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Contemporary Criticism of Charlotte Bronte's Three Novels (1847-1855) and the Author's Reaction to the Criticism

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CONTEMPORARY CRITICISM OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S THREE
NOVELS (1847-1855) AND THE AUTHOR'S
REACTION TO THE CRITICISM

by

Ola A. Jerry

Contributions of the Graduate School
Indiana State Teachers College
Number 514

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The thesis of Ola A. Jerry,
Contribution of the Graduate School, Indiana State
Teachers College, Number 514, under the title
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(1847-1855) AND THE AUTHOR'S REACTION TO THE CRITICISM
is hereby approved as counting toward the completion of
the Master's degree in the amount of 8 hours' credit.

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Ola A. Jerry

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Chapter

I JANE EYRE	1
Athenaeum	2
Literary Gazette	3
Thackeray	5
Spectator	7
People's Journal	10
Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine	12
Examiner	14
Howitt's Journal	17
Fraser's Magazine	21
Thackeray Dedication	29
Westminster Review	34
Literary World	34
Christian Remembrancer	35
British Quarterly Review	42
Dublin University Magazine	42
Tait's Edinburgh Magazine	44
Blackwood's Magazine	46
George Eliot	48
John Gibson Lockhart	49

North American Review	49
Revue des Deux Mondes	54
Quarterly Review	57
North British Review	65
II SHIRLEY	70
Daily News	71
Athenaeum	73
Literary Gazette	76
Spectator	78
Examiner	81
Revue des Deux Mondes	87
Times	89
Fraser's Magazine	94
Dublin University Magazine	97
Bentley's Miscellany	101
Westminster Review	104
Edinburgh Review	105
Dublin Review	114
Sharpe's London Magazine	117
Palladium	120
New Monthly Magazine	127
Elizabeth Barrett Browning	130

How shall we honour the young,
The ardent, the gifted? how mourn?
Console we cannot; her ear
Is deaf. Far northward from here,
In a churchyard high mid the moors
Of Yorkshire, a little earth
Stops it for ever to praise.

Where, behind Keighley, the road
Up to the heart of the moors
Beneath heath-clad showery hills
Runs, and colliers' carts
Poach the deep ways coming down,
And a rough, grim'd race have their homes--
There, on its slope, is built
The moorland town. But the church
Stands on the crest of the hill,
Lonely and bleak; at its side
The parsonage-house and the graves.

Matthew Arnold.

PREFACE

This study was developed from a desire to "honour the young, the ardent, the gifted" Yorkshire woman who wrote so earnestly and powerfully from the year 1847, the date of the publication of Jane Eyre, to 1855, the date of her untimely death. There has been an attempt to discover how the novels, Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette were received at the time of publication, and how the author reacted to the criticism.

The ever-increasing value placed upon Miss Brontë and her works, almost a century after the publication of Jane Eyre, has proved that a study of this type is worthwhile. As early as October, 1848, the North American Review spoke of the "Jane Eyre fever" in this country. The worth of Jane Eyre has not diminished through the passing years. The book was read and discussed in England, in France, and in Ireland at the time of publication; since then, there have been translations into various languages. There was much conjecture as to the sex of the author of the work; it was decidedly a new type of novel.

Today everyone knows about the authorship. However, there is still much concern as to why this book and the two that followed were written, and as to where the ideas for the characters in the books originated. So in 1847, a

mystery surrounded Jane Eyre; now a mystery surrounds the entire Brontë genius.

In America we have always been aware of Jane Eyre; as to the other two productions, Shirley, a tale of the Yorkshire country, published in 1849, and Villette, a tale of school life in Brussels, published in 1853, we hear little about them. Yet in Charlotte Brontë's time, Villette received almost as much favorable comment as did the first production. In this study, it is hoped that we shall think of Miss Brontë as the author not only of Jane Eyre but also of Shirley and Villette.

Since the death of Charlotte Brontë in 1855, many books have been written about her. Perhaps the most famous for all time is the Life of Charlotte Brontë, by Mrs. E. C. Gaskell. This book, published in 1857, is unique in that the author was an intimate friend of Miss Brontë. Another biography, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, by Augustine Birrell, appeared in 1887. Clement K. Shorter's two books, Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle, published in 1896, and, The Brontës: Life and Letters, published in 1908, are vitally important to the Brontë student. They contain letters written by the Brontë family to their friends; they contain Charlotte's letters to her publishers at Cornhill. In 1893, Dr. William Wright gave us the book, The Brontës in Ireland, which attempted to explain the mystery surrounding the famous family

by an insight into the Irish ancestry. In 1889, M. V. Terhune, (Marion Harland) wrote the volume, Charlotte Brontë at Home. These works named are but a few of the many works published.

Early in the twentieth century, in the year 1912, we had Flora Masson's tribute to genius, The Brontës. In the same year, 1912, appeared May Sinclair's contribution, The Three Brontës. Two years later, in 1914, we had the intensely fascinating book, In the Footsteps of the Brontës, by Mrs. Ellis Chadwick, who loved the Haworth country and lived there for several years. In 1917, the Brontë Society published the centenary memorial, Charlotte Brontë. 1816-1916.

In 1927, Louise Morgan Sill gave us the translation of Ernest Dimnet's book, The Brontë Sisters, (Les Soeurs Brontë). The year 1929 brought forth another book, A Short History of the Brontës, by Kaye Aspinall Sugden; the same year saw a work by Rosamond Langbridge, Charlotte Brontë; a psychological study. Three years later, in 1932, Edward Frederic Benson gave us the book, Charlotte Brontë; in the year 1938, Mary Louise Jarden wrote, The Young Brontës--Charlotte and Emily, Branwell and Anne. A Miracle of Haworth appeared in 1939, under the authorship of W. Bertram White. Added to all these and many others, we wish to mention the two works of Fannie E. Ratchford. In 1933, she, with the help of William Clyde DeVane, compiled the minutely written tales of the young girl, Charlotte Brontë, Legends of Angria. Then, in 1941, she gave

the world the book, The Brontës' Web of Childhood, in which the stress is laid upon the childhood writings as an explanation of later works of genius.

Novels have been written about the famous Yorkshire family. In 1935, Mrs. Elsie Thornton-Cook wrote, They Lived; a Brontë Novel. In 1940, Dorothy Helen Cornish wrote, These Were the Brontës.

Vast amounts have been written about the author of Jane Eyre, and we find excerpts from reviews of her three novels in many of the Brontë biographies. In this study, we have attempted to collect a sample of the reviews of each work, in order that we might judge how the author was received by her critics. Also, we have tried to find, from her letters, how the author regarded these criticisms.

Throughout this study, when there is a reference to Mrs. Gaskell's Life of Charlotte Brontë, or to any work by the Brontë sisters, unless otherwise designated, the Thornfield Edition is understood. We have given diligent attention to the matter of spelling and punctuation as appeared in the reviews. Wherever first paragraphs were not indented, however, we have, in this copy, indented them.

Chapter I deals with the critiques, written during Miss Brontë's lifetime, on Jane Eyre; here, too, are to be found letters by the author, showing her thoughts on many of the reviews mentioned. Chapter II deals in a similar way with Shirley. Chapter III concerns Villette, the author's last work.

CHAPTER I

JANE EYRE

Jane Eyre: an Autobiography, by Currer Bell, was a decided success. The book was published October 16, 1847, by Smith, Elder, and Company at Cornhill, of which firm Mr. W. S. Williams was reader and literary adviser. During the next eight years, there was much correspondence between the young Charlotte Brontë and her good friend, Mr. Williams.

However, Jane Eyre was not the first piece of work that Charlotte Brontë had done. Since early childhood, she and her sisters, Anne and Emily, and Branwell, the brother, had written much for their own pleasure. In the year 1846, the three girls had received some little attention from the reviewers, upon the publication of a book of poems, under the authorship of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. The novel, The Professor, by Currer Bell, was submitted to six publishers, but was rejected by all. Therefore, we see that Jane Eyre was not a first attempt, but rather a perfection of earlier efforts.

The story is one of the young Jane Eyre, an orphan, first at the home of Aunt Reed, where she is most cruelly abused; later, she suffers at Lowood, the part-charity institution under the iron rule of the Rev. Mr. Brocklehurst; still later, as governess at Thornfield Hall, she loves the

master, Mr. Rochester, who returns the passionate love, although he has an insane wife hidden in an upper room at Thornfield Hall. Through many tribulations, Jane makes her decision as to the right course to follow.

Among the first to review the novel, Jane Eyre, was the Athenaeum. On October 23, 1847, the critique appeared. First, the power of the book was mentioned:

There is so much power in this novel as to make us overlook certain eccentricities in the invention, which trench in one or two places on what is improbable, if not unpleasant. Jane Eyre is an orphan thrown upon the protection--or, to speak correctly, the cruelty--of relations living in an out-of-the-way corner of England; who neglect, maltreat, chastize, and personally abuse her. She becomes dogged, revengeful, superstitious: and at length, after a scene,--which we hope is out of nature now that "the Iron Rule" is over-ruled and the reign of the tribe Squeers ended,--the child turns upon her persecutors with such precocious power to threaten and alarm, that they condemn her to an oubliette--sending her out of the house to a so-called charitable institution. . . .¹

The Athenaeum spoke of the truth of the book, including even the story of the maniac at the home of Mr. Rochester, although many critics spoke of the story as improbable:

. . . The pretty, frivolous, little faëry Adele, with her hereditary taste for dress, coquetry, and pantomimic grace, is true to life. Perhaps, too--we dare not speak more positively--there is truth in the abrupt, strange, clever Mr. Rochester; and in the fearless, original way in which the strong man and the young governess travel .

¹ "Jane Eyre: an Autobiography," Athenaeum, p. 1100, October, 1847.

over each other's minds till, in a puzzled and uncomfortable manner enough, they come to a mutual understanding. Neither is the mystery of Thornfield an exaggeration of reality. We, ourselves, know of a large mansion-house in a distant county where, for many years, a miscreant was kept in close confinement,--and his existence, at best, only darkly hinted in the neighbourhood. Some such tale as this was told in a now-forgotten novel--'Sketches of a Seaport Town.' We do not quarrel with the author of 'Jane Eyre' for the manner in which he has made the secret explode at a critical juncture of the story. From that point forward, however, we think the heroine is too outrageously tried, and too romantically assisted in her difficulties:--until arrives the last moment, at which obstacles fall down like the battlements of Castle Melodrame, in the closing scene, when "avenging thunder strikes the towers of Crime, and far above . . . young Hymen's flower-decked temple shines revealed." No matter, however:--as exciting strong interest of its old-fashioned kind 'Jane Eyre' deserves high praise, and commendation to the novel-reader who prefers story to philosophy, pedantry, or Puseyite controversy.²

On the same day, October 23, 1847, a review appeared in the Literary Gazette. This review showed some similarity to that of the Athenaeum, in that it spoke of the reality of the book. The reviewer mentioned, too, the impersonality, the simplicity, and the earnestness of the novel. The critique is given here:

This is a production almost sui generis: for there is obviously so much of reality in it that we cannot call it a novel, and so much of fiction in the way of dreams and embellishments, that we cannot consider it to be altogether a literal exposition of real life and circumstances. And the style is as much contrasted as the matter; being often such common-place description

² Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 1101.

of events as we might expect in every-day relations, and then varying into a literary character quite dissimilar. The account of a Cheap Saintry Prison School, in which the heroine passes her earlier years, is evidently no invention, but the plain tale of an institution which has a number of resemblances throughout the country. The mystery of the story appears also to be founded on fact, and the characters of the dramatis personae to be copied from nature; whilst the collateral incidents are too likely and genuine to be suspected of dramatic introduction for the mere sake of adding interest to the narrative. The denouement, too, is as unlike the usual finale to works of the kind as can well be imagined; and we are thus trebly bound up not to inform our readers what were the acts, persecutions, perils, trials, adventures, and fate of Jane Eyre,--only that she is a young lady of so well regulated a mind that we could scarcely anticipate she would have to go through so much.

Impersonality, simplicity, and a truth-like earnestness are prominent features of the design; and the development of Jane's own character, from a somewhat precocious childhood, is ably sustained. Her selfish aunt and cousins, Mr. Brocklehurst, the priestly Patron of the Lowood Seminary, Mrs. Temple and the other teachers, Mr. Rochester (the hero), St. John the Missionary, and others, possess individuality and verisimilitude from first to last; and upon the whole we can cordially recommend the publication for its novelty and talent, however mixed with ingredients of a less attractive nature, if viewed in the light of a common novel. It possesses more of the actual, and displays an observant insight into the workings of the human heart.³

In a letter to Messrs. Smith, Elder, and Company, three days later, October 26, 1847, Charlotte Brontë wrote:

. . . The notice in the "Literary Gazette" seems certainly to have been indited in rather a flat mood, and the

³ "Jane Eyre. An Autobiography," Literary Gazette, 62:748-49, October, 1847.

"Athenaeum" has a style of its own, which I respect, but cannot exactly relish; still, when one considers that journals of that standing have a dignity to maintain which would be deranged by a too cordial recognition of the claims of an obscure author, I suppose there is every reason to be satisfied.⁴

Mr. Williams sent a copy of Jane Eyre to William Makepeace Thackeray, the satirist. Thackeray replied with this note to the reader:

I wish you had not sent me Jane Eyre. It interested me so much that I have lost (or won if you like) a whole day in reading it at the busiest period with the printers I know waiting for copy. Who the author can be I can't guess, if a woman she knows her language better than most ladies do, or has had a 'classical' education. It is a fine book, though, the man and woman capital, the style very generous and upright so to speak. I thought it was Kinglake for some time. The plot of the story is one with which I am familiar. Some of the love passages made me cry, to the astonishment of John, who came in with the coals. St. John the Missionary is a failure I think but a good failure, there are parts excellent. I don't know why I tell you this but I have been exceedingly moved and pleased by Jane Eyre. It is a woman's writing, but whose? Give my respects and thanks to the author, whose novel is the first English one (and the French are only romances now) that I've been able to read for many a day.⁵

Miss Brontë wrote, October 28, 1847, to Mr. Williams:

. . . I feel honoured in being approved by Mr. Thackeray, because I approve Mr. Thackeray. This may sound

⁴ Elizabeth C. Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë, pp. 342-43.

⁵ W. Bertram White, A Miracle of Haworth, p. 211.

presumptuous perhaps, but I mean that I have long recognised in his writings genuine talent, such as I admired, such as I wondered at and delighted in. . . .

You are right in having faith in the reality of Helen Burns's character; she was real enough. I have exaggerated nothing there. I abstained from recording much that I remember respecting her, lest the narrative should sound incredible. Knowing this, I could not but smile at the quiet self-complacent dogmatism with which one of the journals lays it down that 'such creations as Helen Burns are very beautiful but very untrue.'

The plot of Jane Eyre may be a hackneyed one. Mr. Thackeray remarks that it is familiar to him. But having read comparatively few novels I never chanced to meet with it, and I thought it original. The work referred to by the critic of the Athenaeum I had not the good fortune to hear of.

The Weekly Chronicle seems inclined to identify me with Mrs. Marsh. I never had the pleasure of perusing a line of Mrs. Marsh's in my life, but I wish very much to read her works, and shall profit by the first opportunity of doing so. I hope I shall not find I have been an unconscious imitator.⁶

On November 10, 1847, Charlotte Brontë wrote to the reader of Smith and Elder:

I have received the Britannia and the Sun, but not the Spectator, which I rather regret, as censure, though not pleasant, is often wholesome.⁷

However, three days later, November 13, 1847, she wrote to say that she had received the Spectator, and the People's Journal as well:

⁶ C. K. Shorter, The Brontës: Life and Letters, 1:362-63.

⁷ Ibid., p. 366.

. . . The notice from the People's Journal also duly reached me, and this morning I received the Spectator. The critique in the Spectator gives that view of the book which will naturally be taken by a certain class of minds; I shall expect it to be followed by other notices of a similar nature. The way to detraction has been pointed out, and will probably be pursued. Most future notices will in all likelihood have a reflection of the Spectator in them. I fear this turn of opinion will not improve the demand for the book--but time will show. If Jane Eyre has any solid worth in it, it ought to weather a gust of unfavourable wind.⁸

The account in the Spectator appeared November 6, 1847. It was extremely discouraging to the keenly-sensitive author:

Essentially, Jane Eyre, an Autobiography, has some resemblance to those sculptures of the middle ages in which considerable ability both mechanical and mental was often displayed upon subjects that had no existence in nature, and as far as delicacy was concerned were not pleasing in themselves. There is, indeed, none of their literal impossibilities or grotesqueness--we do not meet the faces of foxes or asses under clerical hoods; neither is there anything of physical grossness. But, with clear conceptions distinctly presented, a metaphysical consistency in the characters and their conduct, and considerable power in the execution, the whole is unnatural, and only critically interesting. There is one fault, too, in Jane Eyre, from which the artists of the middle ages were free--too much of artifice. Their mastery of their art was too great to induce them to resort to trick to tell their story. In the fiction edited by Currer Bell there is rather too much of this. Dialogues are carried on to tell the reader something he must know, or to infuse into him some explanations of the writer; persons act not as they would probably act in life, but to enable the author to do a "bit o' writing"; everything is made to change

⁸ Shorter, op. cit., p. 367.

just in the nick of time; and even the "Returned Letter Office" suspends its laws that Jane Eyre may carry on her tale with "effect."

The fiction belongs to that school where minute anatomy of the mind predominates over incidents; the last being made subordinate to description or the display of character. . . .⁹

Although the hero and the heroine did not attract, the Spectator praised the part referring to Helen Burns:

A story which contains nothing beyond itself is a very narrow representation of human life. Jane Eyre is this, if we admit it to be true; but its truth is not probable in the principal incidents, and still less in the manner in which the characters influence the incidents so as to produce conduct. There is a low tone of behaviour (rather than of morality) in the book; and, what is worse than all, neither the heroine nor hero attracts sympathy. The reader cannot see anything loveable in Mr. Rochester, nor why he should be so deeply in love with Jane Eyre; so that we have intense emotion without cause. The book, however, displays considerable skill in the plan, and great power, but rather shown in the writing than the matter; and this vigour sustains a species of interest to the last.

Although minute and somewhat sordid, the first act of the fiction is the most truthful; especially the scenes at the philanthropic school. There are many parts of greater energy in Jane Eyre, but none equal to the following scene. Helen Burns, a quiet Scotch girl, with a tendency to consumption, sinks under the hardships of the school. She is removed from the other scholars; but Jane, uneasy when she learns the danger of her friend, steals to her room in the night.¹⁰

⁹ "Jane Eyre, an Autobiography," Spectator, 20:1074, November, 1847.

¹⁰ Loc. cit.

The Spectator quoted the entire death scene of Helen Burns. It is small wonder that this famous scene has been proclaimed so very true, because it was the story of the older sister of the author of Jane Eyre.¹¹

In Miss Brontë's letter to Mr. Williams, December 31, 1847, she showed resentment toward the Spectator critique:

You do very rightly and very kindly to tell me the objections made against Jane Eyre--they are more essential than the praises. I feel a sort of heart-ache when I hear the book called 'godless' and 'pernicious' by good and earnest-minded men; but I know that heart-ache will be salutary--at least I trust so.

What is meant by the charges of trickery and artifice I have yet to comprehend. It was no art in me to write a tale--it was no trick in Messrs. Smith & Elder to publish it. Where do the trickery and artifice lie?

I have received the Scotsman, and was greatly amused to see Jane Eyre likened to Rebecca Sharp--the resemblance would hardly have occurred to me.¹²

On January 4, 1848, in a letter to Mr. Williams, she once more referred to the Spectator, as well as to Mr. Dilke of the Athenaeum, and Mr. Lewes of Fraser's Magazine:

It would take a good deal to crush me, because I know, in the first place, that my own intentions were correct, that I feel in my heart a deep reverence for religion, that impiety is very abhorrent to me; and in the second, I place firm reliance on the judgment of some who have encouraged me. You and Mr. Lewes are quite

¹¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 73.

¹² Shorter, op. cit., pp. 378-79.

as good authorities, in my estimation, as Mr. Dilke or the editor of the Spectator, and I would not under any circumstances, or for any opprobrium, regard with shame what my friends had approved--none but a coward would let the detraction of an enemy outweigh the encouragement of a friend. You must not, therefore, fulfil your threat of being less communicative in future; you must kindly tell me all.¹³

Again, on November 28, 1851, after the Spectator review of The Fair Carew, Miss Brontë wrote to George Smith of the firm of Smith and Elder:

. . . However, if it be any consolation to Miss Biggar, she may be told that the Spectator has treated The Fair Carew with much more respect than it treated Jane Eyre; of the latter its most salient remark was that the conception and characters of the book reminded him (the critic) of nothing so much as the grotesque and hideous masks of apes, wolves, and griffins to be found in the carved works of certain old cathedrals. It was in his estimation a morbid monkish fancy, a thing with the head of an owl, the tail of a fox, and the talons of an eagle.¹⁴

The tone of the review in the People's Journal, however, was extremely courteous:

This is one of the most notable domestic novels which have issued from the press in this country for many years past. We have had so much waste paper sent into the world recently, under the false pretence of being the literature of fiction, that it is quite a relief to find a really good and striking production. English "fiction" is not entirely a "fraud," as we were really beginning to suspect. Jane Eyre is a very remarkable

¹³ Shorter, op. cit., p. 383.

¹⁴ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 566, footnote.

work. The style is bold, lucid, pungent; the incidents are varied, touching, romantic; the characterisation is ample, original, diversified; the moral sentiments are pure and healthy: and the whole work is, in its high and headlong course, calculated to rivet attention, to provoke sympathy, to make the heart bound, and the brain pause.¹⁵

The People's Journal referred to Jane Eyre as the prophecy of greater things to come:

Mr. Currer Bell is already slightly, but rather favourably, known to the public, as one of the writers of a small volume of poems, which was published several months ago as the joint production of three brothers-- Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell. The contributions which bore the signature of Currer Bell in this collection, evidenced some power of thinking, and an uncommonplace turn of mind; but it is no disparagement of the author to say that they hardly afforded any sign of the vigorous intellect, shrewd observation, and great, if undisciplined, powers, unquestionably manifested in the story of Jane Eyre. Yet this novel is far more significant as a promise than it is as a performance. It implies still finer and stronger qualities than it produces--qualities as yet lying fallow in the author's mind; quickening into consciousness, but not yet developed into the fulness of life. Jane Eyre is a prophecy of greater things to come--the herald of loftier and more perfect creations which are to follow her: as such we accept and welcome it.¹⁶

The book, nevertheless, lacked in some manner:

The writer is evidently young. While he has something to teach, he has also much to learn. Inspiration he possesses, but not art. His book, to some extent

¹⁵ "Jane Eyre: An Autobiography," People's Journal, 4:269, November, 1847.

¹⁶ Loc. cit.

at least, wants symmetry, proportion, unity of purpose, harmony of parts--though it never lacks interest, never wants life. His materials are abundant, and he wields them with a strong, but not skilful hand. The reader never tires, never sleeps: the swell and tide of an affluent existence, an irresistible energy, bears him onward, from first to last. It is impossible to deny that the author possesses native power in an uncommon degree--showing itself now in rapid headlong recital--now in stern, fierce, daring dashes at portraiture--anon in subtle, startling mental anatomy--here in a grand allusion, there in an original metaphor--again in a wild gush of genuine poetry. Discipline and deeper study will enable him to turn these attributes to better account, will give him what he most needs, artistic skill, the capacity to construct and to co-ordinate.

The very selection of so homely a name for the heroine is an omen for good. It indicates a departure from the sickly models of the Della Cruscan schools. . . .¹⁷

The critic quoted, as did many of the reviewers, the parts which alluded to Helen Burns at Lowood, the part-charity school.¹⁸

On November 27, 1847, Miss Brontë, in a letter to Mr. Williams, mentioned other reviews:

. . . I have received this week the Glasgow Examiner* the Bath Herald, and Douglas Jerrold's Newspaper. The Examiner, it appears, has not yet given a notice.¹⁹

The Douglas Jerrold Shilling Magazine mentioned the three books: The Bachelor of the Albany, A Warning to Wives,

¹⁷ People's Journal, loc. cit.

¹⁸ Jane Eyre, pp. 52-59, 60-65, and 90-95.

¹⁹ Shorter, op. cit., p. 368. * There was no comma after this word in the original.

and Jane Eyre; an Autobiography. The reviewer commented first on the truth of the novel, Jane Eyre:

"Jane Eyre, an Autobiography," is superior to either of the two previous novels, and contains so much that is fresh and good, and so evidently reveals the experiences of a thoughtful and reflective mind, that we almost wish to omit it from a notice, precluded by such a general condemnation of this species of literature. In the autobiography rests the chief merit of the work; and we are inclined to think much of it veritable biography. It is evidently the work of a young author, though not of a very young person; and we all know that the first works of writers of fiction embrace not only much of their experiences, but also much of their adventures. It has that strong and powerful interest which arises from truth clearly developed, and from that strong delineation of characteristics evidently derived immediately from individuals, and not the result of looking at human nature through "the spectacles of books." It has also the faults of young authorship. To create emotion in the reader is too much the aim, especially in the latter portion of the heroine's career, where the stern face of tragedy is thrown into the extravagant contortions of melodrama. It is, however, a work of considerable merit, and if one-tenth of the works of fiction contained the power of writing that this does, we should not have thought it necessary to preface our remarks by such a decided condemnation of this kind of literature, when considered as a class.²⁰

The preface referred to said in part:

Everyone heated with a disordered fancy is no longer satisfied with reading, but must attempt to write a romance.²¹

²⁰ "New Books," Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine, 6:473-74, July-December, 1847.

²¹ Ibid., p. 471.

By November 30, 1847, the Examiner, for which Miss Brontë waited, had not yet come. She wrote to her publishers:

I have received the Economist, but not the Examiner; from some cause that paper has missed, as the Spectator did on a former occasion; I am glad, however, to learn through your letter that its notice of Jane Eyre was favourable, and also that the prospects of the work appear to improve.²²

The next day, however, she mailed another letter to Smith and Elder:

The Examiner reached me to-day: it had been missent on account of the direction, which was to Currer Bell, care of Miss Brontë. . . . The notice in the Examiner gratified me very much; it appears to be from the pen of an able man who has understood what he undertakes to criticise; of course approbation from such a quarter is encouraging to an author, and I trust it will prove beneficial to the work.

As a postscript she added:

I received likewise seven other notices from provincial papers enclosed in an envelope. I thank you very sincerely for so punctually sending me all the various criticisms on Jane Eyre.²³

The Examiner, though gratifying, found some fault:

This book has just been sent to us by the publishers. An accident caused the delay, and is responsible for what might else have seemed a tardy notice of the first effort of an original writer.

²² Shorter, op. cit., pp. 368-69.

²³ Ibid., p. 369.

There can be no question but that Jane Eyre is a very clever book. Indeed it is a book of decided power. The thoughts are true . . . and the style, though rude and uncultivated here and there, is resolute, straightforward, and to the purpose. There are faults, which we may advert to presently; but there are also many beauties, and the object and moral of the work is excellent. Without being professedly didactic, the writer's intention (amongst other things) seems to be, to show how intellect and unswerving integrity may win their way, although oppressed by that predominating influence in society which is a mere consequence of the accidents of birth or fortune. There are, it is true, in this autobiography (which though relating to a woman, we do not believe to have been written by a woman), struggles, and throes, and misgivings, such as must necessarily occur in a contest where the advantages are all on one side; but in the end, the honesty, kindness of heart, and perseverance of the heroine, are seen triumphant over every obstacle. We confess that we like an author who throws himself into the front of the battle, as the champion of the weaker party; and when this is followed up by bold and skilful soldiership, we are compelled to yield him our respect.²⁴

The simplicity of the book was praised:

Whatever faults may be urged against the book, no one can assert that it is weak or vapid. It is anything but a fashionable novel. It has not a Lord Fanny for its hero, nor a Duchess for its pattern of nobility. The scene of action is never in Belgrave or Grosvenor square. The pages are scant of French and void of Latin. We hear nothing of Madame Maradan; we scent nothing of the bouquet de la Reine. On the contrary, the heroine is cast amongst the thorns and brambles of life; --an orphan; without money, without beauty, without friends; thrust into a starving charity school; and fighting her way as governess, with few accomplishments. The hero, if so he may be called, is (or becomes) middle-aged, mutilated, blind, stern, and wilful. The

²⁴ "Jane Eyre. An Autobiography," Examiner, p. 756, November, 1847.

sentences are of simple English; and the only fragrance that we encounter is that of the common garden flower, or the odour of Mr. Rochester's cigar.²⁵

The Examiner compared Jane Eyre with the works of other authors:

Taken as a novel or history of events, the book is obviously defective; but as an analysis of a single mind, as an elucidation of its progress from childhood to full age, it may claim comparison with any work of the same species. It is not a book to be examined, page by page, with the fictions of Sir Walter Scott or Sir Edward Lytton or Mr. Dickens, from which (except* in passages of character where the instant impression reminds us often of the power of the latter writer) it differs altogether. It should rather be placed by the side of the autobiographies of Godwin and his successors, and its comparative value may be then reckoned up, without fear or favour. There is less eloquence, or rather there is less rhetoric, and perhaps less of that subtle analysis of the inner human history, than the author of Fleetwood and Mandeville was in the habit of exhibiting; but there is, at the same time, more graphic power, more earnest human purpose, and a more varied and vivid portraiture of men and things.

The danger, in a book of this kind, is that the author, from an extreme love of his subject, and interest in the investigation of human motives, may pursue his analysis beyond what is consistent with the truth and vitality of his characters. In every book of fiction, the reader expects to meet with animated beings, complete in their structure, and active and mingling with the world; and he will accordingly reject a tale as spurious if he finds that the author, in his love of scientific research, has been merely putting together a metaphysical puzzle, when he should have been breathing into the nostrils of a living man.

The writer of Jane Eyre has in a great measure

²⁵ The Examiner, loc. cit.

* (In the original, there is no period after the abbreviation, Mr.).

steered clear of this error (by no means altogether avoiding it), and the book is the better for it.²⁶

On November 20, 1847, Howitt's Journal reviewed Jane Eyre:

The autobiography of Jane Eyre is one of the freshest and most genuine books which we have read for a long time. It is a domestic story, full of the most intense interest, and yet composed of the simplest materials, the worth of which consists in their truth. Jane Eyre is a governess, without the least touch of conventionality; she is a sincere, warm-hearted, painstaking, and affectionate woman, and there needs nothing more to make her wind herself as firmly round the heart of the reader as around that of her adorer, Mr. Rochester. . . . What Dickens has so benevolently done, by exposing the atrocities of Do-the-boys Hall, is here done in the description of the institution of Lowood. We believe it to be drawn from the life; it is written with that life-like reality which experience only can give; and he does the work of Christ who relaxes in any degree that severe iron rule which eats into the heart of a child, and cramps and crushes its young and tender spirit. Lowood was under the direction of a clergyman, and it was a so-called religious establishment, in which long daily prayers, scripture-lessons, punctual church-going, an unsightly dress, and coarse and scanty fare, formed conspicuous features,, whilst love, forbearance,* long suffering, and the forgiveness of injuries, those essentials of true religion, were not of necessity part or parcel of the establishment, but only sprung up here and there in wounded and oppressed hearts, and beamed in pale countenances that betokened frames wearing away under the hardships of this iron domination to another and a better land.²⁷

Howitt's Journal described the hero:

²⁶ Examiner, loc. cit.

²⁷ "Jane Eyre. An Autobiography," Howitt's Journal, 2:333-34, November, 1847.

* In the original, there were two commas after the word, features.

. . . The master of this old house, who lives most frequently abroad, a man of the world, and a libertine, rather from circumstances than from nature, of course, sees her, and somewhat old-fashioned, plain, and simple-hearted as she is, he falls in love with her. All this is most admirably managed, and shows the hand of a master. . . .²⁸

The critic spoke of St. John Rivers, "the cold priest, in whose breast duty annihilated love"; Currer Bell had drawn him with "inimitable skill."²⁹

The marriage of Jane and Rochester, according to Howitt's, "impressed with that calm, though somewhat melancholy satisfaction which is much more a part of actual life, than those ecstatic and astonishing consummations in which common novel-writers so much delight."³⁰

George Henry Lewes, apt critic of the day, received a copy of Jane Eyre from the publisher, and gave a scholarly review of the book in Fraser's Magazine. Mr. Lewes sent the following message to Mrs. Gaskell, after the death of the author of Jane Eyre:

When "Jane Eyre" first appeared, the publishers courteously sent me a copy. The enthusiasm with which I read it made me go down to Mr. Parker, and propose to write a review of it for "Fraser's Magazine." He would not consent to an unknown novel--for the papers

²⁸ Howitt's Journal, op. cit., p. 334.

²⁹ Loc. cit.

³⁰ Loc. cit.

had not yet declared themselves--receiving such importance, but thought it might make one on "Recent Novels: English and French," which appeared in "Fraser," December 1847. Meanwhile I had written to Miss Brontë to tell her the delight with which her book filled me; and seem to have "sermonised" her, to judge from her reply.³¹

This was Miss Brontë's reply, dated November 6, 1847:

Dear Sir,--Your letter reached me yesterday. I beg to assure you that I appreciate fully the intention with which it was written, and I thank you sincerely both for its cheerful commendation and valuable advice.

You warn me to beware of melodrama, and you exhort me to adhere to the real. When I first began to write, so impressed was I with the truth of the principles you advocate, that I determined to take Nature and Truth as my sole guides, and to follow to their very foot-prints; I restrained imagination, eschewed romance, repressed excitement; over-bright colouring, too, I avoided, and sought to produce something which should be soft, grave, and true.

My work (a tale in one volume) being completed, I offered it to a publisher. He said it was original, faithful to nature, but he did not feel warranted in accepting it; such a work would not sell. 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.³²

"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,

³¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 351.

³² The tale referred to is The Professor, published after the death of the author.

in your forthcoming article in "Fraser," you would bestow a few words of enlightenment on the public who support the circulating libraries, you might, with your powers, do some good.

You advise me, too, not to stray far from the ground of experience, as I become weak when I enter the region of fiction; and you say "real experience is perennially interesting, and to all men."

