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FOLKLORE, FEAR, AND THE FEMININE: GHOSTS AND OLD WIVES' TALES IN *WUTHERING HEIGHTS*

By Paula M. Krebs

WUTHERING HEIGHTS IS HAUNTED, of course. But not only by the ghost of Catherine, who harries Heathcliff and terrifies Lockwood. Not only by the shades of Heathcliff and Catherine (or Laurence Olivier and Merle Oberon) who set off toward Penistone Crag. The ghosts in *Wuthering Heights* are not Gothic ghosts nor the ghosts from Victorian magazine ghost stories. They represent a different kind of haunting altogether — the haunting of the Victorian middle classes by fear of the people they designated as “the folk.”

The field of folklore studies was born in the Victorian period. Amateurs who had collected “antiquities” — customs, songs, stories — became, in the early years of Victoria’s reign, “folklorists,” with their own professional societies and publications. These early Victorian collectors of folklore were participating in a larger project to help cement an English national identity by establishing an Englishness that depended on the exclusion of certain cultural groups. Much work has been done on the importance of a colonial Other to a developing sense of Englishness in the Victorian era, and theories about race, ethnicity, and evolution certainly interacted with popular ideas about imperialism in the public imagination. But, as Nancy Armstrong has noted, the growth of Victorian folklore studies also helped to construct the “folk” — especially Celts and rural northerners — as Other. When folklorists and their readers in nineteenth-century Britain excluded the folk from their category of Englishness, they did it by relegating the folk to the margins; the folk thus became at once the Other against which the middle-class English could be defined and a symbol of a cultural past that the English had transcended. British folklorists helped to create the folk as Other through a gendered trope: the image that recurs throughout folklore studies in this period, and indeed throughout popular understandings of folklore even today, is the trope of the male folklorist from the city (or university) drawing information from the folksy “old wife.”

In 1846, antiquary William Thoms renamed himself and his fellow researchers; they were henceforth to be known as collectors not of “antiquities” but of “folk-lore” (Dorson 75). This new label signalled a shift in the way such field researchers thought of their material. Antiquaries had considered the customs, traditions, songs, and superstitions they

collected as holdovers from a more primitive age, the oral equivalent of the potshard. But once these customs and tales were categorized as folklore, they became associated more closely with the people from whom they were gathered. Folktales or songs or customs were valued not so much as independent items, like physical relics, but as revelations about the true natures of the “folk” — Celts, northerners, peasants, old wives.

In the seventeenth century, antiquarian John Aubrey had described folklore as “Old-wives Tales” that had been displaced by increased literacy: “the poor people [now] understand letters; and many good Bookes . . . have putt all the old Fables out of doors: and the divine art of Printing and Gunpowder have frighted away Robin-goodfellow and the Fayries” (qtd. in Dorson 5–6). Folklore, associated with women, is directly opposed to man-made products such as “Bookes” and gunpowder.

Evolution was already in the air in Britain in the 1840s, although *Origin of Species* was not published until 1859. By 1852 Herbert Spencer was asserting in the *Westminster Review* that evolutionary struggle, by eliminating the impure specimens of a race, led to a constantly improving racial “type” (Jones 6). With geology, biology, and anthropology arguing that the progress of humanity depended on some humans besting others in the struggle for survival, it was not surprising that arguments for evolution quickly overlapped with the political and imperial aims of Britain. If humanity itself moved forward when superior types defeated inferior types, certainly the British conquest of other peoples could be seen as part of that struggle.

By 1871, anthropologist E. B. Tylor’s *Primitive Culture* had helped folklorists to see their work as part of a grand scheme to assemble from within contemporary cultures those folk traditions that were survivals from “primitive cultures,” evidence of the progress of civilizations.¹ But the folk elements in *Wuthering Heights*, most of which are associated with the “old wife” Nelly, simply are not primitive. To examine the novel as if it “indicates that local cultures continued to govern personal life in many parts of England” (Armstrong 254) is to make Emily Brontë a folklorist. Not only was Brontë no folklorist, but she actually seems to work against the ideological assumptions of the new folklorists. *Wuthering Heights* incorporates folk genres in a way that allows them a status and authority that they could never have had in the accounts recorded by Victorian folklorists, accounts in which narrators were always already discredited, old-fashioned, uneducated “old wives.”

