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Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World

Justine Pizzo
Eleanor Houghton

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Praise for *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World*

"*Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World* presents an innovative approach to ideas of the body and materiality in the life and work of Charlotte Brontë. Shedding new light on Brontë's writing, along with her life and afterlife, this collection of essays will make an important contribution to Brontë scholarship. The book will also make a significant impact on the expanding field of Victorian material culture studies."

—Deborah Wynne, *Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature, University of Chester, UK*, co-editor of *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* (2017)

"This exciting new collection of essays on Brontë is the first to explore her life and work in the aftermath of the 'material turn' in literary studies. The editors bring together literary historians, curators, and textual scholars in a collection that showcases the work of leading experts in Brontë studies alongside the best of the exceptional wave of studies that took shape during the author's bicentenary year. I will certainly be drawing on chapters from this collection when I next teach Brontë's works."

—Ruth Livesey, *Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature and Thought, Royal Holloway, University of London*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Justine Pizzo and Eleanor Houghton

Among the drawings and manuscripts in the Morgan Library & Musuem 1996 exhibition *The Art of the Brontës*—which presented materials from the Library's collection alongside those on loan from the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth—Michael Frank, writing for the *New York Times*, discovers "one of the more poignant curiosities of English literature."[1] The object in question—a diminutive pair of white kid gloves that once belonged to the famous novelist Charlotte Brontë—strike him, as they undoubtedly struck many visitors to the Morgan's acclaimed exhibition, as a hauntingly present and insistently material marker of the author's embodiment. Although the gloves no longer indicate Brontë's true hand size, as kid leather shrinks over time, Frank's notion that they act as a "proxy" for her "incontrovertibly small" hands raises a number of questions for students and scholars of her work: how are we best to understand the literary, cultural, and historical significance of objects associated with an artist's, particularly this artist's, life? What might material artefacts teach us about the production and reception of Brontë's writing and what,

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if anything, do they reveal about the relationship between her embodied experience and literary endeavour?

As this introductory chapter goes on to show, these questions about material culture, human embodiment, and literary achievement raise a conceptual quandary for Frank and, by extension, the general readership he addresses in print. The problem of Brontë's gloves—of thinking critically and holistically about the author's material legacy and embodied life—also faces those scholars and stewards who aim to enrich the cultural contexts of the author's fiction and preserve historical connections between her life and work. The essays collected here bring together a diverse range of these professional and critical voices.

Speaking as specialists in book history, cultural heritage, the history of dress, literary criticism, and museum curation, contributors to this volume look inward to representations of embodiment and materiality in Brontë's fiction and outward to the reception of her work and its material afterlives. In so doing, they challenge the mistaken notion, underlying Frank's essay "The Four Brontës: Myth vs. Reality," that the artefacts she produced, wore, and habitually used are either anomalous "curiosities" or lessons in contrast: quaint reminders of the juxtaposition between her famously slight physical stature and miniscule penmanship, on the one hand and her vast literary imagination and enduring reputation, on the other. The essays collected here embrace the embodied contexts that make the physical artefact—whether a drawing, item of dress, or original manuscript—worthy of investigation. They do so by examining extant items (as in the curatorial case-histories and object-based studies of dress, manuscripts, and works on paper that bridge Parts III and IV) as well as those that have long been lost (as in Broome Saunders's discussion of Brontë's personal copies of *The Lady's Magazine* in Chap. 10). Taken as a whole, *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World* embraces the physical contexts and materials that shape Brontë's writing from her teenage years (Chap. 6) until just before her death (Chaps. 5 and 7). Its authors consequently acknowledge and embrace the conceptual and disciplinary challenges that arise when we attempt to place Brontë's biography in dialogue with her material legacy and artistic practice.

In order to bring these challenges into sharper focus, we begin with the suspicion shared by many culturally literate readers (of the *New York Times,* for instance) that there may be something critically retrograde—even idolatrous—about examining an author's personal artefacts. Frank exemplifies this view when he emphatically claims: "although a writer's

personal relics may appeal to the idolatrous, they do not, as a rule, have much to tell us about literature—unless they are Charlotte Brontë's gloves." Yet, in attempting to articulate what these gloves ultimately reveal about the author's writing, the article problematically elides their unique material history and its connection to Brontë's lived experience and physical being.

