

The Kingdom Where Nobody Dies *Shirley's* Caroline Helstone and the Mimicry of Childhood Collaboration

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Abstract This essay explores Charlotte Brontë's 1849 novel *Shirley* as a literary endeavour to recreate the sibling dynamic of the Brontës' childhoods, and the psychological effect of being the 'surviving' sibling of a formally collaborative unit. In their adolescent years, the Brontës famously forged fictional kingdoms together, known collectively as "The Glass Town Saga". Throughout adulthood, each Brontë continuously returned to these stories, oftentimes due to nostalgia and occasionally for creative reinvention. However, by the summer of 1849, their familial collaboration was at an end. Charlotte was the last sibling standing, having lost all her co-authors in the space of nine months. In despair, as a form of catharsis, she turned to her writing and this essay will focus on how protagonist Caroline Helstone became an elegy for both Branwell and Anne Brontë. Mere weeks before Charlotte began volume 1 of *Shirley*, Branwell was determined to return to a heroine created in his childhood, also named "Caroline (1836)". This juvenilia piece explores themes of waning sibling connections, death and heartbreak – issues which tormented Branwell and Charlotte throughout his prolonged final illness. Yet Caroline Helstone's ethereal femininity and infantilization mirrors Anne Brontë's reputation as the 'obedient' sibling, as well as the views expressed in her semi-autobiographical novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848).

Keywords Charlotte Brontë. Elegy. Familial collaboration. Juvenilia. Mimicry.

Summary 1 Last Sibling Standing: The Final Brontë Collaboration. – 2 The 'Necessary Deaths' of Branwell Brontë and Caroline Helstone. – 3 Bade My Sister to Arise: Anne Brontë's "Resurrection" of Caroline.



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1 Last Sibling Standing: The Final Brontë Collaboration

Charlotte Brontë approached the conception of *Shirley* (1849) in professional and psychological desperation. She began writing *Shirley's* opening chapters in February 1848; by the time it was completed in August 1849 she had lost all three siblings to consumption. As a sister, Charlotte had been cheated of sibling affection and support; as an author she was now deprived of those co-writers who had shaped the formative years of her writing.

The Brontës' literary apprenticeship began within their juvenile collaboration of "The Glasstown Confederacy", a political saga full of duchesses, genii and pirates, as Gérin explains: "the young Brontës were bound together by an intense affection [...] [which] became an intellectual fusion of like minds that eventually coloured all their thoughts" (1973, 7). The Brontës were prolific in completing their juvenilia, with Charlotte and Branwell focusing on their adventure narrative of 'Angria' and Emily and Anne absorbed in the royal court of 'Gondal'. This study will consider how the successive losses of each sibling during the writing of *Shirley* shaped the narrative and characters as Charlotte attempted, fictionally, to restore her siblings and their creative connection. She accomplished this by emulating their writings and personalities into her own style, maintaining a collaboration which crossed the boundary between life and death.

Critics such as Stoneman (2015), Earnshaw (2015) and O'Callaghan (2018) have explored the eponymous Shirley as an elegy for Emily Brontë (1818-December 1848). She is a representation of Emily's idiosyncrasies "in the guise of the land-owning heiress" (O'Callaghan 2018, 120). If Emily can clearly be seen in *Shirley*, can we also catch literary echoes of Charlotte's other siblings? This essay will argue that Branwell (1817-September 1848) and Anne's (1820-May 1849) influences have in fact merged to create the psychologically complex female protagonist, Caroline Helstone.

The very name "Caroline" spells disaster throughout Brontë fiction, as one of Branwell's favourite heroines of his Angrian saga also bore this name. The doomed sister of Harriet O'Connor - mistress of the ultimate Angrian hero, Alexander Percy (or "Northangerland") - Caroline is shown predominantly as she wastes away on her deathbed. It is possible that Charlotte remembered the ominous connection with the name and thought it perfect for her own tragic character. Charlotte's Caroline, having been abandoned by her long-lost mother, left penniless by her cruel deceased father and dependent upon her uncle, is reportedly wasting away from her unrequited love for mill-

owner Robert Moore. Caroline Helstone is a character in “decline”.¹

This essay will outline the consistent parallels between Caroline’s storyline and those of Branwell’s pieces, “Caroline” ([1836] 1983, 66-76), “On Caroline” ([1837] 1983, 65) and “Sir Henry Tunstall” ([1840] 1983, 53-60), and argue that Charlotte not only wished to resurrect the “tragic Caroline” trope but also the creative capability Branwell possessed but never brought to fruition. St. John Conover stresses that “[f]or the eleven years it lasted [...] [was] in many respects, an ideal alliance [...] united in a joint creative urge” (1999, 16).

