

## **Charlotte Brontë Exhibit**

Side Menu:

[Charlotte Brontë Biography](#)

[Childhood Writings](#)

[The Manuscript](#)

[The Stories](#)

[The Discovery of a Treasure](#)

[View Page Images](#)

[Resources](#)

## **Charlotte Brontë Biography**

Pictures to go with this page: Portrait of Charlotte Brontë (from internet), picture of Haworth Parsonage (from internet)

The lives of the Brontë sisters have become almost as romanticized as the stormy, Gothic novels they wrote – Charlotte, her sisters Emily and Anne, and their brother Branwell living in near isolation with a sternly religious father on a lonely, windswept moor, inhabiting a world peopled by their vivid imaginations and fueled by their literary genius. This Myth of the Lonely Geniuses began soon after Charlotte Brontë's death, and it has helped to popularize the sisters' writings to generations of readers. Even so, this myth does not accurately reflect many aspects of the Brontës' lives.

The Brontës' home was at Haworth Parsonage near Keighley in Yorkshire. Charlotte Brontë, perhaps the most famous of the sisters, was born in 1816. She was the third daughter of the Rev. Patrick Brontë and his wife Maria, who died in 1821. Her two older sisters, Maria and Elizabeth, acted as mother figures for the rest of the children even after their aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, moved into the parsonage to help with their care. When Charlotte was eight years old she and her two older sisters were enrolled in a girls' school, but Charlotte was brought home about a year later, after Maria and Elizabeth became ill and died. Although she spent some time as a pupil at two other

schools, her education was conducted for the most part at home. As a young woman she served as a teacher at a girls' school and a governess for a local family for brief periods, but each time she suffered from acute homesickness. Charlotte and her younger sisters Emily and Anne also made a failed attempt at opening their own school for girls at Haworth.

As young adults, the sisters dedicated themselves to their writing and published a volume of poetry under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell in 1846. The first novels of Emily and Anne, *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, were accepted by publishers the following year. Charlotte's first attempt at publication, *The Professor*, was rejected. Her second novel, *Jane Eyre*, was published in late 1847. Although controversial, the novel met with commercial success.

Despite the three authors' accomplishments, the following years were difficult ones for the family. All of its members suffered from intermittent illnesses, some severe. Branwell died in September 1848 from complications related to his persistent alcoholism and drug abuse. Emily and Anne both became seriously ill soon after. Emily died just two months after Branwell, and Anne followed in May 1849. Left to care for her aging father alone, Charlotte battled depression and continued her creative activities. *Shirley* was published in 1849.

Charlotte's first two novels had been published under her original pseudonym, Currer Bell. After her second publication, Charlotte no longer relied on her pseudonym to shield her from publicity. She traveled to London and was introduced into the literary circle of William Thackeray. She also visited the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, in

addition to making several trips to the homes of friends and acquaintances, and she continued writing. Her third novel, *Villette*, was published in 1852.

In 1854, after lengthy opposition from her father, she married the curate of Haworth, the Rev. Arthur Nicholls, and traveled through Ireland with him shortly after their marriage. Later scholars and biographers have debated whether the couple was happy together, but their marriage lasted for less than a year. Only a few weeks after learning she was pregnant, Charlotte was diagnosed with pneumonia. She refused all food and water, complaining that they made her nauseous, and she died about six weeks later, on March 31, 1855.

Charlotte's first novel, *The Professor*, was finally published after her death, in 1857. Her first biography, written by her acquaintance Elizabeth Gaskell, was also published in that year. Arthur Nicholls stayed at Haworth to care for Charlotte's father until his death in 1861, and then returned to his native Ireland. He died in 1906.

### **Childhood Writings**

Pictures to go with this page: Charlotte Brontë's signature (detail from page 7), photo of Blackwood's Magazine (in rare collection), photo of 1841 edition of Byron (from rare collection)

Although the mythology surrounding the Brontës' lives characterizes the Rev. Brontë as a cold and unfeeling parent, the children's surviving writings actually point to a caring father, although perhaps an absent and preoccupied one. Charlotte had ample literary resources in her father's bookshelf. She and her siblings also read the two Leeds newspapers the family subscribed to, as well as current popular journals such as *Blackwood's Magazine*. During the nineteenth century this type of reading was not

considered suitable for young children and was especially frowned upon for girls. However, the only time Mr. Brontë seems to have forbidden reading to his children was when Charlotte and her sisters were caught looking through “ladies’ magazines,” which he thought too full of foolish love stories. Mr. Brontë encouraged independent thought in his children and once wrote that he could discuss current events with them just easily as he would have with adults. Much of Charlotte’s early writing reveals a concern with current politics and world events that goes far beyond her young age.

