Charlotte Brontë: The Female Struggle for Recognition

Margaret Hulmes
Lancaster University, UK

Abstract

This paper traces the attempt of Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) to achieve recognition as a woman author in nineteenth century England. Drawing extensively on Brontë's own works, which are read as a form of self/life writing, it advocates a theory of situated authorship and posits permeable boundaries between the genres of autobiography and fiction. It claims that in her writings from childhood onwards, Charlotte Brontë displayed a fragmented and conflicted subjectivity, constructing herself in the role of Romantic creative genius, regardless of gender, and struggling against contemporary social and religious constraints on women's role in society. The paper analyses Brontë's view of genius, noting her fierce ambition, her religious scruples, her dutiful attempts to construct herself as a teacher and the reasons for her eventual success as an author from a feminist perspective, it affirms that writing offers a means of self-creation for a woman marginalized in a patriarchal society. It contends that Charlotte Brontë finally gained recognition as an author through exploiting the creative potential of her own lived experience and speaking in the voice of a female protagonist in Jane Eyre.

Key words

Author, gender, identity, genius, patriarchy

Introduction

This paper examines the process through which Charlotte Brontë (1816-1855) constructed herself as a woman author in the masculine post Romantic culture of early Victorian England, showing how she eventually achieved recognition despite the rigorous gender constraints imposed on middle class women in that period. The investigation is situated at the interface between Charlotte Brontë's imaginative writing and the records of her lived experience and charts her progression from

juvenile fantasist to the pseudonymous novelist Currer Bell. It affirms that her own creative writings, from childhood onwards, form a self-life narrative that charts the development of her remarkably original imaginative world. It also examines her implicit claim to possess 'genius' which was then widely regarded as a masculine quality.

'Self-life narrative' is defined as "a wide-ranging term for exploring diverse modes around the autobiographical" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 9), while the reading of Brontë's writings in various different genres as self-constitutive is supported by the observation of Smith and Watson that 'many writers take the liberties of the novelistic mode in order to mine their own struggles with the past'. This process will then "illuminate the processes of identity formation through a subjectively rendered consciousness" (Smith & Watson, 2001, p. 197).

Smith and Watson (2001) also note that those telling their own life stories often write simultaneously from externalised and internal points of view, confronting 'not one life but two' if they make use of the multiple 'I', denoting both the narrator and the subject of the narrative, this may lead to the construction of a divided, even conflicted subjectivity. In Charlotte Brontë's early writings a complex identity emerges; the narrating 'I' is used self-referentially by Charlotte herself, posing as arbiter of events in the powerful role of the Genius Tallii, but also by different journalistic characters such as Charles Townshend and Captain Tree, who narrate events in the fictional world of Angria from differing masculine perspectives. It is noteworthy that there is no female first person narrator.

The Romantic Inheritance

Adopting a historically situated and contextual approach to authorship and text, the critic Carol Bock (2002) has noted that the young Brontës' collaborative early writings constitute a 'stunning representation of the [literary] culture of their times'. As the children began to write in the decade following Byron's death in 1825, it is clear that the Romantic ideology of authorship dominated their conception of the writer as an inspired genius, baring his soul to the world. As she attempted to construct herself as a female author following in this admired masculine tradition, Charlotte faced serious cultural and social constraints.

At this point it is necessary to enquire how the Romantic conception of the writer as an originating consciousness may be reinterpreted in a poststructuralist age, when, for many critics an author is seen as merely a cultural construct, "a variable and complex function of discourse" (Hawthorn, 2000, p. 239). Yet Sean Burke (1992) has argued strongly that the human should be 'installed' within the subject, advocating 'the retracing of the work to its author and to its historical, cultural and political 'embeddedness' as this may provide further insights into the writer's self-construction (Weedon, 1987) has also emphasised the importance of recognising and allowing for the historical, often patriarchal, linguistic context of female writing. It is relevant, therefore, to acknowledge the importance of the Romantic ideology of 'genius' while tracing the development of Charlotte Brontë's subjectivity through the varied texts and voices comprising the children's fictional worlds of Glass Town and Angria. There is, in my view, a place for a study of authors in feminist writing, provided that the discursive nature of authorial identity is acknowledged. Such a study offers insights into the problematic subjectivity of women writers seeking recognition in a male dominated public sphere.

Furthermore, in considering Charlotte Brontë's self-construction as author, I argue that there is no full self-present subject in her writing but a site of fragmented subjectivity, involving collaborative enactment of different fictional roles. In her writing she is engaged in what Felski, (1989) refers to as a 'quest for self'. Her work is not merely the compulsive expression of a God-given literary talent, as Charlotte herself was inclined to express it, but a process of self-creation. Felski comments further:

> Writing should be grasped in this context as a social practice, which *creates* meaning rather than simply communicating it; feminist literature does not reveal an already given female identity but is itself involved in the construction of the self as a cultural reality (original emphasis) (Felski, 1989).

It is this process of Charlotte Brontë's endeavour to construct herself as a writer of genius, despite the contemporary masculine construction of that concept that will be traced in her writing.

The Early Writings

Charlotte Brontë's earliest surviving works date from the age of twelve and make clear that through collaborative and inventive play with her siblings, she was preparing herself for a future as a published writer. As she recalled later, "her highest stimulus, as well as the liveliest pleasure...from childhood upwards, lay in attempts at literary composition" (Smith, 2000, p. 742). The children were voracious readers and imitators of *Blackwood's Magazine*; several fictional writers were invented to enact different modes of authorship in their own *Young Men's Magazine*. Charlotte created three 'authors' who allowed her to explore different voices, attitudes and relationships; the satirical gossip writer Lord Charles Wellesley despised the popular novelist Captain Tree, and scoffed at the Byronic Marquis of Douro.

