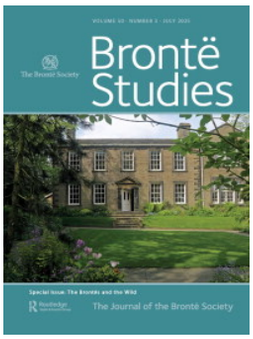

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Dreaming Exiles in Charlotte Brontë's 'The Midnight Song'

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ABSTRACT

Charlotte Brontë's poem, 'The Midnight Song', appears in the second issue of the second series of the 'Young Men's Magazine'. This 'little book', created in miniature to be a fitting object for the toy soldiers that inspired the siblings' collaborative storytelling, was acquired by the Brontë Parsonage Museum in 2019. This article enjoys the privilege of being the first to offer a critical account of 'The Midnight Song' to celebrate its first publication. It considers Charlotte's delineation of the exile, expatriate and dreamer, figures who represent different but related ways of knowing and perceiving the world. As the poem unfolds, Charlotte inhabits these subject positions simultaneously, identifying their privileges and testing their limits. In so doing, she hones her understanding of the writer's craft and creative power, revealing at just fourteen years of age a remarkable self-assurance when wielding her pen. In turn, the poem proves prophetic, for here Charlotte plays with the tropes of un/belonging, dis/connection and mis/communication that recur throughout her oeuvre.

KEYWORDS

Angria; Charlotte Brontë; dreams; exile; expatriate; Glass Town; juvenilia; 'The Midnight Song'

> The meditations of a lonely traveller in the wilderness or the mournful song of a solitary exile are the themes in which he most delights and which he chiefly indulges in, though often his songs consist of grand and vivid descriptions of storms and tempests: of the wild roaring of the ocean mingling with the tremendous voice of thunder, when the flashing lightning gleams in union with the bright lamp of some wicked spirit striding over the face of the troubled waters, or sending forth his cry from the bosom of a black and terrible cloud. Such is the Marquis of Douro.
>
> —Charlotte Brontë, 'Characters of the Celebrated Men of the Present Time, by Captain Tree' (1829)

Such is the literary portrait of Arthur Wellesley, Marquis of Douro, drawn a mere eight months before 'The Midnight Song' appeared in Charlotte Brontë's latest issue of the 'Young Men's Magazine'.[1] In the earlier sketch she gestures towards the sights, sounds and atmospherics of the later poem, associating the Marquis as Romantic poet with elements of water and air in their various awe-inspiring states, from turbulent seas and storms to unsubstantial mist. 'The Midnight Song' provides an

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opportunity for Charlotte to rehearse that now familiar theme, 'the mournful song of a solitary exile', with the Marquis recounting a strange voice carried by the wind, reaching his ear as he lies out of doors in the middle of the night, lulled towards sleep by the sound of gentle breezes and the 'rolling deep' (Brontë 1830, 11).[2]

A substantial reassessment of Charlotte's poetry is long overdue.[3] There is something ironic, of course, that a writer who began her career desiring 'to be for ever known' (Smith 1995–2004, 1:166) for her verses, who sought and failed to secure the encouragement of Robert Southey, Poet Laureate, should be subject in her literary afterlife to a partial (one is tempted to say wilful) act of forgetting. But what is worse is that Charlotte may have brought this upon herself: she worked hard to foster our love and admiration for Emily's 'peculiar music' (Brontë [1850] 2003, xliv), as she called her sister's poems, but the legacy she helped to build now overshadows her. Simply put, Emily's star burns brighter. But this is not all, for now we must reckon with the inconvenient truth that the older sister interfered. In 1850, when honouring Emily and Anne, recently dead, with a new edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte shared their names in a preface (while protecting her own) and published selections from their verses with significant (but silent) alterations: she added and omitted; she manipulated timelines. Although we might sympathise with the anxieties that shaped Charlotte's editorial interventions, can we forgive her? Or have her associations with poetry become too suspect, too compromised? This is certainly the impression left by the revised Shakespeare Head edition of her poems, where readers are warned that 'Charlotte was probably the worst poet in the family after her father, and we do not make any exaggerated claims for the worth of the poems in this volume' (Winnifrith 1984, xii). These are harsh words, but they echo Charlotte's own self-deprecating account shared in a letter to Elizabeth Gaskell while at work upon the 1850 edition that secured Emily's poetic reputation: 'Mine [her contribution to *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*] are chiefly juvenile productions; the restless effervescence of a mind that would not be still' (Smith 1995–2004, 2:475). For too long we have taken Charlotte's word for it, but here I will risk her displeasure by treating such 'juvenile productions' as 'The Midnight Song' seriously. I take my cue from Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith, who look to Charlotte's poetry as a rich repository of 'her precocious and adventurous manipulation and love of words, her developing ability to express emotion, her fascination with exotic characters and scenery, and her absorption of the techniques, images, and vocabulary of the poets whose work excited her' (2006, 384) (Figure 1).

