

# NINETEENTH CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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Pizzo, Justine and Eleanor Houghton, eds. [\*Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World\*](#). London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020. 258 pp.

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<1>One of the greatest challenges, if not the primary challenge, for editors assembling a collection of essays is achieving unity. Lightning strikes when the concept for a collection feels timely yet timeless, specific yet capacious, allowing the editors to construct a cohesive whole that nevertheless lets individual contributors embrace their own idiosyncratic interests. Justine Pizzo and Eleanor Houghton's well-executed *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World*, such intellectual lightning has struck. Embodiment has been a topic of abiding interest for feminist scholars since the 1994 publication of Elizabeth Grosz's *Volatile Bodies*, while the broad scope offered to Brontë scholars by the issue of suffering humans is substantiated by recent publications, such as *The Brontës and the Idea of the Human: Science, Ethics, and the Victorian Imagination*, edited by Alexandra Lewis, and *The Coarseness of the Brontës*, a 2019 special issue of *Brontë Studies* edited by Claire O'Callaghan and Sophie Franklin. Meanwhile, the material turn in Victorian studies (see Pykett; Sattaur) has powered a fascinating strain of scholarship on the objects handled, worn, and made by the Brontës (see Lutz; Pouliot; Wynne, "Approaching;" Wynne, "Frocks"). Admirably, Pizzo and Houghton's collection does not simply juxtapose some essays on embodiment with others on the material world; it maps and re-maps the relationship between the two concepts as mutually constitutive sensory experiences that informed Brontë's life, as well as her plots, characters, and posthumous cultural significance.

<2>Because the contributors also connect embodiment and materiality to Brontë's authorial identity and reception history, *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World* deftly integrates weighty claims about authorship. The clarity of this unified call to reflect "critically and holistically about the author's material legacy and embodied life" is complemented by the diversity of the researchers who answered the call, including "specialists in book history, cultural heritage, the history of dress, literary criticism, and museum curation" (2). This interdisciplinarity engenders a wide range of Brontëan objects and texts under analysis, which in turn ensures that each chapter breaks new ground. It also acts as a corrective for the "trepidation" of literary scholars who fear that too much attention to "the author's lived experience...[would] obscure her literary achievements" and "reanimate the mythos" that surrounds the Brontë family (8). By overcoming this reluctance, which is underwritten by a dutiful but unnecessary fidelity to Brontë's "desire to distance her personal identity from the critical reception of her novels" (10), the collection provides a fresh model for feminist approaches to gender and authorship in Victorian studies. It also eschews the jargon-laden abstractions of other forms of materialist criticism—namely, Thing Theory and object-oriented ontology, which are sadly unattuned to the

themes of gender, sexuality, race, and disability discussed in this collection (see Alaimo and Hekman).

<3>Pizzo and Houghton's introduction opens with an intriguing case study on Brontë's kidskin gloves before providing a comprehensive overview of Brontë scholarship since New Historicism and providing chapter summaries that highlight the collection's methodological diversity. Part I, "Brontë's Bodies," is the most traditionally literary of the volume's four parts. Cornelia Pearsall's "Burying Bertha: Race and the Ungraveable Body in *Jane Eyre*" addresses the serious problem of Bertha Mason's grotesque racialization and contributes to recent scholarship about death, grief, and corpses prompted by the family's bicentenaries (see Morse and Pouliot). Pearsall's elaboration of nine dizzying possibilities—some plausible, some fanciful—for the fate of Bertha's body is provocative and diverting, but also sobering when Pearsall links the narrative gaps around this character to contemporary racial injustice in the United States. In "Gendering the Comic Body: Physical Humor in *Shirley*," Pizzo identifies body-based comedy as an important narrative tool whose ubiquity disproves critical commonplaces about the novel's fragmented form. Pizzo's recovery of intertexts for this comedy by George Henry Lewes, Charles Dickens, and W. M. Thackeray position *Shirley* as a delicious mode of revenge against Brontë's real or perceived rivals, delivering a comeuppance similar to that eventually suffered by *Shirley*'s hapless curates. In another compelling portrait of an unconventionally palpable Brontë, Valerie Sanders's "'Mediocrity in the sensations': Charlotte Brontë and the Yorkshire Marriage" exhaustively reviews the author's fictional and non-fictional texts for her theorization of conjugal passion. By the end of Part I, the reader, having been presented with a series of pulsating, desiring, disobedient, unburied bodies, should be wholly convinced that embodiment is a central trope in Brontë's writing.

