

## “A poet, a solitary”: Emily Brontë—Queerness, Quietness, and Solitude

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Abstract: Emily Brontë is often remembered for her extreme reserve and was clearly an atypical woman for her time. Although she was a figure who struggled within the conventional social fabric, rarely does empathy find a place in writings about her. This paper revisits some of the popular and dominant conceptions of Emily’s reserve and seeks to find a more productive—even compassionate—way of understanding her preference for solitude. Emily’s writings—especially her poems, provide such an opportunity to do so. While recognizing the negative and undoubtedly painful expressions of emotion in Emily’s oeuvre, the analysis argues that more positive insights into Emily’s desire for solitude can equally be found in her writing. Accordingly, drawing on queer theoretical sources, the paper posits a revised reading of this “difficult” Brontë that seeks to open alternative possibilities for understanding Emily’s introverted nature.

Keywords: Emily Bronte, reserve, solitude, Elizabeth Gaskell, queer, poetry, quietness

In May 1871, Charlotte Brontë’s lifelong friend, Ellen Nussey, published her reminiscences of the Brontë family in *Scribner’s Monthly*. Recalling the first visit she made to their home in 1833, Ellen conveyed her earliest memory of the then fifteen-year-old Emily. In her comment, which focuses largely on Emily’s physicality, Nussey noted that although Emily had “very beautiful eyes—kind, kindling eyes,” she “talked very little” and “did not look at you often; she was too reserved” (75). Nussey’s sketch of Emily is, overall, rather flattering, but this statement

is significant, for it is one of the few instances where Emily's infamous reserve is associated (in the same breath) with kindness—a rarity in commentary on the younger Brontë. Emily's reticence is diluted by the positivity Nussey bestows on her eyes.

Nussey later expanded on her reflections to Clement King Shorter, one of Charlotte's early biographers, describing how

Emily's reserve *seemed* impenetrable, yet she was intensely loveable; she invited confidence in her moral power. Few people have the gift of looking and smiling as she could look and smile. One of her rare expressive looks was something to remember through life, there was such a depth of soul and feeling, and yet such a shyness of revealing herself. (179)

Nussey's phrasing—"seemed impenetrable"—coupled with her use of the modifier "yet" is instructive and indicates a complexity to Emily's reserve, suggesting that there was more to her than one might glean from an initial impression. Her second clause reinforces this by noting how Emily's reserve *might* be misconstrued as representative of her actual character.<sup>1</sup>

Nussey's remarks may seem banal, even trivial, on face value, but in the context of Brontë biography and scholarly writing about Emily they are important, given that her "solitude-loving" behavior (as Charlotte famously put it) is frequently criticized ("Selections" 319). Emily, as Lyndall Gordon surmises in *Outsiders*, is among a handful of canonical female authors deemed an "outsider," "outlaw," and "outcast" for their apparent standoffishness (back cover). She is, as Gordon phrases it, a woman who "lost" her reputation yet made her "outsider identity her own." Consequently, Emily has often been often been unfairly represented in select Bronte biographies and scholarly writings. Margaret Lane's 1907 conception of Emily is typical of such portrayals:

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<sup>1</sup> Aspects of this discussion can also be found in Claire O'Callaghan, *Emily Brontë Reappraised: A View from the Twenty-First Century* (Glasgow: Saraband, 2018).

Emily Brontë is now, as in her lifetime, an enigma. Little is known about her, for the events of her life were few, and about her imaginative life, the inner experience on which her genius fed, she was jealously secretive. She had no friends, wrote few letters, bestowed no confidences[.] In the end we are always brought back to *Wuthering Heights*, and her poems, as the only matter that can tell us anything. They tell us that she was a poet, a solitary, a mystic; a passionate being, capable of startling vehemence of feeling; yet so stoical, so harshly self-reliant and uncommunicative, that even her own sisters, who loved her, were locked out from the vital secrets of her nature. (“Introduction” v)

