

Muse, Sister, Myth: The Cultural Afterlives of Emily Brontë on Screen

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This article was originally delivered as a keynote lecture at the Bicentenary Conference for Emily Brontë, *Emily Brontë: A Peculiar Music* (7-9 September 2018, Marriott Hotel, York). It explores the cultural portrayal and legacy of Emily Brontë through an analysis of several representative screen adaptations of both her biography and her novel, *Wuthering Heights*. It uses the recent BBC biopic directed by Sally Wainwright, *To Walk Invisible* (2016), as the guiding screen adaptation around which to discuss the various ways Emily Brontë had been adapted as a cultural persona on screen, imagined in various guises as a mystical author, a radical feminist ‘sister’, and a muse for our contemporary age. Moving from classic Hollywood film to recent independent and BBC productions, this article suggests that Emily Brontë has become implicated in wider and ongoing cultural debates about authorial identity, gender, and myths of creativity that contemporary culture has inherited from the nineteenth century.

KEYWORDS: Andrea Arnold, authorial identity, biopic, Emily Brontë, Sally Wainwright, screen adaptation, William Wyler, *Wuthering Heights*.

In my exploration of the cultural afterlives of Emily Brontë on screen, my focus will take a symbolic approach to the three keywords that form the title of this article: muse, sister, and myth. I am however going to work my way backward through these keywords, by starting with the myth. Before I do so, I want to point out that there is a particular image sitting in my mind as a guiding frame for what I will explore here. That image is from Sally Wainwright’s recent BBC biopic drama about the Brontës, *To Walk Invisible* (2016).¹

This image is from a sequence of two scenes at the end of *To Walk Invisible*, where we see the three Brontë sisters – Charlotte (Finn Atkins), Emily (Chloe Pirrie), and Anne (Charlie Murphy) – walking with Ellen Nussey (Gracie Kelly) on the moors. They all come to a halt at the halo vision of the optical illusion known as *parhelion*, which creates an image of ‘three suns’ on the horizon. Nussey makes it clear that we, the audience, are meant to interpret this image as a stand-in for the sisters themselves, when she asserts that it represents them. The image takes on symbolic meaning here, as it represents the three sisters as akin to ‘three suns’, like illusionary occurrences themselves, existing in the realm of myth. Indeed, the mythical undertone here is heightened when the actresses playing the Brontë sisters are shot with their backs to the camera, with the moving camerawork coming to a sudden halt to align their three figures with the three suns in a still shot of epic proportions (see Fig. 1). This shot and alignment are repeated later in the drama when we see this imagery ‘travel’ to the present day, taking the viewer into the Brontë Parsonage Museum, before the camera roams back to the nineteenth-century past. **[INSERT FIG. 1 HERE]**

I will return to this image again, but for now, it is useful to keep it in mind as the symbolic trope behind the various versions of Emily Brontë on screen, primarily because it gives us the history of what Western culture and screen adaptation have done with Emily Brontë’s persona, turning her into a transcendent authorial myth, a radical feminist ‘sister’, and a muse for the modern age, who travels along with her sisters through her words, and speaks to us in both the historical past and the contemporary here and now. In order to understand though, the layered and nuanced approach Wainwright’s biopic takes with the legacy and persona of Emily Brontë on screen, we must first begin with the myths constructed around her.

The Myth: Constructing the Transcendent Author

The Emily Brontë we know through film, television, and wider culture is largely the product of a set of myths built around her. These are myths fashioned in response to her work during her own time which merge with larger cultural myths about authors and about the gender politics of authors, in general.² It should come as no surprise that her first myth-maker was her own sister, Charlotte. As Sally Wainwright has explained in an interview, the ‘myth that the Brontës didn’t really understand the power of what they were writing was started by Charlotte herself’ when their works ‘were later criticised for being brutal and unfeminine’.³ Indeed, once it was discovered that women wrote these powerful novels, the contemporary reviews emphasized the gender of the writers, rather than the previous admiration of the content of their work.⁴