In the first lines of his review, Frank recounts being struck by the tangible qualities of Brontë's "neatly stitched, lightly soiled, finely creased" white kid gloves, which "so vividly and so hauntingly summon the novelist that a visitor is inescapably drawn to examine them before moving on to the many other treasures in the show." In attributing literary significance to these gloves, however, he pries the body free from its apparently base materiality: "Glowing ethereally within the protective sheathing of a glass case," Brontë's gloves are "like precious ivories rescued from a vanished civilization." They float unfixed in history and turn into something—and belong to someone—comprehensible only beyond the physical realm. Frank's willingness to dispense with the details of these objects' origin, composition, means of circulation, and acquisition—not to mention their precise biographical contexts—is understandable given that he writes as neither a curator nor a material historian. His expertise does not lie in the same arena as those contributors to Parts II through IV of this volume who focus on the exhibition history, provenance, and cultural histories associated with Brontë's material legacy. Nonetheless, the article's tendency to elide the materiality of the gloves suggests its author's keen apprehension that there may be something suspect, probably lowbrow, and ultimately idolatrous about linking the "inescapably" captivating presence of the gloves too closely to the body of their original owner.

Perhaps the most apposite example of this reticence is Frank's effort to disassociate the gloves' symbolic significance as a "proxy" for the author's hands from the "personal description of Charlotte Brontë" written by her first biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell. "Her hands and feet were the smallest I ever saw" Gaskell states in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). "When one of the former was placed in mine, it was like the soft touch of a bird in the middle of my palm."[2] In Frank's view, the "size and delicacy" of Charlotte Brontë's hands were understood by those who knew her as a point of personal pride: an exception from the otherwise plain appearance that Gaskell recounts in *The Life*. But this assumption that the size and shape of Brontë's hands simply reflects a Victorian concern with appearance for appearance's sake fails to account for her early biographer's

important claim that the minuteness of the author's hands did not simply signal an idealized femininity (a gentle bird-like touch), but were also responsible for the physical aspects of Brontë's artistic sensibility. "The delicate long fingers had a peculiar fineness of sensation, which was one reason why all her handiwork, of whatever kind—writing, sewing, knitting—was so clear in its minuteness," Gaskell contends.[3] It is this clarity and minuteness that, as Chaps. 6 (by Judith E. Pike) and 9 (by Barbara Heritage) respectively argue, mark Brontë's exacting manual reproduction of nineteenth-century printing, book binding, and engraving techniques.

In spite of these important connections between Brontë's embodiment, the material world she inhabited, and the objects she produced, Frank's article dispenses with them in an effort to disassociate the artist's work from the "Brontë craze … fuelled by Mrs. Gaskell's biography." In a diligent attempt to recognize—as Lucasta Miller succinctly puts it in *The Brontë Myth* (2001)—that "Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* … was not designed to celebrate the work but to exonerate and iconise the authors," Frank's review of the drawings, manuscripts, and personal possessions on view at the Morgan's 1996 exhibition elides the vital material and physical contexts of Brontë's life and work.[4] This effort to liberate Brontë's apparently "real" literary genius from her "mythologized" persona also overlooks those issues of gender, class, economics, ethnicity, physical ability, and personal identity that inform her work. Thus, her hands become simply "the instrument, fed by her vigorous imagination, that produced the famous juvenilia … fashioned the fiction that defined Charlotte in her maturity, and … were responsible for the correspondence that connected her to worlds beyond her father's parsonage at Haworth."

Over the course of the article, Brontë's body disappears even further from view, as the gloves that initially serve as a "proxy" for her living frame become simply a "few inches of kid [that] once covered the hand that held the pen that wrote *Jane Eyre*." This part-in-place-of-the-whole approach mobilizes what Elaine Freedgood terms in her study of things in nineteenth-century realist novels a "limited or weak metonymic function."[5] "Weak metonymy," she argues in *The Ideas in Things* (2013), understands objects in nineteenth-century realist fiction as having a singular and often obvious quality; it attributes only glancing importance to those objects which simply "suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them."[6] But the "strong, literalizing, or materializing metonymic reading" she proposes instead, adopts a "literal approach to the literary thing"; it examines the objects in realist narratives

on their own terms, as physical entities with distinct "properties and history." Strong metonymic reading, as Freedgood argues, allows us to better understand the cultural, historical, and political significance of objects "both within the novel and outside it."[7]