This 'little essay' celebrates the first publication of 'The Midnight Song' following the return home to the Brontë Parsonage Museum of Charlotte's last surviving 'little book'. In this poem, she is intensely interested in the experiences of the exile, expatriate and dreamer, figures who represent different but related ways of knowing and perceiving the world. As 'The Midnight Song' unfolds, she inhabits these subject positions simultaneously, identifying their privileges and testing their limits. In so doing, she hones her understanding of the writer's craft and creative power, revealing at just fourteen years of age a remarkable self-assurance when wielding her pen. In turn, the poem proves prophetic, for here Charlotte plays with the tropes of un/belonging, dis/connection and mis/communication that recur throughout her oeuvre.

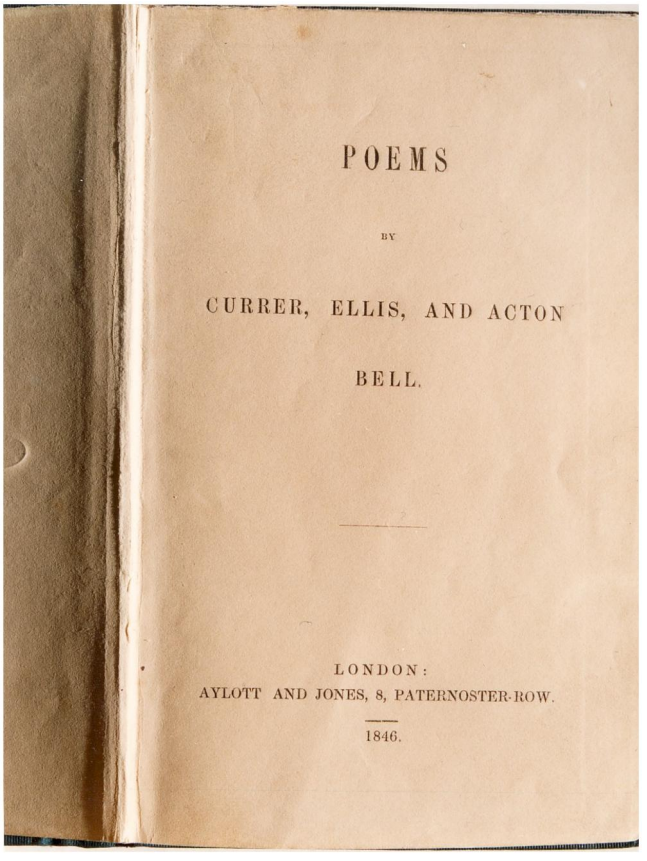

Figure 1. Title page from a first edition copy of *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*. Copyright The Brontë Society.

