between Smith's professional interest in Brontë and Dr John's professional interest in Lucy is as revealing as it is sardonic. Instead of being her publisher's prize, Lucy is only an excessively sensitive young woman with an interesting kind of nervous disorder, an object of sympathy for Dr John and a scientific curiosity ripe for study. Brontë may or may not have been in love with George Smith, but she certainly minded the difference to their friendship that his marriage inevitably made.

Theatrical performance is important in *Jane Eyre*, but *Villette* is the only novel in which Brontë represents a woman who, like herself, earns her living as an artist. In creating Vashti, Brontë provides probably our best example of how the novelist's imagination transports real experience into a fictional world. She writes about Rachel's performances briefly in a letter to Ellen and more fully in one to James Taylor:

Rachel's Acting transfixed me with wonder, enchained me with interest and thrilled me with horror. The tremendous power with which she expresses the very worst passions in their strongest essence forms an exhibition as exciting as the bull-fights of Spain and the gladiatorial combats of old Rome—and (it seemed to me) not one whit more moral than these poisoned stimulants to popular ferocity. (15 November 1851)

In her letter to Sydney Dobell, who had earned her respect by writing an appreciative review of *Wuthering Heights*, she admits that if she could 'bear the high mental stimulus so long', she 'would go every night for three months to watch and study' the manifestations of 'this strange being'.¹¹ In *Villette*, Vashti's achievement stands as the highest kind of creative act, an entirely adequate expression of feeling—one that 'astonished Hope and hushed Desire', 'out-stripped Impulse and paled Conception'.¹²

¹¹ CBL, ii, 652.

¹² *Villette*, 371.