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Unknown woman formerly known as Charlotte Brontë (Mrs A. B. Nicholls)

Unknown artist, ca 1850, watercolour, 311 x 235mm

National Portrait Gallery, London NPG 1444

In October 1906, *The Morning Leader* reported: "In Room 21 of the National Portrait Gallery, in the little section specially devoted to women's portraits, there is hung a small water-colour drawing, so small as to be almost overlooked among its larger contemporaries. It represents Charlotte Brontë as she appeared in 1850 - a quiet little woman, with ringlets, dressed in a dull green frock, reading." (1) The artist was reported to be one Paul Héger. This is the work I am considering now. But it doesn't show Charlotte Brontë sitting in a drab brown room in an unknown house in an unidentified location in the middle of the 19th century. It doesn't show Charlotte Brontë reading a book quietly, decorously, attentively while a commissioned artist - or her brother, sister, father or friend - paints her. This isn't Charlotte Brontë dressed and coiffed in the style typical of the early 1840s, ringletted brown hair with a middle parting and plain, slub-green dress with the desultory decoration of a white collar, unornamented by jewellery of any kind, feet invisible beyond the frame. I know this because I have seen other portrayals of Charlotte Brontë, which I believe to be true, which resemble this one not at all.

But someone thought it was; thought it was because they hoped it was, said it was because they needed it to be, believed it was because they were told so. In the fantasy of the pre-NPG owners, here is the writer either in a room in the Haworth vicarage where she spent most of her life or in a house in Brussels where, with her sister Emily, Brontë went to study in the Héger household in 1842. Herein those owners, investing in this flimsy image far beyond its mild appearance, saw a deceptively respectable and demure young woman who became famous for spinning challenging and dramatic narratives out of her domesticated, routine existence, setting a trail that many women would follow in the era of the 'woman question'. The dreary interior in which she is here found endorsed their lugubriously romantic belief in the humdrum oppression of her home life, which they held her to have transcended in enduringly memorable ways. A clumsy inscription on the book, identifying it as Brontë's novel *Shirley* (1849), would, however, have the

famous author a narcissist, caught reading her own work with a naïve absorption, or an amateur, enthralled by her own latest creation or checking over her own turns of plot and nuances of character, hot from the press. Even at the point of acquisition, was this really convincing as a representation of the admired author? Is this the remarkable, tenacious, independent-minded but pious Brontë "in her half-savage moorland shyness and her charm, in her grace and goodness, in her genius and her heroic strength"? (2) How did this representation square with the animated attractiveness of George Richmond's open-faced Brontë, made in the very same year and, by the time this drawing came to public notice, well documented as having been reckoned by several acquaintances of the writer a good evocation of her personality and her appearance? (3) As one commonsensical journalist put it in 1909, "The latter [Richmond's drawing] is awkward company [for the watercolour portrait] for it emphasises the fact that the lady of the alleged portrait by 'Monsieur Paul Héger' has absolutely no facial resemblance whatever to Charlotte Brontë beyond a certain leanness..."(4) Furthermore, where are the accessories that would testify to both the daily and the interior lives of this remarkable woman? Where are the traces of provincial vicarage life or the trappings of the Brussels bourgeoisie? Where the signs of the spirit which allowed her to break out of the mundane lot of early- Victorian middle-class daughters? Why would she have sat for such an inadequate portrayal as this?

As Richard Brilliant has suggested with reference to another staple of the NPG pantheon, George Gordon, Lord Byron, (5) the identification in itself doesn't deliver the character the subject's admirers might expect from the hero/ine's likeness. This portrait needs Brontë's identity to give it any layers: it has little power and even less show compared with the best portrayals of readers such as Wright of Derby's *Sir Brooke Boothby* (1781) or Mary Cassatt's *Reading Le Figaro* (c.1878). (6) Without the star quality with which the Brontë connection endowed it, this drawing isn't either a successful genre picture: compared with a relative pot-boiler like Ford Madox Brown's contemporary *An English Fireside* (1855), it cuts a poor figure. (7) Having an uneventful mildness about it, it needs the portrait genre to give it a *raison d'être*, because it isn't interesting, dramatic or distinctive enough to be anything else.

But if it is to be a portrait, it needs the name, persona or character of its subject.