'The Midnight Song'

The appearance of 'The Midnight Song' in the 'Young Men's Magazine' locates it as part of the Brontë siblings' collaborative fantasy of English colonial expansion. Created in miniature, these magazines were fit objects for the toy soldiers that provided the imaginative spark for their youthful storytelling. The Young Men's play begins with twelve adventurers, each represented by a toy soldier in their game, sailing to the west coast of Africa where they subjugate the indigenous Ashantee people (represented by ninepin skittles). Here they build the grand settlement of Glass Town and colonise great swathes of land. One of these adventurers is Arthur Wellesley, not our friend the Marquis but his father, who begins his career 'a common trumpeter' (Alexander 1987, 12) aboard the *Invincible* before his elevation to Duke of Wellington and later King of Glass Town. When Charlotte took over the editorship of the 'Young Men's Magazine' from Branwell, initiating its second series in 1830, she established herself as its primary contributor and drew upon an extended range of characters developed in other games, namely, the Duke of Wellington's two sons: Arthur, the Marquis (Figure 2), and his younger brother Charles.[4] They soon became her favoured protagonists and the Marquis's elaborate

verses and his brother's satirical prose fill many pages in the 'little books'.[5] In the 'Young Men's Magazine' for September 1830, for example, 'The Midnight Song' is prefaced by Charles's leading article, a letter recounting 'a certain mysterious incident' (Brontë 1830, 3) in sometimes astonishingly violent detail.

'The Midnight Song' itself contains a nested dramatic monologue. The Marquis provides the frame, setting the scene albeit indistinctly by detailing the soporific soundscape that surrounds him as he lies upon 'the dewy ground': 'soft winds murmured' in concert with the breaking waves, whose 'hoarse voice' is strangely 'softened to an echos [*sic*] tone' (11). But these figurative utterances of natural origin seem to carry another sound, a 'mourning voice of woe' (11) of supernatural origin, there being no one else present at the scene—a voice that sings sweetly. The Marquis cedes the stage, recording the words spoken or sung by this disembodied 'child of Greif [*sic*]' (12): an exile who longs for news of England and issues an apostrophe to the winds, entreating them to cross oceans and penetrate clouds, that 'sea woven shroud / Of vapour' (12) enclosing the island, to bring back comforting knowledge, comforting sounds, of their lost home. It proves a tantalising fantasy: that the Marquis hears their voice suggests the winds uphold part of the bargain, but the exile

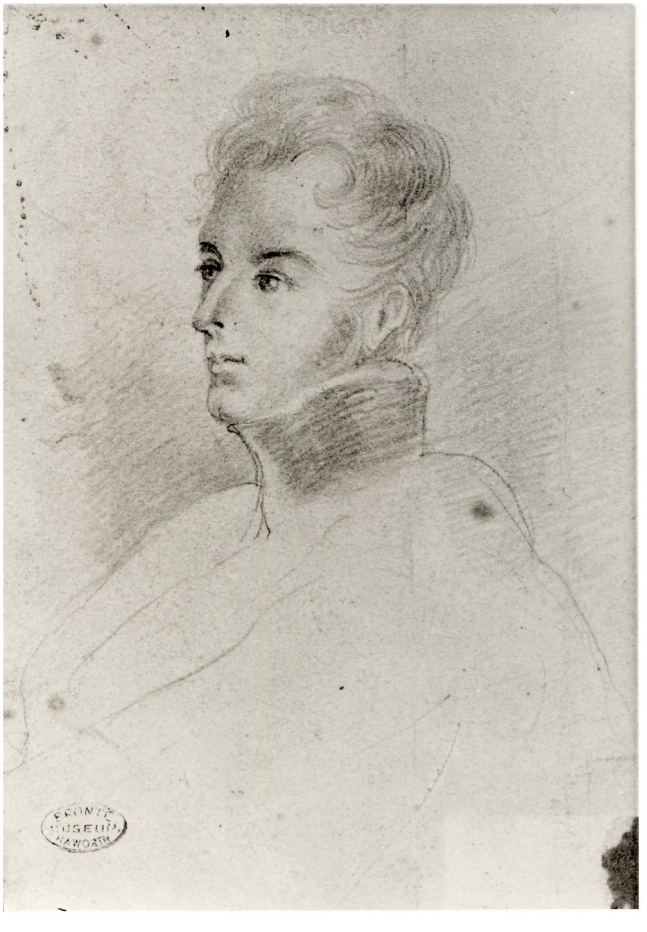

Figure 2. 'Arthur Wellesley' by Charlotte Brontë, c. 1834. Copyright The Brontë Society.

acknowledges no reply. Instead, we learn that they must content themselves with dreams of home, for only when sleeping can they 'visit its shore' (14). As the winds carry the exile's voice away, before the Marquis returns for the final stanza, we catch an echo of Caliban's famous lament, 'when I waked/I cried to dream again' (Shakespeare [1611] 2007, 34): 'I wake unto sorrow once/more, to know I have bidden/fare well' (Brontë 1830, 14).

