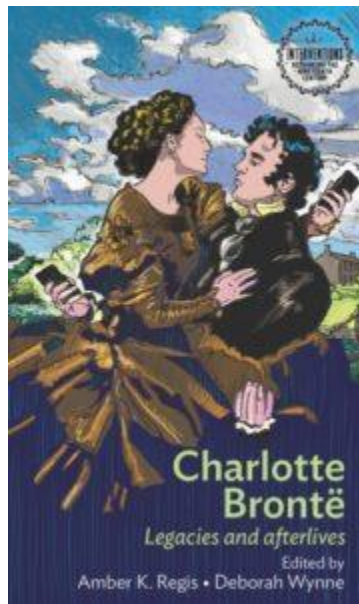


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*Special Issue:*

*Making Masculinity: Craft, Gender and Material Production in the Long Nineteenth Century*

*Guest Edited by Freya Gowrley, University of Edinburgh  
& Katie Faulkner, Courtauld Institute of Art*



**From Memes to Ghost Walks: Charlotte Brontë's Literary Legacies**

[Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives](#). Ed. Amber Regis and Deborah Wynne. Manchester University Press, 2017. 303 pp.

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<1>*Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* is a well-nuanced, wide-ranging, and thorough collection of scholarly essays on the astonishing variety of ways in which Charlotte Brontë's writing, her life, and the cultural myths surrounding it have inspired creative works since the mid-nineteenth century. The book's timely publication coincided with the end of a year-long celebration of the 200th anniversary of Brontë's birth in 2016. This anniversary offered an opportunity both to celebrate her literary legacy and to re-evaluate her various textual afterlives in diverse genres, divergent forms of adaptations, different modes of criticism, and the likewise changing approaches to literary tourism. Among the understandable plethora of responses, this collection stands out in this exclusive focus on 'legacies and afterlives'

considering/evaluating/analyzing the way Brontë and her characters live on in works by other authors who adapted her writing for their times. Although individual chapters also include reconsiderations of Brontë's work, in particular her hitherto neglected poetry, the main emphasis firmly rests on intertextual reworkings and cultural interplays after her death. The book thereby challenges our understanding of a phenomenon to which it simultaneously contributes.

<2>In addition, the editors have made the conscious decision to concentrate exclusively on Charlotte to disentangle her particular legacy from the 'tendency to see the sisters as a collective [which] has sometimes blurred their differences' (3). Several of the critical pieces, therefore, specifically eschew the mythologization of the Brontë siblings as isolated from the rest of the world. While providing an excellent account of the emergence and gradual transformation of a still pervasive iconography, centered around Elizabeth Gaskell's image of a female genius haunting Haworth in her 1857 biography of Brontë (26), *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* also critically parses legacies. In particular, it raises a valid concern about new readerships approaching Brontë through her afterlives, whether through transmedia retellings in blogs or through equally canonical rewritings or film adaptations. On the one hand, such works constitute a form of outreach and ensure the cultural valence of the texts and their author; on the other hand they might obscure the significance of the original novels. While the multiplicity of reworkings have to be reassessed in their own right, it is also vital to see the phenomenon as a whole and critically to consider its implications.

<3>The editors address the issue of re-evaluation in a comprehensive and self-conscious introduction, as they compare their volume with a collection of essays published a hundred years earlier, to mark the centenary of Brontë's birth: *Charlotte Brontë, 1816-1916: A Centenary Memorial* (1917), commissioned by the Brontë Society. The impulse to produce such a book is fundamentally the same – 'to celebrate Charlotte Brontë's achievements' (1) – and yet the way we commemorate an author has radically shifted, reflecting changes in literary culture, in particular in academic criticism, yet also the ongoing reworking of the author's writing and shifting legacies themselves. One way of illustrating this shift is to juxtapose the centenary memorial, which consisted primarily of personal reflections, with critical reassessments today that need to negotiate the scholarly work of another hundred years, while being able to celebrate how Brontë's works have been kept alive through intertextuality, adaptation, and ongoing reconsideration. Another illustration that models the shifting cultural understanding of Brontë is the convoluted story of her likenesses and their changing iconographical impact. The editors describe this story as a 'testing ground for iconographic engagements with Charlotte's posthumous legacy and reputation' (10), connecting it further to the proliferation of images, all with their contested attributions and claims, in the digital age. Memes featuring Brontë newly embody the varied afterlife and the changing impact on a global scale.

