

Child's play or literary rivalry: Charlotte Brontë's 'The Poetaster'*

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"The Poetaster", written in July 1830 when Charlotte Brontë was fourteen, manifests two significant points worth discussing in relation to the Brontës' creative activities in their early teens. One is that the Brontës were widening the thematic scope in their writings; the other is that the Brontës had become interested in investigating and analysing the nature of literature. 'The Poetaster' is distinct from their other earlier writings in its richness of literary allusion and can be appreciated either by itself or within the larger context of the entire Glass Town Saga. Charlotte's main concern here is not in the activities of the Duke of Wellington and his sons, but in defining great literature and discussing how it is produced.

Although Elizabeth Ratchford introduced the crude outline of 'The Poetaster' in her book *The Brontës' Web of Childhood* (36-7) in 1941, it was not until 1981 when Melodie Monahan published the clear text of 'The Poetaster' with notes in *Studies in Romanticism* that this satirical play started to attract academic attention. Monahan pointed out the close associations between Charlotte's play and Ben Jonson's *Poetaster or His Arraignment* (1601) and referred to Charlotte's knowledge of the "War of the Theatres" of the time and her familiarity with nineteenth-century romantic poetry as well. Monahan, however, did not refer to the rivalry between Charlotte and Branwell which led to the production of 'The Poetaster' and therefore missed the leading part played by Branwell. This was first noted by Christine Alexander who examined the relationship between Branwell's and Charlotte's manuscripts in *The Early Writings of Charlotte Brontë* (1983). My paper builds on the work of these pioneers of Brontë juvenilia.

I will first discuss the background of how Charlotte's 'The Poetaster' was produced from the rivalry between Charlotte and Branwell and then examine various literary allusions, especially in relation to Jonson's *Poetaster*. Finally, I would like to discuss Charlotte's acute sense of reality and self-recognition which supports her heavy irony and distinguishes her from Branwell.

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'The Poetaster' is Charlotte's only large scale verse drama. Its style, however, has already been tried in Branwell's 'Lausane: a Trajedy' written in December 1829. Branwell's drama is set in France in 1423 and depicts the restoration to power of the exiled Count Laussane (Laussaine). Here, Branwell writes as Young Soult, his new pseudonym. He had been writing a magazine for the first six months of 1829 under a variety of pseudonyms including Captain John Bud, the historian and prose writer of Glasstown. After handing the magazine over to Charlotte, Branwell became more interested in poetry and created Young Soult to write poetry. Branwell published two volumes of poems with a large number of pedantic notes under the name of Chateubriand in September 1829.

The creative rivalry between Charlotte and Branwell became intense on 18 June 1830 when Charlotte wrote a piece by Charles Wellesley entitled 'An Interesting Passage in the Lives of Some Eminent Men of the Present Time'. This revealed a scandalous fact about a group of Glasstown worthies including Branwell's Captain Bud and his son, as well as Charlotte's main characters. The story is about the resurrectionists who were disturbed in digging up corpses by a group led by the Duke of Wellington who was trying to recover the public library books they had stolen and buried in the churchyard. Against this base attack by Charlotte's narrator, Branwell immediately wrote an answer in his 'The Liar Detected' under the name of Captain Bud and severely attacked Charles Wellesley as follows:

IT [h]as always been the fortune of Eminent Men in all ages and every country to have their lives, their actions, and their works traduced by a set of unprincipled wretches who having no character of their own to support and being too indolent to work vilely employ their days in spitting their venom on every author of reputation within their reach. Homer had his Zoilus, Virgil his Meavius, and CAPTAIN TREE his Wellesley. All these were & are alike contemptible in character and influence and like vipers can do no more than bite the heels of their enemies. (92)

Branwell might have borrowed the names of Greek philosophers from John Lemprier's *Bibliotheca Classica, or a Classical Dictionary* (1788) a copy of which the Brontës owned. Lemprier wrote another book entitled *A Universal Biography of Eminent Persons in all Ages and Countries* which was published in 1808. There is a possibility that the Brontës were familiar with the title, if not with the book itself, and Charlotte borrowed it for her own work mentioned above.

A few weeks later, Charlotte responded with an attack on Branwell's favourite character, Young Soult, by caricaturing him as 'Henry Rhymer' in her drama 'The Poetaster'. Before getting into the details of this work, however, I have to refer to Branwell's other dramatic poem 'Caractacus: A Dramatic Poem by Young Soult' which was written six months after

'Laussane' and just before Charlotte's 'The Poetaster'.

'Caractacus' is the story of the British king Caractacus who fought bravely against the invading Romans. Although there could be various sources for the story, Neufeldt declares that Branwell completely changed the characters of Mumius and Carausius from the originals (Neufeldt 100: n.3). In Branwell's work, Mumius betrays Caractacus to the Romans but later gets executed for this base act by the Roman Emperor Claudius. Carausius, the subject of Caractacus, has been faithful but at the very end he collapses and begs for his life to the Emperor. In contrast to these people, Caractacus has always been a proud patriot and declares that he is ready for death. Deeply moved with his kingly dignity, Claudius forgives Caractacus and releases him immediately.