Unfortunately, the pitfalls of adulthood resulted in a creative schism between the close-knit pair. In his later years, unemployment and chronic writer’s block led Branwell into drug and alcohol-induced melancholy. The beginning of the end came when Branwell embarked upon an ill-fated love affair with Mrs. Lydia Robinson, the lady of Thorp Green and wife of his final employer – as well as Anne’s, as she was also employed at Thorp Green as a governess. In a letter to John Brown, Branwell described Lydia Robinson as a “pretty” mistress of “about 37 with a darkish skin & bright glancing eyes” and “DAMNABLY TOO FOND OF ME!” ([1843] 1997, 114). His position was subsequently terminated with a death-threat from Mr. Robinson and Branwell descended even further into self-pity and a squandering of his talents. Through Caroline Helstone’s own detrimental heartache over Robert and similarities to the Angrian Caroline, Charlotte could hold a mirror to Branwell’s vices and restore his early promise, potentially recovering the brother she had loved in childhood.

If Caroline Helstone was a reflection of what Branwell could have been, she was also an echo of Anne Brontë as she was. The feminine foil for Shirley, just as Anne was for Emily, she is obedient and beautiful and a vision of how Charlotte perceived her youngest sister. Charlotte identified Anne in such angelic, if often insipid, terms that upon her death in 1849 she wrote to William Smith Williams stating she felt able to “let Anne go to God and felt He had a right to her” ([1849] 1997, 237). While she could not rescue Anne herself from death, she would protect the character she inspired. In order to impress the dangers of toxic relationships, Tompkins explains that Charlotte’s “first intention was to give Shirley to Robert Moore and to let Caroline die of a broken heart” (1961, 21). However a last-minute alteration to Caroline’s storyline demonstrates the effect Anne’s death had upon Charlotte’s writing. Instead, Caroline is protected by a feminine network of Emily’s counterpart, Shirley, and Mrs. Pryor – Shirley’s governess and a character shaped by Anne’s novels *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). *Shirley*,

¹ “The reason for the obsession could be the rhythmic quality of the name itself [...] it rhymed very suitably with decline” (du Maurier 1960, 78).

therefore, can be read as a literary séance of the Brontë family dynamic and an act of catharsis for the ‘surviving sibling’.

2 The ‘Necessary Deaths’ of Branwell Brontë and Caroline Helstone

In his final years, Branwell’s talent may have diminished – distorted by gin and opium – but his need for literary greatness did not. In January 1848, he wrote a missive to his drinking companion, Joseph Bentley Leyland, asking that he might “return me the manuscript volume which I placed in your hands [...] enclose that MS called ‘Caroline’ – left with you many months since” as he did not have his own copy (BC. MS.19c Brontë/02/01/21). Considering Branwell’s creative inactivity during this period, this is most likely a reference to his 1836 verse “Caroline”. In this poem Harriet, sister to the titular heroine, narrates how she watches Caroline slowly decline in health, and eventually die. Van Der Meer emphasises the trauma of Harriet’s experience as “[h]er mother lifts her to see Caroline’s face, and, although Harriet is frightened, this fear turns into unexpected relief that there is beauty in what she sees” (2017, 213). Harriet is the personification of the denial stage of grief, refusing to accept Caroline’s passing and assuring herself that she is merely sleeping: “down I bent and bid adieu. | But, as I looked, forgot affright”(Brontë B. 1836, ll. 151-2). Branwell’s heroine even attempts to lull Caroline back to life crying ““Speak Caroline!”” as she “bade my sister to arise” (1836, ll. 168-9). Branwell appears to be taking an Angrian perspective on the traditional Snow White fairy tale, whereby Caroline is not dead in Harriet’s eyes, but kept “[i]n slumber sweet” (1836, l. 106) and “listening to my prayer” (1836, l. 98). She is perfectly preserved within her coffin “with wild flowers round her head | And Lillies in her hair” (1836, ll. 99-100). Harriet seems to believe she will wake again when she is needed, a similar belief Charlotte applies to her elegiac writings.

When we re-read the original “Caroline” poem, and its companion pieces “On Caroline (1837)” and “Sir Henry Tunstall (1840)”, we see why Charlotte was compelled to emulate these characters within her novel. The themes of denial, grief and the broken sibling bond must have resonated with its author, who was witnessing her brother descend into a fatal illness. The poems’ author also believed these manuscripts empathised with his current miseries, namely that of separation from Lydia Robinson. Harriet recalls that she was much younger when Caroline died, as emphasised by her mother having to lift her to see within her sister’s coffin, yet she compares these memories to her present heartache over her lost lover, Northangerland. We see the origins of Harriet’s fixation with Percy in “The Life of Feild [*sic*] Marshal the Right Honourable Alexander

Percy" (1999, 92-191), while she was a friend to his first wife, Augusta di Segovia. She obtains private letters between Augusta and her husband, and hopes to comfort him about the losses of his comrades in the battlefield: "poor Harriet was in tears for when Percy entered she sprung unconsciously to meet him and the sneer with which Montmorency beheld her had harshly called her back to reality" (1835, 161). Harriet's inability to distinguish desire from truth continues into "Caroline" where she simultaneously laments the loss of her sister and her affair with Percy. Harriet is now a "fallen" young woman, abandoned by Percy. Branwell's poem "Sir Henry Tunstall" emphasises how she is full of an 'adulterer's shame' (1840, l. 210), now her lover has left her "FALLEN, FORSAKEN, AND FORGOT!" (1840, l. 216). Despite this, Harriet does not seem fully to regret the relationship, only its consequences:

Deaf to warning, dead to shame.
What to me if Jordan Hall
Held all Hell within its wall,
So I might in his embrace
Drown the misery of disgrace!
(1840, ll. 132-6)

The forlorn Harriet becomes "spent and broken" (1840, l. 217), seemingly exiled from society. It seems the disregarded lady will "weep her heart away" (1840, l. 224) for want of Northangerland, until her heartbreak leads her to her "dying dread" (1840, l. 222). Much like Caroline Helstone, Harriet's fixation has caused her to neglect herself, and she is now dying as a result. Still, her last wish is that Northangerland will kiss her goodbye: "Could He have bent above her head - | Even He whose guilt had laid her there" (1840, ll. 233-4; underlining in the original). She acknowledges but does not repent her sins, a premonition of Branwell's insolence during his affair with Mrs. Robinson.

Branwell did not see himself as the Harriet of his story; he was the hypermasculine Northangerland - bound to rescue Mrs. Robinson from her "heartless", "unmanly" and "eunuch-like" husband (1848, BC., MS.19c Brontë/02/01/23). Adopting the Northangerland persona entirely, he would sign his secret missives to her with this name, believing it "could excite no suspicion"(1845, BC. MS.19c Brontë/02/01/09). Mrs. Robinson seems to have encouraged this clandestine correspondence: "she sent the Coachman over to me [Branwell] yesterday, and the account which he gave of her sufferings was enough to burst my heart" (1846, BC. MS.19c Brontë/02/01/11). When Mr. Robinson died in May 1846, Branwell allowed himself "reason to hope that ere ^{very} long I should be the husband of a lady whom I loved best in the world" (1847, BC. MS. 19c. Brontë/02/01/18; addition in the original), seemingly unaware of how his youth and

penury prevented this. Ellis describes how Mrs. Robinson convinced the coachman “to lie that Mr. Robinson’s will stipulated that if his widow saw Branwell again, she would lose everything. [...] Branwell was too tender to see that he was being manipulated” (2017, 222). A letter to Leyland highlights how deeply he believed her: “I know [...] she has been terrified by vows which she was forced to swear to, on her husband’s deathbed” (1847, MS.19c Brontë/02/01/18; underlining in the original). Charlotte was unsympathetic at even the mention of Mrs. Robinson, as she wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey on 28 July 1848: “the more I hear of her the more deeply she revolts me” ([1848] 1997, 201) and her hatred for the woman increased as she saw how Branwell was being manipulated. Anne knew from her former pupils, Mrs. Robinson’s daughters, that she was not living in agony like Branwell, as Charlotte reiterates to Margaret Wooler: “The Misses R – say that their mother does not care in the least what becomes of them [...] [only] that they may be off her hands, and that she may be free to marry Sir E. Scott – whose infatuated slave, it would appear, she is” ([1848] 1997, 204). Once Mr. Robinson died, Charlotte knew that his widow was pursuing Sir Edward Scott, even as his wife lay on her deathbed: “Sir Edward Scott’s wife is said to be dying – if she goes I suppose they will marry – that is if Mrs. R can marry – She affirmed her husband’s will bound her to remain single – but I do not believe anything she says” ([1848] 1997, 182-3; underlining in the original).

Branwell’s determination to defend Mrs. Robinson’s constancy, despite her clear indifference, mimics that of Harriet, who secretly spies on Northangerland’s letter to his wife in “The Life of Feild [sic] Marshal”. She would gaze at the letter “as if its pages hid some unfound meaning as her eyes dwelt on the very form of the hastily written words their impassioned meaning stole insensibly on her soul” (160). She wishes that Northangerland were sharing his confidences with her and, reading Northangerland’s confessions of faltered loyalty to Augusta, allows herself to believe he could desire her: “Can I love anyone but thee [Augusta]? And yet my Augusta forms and feelings crowd around me which are not of thee, whether I am with three or from thee” (1999, 160-1). Branwell wrote the Caroline sequence from Harriet’s point of view to emphasise ‘feminine feelings’, such as the pain of heartbreak and ruptured sisterhood. Similarly, Charlotte channels Branwell and his characters into the lovelorn Caroline Helstone to emphasise the subverted power dynamic of his circumstances. Branwell may have believed himself the seducing hero, Northangerland, but Charlotte knew that it was Robinson who held all the power.

Their toxic dynamic is represented in that of Caroline and Robert in *Shirley*. From the opening chapters, Caroline is depicted as “wasting away” for unrequited love, while she imagines Robert connected instead to the eponymous heiress: “Of course I know he will marry Shirley [...] And he ought to marry her: she can help him [...] But I