Charlotte did what Charlotte was very good at doing; she refashioned their social reputations. With Emily, she suggested that we are essentially dealing with a reclusive, unworldly, and androgynous young woman who did not really know what she was doing when she wrote *Wuthering Heights*. In her now often-quoted ‘Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell’, Charlotte casts Anne in the traditionally-feminine Victorian role of the sweet, long-suffering, gentle dove, describing her character with words such as ‘milder’, ‘subdued’, and ‘quiet virtue’, reminiscent of John Ruskin’s now infamous tract on Victorian femininity, ‘Of Queens’ Gardens’, where ideal femininity is presented as the self-denying, quiet, and mild version of Anne that Charlotte presents for the reader.⁵ However, to deal with the problem of the violent and blunt nature of *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte defines Emily in far more transcendent language, with words such as ‘power’, ‘fire’, and ‘originality’ being used to describe her, summarising her character with the line, ‘Stronger than a man, simpler than a child, her nature stood alone’.⁶ This initiated the now familiar myth or public image of Emily Brontë as an innocent noble savage, transcending conventional society, as if she existed outside of, or above, her real world, and above typical gender conventions for women of her time.

Charlotte's descriptions also helped begin the ongoing cultural neutralization of the gender, sexual, class, and racial politics of Emily's novel, instead casting her in the role of the harmless transcendent author, existing outside of the temporal world.

Charlotte was cleverly negotiating the gender politics of her time in this 'defence' of her sisters, in often complex and contradictory ways that nevertheless helped initiate a rather stable 'vision' of Emily Brontë as a transcendent author. Charlotte was also not working in unfamiliar territory for her times when she fashioned this public image for Emily, because the dominant ideas around authorship, creativity, and gender during their times were based on a persistent binary whereby men actively create, while women *receive* creation as passive, muse-like receptacles or mediums. In other words, authorship and authorial identity were often gendered male in nineteenth-century conceptualizations of authorial identity and creativity, regardless of the actual sex or gender of the author in question.⁷ This is worthwhile exploring here, because it still influences how we conceive of Emily Brontë today, and how she is rendered more palatable for mass cultural consumption through a gender dynamic that stems from the nineteenth century.

In their seminal book about nineteenth-century women's literature, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar explain how in the nineteenth century, women in America and the United Kingdom were 'defined as wholly passive, completely void of generative power... in the metaphysical emptiness their "purity" signifies they are, of course, *self-less*, with all the moral and psychological implications that word suggests'.⁸ This definition of femininity existed in a binary whereby men were viewed as active and filled with 'generative power' of both the sexual and creative kind. Masculinity was viewed as the essence of individuality and creative energy, while femininity was viewed as a symbolic open 'womb' that silently and passively receives and carries such individuality and creativity in a self-denying manner.⁹ It is therefore not hard to see how authorship and creativity became defined

as primarily ‘masculine’; and likewise, not difficult to understand why work by female authors that dared to engage with the wider social world was labelled as ‘unfeminine’. By taking up the pen and the existential drama of interpreting, creating, and engaging, a woman ‘betrays’ her sex and seeks to move out of her ‘metaphysical emptiness’ and self-lessness.

If Charlotte offered the defence of Emily as a transcendent and unworldly being who did not know what she was doing, she did so with the knowledge that framing a female author as an inexperienced medium for the creative word reflected the metaphysical emptiness required out of women in her times. Like a spiritual medium receiving the ‘truth’ from higher sources, Emily Brontë as transcendent author is a less threatening figure – even if she is simultaneously cloaked in a contradictory language of ‘power’ and ‘fire’. What this created is a lasting myth that presents Emily and her work as elemental, universal, and transcendent forces of nature or God, rather than a specific, cultural, and historical mode of social critique. Every time I re-read *Wuthering Heights*, I am struck by how lucidly it performs social critique of nineteenth-century ideas about gender, class, race, and property. And every time I watch an adaptation of it, I am again struck by how consistently that is swallowed up by romantic myth instead.

