

SCENES OF UNVEILING

reading sex writing in charlotte brontë

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I WROTE A PH.D THESIS about what I ended up calling sexual power dynamics in the novels of Charlotte Brontë. Sometimes I wanted to call it something else, something that felt more direct: BDSM, or sadomasochism, or kink. But sadomasochism, the term most critics who write about these kinds of sexual practices in Brontë's work use, felt too specific for my purposes. Investments in giving or experiencing pain is just one of the sexual currents in Brontë's work: several of the characters that I wrote about, and that I perceive as decidedly kinky, show little interest in pain as such. 'Kink' and 'BDSM' seemed too obviously modern, as well as too obviously self-conscious, to apply to a Victorian writer whose work contains only a handful of direct references to sex of any kind. But there might have been something else at work, too, in my choice of this relatively neutral phrase to describe the worlds of need, devastation, experimentation, and force I read in Brontë's novels. It acted as a kind of protective colouration, or veil, over the desires I had decided to spend three years tracing, half-concealing the desire at work in my own critical perspective.

This instinctive self-veiling makes me think that when considering how critical readers relate to their texts, our responses to sex writing could be a good place to start. When we read and interpret writing about sex, there is often an implied and unspoken missing link between reader and text, a tendency to disavow our own sexual investments and our own perspectives of desire. Here, I explore some scenes of sexual revelation and unveiling in Brontë's novels, and consider the processes of self-unveiling involved in their interpretation. What are the missing links between desire and critical interpretation, and could we allow one to become a form of the other?

'BDSM' and 'kink' are anachronistic terms to use about Brontë's work, but so are "sadism" and "masochism": they were first used in 1886 in Richard von Krafft-Ebing's

Psychopathia Sexualis, and Brontë's novels were published between 1847 and 1857. Of course, the lack of a fully recognised, widely applicable terminology for particular sexual interests and practices does not mean that they did not exist (for instance, there are huge amounts of extant flagellation porn written throughout the nineteenth century). But Brontë did write in a period where sexual power dynamics lacked the conceptual weight that they would begin to gain in the late nineteenth century, and where their relations to various forms of more conventional sexual behaviour are not always clear.

In this way, sexual power dynamics in Brontë have a kind of shifting visibility. From some angles a particular scene or dynamic might look like nothing sexual is going on at all, from some angles it might look like a mid-nineteenth-century man and woman engaged in an absolutely conventional, oppressive power disparity, and from other angles it might look like two people consciously enacting or negotiating an eroticised power dynamic. Certainly, not every instance of power imbalances and pain in Brontë has anything to do with desire. Brontë's characters sometimes take on dominant or submissive roles, even apparently sadistic or masochistic ones, not out of any particular erotic inclination, but because their social and gender roles compel them to. In *Shirley* (1849), Robert Moore rebuffs the tentative advances of Caroline Helstone, who is in love with him. In one of the novel's most famous passages, the narrator advises Caroline not only to accept the pain "without a sob", but to welcome it: "You held out your hand for an egg, and fate put into it a scorpion. Show no consternation: close your fingers firmly upon the gift; let it sting through your palm" (90). But Caroline does not relish her pain, even in a conflicted way. She endures it wordlessly not because (as is the case for, say, Lucy Snowe in *Villette*) frustration gives her a kind of complicated pleasure, but because, the narrator explains, her gender role requires a passive, submissive reaction. "A lover masculine so disappointed can speak and urge explanation," the narrator notes; "a lover feminine can say nothing; if she did, the result would be shame and anguish, inward remorse for self-treachery" (89).

But Brontë's characters also express desire in ways that, subtly or explicitly, pervert such conventional roles: by skewing, reversing, departing from or exaggerating them, or by making them a conscious, even hard-fought choice. In the same novel, Shirley Keeldar storms down her uncle when he tries to force her into an engagement to a meek, pleasant baronet around her own age, because, she says, her proposed fiancée is "very amiable – very excellent – truly estimable, but *not my master*...I will accept no hand which cannot hold me in check" (461).