<4>The next two parts of the collection, "Narrative Objects" and "The Power of Things," focus on objects that served as obsessions for Brontë, for her characters, or for her fans. Part II contains two meditations on anomalies that highlight Brontë's ambivalence toward luxury. Julie Donovan's meticulous and subtle study of Catholic material culture in "'Grossly Material': Catholic Things and the Jesuit Order in *Villette*" provides much-needed nuance to critical discussions of Lucy Snowe's anti-Catholic prejudices. In the delightful "Charlotte Brontë: From a Yorkshire Girl to a Regency Writer and Dandy," Judith E. Pike contrasts the Verdopolitan extravagances of Charlotte's early silver-fork stories with the homely domestic imagery of her letters to Ellen Nussey, which affords critics more ammunition against the hagiographic crystallization of Brontë as femininely decorous in Elizabeth Gaskell's early biography. Taken alongside Emma Butcher's recent *The Brontës and War: Fantasy and Conflict in Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Youthful Writings*, Pike's determination to chart decisive connections between Brontë's early works and her later ones suggests that interest in the juvenilia is growing.

<5>Part III features two chapters that generate a surprising depth and breadth of new knowledge by investigating just one object. In curator Christine Nelson's case, "Brontë Under Glass: Scholarship and Sentimentality in the Museum Context" revisits her staging of a single dress for the 2016 exhibition at the Morgan Library and Museum. In addition to relating the cultural history of Brontë relics, Nelson contextualizes the exhibition as an argument that both positioned Brontë as a professional writer to work against the popular narratives of Brontë referred to as the "Brontë myth" (see Miller) and situated the exhibition alongside other timely demonstrations of

feminist power, particularly the 2017 Women’s March. Eleanor Houghton’s “Charlotte Brontë’s Moccasins: The Wild West Brought Home” thoroughly researches the origin and fate of Brontë’s beaded deerskin shoes and links them to the author’s grief at her sisters’ deaths during *Shirley*’s composition. The number of physical details related about the shoes makes this chapter richly detailed and lush, and a beautiful artistic rendering of the shoes by Houghton herself reveals how closely she studied the pair, but (at least) equally significant is the historical research into Iroquois beadwork, which reveals surprising connections between Yorkshire and Indigenous Americans and drives Houghton to conclude that the moccasins “signify not only a fusion of two disparate cultures—and thus metaphorically exemplify the changing face of North America and its diverse populates—but also a slow erosion of the traditional, Aboriginal peoples’ way of life” (177).

Part IV, “Printed Matter,” begins with Barbara Heritage’s unmissable essay, “Charlotte Brontë’s ‘Chinese Fac-similes’: A Comparative Approach to Interpreting the Materials of Authorial Labor and Artistic Process,” which epitomizes the collection’s primary claims and methodology. A watercolor sketch, a fair-copy manuscript page, and a page of the Clarendon edition of *Villette* corresponding to the manuscript all come under Heritage’s careful scrutiny to foreground Brontë’s slow, laborious physical processes of writing, drawing, folding, and sewing. One stunning result of this admirable exercise in physical bibliography is Heritage’s overturning of long-held beliefs about Brontë’s composition process. Concluding the volume is Clare Broome Saunders’s “I have read the *Lady’s Magazine*”: The Materialities of Charlotte Brontë’s Medievalism,” turns to the shipwrecked periodicals originally owned by Maria Branwell Brontë and hypothesizes the influence of the issues’ Gothic romances over Brontë’s fiction. Like Pike’s chapter, these two concluding arguments overturn the scholarly underestimation of Brontë’s early works and reshape the trajectory of her writing career. And, like the rest of the collection, they decisively rout gendered assumptions that have plagued her literary reputation ever since the publication of the unkind reviews addressed by Pizzo’s chapter. While Brontë scholars will certainly value this volume, the collection’s theorization of material embodiment also makes it a worthwhile read for any scholar interested in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature and gender.

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