The central importance of these fictional authors in their fantasy world reflects the children's professional approach to their creative play, as Carol Bock (2002) has noted. Many of the narratives in the juvenilia show precocious awareness of "the problems of authorship, professional recognition and earning a living". Charlotte's account of 'The History of the Year' dated March 1829 catalogues the newspapers read at the Parsonage, lists the pseudonyms of the real life contributors to *Blackwood's* and introduces an account of the siblings' collaborative plays, presenting them as a collective literary enterprise that provided the basis for their Glass Town saga, based in their fictional realm in West Africa. For this enterprise, the children, posing as manipulators of destiny, adopted the roles of the 'Genii', Tallii, Brannii, Emmii and Annii to dominate events.

Through Charlotte's accounts of these collaborative fantasy writings, the reader becomes aware of her single-minded construction of herself as a creative artist, aspiring for recognition from her siblings and, ambitiously, from a wider audience. She took pride in the speed and prolixity of her writing as is shown in the 'Catalogue of my Books completed August 3, 1830'. As she proudly noted, adding her on signature, her works comprised 'in the whole 22 volumes', completed in less than sixteen months. The creation of the four Chief Genii, Tallii, Brannii, Emmii and Annii, not only emphasised the children's close cooperation in authorship, but also represented them as significant embodiments of

agency, with both creative and destructive powers. At this stage the genii were presented as superior beings whose gender was irrelevant. The word 'genius' also carried flattering connotations of unusual intellectual ability. Fictional 'genii' were familiar to the children in two forms, either as the spirits summoned by protagonists in the *Arabian Nights* or as the dominant creatures in *Tales of the Genii,* a popular children's book by the Reverend James Ridley, in which the Biblical imagery of Revelation emphasised their cosmic power.

The Genii created by the young Brontës resemble Ridley's controlling figures rather than the subservient genii in *The Arabian Nights*: they have specific names, act as guardians to chosen individuals and exercise power on their own initiative. They are capable of spectacular acts of creation and destruction: their dazzling bejewelled palaces arise in moments, but their thunderous voices instil terror into their hearers and their potential for evil as well as good is made clear; in Charlotte's account of 'The Travels of Captain Parnell' they appear as sinister skeletons, chained in the African deserts by the fairy Maimoune. The Genii fictionally embodied the children's collaborative control over events in their fantasy realm of Glass Town in West Africa.

In January 1831 Charlotte was sent away as a boarding pupil at Roe Head School, This disrupted the children's collaboration for a year and when Charlotte returned to Haworth for Christmas, she insisted that their fictional world of Glass Town should be annihilated. The four collaborative Genii were disbanded, allowing Emily and Anne to continue working on their own world of Gondal, while Charlotte and Branwell combined to create their saga of Angria. In these tales of love, betrayal, conflict and revenge attention became focused on power-wielding, aristocratic human beings and their satirical observers rather than supernatural powers.

As Glass Town was eliminated, Charlotte equated the mythical Genii with the Biblical 'Angel of Death', in a poem that closely echoes Byron's 'The Destruction of Sennacherib':

> The secrets of genii my tongue may not tell
> But hoarsely they murmured, 'Bright city, farewell!
> Then melted away like a dream in the night
> While their palace evanished in oceans of light (Alexander, 1983, p.76)

Charlotte's renunciation of the Genii as active participants and controllers of the Glass Town saga allowed her to present the concept of 'genius' as a human quality, a unique personal endowment for gifted individuals. It is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'native intellectual ability of an exalted type; an extraordinary capacity for imaginative creation, original thought, invention or discovery'. The psychologist Ernest Becker has emphasized the desire of the aspiring genius to secure 'an eternal identity' through public recognition of their memorable achievements. Charlotte made such a desire explicit later in 1838 when she incautiously revealed to Robert Southey her ambition to be 'forever known' as a poet despite her female gender.

The destruction of Glass Town and the departure of the Genii was regarded by Fannie Ratchford (1964), as marking a positive and decisive moment in Charlotte's literary development. However, as her view of genius evolved, she embraced the cult of the Byronic poetic hero even more fervently, while Branwell too succumbed to this idolatry, with unfortunate results.

In 1830 Charlotte introduced characters possessing literary genius into her narratives. The first was the young Marquis of Douro, known as Albion, whose poetic inspiration revealed to him 'the astonishing faculties of his own mind', when 'a longing for immortality, an ambition of glory, seized him'. Young Ernest Fitzarthur, Douro's son, was said to inherit his father's gift. The narrator comments: 'Reading, books, are the very delight and end of his existence. ... The sublime poetry, the simple historical narrative of the Bible fascinated him at the very first (Alexander, 1983, p. 19). Douro and his son are cast in the same mould as their fantasising creator, exhibiting Charlotte's preoccupation with genius. Although in her writing the outright possession of genius is limited to men and boys Charlotte makes no admission that it is a gendered concept.

In following the predominantly masculine Romantic literary tradition, dominated by the Byronic myth, and in her admiration for her martial hero, the Duke of Wellington, Charlotte complied with the patriarchal nature of early nineteenth century culture. As noted earlier her professional authors are all men, with the Marquis of Douro (later Zamorna), and his brother, Lord Charles Wellesley (later Charles Townshend) dominating the narratives. Her collaboration with Branwell

reinforced this masculine tendency. In their saga of the kingdom of Angria that replaced Glass Town, Branwell formulated the plot, based largely on the conflict between Charlotte's hero, Zamorna, and Branwell's alter ego, the saturnine Northangerland. Women took little part in such stirring events, but were included as foils to the men; in describing the domestic upheavals resulting from war, and the effects of separation on Zamorna's devoted women, Charlotte exercised her dramatic skills and explored different versions of feminine subjectivity.

Fictional Heroines

At this stage, Charlotte's heroines are all beautiful and nearly all are of noble birth. Although they differ in character and style of beauty, they have in common their devotion to Zamorna, their capacity for suffering and their conscious realisation of their enslavement. However, the spirited Zenobia Ellrington has scholarly interests to console her for unrequited love. She illustrates the dilemma facing a highly intelligent woman desiring recognition for her talent but the reaction of the aristocratic men in her circle makes it clear that genius is not considered a desirable female attribute.

