

## REVIEW FORUM

***Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology*, by Sally Shuttleworth.  
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.**

**Rick Rylance**

This is an excellent, illuminating book. It represents another substantial step away from the dwindling image of the Brontës as writers of moorland romance, wrapped in windy isolation and removed from the intellectual pressures of their times. Sally Shuttleworth's richly detailed account presents Charlotte Brontë's fiction in informed negotiation with the fraught debates around human, particularly female, psychology and sexuality which attended the unsettled adjustment to a full laissez-faire economy in mid-Victorian Britain. It presents Brontë as an intellectual as well as a novelist, as a reader with an impassioned curiosity about the social world, and as a strong and independent thinker on serious issues understood through the particularities of her gender and locality. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* helps reconstruct the intellectual world which nourishes the fictions, and helps understanding of the political urgency which informs them. This is its most valuable and impressive achievement.

Shuttleworth argues that the discourses of economics, social regulation, psychology and psychiatry in Brontë's lifetime shared a set of common concerns. These centred on the elaboration and distribution of models for the self commensurate with the visions and needs of laissez-faire interests in the new society. As Shuttleworth amply demonstrates, the "almost manic Victorian insistence on control" in psychological life (199) was developed in response to a dynamic capitalism with gross inequalities and rocky principles of social cohesion. The psychological life of Victorian individualism needed to regulate itself to reflect and enable the bigger development.

The argument that the self is a social construct is a ubiquitous one at present, but Shuttleworth emphasises that the literary self created in response to these discourses is not a passive imprint, but a violent theatre for the playing out of social issues, and that individuals have the creative will to resist coercive imposition. Shuttleworth's (somewhat distant) theoretical model is found in Foucault, but this is not a book with a theoretical demeanour and her use of Foucault seems largely opportunistic (though the borrowing has at least one disadvantage, as I shall note below). *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* is in fact splendidly dense with detail and evidence. Its structure is plain and in two parts. The first describes "Psychological Discourse in the Victorian Era"; the second examines "Charlotte Brontë's Fiction" text by text, from the early writing (which is read unpatronisingly and in a way which makes sustained intellectual sense of it) to *Villette*. Her career is thus given shape and consistency as a response to a set of preoccupying issues. The coverage is comprehensive, the range exciting; and the development of the argument is well-paced and coherent. There is nothing superfluous in this book. It is lean, clear and exacting, as if following the maxims of many of the

psychological and medical writers it inspects. Its own internal economy is superbly well-regulated.

The principal arguments are as follows. Shuttleworth documents the rise of surveillance as an interpretative tactic and social practice in Victorian medicine and science. She notes the gendered forms of its activity, and the particularly nasty turn it took in the surveillance of women by an increasingly powerful, male-dominated, medical profession. She makes the essential connections between this and key aspects of the wider social, economic and legislative context and reveals very plainly the way medical opinion transposed the social hopes and (especially) anxieties of the aspirant bourgeois, professional and patriarchal culture. In lunacy legislation, medical theory, phrenology and manuals of medical and moral advice (all of which formed part of Charlotte Brontë's reading), many of the same themes are repeated.

The book describes the "female bodily economy" which emerges. It is lurid with menstrual blood and preoccupied with the movement of female energies and substances in the same way that (in an illuminating comparison) writers on the new cities were also obsessed with problems of waste-disposal. Shuttleworth is careful to unravel the contradictory pressures such models of the self create. The new model rejects the abstract moral rhetoric of Jane Austen's day, and the passive language of unlocalised faculties that dominated psychology in the early century. Instead, the new self is dynamic, an energy system constituted within the body. However, too often this energy was theorised within the framework of a vulgar materialism which understood bodily appetences by moral and social judgements, thus violently constraining their potential. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* is most impressive in its grip on this detail, and rarely misses an argumentative or contextual trick in developing its case. The events, circumstances and pressures of Charlotte's life are correlated with debates at both local and national levels in various forms (newspapers, learned journals, advertisements) and the "thick description" and attendant analysis which emerges is entirely convincing.

Shuttleworth presents the ridiculous and vicious detail of the elision of moral, medical and behavioural categories which emerges through accounts of the gendered body in early- to mid-Victorian Britain. The new model of the self was valued for its dynamism in a restructuring society. But the same discourse was also terrified of the appetites it revealed, and one consequence was fierce gender-discrimination. For men, the emphasis was on the conservation of vital force for deeds in the world; its model of the self was the savings bank. For women, however, the problem was the need to dispose of the accumulating energy in quiescent and desperate lives which threatens to throw their systems into disarray and unmake their social roles. Its model, therefore, was the sluice or drain. While men were agents, women were passive in their bodily destinies, condemned to obsession with getting rid of a circulatory excess which may turn pathological. Reduced to regimes of self-control and introspection, women are to exist in nervous self-absorption.