[Caroline] shall be forgotten!" (Brontë C. 1849, 156). Her devotion is encouraged by Robert who appears to enjoy the attention: "if I [Robert] were rich, you should live here always: at any rate, you should live with me wherever my habitation might be" (84). This hollow promise is one of multiple "humiliations" that Langland states Caroline suffers, to the extent that she can now "sense the final betrayal - in which Shirley becomes an unwitting accomplice - and collapses" (2002, 12). As a result, it seems Caroline is doomed for the grave, much like Harriet and her creator. In the chapter ominously titled "Valley of the Shadow of Death", a reference to Psalm 23:4 ("though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for you are with me"), we see Caroline suffering from a supposedly fatal illness. Her symptoms imitate those of Branwell's Caroline. Harriet recalls her sister in seasonal, pastoral imagery, accentuating her transient presence - she is "glitter" turned to "rust" (Brontë B. 1836, l. 237) and also a flower which has "budded, bloomed, and gone" (l. 90). Charlotte mirrors this motif as Mrs. Pryor, Shirley's governess, nurses the bedridden Caroline: "[w]ith all this care, it seemed strange the sick girl did not get well; yet such was the case: she wasted like any snow-wreath in thaw; she faded like any flower in drought" (Brontë C. 1849, 252). The Carolines are depicted as English roses withering from neglect, with the poetical Caroline's world "void of sunlight" (Brontë B. 1837, l.12) and her beauty compared to the flowers dying "underneath yon churchyard stone!" (1836, l. 92). The lack of nurturing continues as Caroline Helstone attempts to draw "the coverlets close round her, as if to shut out the world and sun" (1836, l. 253), barring any healthy influence into the room. Withdrawn from the world outside her bedroom, Caroline is physically, emotionally and mentally defeated and her deathbed apes that of the Angrian Caroline. Although Branwell does not specify what physical ailment affects his heroine, Harriet does observe that her sister's cheek is "*too bright*" (1836, l. 162; italics added), implying she is also feverish. Equally, Shirley and Mrs. Pryor can only look on as Caroline deteriorates: "oppressed with unwonted languor [...] she missed all sense of appetite: palatable food was as ashes and sawdust to her" (Brontë C. 1849, 251). She also writhes from a horrific fever: "[n]ow followed a hot, parched, thirsty, restless night" (251). Unrequited love has contaminated her physicality, and she does not try to fight it. She appears content to never see Robert marry another woman - when Mrs. Pryor asks if she is in any pain, Caroline simply replies: "I think I am almost happy" (1888, 252).

Art imitates life as Branwell also suffered from insomnia and fever, pronouncing "the wreck of my mind and body which God knows have both during a short life been severely tried. Eleven continued nights of sleepless horrors reduced me to almost blindness" (1848, BC., MS.19c Brontë/02/01/23) - Branwell believed himself reduced to a "thoroughly old man - mentally and bodily" (1847, BC. MS.19c

Brontë/02/01/18); similarly Caroline Helstone grows “old” before her time, losing the bloom of her youth: “[s]he could see that she was altered within the last month; that the hues of her complexion were paler, her eyes changed – a wan shade seemed to circle them, her countenance was dejected” (1888, 107). Branwell is known to have died from tuberculosis, aggravated by his lifestyle and general malaise, seemingly struggling with hallucinations and nonsensical speech as a result. His friend John Brown recalled how “he uttered the words: ‘Oh, John, I am dying!’ then, turning, as if within himself, he murmured: ‘In all my past life I have done nothing either great or good’” (Leyland 1886, 208). Equally, Caroline Helstone struggles with nightmares in the heat of fever, and it is in her delirium that her unrequited devotion echoes Branwell’s. Watching over the ailing Caroline, a concerned Mrs. Pryor attempts to disengage an unusual locket from around Caroline’s neck, lest the fitful girl inadvertently choke herself; however, she agitatedly cries: “Don’t take it from me, Robert! Don’t! It is my last comfort” (Brontë C. 1849, 254). Upon examining the pendant, Mrs. Pryor observes that it contains “a curl of black hair too short and crisp to have been severed from a female head” (1888, 254). In her disorientation, Caroline seems to reveal the full extent to which Robert encouraged her attentions, swearing “I never tell anyone whose hair it is” (1888, 254). Branwell would also continue to claim Mrs. Robinson to his death, as he purportedly sent a lock of her hair to his friend John Brown “which has lain at night on his breast”, for safe keeping. He details this exchange in a letter to Brown of November 1843, expressing his wish to God that “it could do so *legally*” (2007, 55). Sutherland speculates he “was buried still wearing on his chest the lock of hair Lydia had given him in happier days” (2016, 27). Perhaps the etymological affinity between ‘Robinson’ and ‘Robert’ can therefore be interpreted as intentional, as both ensnare a younger, less powerful lover and both are content to abandon their devotees for their social superiors – Mrs. Robinson with Sir Edward Scott, and Robert with Shirley, and even Northangerland abandons Harriet for the ladies of the Angrian elite. Caroline’s storyline is a warning against such intense power imbalance in relationships, whether this is the result of unrequited affection or more pragmatic disparities, such as class or gender.