In 'Visits to Verreopolis', the learned and beautiful Zenobia is compared with magnificent swan; however, but the Duke of Wellington argues that swans are elegant only in water, their proper sphere, whereas they can only 'waddle in ungainly fashion' on land. By analogy, "the proper and native element for a woman is home" (Alexander, 1987, pp. 313-314). The bluff Colonel Grenville agrees, declaring he would hate to discover, on returning home, that his table was "heaped with books and papers instead of a good, hot smoking dinner" (Alexander, 1987, p. 314). Zenobia, who, in frustration, had kicked the intrusive Lord Charles downstairs, is partially excused as a hysterical female whose learning has led to a lack of mental balance. The classic arguments against blue-stockings are humorously paraded here. The frustrations of a gifted woman, unable to exercise her talents fully in a patriarchal society, could not be more explicitly addressed, though, ironically, in this case Zenobia's fury was roused not by frustrated ambition, but by sexual jealousy. Her superior intellect does not protect her from the perceived emotional weakness of her sex.

Satire of this nature indicates Charlotte's growing awareness of the difficulties facing an aspiring woman author seeking entry to a predominantly masculine print culture dominated by the Romantic tradition of self-revelation exploited in Byron's 'Childe Harold'. Such an approach was unthinkable for a respectable female writer of the period, when women were sheltered from the sordid and disreputable aspects of life. As noted earlier, Charlotte's creation of masculine writers, whose pseudonyms she adopts in order to write more freely in the first person, bypasses the problem of gender identity; it suggests her willingness to make a partial accommodation to the patriarchal status quo, which she is powerless to change.

As 'the infernal world' of fantasy and the figure of Zamorna came to dominate Charlotte's imagination the merging of fantasy and reality, accepted as entirely natural in the children's collaborative writing, became problematic. In 1835 as she approached adulthood, preparing, in Branwell's words 'to push out into the world', practical possibilities for earning their living needed to be considered. Two important questions had to be answered, which put Charlotte's long held authorial ambitions to the test. Were her sources of inspiration still fresh? Even if they still flowed freely, could she, as a woman *realistically* consider authorship as a career? It was in this context that Charlotte wrote the poem since named 'Retrospection' in which she voiced her doubts and hopes about her future as a writer. Reviewing her prospects in the Christmas holidays of 1835, after she had returned to Roe Head as a teacher, Charlotte rejoiced that her creative imagination, the main emotional consolation her life afforded at school, was as active as ever. In 'Retrospection' she writes:

> We wove a web in childhood
> A web of sunny air
> We dug a spring in infancy;
> Of water pure and fair
>
> We sowed in youth a mustard seed
> We cut an almond rod
> We are now grown up to riper age
> Has it withered in the sod? (Alexander, 1987, p. 419)

She replies in robustly Romantic style that the web has spread over the sky in rich crimson folds and that the 'spring' of inspiration is no longer hidden by a mossy stone but has spread into "an ocean with a thousand isles/ and scarce a glimpse of shore" (Alexander, 1987, p. 419). The almond rod and the mustard seed have grown and still flourish in different lands. Through the use of Biblical tropes of abundant life, Charlotte implies that her creative powers are undiminished and have a divine source. Yet the hyperbole in this imagery shows a tentative unease about the uncontrollable nature of this enriched fantasy world. Later in the poem she writes about her desire to bow before these 'godlike creatures' of her imagination, an admission that Charlotte sees fantasy as a solitary escapist indulgence that she can no longer fully control. This prepares the reader for the revelation of Zamorna as an 'idol' in the outpourings of her secretive Roe Head Journal.

In 1835, as she faced adult responsibilities that required her to combine the role of would be author with that of school mistress, she confronted the problem of a divided and problematic subjectivity. Questions arose in three main areas: Firstly, as she implicitly enquired in 'Retrospection', did she possess genius? If so, how was it to be fostered while she was earning earn her living as a teacher? Furthermore, how was she to conform to the socially accepted conventions of nineteenth century womanhood and still exercise her compulsion to write? Finally, was this compulsion, arising from her unrestrained fantasies about the god-like Zamorna, sinful in itself?

These questions relate to three themes that emerge repeatedly in Charlotte Brontë's subsequent writings, as she sought persistently to construct herself as a professional woman author; they are the constraints of femininity, the nature of genius, and the implications of religious faith. In the following sections they are traced through her fictional writing, her poems, essays and letters until they are at least partially resolved with the success of *Jane Eyre*.

The Roe Head Journal

The problems that confronted Charlotte Brontë when she took up her teaching post at Roe Head School, where she had previously been happy as a pupil, threatened her self-construction as a female author.

In her Roe Head Journal, a series of manuscripts hastily scribbled in minute writing on scraps of paper, Charlotte presents teaching and writing as incompatible conflicting activities, which she sometimes attempted to combine by writing in class with her eyes shut, arousing her students' fascinated curiosity. It was no longer possible, as at home, to merge the imaginary with the 'real'. Crossing the boundary into the 'infernal world' became an act of resistance to being cast in the uncongenial role of teacher, when she was constructing herself in the role of potential literary genius, clamouring to exercise her talents. The conflicting nature of her subjectivity is revealed in the journal fragments and in her correspondence, illustrating the development and frustration of her authorial ambitions.

On returning to Roe Head School as teacher in 1835 Charlotte suffered from home sickness, despite the kindness of her head mistress. Margaret Wooler. Overcome with longing for escape she describes how she is transported, in her daydreams, to a 'lonesome waste' that is the site of a former battle in Angria:

> Never shall I, Charlotte Brontë, forget what a voice of wild and wailing music now came thrillingly to my mind's, almost to my body's, ear; nor how distinctly I, sitting in the schoolroom at Roe Head, saw the Duke of Zamorna leaning against the obelisk, ... with the fern waving at his feet, his black horse turned loose grazing among the heather, the moonlight so mild and so exquisitely tranquil, sleeping upon that vast and vacant road, and the African sky quivering and shaking with stars ... I was quite gone. I had really utterly forgot where I was and all the gloom and cheerlessness of my situation. I felt myself breathing quick and short as I beheld the Duke lifting up his sable crest. ...
> 'Miss Brontë, what are you thinking about?' said a voice that dissipated all charm, and Miss Lister thrust her little, rough black head into my face! (Alexander, 1987, pp. 424-425).

