

Drafting *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë at the Circulating Library

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Abstract

With recent digital advancements, it is increasingly possible to question Charlotte Brontë's 1850 account of the instinctive process by which she and her sisters wrote their way into the British literary canon by exploring popular Georgian and early Victorian fiction for textual similarities to the 1847 novels. After being advised by publishers to consider readerly tastes catered to by British circulating libraries, Charlotte Brontë could consult such works at Haworth or Manchester-area circulating libraries while drafting her successful novel *Jane Eyre* (1847). Though, as the Victorian era approached, genres such as the silver fork novel were framed as inferior, largely intended by librarians for female reading, their undeniable popularity influenced publishing trends between 1825 and 1841 and afterwards remained a financial force at the circulating library despite attracting critical satire. Two anonymously published silver fork novels, *The Coquette* (1834) by Frederick Mansel Reynolds and *The M.D.'s Daughter* (1842) by Lady Harriet Anne Scott contain scenes and dialogue that appear to have been adapted by Charlotte to enliven the plot of *Jane Eyre* and ensure its publication, perhaps justifying George Henry Lewes' sagacious 1847 criticism of this English novel as evoking "the circulating library."

Keywords

Jane Eyre, Charlotte Brontë, circulating library, popular fiction, silver fork novel, English novel, adaptation, reading

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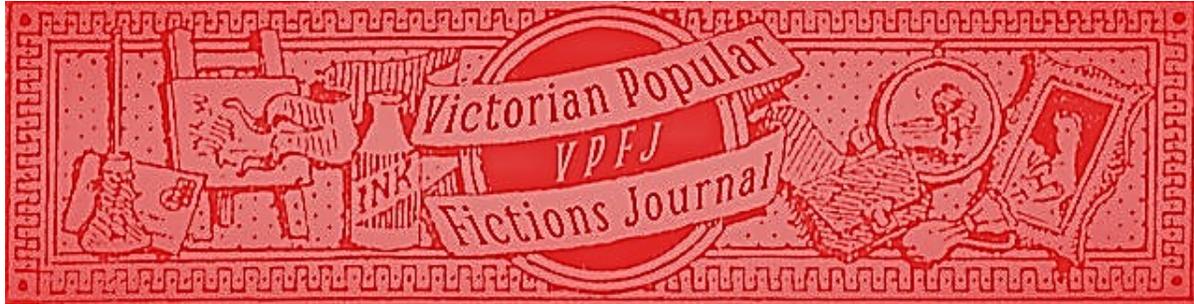
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Lydia Craig

Drafting *Jane Eyre*: Charlotte Brontë at the Circulating Library

When Charlotte Brontë’s manuscript for *The Professor*, a novel narrated in the first person by English schoolteacher William Crimsworth, was rejected by multiple publishers between 1846 and 1847, the fledgling author dutifully applied their criticisms of the plot to her next effort. *Jane Eyre* (1847) became an instant bestseller as rumours swirled regarding the gender and identity of its pseudonymous author, Currer Bell, who had managed so strikingly to delineate the passionate inner life of a governess. One approving critic, George Henry Lewes, regretted however that it contained, “too much melodrama and improbability, which smack of the circulating library” (1847: 692).¹ Responding (as Bell) to him directly on 6 November 1847, Charlotte explained:

I tried six publishers in succession; they all told me it was deficient in “startling incident” and “thrilling excitement,” that it would never suit the circulating libraries, and as it was on those libraries the success of works of fiction mainly depended they could not undertake to publish what would be overlooked there – “Jane Eyre” was rather objected to at first [on] the same grounds – but finally found acceptance.

I mention this to you, not with a view of pleading exemption from censure, but in order to direct your attention to the root of certain literary evils – if in your forthcoming article in “Frazer” you would bestow a few words of enlightenment on the public who support the circulating libraries, you might, with your powers, do some good.

(Brontë 1995-2000, vol. 1: 559)

Until now, this excerpt has not been interrogated for its startling implication that *Jane Eyre* was written specifically “to suit the circulating libraries.” To appeal to this British readership, proliferating in both urban and rural areas alongside increasing literacy rates, Charlotte must have cast an enquiring eye on popular fiction. Facilitated by unprecedented digital access to

¹ Elsie Michie has discussed Charlotte’s continuing authorial quandaries regarding inclusion of melodrama versus realism while drafting *Shirley* (1849).

early nineteenth-century texts, it is now possible to question Charlotte's 1850 account of the Brontës' novels as drawn almost wholly from creative invention, unmediated by Georgian or early Victorian popular fiction.² Comparing circumstances, details, and even dialogue from *Jane Eyre* with similar counterparts in silver fork novels *The Coquette* (1834) and *The M.D.'s Daughter* (1842), suggests such works of popular fiction may represent unremarked influences.