Langland stresses the inexorableness of Caroline’s sacrifice, arguing death is her escape from feminine restriction. Unable to confront Robert, Caroline entraps herself within her room, only bringing herself to sit in her chair near the window, a “station she would retain till noon was past: whatever degree of exhaustion or debility her wan aspect betrayed” (1888, 253), in the hope of catching a glimpse of Robert on his way to the churchyard. Langland states that this entrapment is a condition of the disempowered woman:

“Brontë has an impressive power to make us feel the coffin of social custom contracting around Caroline in her enforced silence upon witnessing Robert’s courtship of Shirley”. Her restrictions are a physical extension of her inability “to escape the scene of her torture” (Langland 2002, 12-13). Similarly, Harriet finds herself trapped in her “ancestral hall” (Brontë B. 1837, l. 1), looking out of the window and waiting for Northangerland to rescue her from the conflict that surrounds them:

Oh Percy! Percy! - where art Thou!
I’ve sacrificed my god for thee,
And yet thou wilt not come to me!
How thy strong arm might save me now!
(1840, ll. 270-4)

If Caroline is the Snow White of Angria, Harriet is the Rapunzel figure. Kept in her tower, Harriet waits in Woodchurch Hall, surrounded by the “clustered chimneys towering” (1836, l. 27) that have disrupted the skyline. These masculine edifices are a reflection of the change approaching Harriet’s sanctuary. This hall holds the memory of her sister, but the chaos of Northangerland’s war is oncoming, harming the landscape. Harriet subsequently contemplates “Nature’s deep dismay | At what her sons had done” (1836, ll. 300-10). Branwell’s narration implies that Woodchurch Hall will not remain untouched: “The light of thy ancestral hall, | Thy Caroline, no longer smiles” (1837, ll. 1-2). Patriarchy has dominated the kingdom and Harriet can only wait within her feminine tower. Her desperation to be saved leads her to hallucinate, like Branwell and Caroline Helstone, that Northangerland has come:

But - my own head whirls dizzily,
For these are visions that I see -
Save me! - I’m falling - was that him
Me thought I saw a sudden beam
(1840, ll. 293-6; underlining in the original)

Similarly, Shirley’s home of Fieldhead is described as an “ancestral hall” surrounded by a “thick, lofty stack of chimneys” (Brontë C. 1849, 15), and her sisterly bond with Caroline is threatened by the mill-owning, landscape-damaging Robert Moore - who had previously stated “my mill is my castle” (1888, 56). Charlotte must have seen the irony that her brother, with all his protestations of heroism, was experiencing the feminine subjection that he had envisioned so perceptively in his teenage years. In order to escape the male influence, Harriet tries too late to seek the solidarity of sisterhood. In “Sir Henry Tunstall”, Harriet is withering away and

when Northangerland does not appear, she calls on Caroline:

As long ago she used to cry
When – When at rest in eve’s decline –
Till Caroline all tenderly
Would bed above her golden head
And sing to sleep the guieless child
(Brontë B. 1840, ll. 244-8)

In her final moments, Harriet seeks sibling support and the memory of childhood innocence this invokes.

Equally, Caroline Helstone eventually finds a lifeline amongst her female network. Perhaps Charlotte is beckoning Branwell back to his sisters, to recall the collaboration of childhood and find solace. Sadly, Branwell died in infamy, arousing little sympathy in those around him, on 24th September 1848. Joseph Bentley Leyland never returned “Caroline” to Branwell (Neufeldt 1999, 413), but her name and her message nevertheless spoke to the divided Angrian collaborators.

3 Bade My Sister to Arise: Anne Brontë’s “Resurrection” of Caroline

Charlotte Brontë did not publicly mourn the death of her brother with the same sisterly despair with which she would come to mourn Emily and Anne. Writing to her publisher William Smith Williams immediately following Branwell’s burial, Charlotte could not help but criticise how he had died without making his mark upon the world, writing this scathing recollection:

Branwell was his Father’s and his Sisters’ pride and hope in boyhood, but since Manhood, the case has been otherwise. [...] I do not weep from a sense of bereavement – there is no prop withdrawn, no consolation torn away, no dear companion lost – but for the wreck of talent, the ruin of promise. (1997, 208-9)

Her unsympathetic tone emphasises Charlotte’s belief that the brother she knew, the one who devised Angrian tales with her, had long been absent. The public and private afterlife of Branwell is one “of trivialities [...] a thing of intellectual rags and patches, an object of amused contempt, a necessary death that confirms retribution” (Collins 1996, 253). Charlotte believes that Branwell and Caroline could only escape their self-destructive ways through the demise of their attachments – which both claim can only be eradicated in death. Caroline Helstone must die in order to confirm retribution for the crimes against one’s self. If Charlotte had always intended

that Caroline should deteriorate from a broken heart, why does she survive?

Caroline endures “the valley of the shadow of death”, and comes out the other side. Unlike her Angrian predecessor, she escapes her “tower” and is reborn as a stronger female within a female network, including Shirley and Mrs. Pryor. Through this sisterhood, Caroline has been cleansed of her obsession with Robert – Caroline’s obsession has been cleansed, although her affection for Robert perseveres. She is no longer dependent on his approval. In a rather artless decision, it is only then that Robert realises his own dependence on Caroline and proposes to her. Branwell may not have survived his addictions, but Caroline undergoes the happier alternative for those caught up in an obsession: she detoxes herself from Robert. When we re-examine Caroline’s physical condition, we recognise that her symptoms of ‘heartbreak’ – fevers, hallucinations, loss of appetite and anxiety – are those of withdrawal. By enduring, Caroline has cleansed herself of Robert’s toxicity. Perhaps in the wake of Branwell and Emily’s deaths, Charlotte could not bring herself to kill a character, or perhaps she wished that her brother had possessed the willpower to save himself before it was too late. However, Shuttleworth (1996, 207) argues that Caroline survives “the inevitable outcome of her internal collapse [...] only by the discovery of a new identity”. Caroline reinvents herself upon the discovery that Mrs. Pryor, Shirley’s companion and Caroline’s nurse, is actually her long lost mother. Moreover, Caroline was also salvaged once her authoress stopped identifying her with Branwell and instead “reimagined” her in Anne Brontë’s image.

