

Rebecca Brudner

Class of 1960 Summer Traveling Fellowship—Research Summary

9/14/15

For my senior project in Theater Studies, I will be creating a play using the writings of the Brontë sisters to tell the story of their lives. My summer research in Haworth, West Yorkshire—the hometown of the Brontë family—was crucial to the development of this play in many ways. The first was in helping me find the textual foundation of my play. I spent 5-6 hours a day for three and a half weeks (June 12-July 8) in the Brontë Parsonage museum and library, looking at a range of primary documents. Sarah Laycock and Ann Dinsdale, the head librarians and two of the foremost Brontë scholars in the world helped me at first by recommending particularly unique and interesting documents, but as time went by, I was better able to navigate the library collections on my own.

I spent the first week looking at the miniscule, hand-made magazines and newspapers the Brontë children had created for their toy soldiers, who lived in the children's fantasy worlds of Glasstown, Angria, and Gondol. It was fascinating to observe how meticulous the children were about making these documents realistic in form, while fantastical in content. They included advertisements, letters to the editor, and tables of contents; but, of course, the subjects of the articles were things like "Political Revolution in Angria" or "The Gondolians Discover the Interior of Gaaldine." Looking at these piqued my interest, so I requested to see any documents and objects that would give me more insight into the lives of the Brontës when they were young. This led my research to books and newspapers that the Brontë children owned and read, which proved extremely useful in understanding their childhood interests and the workings of their imaginations. Their geography textbooks, for example, were rife with drawings of imaginary landscapes and battles,

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kings and queens and soldiers; and in the indexes, countries of their fabrication

were added in alphabetical order. Through looking at these, I started to get a real sense of where their genius minds began to grow and where the seeds of their imaginations were planted.

I worked more or less chronologically through the documents in the library's collection, so the second week I was looking at journal entries and letters from the Brontë sisters' teenage years and early twenties. Among these was Anne Brontë's personal music practice book, which included musical compositions of her own. Because the theater piece I am creating for my senior project will have original music, composed by Gideon Broshy (CC '16), it was incredible to see how Anne's musical mind worked and to get a sense of the music she played and enjoyed listening to. I also looked at many of Charlotte's letters and diary entries from this time period. Most of these are published, but reading the published versions gives the reader only a fraction of the insight into Charlotte's mind that reading the original documents can. I found this particularly true when comparing her journal entries to her letters and observing how her penmanship and syntax reflected the way she was feeling. When writing a letter, even to a friend or family member, she would write deliberately, neatly, with few misspellings or grammar errors. When she was wrapped up in her own mind and writing a journal entry or a story about her fantasy world of Angria, her handwriting would become nearly illegible and her sentences, often sentence fragments, were full of delightful misspellings. Reading these journals, I could feel the energy of her hand across the page, the frenzied

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flourish of quill, her mind working a million miles a minute. These are not the kind of things you can understand from looking at the same text in a book or on a screen.

During my third week at the library, I looked at documents from the latter portion of the sisters' lives. I examined first editions of all of their early novels—*The Professor*, *Agnes Grey*, *Wuthering Heights*, and *Jane Eyre*—as well as some of the letters, journal entries, poems, and stories that they composed in their final living days. I looked at the ways that their language developed as they wrote their great works and also how they began to feed off of each other's ideas and imaginations. I also looked at a great number of letters to and from various publishing houses and prominent social figures of the time like William Thackeray (*Vanity Fair*), Hartley Coleridge, etc., debating the identities of Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, which were Charlotte, Emily, and Anne's pen names. Through these letters, I was able to construct an emotional idea of what it would have been like to be a woman writer in the mid-nineteenth century: to be at once proud of your writing, and ashamed of having to conceal your identity for fear of being dismissed as an author because of your gender.

In my final few days at the library and museum, I focused on examining objects, rather than documents, in order to better understand the physical and material lives of the Brontë family. I was able to handle clothes, jewelry, spectacles, shoes, household objects like silverware and teapots, writing instruments, sealing wax, all belonging to and used by the Brontë sisters. In other words, I was able to experience with 100 percent accuracy and zero degrees of separation, the sensory experiences that the Brontë sisters had when engaging with these objects every day.

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As an actor, writer, and theater-maker, there is essentially nothing more valuable than that.