One can understand Charlotte and her myth-making as a form of defence of their collective reputations as female authors. The Brontës lived in the real world and Charlotte needed to find a way to meld that real world with their work. But what is telling to us here in the contemporary world is how little we have moved on from both this image of Emily Brontë and the associated gender binaries from which it stems. This is particularly true when it comes to screen adaptations of Emily Brontë and her novel, *Wuthering Heights*, which rely on a gendered construction of the author and her work as myth and romance.

The most striking example of this is in the 1992 film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights*, directed by Peter Kosminsky.¹⁰ This version, which was part of the 1980s and 1990s heyday

of costume films in the UK and Europe, is a well-known adaptation that casts Emily Brontë herself in the role of narrator of her own novel. The film begins with imagery of Emily Brontë, played by Sinead O'Connor, walking alone on the bleak and romantic Yorkshire landscape. In her dark, hooded cloak, she resembles a slight and androgynous-looking mystic fairy figure, drawing on explicitly Gothic imagery in her costuming. This Gothic imagery is in turn reflected in the landscape and setting of the excessively ruinous-looking house she accidentally stumbles upon. As I have pointed out in my previous analysis of this film, the camerawork here is telling:

the camera positions itself in a relatively low angle to mirror her own viewpoint. We are clearly made to identify with her perspective and participate in her discovery of the Gothic dwelling. As Brontë is seen entering the building, the camera suddenly shifts to view her from above, almost as if the house itself is watching her, and we switch from identification with the author to identification with the house. This shift, along with Brontë's voiceover, is a marker of the manner in which authorship is constructed and represented in the film: 'First I found the place... Something whispered to my mind, and I began to write'.¹¹

What we are essentially presented with here is the notion of the author as medium, receiving a ready-made narrative through her transcendent body. The film invests in the idea of the author moving above her world in a seemingly mystical manner, and requiring no actual creative work, but receiving that work into her body through her surroundings and through the spiritual 'mystery' of quasi-religious 'inspiration'. The shift in perspective through the movement of camera angles alerts the viewer that her 'genius' is tied up to how well she can 'receive' her surroundings, as if those surroundings were waiting for the right feminine psychic 'womb' to come along. While Brontë is romanticized here, she is nevertheless idealized in a rather harmless manner as a general figure of the transcendent author, instead of the individual she

was, who intelligently engaged with the specific nineteenth-century world she inhabited, and interpreted it through her creative labour.¹²

Brontë's reputation also infects the representation of her characters on screen, so that they both mirror each other as romanticized and harmless transcendent beings. In fact, her novel's characters, Catherine (Earnshaw) and Heathcliff, have come to represent her cultural authorial image. The 1992 film adaptation, like so many other adaptations of *Wuthering Heights*, invests in typically-romantic imagery of Catherine and Heathcliff positioned on the moors as adult lovers as a way of moving both Brontë and her work away from the dangerous mode of social critique to a more palatable mode of universalized romance. One of the ways it does so is by blatantly mirroring the imagery of Catherine and Heathcliff initiated by the classic 1939 Hollywood film directed by William Wyler.¹³

The producer of the 1939 film, Samuel Goldwyn, has been quoted as saying that he could not see why an audience would care for such unlikable characters as Heathcliff and Catherine, and instead instructed the production team to turn their narrative into epic romance, whereby their unlikability is neutralized by their transcendence of their social world and its limitations, akin to a myth.¹⁴ This is precisely what an audience receives in the film – a pair of star-crossed lovers who exist in epic form as a silent, still image on the moors. This is the now-famous image of Catherine (Merle Oberon) and Heathcliff (Laurence Olivier) posing on top of a hilltop landscape, with their bodies, faces, and gazes inclined upwards in unison, forming a transcendent pair.¹⁵ **[INSERT FIG. 2 HERE]** This image is so well-known to *Wuthering Heights* adaptors and fans, that it has come to form a 'template' for subsequent *Wuthering Heights* screen adaptations. As Patsy Stoneman points out, this image

of Catherine and Heathcliff together, as adults, on the hilltop, silhouetted against the sky which represents their mutual aspiration, has become a visual emblem of what the novel 'means'. By 1989 it was so well

known that Monty Python's Flying Circus could assume that two lovers on a hilltop constituted a cultural icon to which a mass audience would respond.¹⁶

