Literary fetishes: the Brontë miniature books

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Included in Amy Lowell’s bequest of rare books, manuscripts, and autographs to Harvard in 1925 were nine manuscript books unusual in two respects: their size, and the size of their authors. The books, each measuring about 5 by 3.5 centimeters, were the handiwork of Charlotte and Branwell Brontë, who had created them at the ages of thirteen and twelve, respectively. For many fans of the Brontës, the origins of these miniature books has become a favorite chapter in the family’s lore. In 1826, when Patrick Brontë gave his son a set of a dozen wooden soldiers, the Brontë children—Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne—did what many children would: they pretended that the soldiers were real people, creating identities for the twelve “Young Men.” As their game continued, however, it grew into something more elaborate than most playtime whims. In 1829, Charlotte created the first volume of what would eventually become known as the “Glass Town saga.” In a series of tiny books, she and Branwell chronicled, through prose, poetry, and drama, the adventures of the inhabitants of a fictional West African colony called Glass Town. The siblings constructed these books out of recycled scraps of newsprint and other paper, inscribing...
them in a miniscule ink script. To all but the best-trained eyes, the books were—and are—legible only through a magnifying glass (see figure 1).

Most of the existing scholarship on the Brontë miniature books has focused on two topics: their role in Charlotte's development as a writer, and their representations of British imperialism. There is another aspect of the miniature books, however, which makes them fascinating documents: the insight they provide into pre-Victorian literary culture, and, specifically, into the changing material world of print. The Brontës did not outwardly present their Glass Town saga as a sociological portrait of literary London. Glass Town was, after all, an imaginary British colony in West Africa, an exoticized landscape of “orange groves,” “broiling heat,” and skies of “monotonous azure” (Tales

3 In her biography of Charlotte, Elizabeth Gaskell mentions the difficulty of reading these manuscripts without a magnifying glass, suggesting that their illegibility is not a result of fading or other historical variables. See Elizabeth Gaskell, The Life of Charlotte Brontë (New York: Penguin, 1997), 64.

4 Meg Harris Williams, for instance, traces the evolution of Charlotte's mystical ideal of authorship from the Glass Town and Angria legends to Jane Eyre; see "Book Magic: Aesthetic Conflicts in Charlotte Brontë's Juvenilia," Nineteenth Century Literature 42.1 (June 1987). As an example of the second approach, Susan Meyer discusses the imperialist dynamics of the Glass Town saga, arguing that Charlotte's later writings begin to question the ideology of conquest that the saga had previously taken for granted; see Imperialism at Home: Race and Victorian Women's Fiction (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996).

5 Carol Bock is one of the few scholars to have examined the depiction of print culture in the miniature books. Though I focus on an aspect that she does not address—how the books satirize the fetishistic practices of literary adults—I follow her approach in treating the saga as a “representation of the culture of their times” (34). See Carol Bock, “Our Plays: the Brontë Juvenilia” in Cambridge Companion to the Brontës (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal, 32). Yet in many respects, the setting of the saga reflects—albeit as if in a funhouse mirror—mid-nineteenth-century London. Glass Town is a bustling cosmopolitan capital; it is industrialized and polluted, dotted with “lofty mills and warehouses” and “tower-like chimneys vomiting forth huge columns of thick, black smoke.” Above all, it is a literary epicenter. Among its citizens are authors, editors, publishers, booksellers, and critics, who spend their days reading newspapers, debating politics, and competing for social and literary capital.

There is a tradition of treating the Brontë miniature books as early evidence of Charlotte’s romantic imagination: “wild weird writing,” as Elizabeth Gaskell put it, in which Charlotte’s “fancy and her language alike run riot.” Departing from this tradition, I will consider the books as something closer to ethnography. In constructing Glass Town, Charlotte and Branwell were striving to understand the customs and manners of literary London, a subculture that, to Yorkshire children, was both fascinating and foreign. The ethnography they produced, of course, was distorted by the lens of juvenile inexperience. But for that reason, it is all the more revealing. Children, as any romantic poet or sociologist can tell you, have always been acute observers of the social world, because they have yet to internalize its conventions.

In Glass Town, one can see reflected a rapidly transforming pre-Victorian literary culture in which books, newspapers, and journals were growing cheaper and more accessible. Printed matter, once the purview of the cultural elite, was becoming democratized and demystified—a shift that both troubled and pleased the Brontë children. Charlotte and Branwell were attracted to the mystique of that older model of literary culture, in which literature was a site of privilege and exclusivity. But they were also writing from the position of provincial children excluded from that culture, who could take pleasure in its decline. Their ambivalence resulted in a set of miniature books that, in content as well as form, simultaneously belittle and aggrandize the adult literary world.