This fragment follows on from the poem 'Retrospection' and clearly indicates the intensity of her inspiration. It is framed autobiographically by the strong assertion of her personal identity: 'I, Charlotte Brontë' is emphatically constructed as both the narrating and the narrated 'I', participating fully in this never to be forgotten visionary experience. She

presents herself here both as an inspired artist, and as enthralled spectator, totally absorbed in the happenings of her imagined world, and clearly subject to Zamorna's erotic magnetism, even though she is his creator. Emphasising the physical nature of this manifestation, she locates it firmly in the prosaic world of the schoolroom and claims to recall actual sense experiences; she actually 'saw' he hero and the music, she asserts, 'came thrillingly to my mind's, almost to my body's ear' while she finds herself breathing 'quick and short'. Commenting on her experience 'Miss Brontë' records the bathos of Miss Lister's intervention at this sublime moment with ironic understatement, modifying her resentment with a touch of philosophical humour.

In the fragment quoted above, Zamorna, as charismatic warrior, Byronic poet and serial adulterer is shown to exercise an explicitly erotic fascination over his creator. At about this time, Charlotte penned a fervid confession of her adoration, describing Zamorna, as a 'mental king' who 'holds a lofty burning lamp to me'. She credited him with inspiring her poetry and concluded:

> He's not the temple but the god,
> The idol in his marble shrine:
> Our grand dream in his wide abode
> And there for me he dwells divine (Alexander, 1987, p. 418)

The writer is clear that worshiping this erotic embodiment of inspiration, the symbol of 'the shared grand dream' amounts to idolatry but how can she reject a figure she sees as the major source of her creative inspiration? Yet Charlotte was soon to realise that her 'idolatry' of this flawed Romantic hero might be an emotional enslavement that was sinful and morally debasing in Christian terms.

It is crucial to recognise that while she taught at Roe Head, Charlotte saw her fantasy life as akin to an alternative form of religion, which she could not relinquish. It had become a compulsion, on one level deeply satisfying, but also frightening in its hallucinatory intensity. Her duties as a respectable schoolmistress, sanctioned by conscience and society, were perceived as an unbearable constraint by the rebellious fantasist within. Her devotion to Zamorna was absolute in 1836, and her commitment to him, as essential for the maintenance of her creative inner

life, was defiant. For her he had become a source of inspiration, a form of 'masculine muse', as suggested by Margaret Homans (1980).

Charlotte's Romantic view of poetic inspiration helped her to feel that she had, in Miltonic terms, 'that one talent that 'tis death to hide'; nevertheless in letters to her friend Ellen Nussey about this time, she articulated guilt and anxiety about her addiction to the fervid dreams of her fantasy world and Zamorna, fearing that her obsession conflicted with conventional ideals of womanly Christian duty.

Disquieting Visions

One disturbing occasion illustrated the dominating power of her fantasy life. After a frustrating time in the school room, Charlotte, released at last, describes how she lay down on the spare bed in the dormitory to enjoy 'the luxury of twilight and solitude', entranced by what seemed at first to be a 'strange' but 'very pleasing' spell. She compared the effect with that of opium, as what she imagined 'grew morbidly vivid', and she no longer felt in control of her imagination. Realising that her pupils have entered the dormitory, she is overcome with panic:

> At last I became aware of a feeling like a heavy weight laid across me. I knew I was wide awake and it was dark. ... They [the ladies] perceived me lying on the bed and I heard them talking about me. I wanted to speak - to rise - it was impossible - I felt that this was a frightful predicament – that it would not do. A horrid apprehension quickened every pulse I had. I must get up I thought and I did so with a start. I have had enough of morbidly vivid realisations. Every advantage has its corresponding disadvantage. Tea's ready. Miss Wooler is impatient (Alexander, 1987, pp. 415-416).

The immediacy of this fragment, with its disjointed statements, and hasty conclusion enables the reader to experience vicariously the emotional shock felt by Charlotte Brontë, the teacher, made suddenly and guiltily aware of social duties and expectations: 'I felt ... that it would not do.' The panic is still vividly in her mind as she writes, while the introduction of the authoritative figure of Miss Wooler and the prosaic mention of tea marks her hasty reorientation into her feminine everyday

world. In this scene, Charlotte's visionary power is no longer a source of wonder but a gift that may cause social inconvenience, embarrassment, and a frightening loss of control. It was now necessary for her to resist the domination of the 'infernal world if she was to retain some control over her own creativity and maintain her social respectability as a teacher. Yet, while she became aware of the problems, she continued to rejoice in her imaginative power and its consolations:

> How few would believe that from sources purely imaginary such happiness could be derived. ... What a treasure is thought! What a privilege is reverie. ... I am thankful that I have the power of solacing myself with the dreams of creation whose reality I shall never behold. ... May I never lose that power, may I never feel it growing weaker. ... If I should how little pleasure would life afford me. ... the lapses of shade are so wide, so gloomy, its gleams of light so limited and dim (Alexander, 1987, p. 414).

Here we see Charlotte determined to sustain an authorial identity through her secret writings, despite her pedagogic frustrations. From these fragments it becomes clear that writing, the creative exploration of her fantasy world, was Charlotte Bronte's main preoccupation, which provided the motive power of her existence. Her efforts to reconstruct herself as a teacher, both at Roe Head and, later, in Brussels proved unavailing as a result. In this remarkable record her consciousness spans two diverse worlds, that of daily reality and the seductive realm of imagination, but the bridge is stretched over a psychic gap that threatens to engulf her. By the end of 1838, worn down by the struggle to conform to social expectations, Charlotte Brontë was granted the freedom to return home and the opportunity to write without restraint.