Exile and Expatriate

Poetic form forges a bond of kinship between the Marquis and the exile. The poet's privileged mode of perceiving the world, their privileged relationship with words, are what make the exile's song first audible then legible. These powers are typical of Charlotte's broader conception of poetic creativity and insight. As Mandy Swann has shown, poetic speakers across her oeuvre, including where that speaker is revealed to be herself, demonstrate a persistent fascination with 'the Romantic figure of the poet-prophet or divine writer':

> Charlotte Brontë's poetic speakers are the quasi-divine revealers of existential truths: they are the apocalyptic visionaries who rend the veil of mortal confusion … [granting] special knowledge about hidden realms, supernatural beings, the inner depths of human emotion, the assuagement of suffering, the mysteries of life, and human fate. (2017, 155–56)

In 'The Midnight Song', of course, the apocalyptic sense is aural—these 'mysteries' are heard, not seen, although we might conjure sights (and sites) in the imagination as we listen or read. The Marquis can hear the exile's voice because, as a poet, he can transcend the 'mortal confusion' produced by ordinary ways of knowing. As he drifts towards sleep, the normal limits of sensory consciousness relax and he awakens metaphorically to otherwise inaccessible realities.

Through their song, the exile lays claim to a share in this privileged knowledge. The frustrated sadness engendered by forced ignorance of home, figured as occluded sight unable to see through the clouds and spray enveloping England, is compensated for by an appreciation of other elemental beauties. Turning their attention from home to the heavens, the exile realises the 'Brighter glories' of fire and firmament, of comets that 'flame along the sky' (Brontë 1830, 13), disregarded by a neglectful God and their retinue of souls, those 'Childeren [*sic*] of Albion Spirits sublime' (12). For poet and exile alike, privileged knowledge is the result of dislocation, their existing on the periphery between different states of being and perceiving. The poet's way of knowing the world has much in common, therefore, with what Jane Stabler has called 'a distinctly exilic self-consciousness': an unsettling because unsettled mode of engagement; a reckoning with alternatives and a restless drawing of comparisons that finds expression through 'oblique and ironic modes [that] articulate the sensation of being at odds with two cultures' (2013, 20). The Marquis offers a superlative example of the poet as exilic outsider: he belongs, after all, to an expatriate family. This forges a further bond of kinship between the Marquis and the exile: although subject to different pressures, enjoying different privileges, the expatriate too has a troubled

relationship with home. As Stabler notes, 'their imaginative conditions overlap and run into each other' (2013, 5).

The Wellesleys were Anglo-Irish with large estates in Ireland, but in the games and stories that comprise the Young Men's play, they settle in Africa and acquire extensive property and lands. Nevertheless, Charlotte has the children return to England for schooling at Eton. Here the muse visits his brother Charles Wellesley, rather than his older brother, and he records feeling out of place (in an untitled poem popularly known as 'Homesickness'): 'And England does not suit me: it is cold and full of snow;/So different from black Africa's warm, sunny, genial glow' (Alexander 1983, 54). As a second-generation colonialist, Charles experiences a fraught state of unbelonging (in this, he stands as proxy for his brother, the Marquis). On the one hand, the metropole is a strangely hostile environment and the pull of national identity proves weak, whereas on the other, his desire to return to the colony is limned by unequal relations of power. Charles's fantasy of a warm African welcome conceals the fact that his family's presence in Glass Town remains rooted in violence, precluding his just and equitable involvement with the indigenous population. What is never doubted, however, is his ability to move between England and Glass Town, metropole and colony. For the expatriate, unbelonging appears to guarantee a privileged mobility.

