



The Brontë Myth

By Lucasta Miller

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Since 1857, hardly a year has gone by without a book or play or monograph or film about the Brontës. Each generation has reimagined Charlotte, Emily, and Anne in ways that reflect changing visions—of the role of the woman writer or of sexuality or of the very concept of personality. Charlotte Brontë has been seen as domestic saint, as sex-starved hysteric, as ambitious literary careerist. Her sister Emily has been furnished with apocryphal lovers of both sexes; has even been denied the authorship of *Wuthering Heights* by conspiracy theorists who attribute it to her brother, Branwell.

Now Lucasta Miller, in *The Brontë Myth*, shows us how the Brontës became cultural symbols almost as soon as their novels were published; how they became notorious even before the veil dropped from their carefully chosen pseudonyms, as Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, appearing out of nowhere, instantly fascinated, inspired, and scandalized English readers.

The subsequent discovery that Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell were three youngish spinsters—parson's daughters—living rural lives of utmost propriety made interest in the sisters obsessive. Add a supposedly ferocious father and untimely death, to say nothing of the Victorian penchant for seeing noble sacrifice in every possible situation, and the production of legends multiplied.

Lucasta Miller provides fascinating insight into the manufacture of cultural myth and how it can distort our memory of the artist even as it obscures the art. She traces the reinterpretations, indeed re-creations, of the Brontës, from Charlotte's own efforts to soften her dead sisters' reputations and Mrs. Gaskell's classic portrait of the artists as exemplary Christian ladies to the fashionably Freudian psychobiographies of the 1920s and '30s, from counterfeit memorabilia and the promotion of literary tourism to Hollywood representations of gloomy heroines on savage windswept moors. She rescues the Brontës from their admirers and attackers, giving us back three vivid women who, with little formal education, were writing in the days when few women dared to try: geniuses and sisters who, in the words of a household witness in the late 1850s, were "as cheerful and full of spirits as possible.... full of fun and merriment."

From the Trade Paperback edition.

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The Brontë Myth By Lucasta Miller Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #281365 in Books
- Published on: 2004-01-13
- Released on: 2004-01-13
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.56" h x 1.25" w x 6.59" l,
- Binding: Hardcover
- 368 pages

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Even in their lifetimes, the Brontë sisters—Charlotte, Emily and Anne—were remarkable figures whose literary reputations were often shrouded in a web of myth and lies that to some degree still endures. In this volume, Miller, a literary critic and former deputy literary editor of *The Independent*, presents a markedly intelligent "metabiography" that sorts through these half-truths to give a fresh, original portrait of three exceptional writers. Celebrated by some of their 19th century readers as literary heroes and castigated by others as reckless and immoral, the Brontës defied conventions even as they tried to live within them: "revolutionizing the imaginative presentation of women's inner lives" even as they cultivated the social persona of "the modest spinster daughter." Miller traces the trajectory of their careers, particularly Charlotte's, from their childhood games to the stunning success of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Drawing on a wealth of letters and scholarly works, Miller succeeds in carefully revealing how the rumors that portrayed the Brontës as gothic creatures, saints and martyrs became more important than the women's novels, "covering and supplanting," as Henry James said, "their matter, their spirit, their style, their talent, their taste." Miller touches on everyone from Elizabeth Gaskell, whose famous *Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) "marked the birth of the Brontës as cultural icons," to Ted Hughes, and thus illuminates not only the lives of the sisters, but the significance and import of their work. Ultimately, such literary reclamation is what Miller is after: to clear up the clutter of history, to bring to light the genius and artistry of the novels and to let the Brontës speak for themselves.

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From [The New Yorker](#)

Although a collaborative first book of poems sold only two copies, the Brontë sisters were in their own time subject to the kind of cult fascination that persists today, with thousands of pilgrims journeying every year to the Brontë home, in Yorkshire. Miller's ingenious book traces this fascination, beginning with Mrs. Gaskell's famous 1857 biography, which sought to excuse the "coarseness" of novels like *"Jane Eyre"* and *"Wuthering Heights"* by embellishing details of the authors' gothically miserable childhood. Miller provides a corrective—a biography of a biography—showing how successive generations, including Stracheyan, Freudian, feminist, and poststructural critics, remolded the Brontës to fit their own agendas. Like Mrs. Gaskell's, these treatments often focussed more on the authors' lives than on their work, in spite of Charlotte's plea: "I wished critics would judge me as an author, not as a woman."

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From [Booklist](#)

Desolate moors, isolated parsonage, doomed siblings and their fevered imaginations--these are elements of the Brontë myth. Charlotte herself had trouble explaining where such powerful fiction as *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* came from, and she helped foster the myth to deflect criticism from those who thought her works and those of her sisters were immoral and coarse. The myth was refined by friend and biographer Mrs. Gaskell, who marginalized the writings and crafted a sentimental image of Charlotte as a domestic martyr; later it was adopted by various novelists, dramatists, psycho-biographers, filmmakers, and feminists. Our image of Emily as "mystic of the moors" can be traced, again, to Charlotte, who felt there was something disturbing about Emily's creative gift. It is only recently, Miller asserts, that all of the Brontës have started to emerge from the shadows, with critics and biographers focusing at last on the works rather than just the lives. This book gives serious Brontë readers much to ponder. *Mary Ellen Quinn*

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

Ashley McKay:

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