It is in fact difficult to find a screen adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* that does not replicate and expand on the representational authority of this image. While this attests to the film's continuing legacy in shaping what the novel means to the wider public, it also attests to the continuing legacy of Charlotte Brontë's myth-making around Emily Brontë. This imagery associated with the 'hilltop lovers' is also a reflection of how the creation of Emily Brontë's authorial identity as transcendent myth functions as an epic cultural romance used to gender her work as a passive, idealized love story.

Emily Brontë most certainly knew what she was doing, and what she was saying when she was writing *Wuthering Heights* – her own character, Heathcliff, even self-consciously mocks his wife Isabella, and by extension, the reader and subsequent screen audiences, should they desire to see within him an epic 'hero of romance', rather than viewing his actions within the specific legal and social constraints of class, property, gender, and marriage in nineteenth-century England.¹⁷ But screen adaptations, aided by Charlotte's myth-making, have woven the persona of Emily as child-like medium and transcendent romantic figure into Catherine and Heathcliff, encapsulating them all in the safer genre of universalized romance. There is, however, another, more radical Emily who has recently emerged on the screen through her characters, and whom I will now explore through a consideration of her as a feminist 'sister'.

The Sister: Reawakening Emily Brontë's Radicalism on the Twenty-First Century Screen

The Brontës and their novels have been interpreted as part of a larger body of thought regarding the rise of proto-feminism and feminism per se.¹⁸ The idea of Emily Brontë as an iconic feminist 'sister' also stems from the sheer radicalism of her novel for its times, which questions

and exposes ideas about women, marriage, and love in the nineteenth century in ways that have gone on to form a larger body of feminist scholarship and criticism.¹⁹ While many screen adaptations of *Wuthering Heights* bypass this radicalism in favour of merging Emily Brontë's authorial persona with the 'love story' of Catherine and Heathcliff as timeless, apolitical, and universal, I sense a reawakening or a desire for a more radical vision of both the novel and its author in a recent adaptation such as Andrea Arnold's 2011 film version of *Wuthering Heights*.²⁰

As Shelley Anne Galpin points out with regard to Arnold's *Wuthering Heights*, 'the "ready-made" target audience' and adaptation template created by the 1939 film 'is sacrificed' by Arnold, 'resulting in a film which' displeased 'Brontë fans'.²¹ Arnold has given explicit reasons for her irreverent approach and what she sought to do with this film. Firstly, she sought to move the focus away from Catherine and Heathcliff as unified transcendent lovers, and, instead, refashioned the narrative from Heathcliff's perspective, aligning his powerlessness in the novel with the position of women in the nineteenth century, and with Emily Brontë herself. She explains this position in various interviews, one of which I would like to quote from here:

one of the things that I felt so strongly poring over it [the novel] was that Emily was upset about difference. She was upset about being female. And I think Heathcliff is really a representation of a part of her, a part of her that felt annoyed about being different. I think that women then were not supposed to have a voice. ... I think now I would have made Heathcliff a woman possibly. ... People say to me, 'Why don't you tell it from Cathy's point of view, why do you tell it from Heathcliff's point of view? You're a woman.' However, I think that Heathcliff was Emily, so it is a woman's point of view in a roundabout sort of way.²²

What she is essentially pointing to here is an established feminist critical tradition of viewing Catherine and Heathcliff's attachment to each other from the position of gender and power,

only here, Arnold adds Emily Brontë herself into the mix, so that the idealized romantic couple becomes a radical triangle.²³ I would like to briefly consider the implications of this for how we use and remember Emily Brontë in contemporary culture by way of the opening scene of Arnold's film.

