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A Vain Talent?

The Question of Female Artistry in the Life and Work of Anne Brontë

Edited by
Taten Shirley



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I enjoyed the anthology immensely. As an art historian and not a literary scholar, I was not familiar with several of the works discussed within the anthology. This was not a negative, as the authors utilized and explained the texts effectively. Their findings made me appreciate the complexity of Anne Brontë's oeuvre as her characters navigate through the challenges of being a woman in the nineteenth century. All the authors highlight the struggles these women face in searches for education, work, recognition and love.

Prof. Jennifer Bates Ehlert
Department of Art and Art History
Salve Regina University

"A Vain Talent?" provides scholars and students with a much-needed positive appraisal of Anne Brontë. Not only does the anthology give voice to this often-overlooked youngest sister's life, it also discusses how she utilized the theme of artistry in her poetry and novels to explore women's experiences in the Victorian age. "A Vain Talent?" helps fill a void in the Brontë conversation, which is good news for those who wish to recognize Anne as one of the greatest writers of her time.

Dr. Laura Johnson Dahlke
University of Nebraska at Omaha

About the editor

Taten Shirley is an Associate Professor of Humanities and Director of Interdisciplinary Studies at Faulkner University. She received her PhD in humanities from Salve Regina University. Her book 'The Industrial Brontës: Advocates for Women in a Turbulent Age' was published in March 2023.

Summary

The main goal of this anthology is to aid Brontë scholars, along with undergraduate and graduate students alike, in their research of Anne Brontë, specifically in regards to the question of her artistry in her own life and the theme of artistry in her novel, 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall', and her poetry. While there have been numerous publications on the Brontë sisters, there is the least amount of scholarship on Anne. Literary criticism of Anne is usually included within commentary on her sisters as a whole, and Anne is always discussed the least in the works. There are few, if any, anthologies on Anne's writing, especially not one that focuses on artistry specifically. This anthology seeks to reduce the disparity of scholarship on Anne compared to her sisters. The chapters all focus on artistry in some aspect of her life or her writing. The first chapter focuses on Anne's poetry and how it can be viewed as a therapeutic for her homesickness while at Thorp Green. Chapter two examines the ways in which Anne Brontë demonstrates that Agnes Grey's pedagogic craft is one steeped in virtue but punctuated by limited authority, thus stressing the inherently artistic nature of education as aesthetic expression that ultimately remains subordinate to the power of individual autonomy. The third chapter examines Helen Huntingdon through the medieval lens of chivalric domestic violence. Chapter four discusses how Anne's artistry impacted the characters she wrote, illustrating how Helen's career as an artist relies on the commercial prospects that painting permits to investigate the problems and disagreements that occur when a woman endeavors to construct "a room of one's own" outside the conventional societal circumstances. The fifth chapter explores how Brontë traces Helen Huntingdon's moral and emotional development through her art and how characters of both genders interact with that art and how the acts of production and interpretation serve as an important dimension of her social critique and refusal to conform to gendered expectations of her own art. Then the sixth chapter examines Victorian women's artistic skills and their modest craft of sketching imaginary kingdoms and painting realistic landscapes and (self-)portraits in Anne Brontë's 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall' (1848) and in Charlotte Brontë's 'Jane Eyre' (1847), as the equivalents of unprofessional female writings expected in the nineteenth century. The seventh chapter explores the use of art as a means of escape from an unvirtuous marriage in 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.' Lastly, the eighth chapter takes a closer look at why exactly Anne is the least-known sister by contrasting the supernatural in Charlotte's 'Jane Eyre' to the realism in Anne's 'The Tenant of Wildfell Hall.'

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