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## CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S LIFE AND WRITINGS SHOWCASED IN MAJOR NEW EXHIBITION AT THE MORGAN

ORGANIZED IN COLLABORATION WITH THE BRONTË PARSONAGE MUSEUM  
AND THE NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY, LONDON

***Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will***  
September 9, 2016 through January 2, 2017

**New York, NY, August 17, 2016** — From the time Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre* was first published in 1847, readers have been drawn to the orphan protagonist who declared herself "a free human being with an independent will." Like her famous fictional creation, Brontë herself took bold steps throughout her life to pursue personal and professional fulfillment. *Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will*, a new exhibition opening at the Morgan Library & Museum on September 9, traces the writer's life from imaginative teenager to reluctant governess to published poet and masterful novelist.

The exhibition celebrates the two-hundredth anniversary of Brontë's birth in 1816, and marks an historic collaboration between the Morgan, which holds one of the world's most important collections of Brontë manuscripts and letters, and the Brontë Parsonage Museum, in Haworth, England, which will lend a variety of key items including the author's earliest surviving miniature manuscript, her portable writing desk and paintbox, and a blue floral dress she wore in the 1850s. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a portion of the original manuscript of *Jane Eyre*, on loan from the British Library and being shown in the U.S. for the first time, open to the page on which Jane asserts her "independent will." Also shown for the first time in America will be the only two life portraits of Brontë, on loan from London's National Portrait Gallery.



George Richmond (1809–1896), *Charlotte Brontë*, chalk, 1850. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

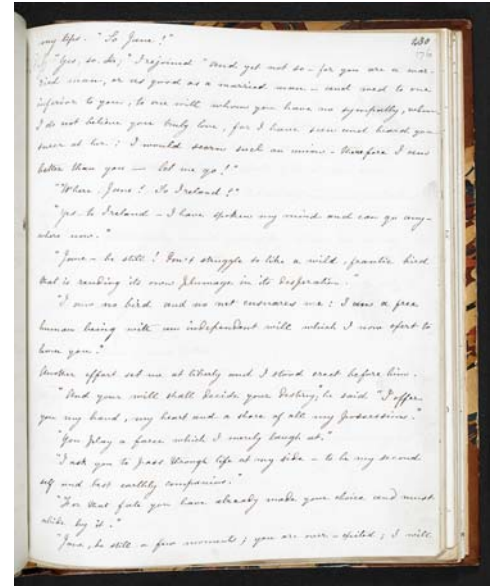
“With *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë introduced one of the strongest—and most unforgettable—heroines in all literature,” said Colin B. Bailey, director of the Morgan. “Brontë herself was uncommonly ambitious, pursuing literary fame in a male-dominated profession and insisting that her work be judged on its own terms. The Morgan is very pleased to be able to tell her remarkable story and to explore her legacy in this important exhibition.”

## THE EXHIBITION

### I. Home

Charlotte Brontë, the daughter of an Anglican clergyman, spent most of her life in the village of Haworth in West Yorkshire. Her mother and two eldest sisters died when she was young. The surviving children—Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne—began writing poems and stories before they reached their teens and formed their own creative community in a home where reading and play were intimately intertwined. An unfinished oil painting, begun by Branwell when he was about seventeen, is on view in the exhibition and features his three sisters together. It is the only surviving Brontë family portrait and among the icons of London’s National Portrait Gallery.

A drawing that was found tucked inside Charlotte Brontë’s school atlas depicts a stone cross—one of several that dot the West Yorkshire moors, windswept expanses that erupt in purple when the heather blooms in late summer. Haworth parsonage, the Brontë family’s home and now the site of the museum from which many of the artifacts in the exhibition derive, faced the church and village, while the rear of the house looked onto open moorland. The children took frequent rambles across the dramatic landscape that Emily Brontë would conjure so memorably in *Wuthering Heights*.