The Correspondence with Robert Southey

During Charlotte's time at Roe Head she and Branwell had continued to collaborate on the Angrian saga to test out the possibilities of future professional success. Branwell had sent a sample of his work to Wordsworth but there was no reply. In March 1837 Charlotte approached the Poet Laureate, Robert Southey, and received a letter that

influenced her greatly. Judging from Southey's comments, Charlotte had written in Romantic vein, possibly including a long Byronic poem in the metre of 'Don Juan' and a 'visionary' verse of three stanzas. She had confessed her ambition to be 'forever known' as a poet, but despite this extravagant claim, she was trying to come to terms with reality and to discover, in Branwell's phrase, whether she should 'write on or write no more.'

One sentence in Southey's reply has become notorious; this is the oft quoted statement, 'Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life and it ought not to be.' He claimed that in writing this response he was administering a 'dose of cooling admonition' that would be for his correspondent's ultimate benefit. Importantly, though, Southey conceded that Charlotte had talent; as she displayed 'the faculty of verse', he encouraged her to write for pleasure rather than for profit or publication. He appeared to understand the nature of her imaginative gifts, and reinforced Charlotte's own doubts about the morbidity of her imagination when he wrote:

> The daydreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind and, in proportion as "all the ordinary uses of the world" seem to you "flat and unprofitable" you will be unfitted for them, without becoming fitted for anything else (Smith, 1995, p. 167).

It appears that Charlotte Brontë recognised Southey's good faith and made a positive response. In a second letter, thanking him, she attempted again to construct herself conventionally as a teacher and a respectable parson's daughter, claiming not to be 'the idle, dreaming being,' she must have seemed'. It is clear, however, that at first Charlotte regarded Southey's verdict as the death knell to her hopes of ever publishing her work. On the envelope of his letter she wrote, 'Southey's Advice. To be kept for ever/ Roe - Head April 21/ my 21st birthday 1837' and inscribed the name of the tragic muse 'Melpomone' above his name, dramatising its crushing impact on her ambitions. Her dutiful attempt to accept Southey's advice shows Charlotte's uncritical submission to patriarchal opinion, despite any rebellious instincts.

But despite her initial dismay, the long- term effect of the corre-

spondence was to encourage her to further creative efforts because her talent had been recognised and approved; she was not deprived of the 'single, absorbing, exquisite gratification' of writing 'poetry for its own sake. Much later, Charlotte commented to Elizabeth Gaskell 'Mr. Southey's letter was kind and admirable; a little stringent but it did me good'. Viewed in its entirety, then, Southey's 'dose of cooling admonition' may be regarded as a constructive response, which was, in his own words, 'well taken' at the time, though it did not lead Charlotte ultimately to forfeit her ambition. His response showed Charlotte that the Byronic poetic hero was a figment of her overheated imagination, warned her of the need to distinguish clearly between her fantasy world of the imagination and the restrictions and vicissitudes of real life, in which he included the necessary constraints of Victorian womanhood.

Religious Conflict

Charlotte's faith in the compatibility of her creative imagination with religious commitment had become difficult to sustain at Roe Head. In her Journal entry of 4 February 1836, she describes her 'strange' failure to find satisfaction in teaching, though she performs her duties 'strictly and well' because she must. Doubts arose about her Christian duty and her fitness for salvation. Should she be employing her gift in describing scenes of conflict and decadence that contrasted so violently with her religiously sanctioned teaching duties and her Evangelical upbringing? Why were the visions granted to her so powerfully disturbing? What would others think if they knew?

She turned to the devoutly unquestioning Ellen Nussey for spiritual consolation, fearing that her visions of the dissolute 'infernal world', which she could not fully reveal, would lead to her ultimate damnation. On 10 May 1836 she writes:

> Don't deceive yourself by imagining that I have a bit of real goodness about me. My Darling, if I were like you I should have my face Zion-ward. ... but I am not like you. If you knew my thoughts; the dreams that absorb me; and the fiery imagination that at times eats me up, you would pity and I dare say despise me. But Ellen, I know the treasures of the Bible I love and adore them I can see the Well of Life in all

> its clearness and brightness. ... I have written like a fool. [as a postscript] Come and see me soon, don't think me mad. ... this is a silly letter (Smith, 1995, p. 144).

In this letter Charlotte clearly distinguishes the 'spring' of creative inspiration from the Christian 'Well of Life', a trope of salvation that Charlotte now feels is unavailable to her. The association of her imagination with consuming fire reinforces the suggestion of the hellish torment that she fears after death because she is unable to wholeheartedly relinquish her devotion to the 'gods' of her alternative 'religion'. The evangelical Christianity, in which she believed, required an admission of sin, a sincere repentance, recognition of Christ's saving grace for all mankind and a personal acceptance of his redeeming love. In a further letter to Ellen in the autumn of 1836, Charlotte shows she is unable to respond to the Christian message with heartfelt repentance and reveals the spiritual torments of her conflicted subjectivity:

> I keep trying to do right, checking wrong feelings, repressing wrong thoughts – but still – every instant - I find myself going astray - I have a constant tendency to scorn people who are far better than I am I feel an irksome disgust at the idea of using a single phrase that sounds like religious cant – I abhor myself – I despise myself - if the doctrine of Calvin be true I am already an outcast. ... You cannot imagine how hard, rebellious and intractable all my feelings are (Smith, 1995, p. 143).

Despite her fear of eternal damnation, Charlotte seized on Southey's permission to write for pleasure and continued to produce both prose and verse; unlike Branwell, she rarely adopted the pose of the outcast reprobate. Instead she attempted to undercut the appeal of Zamorna, by portraying the passion and anguish of his neglected women, whose suffering was the result of excessive adoration, as was her own. By 1839, a year after her departure from Roe Head, she was ready to write 'Farewell to Angria', which articulated her difficult resolution to 'quit the burning clime where we have sojourned too long' and to 'turn to a cooler region where the dawn breaks grey and sober.'

