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The *Defying Expectations* Exhibition at the Brontë Parsonage Museum: A Reflection on Contemporary Curatorial Practices

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ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the curatorial practices in the Brontë Parsonage Museum's 2022 *Defying Expectations* costume exhibition, to assess its strengths and weaknesses and to identify opportunities for similar exhibitions to be launched and improved upon in the future. The *Defying Expectations* exhibition included interactive art installations, recreations and illustrative reconstructions alongside traditional display methods, and this article evaluates the effectiveness of such a blended approach. Written from the perspective of a museum professional, the article considers how the exhibition developed contemporary curatorial practices and its legacy. Drawing on heritage studies and curatorship, the article juxtaposes information gleaned from literary analysis with an assessment of material culture. It assesses the exhibition's aim of reinterpreting Brontë's reputation as choosing plain and practical clothing by foregrounding her interest in colourful and multicultural textiles, which raises questions of individual, local and national identity as well as regarding the effects of colonisation.

KEYWORDS

Historical costume; Charlotte Brontë; museum dress displays; dress and material culture; Brontë Parsonage Museum

Viewing *Defying Expectations* Through a Professional Lens

The *Defying Expectations: Inside Charlotte Brontë's Wardrobe* exhibition held in the Brontë Parsonage Museum in 2022 was one of the most significant displays of costume items owned by Charlotte Brontë in recent years. It brought together a range of objects displayed in a variety of ways to enable visitors to reach a deeper appreciation of what historic textiles reveal about their wearers in cultural and literary contexts. I was motivated to visit the exhibition partly because since 2014, I have worked for the National Trust at Attingham Park, Shropshire, where in my role as Collections Assistant I have been involved with costume exhibitions of original garments and film costumes, tours to the costume stores, specialist talks and

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supervising living history costumed guides. Indeed, my research specialism focuses on the display of historic costume collections, which formed the focus of my MA in Heritage Management at the University of Birmingham. My research project analysed the value of historical costume displays in improving the ambience and visitor experience at heritage sites. In addition to examining a variety of displays at fashion museums, National Trust properties and living history museums, I conducted extensive audience research to reach an evidenced conclusion about best display practices. My academic research has been augmented by my practical experience, first as a volunteer and later as a professional. I also deliver lectures on historical fashion topics, with a focus on the relationship between textiles and literary heritage and how historical textiles can suggest more sustainable approaches to using textiles today.

As well as having a professional interest, I am also an enthusiastic reader of the work of the Brontës, and I was keen to assess what I could learn from the display practices and conservation and interpretation techniques of the *Defying Expectations* exhibition. My academic and professional assessment of the exhibition forms the focus of this review. This contribution to the Special Issue on material culture will assess the strengths and possible weaknesses of the exhibition and will provide a commentary on how my experience of the exhibition suggested opportunities for similar costume exhibitions to be launched and improved upon in the future.

Is It Possible to Separate Being a Visitor from a Professional Assessment?

Christine Nelson, who curated The Morgan Library and Museum's 2016 exhibition *Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will*, suggests that a combination of emotive and scholarly responses is needed to facilitate the judgement of museum professionals seeking to create memorable displays and that objects need to be displayed in ways that leave 'ample space for a range of visitor responses' (2020, 167). Nelson also states that

The success of a museum installation of literary artefacts may be assessed not merely on the basis of what visitors learn from their experience, and whether they emerge as better readers, but on various categories of impact the encounter engenders: intellectual, aesthetic, critical, creative, social, or even political. (154)

These various resonances were also in my mind as I reviewed the exhibition.

The sheer wonder of being able to get close to authentic items owned by the Brontë sisters enabled me to appreciate the displays through the emotive lens of a visitor without feeling the urge to assess them professionally. On first impression, the atmosphere surrounding the possessions was overwhelmingly evocative of the character of the sisters, with Charlotte's neat yet fashion-conscious persona coming across vividly. The exhibition primarily included garments belonging to Charlotte, as there are few items known to have belonged to her sisters that have survived, although some objects included in the exhibition have either been owned by, or inferred to have belonged to, Anne and Emily Brontë. I admired the details of the objects, picturing how they might have looked originally and been used historically, before assessing what I might learn professionally from the displays. From a visitor's viewpoint, the most evocative element was how visitors were invited to make their

own stories part of the exhibition. The museum commissioned local visual artist Hannah Lamb and her team of staff and students at Bradford School of Art to embroider quotations from visitors about their own treasured items of clothing. These were stitched onto swatches of silk organza that were sewn together to create a gown. The museum also made effective use of Dr Eleanor Houghton's detailed illustrations to enable visitors to picture how the costume items must have looked when originally worn.

I often take notes about costume exhibitions during my visit, or shortly afterwards, and taking photographs helps me to examine the displays from a professional viewpoint once I have left the site. This technique enables me to assess the displays critically after my initial appreciation of the aura of the actual items. In particular, my photographs of the interpretation boards, along with reading the written and online information, assist me in forming a critical judgement. The photographs also facilitate my discussion of the exhibition with colleagues and volunteers, all of which further informs my professional judgement.