Top: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), *Jane Eyre, An Autobiography*, manuscript, 1847. © The British Library Board, Add. MS 43475, f.176. Middle: Branwell Brontë (1817–1848), *Portrait of Anne, Emily, and Charlotte Brontë*, oil on canvas, ca. 1834. © National Portrait Gallery, London. Bottom: *Stone Cross on the Yorkshire Moors*, watercolor drawing, undated, found inside Charlotte Brontë’s school atlas and possibly her own work. The Morgan Library & Museum. Photography by Graham S. Haber.



Left: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), Story beginning “There once was a little girl and her name was Ane [sic],” Brontë’s earliest surviving miniature manuscript book with watercolor drawings, ca. 1828. Brontë Parsonage Museum. Right: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), *Lycidas*, watercolor drawing, March 4, 1835, copied from a print after painting by Henry Fuseli. Brontë Parsonage Museum.

## II. Imagination

Long before Brontë became a published writer, she was an avid reader. She and her siblings read John Bunyan, John Milton, Walter Scott, Aesop, Lord Byron, the *Arabian Nights’ Entertainments*, and the Bible. They read about history and politics; they loved *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* with its mix of fiction, poetry, satire, and criticism. And, of course, they played. For young Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne, there was no rigid line dividing life from art. Their reading fueled their games; their games informed their writing; their drawings enhanced their stories.

The selection of juvenilia presented in the exhibition highlights the whimsy and imaginativeness of Brontë’s production. On view will be her earliest surviving manuscript, a tiny handmade booklet, illustrated with watercolor drawings, that presents the story of a little girl named Anne who goes on an exciting journey. Brontë wrote it when she was about twelve.

In 1826, Brontë’s father, Patrick, brought home a new set of toy soldiers and each of his children claimed a favorite. They acted out plays and imagined a whole world in which the Young Men (or The Twelves), as they dubbed them, lived, fought, and loved. The children took turns documenting the characters’ exploits in a web of handwritten stories, poems, and histories. They kept their manuscripts small—in appropriate scale for a band of toys—imitating the printed text they saw in newspapers and pocket-size books.

One such example is young Charlotte’s *The Poetaster: A Drama by Lord Charles Wellesley*, written in minuscule print in a tiny handmade notebook. When she wrote this satiric play, which derives its title and theme from a 1601 work by Ben Jonson, the fourteen-year-old Brontë was

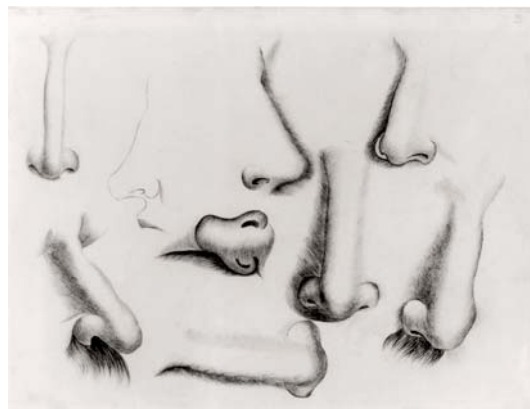
already considering what it takes to be an artist. Is it inspiration, hard work, or something in between? In her play, two pretentious poets consider the issue. She designed a title page that mimicked printed type and declared that the book was “published by no one, possessed by everyone” and sold by booksellers in Glass Town, the principal city in her fictional federation.

The teenage Brontë also delighted in drawing, and like many young women of the day she was taught to copy from prints rather than sketch from nature. Among the drawings presented is a watercolor she made after studying and teaching for several years at the Roe Head school, where she had received formal art instruction. She copied a print after a painting by Henry Fuseli that depicts the grieving shepherd of Milton’s elegy *Lycidas*, a poem she likely knew well. The sex of the figure, decidedly male in Fuseli’s version, is more ambiguous in her rendering, and the color treatment is entirely her own, as she had access only to a monochrome version.