In *Wuthering Heights*, however, the folklorist is haunted by the folk. As we will see in the relationship between the folklorist figure of Lockwood and his informant, Nelly Dean, the relative positions of folklorist and folk are not easy to pin down. Nelly tells ghost stories and sings folksongs, but her place is never as clear as Lockwood initially thinks it is. Victorian folklorists saw folk custom and lore as survivals of earlier cultures, but folk elements in *Wuthering Heights* carry no such connotations. They do not indicate the primitive or the rustic. Instead, in *Wuthering Heights*, folklore functions like Freud’s uncanny; in the novel’s folkloric references, as in the uncanny, a cultural past resurfaces in psyches in which the primitive had been deeply buried. Folklore in Brontë’s novel reveals middle-class English culture’s repressed, unwanted links with the cultures of those who were living artifacts of a British cultural past. In this sense, the relationship between Nelly and Lockwood uses and then overturns the standard trope of the folklorist and the old wife.

Wuthering Heights’s ghost stories do not read like the popular literary ghost stories that boosted the sales of Victorian periodicals.² Nor do they resemble the occult episodes

in Gothic novels. Instead, the stories of encounters with ghosts in the novel read like those in nineteenth-century collections of folklore. They are folk memorats, or first-person narratives of encounters with the supernatural. Brontë resists early Victorian folklorists' nostalgia for their own culture's past by making use of the substance of folkloric writing but embedding that material in fiction. In refusing to condescend to the folk about whom she writes, but also in refusing to be one of them, Brontë sets *Wuthering Heights* in an ambiguous, liminal position in relation to both the early Victorian novel and the newly professionalized discipline of folklore studies. This liminality helps to explain the less-than-enthusiastic reception of *Wuthering Heights* in an age during which the success of the novel had come to depend on an appeal to the English middle classes. While the novel was being established as high literature, Emily Brontë was integrating folk forms into her novel in a less condescending way than did Walter Scott or any of her literary predecessors who laid claim to the culture of the folk.³

Nancy Armstrong's fascinating "Emily's Ghost: The Cultural Politics of Victorian Fiction, Folklore, and Photography" discusses the relation of *Wuthering Heights* to what she calls "internal colonialism." For Armstrong, *Wuthering Heights*

dramatizes the process by which certain textualizing procedures produced a cultural periphery within Great Britain and subordinated that periphery to an English core. But the novel also shows how these same procedures changed the consumers of such information who situated themselves at the core. They evidently began to identify precisely the features that branded other people as peripheral with their own most irrational, primitive, and even perverse selves, and they understood that their right to master others was based on the not-altogether-secure ability to master the Other in themselves. (248)

Lockwood's "venture into the north of England . . . dramatizes the inadequacy of [his] stereotyping and destabilizes the classification system that his stereotypes presuppose" (248). Lockwood may be seen as the folklorist who runs into trouble because, at the same time that he makes the rural inhabitants of Yorkshire into peripheral figures, he also is forced to recognize the presence within himself of the peripheral. Provocative as it is, however, Armstrong's interpretation is limited. For, although *Wuthering Heights* may dramatize internal colonialism, the structure of the novel undermines that very colonialism. While the character of middle-class Lockwood contains elements of the culturally marginal, so does *Wuthering Heights*: Brontë's novel is a high-culture form that incorporates and displays folk artifact. Armstrong has demonstrated the function of colonialism within *Wuthering Heights*, but perhaps even more significant is the function of *Wuthering Heights* within colonialism, within the new construction of the folk that was occurring in the 1840s alongside the consolidation of the literary hegemony of the novel.

