

Jane Eyre Fever: Deciphering the Astonishing Popular Success of Charlotte Bronte in Antebellum America.

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Cree LeFavour

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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Deciphering the Astonishing Popular Success of Charlotte Brontë in Antebellum America

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On 4 September 1848, Charlotte Brontë wrote her friend Mary Taylor to report that "*Jane Eyre* had had a great run in America." This was good news, of course, and yet it created a complication that required immediate attention. As a result of the success of *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte wrote, an American publisher, Harper & Brothers, "had consequently bid high for the first sheets of the next work by 'Curren Bell' which they [Brontë's publisher, Smith & Elder] had promised to let him have." These "first sheets" would have secured for Harper, for a small fee paid to the British publisher, the proofs of the next manuscript, enabling them to issue the first edition of the novel in the American market if not "courtesy of the trade" rights to its "exclusive" publication there.¹

The problem arose when Harper & Brothers wrote back to complain that they had been cheated; the new work by "Curren Bell" was being issued in America by their main rival in publishing, T. B. Peterson. Harper & Brothers "asked to know the meaning of such false play." Enclosed in the letter was a note from Acton and Ellis Bell's rather shady British publisher, Thomas Newby, "affirming that 'to the best of his belief' *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*—*Agnes Grey*—and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—(the new work) were all the production of one writer." As Charlotte wrote, **[End Page 113]** "This was a lie, as Newby had been told repeatedly that they were the productions of three different authors."²

In fact, of course, the novel in question, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), was written by Charlotte's sister, Anne (Acton), and thus could not possibly be promised to Harper & Brothers as "the next work by 'Curren Bell.'" Newby, it seems, "wanted to make a dishonest move in the game—to make the Public & 'the Trade' believe he had got hold of 'Curren Bell' and thus cheat Smith & Elder." This attempt to confuse the American publisher not only deprived Charlotte's publishers of their rightful claim to a share in the profits of her next work, but enabled Newby to take advantage of Curren Bell's success in the United States by selling her sister's work under her name there. And while the Brontës' representation of themselves as "gentlemen" is well known, the confusion over the author's identity in this incident takes the mixing of the Brontës' identities a step further. It thus sets the stage for my discussion of *Jane Eyre*'s reception in the United States, a reception characterized by the novel's widespread popularity, by critical ambivalence, and by a remarkably public conflation of the author and her fictional subject, Jane. I suggest that the circumstances surrounding the novel's reception in the United States exemplify the fluidity of literary genres and the relationship between that fluidity and the value and significance of reading for women. Finally, I argue that the epistemological confusion arising from the combined effects of the genre's, protagonist's and author's ambiguous status conspires to place the reader in a particularly charged and intimate relation to the first-person narrator of *Jane Eyre*.

The fierce competition between the two rival American publishers illustrates the level of their interest in securing the first rights to publish any new work by the author of the smashingly successful *Jane Eyre*, but it also underlines the extent of these publishers' investment in reprints and their desire to secure for themselves a central position in the reprint game. The incident involving *Jane Eyre* thus provides an opening for a broader discussion of the centrality of British reprints in the American market during the immediate antebellum period and how this previously neglected segment of print culture alters our understanding of popular "American" fiction of the period.³ While critics in recent years have revised and widened the scope of "popular" fiction in the...

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