### III. Work

When Brontë created Lucy Snowe, the teacher who narrates her 1853 novel *Villette*, she gave her the most viable occupation for an unmarried middle-class woman of her era. She could teach in a school or a private home, or—if she was lucky and entrepreneurial—run her own establishment. For Brontë herself, writing was the most desirable employment, but she knew she had to earn a living.

Brontë was fourteen when she began the first of her three terms of study at the Roe Head school, about twenty miles from home. The boarding school for girls offered a curriculum that included language, history, geography, arithmetic, French, music, and drawing. When she arrived in 1831, she filled a sketchbook (later separated into individual sheets) with exercises copied from a



Left: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), *The Roe Head School*, conté crayon drawing, ca. 1831–32, inscribed by Patrick Brontë *By my D[ea]f Daughter Charlotte / P Brontë Min[ist]re of Haworth*. Brontë Parsonage Museum. Right: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), *Study of Noses*, pencil drawing, ca. February 1831. Brontë Parsonage Museum.



drawing manual. Students followed a rigid method that prescribed a measured grid, visible in Brontë's study of noses which is on view in the exhibition. From there, she progressed to copying landscapes and flowers. At school, Brontë acquired the skills required of a governess but she lacked the requisite temperament to succeed in the profession.

In 1836, when she was nineteen, Brontë returned to the Roe Head school as a teacher. Though she had thrived as a student and made several lifelong friends there, she chafed in her new role. A few years later she took a short-term position as a governess in a private home, caring for what she called the "riotous, perverse, unmanageable cubs" of the Sidgwick family. With the financial support of an aunt, Brontë and her sister Emily went to Brussels in 1842 to study and improve their teaching credentials. They returned home for their aunt's funeral a year later, but Charlotte went back to Brussels to continue her studies with her inspiring teacher, Constantin Heger. After the sisters' half-hearted attempt to open a small school in the parsonage failed in 1844, Brontë abandoned her teaching career.

#### **IV. Writing**

When Brontë was twenty, she wrote to Robert Southey, England's poet laureate, confessing her aspiration to be "for ever known" as an author. Her inexperience, gender, and obscurity posed significant obstacles to that ambitious goal. Nevertheless, in 1846, she and her sisters Emily and Anne self-published a book of poems.

Brontë spent a year shopping around her first novel, *The Professor*, until she found a publisher, George Smith, who took an interest. The twenty-three-year-old publisher had just begun to manage his father's London firm, and while he was not prepared to accept *The Professor*, he asked for the chance to review her next manuscript. Within weeks, she gave him *Jane Eyre*. The novel was issued in the three-decker format that was popular in the nineteenth century, bound in cloth with a simple blind-stamped design and gold lettering on the spine. "You have given the work every advantage which good paper, clear type and a seemingly outside can supply," she told Smith upon receiving her first six copies. "If it fails – the fault will lie with the author – you are exempt. I now await the judgment of the press and the public."

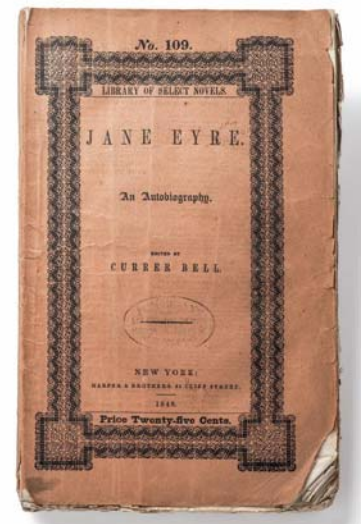
Readers were introduced to Jane Eyre —"a heterogeneous thing" within a conventional world—in 1847. She was a plain orphan with a fierce soul, a child who questions authority, a model of female autonomy. The novel was a sensation. In a matter of weeks, Emily's *Wuthering Heights*, equally explosive, was published in a three-volume set along with Anne's *Agnes Grey*. The

authors retained the pseudonyms they had chosen for their book of poems the year before: Charlotte was Currer Bell; Emily, Ellis Bell, and Anne, Acton Bell.



