

By turning our attention to the materials and mechanics of writing processes as well as the role of women's labor, we can gain clearer insight into the historical practices and domestic duties that marked women's writing. Although material surfaces are silent, laid or wove, embossed or watermarked, excised or intact, they can speak to activities otherwise undocumented in the historical record. By learning how to discern the changes introduced by Brontë amid those made by the hands of many others—printers, publishers, collectors, bookbinders, curators, and conservators—we find the story of a rising woman author who prioritized the care of her family over the expectations of her publishers and readers. Having lived through a global pandemic, many of us are now more attuned to the caregiving duties required of those coping with grave illness. It is helpful, I think, to understand Brontë's break from working on the manuscript as a decision necessitated by this more urgent charge.

And yet we also see another choice at work at a later stage of composition: a strategic process of revision that drew together plot points across the book's three volumes—deliberate changes that, when introduced, drew together the narrative threads of Brontë's novel. By studying the manuscript slowly, carefully, and methodically using the techniques afforded by bibliography, these two distinct stages emerge from among the manuscript's complex layers of composition to tell a more nuanced story of how Charlotte Brontë's work as a writer intersected with her duties as both a daughter and sister. Sometimes slowing down—as Brontë herself was forced to—allows us to revisit our own critical assumptions with fresh eyes and a clearer sense of purpose. Where her work as a writer left legible traces, her labor as a caregiver created subtle absences barely detectable, but still discernable, in the leaves she left behind.