Mr. Brontë also loved to write, publishing a book of poems in 1811 and several other didactic works before his wife’s death. Although his daughters received only sporadic formal education outside the home, it seems apparent that he worked to instill the same love of the written word in all of his children. They exercised their creative talents by writing numerous stories and poems, but their most important childhood pastime were their “plays”:

Our plays were established; *Young Men*, June, 1826; *Our Fellows*, July, 1827; *Islanders*, December, 1827. These are our three great plays, that are not kept secret. ...The *Young Men's* play took its rise from some wooden soldiers Branwell had; *Our Fellows* from *Æsop's Fables*; and the *Islanders* from several events which happened. I will sketch out the origin of our plays more explicitly if I can. First, *Young Men*. Papa bought Branwell some wooden soldiers at Leeds; when Papa came home it was night, and we were in bed, so next morning Branwell came to our door with a box of soldiers. Emily and I jumped out of bed, and I snatched up one and exclaimed, 'This is the Duke of Wellington! This shall be the Duke!' When I had said this Emily likewise took one up and said it should be hers; when Anne came down, she said one should be hers. Mine was the prettiest of the whole, and the tallest, and the most perfect in every part. Emily's was a grave-looking fellow, and we called him 'Gravey.' Anne's was a queer little thing, much like herself, and we called him 'Waiting-boy.' Branwell chose his, and called him 'Bonaparte.'<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charlotte Brontë’s “History of the Year 1829” as published by Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/EG-Charlotte-1.html#V>).

The *Young Men's* play gave rise to an imaginary colony in Africa called Angria, peopled by the characters represented by the toy soldiers. Although all four of the children were involved in the play at first, Emily and Anne soon branched off into their own imaginary kingdoms, leaving Charlotte and Branwell to manage the affairs of Angria by themselves. Both brother and sister wrote stories, poems, articles, and histories about the colony, and it seems that they were often at odds with each other regarding how events should proceed. Because many of the Angrian tales do not survive, scholars of the Brontë juvenilia face difficulties in piecing together details of the characters and the overall story of the colony.

Charlotte eventually became the dominant creative force behind the play, and she developed complex, interconnected plots that drew on the often-stormy relationships between several main characters. These plots were also strongly influenced by recent events in the political world, as well as by Charlotte's current choice of reading material. Magical elements permeate the early stories, in which the four siblings feature as all-powerful Genii who control the colony. By the later stories, Charlotte was more interested in the political machinations and romantic entanglements that she wove into her complex plots, leaving the world of fairy tales behind. Her writing shows the influence of various histories and legends, stories like the *Arabian Nights*, and the literature of Byron, Scott, and contemporary writers.

The fact that the plays were not just an idle pastime but also a serious literary endeavor is apparent in the seriousness with which Charlotte regarded her creations. She wrote to Robert Southey, then poet laureate of England, in 1837 to ask for his opinion on her writing, and was advised to give up her immersion in her dream world:

The day dreams in which you habitually indulge are likely to induce a distempered state of mind; and, in proportion as all the ordinary uses of the world seem to you flat and unprofitable, you will be unfitted for them without becoming fitted for anything else. Literature cannot be the business of a woman's life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation. To those duties you have not yet been called, and when you are you will be less eager for celebrity. You will not seek in imagination for excitement, of which the vicissitudes of this life, and the anxieties from which you must not hope to be exempted, be your state what it may, will bring with them but too much.<sup>2</sup>

Charlotte replied to Southey's letter to let him know "your advice shall not be wasted, however sorrowfully and reluctantly it may at first be followed." However, she does not seem to have taken Southey's warning against an over-imaginative life too much to heart. Charlotte continued writing and "daydreaming" for the next two years, and she does not seem to have consciously rejected the trappings of her childhood until 1839, when she was twenty-four years old. She wrote,

...It is not easy to dismiss from my imagination the images which have filled it for so long; they were my friends and my intimate acquaintances, and I could with little labour describe to you the faces, the voices, the actions, of those who peopled my thoughts by day, and not seldom stole strangely even into my dreams at night. When I depart from these I feel almost as if I stood on the threshold of a home and were bidding farewell to its inmates. When I try to conjure up new inmates I feel as if I had got into a distant country where every face was unknown and the character of all the population an enigma...<sup>3</sup>