Though revering Emily’s “genius,” Lane characterizes Emily in negative terms, scrambling together commentary on her preference for privacy and her shyness with her penchant for solitude. Although she does not use the term “introvert,” she affirms Emily as such, reminding us that she “had no friends,” “bestowed no confidences,” and willingly “locked out” all other people from her “imaginative life.” Gone is any reference to Emily’s “moral power,” her smile, “kindling eyes,” or the idea that she was “intensely lovable,” as Ellen Nussey suggested (75).<sup>2</sup>

More recently, in contemporary news media, distorted accounts of Emily’s quietness and desire for solitude have been taken further by commentators who, using the slim evidence available about her person, have used these traits to posthumously “diagnose” her with various medical disorders.<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to Dana Stevens, “Emily’s reclusiveness bordered on

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<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that in his extended discussion of the siblings’ individual characters, Rick Rylance does not consider Emily’s quietness or reserve. Although discussing Charlotte and Anne’s personalities in depth, Rylance limits his discussion of Emily to a consideration of the way that judgments about her personality were assumed following the publication of *Wuthering Heights* (1847). See Rick Rylance, ““Getting on” ideology, personality and the Bronte characters” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*. Ed. Heather Glen, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002. 148-69.

<sup>3</sup> Aspects of this paragraph alongside an extended discussion of the ways in which Emily has been pathologizing can be found in O’Callaghan, *Emily Brontë Reappraised* (2018). Further, Emily Willingham has offered an astute response to Harman’s comments in her own journalist response. Willingham invaluably highlights the irresponsible implications of such a ‘freewheelin approach to characterizing what it means to be on the autistic spectrum’ by critiquing the casual manner of applying a disability retrospectively and on scant evidence (online).

agoraphobia,” an anxiety disorder that gravitates around a fear of public spaces and often finds expression in subjects not wanting to leave their home. Similarly, Maureen Adams asserts that today, Emily “might be classified as an avoidant personality disorder or an agoraphobic” (169). In turn, Dolores Malet ponders how Emily’s “reclusive, agoraphobic nature” led to the creation of a novel like *Wuthering Heights*. Elsewhere, Katherine Frank reads Emily’s “ongoing, interior fantasy world, and her social isolation,” coupled with her “refusal to eat and her extreme slenderness and preoccupation with food and cooking,” as characteristics of anorexia nervosa (3). For Claire Harman, meanwhile, Emily experienced Asperger’s Syndrome, a “diagnosis” delivered in off-the-cuff comments that she made in the promotion of her 2015 biography, *Charlotte Brontë: A Life*. The Press responded to Harman’s lurid suggestions with uninhibited speculation: “Emily Brontë may have had Asperger syndrome, according to the literary biographer Claire Harman,” wrote *The Guardian*. It is not my intention here to rehearse the irresponsible implications of retrospective diagnoses by non-medical experts nor to expand on the problems of uncritically accepting scant evidence and repackaging it for speculative diagnosis. However, with such a long history of ever-expanding interpretations of Emily’s character (or “biographical fancies,” as Gordon puts it), it is no wonder that Emily Brontë is still perceived today as “no normal being” (Gordon 67; Spark and Stanford 16).

In response to the above issues, this paper builds on Gordon’s endeavor to recontextualize Emily’s character through a similar rehabilitative approach and suggests a more productive—even compassionate—way of understanding Emily’s “antisocial” behavior and her penchant for solitude. It explores how and why Emily’s quietness and love of solitude have become pathologized, and considers what Emily’s poetry reveals about these ways of being. Because accounts of Emily’s character frequently bleed into observations

about her body, contemporary queer theory presents an avenue through which to re-read Emily in a manner that disrupts the habituated practice of viewing her punitively and inclines us to read empathetically.<sup>4</sup> Queer, as deployed critically here, does not designate a sexual category; rather, it signifies a resistance to norms, especially social, cultural, and gendered; a queer reading of Emily's quiet disposition, then, challenges an unhelpfully narrow model of identity determined by social norms and "appropriate" ways of being.<sup>5</sup> As such, this analysis argues that accounts of Emily's desire for solitude and reserve within the conventional social fabric might usefully be reconstituted through critical reappraisal and reread via queer theoretical frames. Moreover, it suggests that Emily's own articulations of solitude and separateness as expressed in a handful of poems embraces solitude and expresses agency and happiness in quietness. Together, this two-pronged approach invites a revised reading of this "difficult" Brontë that seeks to open alternative spaces for how we might understand Emily's introverted nature.