**Glass Town Literati**

By the end of the nineteenth century, London’s booming literary scene had become an easy target for caricature and taxonomy. In George Gissing’s *New Grub Street* (1891), one writer pitches to another the idea for a satirical “paper consisting of sketches of typical readers of each of the principle daily and weekly papers.” Over half a century before Gissing’s novel, however—and a century and a half before Pierre Bourdieu would map out the social types making up the “field of cultural production”—the Brontë

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6 Alexander, *Early Writings*, 58.
7 Gaskell, 71.
children were casting an ethnographic gaze on literary London. Glass Town is home to a panoply of literary types, both established authors and younger ones who hope to join their ranks. Numbering among Glass Town’s aspiring authors is “Young Soult the Rhymer,” a romantic poet: “What’s that? Oh! ‘twas but the wind, mournfully serenading me on its passage through the sky. Methinks I will apostrophize it...” Charlotte mock mocks Rhymer for his pompous doggerel as well as his sentimental personality; in the midst of declaiming a Coleridgean verse, Rhymer “sinks down into a fainting fit” (Tales of Glass Town, Angia, and Gondal, 47). In Charlotte's story “The Poetaster,” from a miniature book dated July 1830, Rhymer attempts to murder an author who criticizes his poetry. When Rhymer announces, from the scaffold, that he will bequeath his writings to the public “as a legacy,” a merciless jester responds, “Thank you lad. They’ll do to light our pipes” (Edition of the Early Writings, 194). Not all of Glass Town’s aspiring authors are so hapless; a more heroic image of the literary type can be seen in Lord Charles Wellesley, Charlotte’s favored alter ego throughout the miniature books (and a fictionalized version of a real historical figure, the Duke of Wellington’s son). Signing many of her early stories with Wellesley’s name, Charlotte depicts him as a suave Byronic outsider, a blasé aristocrat with knowledge of Glass Town's secrets.

In addition to poets and novelists, Glass Town is home to a large population of editors, booksellers, critics, and readers. This vibrant literary culture is spotlighted in Branwell’s series of fictional dialogues entitled “Nights.” “Nights” parodies “Noctes Ambrosianae,” a signature feature that appeared throughout the 1820s in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine, an influential literary journal that was read with enthusiasm by the young Brontës. The original “Noctes” took the form of dialogues between characters—some based on editors of Blackwood’s, some based on fictionalized celebrities—who would debate literature and politics while eating, drinking, and smoking cigars in Ambrose’s Tavern in Edinburgh. In Branwell’s parody, prominent residents of Glass Town sit around a table at “Bravey’s Inn,” drinking heavily and discussing literature in a tone that imitates the swaggering, clubbish manner of the “Noctes.” While there was a degree of self-parody in the original Blackwood’s feature, Branwell’s ridicule of literary types is less forgiving. In his “Nights,” the men’s urbane rivalry devolves into newspaper...
throwing ("Ye have Flung yer Newspaper on the top of my Food which I was atin at beack of fire") and ad hominem attacks ("You rascal, you Dog, you villain!"). Branwell seems to take a mischievous pleasure in killing his idols, revealing how quickly these sophisticated literary adults can regress into childish behavior.

The Blackwood’s parodies and other early miniature books capture the Brontës’ developing understanding of literary culture. Because of Patrick Brontë’s liberal attitude toward education, the Brontë children had access to their father’s newspapers from an early age, resulting in a precocious awareness of the nuances of British periodicals. In one of Charlotte’s earliest books, written at age thirteen, she proudly catalogs all the publications to which the family subscribes:

Papa and Branwell are gone for the newspaper, the Leeds Intelligencer, a most excellent Tory newspaper edited by Mr. [Edwa]rd Wood [for] the proprietor Mr. Hernaman. We take 2 and see three newspapers a week. We take the Leeds Intelligencer, party Tory, and the Leeds Mercury, Whig, edited by Mr. Baines and his brother, son in law and his 2 sons, Edward and Talbot. We see the John Bull; it is a High Tory, very violent. Mr. Driver lends us it, as likewise Blackwood’s Magazine, the most able periodical there is. The editor is Mr. Christopher North, an old man, 74 years of age. The 1st of April is his birthday. His company are Timothy Tickler, Morgan O’Doherty, Macrabin, Mordecai Mullion, Warrell, and James Hogg, a man of most extraordinary genius, a Scottish shepherd. (Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal, 3)

The Brontë children probably began reading Blackwood’s around 1825, initially borrowing back issues from a neighbor who subscribed to it, and later checking out issues from a local lending library. The children’s miniature book parodies of the journal, initially running under the title “Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine,” grow more polished with every issue in their imitation of the Blackwood’s format. They incorporate many of its paratextual features: a table of contents, a title page and