What the Brontës Read

Charlotte attempted to defend her sisters Emily and Anne from allegations of crudeness by stressing their total isolation from the world beyond Haworth. Key to her strategy was to cast her sisters as instinctive writers, and Charlotte also presented herself as writing through deeply personal inspiration. Her "Biographical Notice," an 1850 account of how the sisters wrote and published *Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre*, claims that the 1847 novels were based on witnessing life and on private thought, alleging that none of them "thought of filling their pitchers at the well-spring of other minds; they always wrote from the impulse of nature, the dictates of intuition, and from such stores of observation as their limited experience had enabled them to amass" (Brontë 1850: xv). In Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Charlotte describes her own drafting process as dependent on almost mystical intuition. According to Gaskell,

She said, that it was not every day that she could write. Sometimes weeks or even months elapsed before she felt that she had anything to add to that portion of her story which was already written. Then, some morning, she would waken up, and the progress of her tale lay clear and bright before her, in distinct vision.

(1857, vol. 2: 8).

Scholarly inquiries into potential literary "sources" of *Jane Eyre*, besides the Bible, have focused almost exclusively on the established canon of English and European literature and religious, theological, and scientific works owned by the Brontës. Charlotte's own literary preferences were communicated privately to her close friend Ellen Nussey on 4 July 1834:

If you like poetry let it be first rate, Milton, Shakespeare, Thomson, Goldsmith Pope [sic] (if you will though I don't admire him) Scott, Byron, Campbell, Wordsworth and Southey [...] For Fiction – read Scott alone [sic] all novels after his are worthless ... I only say adhere to standard authors and don't run after novelty.

(Brontë 1995-2000, vol. 1: 130-1)

Accordingly, Ian M. Emberson has sought to trace Charlotte's debt to Milton in *Jane Eyre* (2007: 213) and Robert Stowell has explained how Sir Walter Scott's *Ivanhoe* (1819) was an additional significant influence (1996: 246). Another conduit of traditional classical reading might have been the library of the estimated thousand volumes at Ponden Hall, the residence of the Heaton family located a few miles west of Haworth. Its shelves were mostly stocked with Early Modern and eighteenth-century literature, including a first folio of William Shakespeare's plays. As Bob Duckett notes, however, the "many works

² Ongoing research indicates that certain themes, plots, and language contained in Anne Brontë's *Agnes Grey* and, especially, Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* also borrow heavily from nineteenth-century popular fiction.

of fiction” referenced by the Brontës are not in evidence there (2015: 119-20) and critics have remained largely concentrated upon *Jane Eyre*’s engagement with standard works. Recent scholarship has tentatively begun to chip away at this narrative, acknowledging the family’s active engagement with, and writerly interest in, cultural and literary trends, thematic developments, and stylistic innovations, and linking it to popular periodicals, religious writings, and lesser-known Victorian novels.³ Robert Dingley contends that Edward Fairfax Rochester’s attempt to illegally wed Jane Eyre mimics behaviours of the historical John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester as pictured in William Ainsworth’s *Old St. Paul’s* (1841) (2010: 288). Tracing similarities between Becky Sharp’s conversation with the lovestruck gentleman Rawdon Crawley in William Makepeace Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair*, serialised between 1847-1848, Miriam E. Burstein argues that Charlotte echoes Becky’s declaration, “do you suppose I have no feeling of self-respect, because I am poor and friendless, and because rich people have none?” with Jane Eyre’s far more famous retort, “do you think, because I am poor, obscure, plain, and little, I am soulless and heartless?” (2012: 159-160). Though she would later deny reading *Vanity Fair* prior to *Jane Eyre*’s publication, when the number containing Becky’s defiant question appeared, Charlotte was still busily drafting (Burstein 2012: 159).

In a couple of letters to Lewes (18 January 1848) and Nussey (26 June 1848), Charlotte ambiguously wrote about her relationship to circulating libraries: it may be that she was referring simply to the lack of such institutions in Haworth itself in that year (Brontë 1995-2000, vol 2: 14, 81), for we do know that she and her sisters used them. Juliet Barker acknowledges that a subscription library existed in Haworth until 1844, with several located only miles away (1994: 863, note 30). As Gaskell relates, the sisters “were allowed to get books from the circulating library at Keighley; and many a happy walk, up those long four miles must they have had burdened with some new book into which they peeped as they hurried home” (1857, vol. 1: 109). After the two eldest returned from Brussels, they went in search of “such books as had been added to the library there during their absence from England” (Gaskell 1857, vol. 1: 228). Among their multiple options in the vicinity, states Duckett,

Two Keighley circulating libraries are well attested in local directories. Thomas Duckett Hudson of 32 High Street, Keighley, is styled “Bookseller, Stationer, Binder, and Chemist” in 1837 and 1841; as bookseller and stationer of 32 High Street North in 1848; and as “chymist, druggist and bookseller” in 1851. Another shop which ran a circulating library as early as 1822 was that of Robert Aked, in Low Street. Aked, in 1835 and 1836, printed two of Patrick Brontë’s pamphlets. He was still in business in 1853. And there were doubtless others, for often shopkeepers ran a small circulating or subscription “library” as a side line ... It is possible that the Haworth bookseller, John Greenwood, lent books on subscription from his shop, opened in 1847.