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries the novel developed as a narrative of domestic life and relationships, distinguished from the fantastic and the supernatural of the romance and the Gothic. While folklore studies was concerned largely with oral narratives, narratives by and about peasants and uneducated populations (albeit captured by and produced for the middle classes), the novel was a narrative by, for, and largely about the middle classes, as the work of Richard D. Altick, John Sutherland, and others has shown. Folklore was considered unmediated — the direct expression of a culture's superstitions, stories, and emotions — rather than carefully crafted, as the novel was.

Wuthering Heights's appropriation of folk forms without condescension marks the novel as an anti-colonial text.

The novel's improved status in the nineteenth century was linked to the class status of its authors and readers. J. Cordy Jeaffreson, in his 1858 *Novels and Novelists, from Elizabeth to Victoria*, declared that the novel had succeeded the romance as the premier fiction genre: "Novels are now the poems of the time — prose-poems, and they are composed by the authors who in any previous age would have expressed their thoughts in verse" (306). Novels were written and read, according to Jeaffreson, by "the leading men of every department of intellectual activity — lawyers, physicians, clergymen, men of science, statesmen" (306). This new legitimacy for the novel on the basis of class could only be undermined by a work like *Wuthering Heights*, with its "crude" characters and its credit to folk custom and superstition. It is no wonder that Brontë's novel got, at best, mixed reviews.

Indeed, *Wuthering Heights* was reviewed harshly because its characters and dialogue were seen as too rough for the novel-reading public. "[T]here is such a general roughness and savageness in the soliloquies and dialogues here given as never should be found in a work of art," said G. W. Peck in the *American Review* (qtd. in Allott 1990, 573), adding that the author was "one who is evidently unfamiliar with and careless of acquiring, the habits of refined society" (575). British reviewers, too, saw the novel as "rough." The *Britannia* reviewer asserted that "[t]he uncultured freedom of native character presents more rugged aspects than we meet with in educated society. Its manners are not only more rough but its passions are more violent. It knows nothing of those breakwaters to the fury of tempest which civilized training establishes to subdue the harsher workings of the soul" (qtd. in Allott 1974, 223). *Wuthering Heights* was reviewed as if it were unmediated, like folklore — not created with an audience in mind, but "a youthful story, written for oneself in solitude," according to Sydney Dobell (qtd. in Allott 1974, 278). *Wuthering Heights* was annoying because it did not seem to fit within many critics' parameters for the proper subject matter and style of a novel. What it contained instead was both subject matter and style associated with the folk, as recorded by folklorists.

Most real ghosts had disappeared from middle-class English culture by the 1847 publication of the novel, replaced with fictional counterparts in magazine stories. But nineteenth-century folklore studies was busy chronicling a ghost-ridden past for the English. Early Victorian folklore collector M. A. Denham declared that late eighteenth-century England had been "overrun with ghosts, boggles, bloody-bones, spirits, demons" (4). Lockwood's 1801 visit to *Wuthering Heights* falls in the transitional time for English ghosts. Real antiquaries in Lockwood's time had not yet given up looking for tales of ghosts in England. Yet a servant like Nelly did not care to admit to belief in spirits and bloody-bones. Brontë's not-quite ghost story takes place in that border time between the days of ghost-believers and the time of the destruction of haunts and haunters by industrialization. When he sees that Heathcliff believes in Catherine's ghost, the southern Lockwood calls Heathcliff's reaction "raving" and "folly" (33). For Lockwood, the ghost could only have been a dream. Yet the inhabitants of the region around the Heights, the people Nelly calls "country folks" (265), see ghosts and are not ashamed to admit it. Why should we be surprised that lurking just behind the sophisticated exterior of the cultured Lockwood is a man who would be terrified and threatened by a dream that would link him with ghost-believers? People like him had only recently risen above that kind of superstition.

Because England seemed to have lost (or overcome) much of its folk heritage by the nineteenth century, Victorian collectors such as Thomas Crofton Croker went tramping off to Celtic regions for their material. Croker found in the 1820s that the “kitchen of some country houses in Ireland presents in no ways a bad modern translation of the ancient feudal hall” (qtd. in Dorson 46). Ireland was the living past of England. In his *Fairy Legends and Traditions of the South of Ireland*, Croker collected legends, but not with the nostalgic purpose of “perpetuat[ing] a creed which has disappeared.” Instead he wanted to expose the legends so as to prevent the Irish “retard[ing] the progress of their civilization” (Croker vii). The Irish, to their detriment, remained more closely linked to the feudal past than the English, whose education and industrial progress had, according to Croker, moved them out of the feudal age.

