Approaches to Teaching Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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Victorian Border Crossings: Thinking about Gender in *Wuthering Heights*

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> No *woman* could write *Wuthering Heights*.
> —1848 review, *Union Magazine*

> What, then, I would ask again, is love in its highest, holiest character? It is woman's all—her wealth, her power, her very being. Man, let him love as he may, has ever an existence distinct from that of his affections. He has his worldly interests, his public character, his ambition, his competition with other men—but woman centers all in that one feeling, and "In that *she* lives, or else *she* has no life."
> —Sarah Ellis, *The Daughters of England*, 1842

> Woman peculiarly represents the private life of the race. Her ascendancy in literature must mean the ascendancy of domestic ideas, and the assertion of the individual, not as a hero, but as a family man—not as a heroine, but an angel in the house. The individual as a great public character withers. The individual as a member of society in all his private relations grows in importance.
> —E. S. Dallas, *The Gay Science*, 1866

Gender is a subject inherent in the domestic realism of nineteenth-century British fiction. Yet when *Wuthering Heights* is the focus, gender tends to be one of the last things that students think about, discuss. They cannot locate a voice discussing the dangers of gender prescriptions as they can in *Jane Eyre*. Charlotte Brontë is certain about the gender ideas that constitute, and confine, ideals of feminine and masculine. For her characters, as for those of most major writers of the period, male and female roles are clearly defined and require strict adherence to divinely ordained rules. Transgressing these rules comes at enormous peril. The woman is the moral guide, her realm the domestic interior; the male, controlled by the domestic fire of the hearth, is the preserver, defender, and—if necessary, in other realms—the creator-enforcer of the settled order. But Emily Brontë? In a course in which gender and social class are primary issues in discussions of authors and novels, *Wuthering Heights* continues to defeat our categories of analysis, as it defeated the ways of reading of its original critics.

Yet in Emily Brontë's story gender and class are connected in ways more troubling and paradoxical than in any other novel we read. When I teach

Wuthering Heights (in an upper-level survey course of nineteenth-century British fiction that runs from *Frankenstein* or *Oliver Twist* to *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* or *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* or *The Odd Women*), I usually place it at the end of term. For me, no other nineteenth-century novelist offers so critical a reading of traditions of narration, representation, and thus of gender issues as Emily Brontë does. By 1847, as *Jane Eyre* illustrates, the patterns that shaped the century's novels were clearly established. The marriage plot reproduced the march toward domestic order and tranquillity guided by good women who served as patrollers of the moral territories that men left behind when they set out to make an imperial world. Of course no novel actually does all this (though many of Dickens's come close), but the example of *Jane Eyre* is a potent model for a critique of the domestic order and for an example of its constitution. Indeed, students of George Eliot's *The Mill on the Floss* often find Maggie Tulliver's drowning the result of her failure to fit the requirements of the pattern commandeered by Jane Eyre.

To place students in a Victorian environment of gender discussion, I provide them at the outset of the course with examples of gender formation from conduct books like Sarah Ellis's *The Women of England* (1839), *The Daughters of England* (1842), and *The Wives of England* (1843); from *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861); from George Henry Lewes on the function of women as novelists; and from paintings of Queen Victoria.[1]

These texts together give students a sense of what the novels will at once illustrate and complicate: how pervasive gender distinctions are in these works (as powerful in *Frankenstein* as they are in *The Mill on the Floss*) and how inextricably connected they are to issues of social class. Ellis offers an ideal example of the codification of gender issues. In her preface to *The Women of England*, which she wrote "to show how intimate is the connexion which exists between the women of England, and the moral character maintained by their country in the scale of nations" (38), she declared that "one of the noblest features in England's national character . . . is the domestic character of England—the home comforts, and fireside virtues for which she is so justly celebrated" (9–10). Lewes was equally certain that the "domestic experiences which form the bulk of woman's knowledge find an appropriate form in novels. . . . Love is the staple of fiction, for it 'forms the story of a woman's life' " ("Lady Novelists" 43). Thomas Barker's 1861 painting of Queen Victoria presenting a Bible to a kneeling African chief, generally titled *The Secret of England's Greatness*, perhaps makes the point best of all.[2] Here the queen, in white, brings the foundation of English life to someone not English. The painting is a perfect emblem for the work of home building and cultural construction that is the task of the younger Catherine in *Wuthering Heights*.[3]