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12 The various collected editions of the Brontë juvenilia take different approaches to transcription. Christine Alexander’s 1987 edition (see note 11), the source of many of my quotations from Charlotte’s texts, chooses to normalize Charlotte’s spelling and punctuation. In quoting from Branwell’s texts, I typically draw from Alexander’s critical edition of “Branwell’s Blackwood’s”: see Patrick Branwell Brontë, Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine: The Glass Town Magazine Written by Branwell Brontë; with Contributions from his Sister Charlotte Brontë, ed. Christine Alexander (Edmonton: Juvenilia Press, 1995), hereafter cited in the text as Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine. This edition attempts to preserve Branwell’s original spellings, but uses brackets to indicate his presumed errors and omissions. When quoting from the latter, I will represent

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insignia (which Branwell morphs into his own logo), and publication information (“Printed and sold by all booksellers in the Glass Town . . . Paris, &c. &c.”). They also mimic its typical contents, including an advertisement section (“To be sold: 17 pounds of Prussian Butter / by how-to-kill-20-folk-a-day”) and a “Letters to the Editor” page and (see figure 2). Beyond all this, they carefully imitate the Blackwood’s house style. In the July 1829 issue, Branwell showcases this gentlemanly style in a “Concluding address to my readers,” in which he formally hands over the reins to Charlotte (see figure 3):

We have hitherto conducted this Magazine, we hope, to the satisfaction of most. (No one can please all.) But as we are conducting a Newspaper which requires all the time and attention we can spare from oter employments we hav found it expedient to relenquish the editorship of this Magazine, but we recomend our readers to be to the new Editor as they were to me. The new one is the Cheif Genius Charlotte. She will conduct it in future, tho’ I shall write now and then for it. (MS Lowell 1 [9])

As suggested by the faux pomposity of this “Concluding Address,” the Blackwood’s parodies ride a fine line between emulation and mockery. Branwell pokes fun at the erudite literati of Glass Town, but he also clearly identifies with them. This ambiguity similarly characterizes a story that spans several volumes of “Branwell’s Blackwood’s,” in which a Glass Town publisher named Sergeant Bud decides to issue an annotated edition of Ossian’s poetry:

Upon an attentive perusal of the above said works, I found they were most sublime and exelent. I am engaged in publishing an edition of them in Quarto, 3 Vols, with notes, commentrys, &c. I am fully convinced that it is the work of OSSIAN, who lived 1000 years ago—and of no other. There is a most intense anxiety prevailing amongst literary men to know its contents. In a short time they shall be gratifi, for it will be published on the first of July 1829. (Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine, 12)

In the subsequent volume, several Glass Town notables (including the Marquis of Douro, the Duke of Wellington, and Napoleon Bonaparte) listen to Sergeant Bud read from his book on Ossian. Bud’s dialogue is accompanied by a series of elaborate

Branwell’s texts (mistakes intact) sans brackets, except when referring to the series title (as “Branwell’s Blackwood’s,” adding his omitted apostrophes).

15 Charlotte Brontë Juvenilia (MS Lowell 1), Houghton Library, Harvard University. Works in the Houghton Library collection are cited parenthetically as (MS Lowell 1 [#]).

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Figure 2.2. Patrick Branwell Brontë. “Branwells Blackwoods Magazine.” July 1829. MS Lowell 1 (9).

Figure 2.3. Patrick Branwell Brontë. “Branwells Blackwoods Magazine.” July 1829. MS Lowell 1 (9).

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marginal notes, which include explanations such as, “Tura’s wall: Tura is the dwelling of Cuthuln. It is by some thought to be a cave, by others a castle. In those times their greatest chiefs lived in caves very often and to have a rock and grass just by a castle is not very lik. I think it is a cave” (see figure 4). After Sergeant Bud has finished reading, the Marquis of Duoro responds:

Ossian is sublime. The commentary is in many parts very good, sound and just, but that which relates to Tura is unjust in the extreme. It says that Tura is a cave whereas by your own account it must be a castle for Ossian says Cuthullin sat by Tura’s WALL. No cave could have a wall. A castle could, nay, must have walls. Can you answer? (MS Lowell 1 [9])

The tone of this exchange is hard to pin down: Branwell ridicules the pedantry of these literary types, but he also seems to revel in their hairsplitting. However, in Branwell’s “Review of Bud’s Commentary on Ossian,” which immediately follows this dialogue, mockery is clearly the dominant tone: “This is one of the most long winded Books that have ever been printed. We must now conclude for we are dreadfully tired” (MS Lowell 1 [9]). In segments like this, the form of the miniature books contributes to their satirical goal: that of cutting people down to size.