There are various telling uses of cinematic techniques in this opening scene. Firstly, the camera angles literally adopt Heathcliff's point of view; the camera is positioned at his eye-level in the landscape as he trudges through the darkness, or is placed in an over-the-shoulder shot position so as to follow his perspective once he enters the domestic confines of the house. Then there is the lack of artificial lighting, utilizing darkness as a theme – that is, it is difficult to see what is going on, and under this lighting scheme, things generally look dreary and ugly, as opposed to being a pretty and polished costume drama, like the very stylised 1939 film. And lastly, there is the lack of traditional cinematic music/soundtrack; this silence is later filled by Heathcliff's untranslated, non-English words, uttered in anger as Cathy spits on him when she finds out she has received him as a 'gift', as opposed to the whip she asked her father for. This takes on uncomfortable undertones of racism, considering Arnold's casting choices of Solomon Glave and James Howson to play Heathcliff. In short, the aesthetics of this scene highlight darkness, powerlessness, lack of understanding and clarity, and differences based on language, gender, race, and class. They suggest the brutal world of the novel itself, replete with abuse and the mishandling of the human body and spirit, both inside and outside the domestic confines of the nineteenth-century home.

What this opening scene therefore alerts its viewer to is the fact that it is going to provide them with the exact aesthetic opposite to Wyler's romantic couple upon the hilltop. No flourish of romantic music here, or soft, polished lighting, or a lovely landscape of tall heather imported into a Hollywood studio to seduce us all, or indeed a unified couple representing transcendent bliss and removal from social concerns. Rather, here, nature is dirty,

uncomfortable, dark, and cold, and reflects the equally-problematic interior where difference, power, and abuse are highlighted above unity and love. It is important to remember that in the book, Catherine does indeed ask for a whip from her father. Instead, she receives Heathcliff, who becomes her human whip. Right from the beginning, Brontë makes it clear that Catherine's attachment to Heathcliff is grounded in a reflection of her own powerlessness as a nineteenth-century woman. This becomes a literal imprint upon Heathcliff's skin in Arnold's film through whip marks upon his back, rendered all the more uncomfortable here due to their visual connotations with the slave trade. Catherine's fascination with Heathcliff in Arnold's film emerges as she watches those scars being washed roughly, and so, her confinement of gender and his racially-defined powerlessness are merged in the most unromantic and non-transcendent fashion.

But the idea that Arnold is aligning the use of Heathcliff as a metaphorical feminist whip against the inequalities of the world with Emily Brontë herself also suggests that she is seeking to reimagine how we remember Brontë in the here and now, and what we can do with her as a force of cultural critique. That is, if previous screen adaptations have sought to meld Brontë with her own characters through a unified and transcendent romance, here, she is absorbed into her characters through a narrative of difference and cultural critique that could be conceptualized as distinctly feminist in its approach. While it is not an unproblematic position to take, and I still think it is about time a director approached both Brontë and Catherine from their own feminine point of view rather than through the stand-in of a masculine character, this is still a different kind of Emily Brontë and a different kind of legacy, to the romantic one that has tended to dominate. This suggests that as we move through the twenty-first century, perhaps we are inching toward a radical Emily Brontë who speaks to us through her characters about power and powerlessness, rather than about romance alone. In light of this, I want to now return to the biopic *To Walk Invisible*, and consider what it does with both

the romance and the radicalism in a more direct biographical representation of Emily Brontë and her siblings.