Students encountering these texts and the painting, as well as novels by Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë, and George Eliot, should be ready for the challenges that a novel like *Wuthering Heights* presents. They have come to understand the supervisory power that the doctrine of separate spheres obtained over middle-class women as characters and as writers of character. They have witnessed Dickens's good woman gazing toward heaven: Rose Maylie arrives in *Oliver Twist* "made for Home; for fireside peace and happiness" (227; ch. 29); her presence beside the incorruptible Oliver concludes the novel. Maggie Tulliver, even as she longs for a world "outside of loving," still desires the "sanctuary" of home (413, 479). Jane Eyre herself is providentially blessed with an English home when her pilgrim's progress concludes. Yet her insistence that "women feel just as men feel" marks her individualism as unfeminine, even masculine. That she connects her discontent to the "silent revolt" (178) of millions like her, in a novel being read during the 1840s, at a time of the Chartist rebellions at home and revolution in France, indicates the novel's implications for gender boundaries and for social ones. But these implications exist in tension with the novel's desire to feminize and domesticate masculine individualism and with its refusal "to purchase liberty at the price of caste" (82). Jane knows, from the first page of her narrative, that home and hearth require the stabilities of economic life marked as middle class. She may assert a woman's right to feel as men feel, but she does finally live in love that is amazingly near the boundaries that Ellis specifies for "the daughters of England."

The education of Catherine Earnshaw and Heathcliff into comprehending, and for Catherine ambivalently incorporating, what Thrushcross Grange represents illuminates the tensions in *Wuthering Heights* and exposes its radical questioning of the gendered dimensions of domestic realism. It is not simply that the domestic economies of Thrushcross Grange differ from those of Wuthering Heights. It is that the exposure of Catherine *and* Heathcliff to the world of the Grange introduces the gender and class issues that will kill both of them by novel's end.

This exposure begins, before Catherine and Heathcliff go to the Grange, when Hindley Earnshaw returns to the Heights with his new bride, Frances. They bring with them an alteration in the domestic arrangements of the Heights (the separation of servants and family, the exile of Heathcliff to the servants' quarters) that provokes Catherine's notes of rebellion that Lockwood will later read: "H. and I are going to rebel" (16). The rebellious excursion of Catherine and Heathcliff to the Grange produces one of Emily Brontë's most brilliant narrative choices, the introduction of the Grange through Heathcliff's narrative to Nelly. He notes the "petted" children (42) that he and Catherine spy through the window; but in his remarkable "ah! it was beautiful" response to the material splendor of the room where the Linton children fight (41), he also introduces into the novel the seductiveness of the Grange. That seductiveness is inseparable from the class-defined gender issues that are at the heart of the novel.

Students immediately see the meaning of Catherine's experience of the Grange. Her return to the Heights, "look[ing] like a lady now" (46), is

perceived by Heathcliff, according to Nelly, as the return of someone "converted into a stranger by her grand dress." Her return provokes Heathcliff's desire to be made "decent" (49); and it provokes Catherine's fatal schizophrenia between desire for Heathcliff and affection for Edgar Linton and the protection of class that the Grange offers. At the same time, her stay at the Grange introduces her to a world of gender discriminations, all powerfully clear when, married to Edgar, she and Heathcliff damn him in gendered terms during their confrontation scene. Catherine sees Edgar as part of "a colony of mice" and "a sucking leveret." Heathcliff calls him a "lamb [that] threatens like a bull" and a "milk-blooded coward" (102).