Why did Branwell create his own Mumius and Carausius? What roles do they play in the drama? One possible answer is that they are necessary to enhance the dramatic effects. Their cowardice and baseness are effective in highlighting Caractacus's heroic attitude and the grandiose atmosphere of the drama itself. In the title page, Branwell declares the importance of describing passion in dramatic poetry borrowing the mouthpiece of Captain Bud. He repeats a similar manifestation in the title page of 'The Revenge', another medieval tragedy in 3 acts, written six months later.

In dramatic poetry, the chief thing to be attained is an excellence in describing the passions and in proportion as this excellence is attained so are we to judge of the merits of the piece.
(125)

All three dramas show that the young Branwell had considerable knowledge of ancient history, the classics, seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and early nineteenth-century literature and recent French history. These dramas are also remarkable for the seriousness and pretension with which the thirteen-year-old boy sets about his task of producing 'great' literature. Just as he started the magazine, Branwell here again introduced new forms, styles and themes into their creative activities. Now, defining great literature and discussing the role of artists became central topics among the Glasstown writers.

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Charlotte joined the discussion, however, in a different way. While Branwell was attracted to dramatic and grandiose subjects, Charlotte was more interested in satirical plays. The more serious and direct Branwell became in his ideal of literary activities, the more detached and sarcastic Charlotte became in her stance. Pedantic, imitative, and supremely self-confident, Branwell seemed to be the right person for Charlotte to caricature. She found a model of satire in Ben Jonson. That Charlotte was reading Jonson in 1830 or earlier is suggested by the name of her minor character General Bobadill, who derives from the soldier in *Every Man in His Humour* (1598). Moreover, numerous similarities in title and theme indicate close

associations between her play and Ben Jonson's *Poetaster*.

Charlotte's 'Poetaster', however, should be discussed against a larger background because it reflects her knowledge about 'The War of the Theatre' which was fought between Jonson and his rivals. The strife started when Jonson suspected that the pedantic character Chrisoganus in Marston's *Historiomastix* (1599) was a caricature of him and retaliated by presenting Marston as a boasting fop named Clove in his *Every Man out of His Humour* (1599). Then, Marston answered this with another drama in alliance with Dekker. Jonson immediately wrote *Cynthia's Revel* (1600) and *Poetaster* in which Jonson ridiculed Marston and Dekker thoroughly. Dekker's counter-attack was his *Satiromastix* (1602) which satirized Jonson's conceit and self-righteousness.

This series of bitter exchanges is reminiscent of the exchange of mockery between Charlotte and Branwell which we have already seen. Their rivalry had existed from the very beginning when Charlotte chose the Duke of Wellington and Branwell Napoleon Bonaparte as their respective heroes. This antagonistic relationship was succeeded by the second generation of characters when Charlotte adopted the names of the sons of the Duke of Wellington and Branwell invented a son for the real Marshall Soult, one of Napoleon's commanders.

Charlotte introduced Branwell's Young Soult in her 'Characters of the Celebrated Men of the Present Time' written under the name of Captain Tree in December 1829. She comically depicts Soult's eccentric appearance and makes a satirical comment on his propensity towards emotional as follows:

His hair is dark and he wears it frizzed in such a manner as make one suppose he had lately come out of a furze bush. His apparel is generally torn and he wears it hanging about him in a very careless and untidy manner...He appears constantly labouring under a state of strong excitement occasioned by excessive drinking and gambling, to which he is unfortunately much addicted. (127)

In 'The Poetaster', which was written six months later, Charlotte makes Young Soult a complete laughingstock as the mock-romantic poet Henry Rhymer. Although Rhymer supports the notion that creativity is the spontaneous flow of imagination, his real method of composition reveals his total lack of poetical inspiration. Rhymer, however, visits the Marquis of Douro and Lord Charles in order to impress them with his product but fails and then goes to Captain Tree for proper evaluation and patronage. Tree no sooner starts to read Rhymer's poetry than he harshly orders Rhymer to get out of his presence. Off stage Rhymer retaliates by slaying Tree and, in the next scene, he is in jail rhapsodizing about Tree's last cry and his own guiltless martyrdom. In the hanging scene, however, Rhymer forgets his heroics and pleads for a change of verdict. The final insult is that Rhymer is only saved from execution on condition that he gives up poetry and becomes Charles' secretary.

Melodie Monahan closely examines the parallels between Charlotte's play and Jonson's *Poetaster* and finds a similar structure in both: Jonson identified himself with Horace and tried

to establish a hierarchy of poets, with Virgil, Horace, and Ovid at the top and his Roman enemies, Demetrius and Crispinus, who are thinly disguised characters of Marston and Dekker, at the bottom. In the same way, Charlotte aligns herself with the celebrated Captain Tree, the Marquis of Douro and Lord Charles who confront the obnoxious Rhymer. She finally reveals how the poetaster tries to rely on inspiration alone while the genuine poet works beyond inspiration to refine and perfect his art. The purpose of both plays is to discuss the moral obligation of poetry.