While the Irish, and other Celtic peoples, were past to the English present, they were also feminine to the English masculine. Matthew Arnold wrote in 1866 that the Celts had greater “delicacy and spirituality” than the English middle classes and could serve as an example for those “Philistines” to help them rise to take up their proper role in British culture (5).⁴ Yet, while Arnold laments the loss in England of the folk elements that Celtic regions retained (“where the past still lives, where every place has its tradition, every name its poetry” [14]), he does believe in the inevitability of progress. He holds that progress, for Great Britain, means the swallowing up of things Celtic into things English, “a consummation to which the natural course of things irresistibly tends; it is a necessity of what is called modern civilisation” (20). Arnold’s praise of the Welsh for their refusal to abandon their folk traditions resembles nineteenth-century folklorists’ nostalgia for the bygone customs of the English, a nostalgia, as Armstrong notes, tinged with condescension (252–53). For some folklorists, locating the romantic past in “the folk” was a way of romanticizing their own past: while they thought it was nice that valuable aspects of their past were still being lived by someone, they didn’t want to be held back by them themselves.

Yet although *Wuthering Heights* associates northerners or Celts with the supernatural, it avoids the condescension of the folklorists. For one example, we can turn to Brontë’s use of the Irish banshee motif for the ghost of Cathy at Lockwood’s window. Brontë might have picked up the banshee image from the tales of her Irish father, Patrick, but the *Wuthering Heights* banshee bears some striking resemblances to a tale recounted by Walter Scott in the notes to *The Lady of the Lake*, which Katherine Ankenbrandt and J. F. Goodrich have shown that Emily Brontë read. Scott recounts the “true” story of an Irish ghost as seen by an Englishwoman, and the similarities between the Fanshaw and the Earnshaw ghosts are striking. In telling the story, Scott allows that prominent English people could see ghosts, but only in the past, and only in Ireland. When Brontë uses the form of the ghost memorat in *Wuthering Heights*, however, she does not use the same distancing technique. Instead, she divorces the memorat both from the tone of quaintness used by Scott and the condescension used by Victorian folklorists.

Let us first examine Scott’s ghost memorat for its similarities to Brontë’s. A prominent Royalist during the civil wars, Lady Anne Fanshawe (as everyone but Scott spells it) was in Ireland visiting a friend in his “ancient baronial castle, surrounded with a moat,” when, as Scott tells it:

At midnight, she was awakened by a ghastly and supernatural scream, and looking out of bed, beheld, by the moonlight, a female face and part of the form, hovering at the window. The

distance from the ground, as well as the circumstance of the moat, excluded the possibility that what she beheld was of this world. The face was that of a young and rather handsome woman, but pale, and the hair, which was reddish, loose, and dishevelled. (348–49)

When Lady Fanshawe asked her host about the apparition, he told her that a relative had died that night in the castle and that, whenever a member of the family died, the apparition surfaced. According to the host, the apparition was “a woman of inferior rank, whom one of my ancestors degraded himself by marrying” and whom he had then drowned in the moat (349).

The Fanshawe ghost is clearly a banshee, “an Irish death spirit . . . who wails only for members of the old families” (Briggs 14). Banshees were always female, and they were often associated with women’s work or uniquely female suffering such as death in childbirth. The ghost of Catherine bears at least a strong family resemblance to an Irish banshee, although Brontë’s banshee does not wail for members of old Irish families. Nor does she wail for the death of a *Wuthering Heights* family member. Instead, she is a female ghost who wails for herself, for her own isolation and death. Brontë’s excision of the Irishness of the banshee folk motif in *Wuthering Heights* makes the femaleness, rather than the Irishness, of the banshee its salient quality. Thus the novel does not mark the folk element as foreign but locates it within the social structures of *Wuthering Heights* and Thrushcross Grange, visible to both Heathcliff and Lockwood.