Catherine's confusions and madness, students see, are the result of the inculcation of gender and class distinctions at the Grange that Catherine cannot resist, even as she recognizes their demands and their falseness for her. She knows that "if Heathcliff and I married, we should be beggars" (72). Nelly agrees, characteristically noting that marrying Edgar will allow Catherine to "escape from a disorderly, comfortless home into a wealthy respectable one" (70). The mad scene summarizes the gender and class issues:

> But supposing at twelve years old I had been wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time, and been converted at a stroke into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, an outcast, thenceforth, from what had been my world—You may fancy a glimpse of the abyss where I grovelled! . . . Why am I so changed? (111)

Catherine has seen, in her madness, that the social and financial comfort that being a lady requires "is also a bondage; it encloses her in the oppressive security of the family," in the words of Leo Bersani (222).[4] Yet even before her marriage, Catherine has recognized its madness. In telling Nelly her dream of going to heaven, she notes that "heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy" (71). Home is always out there, not in a house or in heaven. It is a vision of, and a necessity for, existing outside the social, cultural, religious, gender, and narrative conventions that make the world of the Grange a death to her.

Catherine's "I *am* Heathcliff" (73) is thus not the speech of a Jane Eyre or a Maggie Tulliver, who need to secure themselves, not dissolve into another. It is the proclamation of a woman for whom gender discriminations smother and whose choice of smothering leads to her death. Her weariness of "being enclosed here" in "this shattered prison" (141) is a profoundly antidomestic gesture. Her life in love is a cri de coeur against all that Ellis promotes when she proclaims love as "woman's all—her wealth, her power, her very being" (*Daughters* 224). Catherine is not a character conceived to survive the requirements of Nelly Dean's conduct books or of Victorian domestic realism. Her mad scene and death in childbirth are the result of a confinement at once physical and profoundly metaphysical.

Nor can Heathcliff survive (in) the world of domestic realism. As he begins his expropriation of the Earnshaw property and his brutalization of Hareton, of his son, and of Catherine Linton, he becomes the conventional villain of Victorian melodrama, acquiring capital and property at the expense of all family values.[5] Students inevitably know the first part of the novel in detail and often, as with the Laurence Olivier film (Wyler), give the second half only cursory attention. Though their sense of Heathcliff must come from both parts and though many see, and abhor, the villainy and meanness in the second half of the novel, they tend not to register its serious role in Brontë's overall narrative scheme. They do not easily assimilate the idea of Heathcliff as villain to the love story that many of them admire. No more bothered by the atheism of Heathcliff than they are by Catherine's, they cite his great speech—"The entire world is a dreadful collection of memoranda that she did exist, and that I have lost her!" (288)—as something they have not found in other Victorian novels, not even *Jane Eyre*. Here the world of feeling seems more real to them, even if it is closer to the madness of Bertha Mason than to the passion of Jane Eyre. Yet it is not mad, even if Nelly finds it so. We understand again the social implications of the move from the Heights to the Grange and the implications of this move for narrative representation. (The alignment of class issues with those of narrative representation is important in talking about a novel that is contemporary with Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* and other "condition of England" novels, where the struggle to represent the impoverishment and alienation of class is foregrounded.) But why that movement from the Heights to the Grange produces this story is for students more elusive.

Wuthering Heights of course also concludes at the Grange, in Nelly's ending, with a vision of a happy middle-class home. But because the novel has two main narrators, one female and one male, one a housekeeper and the other a London tourist seeking repose from the busy-ness of town life, and because it seems to "tell the same story twice" (Bersani 222), with carefully worked out replications of names and events, it submits gender issues, class issues, and novelistic conventions to intense questioning. Indeed, the gendered foundations of domestic realism are implicit in the narrative work of Nelly Dean and Lockwood.

The novel's heroine and hero—and students insist on seeing Catherine and Heathcliff in these terms, even though many may not like the two characters—do not belong to the worlds of Nelly's Thrushcross Grange and Lockwood's London. And yet the story is told from the Grange; it is the home of narration, and it is the home of clearly understood and clearly articulated gender distinctions. Nelly Dean's delight in the approaching marriage of Catherine

Linton and Hareton Earnshaw is a delight in the assertion of the domestic Englishness and hierarchical order that are being restored to the Grange. The blonde heroine of Nelly's narrative, the daughter of the heroine of students' reading, has taught the rightful heir how to read *and* how to apprehend her value as "angel in the house." Hareton's desire to touch young Cathy's blonde curls and to hear her read (262–63) and his desire to be clean so that he can participate in these blessings (192) provide some of the most moving scenes in the novel, all the more so because they recall Heathcliff's "Make me decent" speech to Nelly (49). But Heathcliff instinctively knows he cannot be a Linton. He may say, "I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be!" (50); he may become as rich as Linton, but he also sees that achieving this status entails the extinction of himself and Catherine as unified beings who find life only outside the Grange and its conventions, outside all middle-class understanding of familial bonds. Hareton Earnshaw, on the other hand, requires the Grange and what it means—its education, its central woman figure, its clear boundaries and definitions—for life, as it were.