I feel that this also is true; but, dear sir, is not the real experience of each individual very limited? And, if a writer dwells upon that solely or principally, is he not in danger of repeating himself, and also of becoming an egotist? Then, too, imagination is a strong, restless faculty, which claims to be heard and exercised: are we to be quite deaf to her cry, and insensate to her struggles? When she shows us bright pictures, are we never to look at them, and try to reproduce them? And when she is eloquent, and speaks rapidly and urgently in our ear, are we not to write to her dictation?

I shall anxiously search the next number of "Fraser" for your opinions on these points. Believe me, dear sir, yours gratefully,

C. Bell.³³

On the same day, November 6, 1847, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams, telling of the letter which she had received from Mr. Lewes, whose name as yet meant nothing to her:

. . . This letter bore the signature G. H. Lewes, and the writer informs me that it is his intention to write a critique on Jane Eyre for the December number of Fraser's Magazine, and possibly also, he intimates, a brief notice to the Westminster Review. Upon the whole he seems favourably inclined to the work, though he hints disapprobation of the melodramatic portions.

³³ Gaskell, op. cit., pp. 351-53.

Can you give me any information respecting Mr. Lewes? what station he occupies in the literary world and what works he has written? He styles himself 'a fellow novelist.' There is something in the candid tone of his letter which inclines me to think well of him.

I duly received your letter containing the notices from the Critic, and the two magazines, and also the Morning Post. I hope all these notices will work together for good; they must at any rate give the book a certain publicity.³⁴

Miss Brontë in the meantime had found out more about Mr. Lewes; she had read his Ranthurpe. She wrote once more to him, November 22, 1847:

. . . I await your criticism on Jane Eyre now with other sentiments than I entertained before the perusal of Ranthurpe.

You were a stranger to me. I did not particularly respect you. I did not feel that your praise or blame would have any special weight. I knew little of your right to condemn or approve. Now I am informed on these points.

You will be severe; your last letter taught me as much. Well! I shall try to extract good out of your severity; and besides, though I am now sure you are a just, discriminating man, yet being mortal, you must be fallible; and if any part of your censure galls me too keenly to the quick--gives me deadly pain--I shall for the present disbelieve it, and put it quite aside, till such time as I feel able to receive it without torture.³⁵

Early in December, 1847, came the Fraser review. It was an amazingly discerning review:

³⁴ Shorter, op. cit., p. 364.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 368.

After laughing over the Bachelor of the Albany, we wept over Jane Eyre. This, indeed, is a book after our own heart; and, if its merits have not forced it into notice by the time this paper comes before our readers, let us, in all earnestness, bid them lose not a day in sending for it. The writer is evidently a woman, and, unless we are deceived, new in the world of literature. But, man or woman, young or old, be that as it may, no such book has gladdened our eyes for a long while. Almost all that we require in a novelist she has: perception of character, and power of delineating it; picturesqueness; passion; and knowledge of life. The story is not only of singular interest, naturally evolved, unflagging to the last, but it fastens itself upon your attention, and will not leave you. The book closed, the enchantment continues. With the disentanglement of the plot, and the final release of the heroine from her difficulties, your interest does not cease. You go back again in memory to the various scenes in which she has figured; you linger on the way, and muse upon the several incidents in the life which has just been unrolled before you, affected by them as if they were the austere instructions drawn from a sorrowing existence, and not merely the cunning devices of an author's craft. Reality--deep, significant reality--is the great characteristic of the book. It is an autobiography,--not, perhaps, in the naked facts and circumstances, but in the actual suffering and experience. The form may be changed, and here and there some incidents invented; but the spirit remains such as it was. The machinery of the story may have been borrowed, but by means of this machinery the authoress is unquestionably setting forth her own experience. This gives the book its charm: it is soul speaking to soul; it is an utterance from the depths of a struggling, suffering, much-enduring spirit: suspiria de profundis!³⁶

Lewes mentioned the evils of the circulating libraries:

When we see a young writer exhibiting such remarkable power as there is in Jane Eyre, it is natural that we should ask, Is this experience drawn from an abundant

³⁶ George H. Lewes, "Jane Eyre," Fraser's Magazine, 36:690-91, December, 1847. The general title, which we have used in the bibliography, is, "Recent Novels: French and English."

source, or is it only the artistic mastery over small materials? Because, according as this question is answered, there are two suggestions to be made. Has the author seen much more and felt much more than what is here communicated? Then let new works continue to draw from that rich storehouse. Has the author led a quiet, secluded life, uninvolved in the great vortex of the world, undisturbed by varied passions, untried by strange calamities? Then let new works be planned and executed with excessive circumspection; for, unless a novel be built out of real experience, it can have no real success. To have vitality, it must spring from vitality. All the craft in the circulating-library will not make that seem true which is not true--will not affect the reader after his curiosity is satisfied.³⁷

Lewes, the artist, had an insight into human nature:

It is too often forgotten, that the most ignorant reader is a competent judge of truth in this sense, that he is always powerfully influenced by it, and always feels the absence of it. Hamlet, Don Quixotte,* Faust, marvellous creations as they are, with roots diving deep into the profoundest regions, and with branches rising into the highest altitudes of thought, do, nevertheless, powerfully interest even the foolishlest readers. There is a chord in the human breast which vibrates sympathetically whenever it be touched; and no artist need fear that, if he touch it with skill, his skill will be thrown away.

Quite true it is that the merest platitudes will also gain attention; true that a novelist, scorning all experience, may give such a representation of life as, while outraging every thing we know of life, while substituting the empty phantasmagoria of the library for breathing flesh and blood, shall, nevertheless, enchain the reader's attention, and create for the author a certain vogue. This may seem to militate against all we have said on the necessity for truth,--may seem, but does not. For, not to speak of the merited contempt with which all cultivated minds regard such an author and his works, it is very certain that the admiring

³⁷ Fraser's Magazine, op. cit., p. 691.

* This spelling is like that in the review, Don Quixotte.

readers themselves treat him no better than they would a conjuror; they are not his re-readers. No one, as Jean Paul remarks, will look twice at a conjuring trick of which he knows the secret. No one will read one of these novels twice when he knows the plot. The curiosity in both cases is excited, and during that excitement the means are never attended to, only the end. Thus we often hear professed novel-readers declare, that however stupid, trashy, and absurd the novel, they must finish it, "to see what becomes of the hero and heroine!" They are compelled to finish; but they never go back to it, never think of it afterwards. Whereas, if to that curiosity about the story there are added scenes which, being transcripts from the book of life, affect the reader as all truth of human nature must affect him, then the novel rises from the poor level of street-conjuring into the exalted region of art.

Of this kind is Jane Eyre. There are some defects in it--defects which the excellence of the rest only brings into stronger relief.³⁸

The reviewer pointed out the two major defects--melodrama and improbability. He alluded to the mad wife and to Jane's wanderings after she had left Thornfield Hall. Yet he praised the powerful writing displayed here. He declared that the characters in the book were masterfully drawn. The masterpiece was the character, Jane:

. . . Jane herself is a creation. The delicate handling of this figure alone implies a dramatic genius of no common order. We never lose sight of her plainness; no effort is made to throw romance about her--no extraordinary goodness or cleverness appeals to your admiration; but you admire, you love her,--love her for the strong will, honest mind, loving heart, and peculiar but fascinating person. A creature of flesh and blood, with very fleshly infirmities, and very mortal excellencies;

³⁸ Fraser, op. cit., pp. 691-92.

a woman, not a pattern: that is the Jane Eyre here represented. Mr. Rochester is also well drawn, and from the life; but it is the portrait of a man drawn by a woman, and is not comparable to the portrait of Jane. . . .39

St. John Rivers had a touch of the "circulating-library." The critic classified him as another character drawn by a woman. Helen Burns, however, he described as "at once eminently ideal and accurately real." Not only were the characters done in a masterly fashion, said Lewes, but the reality of description was remarkably striking:

. . . and that reality is not confined to the characters and incidents, but is also striking in the descriptions of the various aspects of Nature, and of the houses, rooms, and furniture. The pictures stand out distinctly before you: they are pictures, and not mere bits of "fine writing." The writer is evidently painting by words a picture that she has in her mind, not "making-up" from vague remembrances, and with the consecrated phrases of "poetical prose."⁴⁰

Lewes quoted from Jane Eyre:

"Folds of scarlet drapery shut in my view to the right hand; to the left were the clear panes of glass, protecting, but not separating, me from the drear November day. At intervals, while turning over the leaves of my book, I studied the aspect of that winter afternoon. Afar, it offered a pale blank of mist and cloud; near, a scene of wet lawn and storm-beat shrub, with ceaseless rain sweeping away wildly before a long and lamentable blast."⁴¹

³⁹ Fraser, op. cit., p. 692.

⁴⁰ Loc. cit.

⁴¹ Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, p. 2.

As an example of Currer Bell's power of "connecting external appearances with internal effects--of representing the psychological interpretation of material phenomena," Mr. Lewes gave the scene in the red room, where the small Jane was locked.⁴²

The critic felt that there might have been a little less of the Scotch dialect or North-country phrases in the book; he lauded the absence of artificiality in the style of writing. Lewes advised Currer Bell, however, to "keep reality distinctly before you, and paint it as accurately as you can: invention will never equal the effect of truth."⁴³

This heart-warming review meant much to the shy, retiring little person who dared to write as she felt. On January 4, 1848, she wrote to Mr. Williams:

I have sometimes thought that I ought to have written to Mr. Lewes to thank him for his review in Fraser; and, indeed, I did write a note, but then it occurred to me that he did not require the author's thanks, and I feared it would be superfluous to send it, therefore I refrained; however, though I have not expressed gratitude, I have felt it.⁴⁴

On January 12, 1848, however, she wrote to Lewes:

⁴² Jane Eyre, pp. 9-10.

⁴³ Fraser, op. cit., p. 693.

⁴⁴ Shorter, op. cit., p. 384.

I thank you, then, sincerely for your generous review; and it is with the sense of double content I express my gratitude, because I am now sure the tribute is not superfluous or obtrusive. You were not severe on Jane Eyre; you were very lenient. I am glad you told me my faults plainly in private, for in your public notice you touch on them so lightly, I should perhaps have passed them over, thus indicated, with too little reflection.

I mean to observe your warning about being careful how I undertake new works; my stock of materials is not abundant, but very slender; and besides, neither my experience, my acquirements, nor my powers are sufficiently varied to justify my ever becoming a frequent writer. I tell you this because your article in Fraser left in me an uneasy impression that you were disposed to think better of the author of Jane Eyre than that individual deserved; and I would rather you had a correct than a flattering opinion of me, even though I should never see you.⁴⁵

In December, 1847, Charlotte Eront^h and her publishers discussed a second edition of Jane Eyre. Currer Bell still remembered the kindness of Mr. Thackeray toward an unknown author; furthermore, she regarded him with the highest esteem. She wrote to Mr. Williams, December 11, 1847, mentioning Mr. Thackeray:

I hardly ever felt delight equal to that which cheered me when I received your letter containing an extract from a note by Mr. Thackeray, in which he expressed himself gratified with the perusal of Jane Eyre. Mr. Thackeray is a keen, ruthless satirist. I had never perused his writings but with feelings of blended admiration and indignation. Critics, it appears to me, do not know what an intellectual boa-constrictor he is--they

⁴⁵ Shorter, op. cit., p. 386.

call him "humorous," "brilliant"; his is a most scalping humour, a most deadly brilliancy--he does not play with his prey, he coils round it and crushes it in his rings. He seems terribly in earnest in his war against the follies and the falsehood of the world. I wonder what the world thinks of him. . . .⁴⁶

Therefore, it was not surprising that, in considering a second edition of Jane Eyre, she decided to honor the great man by dedicating the work to him. She wrote once more to her publishers, December 13, 1847:

. . . In case of Jane Eyre reaching a second edition, I should wish some few corrections to be made, and will prepare an errata. How would the accompanying preface do? I thought it better to be brief.⁴⁷

But on December 21, 1847, she wrote to Mr. Williams:

I am, for my own part, dissatisfied with the preface I sent--I fear it savours of flippancy. If you see no objection I should prefer substituting the enclosed. It is rather more lengthy, but it expresses something I have long wished to express.⁴⁸

Two days later, December 23, 1847, she wrote again:

I am glad that you and Messrs. Smith and Elder approve the second preface.

I send an errata of the first volume, and part of the second. I will send the rest of the corrections as soon as possible.

⁴⁶ E. B. Williams, "Extracts from Some Unpublished Letters of Charlotte Brontë," Macmillan's Magazine, 64:120, July, 1891.

⁴⁷ Shorter, op. cit., p. 373.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 376.

Will the enclosed dedication suffice? I have made it brief, because I wished to avoid any appearance of pomposity or pretension.⁴⁹

Miss Brontë enclosed the following preface to the second edition of Jane Eyre, dedicated to Mr. Thackeray:

A preface to the first edition of 'Jane Eyre' being unnecessary, I gave none: this second edition demands a few words both of acknowledgment and miscellaneous remark.

My thanks are due in three quarters.

To the Public, for the indulgent ear it has inclined to a plain tale with few pretensions.

To the Press, for the fair field its honest suffrage has opened to an obscure aspirant.

To my Publishers, for the aid their tact, their energy, their practical sense, and frank liberality have afforded an unknown and unrecommended Author.

The Press and the Public are but vague personifications for me, and I must thank them in vague terms; but my Publishers are definite: so are certain generous critics who have encouraged me as only large-hearted and high-minded men know how to encourage a struggling stranger; to them, *i.e.*, to my Publishers and the select Reviewers, I say cordially, Gentlemen, I thank you from my heart.

Having thus acknowledged what I owe those who have aided and approved me, I turn to another class; a small one, so far as I know, but not, therefore, to be overlooked. I mean the timorous or carping few who doubt the tendency of such books as 'Jane Eyre': in whose eyes whatever is unusual is wrong; whose ears detect in each protest against bigotry--that parent of crime--an insult to piety, that regent of God on earth. I would suggest to such doubters certain obvious distinctions; I would remind them of certain simple truths.

⁴⁹ Shorter, op. cit., p. 377.

Conventionality is not morality. Self-righteousness is not religion. To attack the first is not to assail the last. To pluck the mask from the face of the Pharisee, is not to lift an impious hand to the Crown of Thorns.

These things and deeds are diametrically opposed: they are as distinct as is vice from virtue. Men too often confound them: they should not be confounded: appearances should not be mistaken for truth; narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few, should not be substituted for the world-redeeming creed of Christ. There is--I repeat it--a difference; and it is a good, and not a bad action to mark broadly and clearly the line of separation between them.

The world may not like to see these ideas dissevered, for it has been accustomed to blend them; finding it convenient to make external show pass for sterling worth--to let white-washed walls vouch for clean shrines. It may hate him who dares to scrutinise and expose--to rase the gilding, and show base metal under it--to penetrate the sepulchre, and reveal charnel relics: but hate as it will, it is indebted to him.

Ahab did not like Micaiah, because he never prophesied good concerning him, but evil: probably he liked the sycophant son of Chenaanah better; yet might Ahab have escaped a bloody death, had he but stopped his ears to flattery and opened them to faithful counsel.

There is a man in our own days whose words are not framed to tickle delicate ears: who, to my thinking, comes before the great ones of society, much as the son of Imlah came before the throned Kings of Judah and Israel; and who speaks truth as deep, with a power as prophet-like and as vital--a mien as dauntless and as daring. Is the satirist of 'Vanity Fair' admired in high places? I cannot tell; but I think if some of those amongst whom he hurls the Greek fire of his sarcasm, and over whom he flashes the levin-brand of his denunciation, were to take his warnings in time--they or their seed might yet escape a fatal Ramoth-Gilead.

Why have I alluded to this man? I have alluded to him, Reader, because I think I see in him an intellect profounder and more unique than his contemporaries have yet recognised; because I regard him as the first social regenerator of the day--as the very master of that

working corps who would restore to rectitude the warped system of things; because I think no commentator on his writings has yet found the comparison that suits him, the terms which rightly characterise his talent. They say he is like Fielding; they talk of his wit, humour, comic powers. He resembles Fielding as an eagle does a vulture: Fielding could stoop on carrion, but Thackeray never does. His wit is bright, his humour attractive, but both bear the same relation to his serious genius, that the mere lambent sheet-lightning, playing under the edge of the summer cloud, does to the electric death-spark hid in its womb. Finally; I have alluded to Mr. Thackeray, because to him--if he will accept the tribute of a total stranger--I have dedicated this second edition of 'JANE EYRE.'

December 21, 1847.⁵⁰

CURRER BELL.

After Mr. Thackeray had received the second edition of Jane Eyre, he wrote to Mr. Williams:

I am quite vexed that by some blundering of mine I should have delayed answering Currer Bell's enormous compliment so long. I didn't know what to say in reply; it quite flustered and upset me. Is it true, I wonder? I'm-- But a truce to egotism. Thank you for your kindness in sending me the volumes, and (indirectly) for the greatest compliment I have ever received in my life.⁵¹

On January 22, 1848, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams:

I have received the Morning Herald, and was much pleased with the notice, chiefly on account of the reference made to that portion of the preface which concerns Messrs. Smith & Elder. If my tribute of thanks can benefit my publishers, it is desirable that it should have as much publicity as possible.

⁵⁰ Brontë, Jane Eyre, Preface, pp. xxxiii-xxxv.

⁵¹ Macmillan, op. cit., p. 123.

I do not know if the part which relates to Mr. Thackeray is likely to be as well received; but whether generally approved of and understood or not, I shall not regret having written it, for I am convinced of its truth.

I see I was mistaken in my idea that the Athenaeum and others wished to ascribe the authorship of Wuthering Heights to Currer Bell; the contrary is the case, Jane Eyre is given to Ellis Bell; and Mr. Newby, it appears, thinks it expedient so to frame his advertisements as to favour the misapprehension.⁵²

By January 28, 1848, Miss Erontë had received a letter from Mr. Thackeray. She wrote to Mr. Williams:

I need not tell you that when I saw Mr. Thackeray's letter enclosed under your cover, the sight made me very happy. It was some time before I dared open it, lest my pleasure in receiving it should be mixed with pain on learning its contents--lest, in short, the dedication should have been, in some way, unacceptable to him.

And, to tell you the truth, I fear this must have been the case; he does not say so, his letter is most friendly in its noble simplicity, but he apprises me, at the commencement, of a circumstance which both surprised and dismayed me.

I suppose it is no indiscretion to tell you this circumstance, for you doubtless know it already. It appears that his private position is in some points similar to that I have ascribed to Mr. Rochester, that thence arose a report that Jane Eyre had been written by a governess in his family, and that the dedication coming now has confirmed everybody in the surmise.

Well may it be said that fact is often stranger than fiction! The coincidence struck me as equally unfortunate and extraordinary. Of course I knew nothing whatever of Mr. Thackeray's domestic concerns, he existed

⁵²Shorter, op. cit., pp. 388-89.

for me only as an author. Of all regarding his personality, station, connections, private history, I was, and am still in a great measure, totally in the dark; but I am very very sorry that my inadvertent blunder should have made his name and affairs a subject for common gossip.

The very fact of his not complaining at all and addressing me with such kindness, notwithstanding the pain and annoyance I must have caused him, increases my chagrin. I could not half express my regret to him in my answer, for I was restrained by the consciousness that that regret was just worth nothing at all--quite valueless for healing the mischief I had done.

Can you tell me anything more on this subject? or can you guess in what degree the unlucky coincidence would affect him--whether it would pain him much and deeply: for he says so little himself on the topic, I am at a loss to divine the exact truth--but I fear.⁵³

In October, 1848, Mr. Thackeray wrote in a letter:

. . . Old Dilke of the Athenaeum, vows that Procter and his wife, between them, wrote Jane Eyre, and when I protest ignorance, says, "Pooh! you know who wrote it, you are the deepest rogue in England, &c." I wonder whether it can be true? It is just possible, and then what a singular circumstance is the † fire of the two dedications. . . .⁵⁴

However, in a letter to Miss Rigby, John G. Lockhart referred, on November 13, 1848, to the gossip of Mayfair:

I know nothing of the writers, but the common rumour is that they are brothers of the weaving order in some Lancashire town. At first it was generally said that

⁵³ Shorter, op. cit., pp. 390-91.

⁵⁴ A Collection of Letters of Thackeray, (1847-1855), p. 29. (These letters were in the main in the possession of Mrs. Brookfield). A footnote explains that the two dedications referred to were Jane Eyre to Thackeray, and Vanity Fair to Barry Cornwall, or Procter.

Currer was a lady, and Mayfair circumstantialised by making her the chère amie of Mr. Thackeray. But your skill in 'dress' settles the question of sex. . . .⁵⁵

On January 4, 1848, after she had read the review of Jane Eyre in the Westminster Review, Charlotte wrote:

What makes you say that the notice in the Westminster Review is not by Mr. Lewes? It expresses precisely his opinions, and he said he would perhaps insert a few lines in that periodical.⁵⁶

The review was indeed like Lewes:

Decidedly the best novel of the season; and one, moreover, from the natural tone pervading the narrative, and the originality and freshness of its style, possessing the merit so rarely met with now-a-days in works of this class, of amply repaying a second perusal. Whoever may be the author, we hope to see more such books from her pen; for that these volumes are from the pen of a lady, and a clever one too, we have not the shadow of a doubt: nor can there be any question as to the reality of many of the scenes and personages so artistically depicted; the characters are too life-like to be the mere creations of fancy, and sketchy as some of them are, they are wondrous telling: several of them we almost feel persuaded we have met with in real life. . . .⁵⁷

On January 29, 1848, the Literary World reviewed Jane Eyre:

This book, we will venture to say, will create a deeper interest and seize more strongly on the hearts

⁵⁵ Letters and Journals of Lady Eastlake, 1:222.

⁵⁶ Shorter, op. cit., p. 384.

⁵⁷ "Jane Eyre. An Autobiography," Westminster Review, 48:581, January, 1848. (Some biographers give this review as definitely the writing of Lewes).

of the reading public, than any work of fiction that has appeared since Miss Bremer's "Neighbors." It is not a fiction, it is a transcript out of the real life of woman; it may be that some of the incidents are improbable or exaggerated, but the spirit of the book is truth itself. The machinery that carries on the story may have been invented, but the actual suffering, the sad experience, the sorrowing existence of the heroine, these are no cunning devices, and the story of these is the outpouring of the overcharged soul speaking in tones that find an echo in the reader's heart. The book is written with singular freshness; it is not "made up" in the usual "circulating library novel style," and filled with conventionalities and platitudes; it is vivid, real, and picturesque; the style is singular, but fascinating; the story is of singular interest, and rivets the attention to the last; the characters are drawn with a masterly hand, and individualized with singular power. Altogether, it is a work of great character and remarkable talent, and we feel assured that whoever commences it will not lay it down until the spell of enchantment is broken by the ending of the book.⁵⁸

On March 3, 1848, Miss Brontë wrote to the reader of Smith and Elder. She had received the Christian Remembrancer:

I have received the Christian Remembrancer, and read the review. It is written with some ability; but to do justice was evidently not the critic's main object, therefore he excuses himself from performing that duty.

I dare say the reviewer imagines that Currer Bell ought to be extremely afflicted, very much cut up, by some smart things he says--this, however, is not the case. C. Bell is on the whole rather encouraged than dispirited by the review: the hard-wrung praise extorted reluctantly from a foe is the most precious praise of all--you are sure that this, at least, has no admixture of flattery. I fear he has too high an opinion of my abilities and of what I can do; but that is

⁵⁸ "Jane Eyre; an Autobiography," Literary World, 2:633, January, 1848.

his own fault. In other respects, he aims his shafts in the dark, and the success, or, rather, ill-success of his hits makes me laugh rather than cry. His shafts of sarcasm are nicely polished, keenly pointed; he should not have wasted them in shooting at a mark he cannot see.

I hope such reviews will not make much difference with me, and that if the spirit moves me in future to say anything about priests, etc., I shall say it with the same freedom as heretofore. I hope also that their anger will not make me angry. As a body, I had no ill-will against them to begin with, and I feel it would be an error to let opposition engender such ill-will. A few individuals may possibly be called upon to sit for their portraits some time; if their brethren in general dislike the resemblance and abuse the artist--
tant pis!⁵⁹

The review spoke of the "masculine power" of Jane Eyre, although surely the author must be a woman. The work, too, was assuredly autobiographical; the preface was pronounced "self-laudatory":

Since the publication of 'Grantley Manor,' no novel has created so much sensation as 'Jane Eyre.' Indeed, the public taste seems to have outstripped its guides in appreciating the remarkable power which this book displays. For no leading review has yet noticed it, and here we have before us the second edition. The name and sex of the writer are still a mystery. Currer Bell . . . is a mere nom de guerre--perhaps an anagram. However, we, for our part, cannot doubt that the book is written by a female, and, as certain provincialisms indicate, by one from the North of England. Who, indeed, but a woman could have ventured, with the smallest prospect of success, to fill three octavo volumes with the history of a woman's heart? The hand which drew Juliet and Miranda would have shrunk from such a task.

⁵⁹ Shorter, op. cit., pp. 399-400.

That the book is readable, is to us almost proof enough of the truth of our hypothesis. But we could accumulate evidences to the same effect. Mr. Rochester, the hero of the story, is as clearly the vision of a woman's fancy, as the heroine is the image of a woman's heart. Besides, there are many minor indications of a familiarity with all the mysteries of female life which no man can possess, or would dare to counterfeit. . . . Yet we cannot wonder that the hypothesis of a male author should have been started, or that ladies especially should still be rather determined to uphold it. For a book more unfeminine, both in its excellences and defects, it would be hard to find in the annals of female authorship. Throughout there is masculine power, breadth and shrewdness, combined with masculine hardness, coarseness, and freedom of expression. Slang is not rare. The humour is frequently produced by a use of Scripture, at which one is rather sorry to have smiled. The love-scenes glow with a fire as fierce as that of Sappho, and somewhat more fuliginous. There is an intimate acquaintance with the worst parts of human nature, a practised sagacity in discovering the latent ulcer, and a ruthless rigour in exposing it, which must command our admiration, but are almost startling in one of the softer sex. Jane Eyre professes to be an autobiography, and we think it likely that in some essential respects it is so. If the authoress has not been, like her heroine, an oppressed orphan, a starved and bullied charity-school girl, and a despised and slighted governess (and the intensity of feeling which she shows in speaking of the wrongs of this last class seems to prove that they have been her own), at all events we fear she is one to whom the world has not been kind. And, assuredly, never was unkindness more cordially repaid. Never was there a better hater. Every page burns with moral Jacobinism. 'Unjust, unjust,' is the burden of every reflection upon the things and powers that be. All virtue is but well masked vice, all religious profession and conduct is but the whitening of the sepulchre, all self-denial is but deeper selfishness. In the preface to the second edition, this temper rises to the transcendental pitch. There our authoress is Micaiah, and her generation Ahab; and the Ramoth Gilead, which is to be the reward of disregarding her denunciations, is looked forward to with at least as much of unction as of sorrow: although we think that even the doomed King of Israel might have stood excused for his blindness, if the prophet had opened his message of wrath with a self-laudatory preface and eight closely-printed pages of

panegyric quotations, culled with omnivorous vanity from every kind of newspaper.⁶⁰

The scene of Aunt Reed's death was cited from Jane Eyre⁶¹ as a specimen of Currer Bell's powerful writing:

. . . a specimen at once of extraordinary powers of analyzing character and moral painting, and of a certain want of feeling in their exercise which defeats the moral object, and causes a reaction in the mind of the reader like that of a barbarous execution in the mind of the beholder. . . .⁶²

The character, Jane Eyre, seemed to be the portrait of the author:

The plot is most extravagantly improbable, verging all along upon the supernatural, and at last running fairly into it. All the power is shown and all the interest lies in the characters. We have before intimated our belief, that in Jane Eyre, the heroine of the piece, we have, in some measure, a portrait of the writer. If not, it is a most skilful imitation of autobiography. The character embodied in it is precisely the same as that which pervades the whole book, and breaks out most signally in the Preface--a temper naturally harsh, made harsher by ill usage, and visiting both its defect and its wrongs upon the world--an understanding disturbed and perverted by cynicism, but still strong and penetrating--fierce love and fiercer hate--all this viewed from within and coloured by self-love. We only wish we could carry our hypothesis a step further, and suppose that the triumph which the loving and loveable element finally obtains over the unloving and unloveable in the fictitious character had also its parallel in the true.

⁶⁰ "Jane Eyre: an Autobiography," Christian Remembrancer, n.s., 15:396-97, April, 1848.

⁶¹ Jane Eyre, pp. 288-91.

⁶² Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., p. 397.

But we fear that few readers will rise from the book with that impression.⁶³

The characters were powerfully drawn; especially were Mr. Rochester and Mr. Brocklehurst excellent:

The character of Mr. Rochester, the hero, the lover, and eventually the husband, of Jane Eyre, we have already noticed as being, to our minds, the characteristic production of a female pen. Not an Adonis, but a Hercules in mind and body, with a frame of adamant, a brow of thunder and a lightning eye, a look and voice of command, all-knowing and all-discerning, fierce in love and hatred, rough in manner, rude in courtship, with a shade of Byronic gloom and appetizing mystery--add to this that when loved he is past middle age, and when wedded he is blind and fire-scarred, and you have such an Acis as no male writer would have given his Galatea, and yet what commends itself as a true embodiment of the visions of a female imagination. The subordinate characters almost all show proportionate power. Mr. Brocklehurst, the patron and bashaw of Lowood, a female orphan school, in which he practises self-denial, alieno ventre, and exercises a vicarious humility, is a sort of compound of Squeers and Pecksniff, but more probable than either, and drawn with as strong a hand. His first interview with Jane Eyre, in which he appears to the eye of the child 'like a black pillar,' and a scene at Lowood in which, from the midst of a galaxy of smartly dressed daughters, he lectures the half-starved and half-clothed orphans on his favorite virtues, would be well worth quoting, but that their humour borders on the profane. His love of miracles of destruction is a true hit. Those miracles are still credible. So is the inscription on the wall of Lowood. 'Lowood Institution. This portion was rebuilt A. D. --, by Naomi Brocklehurst, of Brocklehurst Hall, in this county.' 'Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.'⁶⁴

⁶³ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., pp. 399-400.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 400.

Although Aunt Reed was classified as a "good type of the 'strong-minded' and odious woman," and St. John Rivers, the Calvinist minister, possessed the characteristic of "self-denial strangely shot with selfishness," yet the character, Helen Burns, was pronounced feeble:

. . . The feeblest character in the book is that of Helen Burns, who is meant to be a perfect Christian, and is a simple seraph, conscious moreover of her own perfection. She dies early in the first volume, and our authoress might say of her saint, as Shakspeare said of his Mercutio, 'If I had not killed her, she would have killed me.' In her, however, the Christianity of Jane Eyre is concentrated, and with her it expires, leaving the moral world in a kind of Scandinavian gloom, which is hardly broken by the faint glimmerings of a 'doctrine of the equality of souls,' and some questionable streaks of that 'world-redeeming creed of Christ,' which being emancipated from 'narrow human doctrines, that only tend to elate and magnify a few,' is seldom invoked but for the purpose of showing that all Christian profession is bigotry and all Christian practice is hypocrisy.⁶⁵

The critic praised the imaginative painting of Jane Eyre. He quoted a descriptive extract, "probably from the threshold of the lake country . . ."⁶⁶ Although Currer Bell's painting of nature was excellent, her description of social life was a failure:

The rather ambitious descriptions of manners and social life which the book contains are, we are bound

⁶⁵ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., pp. 400-01.

⁶⁶ Jane Eyre, pp. 86-87.

to say, a most decided failure. Their satire falls back with accumulated force upon the head of the satirist. It is 'high life below stairs' with a vengeance; the fashionable world seen through the area railings, and drawn with the black end of the kitchen poker. Listen to the polite badinage of Mr. Rochester's drawing room.⁶⁷

The "badinage" referred to was the conversation between Lady Ingram and her daughter, and that of the "lily-flower" Miss Ingram and Mr. Rochester; the critic quoted parts.⁶⁸

The Remembrancer gave this "reluctant praise":

. . . To say that 'Jane Eyre' is positively immoral or antichristian, would be to do its writer an injustice. Still it wears a questionable aspect. . . . The authoress of 'Jane Eyre' will have power in her generation, whether she choose to exercise it for good or evil. She has depth and breadth of thought--she has something of that peculiar gift of genius, the faculty of discerning the wonderful in and through the commonplace--she has a painter's eye and hand--she has great satiric power, and, in spite of some exaggerated and morbid cynicism, a good fund of common sense. To this common sense we would appeal. Let her take care that while she detects and exposes humbug in other minds, she does not suffer it to gain dominion in her own. Let her take warning, if she will, from Mr. Thackeray, to whom she dedicates her second edition, whom she thinks 'the first social regenerator of the day,' and whose 'Greek-fire sarcasm' and 'levin-brand denunciation' she overwhelms with such extravagant panegyric. Let her mark how, while looking every where for 'Snobs' to denounce, he has himself fallen into one, and not the least vicious, phase of that very character which he denounces.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., p. 401.

⁶⁸ Jane Eyre, pp. 213, 214.

⁶⁹ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., pp. 408-09.

In March, 1848, the British Quarterly Review gave a brief, but quite favorable, notice of Jane Eyre:

Everybody has been praising Jane Eyre, and for once everybody has been in the right. It is indeed a singularly natural, vivacious, and instructive story. It bounds along more in the manner of an express train than of a stage wagon; is full of the impulses of fresh feeling; and the writer, almost without seeming to intend it, places before you many a vivid delineation of character, and many a lesson of wisdom. It is the story of an orphan, beginning her career in a would-be asylum for orphans, and passing through changes, not of 'flood and field,' but of the sort which are too common in our world, and of which we most of us think too little. It is not only a book worth reading, but one deserving thought, and more than one perusal.⁷⁰

When Jane Eyre was published, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams and asked that a copy of the book be sent to the Dublin University Magazine:

I do not know whether the Dublin University Magazine is included in the list of periodicals to which Messrs Smith & Elder are accustomed to send copies of new publications, but as a former work, the joint production of myself and my two relatives, Ellis and Acton Bell, received a somewhat favourable notice in that magazine, it appears to me that if the editor's attention were drawn to Jane Eyre he might possibly bestow on it also a few words of remark.⁷¹

On May 1, 1848, she wrote to Mr. Williams:

⁷⁰ "Jane Eyre. An Autobiography," British Quarterly Review, 7:257-58, February, 1848.