Armstrong sees the ghost at Lockwood’s window as “an instance of the conflict that occurred when the cultural past refused to die and carried on a struggle to control meaning at the local level” (254). The ghost “places regional culture in the past” (255), and it cannot be accounted for when it appears in the dominant culture. But in *Wuthering Heights* the struggle to control meaning takes place at another level as well, in the person not of the gentleman observer, the folklorist/tourist Lockwood, but of the informant, Nelly. Lockwood fails when he uses books to try to block out a ghost in his dream; he finds that he must learn from the novel’s old wife, Nelly, if he is to understand what he has experienced. His encounter with a ghost causes Lockwood to ask Nelly for the history of the Heights and Grange families. Although he presents his ghost episode not as a straightforward encounter with the supernatural but as a dream, the dream contains information to which the dreamer could have had no access: the child at the window wails that she has been a waif for twenty years, lost on the moor; she calls herself Catherine Linton, the name Catherine had died with as an adult, even though Lockwood “had read *Earnshaw* twenty times for Linton” (30). Although the ghost’s story accords with what we and Lockwood later come to learn about Catherine’s life, at the time of the ghost’s appearance, Lockwood has not yet heard that story. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick remarks, Lockwood “will spend the remainder of the book learning enough about the Heights and Grange families to make it impossible for him simply to dismiss his apparition as a mere individual figment” (106). Lockwood dreams a ghost and then finds out that he could not have dreamt her. He needs an old wife to make sense of his dream, needs folktales if he is to understand his own experience.

The ghost-at-the-window memorat is central to the function of *Wuthering Heights* as a liminal text, a text between folklore and literature. The scene is full of border-crossings. Lockwood narrates what happens when, trying to stop a fir-bough rattling against the window, he finds the window locked: “‘I must stop it, nevertheless!’ I muttered, knocking

my knuckles through the glass, and stretching an arm out to seize the importunate branch" (30). Instead of the branch, he finds himself gripping "the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand" the owner of which pleads in "a most melancholy voice," "Let me in — let me in!" (30):

As it spoke, I discerned, obscurely, a child's face looking through the window. Terror made me cruel; and, finding it useless to attempt shaking the creature off, I pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bed-clothes. (30)

This weak, silly man had been inappropriately, ridiculously courteous to young Cathy, the one young woman we have seen him meet. What could prompt him to rip open the flesh of a child in such a way?

The scene is not a conventional literary encounter with a ghost. We do not read this episode as we would a self-contained literary ghost story or Gothic tale, in which the ghost frightens us. Catherine's ghost is not scary; *Lockwood* frightens us. As Dorothy van Ghent notes, "The cruelty of the dream is the gratuitousness of the violence wrought on a child by an emotionally unmotivated vacationer from the city, dreaming in a strange bed" (161). Sedgwick takes this further, asserting that with Lockwood's "sadism," "the novel is forcibly opened up to the possibilities of terror, where before there had only been unpleasantness and secretiveness" (106). The ghost allows for human cruelty, which is substantially more dangerous than a moaning dead girl outside a window.

While Van Ghent and Sedgwick acknowledge Lockwood's vicious attack on a child, neither stresses that the attack is one of an adult man on a small girl. For Lockwood himself, Catherine is an "it," not a "she." His refusal to name her gender lets Lockwood avoid acknowledging the sexual nature of his attack: he makes Catherine bleed, all over his bedclothes. Lockwood's refusal to acknowledge the sexual nature of his attack in the dream is in keeping with what he has already recorded about his dealings with women. According to him, he had been unable to speak to the woman he fancied while at the seaside. He saw her as a "goddess," but only "as long as she took no notice" of him (15). He could not approach her, but, he writes, "if looks have language, the merest idiot might have guessed I was head over ears" (15). The woman

understood me at last, and looked a return — the sweetest of all imaginable looks. And what did I do? I confess it with shame — shrunk icily into myself, like a snail; at every glance retired colder and farther; till, finally, the poor innocent was left to doubt her own senses, and, overwhelmed with confusion at her supposed mistake, persuaded her mamma to decamp. (15)