The Strengths of the *Defying Expectations* Exhibition

One of the strengths of the exhibition is the way it presented Charlotte's fascination with clothes. On an emotive level, I was pleased to note that Charlotte made innovative and interesting purchases of luxurious items, including clothing, after many years of living on a restricted middle-class income as a perpetual curate's daughter, teacher and governess. For example, on arriving in London to meet her publisher George Smith, Charlotte and Anne purchased new parasols in the richly patterned styles popular in the mid-1840s to try to make their 'plain, high-made country garments' (Gaskell [1857] 2008, 261) appear less incongruous amongst the fashionable London society.

A recognition of Charlotte's long-standing fascination with clothes occurred when I contemplated a draft of her poem 'Twilight Song', which appeared on the same page as a sketch of a 'beautiful lady' (Figure 1). Drawn by a seventeen-year-old Charlotte in January 1834, the sketch depicts a woman from her juvenile Angrian saga wearing an elegant ball gown with fashionable gigot sleeves, and rough sketches of the front and back of the full dress are included, suggesting her early interest in fashion, even if at this age she could never afford expensive silk and lace ball gowns. The lines of the poem and its illustrations are crammed onto a small 135 mm x 122 mm piece of paper (Alexander and Sellars 1995, 227), pointing to the family's restricted means as at this time paper was expensive and every scrap would have been cherished.

Charlotte's striped silk gown (Figure 2) formed the apogee of the exhibition, both aesthetically, as the only fully mannequin-mounted item on display, and because of its information value. Charlotte's desire to be à la mode is illustrated by the dress being partly composed of alpaca fibres; an innovative material to use at the time and likely to have been produced in Yorkshire. As the exhibition's curator Dr Eleanor Houghton said in an interview for *The Guardian*:

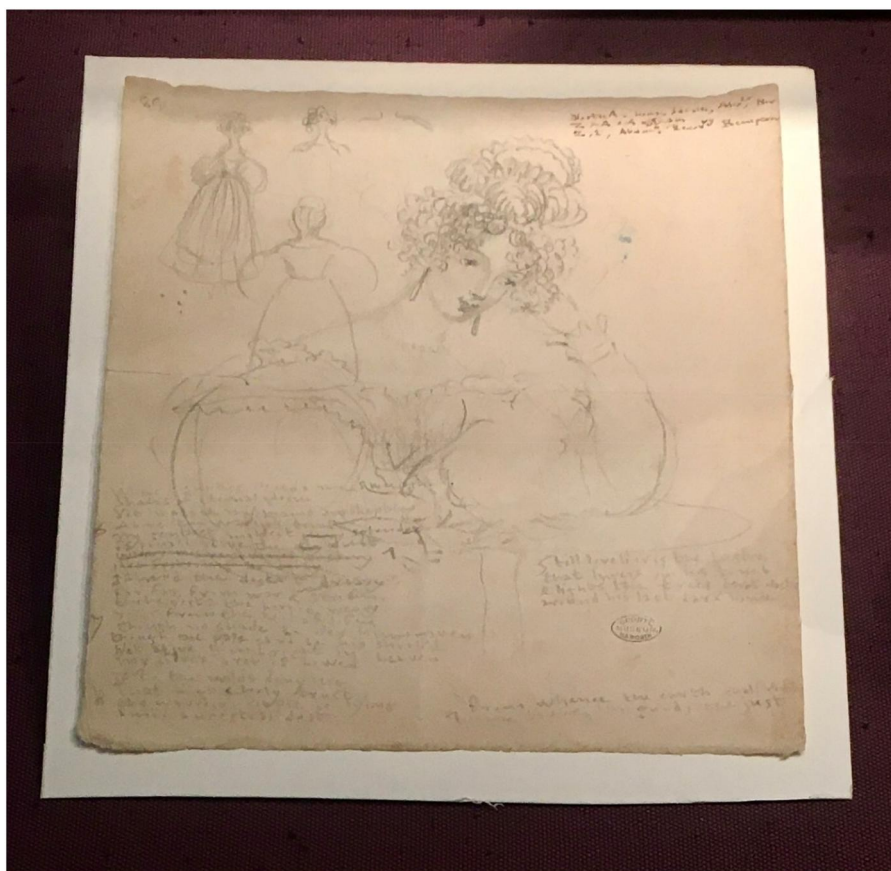


Figure 1. A sketch of a 'beautiful lady' by Charlotte Brontë accompanying her handwritten poem 'Twilight Song'. Author's own photograph, 2022.