The Muse: An Emily Brontë for Our Times

I have recently analysed *To Walk Invisible* closely in my book, *Screening the Author* (2019), and while my exploration of it here revisits some of this analysis, I also seek to pull it in the specific direction of the legacy of Emily Brontë myths in the present, and how Wainwright refashions these myths into her own recasting of Emily Brontë as a metaphorical ‘muse’ for our age.²⁴ As I have previously noted, Wainwright’s approach of narrowing down the focus on the lives of the Brontë sisters to revolve around the demise of Branwell, their brother, has been explained by her as the need to de-romanticize their creative works, and their authorial identities, and show the economic necessity that drove them to write.²⁵ In her own words, she saw their creative literary output as ‘partly fuelled by desperation’, in economic terms.²⁶ This is obviously a less mythologized approach to Emily Brontë, in comparison to the previous incarnations of her as a medium-author traversing a spiritual realm of creativity that is above mundane and earthly concerns. However, this does not mean Wainwright completely avoids myth – she simply refashions a new, more complex, and contradictory one for our own complex and contradictory age. While Wainwright and her production team assert in the DVD ‘Bonus Features’ for *To Walk Invisible* their aim to debunk or demythologize certain Brontë myths, and this is indeed true in some respects with their representation of Emily, they also, whether wittingly or unwittingly, create their own.²⁷

In examining how this shapes how we may conceive of and remember Emily Brontë as an author as we celebrate her bicentenary and locate her on the twenty-first-century screen, I would like to suggest that what Wainwright does in *To Walk Invisible* is both merge Emily

with her sisters as a collective muse for our modern times, and separate her from binary readings where she is either transcendent or radical, suggesting instead that her authority (in both senses of the word) comes from a contradictory position of speaking from within specific nineteenth-century social realities, such as the economic necessity to produce an income in a gendered ‘economy’ of being ‘invisible’ under male pseudonyms, and beyond it, as she travels as a fellow radical ‘sister’ to our age.

As I have argued, ‘what this all points us to is a new, more contemporary way of approaching the author’s role and status within culture’, envisioned through the body of Emily Brontë, ‘that demands contradiction and plurality’ rather than a unified public image.²⁸ This is created by Wainwright in several scenes where she represents creativity and authority through a communion of minds, and places Emily Brontë in the logic of shared ideas and inspiration, away from her previous solitary cloaked figure of romanticized individual genius. One of these scenes is described by Jessica Jernigan as a ‘dreamlike sequence’ where the four Brontë children – Charlotte, Emily, Anne, and Branwell – are shown with ‘haloes of fire’ around their heads, running in an ‘empty ballroom where they play with toy soldiers come to life. Anyone schooled in Brontë lore will recognize this as a reference to the imaginary worlds created by the Brontë children, worlds that fueled their pretend play and inspired their earliest stories’.²⁹ Gracy Olmstead suggests that we are meant to view this as important due to the shared nature of this communal ‘fire’ of creativity: ‘it’s meant to portray their talent – their imaginative genius. And it’s very important that all four children, Branwell included, share the flame’.³⁰ To expand on this point, it seems an intelligent move on Wainwright’s part to use the imagery of fire here to signal a shared creative identity, for any Brontë fan would likewise recognize the solitary ‘fire’ that Charlotte claimed was unique to Emily in her ‘Biographical Notice’; here, that fire spreads beyond Emily, and one does not know where it begins or ends. All four children are in its possession, and Emily Brontë, while partaking in this ‘genius’, is removed

from her solitary confinement of a single ‘flame’ carried alone across the moors with her characters. Therefore, what is especially important about this scene for our discussion here is how Wainwright takes an old Brontë myth about Emily, and reworks it as a new one, suggesting that creativity is here a group enterprise that negates the traditional binaries we have fashioned in our culture about who inspires art, who ‘receives’ it, and who creates it, along gendered lines. This also problematizes the traditional mythologies built around Emily Brontë the child-mystic, standing alone on the moors like her characters.

This scene is later repeated in the drama, only now, Branwell is removed from the communal ‘fire’ of creativity after his death. The audience is therefore left with a female domestic ‘flame’ of creativity, and I have termed its metaphorical significance the ‘female chorus’.³¹ This ‘female chorus’ encompasses all the versions of Emily Brontë we have inherited on the screen: the transcendent author and the romantic visionary, the radical feminist sister, and the muse-like sister to our own age, travelling back and forth from the nineteenth century to our world. It is a chorus that is transformed into a visual image at the end of the drama as another ‘halo of fire’; this is the image with which I began this article of *parhelion* representing the Brontë sisters.