The well-observed face and head are the only areas to have received much attention from the artist. The entire composition, as one continues to look at it, begins to look more like an exercise than a work with more expressive purpose. The palette is limited, with the green of the dress and the browns of the interior set off lightly by the dull reds of the tablecloth and discarded scarf or shawl at the sitter's left hand. The physical reality of the interior is not emphatically delineated, with the wall behind the sitter drifting undecidedly into the floor at the far left of the composition, and the rectangular shape laid upon it resembling a door but not obviously sporting any hinges or handle. This is a room in which nothing seems about to happen, just as it bears no signs of anything having happened in it. It is as if might be a set devised only for the purpose of providing a backcloth for this demure reader - who may be reading simply to facilitate her sitting still enough for an hour or so for the exercise to be completed.

As an image of an unidentified Victorian woman, this portrait cannot look just as it did when it was supposedly of Charlotte Brontë, and it certainly doesn't mean the same. Indeed, what does it mean, post-Brontë? What can it mean - without the punctum of Brontë's identity? Likeness and identity are, after all, the lynchpins of portraiture (8) and the National Portrait Gallery's essential currency. This work would not have been acquired if it had not been thought to show Brontë, for 'eminent persons' were the Gallery's proposed stock in trade. It was the identity that led in 1906 to this watercolour being acquired for the British people and being now preserved for the nation.

Almost at once, however, its identity - and thus its legitimacy as well as its appeal - was challenged, and the strong terms 'hoax', 'bogus' and 'forgery' were quickly taken up in many quarters of the press. (9) It has been generally accepted for many years now not to be a portrayal of Charlotte Brontë - to possibly be of Mary Vickers (10) but more probably to be of the Victorian, female equivalent of Joe Bloggs. It is my guess that it is of an aspiring artist's sister or cousin, obliging them by sitting for a drawing which, if judged by its maker successful enough, could be exhibited, or at least hung on the home wall - and, if not, be confined with stoicism and a resolve to do better next time to the portfolio. This obliging relative could well be a Miss Vickers but if so, her artistic brother, sister or cousin cannot be seen, from the records, to have made a name for themselves.

The other name by which a portrait can make a claim to fame - who made it - was also scoffed at by those who, in 1906 and then again in 1913, scorned the NPG's purchase. There was no Paul Héger who painted, who was with Brontë in 1850, they insisted. So the owner of the gaze that settled on this young woman is also unknown.

Turning from the insistently crucial issues of whom this drawing portrays and by whom, the question that follows is whether the nation, in all or in part, is interested in seeing it now that it does not show the appearance of a well-known person. Certainly the attempt to know this unknown woman was quite concerted, as several bulging folders in the NPG's archive attest: sheaves of letters, notes, newspaper clippings and minutes plough back and forth over the same ground, who is this woman? She is not the only woman in the care of the NPG whose identity has been found embarrassingly mobile, however. Such slippage of selfhood has been suffered by Nell Gwyn, Catherine of Braganza, Sarah Duchess of Marlborough, Mary Sidney, Mary Davis - and if I find myself thinking uncaringly, who is she? In response to the last two cases of missing persons, I equally wonder why the other three's public prominence couldn't be counted on to put the seal on these (in)famous lovers, mothers and ladies of the court. But the central conundrum, from the start of the NPG, was authentication - the records are full of it and all the Gallery's acquisitions were subject to its demanding standard. (11) Anyone more than three generations back from the 1850s could pose a question for the identification police; Shakespeare was just the first and most conspicuous example. If there was another form of witness that confirmed, in speech or image, yes, that is what Lord So-and-so looked like (I'd know him anywhere/ this is a contemporary picture of him/'they' have always said you could tell him by this or that distinctive feature), it was felt the nation - or, in the first place, the NPG's trustees who were charged with deciding for the populace - could be sure that his appearance had been reliably recorded. This is why it seemed to some in 1906 so farcical that this portrait was accepted as being of Charlotte Brontë, when hers was not a face from the dim past, beyond the reach of the twin authorities of photography and eye-witness, but someone whose friends and relatives were still living and able to testify at the time of purchase. No Shakespeare she, over whose likeness debate could revolve for centuries without resolution or satisfaction. (12) Thus Clement Shorter, who made it his mission to expose the false attribution as bungling on the part of the NPG's

director Lionel Cust, suggested that: "I think that any ratepayer may be justified in asking two simple questions - first, whether the trustees of the National Portrait Gallery still intend to hang this picture with its present inscription; secondly, whether they have any more portraits hanging in their gallery which have been purchased on so scanty a basis of genuineness" (13) - not because it was aesthetically worthless but because its identification was easily shown to be not only dubious but perverse, even quixotic. 'Why should we the public pay for a nobody?' he wanted his readers to cry; 'Give us our heroines, by all means, our characters, our leaders, but don't hand over any money for a nonentity, someone who could be any one of us'.