The approach this volume takes to embodiment and material culture is similarly focused on a dual movement between the interior of the text and the objects that lie beyond it (or in some cases comprise its very covers). But it is also profoundly interdisciplinary in its willingness to examine the importance of the material artefact not only as it emerges in literature, but also as it is seen, studied, and presented within a variety of archival, educational, and exhibition settings. For, as cultural historians often note, "things, objects or materials look different, pose different questions and do different work depending on the world of presuppositions in which they operate."[8]

This volume's interdisciplinary approach to materiality and embodiment—much like Frank's reading of Brontë's gloves in "The Four Brontës: Myth vs. Reality"—responds to a particular critical, cultural, and historical moment. Anxiety about mythologizing Brontë emerged as a prominent concern within late twentieth- (and early twenty-first-) century Brontë studies. In the years leading up to and immediately following the exhibition of *The Art of the Brontës: Drawings and Manuscripts*, scholars published some of the most seminal research on the family's life and work to date. Juliet Barker's authoritative biography *The Brontës* (1994), the comprehensive Clarendon edition of *The Letters of Charlotte Brontë* edited by Margaret Smith (published in three volumes 1995–2004), Christine Alexander and Jane Sellars's *The Art of the Brontës* (1995), Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996), Lucasta Miller's *The Brontë Myth* (2001) and Heather Glen's *Charlotte Brontë: the Imagination in History* (2002) are just a few of the influential titles published between the mid-1990s and early 2000s.

These book-length studies advanced historical approaches to the Brontës' lives and works through their respective authors' meticulous examination of public records and private papers; collection and reconstruction of extant correspondence; discussion of the family's engagement with the visual arts; and in-depth analysis of how key cultural events, as well as intellectual and scientific debates, influenced the Brontës' writing (to name just a few examples). In many ways, these important studies grew from the wider literary-critical establishment's turn towards "New Historicism": a movement that encouraged the co-mingling of literary

and cultural studies, joint approaches to historical and formal analysis of texts, and newfound attention to a work's inception, circulation, and reception. These aspects of New Historicism offered a clear alternative to "New Critical" tendencies to address oneself "primarily to the writing rather than to the writer."[9] Put another way, New Historicism helped retrain our readerly attention on the time and place of a work's composition as well as the cultural conditions and materials of its making. Within the context of Brontë studies more specifically, New Historicism also provided a methodological framework for moving beyond dominant critical narratives about "Romance" and "passion" in Charlotte's work: narratives that could not but have helped to promote the apocryphal legend of "three lonely sisters playing out their tragic destiny on top of a windswept moor."[10]

Within the broad scope of New Historicism, however, literary scholars of the 1990s also became increasingly interested in the signifying power of things. This "material turn" in literary and cultural studies emerged from a revival of interest in material culture that had spread across fields ranging from archaeology to anthropology in the 1970s and 1980s and which soon grew to encompass a "Marxian rediscovery" of the importance of objects in the creation of social worlds.[11] The influence of this "material turn" quickly spread across other disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, from political theory and literature to sociology, economics, and the history of art. Public and scholarly awareness of the digitalization of society—a collective movement away from the physical and towards the virtual—only strengthened the movement. After decades of linguistic and textual turns, Frank Trentmann writes: "scholars had rediscovered the world of things and [were tracing] the patina it left on human relations and sensibilities."[12] This increasing emphasis on the social life of things, the agency of objects, and the ways in which humans and things constitute each other encouraged historians to engage more readily with images, bodies, and extant objects.[13] It also encouraged literary scholars to study the book as a physical entity, to examine writing implements and the material processes of printing, and to think theoretically—as Bill Brown states—not just about "things themselves but about the subject-object relation in particular temporal and spatial contexts."[14]

Within Victorian studies, the material turn can be said to begin around the time of Asa Briggs's influential *Victorian Things* (1988), which explores an age in which the range of available commodities widened "much further than [in] any previous century."[15] Briggs's discussion of the Great

Exhibition of 1851—"not only as an event in itself but as one exhibition among many—albeit the key one," charts the ways in which the mid-century's explosion of consumer culture coincided with an international exhibition ethos.[16] It was this ethos that, as Trentmann reminds us, "blurred the lines between culture and commodity" and made the museum and the department store dual displays of "global ambition." Needless to say, this exhibition culture showcased not only the thing itself but also the commercial reach of the British Empire, which at the time *Jane Eyre* was published in 1847 was the industrial and political powerhouse of the nineteenth century.[17]