This was a lengthy and difficult process, but from 1837 onwards a more restrained approach to her creativity was an essential element in resolving Charlotte's spiritual conflict; she subjected the behaviour of her 'mental king' to moral scrutiny, presenting him as an erring Christian, Reed Davis (1982) suggests part of the solution of Charlotte's spiritual dilemma lay in the control she began to exert over her visionary sources of inspiration. He writes: She ultimately resolved the conflict by abandoning the amoral 'Byronism' of her youthful stories and forging a moral aesthetic compatible with her evangelical faith.

This solution was not permanent, as the 'infernal world' still haunted Charlotte's imagination in times of stress. The development of a more restrained moral aesthetic followed Charlotte's final departure from Roe Head after a near breakdown in 1838. She had time to develop a different creative approach when re-established in the role of amateur writer at home and she found release from her spiritual dilemma through embracing a theology that was the reverse of the Calvinistic belief in hell. Ultimately both Charlotte and her sister Anne espoused an unorthodox doctrine of universal salvation, later articulated in *Jane Eyre* by Helen Burns and by Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.*

During her years at Roe Head, Charlotte Brontë was partially successful in constructing herself as a teacher rather than as a writer but at considerable emotional cost. The enforced restraint of her creativity at first seemed to intensify the power of her visual imagination when she had time to indulge her desire to write, and led to outbursts of desperate frustration when her school duties prevented her from doing so. While she remained convinced that she had a creative gift that clamoured for expression, she was able to slowly modify her belief in the Romantic view of the writer as a divinely inspired genius and to satirise, even condemn, the excesses of her Byronic hero, Zamorna. As her collaboration with Branwell lessened, she examined the constraints of gender and the perils of romantic infatuation by creating heroines through whom she could directly explore aspects of her own subjectivity by articulating their devotion and distress. In this way she overcame her religious anxieties, not only through re-appraising her Christian beliefs but also through a gradual modification of the compensatory fantasies that had inspired her earlier writings.

The Novelettes

It has been shown that Charlotte Brontë's early writings constitute a complex web of competing discourses and sites of inner conflict, intensified by guilt at the thrill of indulgence the 'infernal world' of her imagination and her idolatrous devotion to the sinful Zamorna. The advice of Southey and her own religious scruples made the reappraisal of her authorial role urgently necessary. Christine Battersby (1989) has trenchantly summed up the dilemma facing Charlotte at this time: A woman who created was faced with a double bind; either to surrender her sexuality (becoming not *masculine* but a surrogate *male*) or else to be feminine and female and not count as a genius. By choosing to use Charles Townshend and other male characters as first person masculine narrators, Charlotte had adopted role of 'surrogate male', while implying in 'Retrospection' that 'genius' was not a gendered concept. She now had to develop a different narrative persona, realising that to achieve public recognition as a writer she must discipline her Angrian fantasies in a conscious move towards domestic realism, as a more socially acceptable mode.

After her departure from Roe Head in 1838, she had more leisure to embark on a series of prose novelettes that marked a gradual progression towards realism. For Charlotte Brontë at this time, 'realism' involved a process of adjustment to conventional social norms, a movement away from sensationalism to narratives with a more explicitly moral dimension, based on everyday experience. In her first novelette, *Passing Events* (1836), still using Charles Townshend as narrator, she expressed disgust at the callous and dissolute behaviour of her idolised Zamorna, but she found his pervasive influence difficult to shake off. While modifying her presentation of Angrian scenes and creating more realistic environments and situations, she still retained the Romantic emphasis on authorial subjectivity as a key element in her work, in a bid to explore alternative constructions of herself as writer and teacher.

This process is particularly apparent in her creation of Elizabeth Hastings, a heroine in Charlotte's own mould, who may be seen as a precursor of Jane Eyre. Despite limited opportunities and an unremarkable appearance Elizabeth ran a successful school and lived independently, quietly offering courageous support to her renegade broth-

er at a time of crisis. Having emphasised Zamorna's limitations as husband and lover, Charlotte created an independent heroine who did not rely on romantic relationships for maintenance and support.

In *Captain Henry Hastings* the resonant theme of unfulfilled ambitions and wasted opportunities is explored, mirroring the Brontë family's concern over Branwell's future prospects and his sisters' need for employment. The dilemmas explored in the novelettes are increasingly concerned with the challenges of daily living, rather than with the fulfilment of dreams. While Branwell's writing in the Angrian saga remains in Byronic mode, Charlotte increasingly satirises Zamorna's behaviour as a Romantic hero, writing in a more realistic style, with increasing emphasis on a moral aesthetic as she assesses the worth of her characters in the light of her Christian convictions.

However, when hastily concluding 'Mina Laury' on 17 January 1838, Charlotte enacts the feminine weakness her heroines display; having exposed Zamorna to moral criticism, she appears dissatisfied with her work and brings it to an abrupt conclusion Identifying herself by her signature as the originator of the text, she adds an apologetic postscript: For a long space of time, Goodbye Reader – I have done my best to please you - and though I know through Feebleness, Dullness and Iteration my work terminates rather in Failure [than] triumph – yet you are bound to forgive, for I have done my best (Gerin, 1971, p. 169).

It appears that at this point the undermining of Zamorna as Romantic hero and the presentation of his infatuated devotees became painful to Charlotte, and that its relevance to her own emotional situation posed an obstacle to her creativity, which she did not think would be easily overcome. Though Elizabeth Hastings, the teacher, could resist the lure of illicit passion, Charlotte Brontë, the writer, was still, to some extent, in thrall to the Byronic hero.

Through the novelettes, Charlotte Brontë modifies her view of inspirational genius recognising the need to discipline the uninhibited expression of her visionary inspiration if she is to write publishable works. In these prose tales, visionary encounters and sensational plots are gradually replaced by more coherent stories which display increasing psychological realism, as Charlotte draws on her own experience. Most importantly, through the later narratives, she is able to examine and clarify her own preoccupations and conflicts, questioning the nature of patri-

archal control over women's lives and assessing the moral worth of her heroes in accordance with the tenets of her religion.