⁷¹ Shorter, op. cit., p. 361.

I have received the Dublin University Magazine. The notice is more favourable than I had anticipated: indeed, I had for a long time ceased to anticipate any from that quarter; but the critic does not strike one as too bright. . . .⁷²

The Dublin University Magazine praised the novel:

. . . The first few pages, we must confess, rather tired us, but we turned them rapidly over, and found "metal more attractive." We were pleased; proceeding further, we were charmed; and as, towards the hour of noon, we finished the book, we closed it with the conviction, that it was one of the most agreeable and clever novels it had for a long time been our good fortune to peruse. . . . There is not to be found in her pages--for we take it for granted that this book is the work of a female pen--any new or great exhibition of character, nor much poetic conception. No flashes of wit, no piquancy of dialogue enlivens it; but the story is well sustained and interesting; and when we have read to the conclusion, we feel that sort of regret which men experience upon parting with some pleasant friend, whose sentiments and feelings are congenial to our own.⁷³

The critic commented on two powerful scenes in the book, Jane Eyre:

. . . The scene in the haunted red chamber is described with a powerful and vivid pen; but there is, in point of fine description at least, nothing better than the sketch of Mr. Brocklehurst--(what a capital name, too), the principal of the orphan asylum, whither the hapless Jane Eyre is to be removed. . . .⁷⁴

⁷² Shorter, op. cit., pp. 413-14.

⁷³ "An Evening's Gossip on New Novels," Dublin University Magazine, 31:608-09, May, 1848.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 609. (The name was not Brocklehurst, as the critic called it, but Brocklehurst).

The critic quoted the scene of Jane's meeting with Mr. Brocklehurst at the home of Aunt Reed.⁷⁵ Jane was to go to the orphan asylum. The critic praised all the portraits, but that of Jane was perfect:

. . . The characters whose portraits afforded us the greatest pleasure, are those of the heroine herself, her ethereal lover, the young clergyman who is about to become a missionary, the old housekeeper, Mrs. Fairfax, and Mr. Brocklehurst, the treasurer at Lowood, whom we have already held up for the admiration of our readers. He is sketched with the pencil of a true artist. . . . In some particulars it is painted with even finer touches than that of the renowned Squeers. But Jane Eyre is perfect: the little, plain-featured, not to say ugly, governess, full of passion and feeling, reminds us, in some degree, of the Consuelo of George Sand. . . . We think, however, that the portrait of Jane is very much superior to that drawn by the French novelist. It is drawn by one whose pen is cunning to describe every nook and turning in the female heart. . . .⁷⁶

The reviewer mentioned that Jane Eyre contained a little improbability. He was impressed, though, "beyond the possibility of doubt, with the belief that many of the scenes through which the author has passed, as well as the feelings which she describes, are real; and we cannot give it higher praise. . . ." ⁷⁷

Tait's Edinburgh Magazine appeared in May, 1848:

⁷⁵ Jane Eyre, pp. 31-33.

⁷⁶ Dublin University Magazine, op. cit., pp. 613-14.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 614.

We are somewhat tardy in our notice of this work, which is undoubtedly the best novel of the season, if that can be called a novel which is written in the style of an autobiography. We have rarely had the pleasure of reading a better or more interesting work of its class. "Jane Eyre" has already acquired a standard renown, and few circulating libraries, we should think, of any pretensions, are now without it. The earnest tone, deep fervour, and truthful delineation of feeling and nature displayed in its pages, must render it a general favourite.

The story is a love one, but it is love out of the common course, and the scenes and incidents which are evolved out of its development are not of an ordinary kind, though they are not beyond the probability of occurrence in actual life. There is a touch of nature in the whole book, which is one of its greatest charms.⁷⁸

Tait's quoted a passage from Jane Eyre, showing the sufferings of the charity girls in winter time.⁷⁹ Lowood was described in this manner:

. . . To Lowood, a sum of fifteen pounds was paid for each girl, on her entrance, by her friends, to entitle her to admission--the deficiency for their board and teaching being supplied by subscriptions. It was, therefore, partly a charity school; and yet half-hospital, and one part of right and three parts charitable institutions, are not always the best or most comfortable. There still remains in the breast of the inmates a feeling of pride, arising from their paid title to be there, which leaves a proportionate sense of degradation at the dependent nature of their position, and their knowledge that though their right to admission has been duly purchased, their subsistence and education, their bed, board, and lodging, have to be provided for by the often unwilling subscriptions of what Helen Burns fitly styled, in her description of

⁷⁸ "Jane Eyre," Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, 15:346, n.s., May, 1848.

⁷⁹ Jane Eyre, pp. 66-67.

the institution, as "different benevolent-minded ladies and gentlemen in this neighbourhood and in London." This feeling Jane was resolved to conquer.⁸⁰

Tait's quoted Jane's meeting with Rochester on the road,⁸¹ and other passages. These "show the power and vivid painting of Jane Eyre, and bear out our high opinions of its merits. We have only to add, that its views of human nature are in accordance with truth, and the morality it inculcates is throughout of an unexceptionable and instructive nature."⁸²

In her letter to W. S. Williams, October 6, 1848, Charlotte referred to her brother's death. She was naturally morbid, because of the unnatural conditions surrounding the death of Branwell. She had just received Blackwood's Magazine:

Blackwood's mention of Jane Eyre gratified me much, and will gratify me more, I dare say, when the ferment of other feelings than that of literary ambition shall have a little subsided in my mind.⁸³

Blackwood's had been a favorite with Charlotte Brontë since childhood. As early as the year 1829, when she was a child of thirteen years, she had written:

⁸⁰ Tait's Edinburgh Magazine, loc. cit.

⁸¹ Jane Eyre, pp. 132-35.

⁸² Tait's, op. cit., p. 348.

⁸³ Shorter, op. cit., p. 455.

Papa and Branwell are gone for the newspaper, the "Leeds Intelligencer," a most excellent Tory newspaper, edited by Mr. Wood, and the proprietor, Mr. Henneman. We take two and see three newspapers a week. We take the "Leeds Intelligencer," Tory, and the "Leeds Mercury," Whig, edited by Mr. Baines, and his brother, son-in-law, and his two sons, Edward and Talbot. We see the "John Bull;" it is a high Tory, very violent. Dr. Driver lends us it, as likewise "Blackwood's Magazine," the most able periodical there is. The editor is Mr. Christopher North, an old man seventy-four years of age; the 1st of April is his birthday; his company are Timothy Tickler, Morgan O'Doherty, Macrabin Mordecai, Mullion, Warnell, and James Hogg, a man of most extraordinary genius, a Scottish shepherd.⁸⁴

Now Blackwood's had reviewed Jane Eyre. The notice was in dialogue form, with the characters of Aquilius, Lydia, and the Curate discussing the book:

Aquilius.--It is a very pathetic tale--very singular; and so like truth that it is difficult to avoid believing that much of the characters and incidents are taken from life, though woman is called the weaker sex. Here, in one example, is represented the strongest passion and the strongest principle, admirably supported.

Curate.--It is an episode in this work-a-day world, most interesting, and touched at once with a daring, yet delicate hand. In spite of all novel rules, the love heroine of the tale has no personal beauty to recommend her to the deepest affection of a man of sense, of station, and who had seen much of the world, not uncontaminated by it. It seems to have been the purpose of the author to show that high and noble sentiments, and great affection, can be both made subservient, and even heightened, by the energy of practical wisdom. If the author has purposely formed a heroine without the heroine's usual accomplishments, with a knowledge of the world, and even with a purpose to heighten that woman in our admiration, he has made no small inroad into the virtues.

⁸⁴ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 88.

that are usually attributed to every lover, in the construction of a novel. He, the hero, has great faults-- why should we mince the word?--vice. And yet so singular is the fatality of love, that it would be impossible to find two characters so necessary to exhibit true virtues, and make the happiness of each. The execution of the painting is as perfect as the conception.

Lydia.--I think every part of the novel perfect, though I have no doubt many will object, in some instances, both to the attachment and the conduct of Jane Eyre.

Aquilius.--It is not a book for Prudes--it is not a book for effeminate and tasteless men; it is for the enjoyment of a feeling heart and vigorous understanding.

Lydia.--I never can forget her passage across the heath, and her desolate night's lodging there.

Curate.--But you will remember it without pain, for it was at once the suffering and the triumph of woman's virtue.

Aquilius.--To my mind, one of the most beautiful passages is the return of Jane Eyre, when she sees in the twilight her "master" and her lover solitary, and feeling his way with his hands, baring his sightless sorrow to the chill and drizzly night.⁸⁵

George Eliot wrote to Charles Bray in June, 1848, and mentioned Jane Eyre. It is interesting to note her view of Rochester and his mad wife:

I have read "Jane Eyre," and shall be glad to know what you admire in it. All self-sacrifice is good, but one would like it to be in a somewhat nobler cause than that of a diabolical law which chains a man soul and body to a putrefying carcass. However, the book is*

⁸⁵ "A Few Words About Novels," Blackwood's Magazine, 63:473-74, October, 1848.

* The word, carcass, was spelled thus in the review.

interesting; only I wish the characters would talk a little less like the heroes and heroines of police reports.⁸⁶

John Gibson Lockhart had written, about six months before, to Mrs. Hope; he, too, mentioned Jane Eyre. The letter was dated December 29, 1847:

I have finished the adventures of Miss Jane Eyre, and think her far the cleverest that has written since Austen and Edgeworth were in their prime. Worth fifty Trollopes and Martineaus rolled into one counterpane, with fifty Dickenses and Bulwers to keep them company--but rather a brazen Miss.⁸⁷

In October, 1848, Miss Brontë had a review from an American source. The North American Review referred to the "Jane Eyre fever," which attempted to corrupt young America. The critique was not deemed complimentary to the author:

The first three novels on our list are those which have proceeded from the firm of Bell & Co. Not many months ago, the New England States were visited by a distressing mental epidemic, passing under the name of the "Jane Eyre fever," which defied all the usual nostrums of the established doctors of criticism. Its effects varied with different constitutions, in some producing a soft ethical sentimentality, which relaxed all the fibres of conscience, and in others exciting a general fever of moral and religious indignation. It was to no purpose that the public were solemnly assured, through the intelligent press, that the malady

⁸⁶ George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals, ed. Cross, 1:97. (Vols. 1 and 2 were bound together).

⁸⁷ Life of J. G. Lockhart, ed. Lang, 1:310, cited by Moulton, Library of Literary Criticism, 6:22.

was not likely to have any permanent effect either on the intellectual or moral constitution. The book which caused the distemper would probably have been inoffensive, had not some sly manufacturer of mischief hinted that it was a book which no respectable man should bring into his family circle. Of course, every family soon had a copy of it, and one edition after another found eager purchasers. The hero, Mr. Rochester, (not the same person who comes to so edifying an end in the pages of Dr. Gilbert Burnet,) became a great favorite in the boarding-schools and in the worshipful society of governesses. That portion of Young America known as ladies' men began to swagger and swear in the presence of the gentler sex, and to allude darkly to events in their lives which excused impudence and profanity.

While fathers and mothers were much distressed at this strange conduct of their innocents, and with a pardonable despair were looking for the dissolution of all the bonds of society, the publishers of *Jane Eyre* announced *Wuthering Heights*, by the same author. When it came, it was purchased and read with universal eagerness; but, alas! it created disappointment almost as universal. It was a panacea for all the sufferers under the epidemic. Society returned to its old condition, parents were blessed in hearing once more their children talk common sense, and rakes and battered profligates of high and low degree fell instantly to their proper level. Thus ended the last desperate attempt to corrupt the virtue of the sturdy descendants of the Puritans.⁸⁸

There was some conjecture as to masculine aid in the authorship of *Jane Eyre*; probably the author of *Wuthering Heights* produced the passionate scenes:

The novel of *Jane Eyre*, which caused this great excitement, purports to have been edited by Currer Bell, and the said Currer divides the authorship, if we are not misinformed, with a brother and sister. The work bears the marks of more than one mind and one sex, and

⁸⁸ E. P. Whipple, "Novels of the Season," North American Review, 67:355-56, October, 1848.

has more variety than either of the novels which claim to have been written by Acton Bell. The family mind is strikingly peculiar, giving a strong impression of unity, but it is still male and female. From the masculine tone of Jane Eyre, it might pass altogether as the composition of a man, were it not for some unconscious feminine peculiarities, which the strongest-minded woman that ever aspired after manhood cannot suppress. These peculiarities refer not only to elaborate descriptions of dress, and the minutiae of the sick-chamber, but to various superficial refinements of feeling in regard to the external relations of the sex. It is true that the noblest and best representations of female character have been produced by men; but there are niceties of thought and emotion in a woman's mind which no man can delineate, but which often escape unawares from a female writer. There are numerous examples of these in Jane Eyre. The leading characteristic of the novel, however, and the secret of its charm, is the clear, distinct, decisive style of its representation of character, manners, and scenery; and this continually suggests a male mind. In the earlier chapters, there is little, perhaps, to break the impression that we are reading the autobiography of a powerful and peculiar female intellect; but when the admirable Mr. Rochester appears, and the profanity, brutality, and slang of the misanthropic profligate give their torpedo shocks to the nervous system,--and especially when we are favored with more than one scene given to the exhibition of mere animal appetite, and to courtship after the manner of kangaroos and the heroes of Dryden's plays,--we are gallant enough to detect the hand of a gentleman in the composition. There are also scenes of passion, so hot, emphatic, and condensed in expression, and so sternly masculine in feeling, that we are almost sure we observe the mind of the author of Wuthering Heights at work in the text.⁸⁹

The critic used the words "vulgarity" and "disgust" in denouncing the book. He intimated that some take delight in wounding the delicate feelings of others:

⁸⁹ North American Review, op. cit., pp. 356-57.

The popularity of *Jane Eyre* was doubtless due in part to the freshness, raciness, and vigor of mind it evinced; but it was obtained not so much by these qualities as by frequent dealings in moral paradox, and by the hardihood of its assaults upon the prejudices of proper people. Nothing causes more delight, at least to one third of every community, than a successful attempt to wound the delicacy of their scrupulous neighbours, and a daring peep into regions which acknowledge the authority of no conventional rules. The authors of *Jane Eyre* have not accomplished this end without an occasional violation of probability and considerable confusion of plot and character, and they have made the capital mistake of supposing that an artistic representation of character and manners is a literal imitation of individual life. The consequence is, that in dealing with vicious personages they confound vulgarity with truth, and awaken too often a feeling of unmitigated disgust. . . . The truth is, that the whole firm of Bell & Co. seem to have a sense of the depravity of human nature peculiarly their own. It is the yahoo, not the demon, that they select for representation; their Pandemonium is of mud rather than fire.

This is especially the case with Acton Bell, the author of *Wuthering Heights*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and, if we mistake not, of certain offensive but powerful portions of *Jane Eyre*.⁹⁰

When Charlotte read this review, she still had Emily and Anne with her to smile and treat it lightly. True, Emily was ill at the time, but Charlotte attempted to amuse her with the criticism. She wrote to Mr. Williams, November 22, 1848:

The North American Review is worth reading; there is no mincing the matter there. What a bad set the Bells must be! What appalling books they write! To-day, as Emily appeared a little easier, I thought the Review

⁹⁰ North American Review, op. cit., pp. 357-58.

would amuse her, so I read it aloud to her and Anne. As I sat between them at our quiet but now somewhat melancholy fireside, I studied the two ferocious authors. Ellis, the 'man of uncommon talents, but dogged, brutal, and morose,' sat leaning back in his easy-chair drawing his impeded breath as he best could, and looking, alas! piteously pale and wasted; it is not his wont to laugh, but he smiled half-amused and half in scorn as he listened. Acton was sewing, no emotion ever stirs him to loquacity, so he only smiled too, dropping at the same time a single word of calm amazement to hear his character so darkly portrayed. I wonder what the reviewer would have thought of his own sagacity could he have beheld the pair as I did. Vainly, too, might he have looked round for the masculine partner in the firm of 'Bell & Co.' How I laugh in my sleeve when I read the solemn assertions that Jane Eyre was written in partnership, and that it 'bears the marks of more than one mind and one sex.'

The wise critics would certainly sink a degree in their own estimation if they knew that yours or Mr. Smith's was the first masculine hand that touched the MS. of Jane Eyre, and that till you or he read it no masculine eye had scanned a line of its contents, no masculine ear heard a phrase from its pages. However, the view they take of the matter rather pleases me than otherwise. If they like, I am not unwilling they should think a dozen ladies and gentlemen aided at the compilation of the book. Strange patchwork it must seem to them--this chapter being penned by Mr., and that by Miss or Mrs. Bell; that character or scene being delineated by the husband, that other by the wife! The gentleman, of course, doing the rough work, the lady getting up the finer parts. I admire the idea vastly.⁹¹

A few days previous to her comments on the North American Review criticism, she wrote to Mr. Williams concerning the Revue des Deux Mondes critique of Jane Eyre, and the Spectator review of the poems. The date was November 16, 1848:

⁹¹ Shorter, op. cit., p. 464.

To-day I have received the Spectator and the Revue des deux Mondes. The Spectator consistently maintains the tone it first assumed regarding the Bells. I have little to object to its opinion as far as Currer Bell's portion of the volume is concerned. It is true the critic sees only the faults, but for these his perception is tolerably accurate. Blind is he as any bat, insensate as any stone, to the merits of Ellis. He cannot feel or will not acknowledge that the very finish and labor limae which Currer wants, Ellis has; he is not aware that the 'true essence of poetry' pervades his compositions. Because Ellis's poems are short and abstract, the critics think them comparatively insignificant and dull. They are mistaken.

The notice in the Revue des deux Mondes is one of the most able, the most acceptable to the author, of any that has yet appeared. Eugène Forçade understood and enjoyed Jane Eyre. I cannot say that of all who have professed to criticize it. The censures are as well-founded as the commendations. The specimens of the translation given are on the whole good; now and then the meaning of the original has been misapprehended, but generally it is well rendered.

Every cup given us to taste in this life is mixed. Once it would have seemed to me that an evidence of success like that contained in the Revue would have excited an almost exultant feeling in my mind. It comes, however, at a time when counteracting circumstances keep the balance of the emotions even--when my sister's continued illness darkens the present and dims the future.⁹²

Indeed, Charlotte Brontë was well pleased with the review written by Forçade. A few days later, November 22, 1848, she mentioned the Revue once more:

If it is discouraging to an author to see his work mouthed over by the entirely ignorant and incompetent, it is equally reviving to hear what you have written discussed and analysed by a critic who is master of his

⁹² Shorter, op. cit., pp. 462-63.

subject--by one whose heart feels, whose powers grasp the matter he undertakes to handle. Such refreshment Eugène Forçade has given me. Were I to see that man, my impulse would be to say, "Monsieur, you know me; I shall deem it an honour to know you."

I do not find that Forçade detects any coarseness in the work--it is for the smaller critics to find that out. The master in the art--the subtle-thoughted, keen-eyed, quick-feeling Frenchman--knows the true nature of the ingredients which went to the composition of the creation he analyses; he knows the true nature of things, and he gives them their right name.⁹³

Forçade's critique appeared in November, 1848.⁹⁴ He decided, along with Sir Robert Peel, that the author of Jane Eyre was a woman. The novel was not one of universal interest; it would not appeal to a wide public; it was a moral study, wholly English.

The reviewer praised the masculine, virile spirit of the book; it had a vibrant note like a confession. The secret of its power, though, lay in the fact that the heroine was not the beautiful young woman with a handsome lover. The author created her main characters decidedly plain. Then, too, there were no customs of the fashionable world; there was no hint of fashionable London society. Jane Eyre was simply a story of country life among an interesting class of people, the governesses.

⁹³ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 437, footnote.

⁹⁴ Eugène Forçade, "Jane Eyre, Autobiographie," Revue des Deux Mondes, 72:471-94, Series 1, November, 1848. (The notes presented in this study were taken from a rapid translation by Miss Jean Jacob of the University of Illinois).

Forçade quoted the famous red room scene, and stated that this experience was probably a turning point in Jane's life.⁹⁵ He also quoted two scenes showing Rochester and Jane at Thornfield Hall,⁹⁶ and the scene in the fields, in which the man told Jane of the little Adele.⁹⁷ Forçade described Mr. Rochester as having experienced "what Byron calls the fullness of satiety."

Jane's ignorance of the world attracted Rochester to her, perhaps; Forçade thought opposite types are often drawn toward each other. In speaking of the divorce laws as they concerned insanity, he felt that the letter of the law was good, but the spirit was not; therefore, it was not wrong in trampling upon it.

This type of story--an intelligent girl of an inferior class finding love--would always, in his opinion, be worth reading. The Memoirs of Mme. de Stael presented the same type of character. Currer Bell's characters were more heavily drawn than delicately; the characters were true.

The element most lacking in the book was the intrigue. It was not necessary that the author should have the complications of happenings so poorly held together; there

⁹⁵ Jane Eyre, pp. 6-14.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 141-44, and 147-50.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 168-74.

could have been more simplicity. However, the author had talent enough; virile, healthy moral inspiration animated Jane Eyre in every page. This book proved that fiction can paint the honest customs in realistic life, simple and frank expressions of the passions. He wondered when the French would stop "digging down and finding depraved affections"; the French novels were not so healthy as that of Currer Bell; there was a "shameful sterility" in the French works. "Goethe decided against the French literature and adored Shakespeare."⁹⁸

The Quarterly Review gave its opinion of the book in December, 1848. On November 13, 1848, John G. Lockhart of the Quarterly wrote to Miss Rigby, who was at the time preparing the criticism of Jane Eyre which appeared in the following month:

I am glad to have report of progress as to Jane Eyre and Becky, which last I, like you, have rather a sneaking tenderness for. Her end seems to me well chosen, though borrowed from Byron, who, you know, meant Don Juan to be in the upshot an Irish bishop. About three years ago I received a small volume of 'Poems by Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell,' and a queer little note by Currer, who said the book had been published a year, and just two copies sold, so they were to burn the rest, but distributed a few copies, mine being one. I find what seems rather a fair review of that tiny tome in the 'Spectator' of this week: pray look at it.

I think the poems of Currer much better than those of Acton and Ellis, and believe his novel is vastly better than those which they have more recently put forth.

⁹⁸ Revue des Deux Mondes, loc. cit.

I know nothing of the writers, but the common rumour is that they are brothers of the weaving order in some Lancashire town. At first it was generally said Curren was a lady, and Mayfair circumstantialised by making her the chère amie of Mr. Thackeray. But your skill in 'dress' settles the question of sex. I think, however, some woman must have assisted in the school scenes of 'Jane Eyre,' which have a striking air of truthfulness to me--an ignoramus, I allow, on such points.

I should say you might as well glance at the novels by Acton and Ellis Bell--'Wuthering Heights' is one of them. If you have any friend about Manchester, it would, I suppose, be easy to learn accurately as to the position of these men.⁹⁹

Mr. Lockhart once more commented on the Quarterly critique, as he wrote to Miss Rigby, November 20, 1848:

You have read Becky S. with happy acuteness: she merited the dissection of a Brodie, and has got her deserts. All 'Jane,' too, is good.

I wrote to Ainsworth, the novelist, as being a Manchester man, but he is in the dark as to the Bells, and only knows that the proof-sheets were sent into Yorkshire.¹⁰⁰

The book, Jane Eyre, was reviewed along with Vanity Fair in the Quarterly. Jane was another "Pamela":

'Jane Eyre,' as a work, and one of equal popularity, is, in almost every respect, a total contrast to 'Vanity Fair.' The characters and events, though some of them masterly in conception, are coined expressly for the purpose of bringing out great effects. The hero and

⁹⁹ Letters and Journals of Lady Eastlake, op. cit., pp. 221-22. Part of this material was quoted before in this study, pp. 33-34.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., pp. 222-23.

heroine are beings both so singularly unattractive that the reader feels they can have no vocation in the novel but to be brought together; and they do things which, though not impossible, lie utterly beyond the bounds of probability. . . . Jane Eyre is merely another Pamela, who, by the force of her character and the strength of her principles, is carried victoriously through great trials and temptations from the man she loves. Nor is she even a Pamela adapted and refined to modern notions; for though the story is conducted without those derelictions of decorum which we are to believe had their excuse in the manners of Richardson's time, yet it is stamped with a coarseness of language and laxity of tone which have certainly no excuse in ours. It is a very remarkable book: we have no remembrance of another combining such genuine power with such horrid taste. Both together have equally assisted to gain the great popularity it has enjoyed; for in these days of extravagant adoration of all that bears the stamp of novelty and originality, sheer rudeness and vulgarity have come in for a most mistaken worship.¹⁰¹

The characters of Jane and Rochester were analyzed:

. . . Mr. Rochester is a man who deliberately and secretly seeks to violate the laws both of God and man, and yet we will be bound half our lady readers are enchanted with him for a model of generosity and honour. We would have thought that such a hero had had no chance, in the purer taste of the present day; but the popularity of Jane Eyre is a proof how deeply the love for illegitimate romance is implanted in our nature. Not that the author is strictly responsible for this. Mr. Rochester's character is tolerably consistent. . . . In point of literary consistency the hero is at all events impugnable, though we cannot say as much for the heroine.

As to Jane's character--there is none of that harmonious unity about it which made little Becky so grateful a subject of analysis--nor are the discrepancies of that

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Rigby, "Vanity Fair and Jane Eyre," Quarterly Review, 84:162-63, December, 1848.

kind which have their excuse and their response in our nature. The inconsistencies of Jane's character lie mainly not in her own imperfections, though of course she has her share, but in the author's. There is that confusion in the relations between cause and effect, which is not so much untrue to human nature as to human art. The error in *Jane Eyre* is, not that her character is this or that, but that she is made one thing in the eyes of her imaginary companions, and another in that of the actual reader. There is a perpetual disparity between the account she herself gives of the effect she produces, and the means shown us by which she brings that effect about. We hear nothing but self-eulogiums on the perfect tact and wondrous penetration with which she is gifted, and yet almost every word she utters offends us, not only with the absence of these qualities, but with the positive contrasts of them, in either her pedantry, stupidity, or gross vulgarity. . . . Even in that chef-d'oeuvre of brilliant retrospective sketching, the description of her early life, it is the childhood and not the child that interests you. The little Jane, with her sharp eyes and dogmatic speeches, is a being you neither could fondle nor love. . . .¹⁰²

But there were wonderful scenes in Jane Eyre:

. . . wonderful things lie beyond--scenes of suppressed feeling, more fearful to witness than the most violent tornados of passion--struggles with such intense sorrow and suffering as it is sufficient misery to know that any one should have conceived, far less passed through; and yet with that stamp of truth which takes precedence in the human heart before actual experience. The flip-pant, fifth-rate, plebeian actress has vanished, and only a noble, high-souled woman, bound to us by the reality of her sorrow, and yet raised above us by the strength of her will, stands in actual life before us. If this be *Jane Eyre*, the author has done her injustice hitherto, not we. Let us look at her in the first recognition of her sorrow after the discomfiture of the marriage. True, it is not the attitude of a Christian,

¹⁰² Quarterly Review, op. cit., pp. 166-67.

who knows that all things work together for good to those who love God, but it is a splendidly drawn picture of a natural heart, of high power, intense feeling, and fine religious instinct, falling prostrate, but not grovelling, before the tremendous blast of sudden affliction. . . .¹⁰³

The Quarterly quoted the scene of Jane in her own room after she had discovered the truth of the mad wife. It was a scene of despair, in which Jane said, "the floods overflowed me."¹⁰⁴

In speaking of Jane, Miss Rigby made this comment: "She has inherited in fullest measure the worst sin of our fallen nature--the sin of pride."¹⁰⁵

Augustine Birrell, in his book, has made this apt statement:

In "Shirley" Charlotte Brontë hit upon the splendid device which--and I have often wondered why--has never become general, of putting the exact language of her hostile reviewer into the mouth of an odious character:

"I fear, Miss Grey, you have inherited the worst sin of our fallen nature, the sin of pride"; and there are other examples of this pleasing method which may be safely recommended to smarting authors.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Quarterly Review, op. cit., p. 171.

¹⁰⁴ Jane Eyre, pp. 359-61.

¹⁰⁵ Quarterly Review, op. cit., p. 173.

¹⁰⁶ Augustine Birrell, Life of Charlotte Brontë, p. 129, citing Shirley, p. 386.

Speaking of Jane's pride, the reviewer said:

. . . It pleased God to make her an orphan, friendless, and penniless--yet she thanks nobody, and least of all Him, for the food and raiment, the friends, companions, and instructors of her helpless youth--for the care and education vouchsafed to her till she was capable in mind as fitted in years to provide for herself. On the contrary, she looks upon all that has been done for her not only as her undoubted right, but as falling far short of it. . . . The excellence of the present institution at Casterton, which succeeded that of Cowan Bridge near Kirkby Lonsdale--these being distinctly, as we hear, the original and the reformed Lowoods of the book--is pretty generally known. Jane had lived there for eight years with 110 girls and fifteen teachers. Why had she formed no friendships . . .¹⁰⁷

The book, Jane Eyre, was pronounced "anti-Christian" and "rebellious":

Altogether the auto-biography of Jane Eyre is pre-eminently an anti-Christian composition. There is throughout it a murmuring against the comforts of the rich and against the privations of the poor, which, as far as each individual is concerned, is a murmuring against God's appointment--there is a proud and perpetual assertion of the rights of man, for which we find no authority either in God's word or in God's providence--there is that pervading tone of ungodly discontent which is at once the most prominent and the most subtle evil which the law and the pulpit, which all civilized society in fact has at the present day to contend with. We do not hesitate to say 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 also written Jane Eyre.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ Quarterly Review, op. cit., p. 173.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp. 173-74.

In spite of the "moral, religious, and literary deficiencies" of the book, Miss Rigby declared that she was spellbound with the freedom of touch. Still, Jane was not pleasing in her sight:

. . . the impression she leaves on our mind is that of a decidedly vulgar-minded woman--one whom we should not care for as an acquaintance, whom we should not seek as a friend, whom we should not desire for a relation, and whom we should scrupulously avoid for a governess.¹⁰⁹

Finally, the gossip about Mr. Thackeray was introduced:

There seem to have arisen in the novel-reading world some doubts as to who really wrote this book; and various rumours, more or less romantic, have been current in Mayfair, the metropolis of gossip, as to the authorship. For example, Jane Eyre is sentimentally assumed to have proceeded from the pen of Mr. Thackeray's governess, whom he had himself chosen as his model of Becky, and who, in mingled love and revenge, personified him in return as Mr. Rochester. In this case, it is evident that the author of 'Vanity Fair,' whose own pencil makes him gray-haired, has had the best of it, though his children may have had the worst, having, at all events, succeeded in hitting that vulnerable point in the Becky bosom, which it is our firm belief no man born of woman, from her Soho to her Ostend days, had ever so much as grazed. To this ingenious rumour the coincidence of the second edition of Jane Eyre being dedicated to Mr. Thackeray has probably given rise. For our parts, we see no great interest in the question at all. . . . The question of authorship, therefore, can deserve a moment's curiosity only as far as 'Jane Eyre' is concerned, and though we cannot pronounce that it appertains to a real Mr. Currer Bell and to no other, yet that it appertains to a man, and not, as many assert, to a woman, we are strongly inclined to affirm. . . . Even granting that these incongruities were purposely assumed, for the sake of disguising the female pen, there is nothing

¹⁰⁹ Quarterly Review, op. cit., p. 174.

gained; for if we ascribe the book to a woman at all, we have no alternative but to ascribe it to one who has, for some sufficient reason, long forfeited the society of her own sex.¹¹⁰

Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams concerning the Quarterly criticism. The letter was dated February 4, 1849. At this time Emily was gone. In the lonely old parsonage there were only Charlotte, the frail Anne, the aged father, and the faithful old Tabby, the house servant.

Charlotte wrote:

Anne expresses a wish to see the notices of the poems. You had better, therefore, send them. We shall expect to find painful allusions to one now above blame and beyond praise; but these must be borne. For ourselves, we are almost indifferent to censure. I read the Quarterly without a pang, except that I thought there were some sentences disgraceful to the critic. He seems anxious to let it be understood that he is a person well acquainted with the habits of the upper classes. Be this as it may, I am afraid he is no gentleman; and moreover, that no training could make him such. Many a poor man, born and bred to labour, would disdain that reviewer's cast of feeling.¹¹¹

Although Miss Brontë said that she read the Quarterly without a pang, she wrote to Mr. Williams, March 2, 1849.

This part of the letter deals with the Quarterly:

Your generous indignation against the Quarterly touched me. But do not trouble yourself to be angry on

¹¹⁰ Quarterly Review, op. cit., pp. 174-76.

¹¹¹ Shorter, The Brontës: Life and Letters, 2:25.

Currer Bell's account; except where the May-Fair gossip and Mr. Thackeray's name were brought in he was never stung at all, but he certainly thought that passage and one or two others quite unwarrantable. However, slander without a germ of truth is seldom injurious: it resembles a rootless plant and must soon wither away.¹¹²

In discussing Carlyle, whom she admired greatly, she wrote: "Carlyle would never do for a contributor to the Quarterly."¹¹³

Again, this piteous remark:

. . . The Quarterly I kept to myself--it would have worried papa. To that same Quarterly I must speak in the introduction to my present work--just one little word. You once, I remember, said that the review was written by a lady--Miss Rigby. Are you sure of this?¹¹⁴

In Miss Rigby's Journal we read:

Oct. 20.--Began review of 'Jane Eyre'; rather halting, but that does not discourage me so much as formerly.¹¹⁵

The author of Jane Eyre received the criticism of the North British Review in August, 1849. She wrote to her good friend, Mr. Williams:

The North British Review duly reached me. I read attentively all it says about E. Wyndham, Jane Eyre, and

¹¹² Shorter, op. cit., 2:31.

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 44.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

¹¹⁵ Letters and Journals of Lady Eastlake, op. cit., p. 221.

F. Hervey. Much of the article is clever, and yet there are remarks which--for me--rob it of importance.

To value praise or stand in awe of blame we must respect the source whence the praise and blame proceed, and I do not respect an inconsistent critic. He says, 'if Jane Eyre be the production of a woman, she must be a woman unsexed.'

