



### Charlotte Brontë and Bewick's "British Birds"<sup>†</sup>

BY JANE W. STEDMAN

"For natural history, read Bewick and Audubon . . ." wrote Charlotte Brontë instructively to Ellen Nussey, July 4th, 1834. Of these her own preference was for Bewick—Thomas Bewick's *History of British Birds*, the 1804 edition of which was owned by the Reverend P. Brontë.<sup>1</sup> Audubon did not begin publishing until Charlotte was an adolescent, and his *Birds of America* was far too expensive for a clergyman's family; but Bewick was a household book for the little Brontës. \* \* \*

Both illustrations and text impressed themselves upon the receptive children. The earliest extant drawings by Anne and Emily are copies of Bewick wood-engravings;<sup>2</sup> his vignettes of dilapidated towers or egg-filled nests on leafy boughs no doubt were models for those "picturesque ruins and rocks," those "wrens' nests enclosing pearl-like eggs, wreathed about with young ivy sprays" which Jane Eyre as a schoolgirl looks forward to drawing. And at least two of the adult Jane's strange water-colours, as we shall see, owe some degree of inspiration to Bewick.

The pictures in the *History of British Birds* fall into two groups: the large ornithological plates, showing each bird in its habitat, and the vignettes, small, almost microscopically detailed, appealing to a child who wrote a diminutive hand. Bewick's own preference was for these

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1. This would seem to be the deny issue of 1805, which was dated 1804. Charlotte could also have inspected later enlarged editions of Bewick, including the 1826 edition, the last issued during the artist's lifetime, and the 1832 edition published by his son. Therefore, I have felt free to allude occasionally to illustrations in later editions. Internal evidence indicates that Charlotte was familiar with both volumes of *British Birds*, although she obviously preferred Volume II, *Water Birds*. For a discussion of editions of Bewick, see S. Roscoe, *Thomas Bewick: A Bibliography Raisonnée* (London: Oxford University Press, 1953).

2. Winifred Céinn, *Anne Brontë* (London: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1959), p. 55. Miss Céinn identifies Arthur's book in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, that "natural history with all kinds of birds and beasts in it, and the reading as nice as the pictures," as *British Birds*.

little pictures, which, fancied and varied, are often unrelated to the bird whose description they follow, or, indeed, to any bird. The tail-piece for the Curlew, for instance, shows urchins chasing a dog to whose tail they have tied a pot, while a burly tanner looks on. Another tail-piece shows a man on horseback flying a kite. Some pictures are comic: an old man with open mouth and closed eyes says grace while a cat on the table before him dips into the dish. Others are sardonic: a donkey leans against a tipsy stone inscribed, "Battle— . . . Splendid Victory." A few are, as later Victorians called them, "coarse."

Many of Bewick's vignettes may be divided by subject matter into four groups, each implicitly or explicitly illustrated in *Jane Eyre*. The least interesting division consists of conventional pictures of ribbons, foliage, nests, etc., of the sort Jane imagines herself producing, although she does not identify Bewick as their source. The other groups are those containing vignettes of sea and beach, of ruins and churchyards, and of the supernatural. Jane describes, in varying detail, examples of each sort when she reads *British Birds* in the window seat. These pictures are already familiar to her from earlier hours with Bewick. She describes pictures of

- (1) "the rock standing up alone in a sea of billow and spray"
- (2) "the broken boat stranded on a desolate coast"
- (3) "the cold and ghastly moon glancing through bars of cloud at a wreck just sinking"
- (4) "the quiet solitary churchyard, with its inscribed headstone; its gate, its two trees, its low horizon, girdled by a broken wall, and its newly-risen crescent, attesting the hour of even-tide"
- (5) "two ships becalmed on a torpid sea" (These, she believes to be "marine phantoms".)
- (6) "The fiend pinning down the thief's pack behind him"
- (7) "the black, horned thing seated aloof on a rock, surveying a distant crowd surrounding a gallows"

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These scenes and others like them are black and white suggestions for Jane's own water-colour of "clouds low and livid, rolling over a swollen sea. . . . One gleam of light lifted into relief a half-submerged mast, on which sat a cormorant, dark and large, with wings flecked with foam. . . ." The fair arm of the sinking corpse and the brilliant bracelet are her own invention, but appropriate to Bewick's atmosphere. Later, when Jane amuses herself by drawing fancy vignettes at Gateshead, the subjects are also reminiscent of Bewick's, especially her sketch of "a glimpse of sea between the rocks; the rising moon, and a