(2007: 198)

Debating why the Brontës would undergo an eight-mile round trip if the “classics” of Ponden Hall’s library were available to them, Duckett logically assumes that the siblings would

³ Frequently acknowledged is the Brontës’ debt to *Blackwood’s Magazine* and *Fraser’s Magazine* in the juvenilia. Lee A. Talley has considered how Methodist characters in stories from *The Methodist Magazine* (1798-1812), owned by Charlotte’s mother Maria, might have inspired religious characters, such as Mr. Brocklehurst and St John Rivers (2008: 112).

have travelled to a circulating library only to “borrow the fiction and light literature which they could not get elsewhere and which were the stock-in-trade of the circulating libraries” (2015: 119-20). Following Duckett’s insight, it is worth considering what titles, obscure as well as enduringly famous, the Brontës might have procured and read from such institutions.

Popular British Fiction of the 1820s-1840s

Circulating libraries, first established in Great Britain in 1725, had become by the early nineteenth century a chief source of access to contemporary publications for aristocratic and bourgeois women. Correcting the popular misconception that they were poorly stocked, David Allan claims that

library holdings running ordinarily to a minimum of several hundred items ... seem to have been the general rule rather than the exception. And if the available evidence is to be trusted, this was apparently so even in the small and medium-sized urban centres, especially by the early decades of the nineteenth century – the period to which the majority of the extant catalogues relate.

(2008: 130).

Though silver-fork novels and romances were regarded as critically inferior to “good” literature, they exerted strong financial influence over commercial literature. Christopher Skelton-Foord explains:

The circulating-library movement had long controlled the production of fiction in Britain. To precisely what degree, is a moot point. Certainly, it determined the authors and plots of novels and it sustained high cover prices. Multi-volume works would typically benefit librarians, who were able to rent out one title simultaneously to several customers, and from the 1810s onwards, novels were, as a rule, divided into three volumes, largely following the trade’s championing of Walter Scott, who favoured the three-decker.

(2004: 101-2).

Members of the “fair sex” able to afford the subscription fee would soon have realised that proprietors of circulating libraries expected them to prefer reading novels to more serious genres and forms of literature, as reflected in the terminology of advertisements and catalogues, and this could indeed have been the case as regards popular demand (Allen 2008: 142-4). Richard D. Altick’s citation of the London Statistical Society’s 1838 tabulation of stock from ten local circulating libraries shows that the specified categories “Fashionable Novels, well known” (439) and “Novels of the lower character, being chiefly imitations of Fashionable Novels, containing no good, although probably nothing decidedly bad” (1008) represent an overwhelming three-quarters of the 2,192 items of stock listed, even distinct from the far more alarming, if even vaguer designation “Books decidedly bad” (10) (1957: 217-8). Accounting for inferior access to books in rural areas, it is important to recognize that Charlotte, Emily, and Anne could procure silver-fork fiction at any decently-sized circulating library in Great Britain.

For British women reading between 1825 and 1841, the fashionable, or “silver fork” novel detailing the lives, adventures, and scandalous amours of the privileged in London’s high society, represented a dominant genre of interest, though its later fall from grace contributes to what Edward Copeland has termed the “black hole in literary history between Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë” (2012: 2-3). Arguing for recognition of their significance during the Reform era, Copeland insists

Novels of fashionable life were novels about power, who has it and who doesn’t. Reform produced the issues that silver fork authors engaged, the renegotiation of traditional systems of power, including the shifts in social relationships and status that come along with such momentous change.

(2012: 2)

Before they were targeted by a long critical campaign in the 1830s which labelled them “non-canonical, low, commercial and not worthy to be included in the company of Literature,” novels of manners allegedly shed light upon aristocratic behaviours and demarcated class divides for the benefit of curious bourgeois readers (Copeland 2012: 3). Writing in 1850 to silver fork novelist Catherine Gore, Charlotte gushed that *The Hamiltons* (1834) “has given me much pleasure.” Specifically, she appreciated its glimpse of upper-class life: “Such a book informs while it interests. I knew nothing of the circles you describe before I read ‘The Hamiltons’ but I feel I do know something of them now.” In the letter, Brontë claimed to have perused the novel only when it was revised and reissued that year, but that it had previously been “a work often-heard-of and long-wished-for,” an admission pointing to her proximity to, if not direct participation in, circulating library culture (Brontë 1850: 455-6). Delineations of aristocratic excess in Charlotte’s *Glasstown* and *Angrian* tales bear suggestive resemblance to the upper-class echelons featuring in stereotypical silver fork fiction. Cheryl A. Wilson frames the Brontës’ novels as “part of a continuum of fiction production that, although it may have undergone changes in the 1820s and 1830s, never halted, and their juvenilia, in particular, bears the influence of fashionable fiction” (2012: 170). Charlotte may not have read *The Hamiltons* by 1850, but she had been influenced by other specimens of the fashionable novel well before then.

Contradicting her advice to Nussey, Charlotte also indulged in reading in her girlhood that her father, Reverend Patrick Brontë, evidently considered undesirable. Scott’s historical romances were permitted, but others he regarded as trite and dangerous were forbidden. Writing to the poet Hartley Coleridge on 10 December 1840, Charlotte confessed her deep childhood love for *The Lady’s Magazine* (1770-1847), a periodical then in sharp decline:

I read them before I knew how to criticize or object ... I read them as a treat on holiday afternoons or by stealth when I should have been minding my lessons – I shall never see anything which will interest me so much again – One black day my father burnt them because they contained foolish love-stories.