Anne Brontë died in Scarborough of tuberculosis on 28 May 1849. Even as the family contemplated burying Emily, Charlotte could see Anne was also slipping away: “Emily suffers no more [...] She has died in a time of promise – we saw her taken from life in its prime [...] I now look at Anne and wish she were well and strong – but she is neither” (1997, 218). On Christmas Day 1848, Charlotte wrote to Smith Williams, “The sight too of my sister Anne’s very still deep sorrow wakens in me such fear for her that I dare not falter. Somebody must cheer the rest” (1997, 219-20). In the turmoil of having lost two siblings, and on the cusp of losing the surviving sister, Charlotte felt compelled to maintain a brave exterior – encouraged to conceal her grief by their father who would say “almost hourly, ‘Charlotte, you must bear up – I shall sink if you fail me’” (1997, 219-20). More than ever, Charlotte needed the cathartic exercise *Shirley* provided. Still, remorse counteracted diversion as Charlotte explained to Smith Williams: “we do not study, Anne cannot study now; she can scarcely read”. The plural pronoun “we” emphasises the solidarity Charlotte was sustaining with her final co-author, the implication being that, if they could not study together, Charlotte would not study at all. Charlotte displayed the same commonality in literary inactivity as

they had throughout their careers, with her 18 January 1849 missive to Smith Williams, claiming contriteness: "I feel as if I were doing a wrong and a selfish thing" (1997, 223), seemingly ashamed that she was not a constant presence at her sister's side, a "traitor" to their literary unanimity. Writing when Anne and Emily could not left Charlotte guilt-ridden, although "sometimes I [Charlotte] feel it absolutely necessary to unburden my mind" (1997, 223). Her need to escape within *Shirley* had intensified, and Barker maintains that the hours she could spare from nursing were spent attempting to resume her novel with "something akin to desperation" (1997, 241). Nevertheless, Charlotte felt her talent diminish with grief and the completion of the book was irrevocably tied to Anne: "[s]hould Anne get better, I think I could rally and become Currer Bell once more - but if otherwise - I look no farther - sufficient for the day is the evil thereof" (1997, 224). Sadly, Anne did not get better and Charlotte struggled to resume her Currer Bell pseudonym. Even her pen name brought her lost sisters to mind, as she shared the invented 'Bell' surname with 'Ellis' (Emily) and 'Acton' (Anne). Eventually, she did rally, but Anne had left her impression upon both *Shirley* and its author, and if Charlotte could not collaborate with Anne in the end of her life, she would echo her authorial voice in death.

Charlotte's perception of Anne as the 'obedient' sister was always present in Caroline Helstone's characterisation, as are the messages of Anne's completed novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Time after time, our heroine is treated as delicate and cosseted, in a manner highly reminiscent of Anne's titular Agnes Grey. For instance, when Caroline states her intention to seek an independent living as a governess, to which Shirley reiterates "Nonsense [...] Be a governess! Better be a slave at once" (144). Shirley is repeating Charlotte's 1838 letter to Ellen Nussey, written upon learning of Emily's experiences as a teacher at Law Hill School: "Hard labour from six in the morning until near eleven at night [...] this is slavery" (1997, 59). The main cause for concern, however, is that Caroline herself is not strong enough - physically or emotionally - to undertake the profession, as resident governess; Mrs. Pryor warns her: "you are very young to be a governess, and not sufficiently robust: the duties a governess undertakes are often severe" (Brontë C. 1849, 144). When Caroline approaches her uncle about possibly following this vocation, he simply states: "Pooh! Mere nonsense! I'll not hear of governessing [...] run away and amuse yourself" (1888, 116). Caroline responds to his condescension by muttering: "What with? My doll?" (1888, 166). Caroline blindly views the self-disciplined work of a governess as an ideal way of becoming a grown woman and leaving her uninspiring home, much like Anne's Agnes Grey: "How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life [...] to exercise my unused

faculties" (Brontë A. 1870, 292). Caroline similarly seeks activity, explaining to Mrs. Pryor: "I want severe duties to occupy me" (Brontë C. 1849, 144). Nevertheless, her opinions are dismissed like those of a child, as happened to Agnes: "What, my little Agnes, a governess!" her father laughs (1888, 292).