In that case the book is an unredeemed error and should be unreservedly condemned. Jane Eyre is a woman's autobiography, by a woman it is professedly written. If it is written as no woman would write, condemn it with spirit and decision--say it is bad, but do not eulogise and then detract. I am reminded of the Economist. The literary critic of that paper praised the book if written by a man, and pronounced it 'odious' if the work of a woman.

To such critics I would say, 'To you I am neither man nor woman--I come before you as an author only. It is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me--the sole ground on which I accept your judgment.'

There is a weak comment, having no pretence either to justice or discrimination, on the works of Ellis and Acton Bell. The critic did not know that those writers had passed from time and life. I have read no review since either of my sisters died which I could have wished them to read--none even which did not render the thought of their departure more tolerable to me.¹¹⁶

The North British Review first discussed the character of Jane:

. . . Though there is nothing that is coarse as a human being, there is much about her that is hard, and angular, and indelicate as a woman. Notwithstanding her love for Rochester, we feel that she is a creature more of the intellect than of the affections; and the matter-of-course way in which she, a girl of nineteen, who had seen nothing of the world, receives his revelations of his former life, is both revolting and

¹¹⁶ Shorter, op. cit., 2:63-64.

improbable. To a pure woman they would surely have soiled, for the time at least, the image of him who related them; and for the probability of the story, if for no better reason, we think that different feelings ought to have been assigned to her on this occasion. . . . We cannot blame her for ultimately falling in love with Rochester, for in doing so she did nothing more than every woman who has read the book has done since. Proud, tyrannical, violent, and selfish though he was, he had the element of power, which, involuntarily and almost unconsciously, in a woman's eyes, supplies the deficiency of every other good quality; and his system of wooing, apparently indifferent almost to rudeness, was consistent with the theory of the greatest masters in the art. . . .¹¹⁷

Mr. Rochester had "one of the most enviable attributes of genius":

. . . By an affectation of indifference he contrived, in the midst of his passion, to retain the air of superiority, which was one of the principal charms which belonged to him, and to bring matters at last to such a pass that her pride consisted, not in resisting, but in being vanquished. But the weapon which Rochester used, happily for the tone of general society, will be effective, for the most part, only in the hands of a thoroughly well-bred man--skilful though he was, his conduct seems often to tread very hard on the borders of rudeness--almost of brutality; and even to such a character as Jane, it must have been revolting, but for other most attractive qualities which he possessed. He had one of the most enviable attributes of genius, that of sympathizing and of calling forth sympathy. There was no want of compass in his spiritual scale; and whatever note you struck he could speedily supply you with a chord. Jane says, that he "suited her to the finest fibre of her nature." He who reads Swift's "Journal to Stella," will see this quality exhibited in its highest perfection, in a character in some respects resembling that of Rochester, and it is equally conspicuous in Goethe at every turn, and we all know how fatally they both were beloved. This

¹¹⁷ "Emilia Wyndham, Jane Eyre, and Fanny Hervey," North British Review, 11:483, August, 1849.

power of entering into the nature of another, is indeed one of the most indispensable qualities of the poet-- it is the feeler which he stretch's out into the waters of life, and in the possession of it, as in many other respects, Mr. Rochester comes nearer to the man of genius than any hero of romance that we know. . . .¹¹⁸

Throughout the review of Jane Eyre, the critic referred to Wuthering Heights and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. He spoke of the author of "these books":

We shall not attempt to resolve the much agitated question of the sex of the author of these remarkable works. All that we shall say on the subject is, that if they are the productions of a woman, she must be a woman pretty nearly unsexed; and Jane Eyre strikes us as a personage much more likely to have sprung ready armed from the head of a man, and that head a pretty hard one, than to have experienced, in any shape, the softening influence of female creation.¹¹⁹

The critic discussed the similarity of settings in the three Bell novels, Wuthering Heights, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, and Jane Eyre. The work of Acton, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, was pronounced more vulgar than Jane Eyre.¹²⁰

In summarizing the reception of Jane Eyre, the following points might be made:

1. Although the work showed lack of artistic skill in the author, it displayed much talent and individuality.

¹¹⁸ North British Review, op. cit., p. 484.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 487.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 486-87.

2. There was a marked departure from the old type of characters; the heroine was a plain governess, not a person of glamour; she was quite intellectual as well as emotional. The hero, too, was not the customary handsome lover, but a plain, harsh man of the world.

3. The truth of the book was outstanding. There was, however, a little improbability and some melodrama.

4. Although the book attacked the many social evils of the times, and many of the reviewers admitted the truth of the situation, some few critics denounced the book as anti-Christian and revolutionary.

5. There was much conjecture as to the sex of the author of such an original book; it was much too bold to have been written by a woman.

6. The book was extremely popular both in England and in America. It received notices from many of the great critics of the day.

CHAPTER II

SHIRLEY

On October 26, 1849, Shirley was published. Emily was now gone; she had passed from life in December, 1848. Anne, too, who had been delicate all her life, was laid to rest in May, 1849. Old Tabby, the servant, was ill; the aged father and the author herself were depressed beyond all help. Yet the book was written.

Shirley Keeldar, in the book, was meant to be "her sister Emily, about whom she is never tired of talking, nor I of listening."¹ On August 29, 1849, Miss Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams:

The book is now finished (thank God) and ready for Mr. Taylor, but I have not yet heard from him. I thought I should be able to tell whether it was equal to Jane Eyre or not, but I find I cannot--it may be better, it may be worse. I shall be curious to hear your opinion; my own is of no value. . . .²

Shirley, the story of the Yorkshire mills in 1812, at the time of the Luddite riots, has two heroes and two heroines; Robert Moore, the mill-owner, loves Caroline Helstone, while his brother Louis, the tutor, loves his student, Miss Shirley Keeldar, the heiress of Fieldhead.

¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 632.

² Shorter, op. cit., 2:67.

Although Charlotte, still hurt at the review in the Quarterly, had fully intended to write, and did write, a preface to Shirley, in which she spoke a "Word to the Quarterly," this preface was omitted at the suggestion of Mr. Williams.³ Therefore, Shirley, like the first edition of Jane Eyre, appeared without a preface. The new book by the author of Jane Eyre was naturally compared and contrasted with the first novel.

Among the first to review Shirley was the Daily News. In a letter to Mr. Williams, November 1, 1849, the author of Shirley spoke of the critique in the Daily News. Although the criticism is not quoted in this study, her reaction to the Daily News is interesting because of the review of Villette given later by the same paper. Charlotte wrote:

I have just received the Daily News. Let me speak the truth--when I read it my heart sickened over it. It is not a good review, it is unutterably false. If Shirley strikes all readers as it has struck that one, but--I shall not say what follows.

On the whole I am glad a decidedly bad notice has come first--a notice whose inexpressible ignorance first stuns and then stirs me. Are there no such men as the Helstones and Yorkes?

Yes, there are.

Is the first chapter disgusting or vulgar?

It is not, it is real.

As for the praise of such a critic, I find it silly and nauseous, and I scorn it.

³ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 395, footnote.

Were my sisters now alive they and I would laugh over this notice; but they sleep, they will wake no more for me, and I am a fool to be so moved by what is not worth a sigh.⁴

The Illustrated London News gave an extract from the Daily News review:

'Shirley' is the anatomy of the female heart. It is a book which, like its predecessor, indicates exquisite feeling and very great power of mind in the writer. The women are all divine, and 'Shirley' is, indeed, an intellectual harem.⁵

Mr. James Taylor, a "clear-headed Scotchman" who sent letters to Charlotte Brontë from the firm of Smith, Elder, and Company, held a high position with that firm. On November 6, 1849, Charlotte wrote to this gentleman:

I am afraid Mr. Williams told you I was sadly 'put out' about the Daily News, and I believe it is to that circumstance I owe your letters. But I have now made good resolutions, which were tried this morning by another notice in the same style in the Observer. The praise of such critics mortifies more than their blame; an author who becomes the object of it cannot help momentarily wishing he had never written. And to speak of the press being still ignorant of my being a woman! Why can they not be content to take Currer Bell for a man?⁶

⁴ Shorter, op. cit., 2:78-79.

⁵ "Shirley," Illustrated London News, 15:303, November, 1849. In the excerpt from the Daily News, there was no period after the word, harem.

⁶ Shorter, op. cit., 2:82.

On November 3, 1849, the Athenaeum review appeared.

The critic spoke first of Jane Eyre:

That 'Jane Eyre' is a book of more than ordinary power and cleverness, we said among the foremost--* that it is a world's wonder of power or passion we have never admitted. While we understand the causes of its popularity, we hold the same to be greater than the tale as a work of art deserves to have gained. The novel pleased the many because it contained yet one more protest against social conventionalisms and inequalities--yet one more expression of aching discontents and vague ambitions, uttered through the medium of eccentric characters and startling incidents, and combined with descriptions of scenery and pictures of manners the strangeness of which gave them a welcome relish. Critics and coteries fell upon the book with an eagerness whimsically proving how young Old England is in spite of all John Bull's mishaps,--and how precious is a literary sensation even in this over-wrought London of ours. Parties ran high and waxed hot in discussing whether 'Jane Eyre' owned a masculine or a feminine parentage. . . . Subsequently, other tales appeared by other Bells, and the attempt to ascertain whether they were kindred or identical kept up the excitement:--so that the intrinsic qualities of the novel in question, and the power of its writer to maintain a high place, ran small chance of being calmly considered or fairly determined.

We have always felt that the question was adjourned till the appearance of Currer Bell's second venture:--which, at last, is before us. And to do the writer justice,--it is obvious, not merely from the time which has elapsed before its appearance, but further from the quality of the work itself, that she (for we will assume at once that these books are from a female hand) has taken every possible pains to justify her first success, by diligence and deliberation in her second appeal to the public. Whatever be thought of 'Shirley,' it is neither a slight nor a slighted book,--but one demanding close perusal and careful consideration.⁷

⁷ "Shirley. A Tale," Athenaeum, p. 1107, November, 1849.

* In the review, after the dash, the words, Ath. No. 1043, were inserted in brackets.

As a work of art, Shirley was somewhat at fault:

. . . But the outcast governess in 'Jane Eyre,' rambling by chance to the door-step of the only living relative on whom she had any claim, did not come by shelter and relief more theatrically--than do the Hero and the Beatrice of 'Shirley.' We could mention other passages and substitutions in proof that as a work of art 'Shirley' is not guiltless of violence in the general arrangement of incidents. After having said this, we will exhibit the author in her more favourable light as an adjuster of separate scenes. . . .⁸

The Athenaeum quoted the long passage from the scene in Caroline's sickroom.⁹ He said of it, "This is powerful,-- but very painful."¹⁰ Also the love scenes between the heiress and her tutor¹¹ were given as "very passionate, but not very probable."¹² The whole book was a pleading for passion:

. . . Vigorous the foregoing passages prove it to be; but the vigour is that of discontent, disorder, and rebellion,--a strength how far inferior to the might of such quiet and holy power as settles not disturbs the spirit! . . . Let the work be taken in whichever way the reader shall please, it is virtually a pleading for passion,--it is a denial of the power of duty and self-sacrifice to bless the human agent with a hopeful or serene spirit. It appears never to have entered the author's conception that each man and each woman who

⁸ Athenaeum, loc. cit.

⁹ Charlotte Brontë, Shirley, pp. 434-37.

¹⁰ Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 1108.

¹¹ Shirley, pp. 630-36, and 638-43.

¹² Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 1109.

lives is in part responsible for his or her own happiness; that neither love, nor health, nor riches, nor freedom-- nor all in combination,--will satisfy the busy, ill-regulated mind that leans towards weariness and sorrow and disappointment. It seems totally ignored by her that the withdrawal of all these gifts and blessings has proved insufficient to lay waste the heart or deaden the hope of those who,--knowing life to be a conflict,--accept the conditions of struggle as a necessity not to be evaded, but to be lovingly, firmly, cheerfully borne.¹³

Although the male characters in general were not good, yet some provoked admiration:

Let us now return to the male dramatis personae of 'Shirley.'--The three curates who open the play and appear as Chorus, after the fashion of the three Anabaptists in Meyerbeer's 'Prophète'--are hit off cleverly enough; and Mr. Donne's display of contempts and fine language, by way of astounding the Yorkshire heiress into admiration, is a good bit of comedy in its hard, dry way. Mr. Helstone, though a sketch, is a character. Gérard Moore, the mill-owner, is somewhat of an incompatibility, more closely resembling a hero cut out by a lady's scissors than one engraved by "her master's" etching-needle. His occupation, however, and the locality and epoch of the tale (the close of the long war) give rise to some forcible scenes:--and the attack on the mill by the frame-breakers is among the number. Louis, the tutor, is yet another study of the proud, silent, but ardent student whose wooing was better sung by Mrs. Browning in her 'Lady Geraldine's Courtship' than it is said here.¹⁴

The critic spoke of the tale as one that "moves languidly and cumbrously"; there was too much conversation; the introduction, too, of "tea, buns, catechisms and samplers"

¹³ Athenaeum, loc. cit.

¹⁴ Loc. cit.

was out of place in this book which was by no means a "good-boy book." The characters, in their speeches, played to the audience. In closing,

. . . we do not think that 'Shirley' is an advance upon 'Jane Eyre:'--and, without prophesying its ultimate destiny, we imagine that it is a book which women will admire as very passionate and which men may regard as somewhat prosy.¹⁵

On the same day, November 3, 1849, the Literary Gazette review began, to be concluded on November 10, 1849. This reviewer declared that Currer, Acton, and Ellis Bell were one and the same person. He, like the critic of the Athenaeum, referred to Jane Eyre, and to the mystery of the Bells:

The author of Jane Eyre would command immediate attention from the press, even were he not the prolific writer of other publications which have attracted a full share of public notice and approval. And thereby hangs a tale. Since the days of Junius and Waverley, the art of mystery has been found very efficacious in promoting curiosity, and, with curiosity, the sale of books which possess features of novelty or merit above the general mass of contemporaneous issues. Jane Eyre fell readily within this category, and changes of Bells were sounded in our ears till we hardly knew if there were any or many, real or ideal. . . . The inference, therefore, is that Currer, Acton, and Ellis are not three Bells, and that there is no Currer Bell, Acton Bell, or Ellis Bell at all. Who the individual is we know not: he is evidently intimately acquainted with the localities and inhabitants of the north of England.¹⁶

¹⁵ Athenaeum, loc. cit.

¹⁶ "Shirley: a Tale," Literary Gazette, 66:808, November, 1849.

The portraiture of character in Shirley was lauded:

Shirley, like the preceding work or works of the writer, exhibits much ability; and, in this instance, of a peculiar kind, or more developed than before. We allude to the portraiture of character in which the tale abounds. Not only are the principal personages delineated with minute precision, but the secondary actors, and even the children, are drawn with all the distinctness of a Denner; and from the incipient traits in boyhood and girlhood their future destinies are shadowed forth and anticipated. That there are vigour and originality in most of these sketches is unquestionable, but in the chief of them there is more the semblance of rough-hewing than of refined artistic finish. There is no want of truth in the bold outlines, but the more delicate lineaments and natural fillings-up are uncared for. Thus the second heroine, Caroline Helstone, is obliged to think things aloud, that is to say, clothe them in words, which scarcely become the shrinking grace and sensitive innocence of female modesty. In short, there are more of force and breadth than of other qualities in this numerous gallery. It so happens, perhaps owing to this cause, that we do not get to love or even admire any of the leading parties in the drama. . . .¹⁷

The characters were analyzed in this manner: "Shirley, wayward and masculine; Caroline, forward in her loving attachment; Robert Moore, ruggedly enslaved by ambitious desires; Louis, anomalous but the most natural in a difficult position; Mr. Yorke, infidel and radical, and Mr. Helstone, selfish and unfeeling."¹⁸

The critic quoted the curate scene, in which those gentlemen "sipped their wine,"¹⁹ and a scene in which Mr. Yorke

¹⁷ Literary Gazette, loc. cit.

¹⁸ Loc. cit.

¹⁹ Shirley, pp. 5-7.

appeared;²⁰ he also gave that scene in which the two girls discussed Milton's Eve.²¹

The Literary Gazette stated that "especially after the first volume, the reader must be apathetic indeed who does not continue, with mind fully occupied, to the close."²²

On the same day, too, the Spectator reviewed the book. The Spectator proclaimed the new book to be an improvement in many ways; it was less coarse than any of the other Bell books. However, Shirley showed an "ingrained rudeness":

In several respects this "tale" exhibits a considerable improvement upon the novels that under the name of Bell with several prefixes have excited so much attention. There is less coarseness than was displayed in all of them, somewhat less questionable propriety than appeared in the best of them, Jane Eyre, and nothing of the low and almost disgusting characters and circumstances that disfigured the rest. Shirley has more variety of persons, and in a certain sense more of actual life than was found in Jane Eyre; but in essentials we observe little difference. That part which forms the story of the novel still depends less upon incidents than upon metaphysical delineation of character, executed with more power than skill or naturalness; a sort of ingrained rudeness--an absence of delicacy and refinement of feeling--pervades the book; and above all, we have small sympathy with either the principal or the subordinate characters. It would seem as if the writer's mind had a peculiarity which defeated its genius, compelling it to drop something distasteful into every idiosyncrasy, that increases in proportion to*

²⁰ Shirley, pp. 52-56.

²¹ Ibid., pp. 327-30.

²² Literary Gazette, op. cit., p. 830.

* This spelling of idiosyncrasy is from the review.

the importance of the character to the fiction. The only exceptions to this are two old maids and a clergyman, who rarely appear, and who do nothing. These faults co-exist with great clearness of conception, very remarkable powers of delineation both of internal emotion and outward scenes, much freshness of topic, scenery, and composition, with a species of vigour, which rather resembles the galvanic motions of a "subject" than the natural movements of life. But Currer Bell has yet to learn, that in art the agreeable is as essential as the powerful, and that the reader's attention must be attracted, not forced.

The scene of Shirley is laid in Yorkshire, towards the close of the war against Napoleon, when the Imperial Decrees and the British Orders in Council were creating apprehension amongst the clothiers, distress among the workmen, and Jacobinical principles generally. To paint this state of society is one object of the tale, and, we think, the most successfully attained; though the generality of the characters have so strong a dash of the repelling, as well as of a literal provincial coarseness, that the attractive effect is partly marred by the ill-conditioned nature of the persons, whether it be the author's fault or Yorkshire's. The sketches of the workmen, the masters, the dignified clergy, the curates, the Dissenters, and the various persons who forty years ago went to make up the society of an obscure place in Yorkshire, are done with a somewhat exaggerated style, and coloured too much by the writer's own mind, but possessing rude vigour and harsh truth. . . .²³

The critic quoted from Shirley the long passage ending, "Long may it be ere England really becomes a nation of shopkeepers!"²⁴

²³ "Currer Bell's Shirley," Spectator, 22:1043-44, November, 1849.

²⁴ Shirley, pp. 171-72.

The reviewer mentioned also the two love tales, saying that they were "neither of a sufficiently large or pleasing kind."²⁵ Then, too,

Whether broad cloth and bankruptcy, or the marriage of a poor lover to a rich wife, are proper moving elements of fiction, may be doubted. Trade, in its money-making aspect, appeals to no lofty emotion, if it does not rather suggest the reverse. . . . This ill choice of subjects in Shirley is not counterbalanced by felicity of treatment. Robert Moore, out of the factory, is a self-satisfied melodramatic coxcomb, "half soft and half savage"; in the factory, he is a hard and mercenary man, his objects being too much sunk and his means too much presented. Caroline Helstone is marred by weakness and by an unfeminine display of her feelings. Louis Moore, though well drawn, and well sustained up to a certain point, flags at the critical moment, and, to make a bad thing worse, writes down the whole account of his wooing autobiographically. Indeed, this part is a sort of reverse of Mr. Rochester and Jane Eyre, as that of Caroline and Robert is a repetition of what is rarely attractive in itself--a metaphysical love tale.²⁶

The Spectator felt that for this reason the scenes not directly connected with the lovers were the most agreeable. Two passages were quoted to illustrate this fact; one was the mill scene, showing "a specimen of a Yorkshire artisan, whom Moore has repelled as one of a deputation."²⁷ The other was a "tea-drinking" scene at the home of Mr. Helstone.²⁸

²⁵ Spectator, op. cit., p. 1044.

²⁶ Loc. cit.

²⁷ Shirley, pp. 141-43.

²⁸ Ibid., pp. 115-18.

On November 5, 1849, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams to speak of the critique in the Examiner. She mentioned, too, the Daily News review once more:

I have got the Examiner and your letter. . . . The critic of the Daily News struck me as to the last degree incompetent, ignorant, and flippant. A thrill of mutiny went all through me when I read his small effusion. To be judged by such a one revolted me. I ought, however, to have controlled myself, and I did not. I am willing to be judged by the Examiner--I like the Examiner. Fonblanque has power, he has discernment--I bend to his censorship, I am grateful for his praise; his blame deserves consideration; when he approves, I permit myself a moderate emotion of pride. Am I wrong in supposing that critique to be written by Mr. Fonblanque? But whether it is by him or Forster, I am thankful.

In reading the critiques of the other papers--when I get them--I will try to follow your advice and preserve my equanimity. But I cannot be sure of doing this, for I had good resolutions and intentions before, and, you see, I failed.²⁹

The notice in the Examiner had also appeared on the day of November 3, 1849. The Examiner had some harsh comments:

The peculiar power which was so greatly admired in Jane Eyre is not absent from this book. Indeed, it is repeated, if we may so speak of anything so admirable, with too close and vivid a resemblance. The position of Shirley and her tutor is that of Jane and her master reversed. Robert and Louis Moore are not quite such social savages, externally, as Mr. Rochester; but in trifling with women's affections they are hardly less harsh or selfish, and they are just as strong in will and giant in limb. The heroines are of the family of Jane, though with charming differences, having wilful as well as gentle ways, and greatly desiderating

²⁹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:81.

"masters." The expression of motive by means of dialogue is again indulged to such minute and tedious extremes, that what ought to be developments of character in the speaker become mere exertions of will and intellect in the author. And finally the old theme of tutors and governesses is pushed here and there to the tiresome point. The lesson intended is excellent; but works of art should be something more than moral parables, and should certainly embody more truths than one.³⁰

In spite of the repetition of plot, the Examiner gave proof of the genius of the author:

. . . let us at the same time express, what we very strongly feel, that the freshness and lively interest which the author has contrived to impart to a repetition of the same sort of figures, grouped in nearly the same social relations, as in her former work, is really wonderful. It is the proof of genius. It is the expression of that intellectual faculty, or quality, which feels the beautiful, the grand, the humorous, the characteristic, as vividly after the thousandth repetition as when it first met the sense. We formerly compared the writer to Godwin, in the taste manifested for mental analysis as opposed to the dealing with events; and might have taken Lord Byron within the range of the comparison. As in Jane Eyre, so in Shirley, the characters, imagery, and incidents are not impressed from without, but elaborated from within. They are the reflex of the writer's peculiar feelings and wishes. In this respect alone, however, does she resemble the two authors named. She does not, like Godwin, subordinate human interests to moral theories, nor, like Byron, waste her strength in impetuous passion. Keen, intellectual analysis is her forte; and she seems to be, in the main, content with the existing structure of society, and would have everybody make the most of it.³¹

³⁰ "Shirley. A Tale," Examiner, p. 692, November, 1849.

³¹ Loc. cit.

Currer Bell took pleasure in dwelling on the repulsive:

As well in remarking on Jane Eyre, as in noticing other books from the same family, if not from the same hand, we have directed attention to an excess of the repulsive qualities not seldom rather coarsely indulged. We have it in a less degree in Shirley, but here it is. With a most delicate and intense perception of the beautiful, the writer combines a craving for stronger and rougher stimulants. She goes once again to the dales and fells of the north for her scenery, erects her "confessionals" on a Yorkshire moor, and lingers with evident liking amid society as rough and stern as the forms of nature which surround them. She has a manifest pleasure in dwelling even on the purely repulsive in human character. We do not remember the same taste to the same extent in any really admirable writer, or so little in the way of playful or tender humour to soften and relieve the habit of harsh delineation. Plainly she is deficient in humour. In the book before us, what is stern and hard about Louis Moore is meant to be atoned by a dash of that genial quality. But while the disagreeable ingredient is powerfully portrayed in action, the fascinating play of fancy is no more than talked about.³²

The characters in Shirley were creatures of the intellect:

Is there, indeed, in either of these books, or any of the writings which bear the name of "Bell," one really natural, and no more than natural, character--a character, we mean, in which the natural is kept within its simple and right proportions? We suspect it would be hardly an exaggeration to answer this question in the negative. The personages to whom Currer Bell introduces us are created by intellect, and are creatures of intellect. Habits, actions, conduct are attributed to them, such as we really witness in human beings; but the reflections and language which accompany these actions, are those of intelligence fully developed, and entirely self-conscious. Now in real men and women such clear knowledge of self is rarely developed at all, and then only after long

³² Examiner, loc. cit.

trials. We see it rarely in the very young--seldom or ever on the mere threshold of the world. . . . But even in the children described in this book we find the intellectual predominant and supreme. The young Yorkes, ranging from twelve years down to six, talk like Scotch professors of metaphysics, and argue, scheme, vituperate, and discriminate, like grown up men and women.³³

The young Yorkes were fashioned after the young Taylor children.³⁴ Then, too, the young Brontës had been children of the highly intellectual type. The Examiner mentioned the reality of the book:

. . . the book before us possesses deep interest, and an irresistible grasp of reality. There is a vividness and distinctness of conception in it quite marvellous. The power of graphic delineation and expression is intense. There are scenes which for strength and delicacy of emotion are not transcended in the range of English fiction. There is an art of creating sudden interest in a few pages worth volumes of common-place description. Shirley does not enter till the last chapter in the first volume, but at once takes the heroine's place. Louis Moore does not enter till the last chapter of the second volume, yet no one would dream of disputing with him the character of hero.³⁵

Although some critics found fault with the girls, Shirley and Caroline, the Examiner found them both charming:

. . . But the women will be the favourites with all readers. Both are charming. Caroline is a gentle, loving nature, who long loves hopelessly, and "never tells her love," though she lets it be seen. Shirley is, as the "wildly witty" Rosalind, clear, decisive, wilful,

³³ Examiner, loc. cit.

³⁴ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 108, footnote.

³⁵ Examiner, loc. cit.

self-dependant, yet also most womanly and affectionate; too proud to woo her inferior in station, whom she nevertheless wishes to woo her. The staple of the three volumes is made up of the thinkings, sayings, and doings of these four persons; presented to us less in the manner of a continuous tale, in which incidents spring from character, and reflections are suggested by incidents, than in a series of detached and independent pictures, dialogues, and soliloquies, written or spoken. So in-^{*} distinct with life, however, are these pictures, dialogues, and soliloquies; so replete with power, with beauty, and with subtle reflections; that the want of continuity in the tale is pardoned. Tediousness is felt before the author's purpose comes distinctly in view; but when it does, the interest becomes enchaining. We could not lay down the third volume.³⁶

The reviewer quoted freely from Shirley. He spoke of the author's leaning toward "Toryism and High Church":

. . . There is a hankering, not to be suppressed, after the fleshpots of Egypt--a strong sympathy with Toryism and High Church. The writer sees clearly that they are things of the past, but cannot help regretting them. The tone assumed to the dissenters and manufacturers is hardly fair. Their high qualities are not denied, but there is a disposition to deepen the shadows in delineating them. There is cordiality when the foibles of rectors and squires are laughed at, but when the defects of the commercial class are touched there is bitterness. The independence and manlier qualities of even that class are nevertheless appreciated, and some truths are told, though told too sharply, by which they may benefit. . . .³⁷

This statement showed an insight into the art of the author of Shirley:

³⁶ Examiner, op. cit., pp. 692-93.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 694.

* The word, soliloquies, in the ninth line, was spelled soliloques; it was assumed to be an error in print, since the same word, two lines below in this manuscript, was spelled correctly.

. . . The writer works upon a very limited range of rather homely materials, yet inspires them with a power of exciting, elevating, pleasing, and instructing, which belongs only to genius of the most unquestionable kind.³⁸

On November 16, 1849, Charlotte sent two reviews to her friend, Ellen Nussey, whom she had met as a child at school:

. . . I send you a couple of reviews; the one is in the "Examiner," written by Albany Fonblanque, who is called the most brilliant political writer of the day, a man whose dictum is much thought of in London. The other, in the "Standard of Freedom," is written by William Howitt, a Quaker!³⁹

The day before, she had written to Mr. Williams about the Examiner and the Standard of Freedom:

As far as I can judge from the tone of the newspapers, it seems that those who were most charmed with Jane Eyre are the least pleased with Shirley; they are disappointed at not finding the same excitement, interest, stimulus; while those who spoke disparagingly of Jane Eyre like Shirley a little better than her predecessor. I suppose its dryer matter suits their dryer minds. But I feel that the fiat for which I wait does not depend on newspapers, except, indeed, such newspapers as the Examiner. The monthlies and quarterlies will pronounce it, I suppose. Mere novel-readers, it is evident, think Shirley something of a failure. Still, the majority of the notices have on the whole been favourable. That in the Standard of Freedom was very kindly expressed; and coming from a dissenter, William Howitt, I wonder thereat.⁴⁰

³⁸ Examiner, loc. cit.

³⁹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 435.

⁴⁰ Shorter, op. cit., 2:83.

About this time, Eugène Forçade, who had pleased Miss Brontë with his review of Jane Eyre, came forth with a critique of Shirley. On November 22, 1849, Charlotte wrote to her good friend, Miss Ellen Nussey:

Shirley works her way. The reviews shower in fast. I send you a couple more by this post. You may take care of them and bring with the others. The best critique which has yet appeared is in the Revue des deux Mondes, a sort of European cosmopolitan periodical, whose headquarters are at Paris. Comparatively few reviewers, even in their praise, evince a just comprehension of the author's meaning. Eugène Forçade, the reviewer in question, follows Currer Bell through every winding, discerns every point, discriminates every shade, proves himself master of the subject, and lord of the aim. With that man I would shake hands, if I saw him. I would say, 'You know me, Monsieur; I shall deem it an honour to know you.' I could not say so much to the mass of London critics. Perhaps I could not say so much to five hundred men and women in all the millions of Great Britain. That matters little. My own conscience I satisfy first; and having done that, if I further content and delight a Forçade, a Fonblanque, and a Thackeray, my ambition has had its ration; it is fed; it lies down for the present satisfied: my faculties have wrought a day's task, and earned a day's wages.⁴¹

Forçade first compared the book with Jane Eyre, which book he liked, in spite of its awkwardness, for its boldness. This critic realized that a second novel was difficult after a passionate work like Jane Eyre. Currer Bell was a woman-- Shirley showed it definitely. The variety and delicateness showed it; the position of woman was defended with personal art.

⁴¹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:88-89.

As to the characters, Forçade declared that Mr. Helstone, the minister, a boiling Tory, was more like one of Wellington's soldiers; Shirley had the elegance of woman, and the boldness of a man. Robert Moore was a "bull-headed imperialistic"; Caroline was a type of the purely English beauty; Mr. Yorke was an interesting type. Also, Louis Moore was more refined than his brother, Robert. The critic felt that these books had been written, no doubt, in the long, lonely evenings, and they should be read in the same manner.

Although there was less of improbability and more of art in the style of Shirley, Forçade preferred Jane Eyre. Currer Bell's novel was the first English one to attack marriage with bitterness; in France, it was often done.

The critic quoted the scene of the reading of Coriolanus;⁴² he gave, too, the quarrel between Shirley and Mr. Sympson,⁴³ and the tender scene between Louis and Shirley.⁴⁴

In spite of the fact that there was no flame as in Jane Eyre, said Forçade, Shirley's high qualities maintained a place of distinction for Currer Bell. This author taught the doctrine of insubordination. The individual had rights.

⁴² Eugène Forçade, "Shirley," Revue des Deux Mondes, 76:722, Series 1, November, 1849, citing Shirley, pp. 90-93. (Notes on this review were made from a rapid translation of the French by Jean Jacob of the University of Illinois).

⁴³ Shirley, pp. 563-72.

⁴⁴ Ibid., pp. 629-43.

Mrs. Gaskell has told of Miss Brontë's first glimpse of the Times review of Shirley.⁴⁵ The author of Shirley was visiting in London when the critique appeared, December 7, 1849. Her hostess, the mother of George Smith of the firm of Smith and Elder, tried to keep Charlotte from seeing the Times, but she discovered it. As the author read, she attempted to hide her face behind the paper, but Mrs. Smith saw the tears "stealing down the face and dropping on the lap." In the afternoon, Mr. Thackeray called and asked how Miss Brontë liked the review. The Times began with praise for Jane Eyre:

With all its faults Jane Eyre was a remarkable production. The volumes were disfigured by coarseness; in the final development of the plot the craft of the bookmaker was more commendable than the subtle and fine working of the master; after the story had been told, pages and pages of unnecessary matter were forced upon the reader to complete three imperfect volumes, and to spoil two which could hardly be improved; yet, in spite of these and other obvious imperfections, Jane Eyre had as good a claim as any work of fiction to the esteem and approval of the novel-reading public of 1848. Freshness and originality, truth and passion, singular felicity in the description of natural scenery and in the analyzation of human thought, enabled this tale to stand boldly out from the mass of such compositions, and to assume its own place in the bright, but at the best evanescent, field of romantic literature. The early scenes of Jane Eyre are not to be surpassed; her struggles in the school, the whole picture of that academy, are drawn from the life, and we are bold to say are to this hour impressed upon the reader's mind with all the vivid force that belongs to reality, touched and adorned by the hand of genius. . . .

⁴⁵ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 440.