In approaching this argument, the analysis briefly rehearses and evaluates some of the formative accounts of Emily's reserve with a queer and critical eye in order to encourage a rereading of them empathetically. It then turns to Emily's own commentary on social interaction and solitude in her poems to provide insight into how she embraced quietness and solitude. An examination of two poems—"All day I've toiled but not with pain" (undated) and "How still, how happy! Those are the words" (1838)—enables insightful articulation of her thoughts on solitude.

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<sup>4</sup> My thinking on this topic has been influenced by Virginia Blain's invaluable scholarship on queerness and empathy in Victorian poetry. See "Queer Empathy; or, Reading/Writing the Queer in Victorian Poetry," *Literature Compass* 1 VI 059 (2004), pp. 1-13

<sup>5</sup> This paper draws on the work of queer Victorianism led by Sharon Marcus's inspiring work, *Between Women: Friendship, Desire and Marriage in Victorian England* (2007) and Holly Furneaux's *Queer Dickens* (2009), both of whom pursue readings of Victorian figures and plots considering the recent turn in queer studies away from associating non-normativity with transgression.

## Queerly misshapen

As is well documented in the field of Brontë studies, far less is known about Emily than Charlotte because so much of her early and private writings have been mislaid or destroyed. Her only novel and surviving poetry, a handful of perfunctory notes, some sketches, four “Diary Papers” that she wrote with Anne, a handful of essays written during her time in Belgium (known as the French “devoirs”), and the objects of her writing desk form the entirety of primary material that scholars and biographers have to form an impression of her. Together, they are the basis on which her literary legacy rests.

With so little bequeathed to us directly from Emily, alternative sources inform us about her character, mostly Charlotte’s reminiscences of her sister as expressed in her letters and the “Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell,” but also the anecdotes of family, servants and acquaintances. Elizabeth Gaskell’s account in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857) is of significance too. Such a small body of material not only makes Emily less accessible than Charlotte—who, by contrast, produced hundreds of letters in addition to several classic novels and a body of poetry—but also means that the few anecdotes and commentaries available about Emily both amplify and limit readers’ understanding of her; they are always second hand and therefore potentially unreliable.

Indeed, as Juliet Barker, Lucasta Miller, and Patsy Stoneman among others have valuably shown, following Emily’s death in 1848, successive biographical “custodians” negatively shaped Emily’s reputation in a manner that resulted in the prevailing destructive image. While not intending to rehearse the established details of these interventions, this discussion briefly highlights a handful of pertinent moments when biographers (or more properly, mythographers)

have negatively muddled together commentary on Emily's shyness and introverted character to "Other" her.

As is well known, Charlotte Brontë was the first to manufacture a contradictory account of Emily that deliberately scrambled fact with fiction in order to posthumously portray the Emily *she* wanted. The most famous of Charlotte's illusory sketches is the "Biographical Notice of Ellis and Acton Bell," something she composed in the immediacy of her siblings' deaths when she was emotionally raw and vulnerable. In her need to "explain briefly the origin and authorship of the books written by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell," Charlotte sought both to correct the misheld assumption that the Bells were the same person *and* respond to critics who had derided her sisters' works (308). Her aim was admirable, but Charlotte's portrayal of Emily was unkind and lay the basis for all subsequent misshapen conceptions of Emily as a recluse:

My sister Emily was not a person of demonstrative character, nor one on the recesses of whose mind and feelings even those nearest and dearest to her could, with impunity, intrude unlicensed [.] Under an unsophisticated culture, inartificial tastes, and an unpretending outside, lay a secret power and fire that might have informed the brain and kindled the veins of a hero; but she had no worldly wisdom; her powers were unadapted to the practical business of life; she would fail to defend her most manifest rights, to consult her most legitimate advantage[.] Her will was not very flexible, and it generally opposed her interest. Her temper was magnanimous, but warm and sudden; her spirit altogether unbending. (308; 312)

As her sister, Charlotte was considered best-placed to comment on Emily's personality, and her account was readily received. Although Charlotte concludes the "Notice" poignantly,

commenting that “for strangers [Emily and Anne] were nothing, for superficial observers less than nothing; but for those who had known them all their lives in the intimacy of close relationship, they were genuinely good and truly great” (312), the more virulent image of Emily as difficult was established. She was impenetrable, stubborn, and difficult.