All these things really connect her to the place in which she was living but also to this much more globalised world. It helps to release her from the myth that she was holed up in Haworth separate from everyone else. (Flood 2022)

The display of this dress and accompanying accessories was especially gratifying as it added to the 'personality' value of the Brontë Parsonage Museum as a literary heritage site, enabling visitors to envisage the figure of the author and thus imaginatively break the boundaries of time, especially when confronted with 'the obvious but somehow startling fact that Brontë, the icon, had walked the same earth as we do, [and] put on a dress each morning' (Nelson 2020, 158). Charlotte Brontë was brought vividly into my presence by my appreciation of the range of garments that she wore in daily life. This particular outfit suggested that, like her heroine Jane Eyre, Charlotte was concerned with dressing neatly. In Chapter 11 of *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane narrates: 'I ever wished to look as well as I could, and to please as much as my want of beauty would permit' (Brontë [1847] 2006, 131). I could easily understand the response of Virginia Woolf (then Virginia Stephen) who visited Haworth on 24 November 1904. When she was confronted with items in the museum, she concluded that 'Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one



Figure 2. A striped silk dress owned by Charlotte Brontë. Author's own photograph, 2022.

forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer. Her shoes and her thin muslin dress have outlived her' (Woolf [1904] 1979, 168). In contrast to Woolf's realisation that Brontë was an ordinary person, the displays also prompt the notion of genius. As Nelson asks, 'Was Brontë, then, ultimately like us (ordinary) or unlike us (extraordinary)?' as the 'enshrined' presentation of her garments suggests something special about her (2020, 150). For me, a strength of the *Defying Expectations* exhibition was the way it facilitated both interpretations. How Charlotte chose and used garments was interpreted along with items that evoked her

personality as a woman writer. The struggles that she faced, due to not only the stereotyped views of women at the time but also the self-consciousness of her appearance, could be appreciated as visitors encountered how, for example, Brontë was short by Victorian standards, standing at just 4 ft 10 inches.

The displays were also highly effective in providing insights into how outer clothing was layered and adapted to different weather conditions. Shawls offered a versatile way to keep warm or to shade the décolletage from the sun in summer, and the *Defying Expectations* exhibition displayed a diverse collection of shawls belonging to Charlotte and other family members (Figure 3). The interpretation of the shawls foregrounded the cultural heritage of the local area because it explained how although they originated in Paisley in Scotland, many so-called 'Paisley' shawls worn in the Victorian period were produced in Thornton, Charlotte Brontë's birth town. The many references to clothing manufacture, sewing and dress in Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849) suggest that garment production was part of everyday life in Haworth, with its many textile mills, dressmakers and, of course, womenfolk able to mend and make their own garments.

Reinterpreting Charlotte Brontë's Reputation

Marketing for the *Defying Expectations* exhibition foregrounded it as a platform for reinterpreting Charlotte Brontë's reputation as a plain and demure clergyman's daughter, a view that perhaps originated in Elizabeth Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), where Charlotte is quoted as telling her sisters that she sought to 'show [them] a heroine as plain and as small as myself, who shall be as interesting as any of yours' ([1857] 2008, 227). I found this reinterpretation an effective aspect of the exhibition. One thought-provoking revelation was the many items made from silk, which seems a luxurious fabric for the clothing of the daughters of a perpetual curate. The Reverend Patrick Brontë had a morbid fear of fire, having presided at funerals of unfortunate women who died when their full skirts caught light as they got close to fires, and he believed silk was less flammable (Green 2010, 206). Perhaps growing up with this awareness of the danger of fire stimulated Charlotte's imagination when it came to the scenes in *Jane Eyre*, where Bertha Rochester sets light to her husband's bed hangings, and ultimately Thornfield Hall itself.

The exhibition certainly succeeded in transforming the myth of Charlotte Brontë living in a bucolic backwater as many of her clothes reflect innovative industrial changes in fashion. For example, some of the fabrics used synthetic dyes and mechanised printing methods in an interesting contrast with gowns of an earlier period, such as the eighteenth-century costumes at Attingham Park, which relied on natural dyes and hand embroidery for patterning. Charlotte's colourful outfits in warm reds and oranges and the striking paisley patterned materials may come as a surprise to people who imagine Charlotte dressed like her 'plain, Quakerish governess' heroine Jane Eyre (Brontë [1847] 2006, 340), who only owns a few gowns, most of which are described as dark in colour with little ornamentation.

Also fascinating was the evidence that Charlotte sometimes thought more about practicality than appearance when choosing to buy into new fashion trends. She was