Struck, however, as we could not but be by the raciness and ability of the work; by the independent sway of a thoroughly original and unworn pen, by the masculine current of noble thoughts, and the unflinching dissection of dark yet truthful character, we perused the last words of the story with the conviction that the second effort of the author would not surpass the first. . . . The circulating libraries heave with the materials of which the third volume of Jane Eyre is composed; you may ransack the same mausoleums in vain for such living stuff as animates the other two. . . .⁴⁶

All this that spoke of Jane Eyre merely led up to the opinion of Shirley:

Shirley is very clever, as a matter of course. It could not be otherwise. The pencil that sketched Jane Eyre and filled up the broad outlines of Rochester's fine form, could not be worn down to the stump by one vigorous performance. The faculty of graphic description, the strong imagination, the fervid and masculine diction, the analytic skill, all remain as visible as before, but are thrown away upon a structure that bears no likeness to actual life, and affords no satisfaction or pleasure to those who survey it. The story of Shirley may be told in a couple of pages, yet a more artificial and unnatural history cannot be conceived; and what is true of the plot is even more applicable to the dramatis personae. The characters, from Miss Shirley Keeldar down to the smallest boy in the narrative, are manufactured for the occasion. As for Miss Shirley, her metaphysical acumen and argumentative prowess are beyond all praise, whilst the dialectics of the precocious 12-year old would do honour to John Stuart Mill himself.⁴⁷

The Times remarked about Currer Bell's fondness for love in the kitchen; the scene between Caroline and Robert reminded one of Jane and Rochester, who "oftener carried on

⁴⁶ "Shirley," The Times, p. 3, December 7, 1849.

⁴⁷ Loc. cit.

their courtship in the scullery than in the drawing room."⁴⁸

The Times gave an analysis of Robert Moore:

. . . half Yorkshireman, half Belgian--we might say half ruffian, half angel, according to the true romantic model--being at the same time very proud, very humble, very repulsive, very engaging, very odious, and very amiable. . . .⁴⁹

After he had given a resume of the illness and rapid recovery of Caroline, during her heartbreak over Robert, the critic concluded:

. . . It is not with such sheer blotches of paint that Scott depicts nature and Fielding finds his way to the heart. It is not by such tricks of the trade that Jane Eyre won sympathy and sorrow for her sufferings.⁵⁰

As for Shirley and her governess,

. . . Both are originals in their way. The former belongs to the class of heroines whom Shakespeare had in his eye when he drew Katharine and Beatrice; whom Scott immortalized in Diana Vernon, and who presented themselves to the mind of Sheridan Knowles in still later days when that dramatist drew Helen and Constance. Miss Keeldar has much of the metal of the sterner sex beneath her soft skin, and asserts intellectual independence as woman's right. There is always danger in dealing with such delicate commodity. The modesty of nature is overstepped in an instant; one awkward touch spoils the picture and yields a caricature.⁵¹

48 Times, loc. cit.

49 Loc. cit.

50 Loc. cit.

51 Loc. cit.

Mrs. Pryor came in for convenience as the "long lost mother . . . who has done duty for novelists and playwrights innumerable, and, be it said to her honour, has never been found wanting at the critical and trying moment."⁵²

The critic deplored the constant love-making:

Caroline Helstone's love affair, however, is not the only one found in this book, which indeed may be regarded as a species of Agapemone in three volumes. Lovemaking, in one shape or another, is going on from the first page to the last, and as soon as one couple quits the scene another comes on to entertain the spectators with dialogues such as no mortal lovers ever yet spoke, or, we trust, ever will speak in Miss Currer Bell's books again. . . .⁵³

A little fun was had at the expense of Louis and Shirley:

. . . Mr. Louis Moore loves nobody but Shirley, yet, although the mutual affection is as clear to the individuals as it is to ourselves, instead of treating a lawful passion like rational Christians, they get up no end of rencontres to show each other how smart, unloveable, and bitter they can be when they like, and how prodigally Heaven has endowed them both with what Miss Shirley herself would call the gift of palaver. . . .⁵⁴

The reviewer decided that Shirley had been written during the time of pestilence. "Our author has but one prescription for all her lovers." First, Caroline became ill for love of Robert; next, Louis became ill for love

⁵² Times, loc. cit.

⁵³ Loc. cit.

⁵⁴ Loc. cit.

of Shirley; next, Robert was wounded by a shot, and Caroline visited him; and so on, until the two marriages took place.⁵⁵ Currer Bell, however, had genius:

And it would be unjust to the fair authoress--for lady she is, let who will say to the contrary--if we did not allow that at times the talk is worthy of her genius and that gems of rare thought and glorious passion shine here and there throughout her volumes. But the infrequent brilliancy seems but to make more evident and unsightly the surrounding gloom. Shirley is not a picture of real life; it is not a work that contains the elements of popularity, that will grapple with the heart of mankind and compel its homage. It is a mental exercise that can bring its author no profit, and will not extend by the measure of an inch her previous well-deserved success. Millions understood her before-- she may count by units those who will appreciate her now. Jane Eyre was not a pure romance. Shirley is at once the most high-flown and the stalest of fictions.⁵⁶

And thus ended the Times review.

Charlotte wrote to her friend, Miss Nussey, December 10, 1849, saying: "The thundering Times has attacked me savagely."⁵⁷

In a letter to Mr. Williams, March 19, 1850, she said:

As to the Times, as you say, the acrimony of its critique has proved, in some measure, its own antidote; to have been more effective it should have been juster. I

⁵⁵ Times, loc. cit.

⁵⁶ Loc. cit.

⁵⁷ Shorter, op. cit., 2:97.

think it has had little weight up here in the North: it may be that annoying remarks, if made, are not suffered to reach my ear; but certainly, while I heard little condemnatory of Shirley, more than once have I been deeply moved by manifestations of even enthusiastic approbation.⁵⁸

The Times critique was mentioned once more in a letter to Mr. Williams, April 3, 1850:

Are you aware whether there are any grounds for that conjecture in the Bengal Hurkaru, that the critique in the Times was from the pen of Mr. Thackeray? I should much like to know this. If such were the case (and I feel as if it were by no means impossible), the circumstance would open a most curious and novel glimpse of a very peculiar disposition. Do you think it likely to be true?⁵⁹

Fraser's Magazine decided that Shirley was not the equal of Jane Eyre. The review appeared in December, 1849. Shirley lacked the intense interest of Jane Eyre:

Well do we remember how we took up Jane Eyre one winter's evening, somewhat piqued at the extravagant commendations we had heard, and sternly resolved to be as critical as Croker. But as we read on we forgot both commendations and criticism, identified ourselves with Jane in all her troubles, and finally married Mr. Rochester about four in the morning. So to us the announcement of another novel by the same hand was exciting. We refused an invitation for the 31st October, and shut ourselves up with Shirley--there were four of us, three volumes and the present writer--determined on a sleepless night. But, no, about eleven o'clock we began our habitual series of yawns, then lighted the bed-candle, went to bed, fell asleep, and did not resume

⁵⁸ Shorter, op. cit., 2:123.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 126.

Shirley even in our dreams. It was three days before we finished it. Not that it is a dull book by any means--indeed nearly every page contains something worth reading; but the story is deficient in connexion and interest. In Jane Eyre the reader accompanied the heroine throughout, saw with her eyes, heard with her ears, in short, lived over again one life, and regarded other persons and things from one point of view--the heroine's personality. On this ground an autobiography well done is sure of creating the most absorbing interest. But a story in the narrative form requires much more artistic skill in its construction. It is required to concentrate the interest upon one person or one group, while regarding that person or group, as well as the subordinate groups, ab extra. . . . Besides, the stage is overcrowded with characters too insignificant to be named in the bills; some, mere sceneshifters and cendlesnuffers, have no business to be there at all. . . . Nearly a hundred characters to be disposed of! it could not be done, even with the 'resources' of Covent Garden.⁶⁰

The first volume, said Fraser's, was too full of broad Yorkshire and French, although both were excellent:

. . . Most writers seem to imagine that they can produce a genuine Yorkshireman by cutting off the final consonant of every word he utters. Curren Bell's Yorkshiremen are not such Cockneyfied automata. Their thoughts are as provincial as their speech. We would bet a trifle that the author is a Yorkshirewoman;--Yorkshire, we are sure; woman, we think. . . . She knows women by their brains and hearts, men by their foreheads and chests. She . . . depicts women often quaint and odd, but never unnatural, while the men are not unfrequently ranting mountebanks, who, instead of the toleration and applause the author claims for them, would infallibly, in real life, be 'cut' or kicked, or shut up in a madhouse. The author, then, is a woman. Moreover, she is, or has been, a governess. . . .⁶¹

⁶⁰ "New Novels," Fraser's Magazine, 40:692, December, 1849.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 693.

Robert Moore, according to Fraser, was all that could be desired, but he talked to his foreman, Joe Scott, in an "Alexander-the-Great style," which was quite unnatural.⁶² The curate, Donne, as he approached the heroine, Shirley, for a subscription to some school, was no monster, but "only a fool fresh from college."⁶³ The Yorkes were exaggerations, and they had a "marvellous acquaintance with Johnson's Dic-tionary." Yet the critic said that he would have liked very much to hear more of the Yorkes. He concluded:

. . . We like the book as a whole. On the whole, we like its spirit. The author does not, after the manner of some we could name, plead the cause of the poor by indiscriminate slander of the rich, nor advocate religious tolerance by a display of the bitterest sectarian hatred.

The character of Shirley is excellently conceived and well sustained. And how touching is the story of Caroline; an old story, by the way, which reminds one of poor Hartley Coleridge's mournful music:--

Say, what is worse than blank despair?
 'Tis that sick hope too weak for flying,
 Which plays at fast and loose with care,
 And wastes a weary life in dying.

We sympathize with the author's general charity, with her special love for the old country, the old Church, and the old Duke; we kindle with her fervid bursts of eloquence, and recognize the truth of her pictures from life.⁶⁴

⁶² Shirley, pp. 57-59.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 293.

⁶⁴ Fraser, op. cit., p. 694.

The Dublin University Magazine which gave a quite favorable review of Jane Eyre now noticed Shirley. This time, however, the magazine was not so pleasing to the author. First, Jane Eyre was recalled:

The opinion which we expressed some time ago with reference to the powers of the author of "Jane Eyre," has proved, as, indeed, all the literary opinions of Maga must ever do, to be a sound one; and the verdict of an approving public has long since borne ample testimony to its truth. . . .⁶⁵

As to the sex of the author, the Dublin University Magazine decided that a woman was writing; Shirley set any doubts at rest on that point. When asked whether they knew the author, the literary critic for the magazine replied:

. . . we do not know the writer; and, it may appear somewhat rude, that we do not care in the least to know her--we have no kindred sympathies with strong-minded women at all--the coarse, the vulgar, and the eccentric have no charms for us. Such creatures as the fierce Rochester, the able-bodied tutor, with strong desires and small brains, Louis Moore, and Robert his brother, have no attraction in our eyes. They are not gentlemen--not one of them--in their coarse and sensual natures; there is not one touch of the chivalrous, the generous, or the true; nor is there anything kindly or genial about them. We dislike a great, broad-shouldered man, with heavy features, who, being in love, can yet enjoy his dinner, and is not ashamed to own the fact, quite as much as we despise a masculine woman, who, having got a notion into her head that she has been bitten by a mad dog, seeks an interview with the square-shouldered man already mentioned, for the purpose of requesting he will be good enough, in case hydrophobia should

⁶⁵ "A Bunch of New Novels," Dublin University Magazine, 34:680, December, 1849.

supervene, to smother her with a pillow! and to let no one else be present, or assist in an operation so interesting! We must confess that "Shirley" has disappointed us. We were led to expect better things from the pen which produced "Jane Eyre."⁶⁶

The Irish reviewer confessed the power in the book, but he was surprised to find the author still "harping upon the same string, and that her latest work is only a fresh illustration of the old theory of social inequality" to be found in Jane Eyre.⁶⁷

This magazine quoted the scene in which Moore told Mr. Yorke of his proposal to Shirley; this scene showed the "strange partiality of this author in making her heroes hard, selfish, and ungenerous in their dealings with the female heart."⁶⁸ Although the stout rector, Mr. Helstone, "missed his vocation," the critic liked him, and made room for his picture in the article.⁶⁹

Shirley had little in it "to ruffle or to excite" the curiosity of the reviewer:

. . . It may be read piecemeal, scene by scene, thrown aside, or taken up again as suits the reader's convenience. One chapter has but little to do with another, and personages are often introduced upon the stage,

⁶⁶ Dublin University Magazine, op. cit., pp. 680-81.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 681.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 681-82, citing Shirley, pp. 545-50.

⁶⁹ Shirley, pp. 8-9.

minutely described, and then tumbled off again, their entrance or their exit serving no purpose whatever that we, at least, have been able to discover; for instance, what have the screaming, teasing, outlandish family of little Yorkes, aged three years old and upward, chattering and arguing, like noisy devils as they were, to do with the conduct of the story. . . .⁷⁰

The curates, too, were unnecessary to the story; the character, Malone, was an insult to an Irish gentleman:

. . . Noisy, clamorous, and vulgar divines they are, and the most noisy, the most vulgar, and the most clamorous is the Rev. Peter Augustus Malone, an Irishman, . . . The father of the Rev. Peter Augustus, we are further told, was an Irish gentleman, and being an Irish gentleman, was poor, in debt, and besottedly ignorant, and his son was like him! Here we pause to ask this writer if she has ever had the good fortune to see or to know an Irish gentleman. We fear we must answer the question for her, and in the negative. It is not the custom of an Irish gentleman, whether lay or clerical, to pronounce veal, vele--helm, helum--or storm, storrum--whatever may be the opinion of "Shirley;" nor does an Irish gentleman enter an apartment grinning like an ogre, or leave it with his hat on, his cudgel under his arm, "clearing the stairs at a stride or two, and making the house shake with the bang of the door behind him." We quote the writer's very words, . . .⁷¹ Satire devoid of point, buffoonery without humour, and scurrility without wit, must be treated as they deserve. Of all these bad qualities--these violations of good manners and sins against good taste--in this instance, we accuse the writer of "Shirley," and leave her to the judgment of public opinion, by which assuredly she shall be condemned. We accuse her of following in the track of those vulgar panders to a miserable prejudice, which has been fostered and created by the hireling writers of the English press. We accuse her of imitating the example of public libellers--a vulgar and servile crew--

⁷⁰ Dublin University Magazine, op. cit., p. 685.

⁷¹ Shirley, p. 15.

of which the illustrious Cockney, Michael Angelo Titmarsh is the distinguished leader, while the whole of Cockney donkeydom bray in chorus. Alas! for Ireland; her children are exiles; upon the heads of her gentry have been poured the accumulated transgressions of many centuries. All this is not enough: her name must be traduced, and her reputation lied away; the plagues of Egypt have been let loose upon her, and the pestilent vermin of Grub-street overrun the land; . . .⁷²

As for the characters in Shirley, they were classed as intellectuals, except Caroline, who was too "insipid." The author, seemingly, could not describe "gentleness, tenderness, or simple love," but her pencil was powerful in delineating "the stronger, more masculine, and more intellectual qualities of human nature."⁷³ Shirley, with her "panther-like qualities, her fierce love, and her strong mind," had a wayward nature, and, in the critic's opinion, "if the liege lord of Miss Keeldar be not a henpecked man, our sagacity is strangely at fault."⁷⁴ To illustrate Shirley's nature, he quoted the scene with Donne.⁷⁵

For evidence of a keen insight into the beauties of nature, which insight Currer Bell possessed, we have the lovely passage about the dawn "just beginning to steal on night,"⁷⁶

⁷² Dublin University Magazine, op. cit., p. 686.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 687.

⁷⁴ Loc. cit.

⁷⁵ Shirley, p. 293.

⁷⁶ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

and that beautiful scene beginning, "He dropped the curtains over the broad window and regal moon; . . ."77

The Bell books seemed not to benefit the critic in any way; he was no wiser, no better, nor in any manner more capable of bearing life's burdens. "We feel that we have been gazing at a series of pictures produced by the strong action of a morbid mind; and we can extract neither consolation, nor wisdom, nor instruction, from our survey."78

It is interesting to note that Charlotte Brontë later became the wife of one of these divines, Mr. Arthur Bell Nicholls, who was "successor to Mr. Malone."79

Bentley's Miscellany gave a review of Shirley late in the year of 1849. As far as this reviewer was concerned, he was surprised "that there should ever have been any doubt about the matter" of the author's being a woman. It was plain to be seen by the characters in the books:

. . . The characters of the men, unsteady in the outline, occasionally false in the colouring, and seldom sustained with firmness or consistency, are evidently of the feminine gender. Nor is the authorship less distinctly revealed in the successful delineation of female character, in the minute and delicate net-work of womanly feeling, the slight points and truthful touches of womanly sentiments, tastes, antipathies, prejudices, and

77 Shirley, p. 532.

78 Dublin University Magazine, op. cit., p. 689.

79 Gaskell, op. cit., p. 462, footnote.

sympathies. The author is mistress of the grand enigma of woman's nature, and she is so conscious of her power on this tantalizing topic, that she does not hesitate to denounce most of the attempts which have been made by the other sex to solve this same enigma as miserable failures. "If men could see us as we really are," observes one of the heroines of the story, "they would be a little amazed; but the cleverest, the acutest men are often under an illusion about women: they do not read them in a true light . . ."80

Robert Moore was an example of what the critic meant by the characters of the men:

. . . It is irreconcilable with all experience that the man who displays such frankness and probity, and takes such high ground at starting, should first win the affections of a young girl, which he does knowingly and by overt acts, then treat her with mysterious coldness and neglect, propose for another, and, after his rejection and humiliation in that quarter, return at the end of a long interval to the former lady, without giving a solitary proof that he had ever really loved her. . . .81

Mr. Helstone and Mr. Yorke, too, did not live up to the reader's expectations; the curates were "mere excesses and caricatures"; furthermore, Shirley and Louis, "the most consistent persons in the book, are somewhat exaggerated specimens of a rare style of humanity, not always depicted in the best taste, and coming out with more innate selfishness than the author evidently intended."82

80 "Shirley. A Tale," Bentley's Miscellany, 26:640, 1849.

81 Ibid., p. 641.

82 Loc. cit.

As to the plot,

The story is curiously slight. It has scarcely any action. Throughout the whole of the first volume it hardly moves a single step. . . . The plot, in conception and development, is defective in coherency and dramatic truthfulness, by which we mean consequential progress and truthfulness of characterization. In this respect, as in subject, power of treatment, and unity of design, "Shirley" is manifestly inferior to "Jane Eyre."⁸³

The errors, said the critic, were errors of structure. The book had too much superfluous and irrelevant talk in its pages. He referred to Tom Jones as a perfect example of unity and completeness. The author of Shirley was, however, an able and vigorous writer, "who can afford to be warned of her faults, and who will probably place a higher value upon salutary objections than upon vague admiration."⁸⁴

Shirley was praised for its eloquence in descriptive passages. The work showed a "wild, vigorous originality, which, although it will not always bear sober examination, awakens the imagination, and frequently stirs the depths of the heart, with singular force."⁸⁵

Bentley's gave this beautiful tribute:

⁸³ Bentley's Miscellany, op. cit., pp. 641-42.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 642.

⁸⁵ Loc. cit.

. . . Trifles are often wrought out with a deftness and ingenuity, comparable only to the skill with which artists in glass spin to an extraordinary length the finest threads of that fragile material.⁸⁶

Miss Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams, January 3, 1850:

I have to acknowledge the receipt of the Morning Chronicle with a good review, and of the Church of England Quarterly and the Westminster with bad ones. . . .⁸⁷

The Westminster Review said:

'Shirley' is a novel which has floated into circulation on the popularity of its predecessors. 'Jane Eyre' was a remarkable production. There was originality in its construction, skill in the delineation of character, and great artistic power in the development of a plot--in itself a simple one, but wrought up to scenes of breathless interest. Moreover, it touched, although with great delicacy, upon certain ethical problems which were certain to lead to controversy, and which at once compelled every one to read the book who would take any part in the evening discussions of a lady's drawing-room.⁸⁸

The critic felt that the fault of the book was a decided lack of interest. Once the reader had started a chapter, he could lay down the book and go to sleep. Even in the third volume was this true. The cause of this lack of interest was the many characters. One heroine would have sufficed.⁸⁹

⁸⁶ Bentley's Miscellany, op. cit., p. 642.

⁸⁷ Shorter, op. cit., 2:103.

⁸⁸ "Shirley," Westminster Review, 52:418, January, 1850.

⁸⁹ Loc. cit.

As to the two heroines and their lovers,

. . . Both these ladies are in love with two brothers, without knowing it. One of the brothers is in the same predicament; and the other, who is intended as the soul of honour, only just escapes the condemnation of the reader as a bashful blockhead. When, in the denouement, they all get comfortably married, we are glad that they have at last found out the state of each other's minds,⁹⁰ but wonder they did not sooner make the same discovery.

George H. Lewes, who had reviewed Jane Eyre in Fraser, now gave a critique of Shirley in the Edinburgh Review. When Shirley came out, Lewes wrote to the author, before he had read the book, and told her that he intended to review the novel in the Edinburgh Review.⁹¹

On November 1, 1849, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Lewes:

It is about a year and a half since you wrote to me; but it seems a longer period, because since then it has been my lot to pass some black milestones in the journey of life. Since then there have been intervals when I have ceased to care about literature and critics and fame; when I have lost sight of whatever was prominent in my thoughts at the first publication of Jane Eyre; but now I want these things to come back vividly, if possible: consequently it was a pleasure to receive your note. I wish you did not think me a woman. I wish all reviewers believed 'Currer Bell' to be a man; they would be more just to him. You will, I know, keep measuring me by some standard of what you deem becoming to my sex; where I am not what you consider graceful you will condemn me. All mouths will be open against that first

⁹⁰ Westminster Review, op. cit., pp. 418-19.

⁹¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 432.

chapter, and that first chapter is as true as the Bible, nor is it exceptionable. Come what will, I cannot, when I write, think always of myself and of what is elegant and charming in femininity; it is not on those terms, or with such ideas, I ever took pen in hand: and if it is only on such terms my writing will be tolerated, I shall pass away from the public and trouble it no more. Out of obscurity I came, to obscurity I can easily return. Standing afar off, I now watch to see what will become of Shirley. My expectations are very low, and my anticipations somewhat sad and bitter; still, I earnestly conjure you to say honestly what you think; flattery would be worse than vain; there is no consolation in flattery. As for condemnation, I cannot, on reflection, see why I should much fear it; there is no one but myself to suffer therefrom, and both happiness and suffering in this life soon pass away. . . .⁹²

On January 10, 1850, Charlotte wrote to Mr. Williams. She had read the Edinburgh Review on Shirley:

I have received and perused the Edinburgh Review--it is very brutal and savage. I am not angry with Lewes, but I wish in future he would let me alone, and not write again what makes me feel so cold and sick as I am feeling just now.⁹³

She wrote to Mr. Lewes:

I can be on guard against my enemies, but God deliver me from my friends! Currer Bell.⁹⁴

When Mr. Lewes remonstrated with her for taking such a hurt attitude toward the review, she replied, January 10, 1850:

⁹² Shorter, op. cit., 2:79-80.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 106.

⁹⁴ Loc. cit.

I will tell you why I was so hurt by that review in the "Edinburgh"--not because its criticism was keen or its blame sometimes severe; not because its praise was stinted (for, indeed, I think you give me quite as much praise as I deserve), but because after I had said earnestly that I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman, you so roughly--I even thought so cruelly--handled the question of sex. I dare say you meant no harm, and perhaps you will not now be able to understand why I was so grieved at what you will probably deem such a trifle; but grieved I was, and indignant too.

There was a passage or two which you did quite wrong to write.

However, I will not bear malice against you for it; I know what your nature is: it is not a bad or unkind one, though you would often jar terribly on some feelings with whose recoil and quiver you could not possibly sympathise. I imagine you are both enthusiastic and implacable, as you are at once sagacious and careless; you know much and discover much, but you are in such a hurry to tell it all you never give yourself time to think how your reckless eloquence may affect others; and, what is more, if you knew how it did affect them, you would not much care.

However, I shake hands with you: you have excellent points; you can be generous. I still feel angry, and think I do well to be angry; but it is the anger one experiences for rough play rather than for foul play.-- I am yours, with a certain respect, and more chagrin,
Currer Bell.⁹⁵

The Edinburgh started with Currer Bell, the woman:

. . . Currer Bell is a woman. We never, for our own parts, had a moment's doubt on the subject. That Jane herself was drawn by a woman's delicate hand, and that Rochester equally betrayed the sex of the artist, was to our minds so obvious, as absolutely to shut our ears to all the evidence which could be adduced by the erudition

⁹⁵ Gaskell, op. cit., pp. 449-50.

even of a marchande des modes; and that simply because we knew that there were women profoundly ignorant of the mysteries of the toilette, and the terminology of fashion (independent of the obvious solution, that such ignorance might be counterfeited, to mislead), and felt that there was no man who could so have delineated a woman--or would so have delineated a man. . . .⁹⁶

As in Jane Eyre, so in Shirley there appeared an "over-masculine vigour":

This same over-masculine vigour is even more prominent in 'Shirley,' and does not increase the pleasantness of the book. A pleasant book, indeed, we are not sure that we can style it. Power it has unquestionably, and interest too, of a peculiar sort; but not the agreeableness of a work of art. Through its pages we are carried as over a wild and desolate heath, with a sharp east wind blowing the hair into our eyes, and making the blood tingle in our veins: There is health perhaps in the drive; but not much pleasantness. Nature speaks to us distinctly enough, but she does not speak sweetly. She is in her stern and sombre mood, and we see only her dreary aspects.⁹⁷

Lewes spoke of the inferiority of Shirley to Jane Eyre:

'Shirley' is inferior to 'Jane Eyre' in several important points. It is not quite so true; and it is not so fascinating. It does not so rivet the reader's attention, nor hurry him through all obstacles of improbability, with so keen a sympathy in its reality. It is even coarser in texture, too, and not unfrequently flippant; while the characters are almost all disagreeable, and exhibit intolerable rudeness of manner. In 'Jane Eyre' life was viewed from the standing point of individual experience; in 'Shirley' that standing point is frequently abandoned, and the artist paints only a panorama of which

⁹⁶ G. H. Lewes, "Shirley: a Tale," Edinburgh Review, 91:158, January, 1850.

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 158-59.

she, as well as you, are but spectators. Hence the unity of 'Jane Eyre' in spite of its clumsy and improbable contrivances, was great and effective: the fire of one passion fused the discordant materials into one mould. But in 'Shirley' all unity, in consequence of defective art, is wanting. There is no passionate link; nor is there any artistic fusion, or intergrowth, by which one part evolves itself from another. Hence its falling-off in interest, coherent movement, and life. The book may be laid down at any chapter, and almost any chapter might be omitted. . . . The characters often need a justification for their introduction; as in the case of the three Curates, who are offensive, un instructive, and unamusing. That they are not inventions, however, we feel persuaded. For nothing but a strong sense of their reality could have seduced the authoress into such a mistake as admitting them at all. We are confident she has seen them, known them, despised them; and therefore she paints them! although they have no relation with the story, have no interest in themselves, and cannot be accepted as types of a class,--for they are not Curates but boors: and although not inventions, we must be permitted to say that they are not true. . . .⁹⁸

Lewes spoke of Currer Bell's Yorkshire roughness:

. . . She must learn also to sacrifice a little of her Yorkshire roughness to the demands of good taste: neither saturating her writings with such rudeness and offensive harshness, nor suffering her style to wander into such vulgarities as would be inexcusable--even in a man. No good critic will object to the homeliness of natural diction, or to the racy flavour of conversational idiom; but every one must object to such phrases as 'Miss Mary, getting up the steam in her turn, now asked,' &c., or as 'making hard-handed worsted spinners cash up to the tune of four or five hundred per cent.,' or as 'Malone much chagrined at hearing him pipe up in most superior style;' all which phrases occur within the space of about a dozen pages, and that not in dialogue, but in the authoress's own narrative. . . . A French word or two may be introduced now and then on account of some peculiar fitness, but Currer Bell's use of the language is little better than that of the 'fashionable' novelists.

⁹⁸ Edinburgh Review, op. cit., p. 159.

To speak of a grandmother as une grand'mère, or of treacle as mélasse, or of a young lady being angry as courroucée, gives an air of affectation to the style strangely at variance with the frankness of its general tone.⁹⁹

The characters spoke with "harshness and rudeness":

. . . Is this correct as regards Yorkshire, or is the fault with the artist? In one place she speaks with indignant scorn of those who find fault with Yorkshire manners; and defies the 'most refined of cockneys to presume' to do such a thing. 'Taken as they ought to be,' she assures us, 'the majority of the lads and lasses of the West Riding are gentlemen and ladies, every inch of them: and it is only against the weak affectation and futile pomposity of a would-be aristocrat that they even turn mutinous.' This is very possible; but we must in that case strongly protest against Currer Bell's portraits being understood to be resemblances; for they are, one and all, given to break out and misbehave themselves upon very small provocation. . . . But, to quit this tone of remonstrance,--which after all is a compliment, for it shows how seriously we treat the great talents of the writer,--let us cordially praise the real freshness, vividness, and fidelity, with which most of the characters and scenes are depicted. . . .¹⁰⁰

Although Lewes found no "single picture representing one broad aspect of nature which can be hung beside two or three in 'Jane Eyre;'. . . the same bold and poetic imagery, are here exhibited." Lewes gave several examples of this:

'The evening was pitch dark: star and moon were quenched in gray rain-clouds,--gray they would have

⁹⁹ Edinburgh Review, op. cit., pp. 160-61, quoting Shirley, pp. 112, 114, and 121 respectively.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 161, quoting Shirley, p. 364.

been by day; by night they looked sable. Malone was not a man given to close observation of nature; her changes passed for the most part unnoticed by him; he could walk miles on the most varying April day, and never see the beautiful dallying of earth and heaven, -- never mark when a sunbeam kissed the hill-tops, making them smile clear in green light, or when a shower wept over them, hiding their crests with the low hanging dishevelled tresses of a cloud.'¹⁰¹

The motion of the sea was,

'like tossing banks of green light, strewed with vanishing and reappearing wreaths of foam, whiter than lilies.'¹⁰²

A scene of "dispiriting gloom, of stern, savage energy, or of wailing sadness" seemed to rivet the author's eye:

'There is only one cloud in the sky; but it curtains it from pole to pole. The wind cannot rest: it hurries sobbing over hills of sullen outline, colourless with twilight and mist. Rain has beat all day on that church tower: it rises dark from the stony enclosure of its graveyard; the nettles, the long grass, and the tombs all drip with wet.'¹⁰³

Lewes quoted the description of the storm:

'The thunder muttered distant peals; but the storm did not break till evening, after we had reached our inn; that inn being an isolated house at the foot of a range of mountains. I stood at the window an hour, watching the clouds come down over the mountains. The hills seemed rolled in sullen mist, and when the rain

101 Shirley, p. 16.

102 Ibid., p. 248.

103 Ibid., p. 418.

fell in whitening sheets, suddenly they were blotted from the prospect; they were washed from the world.'¹⁰⁴

The following quotation depicted a graphic interior:

'They had passed a long wet day together without ennui; it was now on the edge of dark; but candles were not yet brought in. Both, as twilight deepened, grew meditative and silent. A western wind roared high round the hall, driving wild clouds and stormy rain up from the far-remote ocean: all was tempest outside the antique lattices, all deep peace within. Shirley sat at the window watching the rack in heaven, the mist on earth,--listening to certain notes of the gale that plained like restless spirits--notes which, had she not been so young, gay, and healthy, would have swept her trembling nerves like some omen, some anticipatory dirge: . . .'¹⁰⁵

According to Lewes, Currer Bell excelled in the delineation of character. The men and women "are all set with so much life before us, that we seem to see them moving through the rooms and across the moor." He gave, as a specimen, the picture of the Sympons:

'Mr. Sympson proved to be a man of spotless respectability, worrying temper, pious principles, and worldly views. His lady was a very good woman, patient, kind, well-bred. She had been brought up on a narrow system of views--starved on a few prejudices; a mere handful of bitter herbs.'¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Shirley, pp. 213-14.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 228.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 460-61.

Lewes did not find the heroes very agreeable; the heroines, however, were both loveable. Shirley, barring a few scenes, would have been "irresistible." Caroline was a failure; she and Mrs. Pryor were as untrue as if "drawn by the clumsy hand of a male." Yet, "in both there are little touches which at once betray the more exquisite workmanship of a woman's lighter pencil."¹⁰⁷

This critic scorned the idea of Mrs. Pryor's rejecting her child because she was pretty:

. . . Currer Bell! if under your heart had ever stirred a child, if to your bosom a babe had ever been pressed,-- that mysterious part of your being, towards which all the rest of it was drawn, in which your whole soul was transported and absorbed,--never could you have imagined such a falsehood as that!¹⁰⁸

Louis Moore, according to Lewes, should not have written his feelings in his notebook; Currer Bell should have told us that outright:

. . . Incident is not the forte of Currer Bell. If her invention were in any degree equal to her powers of execution . . . she would stand alone among novelists; but in invention she is as yet only an artisan, not an artist.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ Edinburgh Review, op. cit., p. 164.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 165.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 168-69.

Lewes referred to Schiller's criticism of Madame de Stael's Corinne; the French novelist's faults were "womanly faults"; so, said Lewes, were those of Currer Bell:

. . . For she, too, has genius enough to create a great name for herself; and if we seem to have insisted too gravely on her faults, it is only because we are ourselves sufficiently her admirers to be most desirous to see her remove these blemishes from her writings, and take the rank within her reach. . . .¹¹⁰

Two months later, the Dublin Review gave a criticism of Shirley. Miss Brontë was pleased with this magazine. On April 3, 1850, she wrote to Mr. Williams:

I have received the Dublin Review, and your letter enclosing the Indian Notices. I hope these reviews will do good; they are all favourable, and one of them (the Dublin) is very able. I have read no critique so discriminating since that in the Revue des deux Mondes. It offers a curious contrast to Lewes's in the Edinburgh, where forced praise, given by jerks, and obviously without real and cordial liking, and censure, crude, conceited, and ignorant, were mixed in random lumps--forming a very loose and inconsistent whole.¹¹¹

The Dublin Review discussed both Jane Eyre and Shirley:

. . . In the first place, although novels, they are works of singular talent; there goes to either of them as much of thought and imagination, as might well be beaten out to cover the pages of at least half-a-dozen average works of far greater pretension; in the second, they have originated a new style of novel-writing, as distinct from

¹¹⁰ Edinburgh Review, op. cit., p. 173.