To clarify the elusiveness of *Wuthering Heights* as it moves toward a new generation and a newly reconstituted family, I ask students to think about the ways Nelly Dean and Lockwood look at their world and how they construct it through language. To help students see that their generally sympathetic response to Catherine and Heathcliff results from a narrator who is anything but sympathetic to them is important indeed if the gender foundations of Nelly's narrative perspective are to be realized. The elder Catherine resists until her death being an angel in the house; Heathcliff rails against the story he inhabits. Yet in Nelly Dean and Lockwood, and in Catherine Linton and Hareton Earnshaw, Brontë constructs narrators and characters who use, and live by, the design for living that characterizes the conventional Victorian novel. Nelly Dean belongs to Thrushcross Grange by sympathies of class and culture and by modes of storytelling. In her desire for household and social order (she is, after all, a housekeeper) and for narrative order, she expresses Brontë's genius for representing characters who escape the order of fiction so seemingly necessary to Victorian life. In A *Future for Astyanax*, Bersani has said that Brontë, in telling the love stories of two generations united by family ties and by the two women named Catherine, presents in the second story "a conventionalized replay" of the first:

> Until Catherine's death, the voices of Lockwood and of Nelly Dean have had to obey rhythms and tones with which they are deeply out of sympathy; indeed, they seem to be in the wrong novel, they are ludicrous vehicles for the story they tell. But gradually the story begins to obey them. . . . It's as if Emily Brontë were telling the same story twice, and eliminating its originality the second time. (222)

I want students to discover that much of Brontë's originality resides in her representations of the gender boundaries of nineteenth-century England and their inextricable connection to the conventions of domestic realism.

Brontë does tell the same story twice, and when its strangeness, its originality, is exiled from the novel, Nelly can live happily ever after at Thrushcross Grange and Lockwood can tour the moors. Together they can construct a Victorian novel. These narrators often sound like characters created by Sarah Ellis and the conduct books of the period. Meeting Catherine Linton Heathcliff at the Heights, Lockwood labels her a "beneficent fairy" (10) and repeatedly gazes on her golden curls and imagines her as a potential bride in "something more romantic than a fairy tale" (270); he assumes her pretty face means she's "good-hearted" (12), though later he finds in her lack of politeness indications that she's "not an angel" (265). The paragraph with which Lockwood ends his story and the novel, with its balanced sentences, expels all wayward human energies he has heard and narrated and in the process buries again the demonic, nightmarish elements of himself that his visit has provoked. He needs the conventions of class and gender to preserve his shallowness.

Students without exception find him "effeminate," his language out of place in this novel, his perceptions unreliable, even as his reading and his nightmare allow Catherine Earnshaw to enter the novel. Indeed, I've had students just starting the book insist that the narrative voice of its opening chapter is a woman's—a telling illustration of the gender issues confused, or codified, by their reading of *Wuthering Heights*. The gender labeling by students originates apparently in his prissy Latinate language and his fears about the woman he has fled. No more than Edgar Linton, whom some students have called a wimp (he is almost never liked by students), does Lockwood seem adequate for the romance he discovers. Clearly, the gender and class distinctions that he and Linton appear so facilely to illustrate retain their power, just as some romantic longing to topple them still appeals—and produces misreadings, in Lockwood and in us. There's something more profound in the contrasts that Brontë makes between uncontrolled nature and well-structured nurture. The confinements of gender and class transform Heathcliff into a villain and kill him, as surely as they do the elder Catherine, and yet, paradoxically, these confinements construct Lockwood and his perceptions.