Brontë chose a male pseudonym because she wanted her work to be judged on its own terms. But from the start, readers yearned to uncover her identity. “To you I am neither Man nor Woman,” was her message to her critics. “I come before you as an Author only.”

In the exhibition, the original *Jane Eyre* manuscript is open to a page from Chapter 23, where Jane agrees to marry Edward Rochester—but only if they come together on equal footing: “I am not talking to you now through the medium of custom, conventionalities, nor even of mortal flesh,” she tells him, “it is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal,—as we are!” In the passage shown, Rochester commands Jane to stop struggling “like a wild frantic bird.” Jane famously replies: “I am no bird; and no net ensnares me: I am a free human being with an independent will; which I now exert to leave you.”



Brontë completed four novels before her death at age thirty-eight. *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* were published during her lifetime; *The Professor* (her first effort, initially rejected by her publisher), was released shortly after her death.

## V. Legacy

Brontë’s final years were marked by grave loss, literary celebrity, and, ultimately, personal contentment. In 1848 and 1849, her surviving siblings—Branwell, Emily, and Anne—died in quick succession. The letters she sent to notify friends of these losses are presented together in the exhibition; she wrote each one on mourning stationery with black edges. She published her last novel, *Villette*, in 1853. The following year, at the age of thirty-eight, she married Arthur Bell Nicholls, her father’s curate. She died just



Top: Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell (pseudonyms of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë), Two copies of *Poems*, Dark binding: London: Aylott & Jones, 1846, Light binding: 1848 reissue by Smith, Elder, & Co. The Morgan Library & Museum. Photography by Graham S. Haber. Middle: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), *Jane Eyre, An Autobiography*, edited by Currer Bell, New York: Harper & Brothers, 1848 (first American edition). The Morgan Library & Museum. Photography by Graham S. Haber. Bottom: Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), Letter to William S. Williams, dated Haworth, October 2 . 1848. shown with additional letters about Anne’s decline. The Morgan Library & Museum.

nine months after the wedding, on March 31, 1855, most likely in the early stages of pregnancy. Her widower remained in Haworth until Patrick Brontë's death in 1861 and then returned to his native Ireland, where he remarried. Brontë's marriage license and the probate copy of her will are both on view in the exhibition.

Brontë's writing continues to have a profound impact on readers throughout the world, and many find her life story just as compelling as her extraordinary work. Within two years of her death, fellow novelist Elizabeth Gaskell published the first of many full-length biographies. Dramatists, filmmakers, poets, artists, critics, pilgrims, and still more biographers followed Gaskell in responding to Brontë's life and work. Librarians and other caretakers—beginning with her own widower—have preserved the books, manuscripts, letters, drawings, documents, and personal objects that constitute her material legacy. Her readers, of course, are her ultimate heirs.

## **Public Programs**

### **FILM**

#### ***Jane Eyre***

Director: Robert Stevenson  
(1943, 97 minutes)

This classic American film adaptation of Charlotte Brontë's 1847 novel of the same name stars Orson Welles as Mr. Rochester and Joan Fontaine as Jane Eyre. After a harsh childhood, orphan Jane Eyre is hired by Edward Rochester, the brooding lord of a mysterious manor house to care for his young ward. Original music by Bernard Hermann and cinematography by George Barnes.

**Friday, September 16, 7 pm\***

**Tickets: Exhibition-related films are free with museum admission. Advance reservations for members only. Tickets are available at the Admission Desk on the day of the screening.**

\*The exhibition will be open for program attendees before the screening.

### **LECTURE**

#### **The Brontë Cabinet**

##### **Deborah Lutz and Christine Nelson**

From portable writing desks to personal garments to tiny manuscripts written in minuscule handwriting, the Brontës left behind countless material traces of their lives and work. What stories do these objects tell, and what do they withhold? Join us for a presentation and conversation with Deborah Lutz, scholar and author of the *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* and Christine Nelson, Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts at the Morgan.

