A Daughter of Cornwall: The Overlooked Literary Relevance of Maria Branwell, Mother of the Brontës

Elsa Fierro
Independent Scholar

Maria Branwell (1783–1821), the mother of arguably three among the most gifted British authors of all times, is mostly known to posterity as a pretty face in a sepia portrait. We hear of her early demise and sympathize with her bereaved children, then she fades into obscurity. In this paper, however, I contend that the mother of Charlotte, Emily and Anne Brontë was not merely a faint shadow in the light of her daughters' genius; on the contrary, her literary output—although modest due to family obligations and premature death—displays all the marks of a promising writer.

The daughter of one of the most prosperous and prominent families in Penzance, Cornwall, Maria was an avid reader, educated, pious and comfortably wealthy, leading a life of fashionable gentility in a fine Georgian house.[1] Far from being benighted or isolated, Penzance was a hub of regional and international trade, where dances, plays and cultural events went hand in hand with superstition, Celtic folklore and belief in the supernatural—all elements that played an important role in Maria's formative years.[2] The only biographical novel ever written about her, *Removing the Shroud of Mystery* (2012) by Maddalena De Leo, offers a very plausible depiction of the independent, comfortable and socially active life that Maria led in her elegant house on Chapel Street.

The death of both her parents was the beginning of deep changes for Maria. She decided to move to Yorkshire, where her uncle and aunt Fennell needed help managing a newly founded Evangelical school for boys. Early in 1812, she met Patrick Brontë, a charming young Irish curate, and it was love at first sight. Their marriage was happy but brief: illness—probably caused by frequent pregnancies— claimed Maria's life in 1821.[3] She left behind not only six young children and a grieving husband, but also a collection of literary works, consisting of nine letters and a religious essay intended for publication.

Throughout their engagement, from August to December 1812, Maria and Patrick had an intense correspondence. Only Maria's letters survive, and they offer a fascinating record of their whirlwind romance: in an accomplished and elegant prose, she expresses her deep esteem for her future husband as a man of God, as well as her undeniable attraction for him as a vigorous young man. In 1850 Charlotte was allowed to read these letters, lovingly preserved by her father for decades, and in her missive of February 16 to her childhood friend Ellen Nussey, she wrote:

> Papa put into my hands a little packet of letters and papers—telling me they were Mamma's and that I might read them—I did read them in a frame of mind I cannot describe … it was strange to peruse now for the first time the records of a mind whence my own sprang … to find that mind of a truly fine, pure and elevate order. … there is a rectitude, a refinement, a constancy, a modesty…a gentleness about them indescribable. I wished she had lived and that I had known her (Barker 266-7).

Also we modern readers can understand and share Charlotte's admiration for her mother's writing. In an elegant and expressive style, Maria's letters reveal her state of mind, the depth of her faith and her broad cultural knowledge, as well as her remarkable command of English prose, as shown by the following extracts.

On September 18th, she addresses the issue of a wife's subordination to her husband. After the death of her parents, Maria and her sisters had been free to run their life without having to defer to any man, but she seems ready to renounce her freedom for love:

> For some years I have been perfectly my own mistress, subject to no control whatever … my sisters … and even my dear mother used to consult me in every case of importance and scarcely ever doubted the propriety of my opinions and actions … yet in circumstances of perplexity and doubt, I have deeply felt the want of a guide and instructor. … I shall now no longer feel this want … nor do I fear to trust myself under your protection or shrink from your control. It is pleasant to be subject to those we love, especially when they never exert their authority but for the good of the subject. (De Leo 108-9)

Maria's words might sound jarring to modern ears, but the emphasis on the liberty and the esteem that her family afforded her subtly suggests that Patrick is acquiring quite a sensible wife, whose opinions should definitely be taken seriously. This sentiment would later be echoed at the end of Charlotte's novel *Shirley*, where the eponymous protagonist willingly submits to her future husband's authority.[4]

Passion and faith are beautifully interwoven in Maria's letter of September 23rd, where material and spiritual love skillfully create a touching, intense prose:

> And may we feel every trial and distress … bind us nearer to God and to each other! My heart earnestly joins in your comprehensive prayers. I trust they will unitedly ascend to a throne of grace, and through the Redeemer's merits procure for us peace and happiness here and a life of eternal felicity hereafter. Oh, what sacred pleasure there is in the idea of spending an eternity together in perfect and uninterrupted bliss! (113)

