

shall see, its physical structure. Each of the three novels that Charlotte Brontë wrote and that were published during her lifetime—*Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette*¹⁸—were formulated and composed for publication as three-volume novels in print.¹⁹ Her publisher specifically sought novels in this format to meet the demands of circulating libraries, whose terms and conditions, in turn, proved lucrative for both parties.²⁰ As others have noted, the divisions between volumes were integral to the novel's overall structure and plot.²¹ The complex editorial process underlying *Shirley*'s own three-volume structure is made apparent, in part, by evidence found in paper stocks—a bibliographical analysis that can usefully inform our critical interpretations with regard not only to the novel's shape, but also its meaning.

Since *Shirley*'s initial publication in 1849, much of the criticism on the novel has had to do with the unity of its structure or the lack thereof. George Henry Lewes, who had so warmly championed *Jane Eyre* after its publication in 1847, asserts in an unsigned review that Currer Bell's second published novel is "not a picture; but a portfolio of random sketches."²² He writes: "The book may be laid down at any chapter, and almost any chapter might be omitted."²³ This strand of criticism has continued in various forms into the twenty-first century. Various rationales have been proposed for Brontë's organization of *Shirley*. The novel's collage-like quality, perceived as a flaw by Lewes for its lack of "artistic fusion,"²⁴ has been interpreted by others as a deliberate, experimental approach. For instance, in her chapter "The Terrible Handwriting: *Shirley*," Heather Glen interprets *Shirley* as a "self-conscious play with the fictional medium itself"²⁵—a heteroglossia, cacophony of voices not unlike the Tower of Babel, which, as Glen shows, was both the subject of other artists known to the Brontës and a shaping influence on them.²⁶

In their respective analyses and opposing views, Lewes and Glen both gesture toward physical media—the portfolio and handwriting—to make their points. But for Lewes and Glen, these analogies are merely figurative; they are not intended to refer to the actual physical presentation of Brontë's manuscript, which holds little interest for them, despite the intriguing parallels their comparisons suggest. Lewes speaks of the "portfolio" of the visual artist, while Glen considers not the handwrit-

18. Charlotte Brontë's first full novel, *The Professor*, was not written as a three-volume novel, and was published only after her death in 1857.

19. Brontë dated the end of the first volume *Shirley*, for example, and sent it separately to her publishers for review in February 1849. For an analysis of the three-volume format of the fair-copy manuscript of *Jane Eyre* and its composition as such, see Barbara Heritage, "Authors and Bookmakers: *Jane Eyre* in the Marketplace," *The Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 106, no. 4 (2012): 449–85 (472–75).

20. It was Brontë, however, who determined the content, pacing, and divisions. See "Authors and Bookmakers," 472–75.

21. See "Novelists, Novels, and the Establishment: From George Eliot and George Gissing: The Novelist's Viewpoint," in Guinevere L. Griest's *Mudie's Circulating Library & the Victorian Novel* (Newton Abbot, Devon: David & Charles, 1970), 87–119.

22. Lewes, "*Shirley: a Tale*. By Currer Bell, Author of 'Jane Eyre,'" *The Edinburgh Review*, no. 183 (January 1850): 160.

23. Lewes, "*Shirley*," 159.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Heather Glen, *Charlotte Brontë: The Imagination in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 147.

26. Glen, *Imagination in History*, 168–69.