([Brontë] 1840: 240)

According to Christina Alexander, “Patrick Brontë shared with Wordsworth and Coleridge distaste for the lurid romances of the developing mass market” (2011: 25). While the Brontë siblings obeyed parental dictates in childhood, in adolescence and adulthood they could easily stray at the circulating library into reading genres that their father would have disapproved of. Charlotte was familiar with the stock commonly available for loan, admitting to her brother Branwell from Roe Head School, Mirfield, on 17 May 1832 that their aunt Elizabeth Branwell’s new subscription to *Fraser’s Magazine*, although inferior to *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, was still

better than remaining the whole year without being able to obtain a sight of any periodical publication whatever, and such would assuredly be our case as in the little wild, moorland village where we reside there would be no possibility of borrowing, or obtaining a work of that description from a circulating library.

(Brontë [18]32: 121)

Several Haworth locals later recalled the sisters walking to and from Keighley “to change books,” as frequent patrons (Barker 1994: 148-9).

Significantly, it should be recalled that Charlotte was not in Haworth or its environs when she first drafted *Jane Eyre* in late August 1846, but instead was residing for a month in Manchester, a thriving metropolis which boasted multiple circulating libraries. After supporting Patrick during a serious eye surgery occurring on 25 August, she cared for the invalid at 83 Mount Pleasant, now 59 Boundary Street West. On that very day, Charlotte received word, forwarded by her sisters at Haworth, that *The Professor* had been rejected again (Smith 1995-2000, vol. 1: 81). Amid a tumult of feelings, she originated a new novel, whose mixture of excitement, suspense, and romance still constitutes a page-turner, and she did so in proximity to a wealth of literary resources. A mere twenty minutes or so away on foot, nothing to a determined Brontë, were located the Portico Library in Mosley Street, the Manchester Circulating Library in King Street, the New Circulating Library in Fountain Street, and the New Library in St. Ann Street, among others. In the 1820s, the Manchester New Circulating Library and the Manchester Subscription Library held ninety-five and ninety percent, respectively, of all titles printed between 1805 and 1819, a sign that holdings were kept up to date, at least at that point (Skelton-Foord 2004: 110). Though Charlotte was not a permanent resident, she would not have been barred from admission. Conceding that most surviving circulating library records derive from resort towns like Bath and Leamington Spa, which regularly saw an influx of temporary patrons, Allan has indicated the likelihood of analogous temporary library access being extended cheaply to visitors in other rural towns and urban centres as a short-term profit strategy (2008: 147). With time to spare, as Patrick lay quietly in a darkened room tended to by an expertly trained nurse (Barker 1994: 507-508), Charlotte Brontë could, in short, command unprecedented access to popular fiction before she began to write, composing the engrossing events of *Jane Eyre*’s life with a certain degree of creative assistance. The next section considers the first of the two main case studies of circulating library novels that may have contributed to Charlotte’s most popular novel.

The Coquette and the Broken Tree

The Coquette, published anonymously in 1834 by Frederic Mansel Reynolds, also known as F.M. Reynolds (1800-1850), has not previously been recognized by scholars as a source text for *Jane Eyre* (cf. Jack 1987: 326-35). It can be categorized as a three-volume silver fork novel whose action commences in south Yorkshire and continues in London and other rural and urban areas of England. Reynolds, eldest son of prolific English dramatist Frederic Reynolds, had previously authored the controversial novel *Miserrimus: A Tale* (1833), supposedly narrated by a savage and passionate man. Before his final mental illness and decline, Reynolds would twice serve as editor of *The Keepsake* (1828-1835, 1838-1839) and publish another violent novel, *The Parricide, a Domestic Romance* (1836) (“Reynolds” 1896: 42). The prefatory “Advertisement” to *The Coquette* frames the tale as a turn away from “German absurdities” towards domestic realism:

With the exception of a portion of the third volume, the creation of a smile is the sole object of the following pages. The reader, therefore, is intreated [sic] not to commence the perusal of them, in the expectation of encountering either a harrowing, or even a strong, interest: for, the writer has hoped, that a slight picture of the less tragic, and more frequent follies, and foibles, of existing life, may not be found wholly incapable of sustaining attention.

(Reynolds 1834, vol.1, n.p.)

Resemblances to *Jane Eyre* occur late in volume three, roughly spanning chapters twelve to fourteen, after two rambling volumes filled with outlandish, comedic characters plucked from all stations in society. Coquetry emerges as a theme but is only presented as a devastating moral failing as the plot concludes.