Lockwood tells us that he is completely unprepared to deal with any manifestation of sexual desire, even a look, from a woman. Where direct discussion of desire was impermissible, Lockwood could be comfortable only so long as he was the only party permitted to gaze with desire. Lockwood is a caricature of middle-class Victorian male fears of female sexuality, and his failure to express or accept desire could not be more different from the grand passion of Heathcliff for Catherine.

Still, even given that Lockwood has proven himself afraid of women's sexuality and even, perhaps, of his own, his reaction to the pleas of the girl at his window is shocking.

He tries to get rid of the ghost by slitting its wrists, a method most commonly associated with suicide, not assault. Lockwood tries to shut out this bleeding girl/woman/self by barricading the window with books, but her wailing continues to haunt him; books cannot block out this passion. And what Lockwood cannot block out with books isn't a girl at all; it is a ghost, which is something he, a good, middle-class English gentleman not living in a Horace Walpole novel, should never have seen. In order to understand what he had experienced, Lockwood must turn to Nelly, his connection to the Heights and the novel's connection between folklore and fiction.

Nelly, the unreliable narrator's unreliable narrator, is a source of various folk forms, including the folksong and the memorat, but she is herself on the margins. She is both servant and family, unschooled and well-read, rustic and intelligent. Although Lockwood knows who is the master and who the servant, he is a bit uncomfortable with Nelly. He comments to her: "Excepting a few provincialisms of slight consequence, you have no marks of the manners that I am habituated to consider as peculiar to your class" (58). Nelly's "few provincialisms," the marks of her Yorkshire origins, are also the marks of her class as a servant. Recognizing that Lockwood is complimenting her for being superior to what he assumes a Yorkshire servant to be, Nelly explains the reason for her surprising paucity of provincialisms: books. She replies, "I have read more than you would fancy, Mr. Lockwood. You could not open a book in this library that I have not looked into, and got something out of also" (59). Although Nelly sings folk ballads, ghost stories make her nervous; they are a folk genre as well, but an unsafe one. Likewise, Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship makes her nervous; it is a male-female relationship, but an unsafe one. So it is in Nelly that the novel locates its challenge to genre and convention. Folklore and fiction uncomfortably meet in Nelly, and the intersection produces the central tension, the reader's own discomfort with the brutality that characterizes Heathcliff and Cathy's relationship: is their love transcendent or perverted?

At the end of the novel, Nelly still resists local residents' stories of the ghosts of Heathcliff and Cathy walking the moors: "Idle tales, you'll say, and so say I . . . [Y]et still, I don't like being out in the dark, now; and I don't like being left by myself in this grim house" (265). Nelly cannot convince herself that Heathcliff and Cathy are confined by their graves, even though she presents herself as more sophisticated than those locals who believe in ghosts.⁵ Nelly's unreliability as a narrator has of course been traced to her marginal positioning: she is part of the family grouping, yet she is, in the final analysis, a servant.⁶ Her position is analogous to that of the early-nineteenth-century folk informant. Celts or peasants or working-class citizens of Great Britain who give the middle-class folklorist access to folklore cannot enjoy the privileges of full citizenship in the nation of the folklorists, and neither can women. The place of women in nineteenth-century folklore is ambiguous, as Nina Auerbach and U. C. Knoepfelmacher have shown. As the spinster of tales, the woman is Mother Goose, the source of the fairy tales that did not have the status of real "literature." We cannot see Nelly as a straightforward folk informant in the mode of the narratives of Victorian folklorists, yet we cannot deny her function in the novel as a bridge between the folk and the modern, and her character's function as a bridge between folklore and fiction in the novel's attempt to straddle genres.