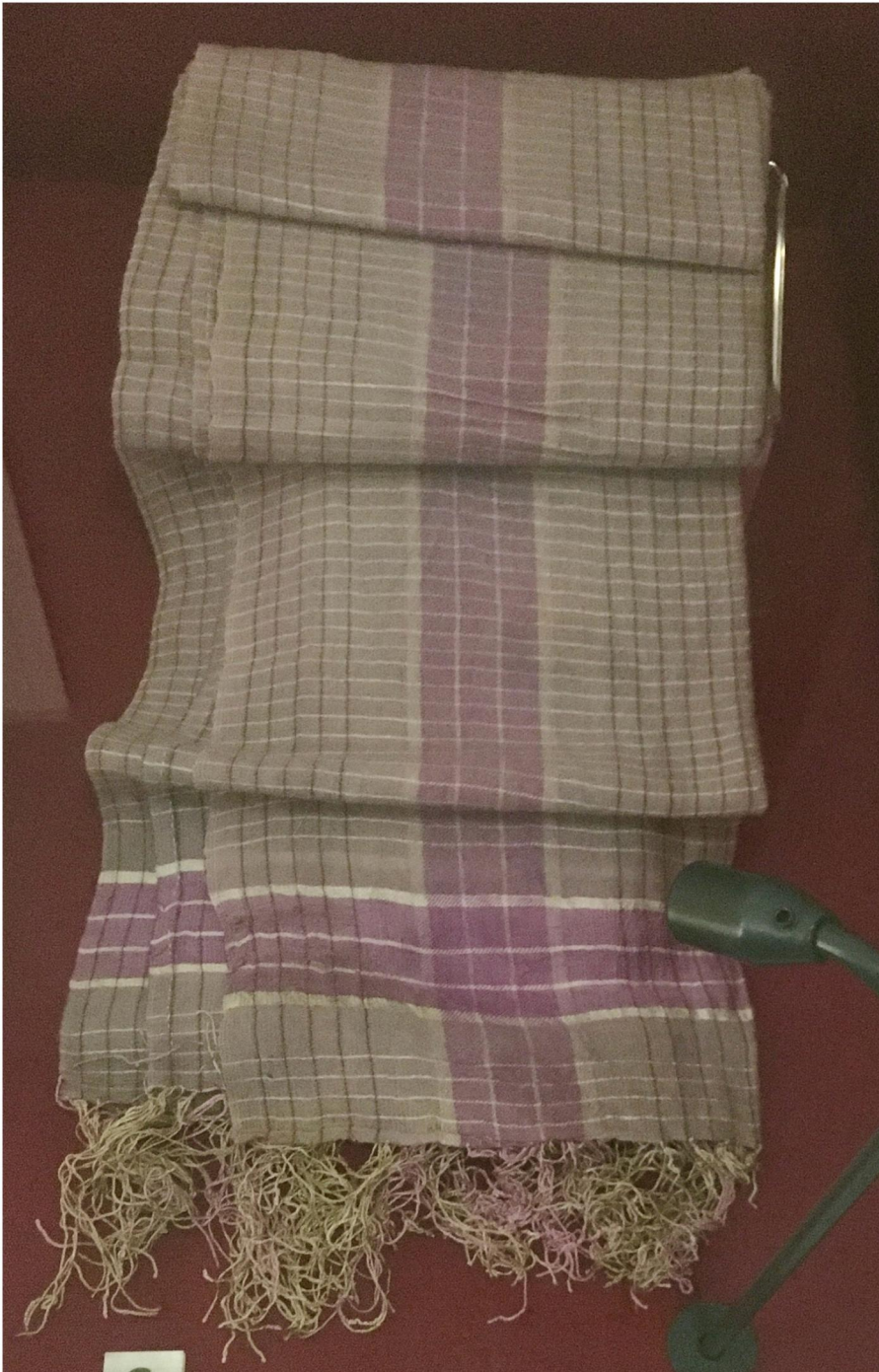


Figure 3. One of the numerous shawls displayed in the exhibition. Author's own photograph, 2022.

the first person in Haworth to own a foldable 'ugly' bonnet to protect herself from the sun in the 1850s. The exhibition explained that Charlotte bought the bonnet in London, and Houghton's miniature papier mâché model conveyed how the 'ugly'

bonnet, worn over a straw bonnet, was pulled forward to form a hood to shield the wearer's face from the sun.

Another vital aspect of the exhibition was its revelations regarding Victorian colonial trends through Charlotte's ownership of particular items, such as the pair of beaded moccasins made in the 1840s and probably gifted to her by the Harper Brothers, her publishers in New York (Figure 4). The moccasins are made from deer hide cured using industrial tanning processes. By the mid-nineteenth century, Native Americans had relinquished traditional methods of tanning and produced moccasins



Figure 4. Moccasins owned by Charlotte Brontë. Author's own photograph, 2022.

with floral patterns created using readily available ‘European materials such as glass beads and silk threads’ (Gadacz 2020) to keep up with the demand for souvenirs of their culture as part of a romanticised view, which postulated them as examples of the ‘noble savage’, even though their traditions were already being ‘considered a relic of the past’ as they became assimilated in western culture (Dresser 2017). Charlotte’s moccasins have a distinctive floral beadwork pattern, which identifies them as being made by Mohawk Indians, who settled at the Kahnawake Reserve near Montreal, Canada. Perhaps Charlotte was thinking of these moccasins when she wrote in *Shirley*: ‘Happy is the slave-wife of the Indian chief, in that she has no drawing-room duty to perform, but can sit at ease weaving mats, and stringing beads’ (Brontë [1849] 1993, 160).

To deepen visitors’ understanding, the same case also displayed a beaded bag, like the one given to the sisters by the Harper Brothers, as well as mid-nineteenth-century moccasins of a similar design but in a near perfect condition. Displaying an identical item in good condition alongside a deteriorated original is an excellent way to allow visitors to appreciate the original appearance of an object, and this is something I will consider for future costume displays I am involved in.