The coddling Anne felt in her own life, and which she echoes within her protagonists, is the common experience of the youngest sibling. Anne was eighteen months old when their mother, Maria Branwell Brontë, died, and their Aunt Elizabeth was determined that the vulnerable Anne felt a maternal presence. As Rees (1986, 24) explains: "Miss Branwell took special pains over the upbringing of her favourite niece. [...] Anne was to share with her aunt the room in which her mother had died". Gérin also stresses Aunt Branwell's favouritism stemmed from Anne's "pretty manners and endearing ways" as well as her resemblance to her late mother (Aunt Branwell's sister) which caused the maiden aunt to love "Anne at sight". Caroline Helstone's appearance emulates the gentility which made Anne "unmistakably a Branwell" (Gérin 1959, 13). Unlike the tomboyish Shirley Keeldar, Caroline is the epitome of nineteenth-century femininity: "To her had not been denied the gift of beauty; it was not absolutely necessary to know her in order to like her [...] every curve was neat, every limb proportionate: her face was expressive and gentle; her eyes were handsome, and gifted at times with a winning beam that stole into the heart, with a language that spoke softly to the affections" (Brontë C. 1849, 67). The narrator continues to exalt Caroline's "pretty mouth", "delicate skin" and "a fine flow of brown hair" (1888, 67). The sole difference between Anne's and Caroline's appearance is their eye colour. Anne was known to have violet blue eyes, where Caroline is described with the "soft expression of her brown eyes" (1888, 115). Tompkins explains that Caroline's eye colour was intended to represent Charlotte's friend, Ellen Nussey:

Caroline's appearance fits very well with what we know of Ellen's. [...] curled, brown hair, the brown eyes, the clear forehead, the gentle expressive face, the modest and pretty dress are what we see in Charlotte's water-colour of her friend as a schoolgirl. (Tompkins 1961, 19)

It is possible that in order to highlight the unparalleled loveliness of Caroline, Charlotte made her a blend of the two most refined women in her life, Anne and Ellen. However, in the pivotal "Valley of the Shadow of Death" chapter, Caroline develops entirely into a mirror image of Anne.

Had Caroline died, it would have been an allegory for the death of potential, namely that of Branwell. As a tribute to Anne, Caroline does not die but is 'reborn' into an earlier stage of development. As Mrs.

Pryor cares for the ailing girl, she reveals that she is in fact Caroline's mother: "James Helstone was *my* husband. I say you are *mine*" (Brontë C. 1849, 258). Not only does Mrs. Pryor reveal her true identity, she consistently refers to Caroline as "mine", claiming possession of her. The prisoner of unrequited adoration suddenly finds unconditional love in the form of her mother, granting Caroline an external focus of identity beyond her own fatal meditations and she is "brought back to life". She has been given something to live for, and finds comfort in retreating to her younger self: "You *must* recover. You drew life and strength from my breast when you were a tiny, fair infant [...] [s]he held her to her bosom, she cradled her in her arms: she rocked softly, as if lulling a young child to sleep" (1888, 258-9). It is in the arms of her returned mother that Caroline fully becomes a representation of Charlotte's youngest sister, as Mrs. Pryor recalls her as a "tiny, fair infant, over whose blue eyes I used to weep" (1888, 259). For the rest of the novel, Caroline possesses Anne's blue eyes. Tompkins (1961, 23) argues that sentiment and sisterhood is what "rescued" Caroline: "the first chapter written after Anne's death was the 24th - that called 'The Valley of the Shadow' - in which Caroline goes down to the gates of death, but returns". Not only does Caroline return, she is born-again, having regressed to that early moment of infancy where we recognise our mothers for the first time. All her mistakes are washed clean and Caroline can begin again. By embodying Anne in appearance and temperament, Charlotte could revive the memory of her sister in her writings. Moreover, in the form of Mrs. Pryor, Charlotte can channel the authorial voice of Anne's two novels. She reveals, for instance, that her maiden name was "Miss Grey" (Brontë C. 1849, 227), whilst her first name is, indeed, "Agnes" (1888, 262) - clearly echoing Anne's own governess character. Furthermore, moments of her personal story and speech are also highly reminiscent of Anne's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Much like Helen Huntingdon, Mrs. Pryor explains that she abandoned her husband and child, changing her name to a former family surname, much as Helen adopts her mother's maiden name of 'Graham' when in hiding. She explains that she left, and took work as a governess, due to the torment he inflicted upon her during her marriage: "I *have* suffered! None saw - none knew: there was no sympathy - no redemption - no redress!" (1888, 259). She recalls being fearful of Caroline's beauty when she was born: "I beheld in your very beauty the sign of qualities that had entered my heart like iron" (1888, 259). Her anxieties that Caroline would be taken advantage of are reminiscent of those of Helen's aunt upon meeting her future abusive husband, Arthur Huntingdon: "I want to warn you, Helen [...] you have a fair share of beauty, besides - and I hope you may never have cause to regret it!" (Brontë A. 1893, 208-9). Thus, in her personal storyline, Mrs. Pryor emulates not one, but both of Anne's novels. The substantial references are Charlotte's attempt

to forge a final collaboration with Anne, to include her in the progress of *Shirley* – as she stated she could not when Anne was ill. By having Anne’s counterpart, Caroline, ‘reborn’ in the arms of Mrs. Pryor, a fusion of Anne’s female protagonists, Charlotte is stating that her sister will live on in her work.