The letter written on September 5th shows us Maria torn between her desire to open her heart to the man she loves and her fear of going too far, thereby risking his disapproval:

> I have now written a pretty long letter without reserve or caution, and if all the sentiments of my heart are not laid open to you, believe me it is not because I wish them to be concealed, for I hope there is nothing there that would give you pain or displeasure. My most sincere and earnest wishes are for your happiness and welfare, for this include my own. … Forgive my freedom, my dearest friend, and rest assured that you are and ever will be dear to MARIA BRANWELL. Write very soon. (106)

This missive of Maria's is especially significant, because it seems to anticipate her daughter Charlotte's dilemma both when corresponding with her teacher Professor Héger[5] and when confiding in her "dearest Nell" (Ellen Nussey) under the oppressive supervision of Arthur Bell Nichols, Charlotte's narrow-minded husband.[6]

The most famous letter, probably due to the intimate nature of the exchange, is the one written on November 18th. Here we get a glimpse not only of Maria's sense of humor, but also of the strong physical attraction between her and Patrick:

> My dear saucy Pat—now, don't you think you deserve this epithet far more than I do that which you have given me? I really know not what to make of the beginning of your last; the winds, waves and rocks almost stunned me. … Both the doctor and his lady very much wish to know what kind of address we make use of in our letters to each other. I think they would scarcely hit on this! (119–21)

Still charming today for their wit, spontaneity and elegance, Maria's letters are not her only literary production, however. In 1816, she decided to contribute to Evangelical literature, becoming the first female Brontë to take up the pen to make her voice heard in the world. Like her daughter Anne many years later, Maria believed that her writing had to be useful and offer some moral guidance. The result of her efforts was an essay titled *The Advantages of Poverty in Religious Concerns*, her only work intended for publication.[7]

Religious pamphlets, known as tracts, were very popular at the time and Evangelical preachers considered them an excellent instrument of conversion among literate lower-class people. Poverty had always been a widely discussed topic and had become especially poignant in 1816, the so-called "year without a summer," when the eruption of mount Tambora in Indonesia caused catastrophic climate changes across the Northern Hemisphere.[8] In England, cold and rainy weather worsened the effects of failed harvests, rising unemployment, low wages, and high food prices. Although Maria had never experienced indigence herself, she felt compelled to comfort the destitute and chose to do that using her pen: "While Mary Shelley responded to the gloom by beginning work on a gruesome afterlife in *Frankenstein*, Maria urged keeping one's attention on a wholesome alternative in Heaven" (Wright 113).

Of course, it would be unrealistic and unfair to expect revolutionary proposals in *Advantages*: Maria was influenced by her deep religious beliefs, other Christian female writers and the cultural *milieu* in which she lived. Thus, her arguments align with the themes discussed in contemporary printed sermons and magazines addressed to the poor. Essentially, she advocates for a patient acceptance of a life of hardship on Earth in anticipation of eternal bliss after death. She also reassures the poor that their penury doesn't indicate lack of God's love; on the contrary, the absence of material comforts serves to elevate one's spiritual life:

> Poverty is generally, if not universally, considered an evil … But is not this a mistaken notion—one of those prevailing errors which are so frequently to be met with in the world and are received as uncontroverted truths? … what is poverty? Nothing—or rather something, which, with the assistance and blessing of our Gracious Master will greatly promote our spiritual welfare and tend to increase and strengthen our efforts to gain that Land of pure delight, where neither our souls nor bodies can possibly know pain or want (173).

Maria reiterates the distinction between deserving and undeserving poor, backing the "current middle-class dogma that poverty was largely deserved" (Gordon 25):

> Such a wretched extremity of poverty is seldom experienced in this land of general benevolence. When a case of this kind occurs, it is to be feared the sufferers bring it on themselves by their own excess

> and imprudent folly … The poor but honest and industrious Christian, for whose benefit this humble attempt is made, is scarcely ever suffered to languish in extreme want. (Wright 174)

From her position of relative privilege, Maria seems also to imply that being poor is an enviable state when compared to the situation of the wealthy, who worry constantly about their material possessions rather than focusing on their spiritual life:

> Being prevented from sharing in the luxuries of life, you are less liable to be assailed by the corrupt dispositions and disorderly passions which an enjoyment of these luxuries tends to produce … That poverty which is sanctified by true religion is perhaps the state most free from care and discontent, the farthest removed from pride and ambition, and the most calculated to promote scriptural views and feelings, and the universal welfare of the soul … The man who … has no property to improve or secure …is free from the anxious inquietude and perplexing care of the man of business (174-5).