As literary criticism and cultural histories of the period also remind us, the social and intellectual anxieties arising from this surplus of stuff had a dramatic impact on the Victorian novel. As Andrew H. Miller argues in *Novels Behind Glass* (1995), fiction writers of the period expressed a "penetrating anxiety" that "their social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities, a display window in which people … were exhibited for the economic appetites of others."[18] He goes on to discuss the ways in which "the ambivalences generated by commodity culture" inform novels by authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and especially William Makepeace Thackeray (whose *Vanity Fair* appeared in serial form the same year as *Jane Eyre*).

This material turn in Victorian studies, and its focus on the ambivalence generated by the exhibition and commodity culture of the 1850s, has had particular impact on early twenty-first-century criticism on *Villette* (1853). Eva Badowska examines how this novel, originally titled "Choseville" ("thing city" or "city of things"), focuses on its protagonist Lucy Snowe's fear that "true interiority has been lost under the pressure of things"—a notion that coalesced around the author's own conflicted response to the exhibition on view at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, which she had visited in May of 1851.[19] In a similar vein, Heather Glen argues that the thousands of objects Brontë encountered during this visit gives rise to Lucy's anxiety that the creative and physical possibilities of vision are hopelessly "obstructed by intransigent material fact" and bounded by the artistically and spiritually inhibiting "world of things."[20]

These insightful studies of materiality in *Villette* demonstrate the ways in which literary critics have embraced those aspects of material culture that surface within the world of Brontë's fiction. Such study has been late, however, to examine those objects that reveal distinctive aspects of the author's personal embodiment, record the physical details of her artistic

method, or provide an important source of public engagement with her work. This resistance is due, in no small part, to an enduring association between Brontë's biography and the reproduction of the "Brontë myth"—in other words, between her personal life and the ahistorical tendency to romanticize her legacy that, at least since Terry Eagleton's *Myths of Power* (1975), scholars have worked tirelessly to "dispel in purely empirical fashion."[21]

Despite Lucasta Miller's persuasive claim that Charlotte acted as her own mythologizer in seeking "to distract attention from the unacceptable elements of her fiction and deflect attacks on her personal morality," scholars have understandably continued to approach Brontë's material legacy with some trepidation, raising concerns that the author's lived experience has the power to obscure her literary achievements.[22] This reticence undoubtedly stems from the knowledge that almost immediately after Brontë's death in 1855, pilgrims travelled to Haworth to see, and ultimately try to possess, those things she had "actually touched."[23] The number of early "relic-hunters" making pilgrimages to the West Yorkshire village only grew after the publication of *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* two years later, with one of the Gaskells' American friends carting off a discarded sash from Charlotte's bedroom window in 1861 and autograph seekers writing to Patrick Brontë to request small scraps of his late daughter's handwriting.[24] As Margaret Smith explains in her painstaking reconstruction of Charlotte Brontë's correspondence, this pervasive practice led to an especially important letter from 9 June 1849 (in which Charlotte informs her father of Anne's death in Scarborough) being distributed across six different locations.[25]

In response to this long history of Brontë fanaticism, "serious" readers have cautiously avoided tending to those aspects of the family's legacy that would reanimate the mythos surrounding their lives. But this trepidation has also encouraged a critical tendency to read as emotive all research that places emphasis on Brontë's lived experience. More than any other biography, Juliet Barker's *The Brontës*, written after years of scrupulous study, has done much to try to correct this enduring association between biography and myth. By chronicling the minutiae of the day-by-day, year-by-year activities of the individual members of the Brontë family, Barker's study has evaded all accusations of excess passion. "There is no apocrypha in Juliet Barker's book," Lucasta Miller acknowledges, "eleven years of painstaking research have produced a documentary record as full and as trustworthy as we are ever likely to get."[26]