Reading Brontë, I kept seeing eroticised power struggles, explicitly chosen sexual roles and unconventional desires. Brontë's eroticism has a rich critical history, and critics including Terry Eagleton, Judith Mitchell, Michelle Massé and Jean Wyatt have

touched on the central role that eroticised power struggles and power imbalances play in Brontë's work. However, these readings often assume that such dynamics are necessarily oppressive in reality as well as in fantasy – driven by, and driven to reproduce, the gendered power disparities of mid-Victorian society. I considered that while Brontëan sexual power dynamics have obvious and important differences from what we think of as BDSM practices today, they also have things in common – among them a sense that flexible, playful sexual power practices, driven by negotiation and mutuality, are possible and can be desirable.

What kinds of things was I seeing? In Brontë's novels, Edward Rochester and Jane Eyre flirt by threatening to put chains on each other, and Jane receives ice-cold "experiment kisses" from St John Rivers that feel like "a seal affixed to [her] fetters" (Brontë 1847, 398). Paul Emmanuel locks Lucy Snowe in an attic to make her learn lines, then eventually lets her out and feeds her cakes (Brontë 1853). Characters repeatedly fall in love with the people who mark their written work, or with the people whose work they are marking: school essays appear with amazing regularity at moments of erotic intensity. Characters use language-learning as means of controlling or obeying each other: William Crimsworth punishes Frances Henri for speaking French to him, in some not-further-described manner which, he notes, only has the effect of encouraging her to do it more (Brontë 1857). Several characters call their beloved "Master", or "keeper", or, in one particularly notable case, "Pantheress! beautiful forest-born! wily, tameless, peerless nature!" (Brontë 1849, 527) Brontë's novels are full of this array of polymorphously perverse sexuality, and they are especially fascinated with the tropes and the postures of sexual power exchange – teasing, deprivation, condescension, evaluation, defiance, surrender.

But the aspects of Brontëan sexuality I was most fetched by were the scenes of revelation and negotiation – scenes where characters reveal their desires to each other, and tacitly or explicitly negotiate the sexual roles they want to enact with each other. One of the most distinct instances of this appears in Brontë's first novel, *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857). William Crimsworth is an English teacher at a school in Belgium; Frances Henri is a former student of his, whose first language is French. The scene where he proposes marriage to her is actually a scene of multiple proposals and, in the end, mutual agreement. Frances responds to William's proposal, "[H]ave you enough [regard for me] to give yourself to me as my wife?—to accept me as your husband?", with proposals of her own (223). In French, she asks whether he will be a good husband as he has been a good master, and then, in what William describes as "an...inflexion of the voice...which provoked while it pleased me", she asks whether he will always be somewhat self-willed and hard to please (223). Finally, she describes herself as, translated, "your devoted pupil, who loves you with all her heart" (224). Before accepting William's proposal, Frances lays out the terms that will

allow her fantasy of devotion to and provocation of a harsh but loving master to be performed or roleplayed within the relationship. William picks up on her wishes and responds in kind: he calls her "my pupil", an echo of her phrase "votre...élève" (224). He then immediately starts to perform the teacher-husband role that Frances has described, ordering her to speak English when he asks for her consent to marry him. In demanding that she speak his language, he is speaking hers.

Shirley is another Brontë novel featuring an eroticised teacher-student relationship (in fact, the only Brontë novel that doesn't centre on such a relationship is *Jane Eyre*). It also contains some of her most extended and complex negotiation scenes, and the ones that taught me most about what it might mean to read a text through a perspective of desire. In *Shirley*, the student is Shirley Keeldar, a wealthy twenty-one-year-old heiress and landowner, and her former tutor is Louis Moore. Around the midpoint of the book, Louis has returned to Shirley's household to tutor her cousin. As the novel progresses, the two characters slowly approach each other, and in various tiny ways, they start to collaboratively reveal their fantasies and desires and work out ways of performing them with each other. Here is one such moment:

"Put back your hair," he said.