I would once again like to remind my reader of the static nature of this image of the three Brontë sisters aligned with the three suns – static camerawork in screen productions is usually associated with the more stylised ‘posing’ nature of still photography. Indeed, it was often used in early Hollywood films to indicate a moment of ‘pause’ in the narrative, where an actress would be framed in still glamour, forming an epic image to be consumed by the adoring gazes of the audience. Such camerawork is explicitly evident in the imagery of Catherine and Heathcliff on the moors in the classic 1939 Hollywood film adaptation of *Wuthering Heights* I have discussed.³² Wainwright’s general camerawork in *To Walk Invisible* is not particularly glamorous, or invested in myth-making; neither is her imagery in much of the drama, which

shows us a realistically-damp and muddy Yorkshire, and mundane domestic settings. Therefore, this scene alerts its viewer to its difference to the rest of the drama in both its content and aesthetic approach – after the realism of much of the drama’s representation of the Brontë sisters and their lives, we are suddenly compelled to pause, and watch them pose as epic outlines in a stylized image that captures their authorial genius as myth. The question is, why does Wainwright do this?

My suggestion here is that Wainwright is deliberately tapping into the screen and cultural histories of Emily Brontë to suggest multiple things. One of those things is that Emily’s mythic ‘power’, like that of her sisters’, lies in how her words and work ‘travel’ to the present age as reminders of radical ‘sisterhood’, to shape and influence a modern generation of women. We see this explicitly communicated in action through the travelling of their bodies from the nineteenth-century static image to contemporary imagery of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, where they are mythic images and statues to be consumed by modern tourists and visitors.

While this ‘message’ is relatively clear, what is less clear to me is what is being communicated when we then travel back to them in the nineteenth century. That is, what is the lingering meaning of this image as it stops travelling, resembling the silent and static image of Catherine and Heathcliff atop the moors as stands-in for Emily Brontë the lone genius? What is ultimately significant for me about this image as I consider Emily Brontë’s legacy in contemporary times is how it does not really pick a side on whether she was a transcendent mystic moving outside of her social world or a radical feminist moving within it. Rather, it merges both positions into a new mythical image of her and her sisters as three simultaneous muses, three simultaneous radical fiery suns, for both each other, and us, through their female authorship of ‘invisibility’.

And this merging of Emily with her sisters, without ‘picking a side’, is important, especially if we consider that the *parhelion* image is not purely Wainwright’s invention or idea,

and is likely adapted from a story in Agnes Mary Frances Robinson's 1883 biography of Emily Brontë. The difference in Wainwright's interpretation of this (perhaps mythic or invented) biographical story is that in Robinson's biography, Emily's reaction to being compared to a *parhelion* along with her sisters is foregrounded as unique through her satisfaction at being mythologized into nature, where she is described as standing 'a little higher' than her sisters, 'on a heathery knoll'.³³ We could presume this mythologizing of Emily in the biography likewise draws on the merging of her public persona with her fictional characters on the moors, aided through Charlotte Brontë's own attempts to do so in her own era, even before this reached epic proportions on the screen. It is telling, therefore, that Wainwright does not follow the logic of the biographical story in 'lifting' Emily above her sisters, but instead, takes an oppositional stance to her many biographers, Charlotte included, in suggesting she is part of an equal circle of a communal feminine 'voice' that forms a counter modern myth and image for the present.

While this is a romanticized image to rival William Wyler's romantic stands-ins for Emily Brontë through the Hollywood version of *Wuthering Heights*, it is not the conventional romance of heterosexual love that neutralizes the female author. It is instead a different mythic image of Emily standing amidst her real sisters, to talk to their metaphorical 'sisters' now, who are seen browsing through their work in the Brontë Parsonage Museum, and seeking to show them that they have inherited a complicated and contradictory world, where the body of Emily Brontë, like the body of her work, is there to be viewed in all its cultural complexity.

Notes

¹ *To Walk Invisible*, dir. by Sally Wainwright (BBC, 2016).

² See Hila Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature: Wuthering Heights and Company* (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 12-14.