In 1840 Charlotte sought advice about her from Hartley Coleridge who had made favourable comments on Branwell's translation of Horace. However, when Charlotte submitted a portion of her new novel *Ashworth* to Coleridge he was unimpressed, suggesting that her young male characters, Messrs. Percy and West were unlikely to make an impression on the heart of any Editor in Christendom. Charlotte's responded with ironic bravado, thanking him for his 'kind and candid letter' but no doubt relieved that she had simply signed herself with the initials C.T (Smith, 2000, p. 239). Possibly, Coleridge's candour was much more dispiriting than Southey's, as he did not appear to acknowledge her literary ability.

Charlotte's attempts to construct herself as a 'realistic' author had met with little success. She was no longer able to see herself purely as an inspired visionary, but the Angrian world that had been the source of her creative power was proving impossible to relinquish completely, and very difficult to transform. Her first attempt at a complete 'realistic' novel, *Ashworth,* was abandoned. Faced again with the prospect of earning a living, Charlotte and her sisters made plans to set up a school at home in Haworth. For the moment she must try again to reconstruct herself as a teacher.

The Belgian Essays

In 1840 Charlotte Brontë faced an impasse in her attempts to construct herself as a professional author. Having accepted Hartley Coleridge's verdict on her writing, she must again resort to teaching, the hope being that the three sisters could establish their own school together at home. In pursuing this project Charlotte and Emily travelled to Brussels in 1842 to improve their qualifications in French at the Pensionnat Heger. Through the stimulating tuition of M. Heger Charlotte not only acquired a sound knowledge of the language but developed critical skills and a more disciplined approach to writing than in her Angrian fantasies. Paradoxically, through a process undertaken as teacher training, Charlotte's aspirations to authorship were strengthened and the likelihood of future success was enhanced.

Confirming this view, Sue Lonoff (1989), has claimed that Charlotte Brontë's Belgian essays constitute a 'discourse of empowerment' that was 'crucially important to her development', as they provided disciplined writing opportunities, in which she could explore the issues relating to genius and identity that preoccupied her at the time. Under Heger's direction Charlotte modifies her view of the author as untutored genius, and progresses from powerful fantasy writing to more structured and coherent work in a different genre and literary tradition. Heger's tuition helped to liberate Charlotte from her addiction to Byronic Romanticism by introducing her to a different French tradition, including writers such as Chateaubriand who openly celebrated the virtues of Christianity as a religious philosophy and a guide to living. It must be noted, though, that Charlotte's creative discourse with Heger, through the devoirs he read and criticised, became more problematic 1843. Returning alone to Brussels for a second year, Charlotte undertook the role of English teacher, with predictable emotional effects, later rendered so powerfully in *Villette*. Her final devoirs paradoxically show the empowering influence of Heger's tuition in their content and structure, but as her unacknowledged devotion to her master grew more intense, they may also be read as records of disillusionment and cries for recognition.

An important consequence of Charlotte's study with Heger was that her writing, while still giving her intense pleasure, became a means of self-improvement rather than an escape from reality. In her essays, with patriarchal approval and encouragement, she was openly presenting herself in the role of author with Heger acting the role of enabler through his enthusiastic presentation of Romantic French literature. Writing undertaken in this context was of a very different order from the 'scribblemania' to which Charlotte had been addicted at Roe Head, when she confessed, 'I'm just going to write because I cannot help it.' Under Heger's direction, writing became a pleasurable duty, carried out with a socially acceptable purpose, in a recognised pedagogic tradition. Yet there are frequent references to inspirational authorship in the essays dealing with genius which show that Charlotte had not relinquished her hopes of success as a creative artist. In essays such as 'The aim of life' and 'Letter from a poor painter to a great Lord', she constructs characters that differ from the satirically presented 'authors' of the

juvenilia. She adopted the roles of a student and a painter; 'men of a serious and reflective nature' who must learn to face the world and test out their abilities in the public sphere. Indeed, the barely concealed question throughout several of her later essays is 'How can I know whether I possess genius?' In these literary offerings to Heger, Charlotte adopts the role of creative artist and the conscientious teacher in training is hidden from view.

Genius in the Belgian Essays

In Charlotte's essays 'genius' is used primarily in the two senses mentioned previously: firstly as 'native ability of exalted type', and secondly as 'one endowed with this ability'. The possibility of a female genius remains implicit in Charlotte's writing but she does not openly question the patriarchal nature of the concept. She adopts the Romantic view of genius as an internalized voice but also retains the idea of a divine influence from without (or beyond). A person who possesses this God-given talent therefore has a Christian duty to exercise it for the benefit of mankind, either as a creative artist or a leader of men who leaves a permanent imprint on history.

The essays that deal most directly with the genius as creative artist were written in 1843. In her response Millevoye's poignant lyric 'The Fall of the Leaves', Charlotte discussed the nature of poetic inspiration. The poem had been celebrated as a 'pearl' of an elegy in which the young poet's decline towards death was presented in harmony with the autumn season. In his comments on this devoir Heger accepted Charlotte's commitment to the ideal of the visionary writer but, challenging her excessive belief in the power of spontaneous inspiration, stressed the need for disciplined study of form. He states the argument for effort and study emphatically and succinctly, whether genius is possessed or not: 'Poet or not, then, study form. If a poet, you will be more powerful and your work will live. If not, you will not create poetry but you will savour its merits and its charms.' As with Southey's advice, the second option appears to be a consolatory offering, rather than a satisfactory solution.