Monahan further mentions that Charlotte satirizes Jonson himself whose arrogance and intolerance were mocked in Dekker's *Satiromastix*. Jonson's paranoia with respects to other playwrights and his pompous efforts to manipulate people in power, Monahan considers, are reflected in the character of Henry Rhymer. Charlotte, therefore, adapts elements not only from Ben Jonson's *Poetaster* but also from Thomas Dekker's counterattack, *Satiromastix*.

What I would like to discuss now is the features of Charlotte's sense of humour and her satirical mind. Charlotte successfully makes Rhymer appear ridiculous and contemptible by contrasting his high self-estimation and his low evaluation by others. His poetry is nothing but a motley of Romantic clichés. When he could not get the admiration he expected, he curses them for their vile jealousy. Even in jail, Rhymer likens himself to a Byronic outcast and gets intoxicated with the romantic scenery which he depicts in his mind. He soliloquizes as follows: 'Here, then, I am, a martyr to the cause of honour. By an unjust judge and jury I have been found guilty of murder of one who had insulted me past all human sufferance. I should not have been worthy the name of man, if I had tamely submitted to such treatment, much less that of poet.' (193)

Conceit and romantic postures of Rhymer, however, are undercut by the pedestrian language of the jailer. When Rhymer is told that he is going to be executed, he tries to imagine that the execution will be held at midnight to complete the tragedy. The jailer, however, instantly denies this and derides Rhymer thus: 'At midnight! What are you talking of? It's just struck twelve at noon. Most people are taking their lunches now, I reckon, while you are lying in bed. Get up, lazysides, and take your swing. It'll be a good exercise!' (193)

Final blow is the execution scene where Rhymer betrays his real frail self and begs for pardon. The crowds cruelly derides Rhymer and the sheriff, who is disgusted with this restive criminal, hastens the executioner.

There is no parallel for this dungeon scene nor for the pleading for his life by Rhymer in Jonson's *Poetaster*. It is possible that Charlotte adopted these episodes from Branwell's 'Caractacus' which contained the dungeon scene where Caractacus was visited by the traitor Mumius and the amphitheatre scene where Caractacus and his subjects were tried. As I noted before, this episode was created by Branwell in order to emphasize Caractacus's heroism. Charlotte parodied the whole scene in her work and tried to reveal the real Rhymer who is totally different from Branwell's hero. Thus, Charlotte achieved her satirical intention to make a sharp contrast between what Rhymer (and probably Branwell himself) pretends to be and what he really is.

Although Charlotte brings in Lord Charles, the Marquis of Douro and Captain Tree as opponents of Rhymer, even they are not free from sarcasm. Charles displays his sarcastic nature by his insinuating remarks not only to his brother Arthur who is in love with Marian Hume but also to his father, the Duke of Wellington, who would not like to be reminded of the body snatchers' case. Charles is also eager to be flattered by the poetaster, although he is thoroughly frightened by the poetaster's rage. The Marquis of Douro is called 'adamant' because of his lack of sensitivity and the fact that he cannot do anything without his father's permission. Captain Tree is a great Glass Town author but an arrogant and narrow-minded man. Obsessed with his own superiority, he accepts Rhymer's flattery as a matter of fact. But when the poetaster declares his ambitions, Tree is enraged by the assumption that his elite world of literature could be penetrated by the likes of Rhymer. Therefore, Charlotte is critical not only of the poetaster but also of the other people who confront him, including her own narrators.

A more remarkable point is that Charlotte extends the satire to herself as well. At the end of the fourth scene, Captain Tree laments about the sad state of contemporary poetry:

Oh, how that noble profession is dishonoured ! I could weep for very misery. 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 the mists of age, every child that walks along the streets, bearing its manuscripts in its hand, going to the printers for publication. I am unable to abide these thoughts. (192-3)

She allows Captain Tree to criticize the mock literary activities by children because she realises that her own creative activities are still immature and in the stage of imitation of her superiors. This self-knowledge is exactly what distinguishes Charlotte from Branwell and, in a sense, from Jonson as well.

For Charlotte, satire is not just a way of expressing criticism. It is a tool for facing reality and perceiving pretense. Unlike Branwell, who sadly confused fiction and reality and completely lost himself in Romanticism, Charlotte has acquired an objective viewpoint which makes her a good satirist and artist. Charlotte's satirical mind of course came into fruition in her later works. In *Jane Eyre*, for example, she exposes the hypocrisy, self-interest, and moral bankruptcy of not only individual persons but also of her contemporary society as a whole in the hope of correcting the hypocritical system. And in *Shirley*, the lot of women, and political, social and religious affairs are held up to ridicule and criticism.

I hope this short talk has given you an idea of Charlotte's satirical mind. I am happy if this will serve to correct the general image that Charlotte Brontë is a writer of passion and lacks Jane Austen's sense of humour and satirical spirit. I would like to stop here, then, and invite your questions and comments. Thank you.

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