Previously, Charlotte’s strong interest in coquetry, insincere flirting demonised in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, has been remarked. Temma Berg intimates that the controversial figure of the heartless coquette strongly appealed in a creative, if not moral sense to all three Brontës: “sometimes they disapproved of coquettes, but sometimes they represented them as exciting, demanding, seductive creatures” (2018: 62). Vain, vapid women who are branded flirts, such as Rosalie in *Agnes Grey*, Blanche Ingram and Rosamond Oliver in *Jane Eyre*, and Ginevra Fanshawe in Charlotte’s later novel *Villette* (1853), lack integrity, but manage to exercise significant female power upon men and wield it against female rivals.⁴ In Reynolds’ novel, Sir Charles Belton becomes estranged from his jealous wife, Ellen. Provoked by the married man’s assumed disinterest, Miss Julia de Vermont determines to attract his notice: “these were her rash determinations; and in the fulfilment of them, she put into play all the insidious arts of the most finished coquetry. Every form that woman can assume she adopted in the hope of piquing him into attention.” While Belton vainly attempts to subdue his interest, Julia deludes herself by disregarding her real love for her victim. The narrator reveals, “she *really* entertained the strong desire to please him, she *thought* she only assumed” (Reynolds 1834, vol. 3: 306). Despite feeling guilt, Belton resolves to

⁴ In *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly Dean is anxious to specify that Catherine Earnshaw is not a coquette.

communicate his passion, as “the mere possibility of its not being reciprocated, inspired him with an anxiety he could not control” (vol. 3: 308). After several false starts and an initial rejection, he manages to bring matters to a head by approaching Julia openly as she walks in the grounds of the park.

Nature becomes a metaphor for the violent passions emanating from both lovers as they confront the spectre of adultery. Initially spurned, Belton violently spars with and parts from Julia. Hurrying back to the country-house where they have been living as guests, Julia accidentally drops a painted miniature of Belton she has long cherished, exposing her true feelings to her emboldened suitor, though she continues to resist his ardent overtures. Subsequently, the pair are reunited by the device of a powerful and abrupt thunderstorm, with the following scene representing a key emotional crisis in their relationship:

The sun was totally obscured; the blackness of the skies was cast upon the earth; and a lurid darkness enveloped every surrounding object. At this moment, the storm broke forth in all its violence. The clouds opened; and discharged themselves of the torrents that had oppressed them. To add to the terror of the scene, loud peals of thunder shook the earth, and vivid flashes of lightning cut the thick shadow from east to west.

Casting his eye rapidly around, Belton discovered within a few score of yards from the spot where they stood, the vast hollow trunk of a withered tree, that offered a perfect shelter from the violently drifted rain.

(Reynolds 1843, vol 3: 165)

Carrying the emotionally overwhelmed Julia, Belton has almost reached shelter when nature strikes:

at this instant, an intensely bright flash of livid matter alighted on their dazzled eyes; a low crash was heard, followed by a peal of thunder, that rent the air like the explosion of a mine; and when the visual power was restored to them, they discovered at their feet, the blasted trunk and branches of the tree they were seeking as a refuge.

(Reynolds 1834, vol. 3: 323-4)

Metaphorising their sinful, unstable love, the tree has been splintered apart. Terrified and lovesick, Julia turns to “her lover for support” and he clasps her in his arms, thus cementing their understanding.

If this scene reads familiarly, there is good reason for it, as some of its language and overall trajectory are mimicked in *Jane Eyre* when Rochester proposes. Unbeknownst to Jane, her employer’s love is an adulterous passion, owing to his secret marriage to the Creole heiress Bertha Mason. Like Julia and Belton, the couple rendezvous outside, engaging in an imprudently private conversation between two individuals of different genders and vastly disparate social classes that results in Jane’s slow but fervent acceptance of Rochester’s offer: “but what had befallen the night?” queries the narrator:

The moon was not yet set, and we were all in shadow: I could scarcely see my master’s face, near as I was. And what ailed the chestnut tree? it writhed and groaned; while wind roared in the laurel walk, and came sweeping over us.

(Brontë 1847, vol. 2: 215)

Her lover also marks the developing weather conditions:

“We must go in,” said Mr. Rochester: “the weather changes. I could have sat with thee till morning, Jane.”

“And so,” thought I, “could I with you.” I should have said so, perhaps, but a livid, vivid spark leapt out of a cloud at which I was looking, and there was a crack, a crash, and a close rattling peal; and I thought only of hiding my dazzled eyes against Mr. Rochester’s shoulder. The rain rushed down.

(Brontë 1847, vol. 2: 215)

Once safely inside Thornfield Hall, affianced Jane watches the storm calmly:

loud as the wind blew, near and deep as the thunder crashed, fierce and frequent as the lightning gleamed, cataract-like as the rain fell during a storm of two hours’ duration, I experienced no fear, and little awe...Before I left my bed in the morning, little Adèle came running in to tell me that the great horse-chestnut at the bottom of the orchard had been struck by lightning in the night, and half of it split away.

(Brontë 1847, vol. 2: 214-216)

Though the tree is split out of Jane’s sight, the passage utilises several words that also appear in the scene from *The Coquette* to describe the wildness of the storm and catastrophe, “vivid,” “livid,” “dazzled eyes,” “peal(s),” “crash(ed),” as well as replicating the lovers’ close embrace following the lightning strike.