The miniature books make fun of Glass Town literati not only for their pedantry but also for their tribalism. In Glass Town, much like in 1830s London, readers can chose from an overwhelming variety of newspapers, including “the Young Man’s Intelligencer, the Opposition, the Greybottle, the Glass Town Intelligencer, the Courier Du Francais, the Quatre Deinne, &c. &c. &c” (Branwell’s Blackwood’s Magazine, 14). This abundance of newspapers does not exactly result in an ideal Habermasian public sphere, however, of intellectual exchange based on rational dialogue. At one point in “Nights,” a regular at Bravey’s Inn throws down his paper in frustration: “I can no longer bear this Newspaper, it is the very essen[c]e of wickedness. Bravey why do you take it?” The inn proprietor replies, “Why, because there are men, Pothouse master villains, &c., for whose use it was first Instituted, often comming to my house. They
ask for a newspaper. I give it them & if it is not this the'll not take it” (MS Lowell 1 [9]).

For Glass Town citizens, who refuse to look at anything but their favored newspaper, periodicals are not catalysts of enlightened exchange so much as markers of fixed political identities.

Despite the comic flaws of the Glass Town literati—their pettiness, their long-windedness, their dogmatism—they form part of a vibrant and glamorous culture. In Glass Town, literati and glitterati are one and the same: the local bookseller, publisher, and librarian number among its “grandees,” and the literary world is one of scandal and intrigue. Not only literary people but also literary artifacts—books, journals, newspaper—figure into the plots of several stories throughout the miniature books. In Charlotte’s comic-gothic story “An Interesting Passage,” it is books, rather than diamonds or oil, which spark an elaborate criminal conspiracy. In one installment of “Nights,” a character throws his newspaper into the fireplace, causing a genie to materialize out of the fire (MS Lowell 1 [9]). One explanation for this mystical strain—which I will return to at the end of this article—is that literary artifacts seem like uncannily powerful objects to children, who are eager to learn about the world but prevented from doing so through firsthand experience. Another explanation, though, is that the young Brontës were caricaturing the powerful influence that they observed books, newspapers, and journals to exert over supposedly rational adults.

**Book Fetishes**

One goal of the field known as thing theory has been to expose a fact that adults, in modern Western societies, are trained to ignore: namely, that “persons form what are evidently social relations with ‘things.’” The idea that people and things are easily distinguishable categories has shaped Western philosophy since Descartes; indeed, the imagination of a subject-object divide, according to Bruno Latour, is the defining concept of modernity, underpinning the Enlightenment effort to rationally master the natural world. Part of the reason that Victorian anthropologists were so fascinated by animism and fetishism—practices of attributing agency to objects—was their belief that these practices distinguished premodern from modern societies, the primitive from the civilized, the rest from the West. In truth, as thing theorists have pointed out, versions of animism and fetishism pervaded the post-Enlightenment West, and continue to do so today. “We have never been modern,” in Latour’s words, in that we have never stopped believing that objects have agency. People frequently treat their

material possessions as crucial parts of their identity (what would a biker be without his Harley, a musician without her guitar); we habitually, if unconsciously, project wills and identities onto everyday objects (e.g., the baseball player with the “lucky bat,” the customer who complains that the laptop is “acting finicky”).

This insight might seem obvious to children, who have yet to internalize a hierarchical distinction between persons and things, evidenced by the way they play with their dolls or toy soldiers. Children are “irresistibly drawn,” as Walter Benjamin observed, to “the world of things,” and especially to neglected or cast-off things: the “detritus generated by building, gardening, housework, tailoring, or carpentry.” The Brontë miniature books are a testament to this childlike fascination with household detritus, with things that have outlived their use. Charlotte and Branwell fashioned their books by sewing together scraps of material gathered from around the house: bits of wallpaper, sheet music, and newsprint that the adults no longer wanted or needed. Perhaps it makes sense that children, accustomed to being objectified—treated, that is, as entities not yet qualifying for full personhood—would empathize with objects in this way.

When Charlotte and Branwell began constructing the miniature books, only just beyond the age of playing with toy soldiers, they envisioned a world with a highly permeable subject-object divide. In Charlotte’s "An Interesting Passage," a Glass Town cabal conspires to steal books from the public library and hoard them for private use. In the story’s central set piece, characters stage a funeral procession for a trove of books: books are mourned, in other words, as if they were people. “But look at this coffin!” exclaims one character upon discovering the ruse. “If I don’t declare it’s full of books instead of bones . . .” (Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal, 35). The subject-object divide is breached, here, on multiple levels: books are mixed up with a human corpse, which is already an object—or is it a subject?—that unsettles the distinction between person and thing.