For one moment, Shirley looked not quite certain whether she would obey the request or disregard it: a flicker of her eye beamed furtive on the professor's face; perhaps if he had been looking at her harshly or timidly, or if one undecided line had marked his countenance, she would have rebelled, and the lesson had ended there and then; but he was only awaiting her compliance – as calm as marble, and as cool. She threw the veil of tresses behind her ear (404).

When this scene begins, Louis has summoned Shirley to his rooms to brush up on her French. She is clearly wary at the prospect of returning to their previous roles, but at the same time willing to play along. What does it mean to decide to be your tutor's pupil again, to take orders, show "a decent obeisance" and assume a position of relative powerlessness (404), when you are no longer a child, but a grown woman? What does it mean to not bring the lesson to an end when it seems to be turning into something else? What is happening in the furtive flicker of a look where Shirley checks to see whether she wants to rebel against Louis's request, or comply with it?

One critic who writes on this scene, Patricia Menon, describes this scene as "a reversion to the worst of Brontë's earlier work" (Menon 2003, 112). She reads it in terms of regression, as "a form of novelistic thumb-sucking" (112). This way of looking at it is, in one way, entirely accurate: Shirley is regressing, she is taking on

a student role that she outgrew many years ago. But of course, all her gestures and all of Louis's gestures in this scene mean something completely different to what they did when she was originally his student. Louis's exercise of authority, Shirley's relinquishing of responsibility, are not straightforward components of a pedagogical situation, but sexually charged gestures. It is a scene about familiarity, but also about something new; about command and obedience, but also about choice. Most of all, it is a moment of mutual revelation. Shirley gives Louis a look to determine whether she wants to participate in the fantasy of control that he seems to be proposing: for her, this means seeing whether he looks harsh, timid or uncertain. And she throws back the "veil" of her hair, showing her willingness to engage with him. She interprets his desire and, in response, unveils her own.

This is a negotiation that ends with assent, with two people deciding that they can accommodate each other's desires. But of course, not all negotiations work out to everyone's satisfaction, and to reveal not just the existence but the particular form of one's desires is to become vulnerable, all the more so when these desires are very specific. This is apparent in another negotiation scene with the same characters, some time after their engagement. Since this is described in an excerpt from Louis's diary, it is in his first person:

'Your voice is very sweet and very low,' I answered, quietly advancing. 'You seem subdued, but still startled.'

'No—quite calm, and afraid of nothing,' she assured me.

'Of nothing but your votary.'

I bent a knee to the flags at her feet.

'You see I am in a new world, Mr. Moore. I don't know myself; I don't know you. But rise. When you do so I feel troubled and disturbed.'

I obeyed. It would not have suited me to retain that attitude long. I courted serenity and confidence for her, and not vainly. She trusted and clung to me again (529).

Negotiations are not always a discovery of perfectly complementary needs; they involve rebuffs and compromises. Louis, who normally fantasises about taming and mastering Shirley, here calls himself her votary and kneels in front of her; Shirley is troubled by this, and, when he stands up, she clings to him. In spite of Louis's remark that "it would not have suited me to retain that attitude long", the word "votary" recalls one of his earlier fantasies about Shirley, which he describes as "the fable of Semele reversed" (440). Semele was Zeus's lover; she asked to see him in his true form, and the sight incinerated her. He imagines – it is implied that he imagines himself as – a priest of Juno, praying to see the goddess in her full glory, as Semele

asked to see Zeus. When she grants his wish, he is consumed by flames at the sight: "Saturnia's statue rises chaste, grand, untouched: at her feet, piled ashes lie pale" (440). This intensely submissive fantasy of worship and immolation is one of the strands of Louis's desire for Shirley, and it coexists with his desire to dominate, control and tame her. As it turns out, Shirley's own sexual interests chime with his dominant tendencies, but her request for him not to kneel in front of her suggests that she has difficulty responding to his submissiveness. One of Louis's remarks suggests that he considers not acting out his submissive desires an acceptable compromise for being with Shirley: "I courted serenity and confidence for her". This suggests that the ways in which desires emerge – as serenity and confidence, or as vulnerability and need – are not always inherent; they can be something courted in order to be able to engage with another's desire. Another of the risks of revealing desire, then, is that the desire might be altered in the process of bringing it to light.