But if Lockwood's gender perceptions are as predictable as his nightmare is not, Nelly Dean is consistently herself, consistently the voice of domestic order, or of the desire for domestic order, and its representation in narrative, the happy ending in marriage. It is she, looking on at Catherine's death scene, who says of Heathcliff, "I did not feel as if I were in the company of a creature of my own species" (141). It is she who celebrates the respectability of a good family and a good home and tries to remove Heathcliff when he first arrives at the Heights, as a replacement for the whip Catherine asked her father to bring her from Liverpool. It is she who tells the dying Edgar Linton that

"people who do their duty are always finally rewarded" (227). Despite the stories she has been telling throughout, she knows that good people live happily ever after, rewarded by Providence. It is she who tells us repeatedly that Edgar Linton is "too soft" (100) and who says of him, in one of the most remarkable metaphors in the novel that students may easily read as one more gender cliché: "The soft thing . . . possessed the power to depart, as much as a cat possesses the power to leave a mouse half killed, or a bird half eaten" (64). Here students may discover Brontë's singular genius in constructing the ambiguities of gender and their potential for violence. It is not surprising to hear Edgar called a "soft thing"; but to think of Edgar as preying on Catherine and to confront the idea that she is already "half killed" (64) (as she has been since she went to the Grange) is to encounter a finely civilized man as a natural predator.[6] This gender delineation is even more difficult for students than "I *am* Heathcliff" because it challenges their world, our world. The novel insists that all readers are a part of the Grange world, are Lockwoods and Edgars who take refuge in books. We are the children of the people of the book, the readers who seek the patterns for living that the Victorian novel offers so generously.

Because Nelly knows who's good and who's bad, who should marry and who should not, and because she knows who should rule and who should patrol the moral territories of our lives, she is the perfect storyteller for Lockwood. Exiling Catherine and Heathcliff from her story of emotional violence and domestic love—of us versus other—she is the perfect narrator and Lockwood the perfect publisher of a good nineteenth-century English novel. Narrative, the providential plot, and middle-class order centered on a good woman are inextricably connected in the alliance of teller and publisher. It is, then, no surprise that at the end of the story Lockwood "wondered how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (300). In this story only ghosts refuse to live inside respectable English homes.

"No *woman* could write *Wuthering Heights*." This comment summarizes the sense of many reviewers during the nineteenth century. The gender issues that are central to the novel continue to intrigue students. They come to understand why Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot challenge the conventions of the novel, even as the two authors finally uphold them; and they see how much these women writers focus their challenge around the cultural work of gender. They see the same operation in sensation novels: Mary Elizabeth Braddon's Lady Audley must be exiled to a foreign madhouse to remove the pollution she brought on an English home by playing the role of angel. But even as *Wuthering Heights* manages to secure the same ending, it eludes the celebrations of that finale. Neither Nelly's delight in the forthcoming marriage nor Lockwood's pleasure in hearing a good story accounts for the power of the novel or the dismay it causes some readers. Most paradoxically, what interests students is that the sister of Charlotte Brontë has constructed a narrative in which the woman housekeeper who loves the order of class and gender inclusions and exclusions tells the story of another woman who was fatally seduced by them and who yet, always, longed to escape them: "What were the use of my creation if I were entirely contained here?" (72). In Catherine's question, Emily Brontë challenges students to read against the orders, cultural and narrative, that shape the Victorian novel and their lives.

NOTES

[1]I also place on library reserve, and frequently cite, Murray; Showalter; Gilbert and Gubar; David; Boone; and Poovey. The Broadview edition of *Jane Eyre* is particularly useful for issues of gender.

[2]This painting is on display at the National Portrait Gallery in London. Also, see Lambourne.

[3]Ellis dedicated *The Wives of England* to Queen Victoria, "in whose exalted station the social virtues of domestic life present the brightest example to her countrywomen, and the surest presage of her empire's glory."

[4]Joseph Boone sees in Brontë's handling of the marriage plot an insistence on "the harrowing effects of wedlock on female identity" (158).

[5]For a discussion of Heathcliff and of gender negotiations in *Wuthering Heights*, see Nancy Armstrong's *Desire and Domestic Fiction*.

[6]Q. D. Leavis offers a brilliant discussion of this passage (115–18).