But Charlotte did come up with "new inmates"; the characters in *Jane Eyre* and her successive novels, although heavily dependent on her imagination rather than her life experience, have no direct parallels in the characters of her childhood plays. Only "echoes of Angrian characters and plot can be found in all Charlotte's novels and later fragmentary writing."<sup>4</sup> Realizing that her dream world did indeed inhibit her calling as a writer, Charlotte eventually followed at least part of Southey's advice and abandoned it

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<sup>3</sup> Reprinted by Fannie E. Ratchford, *Legends of Angria* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1933), 315.

<sup>4</sup> Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Prometheus, 1983), 244.

for the more believable and solid Yorkshire settings that play such an important part in her later work.

### **The Manuscript**

Picture to go with this page: Manuscript page with scale (page 2)

Charlotte and Branwell Brontë wrote many of their stories of Angria on tiny sheets of paper in nearly microscopic handwriting. This particular example consists of four sheets of notepaper folded into sixteen pages. The individual sheets are approximately 4 ½ inches long and 3 5/8 inches wide, and the entire text contains about nineteen thousand words. Charlotte signed this manuscript “Charles Wellesley,” one of the main characters in her Angrian stories, and the story is told from his point of view. The manuscript is dated November 27, 1833, when Charlotte was seventeen years old, and the place of writing is given as Verdopolis, the “Great Glass Town” that is the capital of Angria.

It is unknown why the Brontë children chose to write their stories in such tiny script, but several suggestions have been made. One is that the children may have been trying to hide their imaginative plays from their stern and religious aunt Elizabeth Branwell, their mother’s sister, who did not encourage their literary pursuits. “Aunt Branwell,” as they called her, seems to have been a forbidding and authoritarian figure for the children. If secrecy was the motivation, Charlotte and Branwell were probably successful – most people cannot read the manuscript without a magnifying glass. Another possible explanation is that the children wrote to the scale of the toy soldiers that played such an important role in their imaginary world. Their fascination with the

miniature may have played a material part in the mythos they developed around the world they called Angria.

However, it may have been that Charlotte and Branwell had simply developed a habit of writing in extreme minuscule. It is known that the Brontës produced tiny handwritten books and magazines from an early age, even before they came up with the *Young Men's Play*; Charlotte's earliest surviving manuscript is a miniature book she made at the age of ten for her sister Anne. One of Charlotte's school friends recalled that when she asked about her tiny handwriting, Charlotte responded that she and Branwell had learned to print so small "by writing in their magazine. They brought out a 'magazine' once a month, and wished it to look as much like print as possible."<sup>5</sup> The magazine Charlotte's friend referred to was likely Branwell's *Young Men's Magazine*, "published" as a chronicle of monthly events and notices concerning the *Young Men's Play*. Charlotte, at first uninvolved in the production of the magazine, became its principal editor in 1830. Whatever the reason for the tiny handwriting, the diminutive size of this manuscript is a characteristic of almost all the Brontë juvenilia.

### **The Discovery of a Treasure**

Picture to go with this page: Picture of Senator Symington (from internet)

This manuscript was first documented by Elizabeth Gaskell, Charlotte's biographer, who probably saw it just after her death. The first page of "The Secret" was reproduced in Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Bronte*, which was published in 1857. It was among the papers and effects that Charlotte had left in her father's house after her

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Christine Alexander, *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (New York: Prometheus, 1983), 74.

marriage, and it was bequeathed to her husband Arthur Nicholls along with all of Charlotte's other possessions after her death.

Nicholls returned to his native Ireland in 1861, and the manuscript must have gone with him. The collector and author Clement Shorter purchased the manuscript from Nicholls, along with many other pieces of Brontë juvenilia, in 1895. The manuscript is included in Shorter's *The Brontës: Life and Letters*, which was published in 1908. At some point, the juvenilia purchased by Shorter passed to book dealer T.J. Wise, who sold them piece-by-piece as literary curiosities. This particular manuscript was sold in New York around 1915.

No information is available on the manuscript's whereabouts between 1915 and 1973, and it was presumed lost.<sup>6</sup> However, the manuscript was rediscovered among the personal papers of Evelyn Wadsworth Symington, wife of United States Senator Stuart Symington, after her death in 1973. The senator presented the manuscript to the University of Missouri Libraries in 1975.