Rooting this imagery from *Jane Eyre* in *The Coquette* can help resolve long-standing conjecture regarding Charlotte’s use of the trope. Emberson has speculated that the Judeo-Christian and Romantic symbol of the broken tree that often appears in the Brontës’ art and literature could reference Emily’s childhood fall from a weakened oak branch or the split chestnut tree found in Nussey’s garden at The Rydings, Birstall, West Yorkshire (2011: 336-8). Marilyn Nickelsburg observes that “Charlotte’s use of biblical texts to connote the idolatry of Jane’s relationship with Rochester and the potential for adultery with him presents the reader with a heroine who must confront her sinful state, repent and seek her salvation through appropriate actions” (2012: 293). This new evidence indicates Charlotte enlisted it from Reynolds’ storm scene to highlight the peril of an extra-marital relationship. Much later, a morally chastened and physically marred Rochester will compare himself to the smitten tree, lamenting his former attempt to lead the governess spiritually astray:

“I am no better than the old, lightning-struck chestnut-tree in Thornfield orchard;” he remarked, ere long. “And what right would that ruin have to bid a budding woodbine cover its decay with freshness?”

“You are no ruin, sir – no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop.”

(Brontë 1847, vol.3: 294-5)

Before mutual repentance and renewal can occur, symbolised by the rejuvenated tree, Jane must find courage to resist Rochester’s temptations once she discovers the insuperable barrier preventing their legal union. Again, Charlotte derived creative inspiration from Julia de Valmont’s progress from coquetry to sexual immorality in Reynolds’ novel but refused to allot a comparable fate to her strong-minded, conscientious heroine.

Adultery in Europe

Whereas *The Coquette* ends in tragedy, *Jane Eyre* concludes with ecclesiastically sanctioned wedlock, happy companionship, and promising maternity largely owing to Jane's superhuman resistance to Rochester's persuasive rhetoric. Julia, on the other hand, does struggle against her love for Belton, but ultimately succumbs to his adulterous lure. In further parallels with *Jane Eyre*, the morning after his understanding with Julia, Belton discovers to his chagrin that she has absconded from the house to preserve their virtue. Immediately, his inner turmoil bursts forth: "the regret of Belton was unbounded; but, it was converted into anger and despair, when he learnt all the particulars, and that he was the sole cause of her departure." Pursuing her to London, he despairs after finding that "all further trace was lost; and he knew not whether she remained secreted in its interminable labyrinth, or had thence proceeded into the country," miserably concluding "that the whole globe was before him, without the remotest clue to direct him to the East, or the West, the North, or the South" (Reynolds 1834: 327-9). Months after Jane similarly departs, St John Rivers informs her of Rochester's unremitting search in the aftermath:

What his subsequent conduct and proposals were is a matter of pure conjecture; but when an event transpired which rendered inquiry after the governess necessary, it was discovered she was gone – no one could tell when, where, or how. She had left Thornfield Hall in the night; every research after her course had been vain: the country had been scoured far and wide; no vestige of information could be gathered respecting her.

(Brontë 1847, vol. 3: 162).

In both novels, the woman's defiant absence threatens her suitor's assured dominance and physical conquest, though Charlotte differs from Reynolds in transposing the pair's debate on adultery before the heroine's flight rather than afterwards, intensifying the drama of their conflict.

Impulsively journeying to Dover to commit suicide after Julia's loss, Belton unexpectedly encounters the fugitive and eagerly seeks overcome her moral objections. He urges her to flee with him to Europe: "Yonder are the white cliffs of France. Thither will we fly, and thence to some more distant land; where my whole existence shall be devoted to you; and where your joys shall be hourly increased! There we will learn to annihilate the past." Against Julia's religious objections that "marriage is the institution of God, and the conversation of man, the link of society, and the soul of order," Belton feelingly implores the trembling woman,

Oh, Julia, do not sacrifice my happiness and your own, to the idle prejudices of a dissembling world. Forget the sophistries of the head, and listen only to the dictates of your heart. Yield to *them*, and I will be your repayment; *my* arms shall be your resting-place; my heart and body and whole soul shall for ever be devoted to the furtherance of your lightest wish! – Then come, Julia – quickly come!

(Reynolds 1834: 338-9).

After a months-long struggle, Belton and Julia elope, only to experience a miserable social and spiritual fall; he eventually turns against and impulsively denounces her as his seducer, occasioning her desperate suicide. Almost identical rhetoric appears when Rochester begs Jane to agree to be his mistress:

“You shall be Mrs. Rochester – both virtually and nominally. I shall keep only to you so long as you and I live. You shall go to a place I have in the south of France: a whitewashed villa on the shores of the Mediterranean. There you shall live a happy, and guarded, and most innocent life.”

Still, Jane refuses this European haven, leading Rochester to make the final plea,

Of yourself, you could come with soft flight and nestle against my heart, if you would: seized against your will, you will elude the grasp like an essence – you will vanish ere I inhale your fragrance. Oh! come, Jane, come!”

(Brontë 1847, vol. 3: 41).

Obdurate, despite her heartbreak, Jane instead abandons her lover for an uncertain but independent life, buoyed up by spiritual conviction despite experiencing the pangs of a broken heart. Listening to Rochester’s desperate promises and confident assurances that past sexual activities with former mistresses “Céline, Giacinta, and Clara” are now hateful, she realizes that he might one day come to despise her, too, for agreeing to cohabit outside of wedlock:

I felt the truth of these words; and I drew from them the certain inference, that if I were so far to forget myself and all the teaching that had ever been instilled into me, as – under any pretext – with any justification – through any temptation – to become the successor of these poor girls, he would one day regard me with the same feeling which now in his mind desecrated their memory. I did not give utterance to this conviction: it was enough to feel it. I impressed it on my heart, that it might remain there to serve me as aid in the time of trial.