The night that the book thieves carry out their plan, they park their carriages at a Glass Town establishment called “the Fetish Inn” (see figure 5). The word fetish, an amalgamation of the Portuguese word feitiço (magical practice) and the Latin word facticius (manufactured), dates back to early-modern anthropology, and specifically, to

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18 Gell writes, “Consider a little girl with her doll. She loves her doll. Her doll is her best friend (she says). Would she toss her doll overboard from a lifeboat in order to save her bossy elder brother from drowning? No way. This may seem a trivial example, and the kinds of relations small girls form with their dolls are far from being ‘typical’ of human behavior. But it is not a trivial example at all; in fact it is an archetypal instance of the subject-matter of the anthropology of art. We only think it is not because it is an affront to our dignity to make comparisons between small girls showering affection on their dolls and us, mature souls, admiring Michelangelo’s David” (18).


20 Bock, 39.

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accounts of colonial encounters in Portuguese West Africa. By the time the Brontës were writing, however, the word had spread into “a host of popular and social scientific discourses.” Since then, it has taken on additional connotations: in Capital (1867), Marx introduced the concept of commodity fetishism to describe the discrepancy between an object’s use-value and its exchange-value, in the capitalist system of production; in “Fetishism” (1927), Freud used it to describe a sexual neurosis in which an object or body part is substituted for the genitals as the locus of sexual desire. One thing that fetishism connotes in all of these variants—Marxist, Freudian, anthropological—is the belief that objects can possess mysterious forms of agency.

The literary artifact, as a particular class of object, seems to trouble the distinction between agent and thing, judging by the many varieties of fetishism it has invited. There is, first of all, the seemingly timeless trope of imagining a book as a stand-in (or what Gell would call an “ambassador”) for its human author; Petrarch once quipped that among his library, “I have friends of a very different description, whose society is far more agreeable to me; they are of all countries, and of all ages; they are distinguished in war, in politics, and in the sciences.” Not only do readers often treat books as if they were embodiments of living authors; many readers construct their own identities around literary objects. Gell illustrates this aspect of the agent-object relationship through a different example:

If we think of an anti-personnel mine, not as a “tool” made use of by a (conceptually independent) “user,” but, more realistically, as a component

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of a particular type of social identity and agency, then we can more readily see why a mine can be seen as an “agent”—that is, but for this artifact, this agent (the soldier + mine) could not exist.\textsuperscript{24}

Likewise, it is difficult to imagine the existence of the professional literary class—authors, editors, publishers, scholars—without the existence of books, journals, and magazines.\textsuperscript{25} Finally, literary artifacts can seem like agents in that they make things happen, producing effects on their readers and, by extension, on world events. This last type of fetishism is captured by the phrase (probably apocryphal, but nonetheless telling) with which Lincoln was supposed to have greeted Harriet Beecher Stowe: “So you are the little woman who wrote the book that started this great war!”

There is one particular aspect of the codex that encourages us to conflate it with the human being—or at least with that imagined locus of human subjectivity, the mind. In the practice of idol-worship, Gell writes, the idol’s location within a shrine is crucial to the process by which it is imaginatively endowed with agency:

Just as the “mind” is conceived of as an interior person, a homunculus, within the body, so the idols are homunculi within the “body” of the temple. And it is true that idols, even very representational idols, are invariably presented in a setting, a temple, a shrine or an ark, a sacred space of some kind, which has the effect of emphasizing their interiority, their secludedness and (relative) inaccessibility, as well as their majesty.\textsuperscript{26}

Gell goes on to offer the analogy “idol : temple :: mind : body.” Although historians of the book often ask us to abandon the notion of the book as mere “container,” perhaps this metaphor deserves a second look. Just as the temple comes to signify the idol, rather than the other way around, it could be said that the container-like form of the codex invites a mind-body (or idol-temple) analogy: hence Petrarch’s fantasy that his favorite authors were alive in their books, like idols enshrined in a temple.

As young booklovers trying to make sense of the adult literary world, Charlotte and Branwell were deeply attuned to such forms of literary fetishism. Throughout the Glass Town saga, adult characters project agent-like powers onto books and newspapers, and fixate on the materiality of literary artifacts. In Charlotte’s “The Poetaster,” a character

\begin{itemize}
\item 24 Gell, 21.
\item 25 Of course, the relationship between literary people and literary objects is undergoing a profound shift in the digital era, an issue that I return to at the end of this article. Still, it could be said that literary identity remains dependent on objects, even though the objects in question are changing (e-readers instead of books, for instance).
\item 26 Gell, 136.
\end{itemize}

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teases his brother about a lavish book purchase: “Arthur, what a charming book that was you spent your money about the other day. That I mean which you wrapped in the finest silk paper you could get, then in blue embossed, hot pressed satin paper, sealed in green sealing wax, with some motto, ‘L’amour jamais’” (Edition of the Early Writings, 185). On the “Avertisments” page of one of the Blackwood’s parodies, an advertiser trumpets “a book containing five splendid engravings crown octavo . . . the engravings are in mezotintta style” (MS Lowell 1 [6]). If fetishism entails treating objects as if they were subjects, it might seem counterintuitive to say, as W.J.T. Mitchell puts it, that an object is fetishized when its “materiality is stressed.” But these two practices are complementary, in that to dwell on the material form of an object is to endow it with heightened significance.