Charlotte writes seriously and explicitly about creative ambition in her final devoir, 'A Letter from a Poor Painter to a Great Lord' (Lonoff,

1996, pp. 358-367). The young painter envisages a direct challenge from his patron about the nature of his talent and the grounds for his self-belief. He claims dogged persistence in the face of adversity, a love of art that has triumphed over discouragement and, finally, the possession of 'Genius'. This catalogue of qualities seems particularly appropriate to Charlotte herself. Here she appears to be asking indirectly, in masculine disguise, for recognition of her talents as a basis for a career as a professional author, hoping to cast aside her socially constructed role as a teacher. Through his failure to recognize or respond to this appeal, Heger enacted a repetition of Southey's earlier patriarchal discouragement, implying that Charlotte's considerable talents should not be devoted to writing but to her work as a teacher. Charlotte's attempt to construct a convincing artistic persona remained tentative; while she had learned how to combine a disciplined writing technique with the ardent sensibility of Romanticism, she had yet to confront its masculine construction of the author.

Conclusion: The Creation of Currer Bell

Charlotte's vision of Genius demanded faith in her possession of a divine gift and determination to develop it to the full regardless of gender but when she returned to Haworth at the beginning of 1844, she dutifully intended to become a schoolmistress again, with her sisters. In fact the school did not materialise, as no pupils were to be found. In the absence of a demanding occupation Charlotte had to display a different aspect of genius, persistence in adversity. She struggled to maintain faith in her own talent while fighting crushing depression at her separation from M. Heger, for whom she had developed an obsessive devotion.

Charlotte's self construction as Currer Bell came about not only through her own resolve but through the support and influence of her sisters. Her discovery of Emily's powerful verses prompted, after some resistance, the publication of a volume of poetry by all three sisters and raised again the difficulty of presenting themselves as female writers and being judged accordingly. Arguably, it was the resumption of the collaborative writing of their childhood that led to the success of the 'Bells' They resorted again to pseudonyms, as in their earliest work, choosing

neuter names which, by default, might appear masculine. Although the published poems did not attract much notice, the pseudonymous identities of the authors were established and they went on to write publishable novels.

It is at this stage that Charlotte's faith in herself as a genius was most fully tested. She had revisited her Brussels experiences in a realistic novel, *The Professor*, allowing her masculine hero, William Crimsworth, to tell his own story. Like her former heroes in *Ashworth*, he fails to win the approval of editors. While Emily and Anne's novels, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* were accepted, Charlotte's was still making the rounds of the publishers in 1846, when she embarked on *Jane Eyre*, This novel, the literary sensation of 1847, is also narrated in the first person and through it Charlotte poured out the recollections of her childhood suffering and her passionate longing for love. I argue that Charlotte Brontë, through this fictional 'autobiography' calls explicitly for the right of a woman to recount her experience in her own way, regardless of patriarchal constraints. Here at last, in Jane's passionate outburst, we hear the voice of a woman who abandons conventional restraint to assert her right to be heard, claiming equal status with the dominating Rochester:

Do you think that, because I am poor, obscure, plain and little, I am soulless and heartless? You think wrong! - I have as much soul as you – and full as much heart! ... – it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave and we stood at God's feet, - equal, - as we are! (Brontë, 1847/1987, p. 222)

The main achievement of the novel is to convey, even celebrate, the power of a woman's passionate desire and the compulsive delights of fantasy, while clearly illustrating their dangers. This is a theme that examines and reassesses the aesthetic and emotional problems encountered during Charlotte Brontë's long quest to become a published woman author and to be 'forever known' as a female genius.

References

Alexander, C. (1983). *The early writings of Charlotte Brontë*. Oxford: Blackwell.
Alexander, C. (1987). Charlotte Brontë at Roe Head. In R. J. Dunn (Ed.), *Jane Eyre: Authoritative text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (pp. 407-429). New York, NY: W W Norton.
Battersby, C. (1989). *Gender and genius: Towards a feminine aesthetic*. London: The Women's press.
Bock, C. (2002). 'Our plays': The Brontë Juvenilia. In H. Glen (Ed.), *the Cambridge companion to the Brontës* (pp. 34-52). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Brontë, C. (1987). Jane Eyre. In R. J. Dunn (Ed.), *Jane Eyre: Authoritative text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (pp. 5-398). New York, NY: W W Norton. (Original work published 1847).
Burke, S. (1992). *The death and return of the author: criticism and subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
Davis, R. R. (1982). *Anglican evangelicalism and the feminine literary tradition*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.
Felski, R. (1989). *Beyond feminine aesthetics: Feminist literature and social change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
Gerin, W. (Ed.). (1971). *Charlotte Brontë: Five novelettes: Passing events, Julia, Mina Laury, Captain Henry Hastings, Caroline Vernon*. London: Folio.
Hawthorn, J. (2000). A *glossary of contemporary literary theory*. London: Arnold.
Homans, M. (1980). *Woman writers and poetic identity: Dorothy Wordsworth, Emily Brontë and Emily Dickinson*. Princeton: Princeton University.
Lonoff, S. (1989). Charlotte Brontë's Belgian essays: The discourse of empowerment. *Victorian Studies*, *32*(3), 387-405.
Lonoff, S. (Ed.). (1996). *Charlotte Brontë, Emily Brontë: The Belgian essays: A critical edition*. London: Yale University.
Ratchford, F. (1964). *The Brontë's web of childhood*. New York: Russell and Russell.
Smith, M. (Ed.). (1995). *The letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a selection of letters by family and friends, Letters of Charlotte Brontë Series: Vol. 1, 1829-1847*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Smith, M. (Ed.). (2000). *The letters of Charlotte Brontë: with a selection of letters by family and friends, Letters of Charlotte Brontë Series: Vol. 2, 1848-1851*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2001). *A guide for interpreting life narratives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.
Weedon, C. (1987). *Feminist practice and poststructural theory*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Biographical Note: **Margaret Hulmes** received her Ph. D. in English from Lancaster University, in 2006. She is a retired teacher and a lecturer for the Workers' Educational Association. Academic interests include English Literature, especially the nineteenth century, Women's Education, and Women's Autobiography. E-mail: emhulmes@btinternet.com