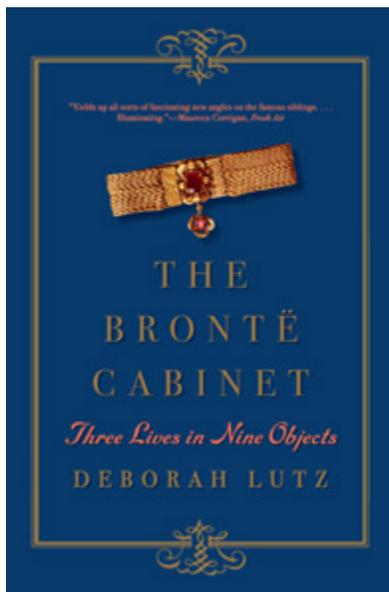


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Guest Edited by Janine Hatter and Helena Ifill



Objectifying the Brontës: Making the Inanimate Intimate

[*The Brontë Cabinet: Three Lives in Nine Objects*](#). Deborah Lutz. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2015. 310 pp.

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<1>Writing desks. Pressed ferns. Stamps. Dog collars. Death masks. Deborah Lutz's study of material culture, specifically objects belonging to the Brontë sisters, illustrates how 'things' retain the energy — moods, desires, and memories — of their possessors. Through Lutz's use of 'thing theory' *The Brontë Cabinet* reveals as much about the works of Charlotte, Anne, and Emily, as it does about their personal lives and the period in which they lived. In the introduction Lutz writes, 'Even ordinary objects can carry us to other times and places. Old things gain an extra patina of significance for this reason' (xxi). Along with being informative historically and biographically, the book is wonderfully readable, with Lutz's deep

knowledge and admiration for the Brontë sisters present in every braid of hair, every sewing needle, every inky pen that is held meditatively, or being meditated upon.

<2>The first chapter 'Tiny Books' focuses on the Brontës' early years in Haworth, where they began creating their own 'micro' books, roughly the size of matchbooks, with the miniature pages sewn together and composed of whatever cheap paper was at hand, including 'salvaged sugar wrappers' (23). Imitating *Blackwood's*, the micro books often featured characters from the childhood games they had played with brother Branwell's toy soldiers. These early self-publications were not only composed by children, but could only be read by them, since the print was so small. Lutz shows how these handcrafted objects hold the secrets of the Brontë children, revealing only enough to betray the sisters' innate, and ultimately lifelong, love of reading, writing, and free-spirited creation.

<3>The second chapter 'Pillopatate' receives its name from Tabby Ackroyd, the Brontës' servant, who would instruct Emily to put down her pen and peel a potato in a 'broad Yorkshire accent' (37). Trading the pen for the peeling knife becomes the theme of Lutz's analysis of the link between writing and women's domestic chores. Demonstrating how the combination was less drudgery than complementary to the creative process, Lutz focuses on the period of time when young Anne and Emily created the fictional world of Gondal. The girls would discuss their story while ironing or peeling potatoes, then stop to jot down a short scene. Lutz connects this blend of housework and creativity to later characters, such as Nelly Dean in *Wuthering Heights* (1847), who knits during much of her gothic tale.

<4>Through characters like Lucy Snowe in *Villette* (1853), who lovingly stiches a watch-guard for M. Paul Emanuel, Lutz reveals how needlework is woven into the Brontës' romantic plots, expressing affection and weaving intention, almost like a fairy spell. The workboxes, frequently locked, used by these talented knitters of stories and socks alike expose more in their contents than on their decorative exteriors. Lutz claims, 'The Victorians had a penchant for depicting inanimate objects as thinking, feeling, and speaking things, with the workbox and its contents especially expressive of vitality' (50). With secret compartments concealing pink pill boxes, kid gloves, beach rocks, and locks of hair, Lutz once more highlights how the Brontës' material objects hold the life force of their initial creation, be it domestic or literary.

<5>'Out Walking' explores the transgressive and restorative act of women walking off the beaten path. From Emily's wild walks on the moors to fictional Jane Eyre walking away from Thornfield, Lutz parallels women's independence through their buoyant stride. Emily's solitary nature, often perceived as taciturn, can be found in fellow 'radical walkers' (81) including Leslie Stephen and women such as Anne Lister, who stepped away from convention to make their own path, occasionally eliciting suspicion and insults from male walkers who felt their territory violated. Lutz utilizes walking sticks as objects associated with perambulation, although it was primarily men who carried them, while women used parasols. However Emily, in heavy boots with a big dog at her side, doubtless left behind her parasol when hiking. Lutz goes in depth not simply on the walking habits of radical women, but on Emily's admiration for Romantic-era poets who were also avid walkers, such as Wordsworth and Coleridge. Walking then becomes further linked to poetry, place, and memory when Lutz discusses the practice of

pilgrimage, relating Emily to her literary descendants like Virginia Woolf, who made the trek to Haworth in order to walk in Emily's formidable boot steps.