(Brontë 1847, vol. 3, 29-30)

Rather than simply imitate the “startling incident” and “thrilling excitement” of novels found in circulating libraries, Charlotte judged their depictions of female morality and powerfully altered them to suit her philosophies and convictions. Despite suffering betrayal and temptation, the heroine of *Jane Eyre* resists, survives, and reinvents herself, refusing to bow to masculine pressure or succumb to her own desires until she can legitimately become Mrs. Rochester.

A Strong Female Heroine

A scene in another novel, published five years before *Jane Eyre*, evokes the final reunion of Rochester and Jane following the role-reversal of his blindness and her rise to fortune, indicating that Charlotte’s exploration of circulating library fiction was more than a passing fancy. *The M.D.’s Daughter: A Novel of the Nineteenth Century* (1842), was written anonymously in three volumes by Harriet Anne Scott née Shank, later Lady Sibbald Scott (1816-1894), a young Scottish aristocrat and novelist living in London’s elite circles and

rural Scotland (Craig 2021). With their inter-class romance dashed owing to a cruel falsehood perpetrated in fashionable circles regarding her sexual purity, Grace Shafton, a mere physician's daughter, and the Lord de Courcy, an earl, are reunited by his dangerous illness and a delirium that frustrates nursing efforts by servants Larry and Jessy. Overcoming her wounded pride out of love, Grace quietly enters incognito and endeavours to administer a critical dose of medicine to the dying man:

He turned, tried to distinguish her features; this he was unable to do, but the voice had struck upon his ear. He caught her hand, and, in a low voice, said –

“Grace, is it you, dear, dear Grace, my own Grace!” then flinging it from him with violence, he continued, “But no, you are not my Grace! You are another's – you are married, married to –”

“No, no,” explained Grace painfully agitated, “I am not married, I never will be!”

“Swear it!”

“I do promise! – Now,” and she offered the cup.

(Scott 1842: Vol.3, 92-3).

Blinded by his fever, de Courcy suffers sensory deprivation; he cannot see Grace, but he can hear her. Both physically taking hold of his nurse and dominating the conversation, he is unable to distinguish between mania and reality in his eagerness to determine whether Grace, whom he has bitterly wronged by his unfounded suspicions, remains single and available for marriage.

An equivalent scene occurs in *Jane Eyre* as the sundered lovers reunite after Rochester's deceit, their last turbulent interchange, and Jane's rapid flight. After Jane enters the Ferndean manor house in quest of Rochester, where servants John and Mary have been tending him, she receives permission to bring the blind man his requested glass of water. Rousing the dog, Pilot, she briefly speaks, and the sound attracts his master's attention: “Mr. Rochester turned mechanically to *see* what the commotion was: but as he *saw* nothing, he returned and sighed.” Far more dramatically than in Scott's novel, where de Courcy recognizes Grace's voice almost immediately, Rochester suspects, but struggles to confirm Jane's presence:

He put out his hand with a quick gesture, but not seeing where I stood, he did not touch me. “Who is this? Who is this?” he demanded, trying, as it seemed, to *see* with those sightless eyes, – unavailing and distressing attempt! “Answer me – speak again!” he ordered, imperiously and aloud.

Finally, he reaches out, a gesture enthusiastically met by Jane, who actively participates in their physical acts of reconnection in contrast to the passivity demonstrated by Grace: “He groped: I arrested his wandering hand, and prisoned it in both mine.” Once she declares herself, Rochester remains emotionally overwhelmed:

“Jane Eyre! – Jane Eyre!” was all he said.

“My dear master,” I answered, “I am Jane Eyre: I have found you out – I am come back to you.”

“In truth? – in the flesh? My living Jane?”

First inquiring rhetorically, “and you do not lie dead in some ditch under some stream? And you are not a pining outcast amongst strangers?” Rochester soon begins to agonize over the conviction that the young woman must leave him one day, though, unlike de Courcy, he does not exact a promise that his love will not marry (Brontë 1847, vol. 3: 272-4).

Both invalids entertain the paranoid delusion that Grace or Jane will prove ephemeral, rebelliously vanishing into thin air before they can be substantially realized and claimed. Succeeding in convincing de Courcy to swallow the medicine, Grace next tries to influence him to sleep, but he resists her efforts, apprehensive that she will disappear forever if unwatched:

“Yes, and when I am sleeping – even if I turn my eyes – you will be gone. Have you not thus mocked my sight continually?”

“I will not go, indeed I will not – believe me!” and she sat down, as if to assure him that she intended to remain.

“Give me your hand then!”

Afraid of irritating him, she laid her hand gently upon his; he seized it eagerly, and held it firmly in his own, as if to prevent the possibility of escape.

(Scott 1842, vol. 3: 94).

Touch continues to serve as a link between the man and the woman which renders their emotional connection literally tangible. After hours of holding the sleeper’s hand and watching him gain much-needed repose, Grace finally manages to slip out of the room, lest propriety be further outraged, leaving the young man to the two servants. Hopeful that he might yet reconcile with and marry Grace, de Courcy soon recovers, proposes, and apologises. All is forgiven, if not forgotten, and the pair live in stereotypical matrimonial bliss ever after.