Yet *Wuthering Heights* demonstrates the failure of progress to eliminate old wives' tales: all of Lockwood's middle-class sophistication and even his violence fails to exorcise

the ghost of Catherine. Books and violence — in other words, printing and gunpowder — are useless; only old wives' tales themselves can lay the ghosts of *Wuthering Heights* to rest. Lockwood needs access to the past, through the liminal figure of the teller of tales — the spinster, the old wife who has no husband, "Mrs. Dean." And Nelly must make the ghost believable by making clear its origins. When Nelly tells the tale of Catherine and Heathcliff, she gives Lockwood access to the folk-feminine from which his male, middle-class positioning has excluded him. But although Lockwood remains unable to use this new information, finding himself, at the end of the book, unable to understand "how any one could ever imagine unquiet slumbers for the sleepers in that quiet earth" (266), we readers understand. We have had the story through the layers of both Nelly's and Lockwood's narration and so can make use of both the folk-feminine of Nelly and the folklorist-masculine of Lockwood.

Nelly links the folk community of the Heights to the world of Lockwood. To examine her role as a folk informant in the novel and to see its analogies to the position of the folk and, especially, of the Celts, we must focus on Nelly's narration of folk events.⁷ Nelly first narrates such an event when she tells of Hindley's wraith:

[I]t appeared that I beheld my early playmate seated on the withered turf, his dark, square head bent forward, and his little hand scooping out the earth with a piece of slate.

"Poor Hindley!" I exclaimed, involuntarily.

I started — my bodily eye was cheated into a momentary belief that the child lifted its face and stared straight into mine! It vanished in a twinkling; but, immediately, I felt an irresistible yearning to be at the Heights. Superstition urged me to comply with this impulse. Supposing he should be dead! I thought — or should die soon! — supposing it were a sign of death! (94)

Forced to admit to her "superstition," Nelly experiences what Freud would later call the uncanny. She finds the experience disturbing because "primitive beliefs which have been surmounted seem once more to be confirmed" (Freud 249). However, since Nelly is disturbed by the event she narrates, she is squarely in the camp of the civilized. If folklorists operated under an assumption that the folk were living relics of an earlier, more primitive civilization, then Nelly must not be one of the folk because she is not happy to find the superstitions of the folk surfacing in her consciousness. Thus, even if we see this singer of folksongs and teller of family stories as a folk figure, an informant, *Wuthering Heights* does not allow us to see her as primitive or naive.

Nelly does tell the tale of Hindley's wraith as a true story of an experience with the supernatural, as a folkloristic memorat. The story has no strong narrative function as such an event might in a Gothic novel, where it would warn of upcoming death.⁸ Instead, the narrator's memorat of the child's appearance is a folklore form interpolated into a work of fiction. In a novel that has been seen to rely on fairy-tale elements,⁹ the incident of Hindley's wraith is a different kind of folklore — more "authentic," less literary. And in using it as she does, Brontë undermines the English folklorists who presented their own informants, their Nelly-figures, as naive survivals themselves, old wives.

Wuthering Heights has been examined for concealed elements of colonialism: was Heathcliff an Indian? was he part African? Irish?¹⁰ Nancy Armstrong's reading highlights the novel's "internal colonialism," with Lockwood in the role of the folklorist in

service of the interests of a southern, middle-class elite. But the novel itself can be placed in relation to colonialism within Britain. The very structure of *Wuthering Heights* undermines the distinctions laid out by Armstrong — distinctions between folklorist and informant, between folklore and fiction. It is not in the character of Lockwood that *Wuthering Heights* subverts the interests of colonialism; it is in the very structure of the novel.