¹¹¹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:126.

anything we have yet had, as Scott from Austen, or as Dickens from either; and, as is usual in such cases, these works have a raciness and charm which we shall not find again in any of their imitators, although there will be many more or less successful, and, finally, more or less odious; of which last phase, indeed, there are already symptoms, for the style will not bear deterioration.¹¹²

As to the religious views in the book,

. . . Undoubtedly we would give neither of these novels to very young people; they are too worldly, too passionate; they strike upon chords in our nature too deep and intricate to be within their comprehension. It must be understood also, that in these stories there is no particular virtue to be inculcated, no individual vice to be held up to abhorrence, no distinct moral, in short, to be enforced; still less are there any peculiar views of religion to be exemplified. Of religion, indeed, there is no more than the occasional, natural aspirations, which serve to redeem the stories from heathenish coldness; and this is fortunate, for . . . there peep out one or two unorthodox opinions, which prove the lady's imagination to be as potent and discursive upon this subject as upon others, more legitimately within its exercise. . . .¹¹³

As for the characters,

. . . It is difficult to analyse the charm which attaches to the characters of this authoress. She is no miniature painter; she has no soft model of ideal perfection in her eyes; Jane Eyre is keen, vehement, resentful, but her life-like vigour, the untrammelled freedom of thought and action are not exaggerated; they are shaded off, by many pretty touches, into the girlish, womanly character. . . .¹¹⁴

Comparing Shirley with Jane Eyre, the former has

. . . less, perhaps of passion, but it is more diffuse,

¹¹² "Jane Eyre and Shirley," Dublin Review, 28:210, March, 1850.

¹¹³ Ibid., pp. 210-11.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 212.

more ornamented, more various; it abounds . . . in those lovely pictures of nature which form so striking a feature in these novels; . . . they are dashed off in few strong colours, laid on broadly; the sounds, the aspect of nature, the effect of the changing temperature upon the nerves, seems re-produced, blending and harmonising with the scene in a peculiar manner. We take at random the description of an old mansion.¹¹⁵

The critic quoted the description of Fieldhead, and also the scene between Caroline and her mother.¹¹⁶ He had heard this scene condemned as unnatural:

. . . In matters of feeling as of taste there is no certain rule; to us it appears that maternal affection does not always spring to life in full force, particularly in a heart absorbed already by painful emotion. . . .¹¹⁷

The reviewer liked the characterization of Mr. Yorke; "the Symptons, too, the good old maids, the various country neighbours" were all good. He liked the dialogues for their spirit and raciness; some parts, however, he disliked:

. . . Finally, we hope the authoress will suppress all tendency to exaggeration and abruptness--that she will avoid all theories concerning her own religion . . . and all attacks upon that of other people; and with these reservations we shall be truly rejoiced to welcome as many more such novels as she will please to give us.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Dublin Review, op. cit., pp. 223-24.

¹¹⁶ Shirley, pp. 193-94, and 440-43.

¹¹⁷ Dublin Review, op. cit., p. 230.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., p. 233.

During her visit to London in June, 1850, Miss Brontë saw "her hero, the Duke of Wellington; she had a conversation with Thackeray, whom she appears to have 'lectured'; and she met George Henry Lewes, with whom she had corresponded with so much vigour."¹¹⁹

She also read the review of Shirley from Sharpe's London Magazine. She wrote to her father from Hyde Park, the home of George Smith, his mother, and his sisters. The letter was dated June 4, 1850:

I hope you don't care for the notice in Sharpe's Magazine; it does not disturb me in the least. Mr. Smith says it is of no consequence whatever in a literary sense. Sharpe, the proprietor, was an apprentice of Mr. Smith's father.¹²⁰

Sharpe's expressed disappointment in Shirley:

. . . A comparison of the present with the earlier production of the same hand would well induce many to reconsider the verdict which they passed; not, indeed, unanimously, though in the main, it was a favourable one, two years ago. The opponents of "Jane Eyre" (and they were "legion") will find in "Shirley" much to cavil at--more to condemn. The somewhat offensive portraiture of a female character in the one is so little altered in the other, that we can hardly hail it as an improvement, or even a sign of progress. "Jane Eyre" had, at least, the charm of originality; the freshness of the colouring no less than the novelty of the subject, arrested and interested us, while it also extorted our praise. Its faults--arising, perhaps, from a desire to

¹¹⁹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:140.

¹²⁰ Ibid., p. 142.

express strongly rather than delicately, what was strongly felt--were, indeed, numerous; but still, we were willing to hope they were capable of emendation, without marring aught of the genuine spirit that breathed throughout the work. . . . So little satisfied are we with the change, that we would have preferred another "Jane Eyre," with all its errors, rather than sacrifice so entirely all its merits. We now discover, with concern, that the writer's is but a limited skill. With her, to feel deeply is to paint coarsely, to mould with spirit is to leave deplorable excrescences on the work. She cannot polish without wearing off all vigour, character, and truth. . . . What was original has here become simply imaginary, and unreal; and she has marred freshness by bombast, homeliness by unmeaning common-place. . . .¹²¹

Sharpe's London Magazine declared that material enough for several tales had been "squandered" in Shirley. Currer Bell, in her attempt to make Shirley, the heroine, a "character," had failed completely:

. . . Are we overstepping our office in inquiring "whether this is a portrait of what the writer is, or wishes, or fancies herself to be?" We might remind the reader of Lord Byron's taste for giving in his poetry what has well been called, a "loose incognito" of himself. . . .¹²²

Shirley Keeldar, according to the critic, was a

. . . second Jane Eyre as she would appear uncramped by her position and circumstances; a somewhat rational and subdued Catherine Linton, transported from the chilling neighbourhood of "Wuthering Heights," and put on her best behaviour as a responsible land-owner amidst the luxuries of Fieldhead Manor. . . .¹²³

¹²¹ "Shirley," Sharpe's London Magazine, 11:371, 1850.

¹²² Loc. cit.

¹²³ Ibid., p. 372.

Sharpe's referred to an article in which the critic had said there was "something in 'Shirley' akin to Jane Austen's books, or Maria Edgeworth's, or Walter Scott's":

. . . Yet will the curious inquire, Whom has the critic in his eye to compare with "Shirley?" Will bold echo answer, "Elizabeth Bennet, of *Pride and Prejudice*?" Judge, reader, between them: here behold "the counterfeit presentment of two" women; the one, a bold but artistic sketch of an every-day character, the other elaborated out of all truth, the mere fantastic creation of a limited imagination and a morbid mind. One thing Miss Austen and Miss Edgeworth never forgot in their pictures, whether of vulgar or genteel life--the charm that belongs to truth and reality. But such has no allurements for the authoress of "Shirley;" effect is all she looks for--startling effect--to produce which, after having in one novel exhausted her view of nature, she seeks for a monstrous birth. . . .¹²⁴

Sharpe's spoke of blending "with a broad Yorkshire lingo the pure intonation of the French accent."¹²⁵ In regard to Currer Bell's statement that perhaps the reader would like to know the moral in Shirley, the critic said:

. . . In a tale that reflects neither the features of nature, nor real character, nor just sentiment, was it unreasonable to look for design, or, if you will, a moral?--by which we mean, something more than a mere dancing of the puppets during three volumes, and then doing no more than marrying up all who were marriageable,--a consummation that might have been arrived at, without much violence, on their first introduction. . . . The great merit of Thackeray is his taste for picturesque

¹²⁴ Sharpe's London Magazine, op. cit., p. 372.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 373.

effect, which he produces by an ingenious, yet simple process, of grouping together in amusing contrast the salient absurdities and contradictions in men; he is quite content to take his materials from every-day life. The great fault of "Currer Bell" is a neglect of the picturesque, even where it should strike her most obviously, in her observation of the face of nature. Graphic power she undoubtedly possesses, and of an extraordinary kind; yet her pictures are like those of Turner, not calculated to please. Like him, the images she chooses are not such as fall under usual observation. We could hardly expect her to be more successful when she came to treat of the more complex subject of man.¹²⁶

Although, in her Note To The Third Edition of Jane Eyre, dated August 13, 1849, Charlotte Brontë had told the public that her claim to fame as a novelist "rests on this one work alone,"¹²⁷ some persisted in the belief that Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell were one person. Sydney Dobell, who wrote an article entitled "Currer Bell" for the Palladium in September, 1850, believed that the author of Jane Eyre and the author of Wuthering Heights were the same. He spoke extremely well of Ellis's book; Jane Eyre, he said, was a book that would live:

. . . Currer Bell has given us one work, at least, which will endure with the prose literature of our language. That work is Jane Eyre. Beliefs cannot die, if they have their root in the nature of man; and this book will live, because there is no other book in modern prose which it is so absolutely impossible to disbelieve. The author has superiors in composition, in construction, in range of fancy, in delicacy of conception, in felicity of execution, in width of grasp, in height and depth of

¹²⁶ Sharpe's London Magazine, loc. cit.

¹²⁷ Charlotte Brontë, Jane Eyre, 1:xii. Thornton Edition.

thought. She has no living rival in the faculty of imposing belief. And in proportion to her excellence in this first requisite of a narrator, is her power for good and evil in a questioning age, and the consequent weight of her responsibilities to the God of Truth. . . .

. . . Currer Bell is a woman. Every word she utters is female. Not feminine, but female. There is a sex about it which cannot be mistaken, even in its manliest attire. Though she translated the manuscript of angels-- every thought neutral and every feeling cryptogamous-- her voice would betray her. Though she spoke in thunder, and had the phrase and idiom of Achilles, she cannot think in a beard. Far more curious, perhaps, than anything her pen portrays, is her own involuntary revelation of the heart of woman. It is not merely improbable, but impossible, that a man has written Jane Eyre. . . . She* thinks of the abstraction, man, with all the blissful ignorance of a boy's dreams of woman. To her, he is a thing to be studied present, and mused upon absent. He comes, and she owns her master; departs, and leaves the air full of vision. She hangs on every word of her hero, as though it were a message from the unknown. His "how d'ye dos" leave a track of glory behind them, and his monosyllables have an atmosphere through which they shine the very stars of fate. For her, he cannot leave the room but on high intent, and shuts the door after him on a world of busy speculation. Her ears are open before he speaks, and the unhappy monarch eats, drinks, coughs, smiles, walks, and sits in a distressing state of unmitigated significance. Is he sullen? It is the wrath of Jove; the thunderous exhalations of a universe of cares. . . . Is he mute? With holy awe she listens to his silence, and gazes on the taciturn face, till the Memnon grows musical. He is plotting empires; he is dreaming epics; he heaves with incommunicable sorrows. Is he gay? She does not wonder that the whole world looks brighter; for, for aught she knows or doubts, he may be leagued with the powers of nature themselves. . . .128

But Currer Bell had not yet done her best work:

128 Sydney Dobell, "Currer Bell," Palladium, September, 1850, cited by Transactions and Other Publications of the Brontë Society, ed. Butler Wood, 5:212-14, printed for the Society, 1919.

* In the review, there was no period after the name, Jane Eyre, although it was the end of the sentence.

. . . For her most perfect work the world is still waiting, and will be content for some years to wait; and, placing in an assumed order of production (though not of publication) the novels called Wuthering Heights, Wildfell Hall, Jane Eyre, and Shirley, as the works of one author under sundry disguises, we should have deemed, a few days since, that an analysis of the first (and, by our theory, the earliest) of these was the amplest justice she could at present receive. Opening, however, the third edition of Jane Eyre, published before the appearance of Shirley, we find a preface in which all other works are disclaimed. A nom de guerrist has many privileges, and we are willing to put down to a double entendre all that is serious in this disclaimer. That any hand but that which shaped Jane Eyre and Shirley cut out the rougher earlier statues, we should require more than the evidence of our senses to believe. . . .¹²⁹

In speaking of the qualities of Wuthering Heights and Jane Eyre, Sydney Dobell contrasted the qualities of the later work, Shirley:

. . . In Shirley, on the other hand, we see the same qualities--with feebler health, and under auspices for the time infelicitous--labouring on an exhausted soil. Israel is at work, indeed; but there is a grievous want of straw, and the groan of the people is perceptible. The book is misnamed Shirley. Caroline Helstone, the child of nature, should yield no pre-eminence to Shirley Keeldar, the daughter of circumstance. The character of the one is born of womanhood; that of the other, of "Fieldhead, and a thousand a year." . . . Place Caroline Helstone where you will, she is still exquisitely sweet, and, in element, universally true. To make Shirley Keeldar repulsive, you have only to fancy her poor. This absence of intrinsic heroism in the heroine, and some shortcomings on the part of the authoress--a consciousness of the reader, an evident effort, and an apparent disposition to rest contented with present powers, opinions, and mental status--would do much to damp the

¹²⁹ Transactions and Other Publications of the Brontë Society, 5:217.

hopes of a critic, were they not the mere indications of overwork, and of a brain not yet subsided from success. One eloquent and noble characteristic remains to her unimpaired. Her mission is perpetually remembered. . . . But we cannot help thinking, with all admiration for Currer Bell, and all respect for her artistic competence, that on those ram's horns she has blown so vigorously before walls that must surely come down (those grim old feudal bastions of prejudice, and those arabesque barriers of fashion, which will fall in the wind of them), there are other tunes possible than that one of which she has already given us the air and variations--that to repeal the test and corporation acts of extinct castes, and to reconstruct society on the theory of an order of merit, something more is needed than a perpetual pas de deux between master and governess, mistress and tutor. . . .130

In further contrast of Jane Eyre and Shirley, the latter seemed like a "Frankenstein skeleton":

We have said that in Shirley we see the qualities of the author of Jane Eyre labouring on an exhausted soil. The fat kine and the lean are a fair emblem of the two books. Jane is in high condition; her "soul runneth over with marrow and fatness;" in her sorriest plight she is instinct with superfluous life; all her "little limbs" are warm, all her veins pulsate; she is full of unction; the oleum vitae lubricates her brain day and night. The other book gives one the idea of a great sketch poorly filled in, or a Frankenstein skeleton finished in haste, at a proportionate economy in fat and flesh. . . .131

The novelist possessed all the necessary attributes:

It seems to us, that the authoress of Jane Eyre combines all the natural and accidental attributes of the novelist of her day. In the ecclesiastical tendencies

130 Transactions and Other Publications, op. cit., 5:225-27.

131 Ibid., pp. 227-28.

of her education and habits--in the youthful ambiguity of her politics--in a certain old-world air, which hangs about her pictures, we see her passports into circles which otherwise she would never reach. Into them she is carrying, unperceived, the elements of infallible disruption and revolution. In the specialties of her religious belief, her own self-grown and glorious heterodoxies--in the keen satiric faculty she has shown--in the exuberant and multiform vigour of her idiosyncrasy--in her unmistakable hatred of oppression, and determination to be free--in the onward tendencies of a genius so indisputably original, and in the reaction of a time on which, if she lives, she cannot fail to act strongly, we acknowledge the best pledges that that passport, already torn, will be one day scattered to the winds. The peculiarities of her local position--evidently Lancashire or Yorkshire--give her opportunity for investigating a class of character utterly out of the latitude of the London litterateur--the manufacturing classes, high and low--the Panocrates of the future, into whose hands the ball of empire has now passed; and in the strange combination of factory and moorland, the complexities of civilisation and the simple majesty of nature, she has before her, at one glance, the highest materials for the philosopher and the poet--the most magnificent emblem of the inner heart of the time. One day, with freer hands, more practised eye, an ampler horizon, an enlarged experience, she must give us such revelations of that heart--of its joys, woes, hopes, beliefs, duties and destinies--as shall make it leap like a dumb man healed. . . .¹³²

Before Currer Bell wrote again, however, she should live another era of "that strong, original, well-endowed mind":

The strength of Currer Bell lies in her power of developing the history, more or less amplified and varied by imagination, of her own individual mind. . . . Before she writes another volume of that great history, in the shape of a new novel, she should live another era of that strong, original, well-endowed mind. She

¹³² Transactions, op. cit., 5:232-33.

must go through the hopes and fears, passions and sympathies, of her age; and by virtue of her high privilege of genius, she must take not only the colour of her time, but that complimentary colour of the future which attends it; she must not only hear the voice of her day, but catch and repeat its echoes on the forward rock of ages; she must not only strike the chord which shall rouse us to the battle of the hour, but seize and embody that sympathetic note on the unseen strings of the "To come," which it is the attribute of genius to recognise and to renew.¹³³

Charlotte Brontë wrote, on September 5, 1850, to
Mr. James Taylor of Smith and Elder:

. . . The article in the "Palladium" is one of those notices over which an author rejoices trembling. He rejoices to find his work finely, fully, fervently appreciated, and trembles under the responsibility such appreciation seems to devolve upon him. I am counselled to wait . . . I will do so; yet it is harder to wait with the hands bound, and the observant and reflective faculties at their silent and unseen work, than to labour mechanically.

I need not say how I felt the remarks on "Wuthering Heights;" . . . Whoever the author of this article may be, I remain his debtor.

Yet you see, even here, "Shirley" is disparaged in comparison with "Jane Eyre;" and yet I took great pains with "Shirley." I did not hurry; I tried to do my best, and my own impression was that it was not inferior to the former work; indeed, I had bestowed on it more time, thought, and anxiety: but great part of it was written under the shadow of impending calamity; and the last volume, I cannot deny, was composed in the eager, restless endeavour to combat mental sufferings which were scarcely tolerable.¹³⁴

¹³³ Transactions, op. cit., 5:235-36.

¹³⁴ Gaskell, op. cit., pp. 488-89.

On the same day, September 5, 1850, she wrote to
Mr. Williams:

. . . The article in the Palladium is indeed such as to atone for a hundred unfavourable or imbecile reviews. I have expressed what I think of it to Mr. Taylor, who kindly wrote me a letter on the subject. I thank you also for the newspaper notices, and for some you sent me a few weeks ago.¹³⁵

To Ellen Nussey, September 14, 1850, she wrote:

An article entitled 'Currer Bell' has lately appeared in the Palladium, a new periodical published in Edinburgh. It is an eloquent production and one of such warm sympathy and high appreciation as I had never expected to see, it makes mistakes about authorship, etc., but these I hope one day to set right. Mr. Taylor (the little man) first informed me of this article.¹³⁶

On December 8, 1850, she wrote to Sydney Dobell to express her appreciation; at the same time she included a copy of the second edition of Wuthering Heights, the introduction to which explained the true authorship. The letter was sent especially to thank the critic for his appreciation of Ellis's book:

I offer this little book to my critic in the "Palladium," and he must believe it accompanied by a tribute of the sincerest gratitude; not so much for anything he has said of myself as for the noble justice he has rendered to one dear to me as myself--perhaps dearer--and perhaps one kind

¹³⁵ Shorter, op. cit., 2:169.

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 170.

word spoken for her awakens a deeper, tenderer sentiment of thankfulness than eulogies heaped on my own head. As you will see when you have read the biographical notice, my sister cannot thank you herself; she is gone out of your sphere and mine, and human blame and praise are nothing to her now. . . .¹³⁷

The New Monthly Magazine, in July, 1852, included an article on Currer Bell. The critic spoke of the originality of the author of Jane Eyre:

Of the many among whom "Jane Eyre" made a sensation, not a few professed themselves a little shocked. The author was so wayward, so free-spoken, so unconventional. The book was to be read gingerly, with caution, with suspicion; it was evidently by some one not used, or willing, to run in harness of the old style--some one not cumbered with much serving to the prejudices, primnesses, and proprieties of genteel fiction as by law established--some one not over punctilious touching her p's and q's, not sedulously trained to mind her stops. The Sympson daughters, in "Shirley," are described as having penetrated the mystery of the abomination of desolation: and what was it? They had discovered that unutterable thing in the characteristic others call Originality. . . . Many are the Misses Sympson of our reading world. And while they felt the power of this new aspirant, they were half-disposed to taboo her on the score of this . . . Originality. . . . Especially was this antipathy in force at a time when she was the accredited author of that wild, wilful, and some think, wicked book, "Wuthering Heights"--written in a tone of such reckless defiance of ordinary canons of art. . . .¹³⁸

In comparing Shirley with Jane Eyre:

¹³⁷ Gaskell, op. cit., pp. 506-07.

¹³⁸ "Currer Bell," New Monthly Magazine, 95:295, July, 1852.

In many respects "Shirley" is a more "likeable" work than "Jane Eyre," but it is correspondingly deficient in power and freshness. The more elaborate is the least effective, and lacks the ars celare artem which its predecessor possessed in so genial a way. "Jane Eyre" has been compared to the real spar, the slow deposit which the heart of genius filters from life's daily stream; "Shirley" to its companion, made to order, fair to look on, but wanting the internal crystal.¹³⁹

The public looked forward with great expectation to Shirley:

Great was the expectation of the public from Currer Bell. The appearance of "Shirley" was an event. Sir Walter Scott--a well-qualified observer--has remarked how often it happens, that a writer's previous reputation proves the greatest enemy which has to be encountered in a second attempt upon popular favour: exaggerated expectations are excited and circulated, and criticism, which had been seduced into former approbation by the pleasure of surprise, now stands awakened and alert to pounce upon every failing. The full-blown rose of literary triumph has thus its attendant thorn--sometimes its canker-worm too. Comparatively, "Shirley" was not a great success; positively, it was a book of distinguished vigour, originality, and eloquence.¹⁴⁰

The New Monthly praised the portraiture in Shirley:

It is rich in portraiture. Some of the figures seem to stand out from their frames, instinct with life and motion, like the elder Vernon, in "Rob Roy." Shirley Keeldar herself, her soul bent on admiring the great, reverencing the good, being joyous with the genial; her countenance, when quiescent, wearing a mixture of wistfulness and carelessness--when animated, blending the wistfulness with a genial gaiety, seasoning the mirth

¹³⁹ New Monthly Magazine, op. cit., p. 296.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 301.

with an unique flavour of sentiment; ever ready to satirise her own or any other person's enthusiasm; indolent in many things, reckless, and unconscious that her dreams are rare, her feelings peculiar--one who knows not, nor ever will know, the full value of that spring whose bright, fresh bubbling in her heart keeps it green. . . .¹⁴¹

Shirley was really inferior to Jane Eyre:

Apart from the overstrained expectations which were disappointed in "Shirley," as following in the wake of "Jane Eyre," there is an intrinsic inferiority in the former, much of it arising, we conjecture, from the author's solicitude to redeem the pledge already given. It is a common case; and an almost constant "corollary" is, that the author thinks best of the second venture, on account of the extra pains it involved. Scott has pointed this out as the explanation of that difference of opinion which sometimes occurs betwixt author and reader, respecting the comparative value of early and of subsequent publications. In the complaint against "Shirley," of its slow and dragging narrative, its paucity of incident, its exuberance of didactic dialogue, and so forth, we very partially concur; knowing at the outset, that if we expect moving accidents by flood and field, and a sterling guinea and a half's worth of dashing dramatics, we have come to the wrong "store." We come to Currer Bell not for narrative, but for delineation of character. We want, not her plot, but her reading of the heart of man--or rather of woman. Between her and the mere narrative novelist there is all the difference which exists (to use an illustration of Dr. Johnson's) between a man who knows how a watch is made, and a man who can tell the hour by looking at the dial-plate. And when characters are fully developed, the narrative necessarily loiters. The forte of Currer Bell lies in deep searchings of heart. She heads the school which devotes its fiction to this anatomy of psychology. The "strong-minded" "Jane Eyre" has been properly pronounced the most notable example of this school. . . . Just now our ears are dinned with peals meant to ring with the true Bell-metal; but it shall not make us careless of again hearing the silver, clear, church-tower

¹⁴¹ New Monthly Magazine, loc. cit.

chimes, whensoever they again summon us to devotion on ground where we have met already a Jane Eyre and a Caroline Helstone, and where we hope to see fresh faces, and to read new names in its book of life. We believe not what some allege, that these chimes have rung out all their changes. We shall yet hear them, we trust, on a new theme, and, as at the first, discoursing most eloquent music. Currer Bell is wise to restrain her hand for a season; but when once she has gathered enough from "fresh woods and pastures new," let her empty her bosom of its treasures, and confirm her part in the description--"Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh."¹⁴²

Mrs. Browning wrote to Mrs. Jameson, April 2, 1850:

. . . I have read 'Shirley' lately; it is not equal to 'Jane Eyre' in spontaneousness and earnestness. I found it heavy, I confess, though in the mechanical part of the writing--the compositional savoir faire--there is an advance. . . .¹⁴³

In general, the following points might be given with regard to the reception of the new work, Shirley:

1. Perhaps because of the many characters, Shirley lacked the intense interest which Jane Eyre displayed.
2. Shirley abounded in wonderful natural description.
3. Currer Bell excelled in portraiture of character.
4. The governess-master, or student-tutor situation was a little tiresome.
5. There was too much unnecessary conversation; there was also too much love in the book.

¹⁴² New Monthly Magazine, op. cit., pp. 304-05.

¹⁴³ Letters of Elizabeth Barrett Browning, ed. Kenyon, 1:442.

CHAPTER III

VILLETTE

Villette, the story of life at a Brussels pensionnat, reminds one of The Professor, written before Jane Eyre, but not accepted by any of the six publishers to whom it was sent. Villette is Brussels; Charlotte and her sister Emily entered the Pensionnat Héger as students in 1842, in the month of February. Late in the same year, they returned to Haworth Village because of the death of Aunt Branwell, who had kept the home for the Brontë family for many years. Emily decided now to stay at home, but Charlotte returned to Brussels, this time as a teacher of English.

In the story of Villette, Lucy Snowe is the young plain student and teacher in Brussels. The principal characters in the book are Lucy and M. Paul Emanuel, the professor of languages. Then there are Dr. John Bretton, the school physician and his sweetheart, Paulina Mary. Madame Beck, the relative of M. Paul is the directress of the school. Lucy, the English Protestant girl among the French and Belgian Catholic students and teachers, is often at a loss to know what to do. The mistress of the school seems to Lucy to be a spy; the little dark professor, however, though a Catholic too, is, to her surprise, quite a likeable person. In fact, the story is built around the professor and his student, Lucy Snowe. Many believe M. Paul Emanuel to be M. Héger, and Mme.

Beck to be Madame Héger. Perhaps all agree that Lucy Snowe is to some extent the picture of Charlotte Brontë.

Villette was published on January 28, 1853. On November 28, 1851, Charlotte wrote to George Smith:

It is not at all likely that my book will be ready at the time you mention. If my health is spared I shall get on with it as fast as is consistent with its being done, if not well, yet as well as I can do it, not one whit faster. When the mood leaves me (it has left me now, without vouchsafing so much as a word of a message when it will return) I put by the MS. and wait till it comes back again; and God knows I sometimes have to wait long--very long it seems to me.

Meantime, if I might make a request to you, it would be this: Please to say nothing about my book till it is written and in your hands. You may not like it. I am not myself elated with it as far as it has gone, and authors, you need not be told, are always tenderly indulgent, even blindly partial, to their own; even if it should turn out reasonably well, still I regard it as ruin to the prosperity of an ephemeral book like a novel to be much talked about beforehand, as if it were something great. People are apt to conceive, or at least to profess, exaggerated expectations, such as no performance can realise; then ensue disappointment and the due revenge--detraction and failure. If, when I write, I were to think of the critics who, I know, are waiting for Currer Bell, ready "to break all his bones or ever he comes to the bottom of the den," my hand would fall paralysed on my desk. However, I can but do my best, and then muffle my head in the mantle of Patience and sit down at her feet and wait. . . .¹

On July 28, 1852, she wrote to Mr. Williams:

Last autumn I got on for a time quickly. I ventured to look forward to spring as the period of publication: my health gave way; I passed such a winter as,

¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 567. (Shorter, op. cit., 2:254 states that the letter was written to Mr. Williams, March, 1852).

having been once experienced, will never be forgotten. The spring proved little better than a protraction of trial. The warm weather and a visit to the sea have done me much good physically; but as yet I have recovered neither elasticity of animal spirits nor flow of the power of composition. And if it were otherwise the difference would be of no avail; my time and thoughts are at present taken up with close attendance on my father, whose health is just now in a very critical state, the heat of the weather having produced determination of the blood to the head.²

Once again, to George Smith:

You must notify honestly what you think of Villette when you have read it. I can hardly tell you how I hunger to hear some opinion beside my own, and how I have sometimes desponded, and almost despaired, because there was no one to whom to read a line, or of whom to ask a counsel. Jane Eyre was not written under such circumstances, nor were two-thirds of Shirley. I got so miserable about it, I could bear no allusion to the book. It is not finished yet; but now I hope. As to the anonymous publication, I have this to say: If the withholding of the author's name should tend materially to injure the publisher's interest, to interfere with booksellers' orders, etc., I would not press the point; but if no such detriment is contingent I should be much thankful for the sheltering shadow of an incognito. I seem to dread the advertisements--the large-lettered 'Currer Bell's New Novel,' or 'New Work by the Author of Jane Eyre,' . . . Remember to be an honest critic of Villette, and tell Mr. Williams to be unsparing: not that I am likely to alter anything, but I want to know his impressions and yours.³

In her letter to Mr. George Smith, November 3, 1852, Miss Brontë mentioned the young English beauty, Ginevra Fanshawe, with whom Dr. John was at first infatuated:

² Shorter, op. cit., 2:272-73.

³ Ibid., pp. 282-83.

I feel very grateful for your letter; it relieved me much, for I was a good deal harassed by doubts as to how Villette might appear in other eyes than my own. I feel in some degree authorised to rely on your favourable impressions, because you are quite right where you hint disapprobation. You have exactly hit two points at least where I was conscious of defect--the discrepancy, the want of perfect harmony, between Graham's boyhood and manhood--the angular abruptness of his change of sentiment towards Miss Fanshawe. You must remember, though, that in secret he had for some time appreciated that young lady at a somewhat depressed standard--held her a little lower than the angels. But still the reader ought to have been better made to feel this preparation towards a change of mood. As to the publishing arrangements, I leave them to Cornhill. There is, undoubtedly, a certain force in what you say about the inexpediency of affecting a mystery which cannot be sustained; so you must act as you think is for the best. I submit, also, to the advertisements in large letters, but under protest, and with a kind of ostrich longing for concealment. Most of the third volume is given to the development of the 'crabbed Professor's' character. Lucy must not marry Dr. John; he is far too youthful, handsome, bright-spirited, and sweet-tempered; he is a 'curled darling' of Nature and of Fortune, and must draw a prize in life's lottery. His wife must be young, rich, pretty; he must be made very happy indeed. If Lucy marries anybody it must be the Professor--a man in whom there is much to forgive, much to 'put up with.' But I am not leniently disposed towards Miss Frost;⁴ from the beginning I never meant to appoint her lines in pleasant places. The conclusion of this third volume is still a matter of some anxiety: I can but do my best, however. It would speedily be finished, could I ward off certain obnoxious headaches, which whenever I get into the spirit of my work, are apt to seize and prostrate me. . . .⁵

On November 29, 1852, she wrote to Ellen Nussey:

Truly thankful am I to be able to tell you that I finished my long task on Saturday; packed and sent off

⁴ Later the name was changed to "Lucy Snowe."

⁵ Shorter, op. cit., 2:283-84.

the parcel to Cornhill. I said my prayers when I had done it. Whether it is well or ill done, I don't know. . . . I will now try to wait the issue quietly. The book, I think, will not be considered pretentious, nor is it of a character to excite hostility. . . .⁶

In this manner was Villette, Charlotte Brontë's last novel, written. Mr. Shorter has made this statement:

. . . Brussels speaks at every point to the reader of this remarkable story. In intensity and dramatic feeling Villette puts all other 'novels of place' in the background.⁷

The footnote on the same page states:

Yet tourists wander about Rome with Hawthorne's Marble Faun, and about Florence with George Eliot's Romola. No one, I suppose, has carried Villette about Brussels.⁸

On January 27, 1853, Miss Brontë wrote from London to her friend, Miss Wooler, Headmistress of Roe Head School:

. . . Villette is to be published to-morrow. Its appearance has been purposely delayed hitherto, to avoid discourteous clashing with Mrs. Gaskell's new work. . . .⁹

On February 5, 1853, the Examiner reviewed Villette:

⁶ Shorter, op. cit., 2:288.

⁷ Ibid., p. 302.

⁸ Loc. cit.

⁹ Ibid., p. 303. Mrs. Gaskell's new work was Ruth.

This novel amply sustains the fame of the author of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Shirley' as an original and powerful writer. Though the plot is very slight, and the whole work if it had been one-fourth shorter might still have filled the orthodox three volumes, the pleasure it affords to the reader never flags. The men, women, and children who figure throughout it, have flesh and blood in them. All are worked out heartily, in such a way as to evince a very keen spirit of observation on the author's part, and a fine sense of the picturesque in character. There is not an actor in the story, from M. Paul in the foreground who fills chapters, to Rosine the portress at a Pensionnat de Demoiselles who fills paragraphs, whom any reader can regard as a mere thing of words. Often with humour, and always with skill and truth, the people with whom we have to do here are presented to us, so that we know them, mind and body and recognise out of our own daily experience the fitness of each body for the kind of mind that dwells in it. The bold, sanguine, cheerful Dr John,--who marches through* all difficulties, becomes deeply enamoured, breaks the spell suddenly when his hidden sensitiveness has been wounded by impertinence towards the mother whom he has loved deeply, and lived with all his life in a warm, joyous way,--who, having fought his way out of the chains of a flirt, allies himself with a more spiritual nature,--of course he is a bold, tall, handsome man, with leonine locks in his boyhood, and whiskers in his manhood very nearly red. Of course the wife he marries is a spiritual little creature, very small in bodily proportions. Examples of French character and physiognomy are also wedded to each other with surpassing skill; and Lucy Snowe, whose autobiography the whole book professes to be, depicts herself with her own pen in the most natural and unobtrusive way.¹⁰

The Examiner, however, pointed out one defect:

The one defect of the book, a similar defect to those which we have had occasion to point out in its predecessors, will be to most people as apparent as its many and extraordinary merits. We touch upon it with respect, because we find it difficult to disconnect from it a feeling of the bitterness of experience actually undergone, and

¹⁰ "Villette," Examiner, p. 84, February, 1853.