However, it is the 1850 “Editor’s Preface to the new edition of *Wuthering Heights*” that amplifies the “trouble” with Emily’s quietness and love of solitude by conceiving her as a recluse:

My sister’s disposition was not naturally gregarious; circumstances favoured and fostered her tendency to seclusion; except to go to church or take a walk on the hills, she rarely crossed the threshold of home. Though her feeling for the people round was benevolent, intercourse with them she never sought; nor, with very few exceptions, ever experienced. (314)

The subsequent behavior Charlotte laments is framed by her use of the phrase “not naturally” to describe Emily’s disposition; as such, Emily’s person is presented negatively as what she was not, rather than what she *was* (or indeed any positivity). Here, Charlotte connects Emily’s “tendency to seclusion” with solitude but recasts it as alienation.<sup>6</sup> She also produces an image of Emily-as-hermit by suggesting that Emily “rarely crossed the threshold of home,” words which imply an unhealthy attitude to life in and beyond the domestic that is coupled by her sister’s unwillingness to talk. This reticence, as Charlotte relays it, is disjointed from Emily’s “benevolent” attitude precisely because she resists conversation. In Charlotte’s commentary,

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<sup>6</sup> Accounts of Emily’s homesickness are popular in Brontë biography, although as Lucasta Miller has shown—and as I have expanded upon in my book, *Emily Brontë Reappraised: A View from the Twenty-First Century* (2018)—Charlotte’s account is, perhaps, also one that’s embellished liberally. Nonetheless, Charlotte’s account continues to hold a dominant place and, of course, fuels the suggestion that Emily was agoraphobic (for which see footnote one). See Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth* (London: Vintage, 2002).



then, not only is Emily's quiet and shy nature critiqued: the censure also bleeds into observations about her body in the home or on the moors.

In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell reproduces and develops Charlotte's formation of Emily. Despite never meeting Emily in person, Gaskell declares that she disliked her: "all that I, a stranger, have been able to learn about her has not tended to give either me, or my readers, a pleasant impression of her," while Charlotte was, in contrast, "genuinely good, and truly great" (299). In the service of her saintly portrayal of Charlotte, Gaskell channels her antipathy through a critique of Emily's inhibited behavior and penchant for solitude. Using insights from a "school-friend" (in fact, Ellen Nussey), Gaskell reports:

The first impression made on the visit by the sisters of her school-friend was, that Emily was a tall, long-armed girl, more fully grown than her elder sister; extremely reserved in manner. I distinguish reserve from shyness, because I imagine shyness would please, if it knew how, whereas reserve is indifferent whether it pleases or not. Anne, like her eldest sister, was shy; Emily was reserved. (95)

What is notable here is how Gaskell distinguishes the siblings in a manner designed specifically to castigate Emily. Using inflammatory language to accentuate Emily's perceived rudeness, Gaskell labors on the contrast between Charlotte (and Anne's) more "positive" shyness with Emily's ambivalent aloofness, something which divides the sisters' shared behavior into a reductive normal vs. abnormal binary division. To classify their manner even more, Gaskell further attempts to distinguish between "reserve" and "shyness," but in doing so she unwittingly draws attention to the difficulty of conceptualizing reserve. After all, "reserve," which describes

the act of withholding as well as form of restraint, is not a term commonly used to describe one's self; it is generally a negative descriptor attributed by another.