She certainly cannot have even remotely conceived that one day her own daughters might find themselves neglected, famished and cold—as they were at the charity school that they attended in Cowan Bridge (1824-5)—or that they "might suffer … the evils of poverty" (Gordon 26), as they sadly did for a good part of their life. It is rather disturbing to think that Maria's pieties—expression of her faith and sincere desire to help—would have been readily shared by Reverend William Carus Wilson (1791–1859), the superintendent of the Cowan Bridge school, and by his fictional representation Mr. Brocklehurst, the cruel and hypocrite principal of Lowood school in *Jane Eyre*.[9]

Perhaps because seen as too sermonic or obvious, Maria's *Advantages* was never published. However, Patrick Brontë devoutly kept it for the rest of his life, adding to it the note "The above was written by my dear wife, and sent for insertion in one of the periodical publications. Keep it, as a memorial of her" (Wright 173). Though *Advantages* might appear naïve or self-righteous today, it demonstrates Maria's remarkable debating talent. Its real significance, however, lies not so much in its content, but in its very existence. Despite the numerous duties imposed on her by a patriarchal society, Maria found the time to craft such an elegant essay, proving how much her daughters inherited from her: "No other family in English literature suggests a genetic element to literary genius as powerfully as the Brontës" (115) and this genetic element can also be traced to Chapel Street in Penzance.

Both letters and essay are available in *The Mother of the Brontës* (2019) by Sharon Wright, but they were published for the first time by the journalist and literary critic Clement Shorter (1857–1926) in *The Brontës and Their Circle* (1896). Shorter was an avid collector of the Brontës' work and in his book, after explaining that the papers received by Charlotte in 1850 were now in his possession, he acknowledged the influence of Maria's literary talent on her daughters: "One notes that from both father and mother alike Charlotte Brontë and her sisters inherited some measure of the literary faculty. … It is sufficient that the zest for writing was there, and that the intense passion for handling a pen … must have come to a great extent from a similar passion in father and mother" (32).[10]

The beauty and intensity of Maria's writing make us regret that her output was so frustratingly modest. We must remember that, however, while Patrick, as a man, could enjoy leisure time, Maria's work was never done; doomed by Victorian patriarchy, she had no choice but to take care of the household and the children that kept coming year after year, with precious little time for writing. As the English literary critic and writer Cyril Connolly (1903–74) drily observed in his *Enemies of Promise* (1938), "There is no more somber enemy of good art than the pram in the hall" (Wright 117).

In our collective imagination, motherhood, housekeeping, and early death have reduced Maria Branwell to an almost insubstantial figure, her daughters' genius completely eclipsing her passionate life. It is therefore time to "put this precious jewel in its rightful place in the Brontë mosaic" (De Leo 10) and appreciate that her example taught her children that women too could write and let their voices be heard outside the home. Although many scholars still consider her daughters as her only legacy, Maria Branwell was an intelligent, well-read and sharp-witted writer, whose literary relevance has been overlooked for far too long and deserves to be finally acknowledged.

ENDNOTES

1. Thomas Branwell, Maria's father, was a successful merchant, who owned warehouses and properties across town and beyond and who took an active role in public life together with his sons. The Branwells were Methodist, educated their daughters as well as their sons, and were instrumental in building the first Wesleyan Methodist chapel in Penzance in 1814. On her mother's side, Maria was related to the Carnes, who too were pillars of the West Cornish community and who supported the scientific and technological advances of the eighteenth-century.
2. For more information about Maria's family and the cultural environment of Penzance, see The Mother of the Brontës, by Sharon Wright, Chapter 1, and Removing the Shroud of Mystery, by Maddalena De Leo, pp. 15-44.
3. No autopsy was performed on Maria's body and for a long time it was thought she suffered from uterine cancer. However, modern medical theories point to cervical

cancer, due to Maria's age and her numerous full-term pregnancies, or to pelvic sepsis and anemia caused by the birth of her last daughter Anne. What we know for sure is that she died after seven and half months of agony, during which Patrick did his best to attend and comfort her, while trying to keep up a semblance of normality for the children.