Despite the impact of Barker's 1994 biography—and the publication of influential monographs on Charlotte's work by other scholars during the same period—there has been a pervasive tendency, from the time of Eagleton's study on, to formulate wholly erroneous equations between those "things" that make up what he labelled the "literary industry"—which at base level consists of fridge magnets and *Jane Eyre* mugs, but which ironically helps to fund the safeguarding of the Brontës' manuscripts and letters—and the actual material relics with which she shared her life.[27] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the cataloguing of these artefacts has historically fallen to their guardians—to those people charged with their day-to-day care and thus most alert to their power. Consequently, it was in her capacity as curator and librarian of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, that Juliet Barker wrote *Sixty Treasures* (1988), a lavishly illustrated short text that briefly examines sixty Brontë relics, ranging from dresses to writing desks, one chosen for each year that the museum had been open to the public. More recently, Ann Dinsdale, the current principal curator and Sarah Laycock, curator of the museum together with Julie Akhurst, owner of Ponden Hall (the site traditionally identified as the inspiration for Thrushcross Grange in *Wuthering Heights*) composed *Brontë Relics: A Collection History* (2012).[28] The book charts how the objects that had once belonged to individual members of the Brontë family survived following the deaths of Patrick Brontë and Charlotte's husband Arthur Bell Nicholls and were eventually returned to their original home at the Haworth Parsonage. What these books did not set out to do, however, was consider not just the provenance and physical attributes of such objects but also what material historians, contributors to the present volume included, value as "the myriad and shifting context through which [these objects] acquire meaning."[29]

Students and stewards of Brontë's literary and material legacy owe a great debt in this regard to Christine Alexander. Her monumental body of work has done more than any other to elevate the afterlives of objects associated with the Brontës and illuminate their historical and cultural contexts. What began with research on the juvenilia and the physical manuscripts that Charlotte and her siblings had created, soon expanded to include their artworks. Rather than seeing these as disconnected from Charlotte's textual productions, Alexander noted the many ways in which the author's relationship with the visual arts influenced her writing. *The Art of the Brontës*, written in 1995 with Jane Sellars, then director of the Brontë Parsonage Museum, was the culmination of years of research. It

offers readers information on the correct date, provenance, source, and style of each of the creations that make up the immense collection of artworks that Charlotte, Branwell, Emily, and Anne produced during their lifetimes. As Juliet McMaster states, the text underscores "the constant and intricate interaction of word and picture in Charlotte Brontë's creative consciousness."[30]

Alexander's efforts to reconnect the author's visual and physical experiences with her literary works do not draw exclusively from aesthetic contexts, however. *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës* (2003), written together with Margaret Smith, provides a comprehensive guide to the lives, works, and afterlives of the Brontë sisters by situating them within a wholly material and culturally specific world. More recently, Alexander's collaboration with Sara L. Pearson on the richly illustrated bicentennial work *Celebrating Charlotte Brontë: Transforming Life into Literature in "Jane Eyre"* (2016) reveals for a broad general readership, the extent to which the author took inspiration from the objects and experiences she encountered on a day-to-day basis. Despite these many contributions to the intersection of material studies and Brontë scholarship, Alexander had remained something of a lone voice until recent years. Sandra Hagan and Juliette Wells's edited collection, *The Brontës in the World of the Arts* (2008) further develops the historical contexts of the family's engagement with art, music, drama, and dress, which Alexander did so much to promote. Likewise, Deborah Lutz's book, *The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects* (2015) places biographical emphasis on everyday objects that illuminate pivotal moments in the lives of the family's individual members.

In spite of this increasing and welcome attention to the material legacy of the Brontës, however, there remains a general critical reluctance to place Charlotte's embodied subjectivity and physical identity in dialogue with material studies. If this reticence is due, in large part, to critics' sustained efforts to dismantle the Brontë myth, it also stems from our enduring awareness of the author's own desire to distance her personal identity from the critical reception of her novels. We recall, for instance, Brontë's celebrated riposte to *The North British Review*'s commentary on *Jane Eyre*, which avowed that if the novel was indeed "the production of a woman—she must be a woman unsexed." "To such critics I would say," Brontë emphatically declares to her editor William Smith Williams, "to you I am neither Man nor Woman—I come before you as an Author only—it is the sole standard by which you have a right to judge me."[31]