When characters in the Glass Town saga discuss the material form of literature, they are especially attentive to the element of scale. In his scathing review of “Bud’s Commentary on Ossian,” Branwell uses bibliographic measures of scale to lambaste his subject:

One day being out of employment we took up in Tree’s shop a volumn of this work & sat down by the fire, & asked Three [Tree] for the whole set of volumns. He gave us 28. We wer dismayed. But however we sat down and began to peruse them. The preface ouccupies 1 vol. folio, Introduction 1 vol folio, Introductory dissertation 3 vols folio, Ossian with commentarys 23 vols folio, & the Appendix, Index, &c 1 vol folio . . . This is one of the most long winded Books that have ever been printed. We must now conclude for we are dreadfully tired. (MS Lowell 1 [9])

Branwell here reminds his readers that size, when it comes to literature, does not correlate with value (and if anything, it correlates with tedium). This point is reinforced, of course, by the very form of the miniature books. Micrography, Susan Stewart has observed, draws attention to “the divergent relation between the abstract and the material nature of the sign”; it reveals that reducing the size of the script “does not produce a corresponding reduction in significance.” As micrographers, and moreover as children, the Brontës could appreciate the properties of a medium in which significance was not contingent on size.

The practice of projecting human traits onto objects, as the Brontës did with their toy soldiers, is often considered the hallmark of the child’s imagination. But the Glass Town saga emphasizes that adults, too—and literary adults, in particular—often find

themselves irrationally invested in inanimate objects. Still, much as the saga satirizes the fetishism practiced by literary adults, the books themselves invite fetishism. Their miniscule size and micrographic script, juxtaposed with the vast imaginary universe they conjure, reminds readers of literature’s ability to transcend its material form. As parodies of the full-sized codex, they call attention to the thingness of the book, while asserting that books are always more than things: a special class of object. If the young Brontës mocked the culture of literary fetishism while participating in it, perhaps this was because they felt that special status of the book to be under threat, in a print culture in which literary artifacts were becoming cheaper, more accessible, and more commonplace.

**Open Access**

The development of British print culture in the nineteenth century is, broadly speaking, a story of democratization. Alongside an increasingly literate British public, which would reach close to universal literacy by the end of the century, the publishing industry underwent a phase of profound growth and transformation. Newspapers and journals were becoming cheaper due to new printing and distribution technologies, as well as to the gradual repeal of “taxes on knowledge” (which had been instituted in the eighteenth century to stave off the revolutionary threat of an educated working class). Experimental periodical formats, such as chapbooks (typically filled with short legends and folktales) and broadsheets (featuring sensational news stories), made literature available to a growing population of working-class readers. And although books, especially three-volume novels, were still expensive to purchase outright, circulating libraries made them affordable to “rent” for most middle-class readers. This trend toward greater accessibility was not neatly linear, to be sure; changes in copyright law, such as the 1842 Copyright Act, could suddenly render certain works more expensive, as William St. Clair has shown. And in 1820s Yorkshire, when Charlotte and Branwell began composing the Glass Town saga, new literature was still hard to come by; if the children wanted a particular book or magazine, they often needed to borrow it from a neighbor or trek four miles to the lending library in Keighly. Nonetheless, the Brontës came of age at the onset of a new literary paradigm, in which reading was becoming part of mass culture, and printed literature was losing its status as a luxury item.

30 Ibid, 38–42.
32 Gaskell, 90.

40 *Literary Fetishes: The Brontë Miniature Books*
The well-educated gentlemen who make up the Glass Town literati seem to embody, in many ways, an older model of literary culture. Branwell’s “Nights,” as discussed earlier, alternate in tone between satirizing and glamorizing that group. Charlotte’s contributions feel, at times, more critical of Glass Town’s literary gentlemen’s club, but her writings still typically portray literary culture as an upper-class, masculine domain. Charlotte’s favored alter ego throughout the early miniature books, Lord Charles Wellesley, is a far cry from the marginalized narrators she would later adopt in novels like *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853).

In other respects, too, the miniature books seem to propagate a vision of literary culture as an exclusive coterie. Their parodic nature contributes to this: parody, in general, operates as a sort of inside joke, intended for readers intimately familiar with the original; the *Blackwood’s* parodies are directed at a very specific audience of those already in the know. Beyond this, the size of the books makes them inaccessible. This was by design: the Brontës initially made the books in miniature to scale them to Branwell’s toy soldiers, but they also recognized that the size would ward off their father or aunt. The siblings seem to have established some kind of secrecy code for their creative collaborations; in “History of the Year 1829,” Charlotte obliquely notes, “Bed plays mean secret plays; they are very nice ones” (*Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal*, 3). Further contributing to the sense that these books were not intended for a wide audience, Charlotte and Branwell frequently refer to characters only by their initials, and allude to character backstories without explaining them. Handwriting aside, these books are very difficult to follow, for readers not already fluent in Glass Town lore.