The novel's careful use of folklore elements prevents it from falling into the cultural imperialism Nancy Armstrong locates in Lockwood. When he sees a ghost, Lockwood reacts by revealing his weakness and his discomfort at being associated with the rural northerners from whom, despite his professed friendliness, he holds himself apart. As Armstrong asserts, he is forced to confront his links with folk culture, and he doesn't like it. But, whereas Armstrong sees Cathy's ghost as symptomatic of how "contending ways of making meaning once struggled for possession of the same cultural space" (251), I argue for the significance of the ghost *as a ghost* in a novel full of the ghosts, folksongs, superstitions, and customs that are the stuff of folklore. The ghosts in *Wuthering Heights*, including the one Lockwood sees, are not Gothic ghosts or magazine ghost-story ghosts; they are folklore ghosts, with roots in Ireland, England's rural past, and British working-class culture. The key to understanding the ghosts in *Wuthering Heights* is not in its character's reactions to the wraiths they encounter but in the structure of the novel itself. The novel sets up an opposition between what the early antiquarian John Aubrey had labeled "Bookes" and "Old-wives Tales." Books should have driven the ghosts out of England, even the rural north. But Lockwood cannot block out the ghost of Catherine with books, nor can what is printed in books help him understand that ghost. He must turn to an "old wife" to explain the ghost, if not explain it away.

When Nelly explains the ghost at the window, she offers an explicit history of class and gender relations at the Heights and Grange. Readers of folklore narratives — old wives' tales — understand that banshees are wailing female ghosts, and Walter Scott's use of folklore allows us to understand the banshee as a woman who had violated her class position. *Wuthering Heights*'s reliance on an old wives' tale within a realist novel allows us to understand the gender politics that limit Cathy's choices, the class dynamic that produces Heathcliff, as well as the gender politics that limit Heathcliff's choices and the class dynamic that produces Cathy. As Armstrong points out, *Wuthering Heights*'s place in the history of Victorian colonial encounters has to do with Lockwood's encounter with *Wuthering Heights*; but more important is Lockwood's function as a folklorist proxy within a radically innovative and ideologically subversive narrative structure. *Wuthering Heights* challenges the colonialism that influences the very form of the realist novel. The novel is a crucial sign of middle-class culture's displacement of folk culture, and Emily Brontë's use of folk forms in her novel is a challenge to the new hegemony of the urban, the industrial, the southern over the rural, rustic, and northern. To see the full implications of colonialism in *Wuthering Heights*, we must see *Wuthering Heights* in the context of the history of narrative, both folk and fiction. To adopt folk techniques in the way Brontë does is not imperial acquisition; it is a refusal of the privilege of the "pure" novel form, and thus tribute to the folk elements that the genre of the novel is helping to displace.

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NOTES

1. See, for example, Jones, Lorimer, and Hogden.
2. See, for example, Cox and Gilbert's introductions as well as Jennifer Uglow's.
3. As Simpson has shown, Emily Brontë chose carefully among folk customs for the ones she incorporated into her novel. Folk tradition in *Wuthering Heights* does not indicate social or cultural backwardness. Ankenbrandt notes that the ballads in the novel are not Yorkshire songs at all but either invented by Brontë herself ("Fairy Annie's Wedding") or taken from other, distinctly non-Yorkshire sources. Goodrich examines "ballad-beliefs" in *Wuthering Heights*, "a novel that preserves them, intact, as part of a much more complex pattern," and portrays Brontë as "capable of receiving, as it were from afar, the vibrations and rhythms of ancient belief and experience as clearly as the impressions of her own locality" (175). My own view of Brontë's use of folklore is less mystic.
4. Cairns and Richards point out that Arnold's writing on Celtic literature owed much to Ernest Renan's characterization of the Celts as "an essentially feminine race" (46).
5. Simpson explores Nelly's complex attitudes toward superstition.
6. See Eagleton.
7. Nelly's relationship to the folk was more complicated than that of Tabby, the Brontë servant who, according to Gaskell, lived in the Haworth area in the days before the factories, when fairies were still seen in the valley. Tabby did not, apparently, see the fairies herself, but she knew people who had. Tabby attributed the demise of the fairies to the coming of industry; Gaskell quotes her as saying, "It wur the factories as had driven 'em away" (49–50).
8. Simpson asserts that the phantom child Nelly sees "does forebode Hindley's doom" because "it comes at the time when Heathcliff has set him irrevocably on the road to ruin and death" (56). Yet Hindley does not die until a year (and six chapters) later.
9. See, for example, Leavis.
10. See, for example, Meyer and, for Heathcliff as "simianized Irish," Michie.

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