

STAGES OF COMPOSITION IN
CHARLOTTE BRONTË'S FAIR-COPY
MANUSCRIPT OF *SHIRLEY*

by

BARBARA HERITAGE

ON September 8, 1849, James Taylor traveled from London to Haworth, Yorkshire, to collect the manuscript of Charlotte Brontë's novel *Shirley* for publication.¹ His firm, Smith, Elder and Co., had been awaiting the completion of the book for nearly a year. Readers both in England and abroad were eager to read the next work by Currer Bell, whose first published novel, *Jane Eyre*, had attracted so much notice. Before that, the previously unknown writer had co-written and published only an obscure collection of poetry with Acton and Ellis Bell that few had read. The public continued to speculate about the identity of this new author, who had written with such power and originality.

Composed in three physically distinct volumes for publication as a three-volume novel, the fair-copy manuscript of *Shirley* consists of high-grade writing paper—a mixture of wove and laid folded half-sheets—copied out in a clear, legible hand with a steel-tipped dip pen. Although the first two volumes of the manuscript are each made up of about 140 bifolia or approximately 280 leaves, the third volume is noticeably longer, composed of about 160 bifolia or 320 leaves. Examining these, one finds that the novel's text has been carefully written

1. The summary description conveyed at the outset of this essay draws on my bibliographical findings, described in detail later in this work. The dates are from correspondence collected in Margaret Smith's invaluable edition, *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000). For more on Taylor's invitation to Haworth, see *Letters*, 2:247. The research presented in this essay was made possible by a 2019 research award from the Wilison Foundation Charitable Trust as well as a 2015 award from the Friends of Princeton University Library. I am grateful to Karen Chase, Jerome McGann, and Michael F. Suarez, S.J. for supporting those projects. A number of other colleagues greatly aided this work: Ann Dinsdale and Sarah Laycock at the Brontë Parsonage Museum provided not only access to rare and fragile materials, some of which were on display, but also expert guidance on their respective collections. Alexandra Ault, Karen Limper-Herz, Alexander Lock, and Laura Walker provided key assistance at the British Library. I am also grateful to Tim Dolin and David Vander Meulen, who both provided feedback toward the final stage of publishing this article. I am most indebted, however, to Terry Belanger, for reading this essay in its own various stages of composition during what turned out to be an unprecedented global pandemic. His bibliographical expertise, learned observations, and helpful suggestions improved this work at every turn. Finally, my own bibliographical research would not have been possible without his support and the early training that I received at Rare Book School. This work is dedicated to him.