³ Quoted in: 'Earthly Passions', *Harper's Bazaar*, January 2017, p. 116.

⁴ See some of the representative reviews collated in: Patsy Stoneman, *Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), pp. 11-31.

⁵ See Charlotte Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', in *Wuthering Heights: Complete Text with Introduction, Contexts and Critical Essays*, ed. by Diane Long Hoeveler (Boston; New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), p. 19; John Ruskin, 'Of Queens' Gardens' [1865], in *Sesame and Lilies: Two Lectures by John Ruskin*, ed. by G. G. Whiskard (London: Henry Frowde, 1912), pp. 98-100.

⁶ Brontë, 'Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell', pp. 18-19.

⁷ See Hila Shachar, *Screening the Author: The Literary Biopic* (Cham; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), pp. 66-70, 83-84.

⁸ Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), p. 21.

⁹ See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 9-21.

¹⁰ *Emily Brontë's Wuthering Heights*, dir. by Peter Kosminsky (UK/USA, Paramount Pictures, 1992).

¹¹ Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*, pp. 99-100.

¹² See my discussion of this scene in: Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*, pp. 99-101.

¹³ *Wuthering Heights*, dir. by William Wyler (USA: United Artists/MGM, 1939).

¹⁴ Goldwyn quoted in: Patricia Ingham, *The Brontës* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 229.

¹⁵ See *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*, pp. 41-42.

¹⁶ Patsy Stoneman, *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (London: Prentice-Hall/Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1996), p. 127.

¹⁷ Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* [1847], ed. by Ian Jack (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 133.

¹⁸ See Stoneman, *Emily Brontë, Wuthering Heights: A Reader's Guide to Essential Criticism*, pp. 155-183.

¹⁹ See Gilbert and Gubar, pp. 248-308.

²⁰ *Wuthering Heights*, dir. by Andrea Arnold (UK, Film4/UK Film Council, 2011).

²¹ Shelley Anne Galpin, 'Auteurs and Authenticity: Adapting the Brontës in the Twenty-First Century', *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 11.1 (2013), 86-100 (p. 97).

²² Arnold quoted in: Brandon Harris, 'Andrea Arnold, *Wuthering Heights*', *Filmmaker Magazine*, (2012), <<http://filmmakermagazine.com/52951-andrea-arnold-wuthering-heights/#.VMzj-SzleuI>> [accessed 31 January 2015].

²³ For example, for a feminist analysis that melds Cathy and Heathcliff's positions, see Susan Meyer, "'Your Father Was Emperor of China, and Your Mother an Indian Queen": Reverse Imperialism in *Wuthering Heights*', in *Wuthering Heights: Complete, Authoritative Text with Biographical, Historical, and Cultural Contexts, Critical History, and Essays from Contemporary Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Linda H. Peterson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 480-502.

²⁴ See Shachar, *Screening the Author*, pp. 88-94.

²⁵ Shachar, *Screening the Author*, p. 89.

²⁶ Quoted in: 'Earthly Passions', p. 116.

²⁷ *To Walk Invisible*, dir. by Sally Wainwright (BBC, 2016) [on DVD].

²⁸ Shachar, *Screening the Author*, p. 91.

²⁹ Jessica Jernigan, "'To Walk Invisible' showcases the kind of verisimilitude that Brontë Fans have been waiting for', *Decider*, (2017), <<https://decider.com/2017/03/29/to-walk-invisible-the-bronte-sisters-review/>> [accessed 28 December 2018].

³⁰ Gracy Olmstead, "'To Walk Invisible' Explores The Suffering And Genius Of The Brontë Sisters', *The Federalist*, (2017), <<http://thefederalist.com/2017/03/29/walk-invisible-explores-suffering-genius-bronte-sisters/>> [accessed 4 May 2017].

³¹ See Shachar, *Screening the Author*, p. 92.

³² See Shachar, *Cultural Afterlives and Screen Adaptations of Classic Literature*, pp. 41-42.

³³ Agnes Mary Frances Robinson, *Emily Brontë* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1883), p. 143.

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