Place of the Brontës among Women Novelists of the last Century

Thomas Seccombe

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Report of an Address by MR. THOMAS SECCOMBE, M.A.,
entitled "The place of the Brontës among the
Women Novelists of the Last Century." Reprinted by
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Examiner."

Mr. Thomas Seccombe said that he stood there like a propitiatory sacrifice to the manes of the Brontës. A more unfitting one, one with less of a "message" it would be hard to find. His only claim was that in a sense he had tried to stay the torrent of Brontë worship. He knew very little about the Brontës, and knew nothing about such shrines as Haworth and Roe Head. Nevertheless he had always been a devoted admirer in a sense of the Brontës. He had always been a sufficiently typical Englishman for that, and felt that he would be a very defective Englishman who did not feel a thrill in approaching the Brontës and their work, especially the wonderful story of "Jane Eyre," on which, indeed he himself was brought up, and the incidents of which in part corresponded so much with those of his own childhood, which was not a particular happy one. As showing, too, what an excellent anodyne the book is, he told how recently he had an attack of rheumatism (of the hands), and in the midst of his intense pain the one thing that distracted and consoled him was the reading of "Jane Eyre." Of "Shirley," as he afterwards said, he has not such a high opinion, but he related how being in Rome not many years ago he saw that an Italian version of the story was running as a serial in one of the evening papers, and a friend told him the servant girls found it so absorbing that they were becoming quite demoralised in regard to ordinary household duties.

In these days of smooth sayings and too much agreeing, it was good, he declared, to have some rough and disagreeable things said sometimes, and thus stimulate opinion by the medium of a little acid. Shakespeare, for instance, had suffered from much absurd laudation, leading to a sort of religious cult. In fact, there were to-day far fewer critics than collectors of opinions, who, when asked their views about a particular subject, uttered the things which were thought likely to be most agreeable to the best people. These orthodox opinions had no salt in them, and beneath the surface there was generally to be found a

strong current of resentment against all exaggeration, as, indeed, he himself found once when he took the opportunity of protesting against the insipid praise that used to be heaped upon Edgar Allan Poe. Similarly, he wrote recently of "Jane Eyre":—"There was a time when the novel appeared to contemporaries wild, seductive, violent and dangerous. . . . 'Jane Eyre,' the most permanently interesting of Charlotte's novels, is distinguished by situations as exciting and garish in their improbability as 'East Lynne.' There is a singular lack of similitude to human beings in Charlotte's characters. Thackeray noted the startling dissimilarity between her characters and their morals, as well he might. In wit, perhaps the most elemental qualities of genius, the sisters were wholly lacking, yet no more lacking than they were in humour, which necessarily depends, like irony, upon a certain knowledge of the human comedy. Critics without number have pointed out these things. Swinburne has deplored that a *ci-devant* governess should have manifested such an educated affection for children—"horrid children."

Perhaps he had been summoned to that gathering in the hope that he would solemnly and ritually eat his own observations! It was not his intention to assess the value of the biographical record or its permanence, or the letters as documents, though they were enormously interesting; but to speak of the novels as works of art, and ask where they should be placed on that footing. A distinguishing quality in the novel as a form of art was that women had excelled in it. In the histrionic art women had attained the highest place. In the art of fiction they had attained very near. The supreme figures in the last century were Fielding, Scott, Dickens and Meredith; in the very next rank, along with Sterne, Smollett, Richardson, Trollope and Hardy, must unquestionably be placed Jane Austen, Maria Edgeworth, Miss Ferrier, Mrs. Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot, with, from among the writers of to-day, Mrs. Humphry Ward and Mrs. Edith Wharton. "It does not matter a bit whence we place them," added Mr. Seccombe; "they cannot stay there long. Nothing is more impertinent than the talk of permanent literary fame. Every generation has to take down and dust these idols of its predecessor, and it invariably forgets to replace one or two." The earlier women novelists of the century—Miss Edgeworth and

Miss Ferrier—were restricted in range and scope by the ideas of decency and propriety then in vogue. Scott shared these ideas to a large extent; he was “too chivalrous to think of giving a lady away by describing what she said at a critical moment.” Happily, he had other methods of giving range to his imagination. With the two ladies it was otherwise.