If this separation between the body and its modes of making meaning holds for the author's professional self-presentation, however, it certainly does not pertain to the representations of body, mind, and spirit in her fiction. As William A. Cohen argues in *Embodied* (2008), the "great achievement of Victorian realism" is the demonstration of a characterological psychology, consciousness, and inner depth "propagated by means of physical embodiment in characterization."[32] Brontë and fellow realist writers such as Charles Dickens, he maintains, locate the "unique essence of the human in the physical existence of the body"—whether that essence is associated with "traditional, religiously inflected names such as 'soul' or 'spirit' or identified with newer, psychological oriented terms like 'mind' and 'self'" (xi). Sally Shuttleworth's *Charlotte Brontë and Victorian Psychology* (1996) similarly demonstrates the ways in which mid-nineteenth-century psychological discourses of self shaped character embodiment in Brontë's fiction.[33] As she explains, the body was a topic of constant concern within Haworth and the domestic environment of the Parsonage. Poor sanitary conditions in the village "offered a defiant challenge to middle-class attempts to segregate the life of the mind from that of the lowly body" (22). Meanwhile, Shuttleworth notes, Patrick Brontë's "fascination with medical science, and with the inter-relations between the body and mind" led him to impose a "rigorous regime" of medical self-care on his family (27). This physical government was only amplified by the widespread self-help rhetoric of the time, which, as Shuttleworth further shows, touted "women's biological fitness and adaptation to the sacred role of homemaker" as well as "her terrifying subjection to forces of the body" (76).

Cohen and Shuttleworth draw vital connections between the author's personal and professional understanding of human embodiment and her translation of this knowledge into the medium of fiction. Nevertheless, the problem of how to read an extant personal object, such as a pair of the artist's gloves, still persists. And, as we have been arguing, many students and scholars of Brontë's work continue to see the objects she touched or made by hand as items destined for hero-worship rather than close material analysis. This assumption urges us to recall a familiar lesson of nineteenth-century history: that the exhibition of things has, at least since 1851, incited anxiety about the body—in particular the female, working class, and racialized body. As Andrew H. Miller duly reminds us, the Great Exhibition "inspired several of its male observers to imagine the display of British women under glass": a fantasy of object fetishism the Victorians

recognized and parodied in satiric periodicals such as *Punch* (10). Indeed, "representing women as objects themselves," Miller explains, promised to contain both male and female desires for goods by placing the middle-class female body, with all its material accoutrements of dress and ornamentation, "on the other side of the window" (66). This image of social discipline, orchestrated through carefully controlled relationships between the gendered body and commodity culture, extended to the contemporary treatment of the working class. Victorian labourers were encouraged to attend the Great Exhibition during promotional "Shilling Days" but the male children of "tradesmen" were deemed "more prone to touch, feel, and finger the goods than they ought to have been" while "here and there, also, were rather slatternly-looking girls, who called aloud to each other."[34] Similarly, as Tony Bennett asserts, the development of nineteenth-century exhibition culture was "organized by the many rhetorics of imperialism, between that [national] body and other, 'non-civilized' peoples upon whose bodies the effects of power were unleashed."[35]

With these lessons in mind, this volume approaches the significance of embodiment and materiality with an eye towards our present literary-critical moment: one in which, as Lauren M. E. Goodlad and Andrew Sartori consider in light of literary studies at large, may seem to be turning towards an emphasis on "form, description, 'surface reading,' and 'distant reading' to combat a perceived overemphasis on historical context or ideological content."[36] But as the following chapters suggest in regard to twenty-first-century Brontë studies, there remains a need for what Goodlad and Sartori helpfully term a "capacious historicism": one that begins "by placing its object—whether a literary text, institutional practice, or material thing—in the relations within which it assumes coherence as an object" (596). This capacious historicism "must leave open the possibility that those relations are mutable and might have been (or might become) radically different." It also allows us to appreciate the ways in which an object, like Brontë's gloves for instance, "becomes an object of history through its relationship to other objects (texts, practices, things)" (596).

As the essays in this volume collectively show, the material world—comprising objects, bodies, texts, and practices—has much to tell us about the way interpretation and public reception of Brontë's art and surviving artefacts shift over time. Thus, Chap. 8, by Eleanor Houghton, demonstrates how the author's beaded deerskin slippers allow us to better understand her involvement in global systems of commercial exchange and its effect on both her literary and personal life. Similarly, Chap. 4, by Valerie

Sanders, draws on theories of embodied subjectivity to examine how physical and metaphorical language in novels like *The Professor* deepens our understanding of the marriage practices Brontë witnessed in the close-knit West Yorkshire circles of which she was part.