Later, in a further comment on Emily, Gaskell remarks: "Emily—that free, wild, untameable spirit, never happy nor well but on the sweeping moors that gathered round her home—that hater of strangers, doomed to live among them, and not merely to live but slave in their service" (111). Again, Gaskell's words frame Emily's love of solitude and walking on the moors as negative, using provocative vocabulary to renovate her preference for seclusion to the charge of people-hating. Accordingly, throughout her commentary here (and more widely), Gaskell renders Emily as "deviant" for resisting social, cultural, and gendered norms.

However, Gaskell's criticism also inadvertently queers Emily. Emily's reserve—as distinct from Charlotte and Anne's more acceptable feminine shyness, more in keeping with mid-Victorian etiquette—does not correspond with typical gender norms and implies subversion. As Gaskell presents it, Emily resists—and fails at—"normalcy," and the contrast between her "normal" sisters (with their pleasing shyness) and Emily's "negative" reserve marks her out as resistant. Emily's queerness, then, as constructed by Gaskell, can be usefully understood by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's definition of queer as "the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically" (8). Emily does not signify "normally" as her sisters do, and in Gaskell's view that is because of her independence and reserve. Because she is "wild, untameable," Emily resists—or rather defies—easy categorization and normative ways of being (111).

Shorter's biography of Charlotte Brontë continues Gaskell's strategy to revere Charlotte by denigrating Emily through anecdotes from others who ostracize Emily because of her reserve.

Most of these narratives derive from Emily's period with Charlotte in Belgium in 1842, when Gaskell notes that she was "impenetrable to friendly advances" (175). One notable account comes from Emily's pupils, the Wheelwright sisters, who not only criticized Emily's reserve, but bullied her because of it, entwining Emily's behaviour with a critique of her appearance.

The Wheelwrights, like Gaskell, found Charlotte kind and friendly and invited her to their home, but felt differently about Emily. "I disliked her from the first," Laetitia, the eldest, reported: "She taught my three youngest sisters music for four months, much to my annoyance, as she would only take them in their play hours, so as not to curtail her own school hours, naturally causing many tears to small children, the eldest ten, the youngest not seven" (Barker 463). Laetitia's unforgiving perspective has been read as evidence of Emily's "self-centredness which allowed her to ride rough-shod over her young pupils' feelings," a view which fails to permit any authority or agency to Emily in the scheduling of her tutorials (despite the inconvenience to her pupils). However, the Wheelwrights also report a dislike of Emily's constrained and restricted character, which hindered their ability to "have fun." The sisters loved Charlotte and regularly invited her to socialize, but begrudged Emily's presence when she attended *because* she was quiet. During these occasions, they teased Emily's sense of dress, making fun of her hand-sewn clothes and old-fashioned sleeves, and laughing at how her skirt hung around her legs because she refused to wear petticoats, all of which draw attention to the queerness of Emily's presentation of self.<sup>7</sup> Charlotte, we know, happily conformed to modern ways of female dress, "learning from the Belgian girls to wear embroidered collars and tailor her dresses to flatter her small frame," but Emily refused to conform or socialize, and resisted the

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<sup>7</sup> In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Gaskell's cruel description of the matter is as follows: 'Emily had taken a fancy to the fashion, ugly and preposterous even during its reign, of gigot sleeves, and persisted in wearing them long after they were 'gone out.' Her petticoats, too, had not a curve or a wave in them, but hung down straight and long, clinging to her lanky figure.' (166).

sisters' peer pressure, quipping bluntly in retort that she wished "to be as God made me" (Reef 66). Often these words are repeated as further evidence of Emily's harsh, stern manner, but they also provide evidence of Emily's resistance to bullying as a result of non-conformity to feminine norms. She is singled out because she will not socialize with the Wheelwrights, and because she will not dress according to the latest female fashions (as Laetitia Wheelwright wishes her to do).

It is ironic, that, given her typical silence and widely documented reserve, Emily is reported to have "spoken back" on this occasion; the words she is purported to have spoken evoke ideas of naturalness and "normalcy" as a counter to the ostracizing effect of being Othered. This is one of the few times that Emily is reported to have spoken at any social occasion in Belgium, as other accounts of her time there suggest that she "hardly ever uttered more than a monosyllable" (Barker 461). Emily's singular response, though, agitated the already strained relations between herself and her pupils, consequently adding to the already established sense of her as different. To put it another way, in Butlerian terms, Emily's resistance to normative modes of femininity and sociality demarcate her as culturally unintelligible.