* In the review, there is no period after the abbreviation, Dr., in speaking of Dr. John.

that a real heart throbs at such times under the veil of Lucy Snowe. We do not know that it is so, but the world brings much trial to many of us, and if the author be numbered among those who have been sorely tried, she may feel that she has cause to accuse fate, to account happiness an accident of life to some who are more fortunate than others, to lapse occasionally into a tone of irony a little harder than is just, and now and then to give vent to a little morbid wail. Her faith seems to be expressed in this passage--

"Oh, Doctor John--I shudder at the thought of being liable to such an illusion! It seemed so real. Is there no cure?--no preventive?"¹¹

The answer was,

"Happiness is the cure--a cheerful mind the preventive: cultivate both."¹²

Lucy's reflection on happiness was quoted:

"No mockery in this world ever sounds to me so hollow as that of being told to cultivate happiness. What does such advice mean? Happiness is not a potato, to be planted in mould, and tilled with manure. Happiness is a glory shining far down upon us out of heaven. She is a divine dew which the soul, on certain of its summer mornings, feels dropping upon it from the amaranth bloom and golden fruitage of Paradise."¹³

Yet Currer Bell was not exactly a wailer:

Now it is quite certain that if anybody be wedded to the theory that "happiness is a glory shining far down upon us out of heaven" and that it "is not a potato," to

¹¹ Examiner, loc. cit.

¹² Villette, p. 296.

¹³ Loc. cit.

be cultivated, he or she, after a day of severe trouble, may sit down and wait for the far glory, and wait and wail until the end of life. Exertion is the indispensable condition of all healthy life, mental or bodily; sluggish despondency is nothing but disease. . . . We do not include wholly the author of Villette among these wailers, for there is nothing sullen in her composition; she bears no ill-will to the world about her; she paints men and women no worse than they are, but on the whole perhaps rather better; she is prompt to detect good qualities that lie concealed. Except one selfish and vain Parisian governess, there is nobody depicted in Villette who is not rather a good person than otherwise. The majority are pleasant and love-worthy people; vanities are mocked, but in a fair, just way; and there is much more smile than heartache in the entire story. But Lucy Snowe deals now and then in needlessly tragical apostrophes. Every now and then, in a determined way, some dirge to the burden of 'I can't be happy' sounds from within; and in the last page of the book, when happiness is placed within her reach, and it was in the power of the disposing author of the book to close her story with a charming satisfying picture, which she really does elaborately paint,--she daubs her brush across it, and upon the last page spoils it all for no artistic purpose whatsoever, and to the sure vexation of all lookers-on.

In the next edition of Villette we should like very much to see the last page altered, and to find all the apostrophes expunged . . .¹⁴

The critic referred to such passages as the one ending, ". . . Presently the rude Real burst coarsely in--all evil, grovelling, and repellent as she too often is."¹⁵

The omission of such passages as this would be extremely easy, and would save readers the pains of skipping them, which they will inevitably do after experience of one or two. They are in no way necessary to the story,

¹⁴ Examiner, loc. cit.

¹⁵ Villette, p. 127.

and are out of harmony with the true, large spirit of humour and good feeling, which prevails, except at these odd and occasional times, throughout the book.¹⁶

The Examiner spoke of the many charms of the book.

The charming little Paulina was introduced with the long passage beginning,

"That same evening at nine o'clock, a servant was despatched to meet the coach by which our little visitor was expected. Mrs Bretton and I sat alone . . ." ¹⁷

The reviewer omitted a description of the young Graham, for want of space; he gave extracts, however, showing M. Paul:

. . . M. Paul, the warm-hearted and hot-tempered, clever, fitful Professor of Languages, upon whose heart the sober and just courses of Mees Lucy have made an impression that has grown monthly in strength, is very admirably presented to us among his pupils in the Pensionnat as follows. . . .

The quoted material began with the following paragraph:

"M. Paul Emanuel owned an acute sensitiveness to the annoyance of interruption, from whatsoever cause, occurring during his lessons: to pass through the classe under such circumstances was considered by the teachers and pupils of the school, individually and collectively, to be as much as a woman's or a girl's life was worth." ¹⁸

¹⁶ Examiner, op. cit., pp. 84-85.

¹⁷ Villette, pp. 4-6. There was no period after Mrs. in speaking of Mrs. Bretton.

¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 385-88, cited by the Examiner, p. 85. Villette, p. 385, says, "from whatsoever cause occurring, during his lessons: to pass through the classe . . ."

Miss Ginevra Fanshawe was given some attention by the Examiner; ¹⁹ the professor was shown in a genial mood at the farmhouse breakfast. ²⁰ M. Paul, in the eye of the critic, was perhaps the "best and most interesting in the story."

The Examiner ended by commending the book:

. . . Reserving the objection that we have already made, we can praise Villette as a most pleasant, a most admirably written novel, everywhere original, everywhere shrewd, and, at heart, everywhere kindly. ²¹

The author of Villette read this review, and sent it to Miss Wooler, February 11, 1853:

Excuse a very brief note, for I have time only to thank you for your last kind and welcome letter, and to say that in obedience to your wishes, I send you by to-day's post two reviews--the Examiner and the Morning Advertiser--which perhaps you will kindly return at your leisure. Ellen has a third, the Literary Gazette, which she will likewise send. ²²

On February 12, 1853, the Athenaeum reviewed Villette:

So curious a novel as 'Villette' seldom comes before us,--and rarely one offering so much matter for remark. Its very outset exhibits an indifference to certain precepts of Art, singular in one who by artistic management alone interests us in an unpromising subject. 'Villette' is a narrative of the heart-affairs of the English instructress and the Belgian professor of literature in a

¹⁹ Villette, pp. 96-98.

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 456-58.

²¹ Examiner, op. cit., p. 85.

²² Shorter, op. cit., 2:307.

school at Brussels,--containing no combinations so exciting as those that in its author's memoirs of another teacher, Jane Eyre, rivetted some readers and shocked others. Yet, thrilling scenes there might have been in it had our authoress pleased. The Benedick to whom Lucy Snowe is Beatrice is a devout Roman Catholic educated by Jesuits. During a considerable portion of the story we are led to expect that the old well-thumbed case of conscience is going to be tried again,--and that, having dealt with a Calvinistic missionary in 'Jane Eyre,' Currer Bell is about to draw a full-length picture of a disciple of Loyola in 'Villette.' But the idea is suggested--not fulfilled. Our authoress is superior to the nonsense and narrowness that call themselves religious controversy. She allows the peril of the position to be felt, . . . The tale is merely one of the affections. It may be found in some places tedious, in some of its incidents trivial,--but it is remarkable as a picture of manners. A burning heart glows throughout it, and one brilliantly distinct character keeps it alive.--The oldest man, the sternest, and the most scientific, who is a genuine novel-reader, will find it hard to get out of Madame Beck's school when he has once entered there with Lucy Snowe, and made acquaintance with the snappish, choleric, vain, child-like, and noble-hearted arbiter of her destiny, M. Paul Emanuel.²³

But the fault of Villette lay in the fact that the thrilling events the reader expects do not materialize:

Thus far we have had to recognize the artist's hand which, wherever it be met--whether in a De Hooghe or a Mantegna, a Velasquez or a Gainsborough, a Watteau or a Dürer--is worthy of respect. We must now return to the fault in 'Villette' which we have already mentioned as singularly provoking. To adopt a musical phrase, the novel begins out of the key in which it is composed. In its first chapters interest is excited for a character who disappears during a large part of the story, and who returns to it merely as a second-rate figure. A character in truth, and not a caricature, is the little Paulina. . . . towards the middle of the first volume, the

²³ "Villette," Athenaeum, p. 186, February, 1853.

narrator steps into the part of heroine, with an inconsequence and abruptness that suggest change of plan after the tale was undertaken. . . .²⁴

The Athenaeum, like the Examiner, spoke of the grief displayed:

. . . We do not suppose that Lucy Snowe is intended to figure as an example,--but remembering Currer Bell's former novels, we must protest against such perpetual expositions of grief dealt with and care overcome. There are other ways for a woman of squaring accounts with trial than that of rushing about the world when the homeland becomes wearisome--of taking midnight rambles through a city when the sense of agony drives off sleep--of anticipating the chosen one in the disclosure of mutual affection when intriguers try to set two hearts at variance. . . .²⁵

The scene at the concert was quoted to justify the praise given Villette as a work of art and power.²⁶ The classroom scene after M. Paul's festival was quoted also.²⁷

Finally,

. . . To conclude, 'Villette' is a book which will please much those whom it pleases at all. Allowing for some superfluity of rhetoric used in a manner which reminds us of the elder Miss Jewsbury--and for one or two rhapsodies, which might have been "toned down" with advantage,--this tale is much better written than 'Shirley,' the preceding one by its authoress.²⁸

²⁴ Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 186.

²⁵ Loc. cit.

²⁶ Villette, pp. 251-52.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 399-407.

²⁸ Athenaeum, op. cit., p. 188.

The Spectator review appeared on the same day that the Athenaeum critique came, February 12, 1853:

. . . Currer Bell might have called her new novel "Passages from the Life of a Teacher in a Girls' School at Brussels, written by herself." Of plot, strictly taken as a series of coherent events all leading to a common result, there is none; no more, at least, than there would be in two years of any person's life who had occupations and acquaintances, and told us about them. Of interesting scenes, and of well-drawn characters, there is, on the other hand, abundance; and these, though they fail to stimulate the curiosity of the reader like a well-constructed plot, sustain the attention, and keep up a pleasant emotion, from the first page to the last.²⁹

As to Lucy Snowe, the Spectator had this comment:

. . . For while the characters are various, happily conceived, and some of them painted with a truth of detail rarely surpassed, the centre figure--the girl who is supposed to write the book--is one who excites sympathies bitter-sweet, and in which there is little that is cheerful or consoling. Like Jane Eyre in her intense relish for affection, in her true-heartedness, in her great devotion to the small duties of her daily life, there is nothing about her of the real inward strength that made Jane's duties something of a compensation for the affection denied her. If it were not too harsh a word to be used of so good a girl as Miss Lucy Snowe, one might almost say that she took a savage delight in refusing to be comforted, in a position indeed of isolation and hardship, but one still that a large experience of mankind and the miseries incident to the lot of humanity would hardly pronounce to be by comparison either a miserable or a degraded lot. But this book, far more than Jane Eyre, sounds like a bitter complaint against the destiny of those women whom circumstances reduce to a necessity of working for their living by teaching, and who are debarred from the exercise of those affections which are

²⁹ "Villette," Spectator, 26:155, February, 1853.

indeed the crown of a woman's happiness, but which it is unwise and untrue to make indispensable to a calm enjoyment of life and to an honourable and useful employment of it. Nor do we think that the morbid sensibility attributed to Lucy Snowe is quite consistent with the strength of will, the daring resolution, the quiet power, the discretion and good sense, that are blended with it in Currer Bell's conception. Still less, perhaps, is such a quality, involving as it does a constant tormenting self-regard, to be found in common with clear insight into the characters and motives of others, and with the habit of minute observation, which, resulting in admirable and clear delineation, makes Lucy Snowe's autobiography so pleasant a book in all respects except the spasms of heart-agony she is too fond of showing herself in--we will not venture to hint of showing herself off in, for there is a terrible feeling of reality about them, which seems to say that they are but fictitious in form, the transcripts of a morbid but no less real personal experience.

But for this one fault in the central character--and even this may be true to nature, though to that exceptional nature which would prevent many persons from recognizing its truth--we have nothing but praise to bestow upon the characterization of this book. Our great satirist has said that the only character in his Vanity Fair that was taken direct from life was the one that persons generally fixed on as the most unnatural; and so it may be in this case. But there can be no question as to the other characters: Mrs. Bretton and her son Dr. John, Madame Beck the mistress of the pensionnat at Brussels, M. Paul Emmanuel professor of belles lettres, M. Home de Bassompierre and his charming little daughter, worthless pretty Ginevra Fanshawe,--we shall henceforth know them as if we had lived among them; and, bad or good, they are people worth knowing, for the skill of the painter if not for their own qualities. But the curious thing is, that the morbid feeling so predominant in the writer--the hunger of the heart which cannot obtain its daily bread, and will not make-believe that a stone is bread--does not in the least reflect itself upon these characters. They are as distinctly drawn, as finely appreciated, as if the soul of the writer were in perfect harmony with itself and with the world, and saw men and things with the correct glance of science, only warmed and made more piercing by a genial sympathy. It may therefore be conjectured, that the mind of Miss Lucy Snowe in writing the book had changed from the mood in which she

passed through the scenes described in it; that a great calm had settled down upon the heart once so torn by storms; that a deep satisfaction, based upon experience and faith, had succeeded to the longing and distress of those earlier days.³⁰

The critic spoke of Lucy Snowe's faith:

Faith is indeed a very prominent feature in Miss Snowe's mind; more a religious than a theological faith; more a trust, a sentiment, and a hope, than a clearly-defined belief that could be stated in propositions. But truth is another feature, and she will not sacrifice truth to faith. When her experience is blank misery, she does not deny it, or slur it over, or belie it by shamming that she is happy. While her eyes turn upward with the agony that can find no resting-place on earth, she indulges no Pagan or Atheistical despair--she does not arraign God as cruel or unmindful of his creatures--she still believes that the discipline of life is merciful; but she does not pretend to solve God's providence--she rather with a stern sincerity cries aloud that her soul is crushed, and drinks the bitter cup with the full resolve not to sweeten the bitterness by delusion or fancy. She seems to think that the destiny of some human beings is to drink deep of this cup, and that no evasions, no attempts to make it out less bitter than it is, will turn aside the hand of the avenging angel, or cause that cup to be taken away one moment the sooner. We doubt the worldly philosophy of this view, as much as we are sure that it is not in any high sense Christian. It may, however, be a genuine effusion from an overstrained endurance--a sort of introverted Stoicism, which gives to the sufferer the strength of non-resistance and knowing the worst.³¹

The favorite characters, according to the critic, are Miss de Bassompierre and M. Paul Emmanuel:

³⁰ Spectator, op. cit., p. 155.

³¹ Loc. cit.

. . . though the former is nearly as perfect as mortals ever can be; and the latter one of the oddest but most real mixtures of the good and disagreeable, of the generous and the little, that a hunter after human oddities could wish for his cabinet of curiosities. The relation between this M. Paul and Lucy Snowe will recall both Rochester and Jane Eyre and Louis and Shirley; though the differences are striking, and the characters themselves have little resemblance. But all three positions have those elements in common which show them to be familiar to the writer, and favourable, in her opinion, for drawing out the characteristic points of her heroes and heroines. In all probability, they are three transcripts, varied by imagination, of the same observed facts.³²

As a tribute to the little Paulina, or Polly, as she was known, the Spectator quoted from a scene of her childhood, when she had to leave her good friends, the Brettons.³³ As to M. Paul, the critic was content to give a description of him.³⁴ Had space permitted, said the reviewer, he should have liked to "exhibit M. Paul in one of the many long scenes in which he is actor and speaker."³⁵

The style of the book was mentioned:

The style of Villette has the same characteristics that distinguished Currer Bell's previous novels,-- that clearness and power which are the result of mastery over the thoughts and feelings to be expressed, over the persons and scenes to be described. When the style becomes less pleasing, it is from an attempt to paint by highly figurative language the violent emotions of the heart. This is sometimes done at such length, and

³² Spectator, loc. cit.

³³ Villette, pp. 32-35.

³⁴ Ibid., pp. 415-18.

³⁵ Spectator, op. cit., p. 156.

with 'so much obscurity from straining after figure and allusion, as to become tedious and to induce skipping.³⁶

To Miss Harriet Martineau, who had become an admired literary friend of Charlotte Brontë, the author of Villette wrote this letter, dated January 21, 1853:

I know that you will give me your thoughts upon my book, as frankly as if you spoke to some near relative whose good you preferred to her gratification. I wince under the pain of condemnation, like any other weak structure of flesh and blood; but I love, I honour, I kneel to truth. Let her smite me on the one cheek--good! the tears may spring to the eyes; but courage! there is the other side; hit again, right sharply.³⁷

But Miss Martineau struck the wrong chord in her review of Villette in the Daily News. Mrs. Gaskell has given an extract from the review, the part which Miss Brontë most resented:

All the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought--love. It begins with the child of six years old, at the opening--a charming picture--and it closes with it at the last page; and so dominant is this idea--so incessant is the writer's tendency to describe the need of being loved--that the heroine, who tells her own story, leaves the reader at last under the uncomfortable impression of her having either entertained a double love, or allowed one to supersede another without notification of the transition. It is not thus in real life. There are substantial, heartfelt interests for women of all ages, and, under ordinary circumstances, quite apart from love: there is

³⁶ Spectator, loc. cit.

³⁷ Shorter, op. cit., 2:304.

an absence of introspection, an unconsciousness, a repose in women's lives--unless under peculiarly unfortunate circumstances--of which we find no admission in this book; and to the absence of it may be attributed some of the criticism which the book will meet with from readers who are no pruders, but whose reason and taste will reject the assumption that events and characters are to be regarded through the medium of one passion only. . . .³⁸

On February 7, 1853, Miss Brontë wrote to George Smith:

I have received and read the Reviews. I think I ought to be, and feel that I am, very thankful. That in the Examiner is better than I expected, and that in the Literary Gazette is as good as any author can look for. Somebody also sent me the Nonconformist with a favourable review. The notice in the Daily News was undoubtedly written by Miss Martineau (to this paper she contributed her Irish letters). I have received a letter from her precisely to the same effect, marking the same point, and urging the same objections, similarly suggesting, too, a likeness to Balzac, whose works I have not read. Her letter only differs from the reviews in being severe to the point of injustice; her eulogy is also more highly wrought. On the whole, if Cornhill is content thus far, so am I.³⁹

From a letter to Ellen Nussey, we have this line:

"Mr. Smith tells me he has ascertained that Miss Martineau did write the notice in the Daily News."⁴⁰

To Miss Martineau she wrote:

I think I best show my sense of the tone and feeling of your last, by immediate compliance with the wish you

³⁸ Daily News review, cited by Gaskell, pp. 610-11.

³⁹ Gaskell, ibid., p. 607, footnote.

⁴⁰ Shorter, op. cit., 2:309.

express that I should send your letter. I enclose it, and have marked with red ink the passage which struck me dumb. All the rest is fair, right, worthy of you, but I protest against this passage; and were I brought up before the bar of all the critics in England, to such a charge I should respond, 'Not guilty.'

I know what love is as I understand it; and if man or woman should be ashamed of feeling such love, then is there nothing right, noble, faithful, truthful, unselfish in this earth, as I comprehend rectitude, nobleness, fidelity, truth, and disinterestedness.--Yours sincerely,

C. B.

To differ from you gives me keen pain.⁴¹

Miss Martineau's letter had said:

As for the other side of the question, which you so desire to know, I have but one thing to say; but it is not a small one. I do not like the love, either the kind or the degree of it; and its prevalence in the book, and effect on the action of it, help to explain the passages in the reviews which you consulted me about, and seem to afford some foundation for the criticisms they offered.⁴²

Miss Brontë still remembered the review, and probably her disrupted friendship with Miss Martineau, when she wrote to Miss Wooler, April 13, 1853:

'Extremes meet,' says the proverb; in proof whereof I would mention that Miss Martineau finds with Villette

⁴¹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:305. (Shorter gives this letter as pertaining to the criticism of Shirley; Gaskell, p. 611, footnote, thinks, Villette. Harriet Martineau, in her Autobiography, 2:326-27, tells of Charlotte's hurt over the Villette review).

⁴² Shorter, loc. cit.

nearly the same fault as the Puseyites. She accuses me with attacking popery 'with virulence,' of going out of my way to assault it 'passionately.' In other respects she has shown with reference to the work a spirit so strangely and unexpectedly acrimonious, that I have gathered courage to tell her that the gulf of mutual difference between her and me is so wide and deep, the bridge of union so slight and uncertain, I have come to the conclusion that frequent intercourse would be most perilous and unadvisable, and have begged to adjourn sine die my long projected visit to her. Of course she is now very angry, and I know her bitterness will not be short-lived--but it cannot be helped.⁴³

Again, on April 18, 1853, she wrote to Ellen:

Two or three weeks since Miss Martineau wrote to ask why she did not hear from me, and to press me to go to Ambleside. Explanations ensued, the notes on each side were quite civil, but having deliberately formed my resolution on substantial grounds, I adhered to it. I have declined being her visitor, and bid her good-bye. Of course some bitterness remains in her heart. It is best so, however; the antagonism of our natures and principles was too serious a thing to be trifled with.⁴⁴

A short time before, in February, 1853, Bryan Waller Procter, the "Barry Cornwall" about whom Thackeray wrote in connection with the authorship of Jane Eyre and Vanity Fair, wrote to Mr. James T. Fields:

The most striking book which has been recently published here is Villette, by the authoress of Jane Eyre, who, as you know, is a Miss Brontë. The book does not give one the most pleasing notion of the authoress, perhaps, but it is very clever, graphic, vigorous. It is

⁴³ Shorter, op. cit., 2:316.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

'man's meat,' and not the whipped syllabub, which is all froth, without any jam at the bottom. The scene of the drama is Brussels.⁴⁵

George Eliot wrote to Mrs. Bray, February 15, 1853:

I am only just returned to a sense of the real world about me, for I have been reading "Villette," a still more wonderful book than "Jane Eyre." There is something almost supernatural in its power.⁴⁶

On March 28, 1853, George Eliot wrote to Sarah Hennell:

. . . Lewes was describing Currer Bell to me yesterday as a little, plain, provincial, sickly-looking old maid. Yet what passion, what fire in her! Quite as much as in George Sand, only the clothing is less voluptuous.⁴⁷

On April 14, 1853, Matthew Arnold wrote to his sister, Mrs. Forster:

Why is Villette disagreeable? Because the writer's mind contains nothing but hunger, rebellion, and rage, and therefore that is all she can, in fact, put into her book. No fine writing can hide this thoroughly, and it will be fatal to her in the long run.⁴⁸

In March, 1853, the Revue des Deux Mondes, the periodical which had so highly gratified Charlotte Brontë in its review

⁴⁵ James T. Fields, "'Barry Cornwall' and Some of His Friends," Harper's Magazine, 52:60, December, 1875.

⁴⁶ George Eliot's Life as Related in her Letters and Journals, ed. Cross, op. cit., 1:155.

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

⁴⁸ Letters of Matthew Arnold, 1848-1888, Collected and Arranged by George W. E. Russell, 1:34.

of Jane Eyre and also of Shirley, gave now a critique of Villette, along with one Lady-Bird, by Lady Georgiana Fullerton. The reviewer, Eugène Forçade, stated at this time that "Curren Bell" was the pseudonym of "Miss Bronty." Curren Bell's manner was labeled sharp, savage, detailed, brusque, and fantastic. This compliment was given the author of Villette:

The scenes of her drama are placed with a skill which is disguised beneath the disdain of the commonplace and the conventional, and by the art of combinations and contrasts, she knows how to shed upon the most commonplace incidents of life, a strange and romanesque color.⁴⁹

Curren Bell was lauded for her mixture of restrained ardor and irony, added to virile force. She showed much vigor and originality, but never any tears. This author was, to the last fibre of her soul, Protestant. Forçade would not have thought it possible to interest himself for three or four hours with schoolrooms, professors, and their subordinates.

Madame Beck, he characterized as a politic woman,--sweet, vigilant, discreet, spying without ceasing. Paul Emanuel, he decided, was a despot, a "Napoleonic keeper of the schoolroom." Forçade spoke of the lonely vacation at the Héger Pensionnat; he thought the life of Lucy, void of affection,

⁴⁹ Eugène Forçade, "Villette and Lady-Bird," Revue des Deux Mondes, March, 1853, p. 1085. (This review was taken from a rapid translation of the French by Professor H. V. Wann of Indiana State Teachers College). Complete reference is Revue des Deux Mondes, Series 1, 89:1084-1114, March, 1853. Main title, "Un Roman Protestant et Un Roman Catholique En Angleterre."

caused the fever, delirium, and frenzy. He quoted the swooning scene from Villette.⁵⁰ Others had quoted this powerful scene.

Currer Bell seemed to have a curious resistance against happiness. She used the Protestant psychology, which approves reason and opposes sentiment. He dealt much on the relations of Lucy and the professor, M. Paul, the Protestant girl against the Catholic man, the rebel Lucy against the autocrat, M. Paul. They, according to Forçade, "repel and yet attract each other."

The French critic gave the book a happy ending. He said, "as one may well imagine, Paul . . . marries Lucy." This ending is most interesting in view of what the author of Villette had said in a letter to George Smith, March 26, 1853:

With regard to that momentous point M. Paul's fate, in case any one in future should request to be enlightened thereon, he may be told that it was designed that every reader should settle the catastrophe for himself, according to the quality of his disposition, the tender or remorseless impulse of his nature: drowning and matrimony are the fearful alternatives. The merciful, like Miss Mulock, Mr. Williams, Lady Harriet St. Clair, and Mr. Alexander Fraser, will of course choose the former and milder doom--drown him to put him out of pain. The cruel-hearted will, on the contrary, pitilessly impale him on the second horn of the dilemma, marrying him without ruth or compunction to that--person--that--that--individual--"Lucy Snowe."⁵¹

⁵⁰ Villette, p. 192, cited by Revue des Deux Mondes, op. cit., 89:1091-93.

⁵¹ Gaskell, op. cit., p. 620, footnote.

The characters in Villette, said Forçade, were endowed with a "living and piquant reality." This part of the review is enlightening and vastly interesting:

Although Currer Bell strives to ennoble the ordinary incidents of mediocre existences by bringing them under the floodlight of imagination, her book has little chance of interesting the very class to which it is devoted; it is only cultivated readers, clever people, who will take the trouble to study and appreciate the talent lavished on the details of Villette.⁵²

Forçade admired the "inner energy of the human soul" in Villette. He feared, however, that stoic victories are very rare.

On March 10, 1853, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Ellen Nussey in regard to the review in Sharpe's Magazine:

I only got the Guardian newspaper yesterday morning and have not yet seen either the Critic or Sharpe's Mag. The Guardian does not wound me much, I see the motive, which indeed there is no attempt to disguise, still I think it a choice little morsel for foes . . . and a still choicer for 'friends' who, bless them! while they would not perhaps positively do one an injury, still take a dear delight in dashing with bitterness the too sweet cup of success. Is Sharpe's small article like a * bit of sugar-candy too, Ellen? or has it the proper wholesome wormwood flavour?

Of course I guess it will be like the Guardian. It matters precious little. My dear 'friends' will weary of waiting for the Times. 'O Siser! why tarry the wheels of thy chariot so long!'⁵³

⁵² Revue des Deux Mondes, op. cit., p. 1113.

⁵³ Shorter, op. cit., 2:312.

* The word, Sharpe's, in this line, was not in italics.

Charlotte Brontë referred to the character, Lucy Snowe, in a letter to Ellen:

. . . As to the character of Lucy Snowe, my intention from the first was that she should not occupy the pedestal to which Jane Eyre was raised by some injudicious admirers. She is where I meant her to be, and where no charge of self-laudation can touch her.⁵⁴

Sharpe's London Magazine spoke of the mature author:

Villette has, at length, made its appearance, to divide laurels with the "NOVEL" of Sir E. B. LYTTON, having the advantage of freshness over the veteran novelist's four volumes, inasmuch as Blackwood had given them to the eager world in monthly portions of marvellous interest, each part rich in present fulfilment, as in promise of the future. . . .

CURRER BELL burst upon the world in the rugged and dangerous passes of Jane Eyre, like a northern light dazzling and uncertain--strong in her power, and yet not aware of her full force; wilful, eccentric, keeping down the beatings of her heart, stilling the instincts of her nature, laughing at the disbelieving world, that . . . declared no female hand had wielded the pen which traced the story. There was, however, much both in Jane Eyre and Shirley, of what it is true, but almost vulgar, to call "brag." The young author sought artificial lights, so as to cast heavy shadows on the earth, and, like the madman of the nursery song, flung about fire, and told you "'twas all but in sport." The matured author of Villette has abandoned this sport, and stands forth brave, but not desperate, the chronicler of a true and earnest woman's pilgrimage--a woman whom nature created good and hopeful, and who, cast upon the world, fights the battle of life with womanly, yet indestructible heroism. Her occasional hardness and unfeminine breadth of character are the results of circumstances, not of a violation of female nature; and this is beautifully proved by her seeking, and finding shelter where it is natural, and right, .

⁵⁴ Shorter, op. cit., 2:314.

and holy that all women should find shelter, LOVE: the noble, elevated love, which is the growth of only noble and elevated natures, becomes her protector. We had been wandering through two or three novels of the eau sucrée school--the young love of Daisy Burns, despite its beautiful scenic descriptions, suffocated us with altar of roses, covered us lip-deep in sweets, leaving us with a sick head ache, which gave us ample time to reflect on the low-love-fever, the love-mania, the sickly silly sensibility, which has taken possession of several of our young lady novelists, and for which the half-grown-up children of the last half century, would have been well whipped and sent to bed. This "love, still love," is as enervating as the strong perfume of musk, or any of the overwhelming perfumes which we import from foreign climes; it has nothing to do with English nature, or English education; it is foreign to both, and we are more than grateful to Currer Bell for dealing with the great passion in its dignity and truth, and treating it with respect and fidelity--not with smiles, and tears, and all the ribaldry of unhealthy sentimentality. Again, "Lucy Snowe's" first and firm steps in life were taken--her feet firmly planted--by greater motives than those which actuate the loving young ladies of our love-sick school. The heroine of Villette is flung upon the world, and finds employment, first as an English bonne, then as an English teacher, in the pension of a certain "Madame Beck," of Villette. This pension, with its manager, its intrigues, its teachings and unteachings, its ways and means, is full of that interest which genius can stamp upon the basest metal. There is nothing forced; nothing (as long as the author keeps to the actual of life) overstrained--nothing overdone. "Madame Beck"--in her shawl and slippers, her unrufferable temper, her constitutional coldness, her mild suavity, her feline pryingness, her watchfulness, her schemes, is a masterly development of a character thoroughly and entirely foreign. It is a powerful portrait, and of marvellous fidelity. The espionage of a foreign pension is as necessary to the safety of the demoiselles, as to the well-doing of the mistress. . . . We vouch for the truth of the tableau; the engrossing nature of the Roman Catholic faith is bravely and fearlessly portrayed, and, what is rare, portrayed without prejudice or bitterness of sect or party. It is evidently more a political than a religious picture of the state of things where priestly influence is dominant from the cradle to the grave. There is little or no plot in these volumes; the characters come and go, appear and disappear, as they do in real life, without our knowing why. The little bit of ghost mystery is clumsily managed: Currer Bell is not as imaginative

as she is real. The world and all that therein is, is hers; but, though Villette is by far the most delicate and refined of her three novels--though she has put away the coarseness which, in her earlier tales, she mistook for strength, and is now strong without coarseness--she will always lack the purely imaginative quality, which, while it enervates a weak mind, lends grace and tenderness to the strong. . . .⁵⁵

This critic wished to praise one "who is gifted with a man's head and a woman's heart."⁵⁶

The Eclectic Review, in March, 1853, gave a critique of Villette. As usual, Jane Eyre was mentioned:

The authoress of 'Jane Eyre' has, by a sort of wilfulness of genius, laid a strong hold on public interest. The readers of our elder novelists and those of Scott, Edgeworth, and Bulwer, and a multitude of others, whose praise is in all the circulating libraries, taste in such works as hers a sort of tamarind-like piquancy, which contrasts agreeably with the flavour of their ordinary imaginative diet. Such readers, whatever may be their literary predilections, will rise from the perusal of 'Jane Eyre' and 'Villette' with the exclamation,--'Curren Bell is unquestionably a powerful and original writer.'⁵⁷

The critic spoke of "casual and delicate delineations of juvenile nature" as shown in the childhood characters of Graham and Paulina:

. . . The reader who can relish casual and delicate delineations of juvenile nature, will be amused, if not charmed,

⁵⁵ "Villette," Sharpe's London Magazine, 2:189, n.s., 1853.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 190.

⁵⁷ "Villette," Eclectic Review, 5:305, Series 5, March, 1853. (This paragraph was not indented in the original).

with the authoress's descriptions of the intercourses of this vivacious youth and his prudish plaything, whose whole nature seemed to be comprehended in filial affection. We introduced them here chiefly because they are destined to figure conspicuously in the sequel of the tale, and we will only add that Currer Bell never indicates her peculiar genius more strikingly than in delineating the characteristics of childhood and early life. It was Dr. Johnson, if we recollect right, who said of Milton, in reference to the alleged inferiority of the 'Sonnets,'-- 'That he was a genius who could carve a Colossus from a rock, but could not cut heads upon cherry-stones.' We are much deceived if Currer Bell cannot do both.⁵⁸

The Eclectic Review also said: "Her description of her first impressions of the great metropolis and especially of St. Paul's Cathedral, near which she had located herself, are drawn with a very masterly hand."⁵⁹

Villette, though, failed to please because,

In the first place, then, the characters are not such as are calculated to interest the sympathies and the heart of the reader. . . . Dr. John, in other words Dr. John Graham Bretton, is certainly intelligent, vivacious, humane, and affectionate, but Mrs. Bretton is too much a woman of the world. She lacks tenderness even to her protégé, the heroine; indeed, her whole nature seems absorbed in that pride in her son which looks too much like a sort of secondary selfishness to awaken a deeper feeling than complacency. . . .⁶⁰

Paulina, "while she is most uninteresting as a child, excites no very impassioned interest at eighteen, owing to a

⁵⁸ Eclectic Review, op. cit., pp. 306-07.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 307.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 318.

strong-minded control of her affections, which contrasts a little with a fretful petulance that spoils both the dignity and the amiability of her character." Ginevra Fanshawe was called "a sort of Cleopatra in her way, selfish and sensuous, and equally destitute of faith and feeling."⁶¹

In speaking of Lucy and M. Paul:

. . . Nor can we, with every desire to do so, fall in love with the heroine herself. She is sensible, clever, and somewhat emotional, but she lacks enthusiasm and deep womanly love, with all those weaknesses and dangers which belong to it, and which irresistibly touch the heart and chain the interest of the reader. In perusing the pages of her autobiography we desiderate in vain those characteristics which have so often charmed us in the heroines of the Waverley Novels, and which have made Flora Macdonald, Julia Mannering, and many others, as real personages, to our imaginations, as if they had been the living objects of an unsuccessful but unforgotten love. . . . Professor Emanuel Paul, as the husband of the heroine, must, we suppose, on all the laws of fiction, be considered as the hero. But what a hero! A short, bustling, angry schoolmaster, between forty and fifty years of age; vain, passionate, and imperious, and who designates as his chief treasure the pair of spectacles that suits his defective eyesight;--a Jesuit, and of course a spy, whose highest glory is the most prominent exhibition of his person in a public assembly; a man who makes young ladies tremble before him in class, and seriously protests that he will hang the housemaid if she dares again to venture into his class-room . . .⁶²

Scarcely one attractive virtue was mentioned:

. . . We have said that the characters are uninteresting, but more than this, they present the worst features

⁶¹ Eclectic Review, op. cit., pp. 318-19.