In embracing these mutable relations between texts, practices, and things, this volume also embraces a diverse range of early twenty-first-century public and scholarly engagements with Charlotte Brontë's work. Thus, the author's unequivocally feminine blue and white dress with floral print—the focal point of the Morgan Library & Museum's 2016 exhibition *Charlotte Brontë: An Independent Will*—proves a vital link between the museum context and the January 2017 Women's March that took place in the streets of Washington D.C., as Christine Nelson explains in Chap. 7. When the authors gathered here focus on the objects in Brontë's novels, they similarly attend to the ways in which shifting perceptions of character embodiment and fictive materiality speak to the ideological significance of her work. Thus, in Chap. 2, Cornelia Pearsall elucidates how the absence of that most stolid marker of the body's ephemeral materiality—the gravestone—invites us to re-examine issues of race, gender, and disability raised by Bertha Mason's "ungrievable" body in *Jane Eyre*. Chapter 5, by Julie Donovan, also examines shifting relationships between the body and its material emblems, in this case, by examining vestiges of the Jesuit "sacred heart" (the iconic image of a lacerated heart made visible outside the body) in *Villette*.

Contributors to this volume also explore the ways in which—despite the meticulous biographical and historical research of the last two decades—students and scholars continue to rely upon certain truisms about Brontë's life and work. We often rehearse an understanding of the author's staunch Protestantism and circumscribed cultural experience in the West Riding of Yorkshire, for instance, or call upon the sober settings and serious concerns in her fiction—from the plight of the governess in *Jane Eyre* to church reform in *Shirley*—as a foundation for classroom discussion. Yet these basic truths need not obviate, as Donovan shows, the ways in which Brontë appropriates the Catholic expressions of embodied emotion she likely encountered during her residence in Brussels (1842–43). Nor do they preclude the slapstick routines and satirical representations of the seemingly "crass" or uncouth body that accompany debates about religious and social reform in *Shirley* (1849), as Justine Pizzo demonstrates in Chap. 3.

As we have been suggesting, then, this volume offers new ways of thinking in and across history. But it is not in placing historical context, material history, or issues of embodiment in dialogue with the author's

literary production that it makes an original contribution to Brontë scholarship. Nor does it suffice in celebrating the material legacy that in 2016—Brontë's bicentennial year—was showcased in large-scale exhibitions of the author's letters, manuscripts, and personal possessions at the Morgan Library & Museum in New York; the National Portrait Gallery in London; and the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth.[37] Rather, the contribution of *Charlotte Brontë, Embodiment and the Material World* rests in its willingness to speak across the varied public, scholarly, personal, and professional contexts in which we encounter Brontë's legacy today—from Haworth to New York; from printed words on a page to objects under glass; from the university classroom to the rare book archive. For in thinking across these contexts, we aim to better understand the issues of dissemination, presentation, and reception that remain important for literary and cultural studies alike.

* * *

This volume contains four parts that speak across disciplinary lines and critical methodologies. Part I, "Brontë's Bodies" adopts a literary-critical approach to character embodiment in *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Shirley* (1849), *Villette* (1853), and *The Professor* (1857) and explores how each of the author's completed novels engages with the materiality of the classed, sexed, racialized, and regionalized body. Cornelia Pearsall's chapter, "Burying Bertha" draws attention to how the absence of a body can be as significant as its presence, thinking about how the non-existence of Bertha Mason's grave is highly conspicuous in a novel where other graves are both visible and material. She argues that the insistent racialization of the out-sized Bertha Mason, that "clothed hyena … who stood tall on its hind feet," accounts for her body's subsequent disappearance in death and the rendering of her body as not only "ungrievable" but also "ungraveable."[38] Pearsall's consideration of the ways in which Bertha's body might have been disposed of draws our attention to contentious issues of race, colonialization, disability, and gender; her chapter looks for an explanation of Bertha's "ungraveability" not in the burial practices of Victorian Britain, but rather in present-day discourse about race in America. This vantage point establishes the centrality of Bertha's ethnicity to the ontology of her remains and the ways in which the materiality of the grave is linked inextricably to the physical identity of the body.

Justine Pizzo's chapter, "Gendering the Comic Body: Physical Humour in *Shirley*" examines the relationship between Brontë's satirical