Together, these accounts of Emily's reserve have had a durable and troubling impact on her reputation, reducing her almost immediately to cliché and stereotype, but also, as I have shown, "Othered" her introverted behavior. Importantly, as Simone de Beauvoir notes, no willing subject "ever sets itself up" as "Other"; it is always a position born from another subject establishing themselves as "the One" that necessitates "setting up the Other over against itself" (17). It is perhaps apt that recent scholarship from across the social sciences and branches of psychology and medicine have reappraised the plight of the introvert and argued vehemently for social tolerance and inclusion, while highlighting the value and benefits that introversion often yields.

## **Songs of solitude**

Charlotte Brontë believed that her sister's poems were esteemed precisely because they were "not common effusions" and unlike "the poetry women generally write," comments that draw attention to Emily's queer gaze ("Biographical" 307-08).<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, Emily's poetry offers a space to analyze her thoughts on quietness and solitude. Sadly, they do not comment explicitly on the charge of being reserved, although a poem like "I am the only being whose doom" (1839) might be read, as Janet Gezari has argued, as a transformation from the position of victim to victimizer, especially since it moves from a sorrowful expression of loneliness and isolation to an expression of self-reliance (65).

In 2004, over fifty of Emily's poems were republished by Hesperus Poetry in a collection entitled *Poems of Solitude*. The pieces are broadly—and sometimes loosely—connected by expressions of solitude. Read together, the collection explores Emily's varied interrogations of solitude and isolation, some of which is (undoubtedly) painful. However, as Helen Dunmore reflects in her foreword, too often Emily's poetry is read as evidence of "emotional deprivation"; but "this is to fail to listen to what the poems are saying" because, "if she was solitary, Emily Brontë also knew how to use words to dissolve that barrier of solitude between her imagination and ours" (xi). Dunmore's words provide an alternative point of departure for approaching Emily's views on sociality and solitude that encourages readers to look more empathetically at them and to seek out the more positive expressions of isolation across her oeuvre.

In approaching Emily's poems, then, there is a temptation to read Emily's poems biographically, and try to make sense of her views this way. But, given that so much of her

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<sup>8</sup> In her inspiring work on Emily's poetry, Janet Gezari also reflects on Charlotte's comment and ponders why Emily's poems have been more frequently rehabilitated by modern gender scholars.

poetry derives from the imaginary world of Gondal, this seems problematic. Moreover, the author Muriel Spark, who has also written extensively on Emily, reminds us that

No poem by Emily Brontë can possibly tell us whether in 1836 she was unhappy; in 1838, bitter; in 1840, transported with mystic joy. We cannot tell the date on which these emotions stirred within her; we only know the month and year on which her poems were completed (for she has recorded the dates); from this we can tell only that on those particular dates ... she was absorbed in writing a poem about despair or rapture. (40)

While Spark rightfully speaks of the danger in solely reading Emily's poems autobiographically, she also alerts us to something else, namely, the powerful emotional responses Emily had to certain subjects on certain dates. With Spark's comments in mind, the poems considered here offer the opportunity to reflect on Emily's emotions and feelings about solitude, and to ponder how, if at all, they mediated her lived experience and imagination.<sup>9</sup>

"All day I've toiled, but not with pain" runs across five quatrains and uses a cross-rhyme scheme that mimics the balance and harmony of the poem's topic: the speaker has, as the first line indicates, "toiled" "all day," but not in a manner that has caused hardship ("in pain"), and has moved from work to leisure time ("All day" l). The poem is undated, but C. W. Hatfield, whose whose scholarship on Emily's poetry is widely respected, conjectures it was written between March and May 1837, when Emily was contentedly undertaking domestic duties at home, as her Diary Papers from June 1837 suggest. The speaker enjoys "The moonbeams" that shine "softly" at "eventide" (ll. 3-4). The imagery suggests that they are alone in a garden or outdoor space that they like to "wander at night," which also implies frequency to their twilight