It is impossible to precisely locate either the exile or the expatriate in 'The Midnight Song'. We glimpse the exile's whereabouts through negation: they are not in England, they are elsewhere, 'Wandering on a foreign strand' (Brontë 1830, 12).

Figure 3. 'Lake and castle' by Charlotte Brontë, 6 July 1833. Copyright The Brontë Society.

But we are less certain about the expatriate. The Marquis provides no distinctive location markers and we must reckon with his ability to cross and re-cross seas, that privileged mobility claimed by his colonialist family.[6] In the Glass Town story 'Albion and Marina' (1830), a counterfeit roman-à-clef relating the tragic romance between the Marquis and Marian Hume, he journeys without apparent difficulty or incident from England to Glass Town and back again. The voyage to Africa is undertaken at the insistence of his father, the 'Duke of Strathelleraye' (a pseudonym for the Duke of Wellington), who

> [determines] to visit that wonder of the world, the Great City of Africa: the Glass Town, of whose splendour, magnificence and extent, power, strength and riches, occasional tidings came from afar, wafted by the breezes of the ocean to Merry England. But to most of the inhabitants of that little isle it [bore] the character of a dream or gorgeous fiction. (Alexander 1987, 290)

Glass Town is a potent symbol of England's dominating presence in the African continent, but the vast distances separating metropole and colony produce an imaginative and moral amnesia. Violent realities of colonial expansion are occluded as Glass Town is enmeshed by de-realising, exoticising narratives: the false (and consoling) impression of the colony as 'a dream or gorgeous fiction' is barely disturbed by the 'occasional tidings' carried back to the metropole by sea and wind. The infantilised inhabitants of 'Merry England' live in ignorance of Glass Town's realities, just as the exile in 'The Midnight Song' cannot penetrate England's island climate to gather news of home. It is only the expatriate ruling elite who show themselves capable of harnessing water and air, those unpredictable and dangerous elements essential for transporting people and goods (and people-as-goods) between far-distant places. What is imagined by them as a channel of communication appears to others as a barrier or uncrossable border.

The exile's privileged knowledge, therefore, remains limited. Although their existence on the periphery fosters different ways of being and perceiving—looking askance at themselves, their forebears, their God—their experience of dislocation is disempowering, figured as loss in 'The Midnight Song'. This is thrown into relief by that bond of kinship between exile and expatriate poet. The Marquis presents the exile's song in a nested dramatic monologue: in so doing, he performs an act of literary ventriloquism in which the expatriate speaks for, speaks as, speaks over the exile. This occludes the Marquis's relative privilege, an amalgam of his Romantic poet's insight and expatriate mobility—belonging nowhere, his powers of perception seem limitless.

Whispering on the Wind: Dreams and Prophecy

Dislocation in 'The Midnight Song' extends further than outsider geographies and perspectives. We might be certain that England is the exile's lost home, but the poem refuses to fix their position along other axes of identity—in addition to being nameless, they are genderless, raceless, ageless. By contrast, in her contributions to the Young Men's play and Glass Town saga, Charlotte constructs an increasingly sophisticated biography for the Marquis, one that continues to evolve as these

narratives shift their focus to Angria and the Marquis transforms into the tyrannical Zamorna.[7] But for all our certainties about the poet, 'The Midnight Song' works hard to sow doubt. Temporalities and consciousness are variously unsettled: events take place at the threshold separating one day from the next, when 'the earth was wrapped in midnights [*sic*] robe' (11); the scene is at once quiet and loud, as 'Full oft it rose with solemn swell/ … Full oft to utter silence fell' (11); and the Marquis is neither fully asleep nor fully awake, but 'lull[ed]' into a kind of waking dream (11). The dream state is significant. It is a precondition for this aural visitation; it licences the poet's extraordinary act of listening. The exile too is interested in dreams, their potential to break bounds, transporting dreamers imaginatively to impossible places.