## **Two Tales by Charlotte Brontë**

Picture to go with this page: Detail from the beginning of "The Secret," detail from the beginning of "Lily Hart"

According to Christine Alexander, a scholar of the Brontë juvenilia, "The Secret" and "Lily Hart" come in the middle of a period of collaboration between Branwell and Charlotte. During this period Charlotte fleshes out the backgrounds and motivations of her characters. Personal and romantic intrigues proliferate, and the web of relationships between the characters of the Brontës' complex world becomes even more entangled.

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<sup>6</sup> Christian, Mildred G. "A Census of Brontë Manuscripts in the United States. Part One." *Trollopian* 2, no. 3 (Dec. 1947): 190.

When they were rediscovered in the 1970s, these stories filled some holes in the Angrian saga that had previously been left unexplained. A later poem by Charlotte, for example, that mourns the death of Henry Percy, was written well after the death of Marian Hume. “The Secret” explains the links between these characters, as well as adding some intrigue to the characters’ backgrounds.

Readers will find full transcriptions of the stories in publications by William Holz and Christine Alexander (both cited in full in the bibliography). Because of copyright restrictions, these transcriptions are not included here. However, summaries of both “The Secret” and “Lily Hart” are included below.

### **The Secret**

“The Secret” focuses on Charlotte’s heroine, Marian Hume, the child bride of the dark, brooding and temperamental Marquis of Douro (also known as Arthur Wellesley and the Duke of Zamorna, the oldest son of Charlotte’s hero, the fictionalized Duke of Wellington). The story is narrated by the Marquis’ younger brother, Charles Wellesley. While shopping in Verdopolis the Marquis encounters Miss Foxley, Marian’s former governess, who manipulated Marian in an attempt to block their marriage several years earlier. Alarmed at the prospect of more interference, the Marquis imperiously forbids Marian to have any contact with Miss Foxley. Even so, Marian receives a midnight letter advising her to meet with her former governess in order to avoid an embarrassing scandal. She sneaks out of the Marquis’s palace under cover of darkness and confronts Miss Foxley about the situation, not knowing what to expect. After her arrival, Miss Foxley calls in a young man who claims to be Henry Percy, son of the terrible Lord Ellrington. Marian refuses to believe it is him because he looks so different, so he shows

her a small token, which produces a strong reaction of fear and dread from her. Miss Foxley makes Marian swear not to consult with her husband on anything she has been told, then tells her to call on Lord Ellrington and gives her directions on how to open a secret box, which she says will contain the answer to another secret about Marian's past.

Marian again has to sneak out of the palace to call on Lord Ellrington, a cruel and bloodthirsty man who is known for attempting to kill all of his sons and an enemy of the Marquis. After dealing with Ellrington's threats and cruel remarks, Marian opens the box and discovers a paper. She quickly reads its contents, and then burns it in the flame of the lamp in front of an astonished Lord Ellrington, who forces her to wait until dawn to return to the palace as punishment. Although her midnight excursions are almost found out, she manages to get back into the palace with the help of her lady-in-waiting.

Back at the palace, the Marquis of Douro detects that Marian is upset about something and flies into a rage when she refuses to tell him what is wrong. He guesses that she must have been in contact with Miss Foxley and is about to send her away forever when his father walks in. Although she promised not to discuss the matter with her husband, Marian reasons that she did not promise anything with respect to the Duke of Wellington. Within earshot of her husband, Marian then confesses everything and informs the reader of the secrets that have been uncovered: Henry Percy, thought to have drowned at sea years ago, was Marian's betrothed long before she met the Marquis of Douro and has come back to claim her. Even more disturbing, the paper in the box revealed a pact between Marian's mother and a former Lady Ellrington. The two ladies were such great friends that they decided to switch children, each bringing up the other's

child as her own. This means that Marian is not Marian Hume, but rather Marian Ellrington, the daughter of her husband's biggest political rival.

Both men, however, have information that reveals Miss Foxley's machinations – the Marquis witnessed her purchasing the token and hiring a young man to impersonate Henry Percy, while the Duke of Wellington confirms that the arrangement between Lady Ellrington and Mrs. Hume was never carried out. The Marquis forgives Marian for her disobedience, Miss Foxley is sent into exile, and the story ends happily.