Beyond the microscopic script and the telegraphic content, the Brontës gave their miniature books an extra layer of protection by wrapping them in paper covers (presumably for the sake of preservation). If every codex has a container-like quality, storing a text between covers that can be opened and closed, this quality is intensified in the case of the Brontë miniatures—at least, for contemporary readers of the originals. Today, in Houghton’s collection, the books are still preserved in their original paper wrappers, and are additionally shrouded in a covered box, which is itself kept behind glass in the Amy Lowell Room bookcases. If the books already invited fetishism in their original context, they do so even more today: the more layers, Gell would say, the more one imagines a homunculus or core within, as if in so much flesh there must be a mind.

In its portrayal of literary fetishism—of newspapers coming to life and books being mourned—the Glass Town saga implies that reading, writing, and debating literature

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is not only an elite pursuit, but an almost occult one.\textsuperscript{34} Perhaps this is because children, for whom the memory of learning to read and write is relatively fresh, still associate literacy with club membership. Learning to decipher the code of written language feels like gaining access to a semiotic world that once, not too long ago, was closed off. Frank Kermode has argued something similar about the adult practice of literary criticism: that hermeneutics is based on an exclusionary desire. The critic sets out to interpret a text on the presumption that it has both “manifest” and “latent” meaning, and that while the former will be accessible to lay readers, the latter will reveal itself only to the elect. Literary culture, by this description, is premised on a dichotomy of “insiders and outsiders.”\textsuperscript{35} The Brontë children were attuned to this dichotomy, as Branwell’s portrayal of the Ossian debate suggests, and their enchantment with literary culture seems to derive partly from the notion of the literary text as a code ready to yield secret meanings to those who can decipher it.

In their construction of books that would only be accessible to the initiated, and in their portrayal of literary culture as the purview of upper-class gentlemen, the young Brontës might sound like cultural reactionaries, eager to defend the gates of literature against would-be interlopers. But other aspects of the miniature books call to mind a different image of these authors: as bookloving children living on the geographic margins, who could appreciate an increasingly open literary culture. If the Blackwood’s parodies often revel in literary elitism, other stories in the Glass Town saga celebrate this more democratic vision. “An Interesting Passage” envisions books as intrinsically public objects—“traffic,” as one character puts it—whose nature it is to circulate freely. To privatize them, stymieing their circulation, is to deprive the powerless of a valuable means of leverage. Charlotte shares the indignation, one senses, of her character who unearths the book theft conspiracy: “‘These books belong to the Public Library. You’ve stole them & buried them here for secrery. I’ll inform against you!’” (\textit{Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal}, 35). Only in the mind of an adolescent bibliophile could a plot against the library merit punishment by “the rack” (\textit{Tales of Glass Town, Angria, and Gondal}, 37).

While the imagery of literary fetishism in the Glass Town saga satirizes the behavior of literary adults, then, it also reflects Charlotte and Branwell’s earnest belief in the transcendent power of literature. The young Brontës essentially subscribed to the Enlightenment notion that literature could serve an “emancipatory function,” as

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} Harris Williams elaborates on this portrayal of authorship “as a vehicle of magical power” in the Glass Town and Angria legends, focusing on the strange force that Charlotte and Branwell refer to throughout as the “Genii”; pages 31–32.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Frank Kermode, \textit{The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative} (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979), xi.
\end{itemize}
Richard Wittman puts it, by expanding the reader’s “moral and intellectual horizon.”

Books and journals might be thoroughly material, commodities to be embossed, pressed, bought and sold; they might be status markers, distinguishing cultural insiders from outsiders. But they were also vehicles of knowledge, self-improvement, and social mobility, and as such they possessed a dazzling and unquantifiable power. This last aspect of literature often speaks particularly to children, who— forbidden by family and law from learning through firsthand experiences— must rely on books for their enlightenment.

As adolescents hungry for worldly experience, Charlotte and Branwell were excited by the prospect of a more accessible print culture. One material feature of the miniature books, which contrasts with the more hermetic aspects of their design, testifies to this. At first glance, perhaps, the hand-sewn, painstakingly inscribed Brontë books evoke nostalgia for a pre-industrial era; they might appear to participate in the Victorian trend of idealizing handmade goods that, as Elaine Freedgood has shown, took shape in reaction to the mass production paradigm of modernity. In fact, however, the Brontë children chose to inscribe their books “in imitation of print,” rather than defaulting to cursive script. They designed their handmade crafts, in other words, to look like mass-produced commodities. In this respect, the miniature books were not mementos of a pre-industrial print culture, so much as tributes to the modern publishing industry.