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<sup>9</sup> Other than passing references by Janet Gezari, Rosalind Miles, and Robin Grove, there is no existing discussion of these poems in scholarly writing on Emily.

actions (l. 9). A sense of solitude is affirmed through Brontë's typical trait of describing states and / or motifs in the negative; in this case, there is "no snow upon the ground" and "No frost on wind or wave" (ll. 6-7). Thus, the repetition of "no" isolates the more positive conditions of the moment; a simple "south wind" with its "gentlest sound" that breaks the "icy grave" of winter (ll. 5, 7, 8). The speaker's pleasure from their solitary nighttime activity is affirmed by the following declaration that their "heart" is "as summer sunshine light / And warm as summer's sky" (ll. 11-12). However, the subsequent stanzas offer a sudden amplification of positivity as the speaker not only affirms the peaceful and happy nature of their solitude on this particular evening but passionately acclaims their emotional state as a formative one they wish to retain:

Oh, may I never lose the peace  
That lulls me gently now  
Though time should change my youthful face  
And years should shade my brow

True to myself and true to all  
May I be healthful still  
And curb away from passion's call  
And curb my own wild will (ll. 13-20)

Despite the ambiguous conclusion of the final lines, which Robin Grove suggests amounts to a "tightening of movement" in Emily's "will" (56), the first two lines in the next to last stanza here demonstrate how the speaker values peace, quiet, and solitude, especially as experienced in this moment. The shift in pacing from observation to introspection seems impulsive, suggesting a voice "through which the real power of her yearnings could speak" (57). Indeed, it is a moment

of solitude and insight that they wish to return to repeatedly as they age (“All day” ll. 15-16). This, as the final stanza indicates, is something the speaker perceives as being “true to myself” and “to others,” which suggests a more thoughtful and community-minded Emily.<sup>10</sup> In other words, the speaker is at peace with their own quietness because they gain such power from moments of solitude in nature and this, in turn, makes them a “better” person.

A similar expression of happiness and solitude can be found in Emily’s poem “How still, how happy! those are words.” Dated 7 December 1838 (a year after the previous poem), the eight-stanza piece describes a solitary moment where the speaker is quite literally “still” and “happy” in a moment of solitude (“How still” 1). As Maureen Peeck- O’Toole indicates, the speaker is alone outside in a winter setting and waiting patiently for spring (76). Peeck- O’Toole also suggests that the speaker is “surprised to find herself enjoy[ing] peace and tranquility.” However, in the third stanza, the speaker expresses a powerful love of solitude that does not suggest surprise but enjoyment and pleasure:

Where silence dwells is sweeter far  
Than laughing mirth’s most joyous swell,  
However pure its raptures are (ll. 10-12)

In this passionate observation, the poet’s love of solitude is positioned in direct opposition to social intercourse (signaled by laughing) with the affirmation of personal happiness “however pure” laughing and conversing might be. Put another way, ‘the individual does not feel lonely’; in fact, they prefer it.

Interestingly, though, the solitude is broken by the speaker’s invitation to an unidentified address, who is called to

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<sup>10</sup> I am very grateful to Professor Deborah Morse for noting the inference of community evidence in the final line of the poem.



“Come, sit down on this sunny stone:

’Tis wintery light o’er flowerless moors—

But sit—for we are all alone

And clear expand heaven’s breathless shores (“How still” ll. 13-16)

In her brief reading of the poem, Rosalind Miles has noted that there is a gentle and “effortless” tone to the direct address here (74). Naturally, the implication of being alone with another evokes intimacy and, according to literary convention, we might assign conventional gender roles to the presumed speaker of the poem (as male) to a presumed female recipient and read this as a moment of seduction.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, scholarship on Emily Brontë’s poetry has often conferred a masculine identity on Emily’s poetic muse.<sup>12</sup> However, neither the speaker nor listener indicate any sense of gender. Moreover, I suggest that we might wish to resist conferring gendered status on the poetic muse and instead read this queerly, seeing instead only an unidentified, imaginary listener with whom the addressee wishes to share the power of being “all alone.” Accordingly, stanza five reflects

I could think in the withered grass

Spring’s budding wreaths we might discern,

The violet’s eye might shyly flash

And young leaves shoot among the fern

It is but thought— (ll. 17-21)

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<sup>11</sup> On the gendered assumptions attributed to poetic addressees in Victorian women’s writing, see Sarah Parker’s “The Muse Writes Back: Lyric Poetry and Female Poetic Identity” in *Genre Trajectories: Identifying, Mapping*. Ed. Garin Dowd and Natalia Rulyova. Palgrave Macmillan, 2015. 89-108.

