

The Brontës, Revisited, Reappraised, Reimagined

With Claire O’Callaghan, author of *Emily Brontë Reappraised*

Sophie Franklin, author of *Charlotte Brontë Revisited*

Adelle Hay, author of *Anne Brontë Reimagined*

Three new Brontë biographers examine three Brontë novels for a 21st Century audience. Each session will feature one of the instructors discussing one novel by the Brontës, Claire O’Callaghan will explore the complexity of gender and race in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, Sophie Franklin will examine the psychological intensity of what many critics call Charlotte Brontë’s masterpiece, *Villette*. Adelle Hay will discuss the keen psychological insight and skillful storytelling of Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. We’ll have one final session with all three instructors to explore how the Brontës relate to each other and how they still resonate today.

Sundays on Zoom

Apr 24, May 22, Jun 5, Jun 26

2:00–4:00 p.m. EDT

April 24, Session One: Claire O’Callaghan on Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*

Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1848) is often hailed as one of literature’s greatest novels, but it offended many readers in its day. As one reviewer put it, ‘Read *Jane Eyre* is our advice, but burn *Wuthering Heights*’. Beginning with a discussion of the novel’s origin as a meditation on love and loss from her Gondal poetry, this session will consider the radical nature of Emily’s novel, considering – among other things – her representation of gender, race and romance, and, of course, the complexity of her provocative anti/hero, Heathcliff.

May 22, Session Two: Sophie Franklin on Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*

“Why is *Villette* disagreeable? Because the writer’s mind contains nothing but hunger rebellion and rage [*sic*].” Matthew Arnold’s searing critique of Charlotte Brontë’s final novel encapsulates its fraught and contradictory reception since its publication in 1853. Various reviewers considered it to be vulgar, odd, unforgettable, and – in the words of George Eliot – a ‘still more wonderful book than *Jane Eyre*’, *Villette* continues to baffle and exhilarate readers in equal measure, with critics now frequently positioning it as Brontë’s masterpiece. What is it about *Villette* that leads to such an array of responses? In this session, we will explore the contradictions and intensities embedded in the novel itself, through the enigmatic narrative voice of Lucy Snowe and the ambiguities of the ending. Along the way, we will touch on issues of religious conflict, psychological depth in literature, and the tendency to read elements of the novel as reflecting Brontë’s own biography. We will end with a consideration of why *Villette* is so often sidelined for the arguably more famous and popular *Jane Eyre* (1847).

June 12, Session Three: Adelle Hay on Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* scandalised and delighted readers when it was first published in 1848. Within six months a second edition was printed, featuring an Author’s Preface in which Anne responded to critics’ accusations of coarseness and brutality; ‘when we have to do with vice and vicious characters, I maintain it is better to depict them as they really are than they would wish to appear.’ Anne Brontë’s novel examined gender equality, women’s rights, and

domestic abuse at a time when the "angel in the house" was the feminine ideal. Her sister Charlotte referred to the novel as an 'entire mistake' and requested that her publishers not reprint it. As a result, *Tenant* went out of print for six years after Anne's death. When it reappeared, it was as a heavily edited version. It is only in the last 40 years that the text has been restored, and readers have once again started to appreciate Anne's keen psychological insight and skillful storytelling.

June, 26 Session Four: all three instructors to discuss the Brontës

How do we think about the Brontës and their novels today? All three of these novels by the Brontës garnered opprobrium upon publication, often for their apparent coarseness, violence, and transgressive representations of women. *Wuthering Heights* shocked readers with its juxtaposed descriptions of passion and violence in familial and domestic settings. *Villette* confounds the reader's expectations and keeps us at a distance throughout the narrative, while also offering xenophobic depictions of Europeans. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* foreshadowed modern conversations about coercive control with its depictions of domestic and marital abuse. The character Helen Graham has startlingly modern views on the education and upbringing of boys and girls, and the damaging effects of outdated gender-based attitudes when it comes to education. So, should we see these authors simply as three "weird sisters", as Ted Hughes memorably described them? Are they realist writers using the literary imagination to write politically about real-life concerns? Are they women writers who were ahead of their time?

In this session, we will explore these questions and consider the connections between the siblings' novels. We will consider the similarities and differences in their works with respect to theme, form, and content. We will also think about the relevance of these novels today, reflecting on what we can continue to learn from Charlotte, Emily, and Anne's writings, and how they speak to contemporary society and culture.

About the instructors

Sophie Franklin is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Tübingen, specialising in the Brontës, violence, nineteenth-century literature and culture, and afterlives. She completed her PhD at Durham University in 2019, where she explored representations of violence in Anne, Charlotte, and Emily Brontë's work; and she is the author of *Charlotte Brontë Revisited: A View from the Twenty-First Century*, published by Saraband in 2016 and reissued in 2018.

Dr Claire O'Callaghan is a Lecturer in English at Loughborough University, U.K. Her research focuses on Victorian and neo-Victorian literature and culture, with an emphasis on gender, sexuality and the body. Claire is an expert on the Brontës. She is the author of *Emily Brontë Reappraised* (Saraband, 2018) and she has also written on *Jane Eyre*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Emily's poetry, contemporary reworkings of *Wuthering Heights*, and the Brontë biodrama, *To Walk Invisible* (2016). Claire was the co-editor of a special issue of *Brontë Studies* devoted to the theme of 'coarseness' in the Brontës and she was the instigator and organiser of Brontë2020, an one-day digital event to raise money for the Brontë Parsonage following its initial closure in the wake of Covid-19. She is now an Associate Editor of *Brontë Studies*. Claire's current research is looking at Charlotte Brontë's commentary on her siblings' experiences of tuberculosis in 1848.

Adelle Hay is a PhD student at the University of Loughborough. Her research focuses on Anne Brontë's changing literary and personal reputations, and how these have been affected by the posthumous editing of her works. Prior to starting at Loughborough, Adelle had trained as a physicist, graduating from the University of York with an MPhys in 2010. Adelle's lifelong interest in books and literature eventually resulted in a career change and in 2020, after three years working as a bookbinder, her first book *Anne Brontë Reimagined: A View From The Twenty-first Century* was published by Saraband. Her technical experience and lifelong interest in the Brontës inspired the PhD project, which combines digital humanities, textual editing, and cultural heritage.