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Approaches to Teaching the Brontës One More Time

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Roundtable

The Oxford Companion to the Brontës. Edited by Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

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One More Time

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Instructors of courses on the Brontë family now have another large encyclopedic resource to use in their teaching of the lives and works of the family. Like Heather Glen's recently published *Cambridge Companion to the Brontës* (2002), this companion surveys the lives and writings of all of the family, including the father, Patrick, and brother, Branwell, while also covering some of the minute details in the works of the three sisters, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne. The question that I will address here is not which companion to use but how to use this particular resource. Of what use to instructors and students are detailed entries on specialized topics found in the lives and works?

The editors state in their preface that their purpose is to "evoke the milieu in which the Brontës lived and wrote, to disseminate new reliable research, and to provide detailed information about their lives, works, and reputation" (ix). With the assistance of seven other scholars and specialists on the Brontës, the editors have ably accomplished their stated intentions. This volume is as comprehensive as any instructor could wish, while at the same time also being specific and focused. For instance, the chronology at the front of the volume runs for almost twenty pages and places the lives of the Brontës into the context of larger literary and artistic movements as well as historical events (xxix – xlvii). In addition, the *Oxford Companion* includes numerous illustrations, including the drawings that Charlotte made to illustrate her early Angrian saga. Several useful maps are also provided, one that charts Charlotte's honeymoon tour of Ireland. Finally, there is a valuable glossary of dialect and obsolete words used in all the writings.

The basic question in approaching a volume like this, however, is how useful is it for the student in the typical undergraduate English course? First of all, the volume would have to be available in paperback (it was released in softcover in 2005) and priced reasonably for student purchase. The more

germane issue, however, is how would students use the *Oxford Companion*? The editors themselves present a caveat to the student reader in the preface, stating: "What the Companion does not do is annotate the Brontës' works. There are entries on authors they drew upon, including explanation of allusions, but there are no specific entries on quotations or attempts to gloss the Brontës' vocabulary" (ix). In short, this is not a large *Cliff's Notes* in hardback. What would students derive from such a resource, and how would they best be directed to make use of the volume? As Terri Hasseler points out in her review of this volume, its availability to students could go a long way to offsetting their very heavy reliance on the Internet for "research." In a recent search of three Brontë Web sites, I found three different dates for the publication of *Jane Eyre*. Only one of those dates was correct. In short, students have developed an attitude of Googling their paper topics and very infrequently using a book or article for their research. The paperback *Oxford Companion* as a course text would, I agree, encourage them to return to the use of print media for their scholarship.

However, it seems to me that the average undergraduate student would be fairly lost in this volume without clear instructional direction. There are hundreds of detailed entries on friends that the Brontës corresponded with, people and families who lived in the Haworth area, and religious, political, and social contexts that influenced their writings. The heart of the volume for students, I would suspect, would be in the detailed biographical sketches provided for each member of the family, as well as the sections on the major novels: *The Professor*, *Jane Eyre*, *Shirley*, and *Villette* for Charlotte; *Wuthering Heights* for Emily; and *Agnes Grey* and *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* for Anne. As someone who spent a semester teaching an undergraduate course on the Brontë family, I never had time to delve into the childhood writings (Angrian and Gondal sagas) or Patrick's or Branwell's writings, although students told *Hoeveler Teaching the Brontës One More Time* 537 me at the conclusion of the course that they wished we had spent time on Branwell because of his obviously strong influence on all his sisters, particularly Emily. In short, there is simply so much to cover in any course devoted to the Brontës that one wonders how much could reasonably be covered in the average course that would not be focused specifically on their works. How much detail would or could one go into about the Brontës in a course on the Victorian novel?

In examining this volume and thinking back through my own extensive attempts to teach the Brontë family as well as to bring the Brontës into my other courses, particularly one on the female Gothic, I can suggest a few ways that instructors could make use of the *Oxford Companion*. First, there is a veritable wealth of material here that can be used to develop courses. One of the most useful is the list of creative works that expand on the Brontë novels (586). An entire special topics undergraduate seminar could be

focused on adaptations of the Brontë novels in print and visual media, and this volume provides several useful leads in that direction (entries on film adaptations, operatic and musical versions of the novels, television and theatrical adaptations). Another way to use the volume would be as a resource for a specifically designed research project on the childhood writings of the Brontës. These works, just beginning to be taught in conjunction with the major novels, are fascinating glimpses into how the creative process evolves and how creativity is frequently not individual but shared within a family. The *Oxford Companion* provides detailed information on all the childhood writings, certainly enough to start any undergraduate on his or her way to a completed research paper on, say, the role and ancestry of the femme fatale in the *Gondal Saga*.

Another way to use the *Oxford Companion* in the undergraduate classroom would be to assign group presentations on various aspects of the Brontë novels. For instance, how influenced were they by the magazines, journals, and annuals that their father subscribed to and that they read even as children? How can we see the residue of these journalistic writings years later in their mature novels? The *Oxford Companion* provides detailed information on a number of journals that the sisters read, also describing a number of their favorite early reading materials. Other group presentations could focus on the influence of divorce and property laws on the novels (with the *Oxford Companion* providing information on those laws). Obviously, there are dozens of topics and these are neatly organized at the beginning of the volume, under the heading "Classified Contents List."

The *Oxford Companion* also contains particularly useful critical and reception histories for each of the authors, charting, for instance, how Charlotte or Emily's lives and works were presented from the time of original publication to today. Such an overview allows students to see that canonical status is frequently a matter of taste, prejudice, and political maneuvering, all subject to change at fairly quick notice. The instructor could require that students read this material in conjunction with the novels, but at a certain point one begins to sense resistance. How much research can we reasonably ask of our undergraduate students? The use of this companion as a supplementary instructional tool begs that question. To be blunt about this, I am pleased when my students have read the primary text under discussion in the class. I am even more pleased when they have understood what they have read or if they have intelligent questions about what has puzzled or annoyed them, and they bring those questions to class. I am not certain that, given the length of *Jane Eyre* or *Shirley*, one can also expect one's students to have surveyed the nuances of the Luddite rebellions or the laws on the incarceration of the insane.

Although the *Oxford Companion* states that it is intended for students, its contents and several of the entries assume a fairly sophisticated

knowledge of the Brontës and their writings. This demur, however, does not take away from the value of a work like *The Oxford Companion to the Brontës*. Its instructional value, though, is probably more for the instructor than for the average undergraduate, who simply would find its entries a bit esoteric and specialized. But I would encourage my students to consult the volume, and I would place it on class reserve in the library for easy access. I would also encourage instructors who find themselves regularly teaching one or more of the Brontë novels to purchase the paperback (or hardback if they can afford it). A valuable and rich tome, the *Oxford Companion* speaks to the wide-ranging expertise that Alexander and Smith have developed over long careers devoted to the study of the Brontës. It is an expertise, however, that very few instructors, let alone students, will ever come close to mastering.