Clutching Jane, Rochester becomes far more physically demonstrative than de Courcy, touching, embracing, and kissing her with abandon as he seeks to reassure himself of his lost love’s materiality. Speaking of Jane alternately in the third and second person, a brilliant innovation on Scott’s original dialogue, Rochester seems to commune both with himself and the object of his affection as he debates the reality of his similarly “mocking” fantasy:

“My living darling! These are certainly her limbs, and these her features: but I cannot be so blest after all my misery. It is a dream: such dreams as I have had at night when I have clasped her once more to my heart, as I do now; and kissed her, as thus – and felt that she loved me, and trusted she would not leave me.”

“Which I never will, sir, from this day.”

“Never will, says the vision? But I always woke and found it an empty mockery; and I was desolate and abandoned – my life dark, lonely, hopeless – my soul athirst and forbidden to drink – my heart famished and never to be fed. Gentle, soft dream, nestling in my arms now, you will fly, too; as your sisters have all fled before you: but kiss me before you go – embrace me, Jane.”

(Brontë 1847, vol 3: 273-4)

Rather than suffer this airy nonsense to continue, pragmatic Jane kisses him, soon making it her business to bring Rochester back to earth with a jolt of jealousy by evoking new images of her courtship by the handsome clergyman St. John Rivers. Like de Courcy, Rochester soon expresses regret for past actions and again offers marriage to a woman now believed to be his moral superior. Regaining health, Rochester weds Jane, and their romance properly transitions from fervent romanticism to contented Victorian domesticity. Again, it is revealing to denote the increase in agency allotted to Charlotte's heroine compared to Scott's, as Jane serves as an equal if not dominant partner in negotiating the terms of her marital alliance, while Grace instead seems to shrink into devotion and submission beneath de Courcy's feverish passion.

Despite similarities with *The Coquette* and *The M.D.'s Daughter*, Charlotte altered their themes and the didactic moral lessons conveyed by their typical plot resolutions. She did not read and admire their "startling incident" and "thrilling excitement" without also engaging in active critique, nor did she reproduce their more fantastic elements, such as Belton's rescue of Julia off the Dover coast as the tide improbably cuts them off from the mainland, or the convoluted resumption of de Courcy and Grace's courtship with its repeated and far-fetched misunderstandings. Certainly, Charlotte did preserve the silver fork novel's "participation in the formation of middle-class domesticity" against aristocratic corruption: Jane Eyre's "class-climbing" into a higher social station, a central theme of the genre, is authorised by her obvious "sense of moral superiority" over the reformed libertine and landed gentleman, Edward Fairfax Rochester (Wagner 2005: 443). But whereas for bourgeois flirts turning the pages of Reynolds' novel the aristocratic coquette Julia de Valmont's seduction imparts a useful warning, Brontë celebrates the positive resistance of a middle-class heroine to sexual seduction and invalid social mobility. Like Thackeray's fiction of the 1830s and 1840s, which Diane Sadoff interprets as hybridizing silver fork fiction and the domestic novel, *Jane Eyre* successfully bridged both genres (2019: 632). Since it shares its "thrilling excitement" with titles popular at the circulating library, this novel should be viewed as an offshoot of Georgian and early Victorian popular fiction. By enlisting some of their dramatic devices to flavour Jane Eyre's narration, Charlotte became not only a novelist and adapter, but also a keen-eyed literary innovator.

Conclusion

Reading popular fiction appears to have aided Charlotte Brontë in developing a novel so attractive to the influential circulating library readership that *Jane Eyre* received an enthusiastic reception even while it divided critics. Some aspects of the experience, such as catering to the public taste, left Charlotte slightly embittered and bewildered by the success of her venture. Reflecting on the difficulties experienced by such rural artists as herself during the creative process, she later reflected glumly in the 1850 preface, "if the result be attractive, the World will praise you, who little deserve praise; if it be repulsive, the same World will blame you, who almost as little deserve blame" (Brontë 1850: xiv). Charlotte had perhaps consciously sacrificed the artistic realism regretted by Lewes in his review to construct a plot as lurid and gripping as that of any Gothic or silver fork novel, but the resulting hybrid was lastingly fruitful. Contrasting the stylistically restrained manuscript of *The Professor* with *Jane Eyre* reveals the latter to be a far more evocative blend of social realism and electrifying romance. George Eliot's famous denunciation of "Silly Novels by Lady Novelists" (1856)

faults the silver fork novel for its failure to “rarely introduce us into any other than very lofty and fashionable society” (443), but this criticism does not apply to the middle-class perspective of *Jane Eyre*. Certain aspects of Charlotte’s first published novel bear witness to her strong reaction against the sight of seductive aristocrats and easily cowed women encountered in *The Coquette* and *The M.D.’s Daughter*. Though unlawfully yearning for the embrace of a married gentleman, Charlotte’s vulnerable governess refuses either to relinquish her agency or yield to temptation, countering silver fork views of female moral weakness with unequivocal strength.

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