CHAPTER 1

Brontë or Bell? Identity as Barrier in the Works of Charlotte and Emily Brontë

Charlotte Brontë is widely acknowledged as being a champion of women’s rights within the patriarchal structures of early Victorian Britain.1 Her novels have at their heart the struggle of the single middle-class woman to assert her independence, exploring the limitations of the ‘feminine’ professions of governess or teacher. A discussion of the semiotics of textual, actual and perceived barriers will enable in-depth analysis of these limitations. Furthermore, the Lotmanian theory of the extra-text will be applied to Brontë’s use of her pseudonym, Currer Bell, by exploring how Brontë’s two distinct identities as woman and writer can be viewed as her own extra-textual barrier. To this end, it will be contended that this is manifested in the dichotomy of “Reason” versus “Feeling” which Lucy Snowe struggles with in Villette. For the purposes of this chapter, “Reason” – the expected social norm – is a role as wife and mother (“Charlotte Brontë”), and “Feeling” – the unconventional – is a role as an author (“Currer Bell”).2 The discussion of Brontë’s works will relate mainly to Jane Eyre and Villette, but examples from Shirley and The Professor will also be included.

In contrast, it might be argued that Emily Brontë is less restricted by this extra-textual barrier. As she never married, Emily did not have the same issues with identity conflict as Charlotte; she had only to be Ellis Bell the writer. Therefore, the aim of this chapter is to consider how this is revealed in her only novel, Wuthering Heights, by again exploring the semiotics of barriers. It will also be argued that one of the main reasons that the novel seems to defy convention and is notoriously difficult to ‘place’ lies within Emily’s confidence in her one assigned role as writer.

First of all, I will consider the context within which the Brontës were writing, and how aspects of the Woman Question are discernible in their works.

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2 Of course, these concepts may, in the more conventional sense, be applied the other way round; “Reason” would be identified with a career-focused woman writer, and “Feeling” would be concerned with the traditionally ‘feminine’ domain of motherhood.
The impact of their troubled family life upon their writing, particularly Charlotte’s, will then be explored. The Elizabeth Gaskell biography, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), will also be deemed to be an extra-textual barrier, in the sense that it is said to have “single-handedly contributed to the ‘Brontë Myth’”,3 a term widely used by critics to define the notion that the Brontës were somehow uncultivated and cut off from society.4

**The Brontës and the Woman Question**

The late 1840s saw political unrest and revolutions throughout Europe, and it is within this context that Charlotte and Emily Brontë were engaged in most of their work on their novels. Writing in the Quarterly Review in December 1848, Elizabeth Rigby made the connection between *Jane Eyre* and the political situation, noting that the “tone of mind and thought which has overthrown authority and violated every code human and divine abroad, and fostered Chartism and rebellion at home, is the same which has written *Jane Eyre*”.5 Ever since its publication, the novel has been viewed as a groundbreaking text, one which challenges notions about what role a woman should play, and it is therefore a vital text when considering the Woman Question within English literature (as indeed are all of Charlotte Brontë’s novels).

Caroline Helstone in *Shirley* directly voices the fundamental concern regarding the Woman Question when she asks: “What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?”6 The question of what position a woman should hold in society is a recurring theme in Brontë’s fiction. The first and main option open to women at this time was, of course, to be a wife and mother. Because of this expectation, there was a genuine fear of becoming an ‘old maid’; as Caroline herself comments, “the matrimonial market is overstocked” (293). Indeed, in 1850, women outnumbered men in England by 360,000 (9.14m and 8.78m), and thirty percent of women over the age of twenty

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4 The fact that relatively little is known about their lives, Emily’s in particular, has also contributed to this.
6 Brontë, Charlotte, *Shirley*, London: Wordsworth Classics, 1993, 133. All subsequent references to *Shirley* will be to this edition. Page numbers for this work, and for all other subsequent primary texts (once the first reference has been given) will be cited in the main text, in parentheses.