<4>The organizational framework of the study is at first chronological before it then shifts to a juxtaposition between the divergent contemporary literary and cultural phenomena that

surround or involve Brontë's life and works. The study is divided into two sections, with Part I focusing on the changing manifestations of a Brontë cult that ranges from literary tourism to séances, while Part II comprises analyses of literary influences and adaptations. Since no single study can purport to explore all intertextual reworkings even of *Jane Eyre* (1847) alone, the book contains a useful appendix, compiled by Kimberley Braxton, which lists Brontë's cultural legacy from 1848 to the present day, comprising films, television, radio, and transmedia adaptations, novels and poetry, stage plays, musicals, and operas, as well as biographical studies. By contrast, the individual chapters critically discuss particular aspects of an ongoing phenomenon. The first section, 'Part I: Ghostly afterlives: cults, literary tourism and staging the life,' situates the phenomenon of rewriting Brontë's life and work in its changing historical context. Thus, Deborah Wynne explores the late-Victorian 'Charlotte cult,' which began with Gaskell's biography and led to the formation of the Brontë society in 1893. Wynne also discusses Marion Harland's more seldom analyzed *Where Ghosts Walk: The Haunts of Familiar Characters in History and Literature* (1898) and *Charlotte Brontë at Home* (1899), important manifestations of the Brontë cult that themselves reacted to and reflected Gaskell's influence, as well as Virginia Woolf's self-conscious reactions to the growing cult in 'Haworth, 1904.' Jude Piesse's contribution concentrates on mobility and migration, both in Brontë's social-problem novel *Shirley* (1849) and in the writings of Mary Taylor, arguing that *Shirley* challenges the Brontë myth that has obscured her fascination with travel. Charlotte Mathieson then discusses the shifting significance of the literary landscapes of Haworth and Brussels as 'Brontë countries.' But if 'Brontë tourism' included literary tourists evoking ghosts in their imagination from the beginning, the Brontë cult tended to involve the supernatural in a wide variety of often very spooky ways that likewise changed with the times. In her chapter, Amber Pouliot discusses related phenomena as different as the 'ghost walks' offered at Haworth to the publication in 1893 of a spirit photograph supposedly of Brontë's ghost. Amber K. Regis's critical analysis of the biodramas based on Brontë's life in the 1930s then offers a smooth transition to the discussions of adaptations that predominate in the second part of the book.

<5>'Part II: Textual legacies: influences and adaptations' chiefly comprises individual critical assessments of the diverse adaptations of Charlotte Brontë's works, while also including new discussions of the works themselves. Thus, readers interested in Brontë's rarely discussed poetry will appreciate Anna Barton's reconsideration of what she terms Brontë's lyric afterlife in the novels: an ongoing revisionary internal exchange in her fiction, which can be further interpreted as 'a sequence of experiments in the poetics of the Victorian novel' (162). The resulting intertextual exchanges, Barton suggests, also prompt new readings of the novels. Her assessment culminates in a discussion of the 2014 production of *Jane Eyre*, directed by Sally Cookson, which forms an excellent link to the subsequent chapters. Following a chronological arc, the first of these chapters on adaptations deals with inter-war women's writing. Emma Liggins traces the reconfiguration of the Victorian family and in particular the unmarried middle-class woman through texts inspired by *Jane Eyre* or Brontë's life. Another particularly intriguing approach to Brontë adaptations is the chapter on film versions of *Villette* (1853) –

precisely because it has never been adapted for the screen. Benjamin Poore discusses the absence of any movie-length adaptations, which is exacerbated by the disappearance of the only two television adaptations (1957 and 1970). Poore makes two really interesting points about this absence. First, that this lack of canonized film versions has allowed more freedom for experimental adaptations on stage and for radio, and second what he terms ‘the problem of transmedial adaptation’ of a novel that might already been seen as an adaptation of other texts (183). In addition, in speculating that perhaps ‘the critical reappraisal of *Villette* came rather too late in the twentieth century for the novel to become canonized in Hollywood film adaptations’ (182), he opens up an important discussion on the power and influence of canonical adaptations.

<6>In the following chapters, Alexandra Lewis selects some of the impressively wide range of reworkings of Brontë’s most-often adapted novel, *Jane Eyre*, in contemporary novels as different as Emma Tennant’s *Thornfield Hall*, (2007) Jasper Fforde’s *The Eyre Affair*, (2001) and Gail Jones’s *Sixty Lights*, (2005) while Jessica Cox traces the literary afterlives of Bertha Mason both in novels for which *Jane Eyre* works as ‘an important intertext’ – such as Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s *Lady Audley’s Secret* (1862) or Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) – and in twenty-first-century film and literary adaptations. The final two chapters concentrate on a relatively new and hitherto little explored phenomenon: the impact of digital media, including social media, on the way Brontë is marketed and how *Jane Eyre* is being read, transformed, and consolidated as Brontë’s most canonical novel. Thus, Monika Pietrzak-Franger provides a critical evaluation of *Jane Eyre*’s ‘transmedia lives’ in Instagram and Tumblr accounts as well as *The Autobiography of Jane Eyre*’s Facebook page that connects to an interactive online adaptation. In particular, Pietrzak-Franger raises the ethics of transmedia adaptations that may obliterate the original novel. Louisa Yates adds to this by exploring the novel’s ‘sexual and financial afterlives’ as an exploited cultural capital. While it is refreshing to know how very much Brontë is being kept alive in ever new ways, her ongoing transformations are also haunted by the specter of appropriation and financial exploitation.