

## BOOK REVIEWS

### *The Brontes in the World of the Arts*

Edited by Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008.

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Like so many multi-authored books or edited collections these days, this volume derives from a conference session. It brings together eleven scholars from various fields, amongst whom the English Literature specialists predominate. It is part of the Nineteenth Century series under the oversight of Joanne Shattock and Vincent Newey which has put the work of so many of us, our colleagues and our students on the published page. The arts of the title which are considered in relation to the three sisters are visual art (fine and graphic), music, theatre, and dress. Though the editors' introduction does not propose it, areas that might be construed to be absent are sculpture and dance, and even photography, despite it being in its infancy when our heroines were most famously active. The editors do not advance any thesis of their own but, although they do not say so, there are some threads that run throughout the collection, such as amateurism, professionalism, romanticism, realism, and the interface between real life and the authors' imaginations.

Christine Alexander looks at some things she has considered before in her own path-breaking publications, concentrating here on the issue of amateurism and professionalism in Charlotte's activities. Richard Dunn looks at the relationship between Branwell as 'the artist of the family', and Charlotte as an aspiring artist. Several writers play on the now accepted fact that Charlotte's first ambition was to be a visual artist although it was writing that eventually brought her fame. Antonia Losano, in one of the more compelling essays, examines Anne's *Wildfell Hall* for its presentation of the figure of the female artist. It is interesting to be asked to think about Charlotte's opinion of this novel of her sister's, which has received much more attention in the last twenty years than at any earlier time. The proposition that Anne and Charlotte had quite differing agendas as novelists is one of this essay's sub-texts. Juliette Wells revisits the question of amateurism in an essay whose intentions are confused although individual points of value are raised during the course of it. Meg Harris Williams' essay brings music into the mix, considering Emily's serious enthusiasm for music as an entry-point to her well-known novel as well as to her poetry. A sustained account of the 'music' of *Wuthering Heights*, in which the book is read closely for rhythm, composition and sonic effects, is very convincing. A late excursion into philosophy is, however, somewhat redundant although it forms the starting point for another equally valid essay. Juliette Wells returns with Ruth Solie to continue the musical element, this time examining Charlotte's *Shirley* for the play of masculinity and femininity within the theme of music. They look at the novel's characters - the Moores, Shirley Keeldar herself, Mr Yorke and Mr Sweeting - as well as at situations and descriptions in an attractive analysis which brings out a less obvious dimension of this problematic work.

New territory is broached when Anne Jackson's essay introduces the art of the theatre, privileging Charlotte's *Villette* but also finding room for more cursory consideration of

*Jane Eyre*. A greater balance or more even-handedness in her handling of the two works, however, might have made this inquiry more satisfying. In many cases, indeed, the essays were too short to take their theses very far or to propose them in great depth. This was presumably an editorial decision for which no individual author should be faulted. Sara Bernstein addresses herself to a less expected topic which turns out to be quite fascinating, in her essay on the functions of fashion in *Villette*. The lack of focus in the composition of the essay, betraying the doctoral student author's lack of experience unfortunately weakens the piece's achievement. Sandra Hagen's essay, on the illustration of *Villette* (by Edmond Dulac in 1904), also has a valid topic in hand but does not explore it very satisfactorily, perhaps because she is not an art historian. Indeed, though the contributors who write about music are music specialists, it is notable that those who address questions of visual art are not art historians, and their lack of specialised knowledge and expertise does tend to show. In this case, Hagen doesn't ask the right questions so comes up with inadequate answers. By contrast, Patsy Stoneman and Linda Lister do manage to cover their selected territory well: the former achieving one of the book's highlights in looking at treatments of *Jane Eyre* in the twentieth century on page, stage and screen, and the latter considering musical versions of *Wuthering Heights*. Here, the familiar elements such as Jean Rhys' *Wide Sargasso Sea* rub shoulders with the less predictable such as Lister's own chamber opera *How clear she shines!*

The illustrations do their job nicely, and the bibliography is rich, although primary and secondary sources are not distinguished. The order in which the essays are arranged is a little irksome, with no obvious rationale and requiring the reader to re-focus repeatedly rather than facilitating their journey through the works and the issues. The absence of a Bronte bibliography hampers the reader who is not already steeped in this literature; a checklist of the works under examination, with original dates of publication, was a glaring omission to this reader, and is gratuitously excluding to interested but non-specialist readers.

*Pamela Gerrish Nunn*