Charlotte Brontë's attitudes to all this were complex. She was steeped in medical information in an illness-obsessed household where Patrick Brontë kept exact records of his family's diseases interpreted through John Graham's *Domestic Medicine*, an early repository of the emergent medical lore. Later, she immersed herself in phrenology, whose language she used extensively in her fiction with, Shuttleworth

demonstrates, sustained and telling effect. Phrenology provided her with new and ambiguous ways of thinking about the issues which haunt her career. Not that her position was straightforward: instinctively resistant to medical authority's crabbed account of women's predicament, she opposed the practice of intrusive surveillance (something widely dramatised in her fiction), and the stereotypes of femininity and mental illness it promoted. But at the same time she could find no clear ground to stand in opposition. As a writer of her time, she also manipulated and indulged the same stereotypes, as in the notorious case of Bertha Mason, and Shuttleworth notes that one of the possible, unsettling messages to be taken from *Jane Eyre* is that an inward turn to the self, harsh regimes of self-control and outward conformity can bring exciting reward for a woman.

But Brontë's work is at its best—and Sally Shuttleworth's account of it is at its best too—when Brontë's instincts to resist the new orthodoxies are in dialogue with the contradictions they engender. Her heroines, Shuttleworth notes, are characteristically double-bound, twinning self-assertion with powerlessness and self-aversion. Their independent energy is at war with internalised norms and thus becomes a source of guilty self-concealment. The second part of *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* traces these concerns. *The Professor* is read as an account of the contradictory masculinity of the new psychologised man, while *Jane Eyre* explores the impossible compromise between energy release and self-control implied in the new model of the female self. *Shirley* analogises psychological and political discourse directly, and is pre-occupied by problems of superfluity—un-drained excess—in the novel's female characters and the labour and marriage markets alike. *Villette*, finally, is Brontë's most direct and uncompromising engagement with the new theory, challenging, in its defiant presentation of a damaged subjectivity and slippery narration, the definitions of reality imposed by the new psycho-medical orthodoxy's reductive materialism and hypnotising moral and medical surveillance.

My admiration for this book will be clear, but I have three questions to put to it. The first concerns the model of discursive formations inherited from Foucault which can be, as is well-known, epochal, rigid and over-generalised. *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* is compelling in its array of evidence. It is also impressively diligent in tracing what access Brontë had, in Haworth, to popular debate in relevant areas. But it does tend to present "medical discourse" or psychology as monolithic and totalitarian. Though due respect is shown to the ambiguities embedded in phrenology, for example, the dominant impression is of a massive, compliant, self-repeating discursive formation stretching from the metropolitan establishment to the platform of the Haworth Mechanics' Institute. Attention to the latter is very welcome, and impressively done, but I wonder if there were not a few contesting voices raised in challenge to this incipient, violent orthodoxy.

My second point is a related one. I applaud this book's opposition to the view that the history of psychology hinges on Freud, and its demonstration that theories of desire, repression and compensatory formation, and models of the mind based on energy systems, were available in abundance before Freud himself was well into his oral stage. Such ideas are described and contextualised fully from work in Charlotte Brontë's lifetime, and Shuttleworth rightly rejects the anti-historical narcissism of judging nineteenth-century formations by twentieth-century elaborations. But she does

not herself offer a rounded account of the messy dynamics of Victorian psychology as a whole, as might be inferred from the book's title. What is here is very fine, but it isn't all there is. Victorian psychology, drawing on diverse traditions, composed of different theoretical and investigative impulses, with uneven and different relations to the political and social questions of the day and different familiarities with physiology and the bio-medical sciences, is a much more complicated affair, and maybe this needed to be made a little clearer.

My third question is more specific. In her account of *Villette*, Shuttleworth argues that the novel responds to *Jane Eyre's* concession to the ideological claims of repressive self-control. *Villette*, she writes, "tentatively asserts the claims of the imagination, in opposition to the reason and control of the masculine world" (233). I think this is probably so, but an assessment of the value of such a step needs to be made in historical terms. As it stands, it seems a little stranded between the reaction-formations of Romantic protest, and the celebratory essentialism of some modern-day feminist theory in the manner of Cixous. Either way it doesn't, for me, enable much purchase to be gained on the hard contest of Victorian theories of psychology and femininity. Lucy Snowe's subjectivity remains embattled, and it is a slender foundation on which to build assertions of imaginative hope.

Much better I think is the book's overall judgement which resists such tentative positivity. Shuttleworth concludes that Charlotte Brontë is a much more political writer than is usually supposed in her exploration of Victorian theories of the self, but that her politics lack an "overarching moral frame," unlike those of Dickens or George Eliot (on whom Shuttleworth has written an equally excellent earlier book). Brontë's work is distinguished "not by the clarity with which she articulates an achieved position, but rather by the intensity with which she wrestles with contradictions (246). This is a just and accurate conclusion to a very fine book.

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### **Kate Flint**

"In the Victorian period, as today, the writing of the self is a political act" claims Sally Shuttleworth, and her study of Charlotte Brontë brilliantly illustrates this assertion. By placing Brontë's fiction firmly within the medical and social discourses which consistently resonate within it, she demolishes any lingering vestiges of the myth that the novelist worked in an isolated vacuum, generating and emplotting characters through some innate, almost miraculous creative power. Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* has had a great deal to answer for in establishing an image of Brontë's own split self, divided between the near-painful gift of literary genius and more domestic, stereotypically womanly urges. Shuttleworth, however, forcefully demonstrates not just Brontë's awareness of contemporary debates concerning the relationship of the mind and body, of indivisible spiritual and physical selfhood, but shows her manipulating these ideas, even to the extent that her fiction consciously, and provocatively, anticipates more recent formulations of the contradictory positions occupied by the individual subject in relation to particular social and economic structures.