Another striking item was the poignantly delicate wedding bonnet, which allowed visitors to appreciate why witnesses described Charlotte as looking ‘like a snowdrop’ on her wedding day (Gaskell [1857] 2008, 412), revealing an evocatively romantic and domestic side to an author who many view as an early feminist (Harman 2015). Charlotte’s wedding bonnet has a wire frame with lace and silk sewn over the top and was bought from Hunt and Hail in Leeds. This was the same shop where she earlier bought a bonnet made of Leghorn straw plait; the name Leghorn comes from the Anglicised name of the port of Livorno in Tuscany from where the fine quality straw was exported, yet another instance of Charlotte buying into globalised fashion (Main 2024). Bonnets, hats and caps were worn for much of the day for the sake of propriety and warmth, and to express personality and fashion consciousness. Some of the bonnets show marks of being quickly constructed, such as large stitching on the inside, which would be hidden when the bonnet was worn, and this gives a fascinating insight into contemporary millinery practices as demand for bonnets grew amongst the expanding middle classes.

How Effectively were Significant Dress Items Represented within the Displays?

The *Defying Expectations* exhibition was constrained by the age and design of the historic house museum, where space is at a premium and the constraints of funding and the desirability of using existing display hardware, such as traditional display cases, played a role in limiting the number of garments on display and the methods of display. However, I feel that some additional mannequin-mounted displays would have added greatly to the information value of the exhibition. One gown that would have worked well viewed in its entirety is the fascinating ‘Thackeray dress’ (Figure 5). Like many nineteenth-century women writers, such as Jane Austen and George Eliot, Charlotte Brontë chose her clothing to project a message about her personality and



Figure 5. A display case interpreting the blue floral print delaine 'Thackeray dress' owned by Charlotte Brontë. Author's own photograph, 2022.

status. An ideal opportunity to use dress to promote her newly revealed status as the author of the bestselling novel *Jane Eyre* came in the summer of 1850 when she was invited to be the guest of honour at a dinner hosted by her literary idol, William Makepeace Thackeray. Another significance of the 'Thackeray dress' is postulated by biographer Juliet Barker, who suggests that Charlotte had come out of mourning after the deaths of her sisters shortly before her London trip, and the gown probably formed part of a new wardrobe commissioned from a dressmaker to mark a new stage in Charlotte's life (Barker [1994] 2010, 1103).

Tradition has it that for the dinner, Charlotte wore a dress made of delaine, which is a high-grade fabric made of fine-combed wool (Nelson 2020, 161). The delaine dress surviving in the Brontë Parsonage Museum has a bell-shaped white and blue floral print skirt with a flat front panel, and a separate high-necked bodice with mother-of-pearl buttons. The delaine fabric was likely to have been produced in Yorkshire, the major wool-producing area of the era. There were twenty-five working woollen mills in Haworth in 1847, inspiring Charlotte to write vividly of the lives of mill-owning families and their workers in *Shirley*. The shades of blue in the dress probably include indigo sulphate, which is a dye originating from a legume plant and

an example of a more sustainable dye than the aniline chemical dyes popularly used from 1856 onwards. Eleanor Ratcliffe, the niece of the Brontës's long-standing servant Martha Brown, received the dress after Charlotte's death and made alterations to its size and shape, adding a mandarin collar made from brown silk velvet to update its style. These alterations have not been reversed as they are regarded as part of the history of the garment, so it is important that visitors can appreciate that the dress looked different when it was worn by Charlotte Brontë. The exhibition interpreted this well by explaining that the fabric in the case was part of the skirt removed in Eleanor Ratcliffe's alterations.

The idea that Charlotte wore the dress to the Thackeray dinner party originated in the 1914 book *The Footsteps of the Brontës*, in which Chadwick writes that she showed Anne Ritchie, Thackeray's eldest daughter, fabric from the dress, and how: 'she recognised it at once' (1914, 398). However, the shape, pattern and material are typical of day dresses, not of evening dresses. Houghton conjectures that Charlotte wore the delaine dress when 'Thackeray made a private morning visit' to her during her 1850 London trip, accounting for Anne Ritchie being 'confused' between the dress worn for a morning visit and the gown Charlotte wore for the dinner (2016, 219).

Having previously read about this famous dress, I was keen to see it on display. However, even though photographs suggest that it is robust enough to be occasionally displayed mounted on a mannequin, the dress was not on view when I visited the exhibition. The museum attempted to mitigate this by interpreting the story of the dress using a display case containing a fragment of the fabric accompanied by an illustration by Houghton (Figure 5).

A further interesting aspect of Charlotte Brontë's costume collection is that it is fairly complete, including a corset, stockings and slippers, enabling an appreciation of how Victorian middle-class women dressed from the undergarments outwards. However, the exhibition as I saw it did not interpret the full range of surviving garments. When I visited in July 2022, the displays focused on outer garments, although this could have been for conservation reasons, as textile items cannot be displayed indefinitely without putting strain on the fibres or risking fading, and consequently it is best practice to rotate displays. However, when I conducted visitor surveys at fashion history sites as part of my own research, data showed that the layers of undergarments that Victorian women wore fascinated visitors, who wondered if the fashions were uncomfortable, as the use of corsets and layered petticoats are very different to modern dress practices. Considering this interest from visitors, the exhibition might have been improved by an interpretation board, or even a living history video, explaining the various layers in dress worn during the early Victorian period.