In Brontë, the process of discovering the desires and fantasies of others is always reading, in the sense of interpreting. The scene between Frances and William is perhaps the most explicit of these negotiation scenes: Frances literally asks William whether he would be stern enough with her if she married him. But even here, most of the negotiation is not done explicitly – it takes place in the switching between different languages, in the echoing of key phrases, and in the way one character starts to perform the role the other has requested. The process of interpreting, of picking up hints and disseminating one's own hints, becomes part of the negotiation: the way you interpret or fail to interpret the other's desires says something about your own.

This means that we have an opportunity to ask about the position of the third reader in the room: the literary critic. One of the enjoyable aspects of Mary Ann Davis's doctoral thesis on sadomasochism in Victorian literature, "Useful Dangers: The Erotics of Form, Sadomasochism, Victorian Narrative" (2012), is that it is bookended by two structuring elements of a formalised, present-day BDSM scene: the introduction is entitled "Negotiations", and the afterword "Aftercare". The text directly invokes a dominant/submissive dynamic between the narrator, who is presented as a guide or leader, and the reader, who Davis describes as "lashed and worn" (225). In this way, Davis calls attention to the power dynamics already at work in what she describes as "this most normative and regulated space of academia", the critical text (225).

Reading sexual power dynamics in literary texts, then, holds possibilities not just for a richer and weirder understanding of literary sexuality, but also for reimagining how critical readers materialise and dematerialise, veil and unveil themselves within their own writing. We might begin to think about the phrase "critical position" not just as a hard-won and constantly embattled set of views, but as a shifting point in a power dynamic. The critic might imagine herself as a leader, or a supplicant, or as someone

about to embark on a negotiation that might, in the end, turn out to be a badly calculated risk.

In my last critical writing project, I had a lot of opportunity to think about scenes of revelation because I felt I was constantly engaged in one. The things I focused on in Brontë's texts – material objects as sexual mediators, sexual negotiations, the compelling power of bodies in pain, the subjectivity-bending process of sharing fantasies – came from using the perspective of my own fascinations and desires as a filter and an angle on the text. The critical work I do is in itself an unveiling; my desires emerge not only from the topic of my work but from its arguments, its values, the things it notices, and, perhaps not least, the things it fails to notice.

For instance: although I spent months writing about sexual power dynamics in *Shirley*, I completely missed the scene I discuss above, where Louis kneels in front of Shirley. It only occurred to me that there was something significant about it when I was writing my conclusion, and remembered that Louis had used the word "votary" when he imagined worshipping Shirley as Juno. I began to join up the links between all of Louis's references to being in Shirley's power. In one scene, I realised, he struggles to maintain his teacherly, "very cool and very supercilious" demeanour with Shirley: "I have known the moment when I seemed about to forget it, when Confusion and Submission seemed about to crush me with their soft tyranny, when my tongue faltered, and I have almost let the mantle drop, and stood in her presence, not master—no—but something else" (421). Earlier in my reading I had noticed and interpreted Louis's fascination with taming, controlling and tending to Shirley, but it took a long time to notice this other strand of desire in the character.

In my negotiation with the text, these were the signals, the hints that I failed to pick up on and respond to. And when I eventually did, I found that my own perspective of desire shifted or widened a little: I started to delight in this revelation as much as I had delighted in the other ones. As I found, starting to link desire and interpretation does not just mean interpreting through the perspective of one's own desire, disquieting and vulnerable as that feels in itself. As with other kinds of intimacy, the risk and the potential reward is that it becomes a two-way process: the text disturbing its readers, as we disturb it with our desires.

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