⁶² Ibid., p. 319.

of our nature, and that too on a petty scale. There are some writers who invest even the bad with a sort of heroic sublimity, from the colossal pre-eminence of their wickedness. Milton's Satan, Shakspeare's Lady Macbeth, and a thousand others, will occur to the reader as illustrations of our meaning. But even about the defects in the characters of our author there is a tame negativeness which, as contrasted with their unimpressive excellencies, suggests the idea of the mixture of acids and alkalies, minus the effervescence.⁶³

The plot was at fault:

And yet, after all, it is the plot alone that is defective; the development of the characters, comparatively insipid as they are, is achieved with a degree of talent, the triumph of which is rendered the more remarkable by comparison with the poverty and scantiness of the material. The plot itself lacks incident, it contains few of what the dramatists call situations, and is chiefly transacted in a girls' boarding school. Hence the work mainly consists of dialogue, and although this is sustained with all the vivacity of an unquestionably powerful pen, yet it tires by its sameness. The greatest master of fiction that ever wrote would have fatigued his readers if he had dwelt upon crochet, guard-chains, cookery, and dress, and all the vapid details of a girls' school room. In a word, that Currer Bell possesses distinguished talents, and that delicacy of touch which none but a female writer can give, we most cheerfully concede; but the plan of her fictions is not equal to their execution. If a bolder hand were to strike her outline, and to develop the plot with her own admirable discrimination of light and shade, we think she would produce a work far more worthy of her talents than any with which the public has yet associated her fictitious name.⁶⁴

On April 1, 1853, the Westminster Review gave a critique of Villette. The power of the book was praised:

⁶³ Eclectic Review, op. cit., pp. 319-20. (This spelling of the word, Shakspeare, came from the review).

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 320.

. . . It is a work of astonishing power and passion. From its pages there issues an influence of truth as healthful as a mountain breeze. Contempt of conventions in all things, in style, in thought, even in the art of story-telling, here visibly springs from the independent originality of a strong mind nurtured in solitude. As a novel, in the ordinary sense of the word, "Villette" has few claims; as a book, it is one which, having read, you will not easily forget. . . .⁶⁵

Currer Bell, according to this critic, had "the fault of running metaphors to death sometimes." However, the "power with which she writes at times is marvellous: read this, for example, and read it slowly, . . ." The passage to be read began,

"At last a day and night of peculiarly agonizing depression were succeeded by physical illness, I took perforce to my bed. . . ."⁶⁶

or, perhaps, the one beginning,

"The drug wrought. I know not whether Madame had over-charged or under-charged the dose; its result was not that she intended. . . ."⁶⁷

or, speaking of truth, the passage beginning,

"I always, through my whole life, like to penetrate to the real truth; I like seeking the goddess . . ."⁶⁸

⁶⁵ "Ruth and Villette," Westminster Review, 59:485, April, 1853.

⁶⁶ Villette, pp. 186-89.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 539-42.

⁶⁸ Ibid., pp. 558-59.

To illustrate writing which had a "rhythm and a cadence of its own, not surpassed by the march of verse," the critic quoted the passage which begins, "Dim I should not say, for the beauty of moonlight . . ."69

As a book, Villette was given high praise:

. . . indeed it is as a book that "Villette" most affects us, and every chapter contains or suggests matter for discourse. We say emphatically, a book; meaning by a book, the utterance of an original mind. In this world, as Goethe tells us, "there are so few voices, and so many echoes;" there are so few books, and so many volumes--so few persons thinking and speaking for themselves, so many reverberating the vague noises of others. Among the few stands "Villette." In it we read the actual thoughts and feelings of a strong, struggling soul; we hear the cry of pain from one who has loved passionately, and who has sorrowed sorely. Indeed, no more distinct characteristic of Currer Bell's genius can be named, than the depth of her capacity for all passionate emotions. . . . and there is no writer of our day, except George Sand, who possesses the glory and the power which light up the writings of Currer Bell. She has not the humour, so strong and so genial, of Mrs. Gaskell. There are, occasionally, touches approaching to the comic in "Villette," but they spring mostly from fierce sarcasm, not from genial laughter. Ginevra Fanshaw is "shown up" in all her affectations and careless coquetry, but there is something contemptuous in the laugh, nothing sympathetic. Nor has Currer Bell any tendency towards the graceful, playful, or fanciful. There is more of Michael Angelo than of Raffaele in her drawing; more of Backhuysen than of Cuyp; more of Salvator Rosa than of Claude. . . .70

The critic quoted from Villette: "A new influence began to act upon my life, and sadness, for a certain space,

69 Villette, p. 562.

70 Westminster Review, op. cit., p. 490.

was held at bay. . . .

"A new creed became mine--a belief in happiness."⁷¹

The review ended,

If, as critics, we have one thing to say with regard to the future, it is, that Currer Bell, in her next effort, should bestow more pains on her story. With so much passion, with so much power of transmuting experience into forms of enduring fiction, she only needs the vehicle of an interesting story to surpass the popularity of "Jane Eyre."⁷²

In April, 1853, the Edinburgh Review pronounced Villette a "most remarkable work":

'Villette,' by the author of 'Jane Eyre,' is a most remarkable work--a production altogether sui generis. Fulness and vigour of thought mark almost every sentence, and there is a sort of easy power pervading the whole narrative, such as we have rarely met. There is little of plot or incident in the story; nearly the whole of it is confined to the four walls of a Pensionnat at Brussels; but the characters introduced are sketched with a bold and free pencil, and their individuality is sustained with a degree of consistency, which marks a master's hand. The descriptions, too, whether the subjects of them be solemn, ludicrous, or pathetic, are wonderfully graphic and pictorial. It is clear at a glance that the groundwork and many of the details of the story are autobiographic; and we never read a literary production which so betrays at every line the individual character of the writer. Her life has evidently been irradiated by but scanty sunshine, and she is besides disposed to look rather pertinaciously on the shady side of every landscape. . . .⁷³

⁷¹ Villette, p. 300.

⁷² Westminster Review, op. cit., p. 491.

⁷³ "Villette," Edinburgh Review, " 97:387, April, 1853. (The general title of this article was, "Recent Novels.")

The Edinburgh Review characterized Lucy Snowe:

. . . With an almost painful and unceasing consciousness of possessing few personal or circumstantial advantages; with spirits naturally the reverse of buoyant; with feelings the reverse of demonstrative; with affections strong rather than warm, and injured by too habitual repression; a keen, shrewd, sagacious, sarcastic, observer of life, rather than a genial partaker in its interests; gifted with intuitive insight into character, and reading it often with too cold and critical an eye; full of sympathy where love and admiration call it forth, but able by long discipline to dispense with it herself; always somewhat too rigidly strung up for the hard struggle of life, but fighting sternly and gallantly its gloomy battle,--the character which Lucy Snowe has here drawn of herself presents rather an interesting study than an attraction or a charm.⁷⁴

The critic quoted, as did many others, the long, lonely vacation at the school at Brussels. The selection began, "My heart almost died within me: miserable longings strained its chords."⁷⁵ Then, to show the author's power of lighter description, the scene in the art gallery was presented.⁷⁶ From the scene in which the heroine was ill with a fever, the critic quoted the part which began,

"Sleep came once--but in anger. Impatient at my importunity she brought with her an avenging dream."⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Edinburgh Review, op. cit., p. 387.

⁷⁵ Villette, p. 183.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 238.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 187.

In a letter to Dr. Dewey in April, 1853, Catharine Sedgwick wrote of Villette:

Have you all read "Villette"? and do you not admire the book, and own it as one of the great books of the time? I confess that I have seldom been more impressed with the genius of the writer, and seldom less drawn to her personally. She has nerves of such delicate fineness of edge that the least touch turns them, or she has had an exasperating experience. Whether she calls herself Jane Eyre, or Lucy Snowe, it does not matter--it is Miss Brontë. She has the intensity of Byron--of our own Fanny Kemble. She unconsciously infuses herself into her heroine. It is an egotism whose fires are fed by the inferior vitality of others; and how well she conceives others! how she daguerreotypes them!⁷⁸

From Haworth, April 13, 1853, Charlotte Brontë wrote to Miss Wooler:

My publishers express entire satisfaction with the reception which has been accorded to Villette, and indeed the majority of the reviews has been favourable enough; you will be aware, however, that there is a minority, small in number but influential in character, which views the work with no favourable eye. Currer Bell's remarks on Romanism have drawn down on him the condign displeasure of the High Church party, which displeasure has been unequivocally expressed through their principal organs--the Guardian, the English Churchman, and the Christian Remembrancer. I can well understand that some of the charges launched against me by those publications will tell heavily to my prejudice in the minds of most readers--but this must be borne; and for my part, I can suffer no accusation to oppress me much which is not supported by the inward evidence of conscience and reason.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Life and Letters of Catharine M. Sedgwick, ed. Dewey, p. 349, cited by Moulton, Library of Literary Criticism, 6:28.

⁷⁹ Shorter, op. cit., 2:315.

The Christian Remembrancer placed the name of Currer Bell with that of Lady Fullerton. The review appeared in April, 1853:

After threading the maze of harrowing perplexities thus set forth by Lady Georgiana, having followed her characters through their course of fatal mistakes and hair-breadth perils, witnessed their bursts of tragic passion, listened to their turgid sentiments, and felt the whole to be the offspring of a lively imagination, confined within too narrow a sphere of observation,--a society removed so high above many of the real troubles of life that they must needs allow idleness and luxury to coin some for them,--it is, we own, a relief to turn to the work-day world of 'Villette.' The rough winds of common life make a better atmosphere for fiction than the stove heat of the 'higher circles.' Currer Bell, by hardly earning her experience, has, at least, won her knowledge in a field of action where more can sympathise; though we cannot speak of sympathy, or of ourselves as in any sense sharing in it, without a protest against the outrages on decorum, the moral perversity, the toleration of, nay, indifference to vice which deform her first powerful picture of a desolate woman's trials and sufferings--faults which make Jane Eyre a dangerous book, and which must leave a permanent mistrust of the author on all thoughtful and scrupulous minds. But however alloyed with blame this sympathy has necessarily been, there are indications of its having cheered her and done her good. Perhaps . . . she has been the better for a little happiness and success, for in many important moral points 'Villette' is an improvement on its predecessors. The author has gained both in amiability and propriety since she first presented herself to the world,--soured, coarse, and grumbling; an alien, it might seem, from society, and amenable to none of its laws.⁸⁰

The Christian Remembrancer termed the author of Villette "the novelist of the schoolroom." Currer Bell would not "shift the scene":

⁸⁰ "New Novels by Lady G. Fullerton and Currer Bell," Christian Remembrancer, 25:423, n.s., April, 1853.

We have said that Currer Bell has found life not a home, but a school; and this is more than a figure, as we gather from all her works. She may, indeed, be considered the novelist of the schoolroom, not, we need scarcely explain, for any peculiar fitness for the pure, youthful mind, her best efforts exhibit, but because, as the scholastic world would seem to have been the main theatre of her experience--as here have been excited, in herself, many a vivid thought and keen interest--she chooses that others shall enter it with her. She will not condescend to shift the scene; she will not stoop to her reader's prejudices--they must overcome them; what has interested her, she means shall interest them: nor are we losers by the obligation. It cannot be denied that hitherto the art of teaching has cast a suspicion of coldness and dryness over its professors: it should not be so; it is unfair to an honourable profession, which should at least be cheered by sympathy in its irksome labours. In these days of educational enthusiasm the prejudice ought to be done away. Currer Bell seems to regard it as the mission of her genius to effect this: her clear, forcible, picturesque style gives life to what our fancies thought but a vegetating existence. . . . Vilette must* be considered the most scholastic of the series. In 'Jane Eyre' we have the melancholy experience of the Clergy-daughters' school, and her own subsequent position as governess; in 'Shirley' we have the heart-enthraling tutor, and the heiress falling in love as she learns her French and writes her copy-books under the assumed austerity of his rule,--a wrong state of things, we need not say: but in 'Vilette' almost the whole corps of the drama is furnished for the Pensionnat de Demoiselles. The flirting beauty of a school-girl; the grave, thoughtful young English teacher, with her purely intellectual attractions; Madame, the directress, the presiding genius; the little French professor of Belles-lettres, for the hero, and the classes and large school-garden for the scenes. Even the outer-world hero, Graham, comes in as the physician of the establishment, and is entangled by the school-girl beauty; though it is his business to introduce us sometimes to the world beyond the walls, which now and then affords a refreshing change.⁸¹

Currer Bell, in the mind of the critic, was quite fair in repeating even the peculiarities of the schoolroom:

⁸¹ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., pp. 423-24.* (The word, Vilette, in the center of the page, was not enclosed in single quotation marks, as it was later on).

Nor does she gain the point of interesting us by ignoring any professional peculiarity which belongs to the science of teaching. Even the writer (for it is an autobiography) is, we see clearly, in look and air the 'teacher' she describes herself: her manner affected and influenced by her position. The consciousness of being undervalued, the longings for some one to care for her leading to some undignified results, the necessary self-reliance, the demure air, the intellect held in check, but indemnifying itself for the world's neglect and indifference by the secret indulgence of an arrow-like penetration,--all are portrayed; and for the hero--what can be more like a professor and less like a standard hero than M. Emmanuel Paul? a character in the highest degree fresh and original, but in no sense calculated to attract a lady's fancy, except in scenes where the world of male society is shut out as it is in large female assemblies,--in schools, convents, and, according to the satirist, old maid coteries,--in all of which a very small amount of heroic qualities are often found enough to constitute a man a hero.⁸²

The scenes in Villette showed reality:

. . . There can be no doubt--the style admits of none--that, however fictitious may be the mode of admittance there, the description of the establishment itself, and many of its inmates, is drawn from nature and fact. The school is a real school; the state of things there is such as seemed to the writer actually to exist; and, above all, the Professor . . . is a real, bonâ fide, actual personage, a close study from the life--an admirably-drawn portrait--not a creation, in any other sense than an expressive, spirited, picturesque portrait may be called one. Not only does this character bear in every stage, at every fresh touch, the mark of reality, but the authoress finds that difficulty in bending him to her plot that a real person, set to play his part amongst inventions, must always furnish. The lame conclusion of the story confirms the previous conviction; but the reader excuses the failure. Having enjoyed M. Paul through the book, we are content that he should disappear in a mist of indistinctness at the end. It is the truth in him we have

⁸² Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., pp. 424-25.

cared for;--that remains, whatever uncertainty may be thrown over his fictitious existence. He is introduced to the reader with little prestige or ostentation. . . .⁸³

Currer Bell, said the critic, was jealous of the dress-side of life:

. . . We have, on the contrary, the deshabille of every character when free from the restraints that society imposes. Thus the beautiful flirt that fascinates in the ball-room, is seen with all her careless, rude, rough, schoolroom selfishness, where there are no men to keep her in order; girlhood, in general, is stripped of its poetical illusions; Madame Beck, whose public career is so useful and respectable, sinks into a spy. It is the same in Currer Bell's former works. She is jealous of the dress-side of life:--being, for some reason, cut off from, and by her peculiar class of faults and deficiencies ill adapted to it, she is not in its interests. She describes gay scenes well and vividly; but solely as a spectator, not as an assistant and component part, which is the element of pleasure in all festal scenes. A feeling is always conveyed which it would be unjust to call envy, implying rather a kind of yearning, a sense of isolation, which may not belong wholly to situation, and perhaps is inseparable from keen penetration, but which, as we have said, fits in exactly with the position and the character assumed in the story.⁸⁴

The Christian Remembrancer quoted largely from scenes in which M. Paul appeared. One picture of Madame Beck's school was given also.

As to the fate of M. Paul at the end of the tale,

. . . Whether they are married, or whether he is drowned in a storm, described in very windy fashion, is a moot

⁸³ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., p. 430.

⁸⁴ Ibid., pp. 431-32.

point, but happily one which in no way affects the spirits, and scarcely arouses the curiosity, of the reader: an indifference which leads to the true conclusion--that the merit of the book lies in its scenes, and not in its plot.⁸⁵

This viewpoint, however, as to the fate of M. Paul, did not seem to be prevalent among the women of the day, because Miss Brontë wrote to Mr. Williams about M. Paul:

. . . The note you sent this morning from Lady Harriet St. Clair is precisely to the same purport as Miss Mulock's request--an application for exact and authentic information respecting the fate of M. Paul Emanuel! You see how much the ladies think of this little man, whom you none of you like. I had a letter the other day announcing that a lady of some note, who had always determined that whenever she married her husband should be the counterpart of 'Mr. Knightley' in Miss Austen's Emma, had now changed her mind, and vowed that she would either find the duplicate of Professor Emanuel or remain for ever single! I have sent Lady Harriet an answer so worded as to leave the matter pretty much where it was. Since the little puzzle amuses the ladies, it would be a pity to spoil their sport by giving them the key.⁸⁶

Miss Brontë was much chagrined by the review of the Christian Remembrancer; especially was she indignant about the words, "an alien--it might seem from society, and amenable to none of its laws." She wrote to the editor of the Christian Remembrancer:

July 18, 1853.

Sir: I think I cannot be doing wrong in addressing you a few remarks respecting an article which appeared in the Christian Remembrancer for last April. I mean an article noticing Villette.

⁸⁵ Christian Remembrancer, op. cit., p. 442.

⁸⁶ Shorter, op. cit., 2:317.

When first I read that article I thought only of its ability, which seemed to me considerable, of its acumen, which I felt to be penetrating; an occasional misconception passed scarce noticed, and I smiled at certain passages from which evils have since risen so heavy as to oblige me to revert seriously to their origin. Conscious myself that the import of these insinuations was far indeed from truth, I forgot to calculate how they might appear to that great public which personally did not know me.

The passage to which I particularly allude characterizes me by a strong expression. I am spoken of an alien it might seem from society, and amenable to none of its laws.

The G-- newspaper gave a notice in the same spirit. The E-- culled isolated extracts from your review, and presented them in a concentrated form as one paragraph of unqualified condemnation.

The result of these combined attacks, all to one effect--all insinuating some disadvantageous occult motive for a retired life--has been such that at length I feel it advisable to speak a few words of temperate explanation in the quarter that seems to me most worthy to understand rightly my intention. Who my reviewer may be I know not, but I am convinced he is no narrow-minded or naturally unjust thinker.

To him I would say no cause of seclusion such as he would imply has ever come near my thoughts, deeds or life. It has not entered my experience. It has not crossed my observation.

Providence so regulated my destiny that I was born and have been reared in the seclusion of a country parsonage. I have never been rich enough to go out into the world as a participator in its gaities, though it early became my duty to leave home in order partly to diminish the many calls on a limited income. That income is lightened of claims in another sense now, for of a family of six I am the only survivor.

My father is in his seventy-seventh year; his mind is clear as it ever was, and he is not infirm, but he suffers from partial privation and threatened loss of sight; and his general health is also delicate, he cannot be left often or long: my place consequently is at home. These are reasons which make retirement a plain duty; but were

no such reasons in existence, were I bound by no such ties, it is very possible that seclusion might still appear to me, on the whole, more congenial than publicity; the brief and rare glimpses I have had of the world do not incline me to think I should seek its circles with very keen zest--nor can I consider such disinclination a just subject for reproach.

This is the truth. The careless, rather than malevolent insinuations of reviewers have, it seems, widely spread another impression. It would be weak to complain, but I feel that it is only right to place the real in opposition to the unreal.

Will you kindly show this note to my reviewer? Perhaps he cannot now find an antidote for the poison into which he dipped that shaft he shot at "Currer Bell," but when again tempted to take aim at other prey--let him refrain his hand a moment till he has considered consequences to the wounded, and recalled the "golden rule."

I am, Sir, yours respectfully,

C. Brontë.⁸⁷

In October, 1853, under the section entitled "Notices," this article appeared in the Christian Remembrancer:

A letter from the author of 'Villette,' which claims at once our respect and sympathy, complains of a passage in our recent review of that work (April, 1853,) which she says has been interpreted by some persons--not by herself, for this was not her own unbiassed impression--in a sense the remotest possible from our thoughts. We wrote in entire ignorance of the author's private history, and with no wish to pry into it. But her keen and vivid style, and her original and somewhat warped mode of viewing things, must excite speculation in her readers as to the circumstances of education and position which have formed both mind and style. Some grave faults in her earliest work we thought most easily accounted for by the supposition of a mind of remarkable power and great capabilities for happiness exposed to early and long trial of

⁸⁷ W. Robertson Nicoll, "Charlotte Brontë and One of Her Critics," Bookman, 10:443, January, 1900, citing Christian Remembrancer, July, 1857.

some kind, and in some degree embittered by the want of congenial enjoyment. We refer our readers to the article in question, where not only is there no insinuation of 'a disadvantageous occult motive for a retired life,' but such a supposition is at variance with the whole line of suggestion, which tends to attribute what we must differ from in her writings, to adverse circumstances, not to conduct. We will, however, distinctly state that we had no idea in our mind, and therefore could not desire to express any suspicion, of an unfavourable cause for a life of seclusion. We now learn with pleasure, but not with surprise, that the main motive for this seclusion is devotion to the purest and most sacred of domestic ties.⁸⁸

Putnam's Monthly reviewed Villette in May, 1853:

. . . We are not sure that Thackeray's "Henry Esmond" was more ardently anticipated, than Miss Bronte's "Villette." "Jane Eyre"--a novel with a heroine neither beautiful nor rich, an entirely abnormal creation among the conventional heroines--came directly upon "Vanity Fair, a Novel without a hero," and made friends as warm, and foes as bitter, as that noted book. "Shirley" disappointed. It is in fact entirely overshadowed by its predecessor. But now, after six years, "Villette" appears, and takes rank at once with "Jane Eyre," displaying the same vigor--the same exuberant power--the same bold outline--the same dramatic conception--and the same invincible mastery and fusion of elements usually considered repugnant to romance. The great success of "Jane Eyre" as a work of art, and apart from the interest of the story, which is very great, consists in its rejection of all the stage-appointments of novels--all the Adonis-Dukes and Lady Florimels in satin boudoirs, which puerile phantoms still haunt the pages of Bulwer . . . and are, of course, the staple of the swarm of "the last new novels" which monthly inundate the circulating libraries in England. . . .⁸⁹

The critic of Putnam's contrasted Jane, the governess, with the customary heroine:

⁸⁸ "Notices," Christian Remembrancer, 26:501, n.s., October, 1853.

⁸⁹ George William Curtis, "Villette and Ruth," Putnam's Monthly Magazine, 1:535, May, 1853.

. . . Jane Eyre was a governess, and a strong-minded woman. She was by no means the lady with whom Harley L'Estrange in or out of "My Novel" would ever fall in love. . . . She moved up and down the novel totally regardless of nerves and the "tea-table proprieties." She was a woman bullied by circumstances and coping bravely with a hard lot, and finally proving her genuine force of character by winning the respect and love of a man who had exhausted the world and been exhausted by it; a man in whom the noble instincts were so deeply sunk, that they could only respond to a ray so penetrant and pure that it would not be dispersed in fogs--but which instinctively, when they were touched, would respond and rule the life. Of course a novel of this kind, full of the truthful and rapid play of character, and from which rustling silks and satins are rigorously excluded--except once, when they sweep, cloud-like, down the stairs, in one of the most picturesque passages of the book--has no interest for those who are snuffing in the air for perfumes. It wears an almost repulsive sternness to those who quiz it daintily through tortoise-shell eye-glasses.⁹⁰

Just as Jane Eyre was different, so was Villette:

"Villette" has the same virtues. It is a novel of absorbing interest as a story. It is somewhat less severe than "Jane Eyre." Paulina is a strain of grace and tenderness that does not occur in the other book. Paul has many traits like Rochester. Lucy Snowe is a governess like Jane Eyre herself--neither very young, nor lovely, nor fascinating, as we can easily see from the impression she makes upon Grahame Bretton. He is such a hero as daily experience supplies. We have all seen many Grahame Brettons, free, joyous natures, bounding through life; and therefore we are the better for meeting him in "Villette."⁹¹

The book did, however, have some defects:

. . . The difficulty with the book as a work of art is, that the interest does not sufficiently concentrate upon

⁹⁰ Putnam's Monthly Magazine, op. cit., p. 536.

⁹¹ Loc. cit.

the two chief figures. Grahame and Paulina are disproportionately interesting. In fact, we are not sure that most readers are not more anxious to marry Grahame than to follow the destiny of Lucy Snowe. There is a pause over his marriage, and a glance into the future, which properly belong only to the close of the book, and which materially affect the sequence of interest.

. . . The book overflows with exuberant power. Its scenery is vivid and grim, like the pictures in "Jane Eyre." But it is also more ambitious in style, and more evidently so, which is a great fault. The personifications of passion are unnatural, and clumsily patched upon the tale. They are the disagreeable rents in the scenery, making you aware that it is a drama, and not a fact; that it is an author writing a very fine book, and not scenes of life developing themselves before you. . . . The finest passages in the book are the descriptions of the dreary vacation. The portrait of Rachel is sketched in the lurid gloom of the French melo-dramatic style. It partakes of the fault of the personification to which we alluded. "Villette" has less variety, but more grace than "Jane Eyre." It is quite as bold, original, and interesting, allowing always for the fact that we have had the type in the earlier book.⁹²

On Saturday, May 7, 1853, the Illustrated London News Supplement published a review of Villette. While Jane Eyre was praised, Shirley was not, and Villette was pronounced a book which would not add to the reputation of the author of Jane Eyre:

The fidelity and force with which the sufferings of unprotected childhood were portrayed in "Jane Eyre" ensured the extraordinary success of that very favourite novel. There was much of coarseness in the book, it is true; but that coarseness was regarded rather as the failing of a masculine, and not over sensitive, mind, than as the indication of a tainted imagination. The brilliancy and pathos with which the tale was told, and the freshness

⁹² Putnam's Monthly Magazine, op. cit., p. 537.

which pervaded it, disarmed criticism as to its faults, and secured an ample measure of praise for its perfections. It was reasonably expected that experience would correct the errors, and refine the taste of an unpractised, but powerful writer. "Shirley" was by no means so favourably received as its predecessor; and "Villette" will rather derogate from, than add to, a reputation which must rely for support upon the popularity and merits of a maiden effort. The style of "Villette" is strained and meretricious. The author, sensible of the deficiencies of her second work, and unable to reach the level of the first, indulges in a sort of florid clap-trap declamation, which, from its magniloquence and complexity, is peculiarly well adapted to secure the approbation of enthusiastic spinsters and romantic chambermaids. . . . The sketches of Madame Beck, the schoolmistress, and Monsieur Paul the professor, are excellent, though given, perhaps, too much in detail; while the story, although deficient in plot, is interspersed with incidents which render it amusing.⁹³

In summing up the criticisms of Villette, one might say in general that the following points were made:

1. Although the plot was very slight, the story was intensely interesting.
2. Currer Bell clung to the schoolroom theme, but made the schoolroom so attractive as to hold the reader spellbound.
3. The story centered on one heroine, as in Jane Eyre, and the book was autobiographic, as was the first novel.
4. There was perhaps too much love, and the heroine's interest changed too suddenly from one man to another.
5. Most critics agreed that the author handled the subject of Catholicism in a dignified manner.
6. Currer Bell, through her heroine, fought happiness.

⁹³ "Villette," Illustrated London News. Supplement, 22:358-59, May 7, 1853.

RETROSPECT

When Jane Eyre appeared in 1847, the critics of the day pronounced it at once the novel of the season. It was different from the fiction of the time in that the heroine was a little, plain governess instead of a duchess; the hero, also, was not the customary curled darling, but a man past middle age with a past. Then, too, the question of love between the man and the woman was handled in a frank, wholesome manner.

The critics gave quite a little attention to the merits of the book. It was proclaimed a real autobiography; one could sense the reality behind every page. George H. Lewes, in Fraser, named it "a book after our own heart"; Forçade, in the Revue des Deux Mondes, praised the frank method of dealing with the passions; the Athenaeum gave as much attention as the author could expect from such a dignified periodical; the Examiner was frank in its approval. Thackeray, in a letter to the publishers of Jane Eyre, said that this book was the first work of fiction he had been able to read for a long time.

Many, however, did not approve of Jane Eyre. The North American Review, for instance, spoke of the "Jane Eyre fever" in America; the book was an attempt to corrupt the morals of the young; the North British Review praised

the book for its power, but felt that if the author should be a woman, she must be very nearly unsexed; also, the Quarterly Review, in the article by Miss Rigby, would not believe the author to be a woman; however, should it be true, she must be one who had long ago forfeited the society of her sex. The Christian Remembrancer regarded the book with suspicion.

Even among the favorable critiques, many suggestions were made. Lewes warned the author to beware of melodrama and improbability. Currer Bell's style of writing was indeed faulty, but it was certainly original. The work had many of the faults of young authorship, but the powerful story overbalanced these faults.

Charlotte Brontë was keenly sensitive to criticism. She spoke of the "artifice" and "trickery" she had been accused of in the Spectator review; she kept the Quarterly notice from her aged father, because it would worry him. She was angry with the Quarterly, and proposed a "word" with them; she used their harsh remarks in Shirley. She scorned the praise of a weak critic like the writer for the North British Review who praised the work if by a man, and condemned it if by a woman. She rejoiced over the favorable criticisms and sent them to her friends for their perusal; she wrote to her publishers about them, and she wrote to thank Mr. Lewes for his notice.

When Shirley appeared in 1849, public expectation ran high. But the book was, in general, a disappointment. The critics compared it with Jane Eyre and decided that the second work lacked the keen interest and fire that made the first book so highly admired or so violently disliked. The Examiner, whose praise Miss Brontë coveted, had to place Jane Eyre above Shirley. Forçade praised the book.

There was indeed much adverse criticism of Shirley. Lewes complained of the too frequent use of Yorkshire dialect and French phrases. Many critics mentioned the two heroes and two heroines, where one of each would have sufficed. The Times wrote a harsh review of the book. The Dublin University Magazine accused the author of bad taste in dealing with the Irish curate. The Daily News was most severe. Sydney Dobell's article in the Palladium did much to heal the wounded feelings of the young author, although even this critic spoke of the first production, Jane Eyre, as a novel that would live.

Charlotte Brontë cried when she read the Times review; she heard afterwards that Thackeray, her literary hero, might have been the author of the article. It was revolting to her that such a critic as that of the Daily News should criticize her work; she bowed, however, to the blame of the Examiner, as she rejoiced in its praise. She once stated that when she had the approval of Thackeray,

Fonblanque of the Examiner, and Forçade, she was content. As for Lewes, after his review of Shirley, she wished that in future he would let her alone, because he stressed the fact that Currer Bell was a woman.

In 1853, when Villette came before the public, it was received with great enthusiasm, equal to that which greeted Jane Eyre. Here was the same governess and teacher as in the first book; here was the same autobiography; here was the same master. Although some critics had complained before that they were tired of the schoolroom setting and the governess-master, tutor-student situation, Villette contained it once more, and throughout the entire book left the reader spellbound with the school life at Brussels. The foreign setting made the book perhaps a little less popular than Jane Eyre. However, George Eliot wrote in a letter that Villette was still more wonderful than Jane Eyre; she spoke too of the author's having the fire of George Sand.

Miss Martineau of the Daily News gave a harsh review, thus ending her friendship with Miss Brontë. The reviewer of the Christian Remembrancer hinted at some obscure reason for Currer Bell's being a recluse; the author of Villette wrote to the editor and explained the home situation. The Examiner, the Revue des Deux Mondes, and many others had only praise for Villette.

Catharine Sedgwick in a letter spoke of the author of Villette; she possessed the "intensity of Byron"; Barry

Cornwall called the book "man's meat, and no whipped syllabub." The Illustrated London News, however, felt that the book did not add to the fame of the author of Jane Eyre, but rather detracted.

Miss Brontë wrote happily that the women of the times wished to know the fate of the little professor of languages. She rejoiced that Villette, the book which she had sent out in fear and trembling, had found a place equal with Jane Eyre. Although Harriet Martineau accused her of attacking popery, other critics lauded her for the courteous manner in which she handled the question of religious faith.

Although Charlotte Brontë, who passed from the earth in 1855, two years after the publication of Villette, had endured much unkind and unjust criticism, she most assuredly enjoyed equal pleasure in having, as she said, the approval of such men as Thackeray, Fonblanque, and Forçade. She had the unfailing sympathy of her first critics, Mr. W. Smith Williams and George Smith; the latter, in Villette, is immortalized as John Graham Bretton.¹

As we have stated before, the fame of Charlotte Brontë has not lessened with the passing years. In fact, that fame has grown steadily throughout the entire world.

¹ Sir George Murray Smith, "In the Early Forties," Critic, 38:59, January, 1901.

We read with the greatest pleasure from the Brontë Society publications this tribute to the author of Villette, and to her sisters, Emily the courageous, and gentle Anne:

Ninety years is a sufficiently long time to decide the question of permanence in literature; and the seal of national approval is to be set upon the Brontës and their works, and they are, at last, to have their memorial in Westminster Abbey. Owing to the exigencies of space, the memorial can be only very small in size--not more than two feet square. The inscription, therefore, must be very short, and as simple as the sisters themselves would have wished. Their three names, with the years of birth and death, and the final line from Emily's "Old Stoic"--"with courage to endure"--that is all.

But, thanks to the Dean (who has so recently gone to Westminster from the West Riding) and Chapter, this little memorial is to have one of the proudest and most honourable positions in the Abbey: for it is to be placed in the Poets Corner, at the side of the memorial to the greatest and most human writer of all time--William Shakespeare.²

As we conclude this study of Charlotte Brontë, we see Jane Eyre filmed; we note stage productions of the same book; we read also of the making of a film, Devotion, showing the lives of the gifted Yorkshire family. So the living memorials are being constantly erected before our eyes. We have attempted to add our little tribute to the author of Jane Eyre, Shirley, and Villette.

² Donald Hopewell, "A Westminster Abbey Memorial to the Brontës," Brontë Transactions and Other Publications, 9:237-38, Printed for the Society, 1940. (The author of the extract meant ninety years after the publication of Jane Eyre).

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