How the Exhibition Interpreted Conservation

As I mentioned previously, one drawback of the exhibition was that I was unable to see the full collection of costume items during my visit, although I appreciate that space constraints and best conservation practices made this impractical. Nevertheless,

there might have been opportunities to offer guided tours or online viewings of storerooms, which have proven to be a popular and lucrative solution for Attingham's costume items in store. Costumes too fragile to mount on mannequins might also be safely displayed padded with acid-free tissue paper in storage boxes placed inside museum display cases, as the Attingham team exemplified in the *All Dressed Up* exhibition, which successfully displayed items damaged due to previous wear and tear or by the decay of the fabric due to chemical dyes.

An explanation of any textile conservation work done on the items would have been a fascinating addition to the exhibition. For example, I knew from prior reading that the 'Thackeray dress' was restored in 1983, and I would have liked to see such work mentioned in the interpretation. Details of the restoration of dress items successfully engage visitors if they can see the work in progress, either in person or online, and this can encourage them to donate funds as they become aware of how important and specialised the behind-the-scenes work of conserving costumes tends to be. Conservation value is increasingly important as organisations such as the National Trust promote the work done to preserve their collections as an essential part of visitor engagement. Laurajane Smith claims that this is fundamental to the concept of 'Authorised Heritage Discourse', an ideology that dictates which values are interpreted, as the 'performance of preservation' is 'an important aspect of English national identity' (2009, 45). Although Smith positioned the concept of 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' negatively, my own research has proved that the conservation value inherent in the traditional concept of heritage is perennially popular amongst visitors.

I feel the *Defying Expectations* exhibition might have gone further in tapping into the increased desire for visibility and transparency about conservation techniques that have informed conservation interpretation in the National Trust in recent years. For example, the 'painstaking hours' spent in the complex process of 'padding and fitting' garments on to a 'suitable display mannequin with historically appropriate petticoats', as discussed in Christine Nelson's display of the 'Thackeray dress' for the 2016 *Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will* exhibition (2020, 156–67), might have been interpreted here. Daily care considerations for textile displays might also have been touched upon, including details about how environmental conditions are controlled, which is an essential element of preventive conservation. One of the challenges of exhibiting authentic garments is that their original brightness has been partly obscured by the natural deterioration of fabrics, and many dresses have faded due to light damage. This can be inferred by comparing the current state of the fabrics with Houghton's illustrations showing the dresses with their original vibrant colours. Other exhibitions have displayed replicas of costumes using fabric that matches the original garments as closely as possible, and this might have been a possibility to allow visitors to fully appreciate one of the most flamboyant outfits in the collection: a bright pink wrapper with a matching cape, said to be part of Charlotte's 1854 trousseau, although it may have belonged to Emily Brontë from its size (Hathaways of Haworth 2012). Due to light damage, this item has faded significantly, especially on the front and other parts of the cape where light catches the fabric. This is surprising given that the wrapper was designed to be worn about the house like a dressing gown. This item would have been ideal for an interpretation of the

conservation considerations involved with dress display. The wrapper was featured in news articles about the *Defying Expectations* exhibition to surprise readers of Charlotte Brontë's works and encourage them to attend. However, it was not on display when I visited, exemplifying the need to rotate displays to avoid placing strain on textiles, or subjecting them to damage from dust, light and humidity, despite the careful controls in the museum.

Innovative Illustrative Approaches to Visitor Interpretation

Houghton's annotated paintings effectively enabled viewers to understand how dresses might originally have appeared when worn, making their original colours and fabric details vividly apparent. Historical fashion aficionados could enjoy reading the annotations alongside the images that explained how dresses were imaginatively reconstructed, based on expert knowledge of surviving period garments. A further benefit was that visitors could buy prints of the illustrations as souvenirs, enabling the museum to recoup some of the costs of mounting the exhibition. Dr Houghton's talent is a great boon to the heritage world, and she built on her success at the Parsonage in her current work on a similar project for Chawton House, interpreting textile items associated with Jane Austen (Houghton 2023).

Regrettably, not all of Charlotte's dresses survive due to the Victorian practice of memorialising the dead by keeping fabric swatches from their clothing. Deborah Lutz has explained how such 'celebrity' relic collecting became an increasingly popular practice' (2015, 55). Houghton's judgement, based on fashionable patterns of the time, proved invaluable in enabling her to artistically recreate how the dresses may have looked. A prime example is Charlotte's barège dress worn for her honeymoon in Ireland, of which only one sleeve and the back of the bodice survive, pieced together from swatches cut up and sent to relic-hunting admirers after her death (Figure 6). This is a pity as the dress is well documented. In May 1854, in readiness for her June wedding to Arthur Bell Nicholls, Charlotte travelled to Leeds and Halifax to buy garments and accessories for her trousseau. She wrote to Elizabeth Gaskell that she purchased fabric for two gowns—'a sort of fawn-coloured silk'—and 'a drab barège with a green spot in it' (Smith [2007] 2010, 231). Barège, a fine woollen warp and silk weft fabric, originated in France, but by the mid-nineteenth century it was made in factories near Bradford, which is the likely origin of the fabric used in Charlotte's 'Going Away Dress'.