<6>Chapter four emphasizes the relationships between humans and animals. From Keeper, Emily's canine companion on the moors, to Heathcliff (Catherine's 'faithful pet' in *Wuthering Heights* (108)), Lutz demonstrates how a regard for animals manifests in fact and fiction for the Brontë sisters, whose home hosted dogs, cats, geese, a canary and a merlin hawk — though how they all got along is not revealed. A tenderness towards a spaniel sparks affection between M. Paul Emanuel and Lucy Snowe in *Villette* while Rochester's fondness for Pilot reveals his hidden compassion in *Jane Eyre* (1847). Similarly, Lutz provides surprising examples of real pet owners, such as Charles Dickens, who had the paw and leg of his cat removed after its death and "made into a letter opener" (103). The commemoration of lost pets illustrates the growing nineteenth-century obsession with pets (Queen Victoria's included) as well as their fetishizing of death.

<7>'Fugitive Letters' is an especially poignant and provocative chapter focusing on Charlotte's letters. In between intimate correspondence including Charlotte's increasingly desperate letters to Constantin Heger, a married man she believed reciprocated her romantic feelings but who seemingly did not, Lutz juxtaposes the tactile elements of letter writing and Victorian postal history. Perhaps most intriguing for readers of recent Brontë biographies by Claire Harman and Lucasta Miller will be Lutz's examination of Charlotte's letters to her friend, Ellen Nussey. Lutz claims that 'Charlotte courts Ellen, as if they were on their way to becoming lovers, using the kind of language a Victorian man would use in wooing a woman' (149). While this may have been acceptable in the Victorian era, where women were encouraged to form intimate female friendships, the frequency of the letters (every week with '340 recovered') speaks of a romantic passion (125). Charlotte took pains not only to compose compelling and amusing letters, but to produce elegant penmanship, illustrations, and all the trappings of postage at that time: stamps, sealing wax, small gifts of socks or tresses or pressed flowers and motto wafers. Letters as tokens of attachment, or hope for attachment, appear in Charlotte's *Shirley* (1849) and in *Villette*, when Lucy Snowe is so thrilled to receive letters from Dr. John Graham Bretton that she cannot open them immediately. The postal history Lutz delivers is equally engaging for those readers unaware of the practices previous to the Reform of 1840, which introduced the much-needed "country-wide penny post" (133).

<8>'The Alchemy of Desks' gives another compelling account of places where women kept their private and significant objects. Whereas workboxes held sewing items, portable writing desks held creative secrets (along with ink, paper, and metal nibs). In the Brontë household these desks were often locked. Emily even carried her key on her person. This was perhaps less paranoid than practical, as Charlotte did peek inside Emily's desk to discover her hidden poetry. Lutz proposes that this violation eventually led to the publication of their poetry volume under the androgynous pseudonyms of Currer, Ellis, and Acton. The act of prying into desks can be found both in *Villette*, where Madame Beck rifles through Lucy's possessions, and in Anne's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), where an abusive husband steals the keys to his wife's desk.

<9>Chapter Seven, 'Death Made Material,' leads with a photograph of 'the amethyst bracelet... made from the entwined hair of Emily and Anne [that] is positively ghost-ridden' (186). Losses riddle this chapter, leaving Charlotte the sole survivor of the Brontë legacy. It starts with the death of Branwell, followed by Emily, and then Anne less than a year later. Clips from each sibling's hair were preserved in lockets, rings, and brooches — common Victorian 'death souvenirs' (210). Lutz claims that there are 'fifty curls or hairwork associated with the family' (201).

<10>In 'Memory Albums' Lutz explores the Brontës as 'fern lovers, beating the fern cultists by more than a decade' (215). 'Skeletonized' or 'bleached to make mourning arrangements' (216), fern collecting was a popular activity, mainly for women, who would fill albums with their sylvan relics of maidenhair and fiddlehead, along with souvenirs, verses, and silhouettes. Lutz notes that after Charlotte's marriage to Arthur Bell Nicholls, she 'gathered and pressed ferns in an album she kept when she honeymooned in Ireland' (220). Lutz then relates ferns to eroticism, specifically the type that occurs between fictional Jane and Rochester at Ferndean during the early days of their marriage.

<11>The final chapter 'Migrant Relics' investigates the origins and present-day fascination with Brontë memorabilia. From Charlotte's wedding veil, tea apron, letters, and manuscripts, to the formation of the Brontë Society in 1893, the sisters were soon considered 'secular saints; the things they may have touched bring their persona; magic closer' (253). Indeed the magic is made manifest in Lutz's *The Brontë Cabinet*, creating another valuable relic to add to the treasure chest of Brontë collectibles.