Miss Austen was subject to the same restrictions or worse. But she infused into her work malice, and, above all, femininity. Her work was a wonderfully delicate enamel, small, but perfect, the delight of the blasé connoisseur, the amateur, the eclectic. But she had no world audience. In the next generation the great exemplar of a femininity far fuller than that of Jane Austen was Mrs. Gaskell. Her style was far less perfect and complete than that of her predecessor, but her range was enormously fuller. She had the courage of her emotions, and her emotions represented all the sensibilities of a large-hearted woman. With her, omniscience was rather a foible, and her wide experience gave her a perilous wealth of material.

Charlotte Brontë had none of the omniscience, real or assumed, of Mrs. Gaskell. “She does not seem to me,” went on Mr. Seccombe, “to represent any very destructive quality of femininity. No one could have doubted that ‘Pride and Prejudice’ was by a woman. But ‘Jane Eyre’ was widely accepted as a thoroughly masculine novel. She had, however, a courage and originality entirely her own. She throws the scruples and the reticence of the earlier generation contemptuously to the winds. Prolonged in the next generation by such writers as Dickens and Thackeray, such reticence becomes almost shameless, disgusting. To shatter it needed no ordinary mind, no common courage. Charlotte performs the feat with the naiveté of a child and the simple ease of a giant-killer.” In an autobiography of real suffering, narrow means, heroic aspirations, sordid circumstances, the universal longing for a grand, elevating, absorbing passion in acute contrast with the obscurity of plainness and insignificance, she obtained a lever of enormous power. The story of “Jane Eyre” was an asset; improbabilities notwithstanding, it was an enthralling and resistless instrument of destruction. It would have been

astonishing if it had not shocked many people—it would indeed have failed of its purpose. The improbabilities, the infringements of the canons of taste, the gross exaggerations did not matter in the least. They were incurred in a good cause; and the unity and energy of the book as a whole were totally unimpaired. “I know of no work of prose,” said Mr. Seccombe, “the rapidity of which is so marvellously sustained as in ‘Jane Eyre.’ It carries one forward and ever forward with a victorious rush, and the result is that Rochester and his Jane live for ever in the Champs Elysée of fiction.”

Charlotte Brontë’s distinction was her discovery of the *motif*. She saw that in the relation between two people there lay a capacity for dramatic development which could scarcely be exceeded by the greatest wealth of incident or complexity of plot. It was not “the biting woman” that enthralled—it was Rochester and Jane. “It has been objected,” proceeded the lecturer, “and no doubt will be objected again, that Charlotte Brontë secured this unusually strong interest by attaching an importance to the passion of love which it does not possess, and ought not to possess in real life, and which it is therefore wrong in a novelist to represent. But in the first place it may be fairly maintained that love, even in this restricted sense, is the most potent factor in human nature, and that if its significance is not realised in actual life as it is in fiction it is because reflection has been so largely and so unfortunately diverted from it. If this all-important element in the evolution of the race were in any adequate sense understood, we should not have people marrying and giving in marriage in the haphazard and irresponsible and sordid fashion of our undeveloped civilisation. It is Charlotte Brontë’s chief claim to greatness that she has ennobled the passion of love by triumphantly proving that it may be independent of physical attraction, and revealing its true basis in the subtle affinities of character.

Nothing else that Charlotte Brontë wrote, added Mr. Seccombe, was comparable with “Jane Eyre.” The book conquered a place for itself, not only in the history of literature, but also in the history of art; for it, like *Hernani*, supplied the only possible key to a dungeon of Doubting Castle. “*Shirley*” seemed to him a complete

failure—incondite, chaotic, unrealised. Charlotte was suppressed in it. There was no autobiography, no life. In “*Villette*” Charlotte entered again, and brought back a large measure of the old magic life, and a double portion of the style. Episodes in the book were first rate; but as a harmony in unity, as an instrument of velocity in propulsion and breathless suspense in pursuit, the book as a whole was not comparable with “*Jane Eyre*.” George Eliot, concluded Mr. Seccombe, had every possible and almost every conceivable advantage—knowledge of life, art, humour, the power of intellect. Every good gift unhappily was neutralised to a considerable extent by her determination to omniscience and her inveterate leaning to didacticism. Had she possessed the saving grace of knowing how little she knew and how superfluous were her patronage and morality to “the cursed ways of going on of unregenerate man,” she would have occupied an enormous and over-shadowing place. As it was, all that she accomplished was at no single point comparable to what “*Jane Eyre*” unquestionably did; and it should be remembered that much of what George Eliot accomplished was only by direct inheritance from the Brontës and Mrs. Gaskell.