I particularly appreciated Dr Houghton's efforts at using surviving fabric fragments to envisage Romantic-era muslin print dresses as iconic examples of the dresses that contemporaries remember the Brontë sisters wearing and of the garments mentioned in Charlotte's novels. An account from a local mill worker suggests that the Brontë sisters often wore printed cotton and muslin day dresses: 'I do not know that I ever saw them in owt but print' (Holmes 1910, 211). The quotation recalls how in *Villette* (1853), Lucy Snowe acts as a chaperone to a group of girls, some of whom are English, and attired in 'clean fresh print dresses and light straw bonnets' for a countryside picnic (Brontë [1853] 1985, 469). In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte has her heroine take 'a plain but clean and light summer dress from my drawer and put it on; it seemed no attire

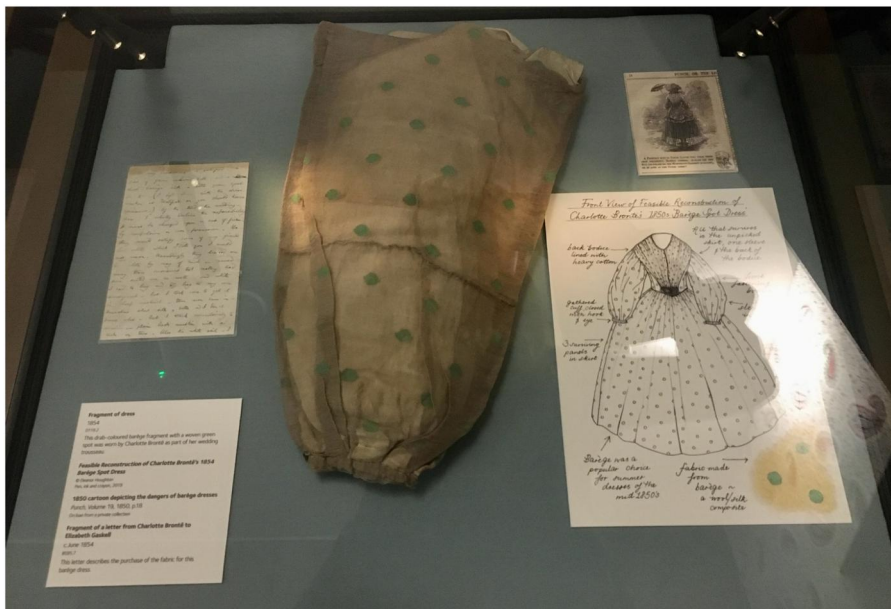


Figure 6. A display case featuring a fragment of fabric from a barège dress owned by Charlotte Brontë, and Eleanor Houghton's illustration of how the dress originally looked. Author's own photograph, 2022; illustration copyright Eleanor Houghton, used with permission.

had ever so well become me, because none had I ever worn in so blissful a mood' (Brontë [1847] 2006, 338). I recognised the paisley print of the muslin gowns used on interpretation panels and the use of exhibition logos taken from patterns in the textiles and relevant illustrations, for example, of bonnets, shawls and parasols. This improved clarity for visitors wishing to follow the exhibition's interpretation.

Opportunities to Strengthen Visitor Engagement

One of Houghton's illustrations replicates a circa 1830s dress made from paisley cotton printed in seven colours, notably duck egg blue, mint, red and black, on a white ground using a combination of abstract shapes and floral motifs. Detailed renderings of the original, printed design were recreated by Houghton and successfully used by costume designer Michael O'Connor to reproduce the fabric for the 2022 biopic *Emily* (Shachat 2023) and it would have added to the visitor engagement value if this costume had been displayed. A development on the *Defying Expectations* exhibition might be to include costumes from Brontë television adaptations and films alongside historic items, as the Parsonage Museum did in their successful 2017 display of costumes from the *To Walk Invisible* (2016) Brontë biopic.

Film costume exhibitions successfully attract visitors by drawing on popular interest in history. For example, the National Trust displayed costumes from *Downton Abbey* and *Onegin* at Attingham Park, and Berrington Hall's *A Thousand Fancies* exhibition juxtaposed Jane Austen film costumes with original historical garments. However, my research here suggests that although successful at boosting

visitor numbers and allowing a wide audience to appreciate the socio-historical context of the outfits, some visitors missed the academic messages of the exhibitions, instead focusing on the personality value of the cast.

Another area where interpretation might have enhanced links to the costume exhibition is the display of workboxes owned by the sisters. One workbox of rosewood inlaid with mother-of-pearl survives with its contents intact and contains a fascinating hoard of sewing materials including buttons, finger-ends cut from leather gloves, a length of whalebone for mending corsets, scraps of fabric, and pins and needles. It was unclear whether the workbox was displayed as part of the *Defying Expectations* exhibition or as a permanent fixture in the Bonnell Room, and interpretation might have made this clearer.

The Bonnell Room also had scope to offer an interactive element relating to the exhibition, perhaps via an activity box for families to discuss what they would need to make and repair costumes, or a dressing-up box of replica items, as the room already housed family activities. Interactive activities fulfil the desire for personal involvement with the past, which Laurajane Smith identifies as essential to heritage sites (2006, 34). My own visitor surveys suggest that interactive activities can be the most memorable aspects of a heritage visit and engage diverse visitor groups, some of whom may find it hard to relate to traditional displays.