**Friday, September 30, 6:30 pm\***

**Tickets: \$15; free for members and students with valid ID. Tickets include free museum admission for the day of program.**

\*The exhibition will be open at 5:30 pm for program attendees.

**GALLERY  
TALK**

**Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will**

Christine Nelson, Drue Heinz Curator, Literary and Historical Manuscripts  
Behind the Scenes, Object Exploration in the Education Center

**Friday, October 7, 6–8 pm\***

**Tickets: Free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary.**

\*Drop in anytime throughout the evening.

**FAMILY  
PROGRAM**

**Brontë Book Arts**

Create your own mini-manuscript book with artist Andrew Eason, Head of Adult and Young Adult Services at Plainfield Public Library District. In the style of Charlotte Brontë and her siblings, utilize materials to create a miniature book to illustrate or write a story to share with your family. A visit to the exhibition *Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will* is included in the workshop.

**Saturday, October 22, 2–4 pm**

**Tickets: \$20; \$15 for members. Each ticket is valid for one child and up to two adults. Tickets include free museum admission for the day of the workshop. Appropriate for ages 6–12.**

**ADULT  
WORKSHOP**

**Reading Charlotte Brontë**

Jennifer Minnen, scholar of Victorian literature and PhD Candidate at Princeton University, leads a reading group on Charlotte Brontë's final novel, *Villette*, in the historic family rooms of the nineteenth-century Morgan house. The novel follows protagonist Lucy Snowe as she travels from her native England to the fictional French-speaking city of Villette to teach at a girls' school. The reading group will explore the novel's psychological landscapes, autobiographical strains, and Gothic echoes as Lucy matches wits with her scheming employer, unravels a tangled romance, and wrestles with her own independence. Participants will be reading from the Oxford World's Classic 2008 edition of the novel. Light refreshments will be provided. Advance tickets are required, as space is limited.

**Tuesday, November 1, 3–4:30 pm - Volume I and Volume II**

**Tuesday, December 13, 3–4:30 pm - Volume III**

**Tickets: (2 sessions) \$45; \$35 for members.**

**GALLERY  
TALK**

**Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will**

Christine Nelson, Drue Heinz Curator, Literary and Historical Manuscripts

**Friday, November 4, 6 pm**

**Tickets: Free with museum admission; no tickets or reservations necessary.**



### **Publication**

The exhibition's companion volume, *The Brontës: A Family Writes* (96 pages, 75 photographs), by Christine Nelson, the Morgan's Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts, is published by the Morgan Library & Museum, in association with Scala Arts Publishers, Inc. *The Brontës* provides an intimate portrait of a singular family of writers through the literary manuscripts, rare printed books, personal documents, and private letters in the Morgan's collection, one of the world's finest.

### **Organization and Sponsorship**

The curator of the exhibition is Christine Nelson, the Morgan's Drue Heinz Curator of Literary and Historical Manuscripts.

*Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will* is made possible by Fay and Geoffrey Elliott.

The related publication is underwritten by the Andrew W. Mellon Fund for Research and Publications.



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### **The Morgan Library & Museum**

A complex of buildings in the heart of New York City, the Morgan Library & Museum began as the private library of financier Pierpont Morgan, one of the preeminent collectors and cultural benefactors in the United States. Today it is a museum, independent research library, music venue, architectural landmark, and historic site. A century after its founding, the Morgan maintains a unique position in the cultural life of New York City and is considered one of its greatest treasures. With the 2006 reopening of its newly renovated campus, designed by renowned architect Renzo Piano, and the 2010 refurbishment of the original library, the Morgan reaffirmed its role as an important repository for the history, art, and literature of Western civilization from 4000 B.C. to the twenty-first century.

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