The theme of female solidarity is therefore a key theme of *Shirley*. For instance, the mutual respect, friendship and debate-driven partnership of Shirley and Caroline follows that of Emily and Anne during their Gondal collaboration: “it flashes on me [Caroline] at this moment how sisters feel towards each other – affection twined with their life [...] I am supported and soothed when you – that is, you only – are near, Shirley” (Brontë C. 1849, 152). During the most tumultuous periods of their lives, Emily and Anne could often only find solace in each other, and Caroline and Shirley’s dynamic reflects this. These women also echo the literary tastes of Charlotte’s sisters as they were constructing the Gondal kingdoms:

Caroline’s instinct of taste, too, was like her own. Such books as Miss Keeldar had read with the most pleasure were Miss Helstone’s delight also. They held many aversions too in common, and could have the comfort of laughing together over works of false sentimentality and pompous pretension. (1888, 24)

Moreover, Caroline’s almost ethereal femininity perfectly balances Shirley’s more decisive, masculine character, which leads them to embark on “adventures” together. In a scene where the two young women decide to prevent a Luddite rebellion against Robert Moore’s mill, Caroline states:

‘Do not fear that I shall not have breath to run as fast as you can possibly run, Shirley. Take my hand. Let us go straight across the fields.’

[Shirley:] ‘But you cannot climb walls?’
‘To-night I can.’ (1888, 191)

The description of Shirley and Caroline’s observation of the Luddite uprising is not dissimilar to Emily’s and Anne’s diary papers in which they describe the Gondalian Royal Family being threatened by anti-Monarchists. In Emily’s diary paper of 30 July 1845, she depicts the prince and princesses “escaping from the palaces of Instruction to join the Royalists who are hard driven at present by the victorious Republicans” (2010, 490-1). Equally, when Caroline tells Shirley she wishes to become a governess, Shirley’s immediate fear of separation is reminiscent of Emily’s feelings of abandonment while Anne was working “exiled and harassed” as a governess (2010, 489). Shirley tells

Caroline that “You don’t care much for my friendship, then, that you wish to leave me?”, to which Caroline replies “I don’t wish to leave you. I shall never find another friend so dear” (Brontë C. 1849, 144). Unlike Caroline and Shirley, Anne and Emily were separated and they felt the distance keenly – from each other and Gondal. Throughout Anne’s struggles as a governess for the Robinson family in the early 1840s, the two sisters attempted to continue their diary papers separately and therefore maintain the creative presence of their co-author. The effect of the distance from home is evident, however, as Anne’s 30 July 1841 diary paper confesses her ignorance of what is occurring in Gondal, and seems to doubt the longevity of the kingdom: “I wonder whether Gondaliand [*sic*] will still be flourishing and what will be their condition” (2010, 489-90). Anne’s obliviousness can be explained not only by her separation from Emily, but the aforementioned demands on a governess’s time. She emphasises her displeasure at having returned to the uninspiring schoolroom: “I dislike the situation and wish to change it [...] my pupils are gone to bed and I am hastening to finish this before I follow them”. Correspondingly, Emily completed her own diary entry on the same day and reveals recent events within Gondal: “[t]he Gondalians are at present in a threatening state but there is no open rupture as yet” (Brontë E. 2010, 488-9). Although Emily was contently living at home, the Gondalians were suffering under her lack of inspiration. She describes how she has “a good many books on hand – but I am sorry to say that as usual I make small progress with any”. Her imagination falters in Anne’s absence and her diary paper ends with a battle-cry of sisterly encouragement: “now I close sending from far an exhortation of courage! to exiled and harassed Anne wishing she was here” (2010, 489). While their Gondal juvenilia were faltering in their separation, the diary format allowed Emily and Anne to continue their sisterly support system beyond the geographical divide. Charlotte was inspired to recreate this twin-like bond in *Shirley* because she could empathise with this lack of inspiration, although her severance from her siblings was, sadly, far more permanent.

4 Conclusion: Shirley and the Summoning of Sibling Voices

By inviting Branwell back to the promise of his childhood and granting Anne the security of familial connection and protection, Charlotte is guarding her siblings in fiction in a way she could not in life. Caroline Helstone is the personification of those flaws that would contribute to Branwell’s death: his heartbreak and addictions mirrored in Caroline’s self-pity. By having Caroline acknowledge the cause of her suffering, Charlotte makes Branwell do the same. Through her parallels to Branwell’s juvenile creations, Caroline and her sister

Harriet, she is divesting Branwell of his heroic, “Northangerland” sense of self and exposing Branwell’s warped dependencies. Branwell represents Caroline Helstone’s weakness, but Anne inspired her virtues. Her wish for independence and appreciation of sisterhood mirror both Anne’s private and literary lives. Through allusions to Anne’s novels, Charlotte is lauding her youngest sister’s literary ability and lamenting the loss of this influence. Childhood is “the kingdom where nobody dies” (St. Vincent Millay 2003, 148-50, l. 1) but the collaborative kingdoms of Angria and Gondal could not continue. Within *Shirley*, Charlotte builds a new kingdom where she is the sole surviving co-author, but not the only one whose voice can be heard.

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