Using the Display Practices to Inform Future Exhibitions

As mentioned earlier, the museum invited visitor participation and community engagement by commissioning Hannah Lamb and her team to embroider quotations from visitors about their own treasured items of clothing onto swatches of silk organza to create a gown (Figure 7).

The installation was placed in the servant's bedroom; a compact space in which the dress dominated visitors' views, with small accessories such as shawls, handkerchiefs and bows belonging to the Brontë sisters exhibited in a case alongside the dress, exemplifying an effective use of the space limitations of the building. After the exhibition ended, the installation interpretation noted that it would be deconstructed and the fragments used to create silhouette shadows. This approach would effectively encourage repeat visitor engagement, so it is a practice that I noted for future reference. It exemplifies what Laurajane Smith identifies as visitors' need to relate artefacts to their own identities (2006, 34) for visits to be meaningful. This demonstrates that Smith's critical recognition of a hegemonic 'Authorised Heritage Discourse' governed by privileged concepts of aesthetics and academic value (29) is breaking down in favour of displays that foreground the connections between people, places and objects.

Furthermore, the installation offered an appreciation of dressmaking in the era of the Brontës and how the creation of each item involved detailed and time-consuming work. The installation promoted discourse with broader themes of the significance of clothing to material heritage, and how Victorian dressmaking was both an antithesis to, and the inception of, modern 'fast fashion'. *Fragment of a Dress* has analogies with installations such as the *Miss Berrington gown* at Berrington Hall, where visitors embroidered their own designs onto a Regency dress. However, *Fragment of a Dress*



Figure 7. The *Fragment of a Dress* art installation. Author's own photograph, 2022.

had advantages, as the embroidery activity was supervised by a knowledgeable trained person, thus providing additional benefits for visitor engagement and harmonising the overall aesthetics of the dress.

Recreating a dress as part of a creative art installation is an idea I hope to use and adapt in future displays. One adaptation might be to include a video of the craftspeople involved with the project to increase appreciation for those visiting when the craftspeople are not working. The practice of using historic items as a basis for crafting an item with a visitor involvement element reflecting on material culture could be fruitfully applied to diverse types of museum objects, including furniture, ceramics and tapestries.

Another inspiring display was the case featuring a full range of items that might be worn with a fashionable day dress, such as the striped silk gown owned by Charlotte Brontë after she achieved literary fame. This was particularly pertinent in suggesting the character of this historical figure. From previous experience, I know the effectiveness of similar display practices; at Attingham Park, the 8th Lady Berwick's matching 1931 Peter Russell Ltd gown, evening jacket and shoes were displayed alongside a photograph of her wearing them. These examples show how memorable a full outfit display can be, although unfortunately, few museums have full historic outfits in their collections, as individual items more commonly survive. Perhaps surviving items might be mixed with recreations to suggest a similar effect?

One especially striking idea to take forward, albeit only partly related to the costume exhibition, is the creative use of everyday items placed in ways that make the room displays feel 'lived in', as though the family had casually left items behind and might return for them at any moment. For example, bonnets were placed on the backs of chairs as if freshly discarded, and Branwell Brontë's room (Figure 8) was in a state of disarray. This creative mode of display reflects a postmodern, more irreverent and playful attitude to heritage, and this creative use of clutter is something that has recently been adopted across many heritage sites, including in installations at Attingham Park. The development is grounded in the theories of influential heritage commentator Raphael Samuel, whose diagnosis of a 'revolt against formality' in favour of museums encompassing living history and interactive display methods (1996, 92) is also shown as desirable in the research of Laurajane Smith, who discovered that visitors value heritage that is participatory and focuses on ordinary life (2006, 304).

Final Reflections

Overall, the exhibition was engaging and offered many positive ideas to bring to bear on future display practices; nevertheless, some suggestions for additions and improvements occurred to me based on my professional experience of historical costume displays. Most vitally, the *Defying Expectations* exhibition allowed visitors to gain a deeper, at times revisionist, appreciation of the character of Charlotte Brontë. Supporting findings from my own research into costume display practices and visitor engagement, Icon: The Institute of Conservation, recognises that 'the value of textiles is found in their association with a person or place, or an interest in the objects themselves and their construction' (Icon: The Institute of Conservation 2015, n.p.). These values influence the way that most historical costume exhibitions aim to tell a story, as opposed to presenting garments as objective items, a stance that my research findings demonstrated met visitors' demands. Costumes are invaluable display items due to their close connection to the people who wore them, as people bring emotions



Figure 8. Replica dress items were naturalistically placed in rooms in the Brontë Parsonage Museum, as this example of a nightshirt on Branwell Brontë's bed suggests. Author's own photograph, 2022.

to communication, and emotions make experiences powerfully memorable. The success of the exhibition at conveying the personality value of Charlotte Brontë is thus an overwhelmingly positive sign for a site of literary pilgrimage, and I hope that the museum will continue to mount similar successful costume-related exhibitions in the future to expand upon the success of *Defying Expectations*.

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Disclosure Statement

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Her historical dressmaking projects are based on studying dressmaking in museum garments, using historical patterns where possible.

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