In limbo since 1913, can this portrait survive its exposure as a case of mistaken identity? To take a far more prestigious case in point, the pseudo-Seneca of Rubens' virtuoso portrait *Four Philosophers with a Bust of Seneca* (1611-12) (14) does not eviscerate this great work of art; the maker's pedigree is secure, the principal characters are still believable and the painting itself has visible merit to save it from abandonment. Or, closer to home, one of the NPG's more prominent cases of debated identity, the so-called Fraser-Tytler portrait that was supposed to record Mary Queen of Scots but which is currently described as being of an unknown woman: (15) this painting remains wonderful without needing to be a portrait of the romantic queen, even gaining an enigmatic allure which evokes, for me, that of the most enduringly famous female portrait, the Mona Lisa. But the loss of Charlotte Brontë's presence does eat out the heart of this modest early Victorian watercolour. 'Miss Vickers' continues to sit quietly reading her supposed work of modern fiction, but she's not going to get a lot of attention unless and until someone can show convincingly that she was someone out of the ordinary, was closely related to or married someone a little less ordinary than all of us (for are women not still, to a great degree, perceptually, relative creatures?).(16) Without a name - either of sitter or maker - this particular portrait speaks only of that typicality which struggles against the cult of celebrity to be heard even for a moment.

Endnotes

- 1 Anonymous, "Doubtful Bronte Portrait", **The Morning Leader**, 25 October 1906 (no pagination recorded for this and other press cuttings in the NPG archive cited below). The provocative prospect of gendered hanging raised here I shall have to leave for another discussion.
- 2 May Sinclair, "Introduction", in Elizabeth Gaskell, **The Life of Charlotte Brontë**, (London: Everyman, 1908), p. xv.
- 3 NPG 1452, acquired 1907. See Richard Ormond, **Early Victorian portraits: National Portrait Gallery** (London: HMSO, 1973), vol. 1, p. 61-2.
- 4 Anonymous, "Charlotte Brontë in Trafalgar Square", **The Yorkshire Daily Observer**, 20 September 1909.
- 5 Richard Brilliant, **Portraiture** (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), fig. 44.
- 6 Sir Brooke Boothby, 1781, Tate; **Reading Le Figaro (Portrait of a Woman)**, c.1878, private collection Washington DC.
- 7 Ford Madox Brown, **An English Fireside**, 1854-5, Walker Art Gallery, reworked from a genre subject he entitled **Waiting** to include topical references to the Crimean War.
- 8 Rehearsed in, among others, Joanna Woodall ed, **Portraiture: facing the subject** (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997): part III Likeness and Identity.
- 9 See, for example, **The Daily Mail**, October 6 1906; **The Daily Mirror**, October 27 1906; **Freeman's Journal**, 26 October 1906; **The Daily Chronicle**, November 2 1906
- 10 A faint inscription, "Portrait of Miss Mary Vickers", was discovered on the back of the drawing in 1913. It was hazarded (by John Malham-Dembleby) that this was a veiled reference to Brontë via the fictional character presented by Eugene Sue in his "Miss Mary" (**London Journal**, 1850), which was widely taken to represent Brontë. In addition, a connection with the artist Alfred Vickers was mooted (Anonymous, "Charlotte Brontë and the Professor", **Liverpool Daily Press and Mercury**, 18 October 1913) although the little-known painter A.H. Vickers seems a more likely possibility, but none for which there is no known evidence.

- 11 See Lara Perry, **History's beauties: women and the National Portrait Gallery 1856-1900** (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), pp. 7, 37.
- 12 An argument still going strong at the time of writing and nowadays cleverly exploited by the NPG as a topic of popular interest: see the exhibition **Searching for Shakespeare** (National Portrait Gallery, March-May 2006)
- 13 Clement Shorter, "A Literary Letter", **The Sphere**, 25 October 1906, p. 82. Shorter claimed some degree of ownership of Brontë as a subject through his research and writings on the writer and her life, and was held by many to be the doyen of Brontëists, and in this controversy fully entitled to assume authority.
- 14 See Brilliant, pp. 78-80.
- 15 See Perry, plate 1 and pp. 46-8.
- 16 The phrase is from Françoise Basch's important study **Relative creatures: Victorian women in society and the novel 1837-67** (London: Allen Lane, 1974).