<sup>12</sup> ‘See, for instance, Margaret Homans, *Woman Writers and Poetic Identity*. Princeton University Press, 1980, and Irene Taylor, *Holy Ghosts: The Male Muses of Emily and Charlotte Brontë*. Columbia, 1990.

Here, Emily introduces us to the plurality of perspectives with which to view the “withered grass” when alone, for the speaker “could think” a different view of the image to someone else. As the speaker puts it, the visitor “might discern” “spring’s budding wreaths” and the “shyly flash” of the “young leaves” in the “fern” to another who may only see the dead grass of winter. Moreover, the positivity of seeing spring’s rejuvenation in the depths of winter suggests hope and possibility; thus, we are being encouraged to widen our perception by embracing solitude. As the stanza closes, the phrase “It is but thought” hangs before the dash, suggesting that the speaker’s perspective is one of many on how to read the solitary scene. The dash itself, functioning as a break, interrupts the thoughts, thus implicitly acknowledging (again) that it is but one perspective. As such, Emily signals a variety of possible outlooks here and, through the subsequent lines, her speaker reflects on how the scene *may* look on any of the other days / nights to come:

It is but thought—full many a night  
The snow shall clothe those hills afar  
And storms shall add a drearier blight  
And winds shall wage a wilder war,  
  
Before the lark may herald in  
Fresh foliage twined with blossoms fair  
And summer-days again begin  
Their glory-haloed crown to wear (ll. 21-28)

In sum, this is one moment among many to come before summer. However, the speaker is at pains to affirm the positivity they are experiencing in the present moment of solitude. They

conclude by stating that even though the dominant view is to find pleasure in “July’s golden beam,” their alternate—perhaps queer—perspective “loves” “December’s smile” too, simply for its own beauty (“How still” ll. 29-30). The poem thus articulates a space in which solitude and quietness in isolation can be appreciated and the diverse outlooks that one may have towards such moments is appreciated.

### **Concluding thoughts**

While Emily Brontë was received by some as unsociable and she has been denigrated cruelly by biographers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and others who have taken an unfair dislike of her, the two poems considered here show that Emily held a different perspective on solitude and quietness. While these do not alter the suggestion that she was reserved, they at least show that she did not always experience solitude negatively; in fact, she found happiness in moments of solitude at times. Her own experience of quietness and isolation thus runs counter to some of the times in which her unconventional behaviour (ergo introversion) has been portrayed.

Today, character traits associated with introversion are not received with the same distorted judgment as in the mid-nineteenth century. To be shy or reserved is accepted as a composite part of some people’s personalities, which are complex and multifaceted. Moreover, it is recognized that individuals display diverse character traits in myriad ways in different situations. In fact, thanks to social justice campaigns and education on social tolerance, we are more likely to compensate for any awkwardness or anxieties felt by friends, colleagues or family members in social situations, going out of our way to minimize their concern and put them at ease. Privacy and seclusion, too, is seen as a personal choice that is to be respected by others, and to invade someone else’s privacy or intrude where one is unwelcome is regarded itself as the problem.

With this in mind, it is interesting that Emily begins *Wuthering Heights* (1847) with Mr Lockwood's intrusion on her protagonist Heathcliff who, as chapter one of the novel indicates, is not only reserved but overtly rude. Unlike Emily, then, who Ellen Nussey reminds us, was "intensely loveable" and full of moral confidence, Heathcliff shows that social intercourse can be challenging, but there can be a reason—however erroneous—for quietness and reserve (Nussey 75).

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