Both the form and content of the miniature books express their authors’ conflicted attitude toward the democratization of literary culture. At times, Charlotte and Branwell valorize an older paradigm, in which books were precious objects and literature was the purview of an elect coterie; at other times, they embrace the idea of a more accessible literary culture. In Charlotte’s “The Poetaster,” when a prominent member of the Glass Town literati named Captain Tree encounters the hackneyed verse of a young poet, he issues the following lament:

Oh, how that noble profession is dishonoured! . . . Alas, alas, that those days would come again, when no one had even a transitory dream of putting pen to paper except a few choice spirits set apart from and revered by all the rest of the world; but it cannot be hoped for, it cannot be hoped for. And some years hence, perhaps, these eyes will see, through


38 Bock, 35.
the mists of age, every child that walks along the streets, bearing its manuscripts in its hand, going to the printers for publication. (*Edition of the Early Writings*, 193).

Like most of these early miniature book writings, the tone of this jeremiad of cultural decline—a timeless tradition, stretching from Alexander Pope (and beyond) to recent critics of the blogosphere—is ambiguous. On the one hand, the Brontës take pleasure throughout the saga in mocking talentless writers like Rhymer. Ultimately, however, their most potent satire is reserved for cultural conservatives like Captain Tree. His fearful prophecy of a city run rampant with overly literate children is ridiculous to the Brontës—even if, in their very act of ridicule, they are fulfilling his prophecy.

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Charlotte and Branwell were bound for some disillusionment when they eventually faced the reality of literary London. In his teenage years, Branwell made several attempts to contact *Blackwood's Magazine* (even volunteering, in one especially presumptuous letter, to take over for the recently deceased contributor James Hogg), but his missives were never answered.\(^{39}\) In his twenties, while working as a railway station clerk in West Yorkshire, Branwell managed to get some of his poems published in regional newspapers, but despite these minor successes he was growing frustrated with literary life. In 1846, shortly before his decline into alcoholism and early death, he complained to a friend of the “hopelessness of bursting through the barriers of literary circles, and getting a hearing among publishers.”\(^{40}\) Charlotte, in her adult life, fared somewhat better with those publishers: *Jane Eyre*, published pseudonymously in 1847, found champions in William Makepeace Thackeray and George Henry Lewes, winning her access to London’s rarified literary circles. But she never came to feel at ease in that milieu, wearing her provincial roots uncomfortably, and refusing to admit that she and “Currer Bell” were one and the same.\(^{41}\)

Today, the growing scholarly fields of book history and material culture have provoked a new wave of interest in Charlotte and Branwell’s miniature books. The rise of those fields can be understood as a response to the digital revolution: a “compensatory move,” W. J. T. Mitchell writes, “for the sense of de-realization produced by cyberspace and virtual reality.”\(^{42}\) Without entering into the debates about the fate of the book in the

\(^{39}\) Alexander, “Readers and Writers,” 54-55.


\(^{41}\) Miller, 25.

\(^{42}\) Mitchell, 111.
digital era, it seems safe to say that Captain Tree’s prophecy—of manuscript-clutching children descending on publishing houses *en masse*—will not come to fruition anytime soon. (Why bother, when they can self-publish at the click of a cursor?) In this respect, the Brontës’ vision of Glass Town, with its print-based economy, seems unique to its time, a moment when the publishing industry was beginning an extraordinary phase of growth. It also seems uniquely juvenile: the product of two bibliophilic children with a magnified sense of the power of literature.

For adult readers today, then, the outsized charm of the miniature books comes from how they evoke both a very different stage of life and a very different historical moment. Yet the more things change . . . A century and a half after Charlotte’s death, the Brontë miniature books are prized not only as historical documents, but also as “juvenilia.” As such, they are guarded and preserved with the meticulous care that we bestow on the manuscripts of card-carrying literary geniuses—a reminder that fetishism is alive and well in the literary world, even if art lovers, as Gell puts it, have learned to “explain away their *de facto* idolatry by rationalizing it as aesthetic awe.” 43

This article has argued that what is often taken as mysticism or imaginative whimsy on the part of the young Brontës was actually the product of two child ethnographers who recognized the fanciful behavior of adults toward literary objects. Attuned as the Brontë children were to that behavior, they likely would have been amused by the fact that their miniature books have become fetish objects par excellence. And they would have been intrigued, no doubt, to see how literary culture has begun to reinvent itself in the digital era, at a moment when literary texts are more accessible than ever, while printed literary artifacts seem poised to become objects of nostalgia.

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43 Gell, 97.
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