### **Lily Hart**

The story of Lily Hart is the only one in which the title character appears. Lily and her widowed mother live in a small house in Verdopolis. During the Great Glass Town Insurrection, they find a wounded soldier in their back garden and are about to call a surgeon when another soldier, Colonel Percival, appears. Percival tells them that he knows something about surgery, tends to the soldier's wounds, and then entreats them to keep him safe until he recovers. When asked what the wounded soldier's name is, Percival replies that they should call him Mr. Seymour.

Mr. Seymour improves rapidly, and Colonel Percival comes to visit them often. Although Lily is put off by Seymour's haughty manners and dark expressions in the beginning, the two become very close. Seymour soon gets better, but he does not leave until Percival teases him about being overly attached to a certain young lady of the household. Seymour then packs his bags and leaves immediately, not even thanking Lily and her mother for their hospitality.

Time passes, Lily's mother dies, the Hart family's modest fortunes are ruined, and Lily is on her own, forced to work making handicrafts in a tiny apartment in order to support herself. One day, as she is walking down the street, she sees Mr. Seymour at an open window. She turns away, embarrassed by her poverty, and when she looks back up the window is closed and Mr. Seymour is nowhere to be seen. Hurt, Lily makes her way to the cemetery, where she weeps over her mother's grave. As she leaves the cemetery, she encounters Mr. Seymour again, who professes his love for her and asks her to marry him. She agrees, and he swears her to secrecy, asking her to meet him again at the cemetery the next day.

When Lily returns to the cemetery, Seymour is nowhere to be found. However, Percival appears and whisks her away in a carriage to a shadowy chapel in a great palace. There, she and Seymour are married and immediately leave Verdopolis for the countryside. Seymour installs Lily in the large, comfortable mansion of Elm Grove Villa, but he does not allow her to have guests or to visit Verdopolis. Her only contact with the outside world is Colonel Percival, and she knows nothing about her husband's business or family.

Four years pass, and one night during a violent storm the butler announces that some travelers are at the villa seeking shelter from the rain. Although Seymour instructs him to show them to a separate parlor, they insist on coming into the same room as the family. When they remove their hoods, Lily is astonished to see the King of Sneachiesland, Alexander Sneachi (also called Sneaky, one of the original Twelve Soldiers) who addresses her husband as his son. It becomes clear that Mr. Seymour is actually John, Prince of Sneachiesland and Marquis of Fidena. Lily, the unwitting

Marchioness of Fidenza, is finally accepted by the royal family and taken to Verdopolis, where a lavish ball is thrown in her honor.

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Other publications:

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<http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0891-9356%28198706%2942%3A1%3C29%3ABMACIC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-T>

Other resources in MU Libraries may be found by searching MERLIN under these subject headings:

<http://laurel.lso.missouri.edu/search~S1/d?SEARCH=bronte+charlotte>  
<http://laurel.lso.missouri.edu/search~S1/d?SEARCH=bronte+family>

### **Web Resources**

The Brontë Society and the Haworth Parsonage Museum

<http://www.bronte.org.uk/index.asp>

The home of the Brontës is now a research library and museum supported by the Brontë Society. Most of Charlotte Brontë's other childhood manuscripts are located at this library.

Victorian Web: Charlotte Brontë Overview

<http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/bronte/cbronte/bronteov.html>

Examinations of Charlotte Brontë's work within the literature, history and culture of the Victorian era.

The Life of Charlotte Brontë by Elizabeth Gaskell

[http://www.online-literature.com/elizabeth\\_gaskell/charlotte\\_bronte/](http://www.online-literature.com/elizabeth_gaskell/charlotte_bronte/)

<http://www.lang.nagoya-u.ac.jp/~matsuoka/EG-Charlotte.html>

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=1827> (vol. 1)

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=1700> (vol. 2)

Elizabeth Gaskell was an acquaintance of Charlotte Brontë and wrote her first biography shortly after Charlotte's death. The text, now out of copyright, is available online in several places.

Writings of Charlotte Brontë available online

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Bront%26euml%3b%2c%20Charlotte>

Includes *Jane Eyre*, *Poems* by Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell, *Shirley*, *Villette*, and *The Professor*

Haworth Village

<http://www.haworth-village.org.uk/>

The website of the town where the Brontës lived, with local history and views of the parsonage and the moors that so inspired the authors.