The enduring mystery of dreaming's origin and purpose boasts a rich legacy of competing explanation and interpretation. Philosophical and medical efforts to rationalise dreaming were well underway by the time Charlotte wrote 'The Midnight Song'. Some held fast to physiological causes, where nightmares and other sleep disturbances were attributed to diet or some other sensory stimulation (such as touch or temperature), whereas others held fast to psychological causes, where waking ideas, experiences, fears and desires were transmuted in dreams (see Ford 1998 and Lindop 2004). But superstition dies hard, and dreaming is yet to lose its popular association with possession and prophecy. As Patricia Ford has shown, the coexistence of natural and supernatural accounts of dreaming proved fertile ground for the Romantic imagination. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, for example, responsible for perhaps the most famous Romantic dream poem in 'Kubla Khan' (1816), was a magpie collector of dream theories, just as willing to give credence to accounts of dreams as visions, or the work of spirits, as he was the latest scientific treatise (Ford 1998, 9–32). 'The Midnight Song' is similarly catholic in its refusal to explain the Marquis's dream. Of course, there might be nothing more extraordinary at work than

Figure 4. 'Moonlit scene with rocks and water' by Charlotte Brontë (previously misattributed to Branwell Brontë), c. 1834. Copyright The Brontë Society.

the poet's creative imagination transforming natural stimuli into a human voice. But the Marquis (pictured in Figure 5) gives credence to the exile's song. Although doubtless strange, their voice is undisputed. It is clearly distinguished from the acknowledged figurations used elsewhere in the Marquis's versifying, those metaphors and similes that turn wind and waves into human-like utterances. In doing so, he embraces a superstitious theory of dreams apposite to his status as a Romantic 'poet-prophet' (Swann 2017, 155; discussed above), but 'The Midnight Song' stops short of determining whether the dreaming poet is active or passive in this aural visitation.

The nature or quality of the poet's involvement has important repercussions for the meaning and potentiality of their dream. The Marquis's use of a nested dramatic monologue, a song within a song, suggests this extraordinary experience might reasonably be considered a dream within a dream. If, in sleep, the exile's 'spirit' (Brontë 1830, 14) can move beyond bounds, granting temporary respite from grief while undertaking an impossible journey home, so might the exile's spirit enter the

Figure 5. 'Arthur Adrian Marquis of Douro' by Charlotte Brontë, c. 1833. Copyright The Brontë Society.

poet's dreaming consciousness en route to England (where perhaps it has arrived, since we do not know where our sleeping expatriate lies). This explanation positions the 'poet-prophet' as essentially passive in their revelation of 'hidden realms' and 'supernatural beings' (Swann 2017, 155, 156). As the Marquis's grip on consciousness loosens, an external force takes possession and dictates his dream. In this version of events, the poet is a conduit, receptive rather than creative, and the figure of dictation is literalised. Remembering and recounting, rendering his dream (and the exile's song) as verse, the Marquis appears to copy out, unchanged, what he has heard—his poetry, like his dream, is not wholly his own.