[4] Shirley (1849) is set in Yorkshire during the Luddite uprisings in the textile industry of 1811-12. Its heroine, the orphaned heiress Shirley Keeldar, is an intelligent, independent and strong-willed young woman, who marries Louis Moore, a humble tutor, with an attitude reminiscent of Maria's: "Mr. Moore,' said she …' teach me and help me to be good. I do not ask you to take off my shoulders all the cares and duties of property, but I ask you to share the burden, and to show me how to sustain my part well …Be my companion through life; be my guide where I am ignorant; be my master where I am faulty; be my friend always!" (548).

[5] Constantin Héger (1809–1896) was a Belgian literary figure of the Victorian era. He taught French to Charlotte and Emily Brontë during their stay in 1842-43 at the boarding school in Brussels run by his wife. Although a gifted educator in his own right, he is mostly remembered today for his connection with Charlotte. She developed strong – and not reciprocated – feelings for him, whose nature was publicly revealed only in 1913, when her letters to him were published for the first time. The letters are today in the British Museum and Héger inspired some characters in Charlotte's novels, especially Rochester in Jane Eyre and Paul Emmanuel in Villette.

[6] After their marriage, Nicholls became very controlling, even monitoring Charlotte's letters: "Now, as she wrote as always to her oldest friend, Arthur was looking over her shoulder, deploring her freedom of expression. Letters were dangerous, he told her … He said he would rule out any further correspondence unless Ellen agreed, in writing, to burn all Charlotte's letters … Mr. Nicholls deplored the element of license in Charlotte's letters" (Gordon 354).

[7] The essay was most likely written for a local magazine, the monthly periodical The Pastoral Visitor, founded in 1815 by the Welsh evangelical cleric and friend of the Brontë family William Morgan (1782–1858).

[8] The massive eruption in April 1815 of Mount Tambora on the island of Sumbawa, in the Dutch East Indies (modern-day Indonesia), caused a volcanic winter: the significant quantity of volcanic gas and ashes released into the atmosphere blocked sunlight, leading to extreme weather conditions with disastrous consequences on agriculture and human survival. For more information, see Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World by Gillen D'Arcy Wood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015).

[9] The Cowan Bridge School was a Clergy Daughters' School, founded in the 1820s, at Cowan Bridge, Lancashire. It offered low-cost education to daughters of the poorer members of the clergy. In her Life of Charlotte Brontë (1857) Elizabeth Gaskell explicitly connected Cowan Bridge with the fictional Lowood school in Jane Eyre. For more information see The Brontës by Juliet Barker (London, UK: Phoenix Press, 2001), Chapters 5, 18, and 27.

[10] In her Life of Charlotte Brontë (originally published in 1857), Elizabeth Gaskell had already expressed admiration for Maria as a writer: "The writing of these letters is elegant and neat … there are also allusions to the books she has read, or is reading, showing a well-cultivated mind … Mrs. Brontë must have been … a well-balanced and consistent woman. The style of the letters is easy and good" (37).

WORKS CITED

Barker, Juliet. *The Brontës*. London, UK: Phoenix Press, 2001. Print.

——. *The Brontës. A Life in Letters*. London, UK: Viking, 1997. Print.

Brontë, Charlotte. *Shirley*. Edinburgh, UK: T. Nelsons et Sons, 2023. Kindle Edition.

D'Arcy Wood, Gillen. *Tambora: The Eruption That Changed the World*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015. Print.

De Leo, Maddalena. *Removing the Shroud of Mystery. Maria Branwell's Autobiographical Novel*. Raleigh, NC: Lulu Press Inc., 2012. Print.

Gaskell, Elizabeth. *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Ed. Elisabeth Jay. London, UK: Penguin Books, 1997. Print.

Gordon, Lyndall. *Charlotte Brontë. A Passionate Life.* London, UK: Virago Press, 2008. Print. Shorter, Clement K. *Charlotte Brontë and Her Circle*. London, UK: Hodder and Stoughton, 1896. Print.

Wright, Sharon. *The Mother of the Brontës. When Maria Met Patrick*. Barnsley, Yorkshire, UK: Pen and Sword History Books Ltd, 2019. Print.