But this is strangely at odds with the young Brontës' literary ambitions and their imagining of fantasy kingdoms under the sway of god-like creators, the Genii, whose pens wield extraordinary power.[8] It is strangely at odds, too, with the privileges enjoyed by the Marquis throughout the Glass Town saga. An alternative reading seems necessary, one retaining its faith in the dream's extraordinary origin without sacrificing the poet's creative activity: the writer's power to bring people and places, events and emotions, into being. Mandy Swann (2017) notes this shading of prophecy into creativity in Charlotte's self-reflective poem 'We wove a web in childhood' (1835). Here dreams figure as one of several allegories for the siblings' collaborative storytelling: their games and writings are a 'Dream that stole o'er us in the time/When life was in its vernal clime', and their strange worlds and tall tales are a 'bright darling dream' into which Charlotte escapes from present reality (Neufeldt 2015, 166, 167). If we carry this allegory of dreaming-as-creating back to 'The Midnight Song', a radical possibility emerges: rather than bearing witness to the exile's story and song, the Marquis might create it. This new reading reworks ancient accounts of dreams as oracles that require the subtle art of oneirocriticism (dream interpretation) to make sense of their truths (Ford 1998, 10–11). Taking a longer view of the evolving Glass Town and Angrian saga, drawing upon the privileged hindsight of the literary critic, the Marquis's dream provides an incredible yet irresistible opportunity for dream interpretation. The Marquis will become Zamorna, the increasingly tyrannical ruler of Angria; he will be betrayed, then deposed, by his Prime Minister, Northangerland (Branwell's favoured protagonist), and forced into exile some 2,000 miles distant upon Ascension Isle (Alexander 1983, 151). This is a striking realisation of the Marquis's earlier act of literary ventriloquism in 'The Midnight Song'—our dreaming expatriate will become an exile. His dream, therefore, reveals his fate. He will sail far from home, giving vent to the anger and sadness that accompanies his new state of dislocation; he will plot his revenge and return, composing countless lines of poetry. Declaiming his verse aloud, he will cut a strikingly familiar figure: 'I give my dreams to the wild wind & sea' (Neufeldt 2015, 195).

This is magical thinking, of course. Charlotte could not have foreseen the wars and rivalries that prompted the formation and political strife of Angria, nor could she have known of Zamorna's fate when composing 'The Midnight Song' in 1830. But intentionality matters little. Dreaming remains a potent figure for creativity, and elements of water and air recur as fraught symbols of un/belonging, dis/connection and mis/communication throughout her oeuvre. Charlotte may not have planned for

the Marquis to dream in prophecies and write his future; nonetheless, 'The Midnight Song' rehearses ideas that resound throughout her later work. The Marquis's dream is prophetic in this larger sense and we discern its most famous echo in *Jane Eyre* (1847). On the verge of submitting to St. John's relentless insistence that they marry before leaving England together as missionaries, Jane hears Rochester's disembodied voice call her name three times. Later, when they have reconciled, the phenomenon is revealed to be stranger still: 'As I exclaimed "Jane! Jane! Jane!" a voice—I cannot tell whence the voice came, but I know whose voice it was—replied, "I am coming: wait for me!" and a moment after, went whispering on the wind, the words—"Where are you?"' (Brontë [1847] 1969, 572). The Marquis provides no clue to the exile's identity and offers no reply to their song. But where the trope recurs in *Jane Eyre*, the case is altered: here the voices are known and their 'whispering on the wind' effects a return home.

Notes

1. For clarity, minor alterations have been made to the punctuation and capitalisation of the series and instalment titles.
2. All in-text quotations for the little book cite the page numbers of the original manuscript (BS 11.5).
3. There are encouraging signs of growing critical interest in Charlotte as a poet and an editor of poetry, and in the relationship between her poetry and prose. See, for example, Barton (2017), Bauman (2007), Pearson (2012) and Swann (2017).
4. For a detailed account of the Young Men's play and its evolving combination with other play narratives and characters, see Alexander (1983).
5. The fourth number of the second series is the exception that proves the rule: the Marquis offers a short story ('Silence') while Charles pens some verse ('Song'). See Alexander (1987, 242–50).
6. 'The Young Men's Magazine' for September 1830 opens with 'A Letter from Lord Charles Wellesley'. Charles records that he and his brother are both in Glass Town and residing at Waterloo Palace. His letter is dated 17 August 1830, just two days prior to the Marquis's poem, which is dated 19 August 1830. There are, however, no internal markers for the Marquis's location in 'The Midnight Song'.
7. The kingdom of Angria was established following the Wars of Encroachment that see Ashantee, French and Arabian forces threaten the Glass Town Federation. Angrian characters and stories were largely the collaborative work of Charlotte and Branwell. See Alexander (1983).
8. The Genii are authorial avatars who directly intervene in the Glass Town saga: Charlotte is Taley/Tallii, Branwell is Brany/Brannii, Emily is Emmii, and Anne is Annii. See Alexander (1983).

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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