

**Our Brother's Keepers:  
On Writing and Caretaking in the Brontë Household:  
Review of *To Walk Invisible: The Brontë Sisters***

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***To Walk Invisible: The Brontë Sisters***

Writer & Director, Sally Wainwright

BBC Wales, 2016 (TV film)

Universal Pictures 2017 (DVD)

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In Sally Wainwright's *To Walk Invisible*, a two-part series aired on BBC and PBS in 2016, there are no rasping coughs concealed under handkerchiefs, no flashbacks to Cowen Bridge School, no grief over the loss of a sister; instead, there is baking bread, invigorating walks on the moor, and, most importantly, writing. Wainwright dramatises three prolific years in the lives of Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë when they composed their first joint volume of poetry and their first sole-authored novels: *The Professor*, rejected and abandoned for *Jane Eyre* (1847), *Wuthering Heights* (1847), and *Agnes Grey* (1847), respectively. The young women are shown writing in the parlour surrounded by tidy yet threadbare furniture, at the kitchen table covered in turnips and teacups, composing out loud on the way to town for more paper, or while resting in the flowering heather. For Charlotte, played with a combination of reserve and deep emotion by Finn Atkins, to "walk invisible" refers to their choice to publish under the pseudonyms Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell, but in Wainwright's production, it also refers to invisibility in the home, as the sisters quietly take care of their aging and nearly-blind father, Reverend Patrick Brontë (Jonathan Price), and deal with the alcoholism and deteriorating mental illness of their brother, Branwell (Adam Nogaitis). In contrast, Wainwright, who also created the BBC serials *Happy Valley* (2014–) and *Last Tango in Halifax*

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(2012–), depicts Branwell as anything but invisible, making a disreputable spectacle of himself in nearly every scene.

*To Walk Invisible* begins with the four Brontë children each wearing fiery halos symbolising their creative passion. They race to a box of toy soldiers with Charlotte's poem 'Retrospection' (1835) recited in voice-over narration. A young carrot-topped and heavily-freckled Branwell takes one of the wooden figures, lifts it to the sky, and declares, "One day you shall be kings" (Wainwright 2016). The choice to ground the miniseries in the creative play of their childhood, as well as their early fictional collaboration, is a compelling interpretation of the Brontës. As children, the Brontës often composed their juvenilia together. Lucasta Miller describes their "boisterous imaginative games" with toy soldiers – Emily and Anne creating the world of Gondol, Branwell and Charlotte creating Glass Town (Miller 2001: 4-6). However, this creative alliance dissolves with age as Branwell branches off on his own, eventually spiralling deeper and deeper into addiction. Throughout *To Walk Invisible*, Branwell consistently serves as a foil to his astounding sisters. He is the self-destructive, narcissistic, drug-addicted male artist to their dedicated, uncomplaining, and self-possessed (if somewhat co-dependent) female artists. However, he does serve as creative inspiration for several of the sisters' flawed male characters, most obviously for Arthur Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), since Anne is shown as torn and deeply conflicted about using her brother's real life pain for her fiction.

Wainwright cuts immediately from the Brontës' childhood games to a scene where the grown-up sisters are dealing with Branwell once he returns home in disgrace, dismissed as a tutor after having an affair with his employer's wife, Lydia Robinson. Anne, who was also a governess in the Robinson household, had already left her position there earlier on account of the scandal. As Branwell rages and slams a chair around the dining room, he defends his behaviour by claiming, "She was lonely" (Wainwright 2016). During the entire outburst, Charlotte silently seethes. She is tight-lipped and furious. Of all the sisters, Charlotte is portrayed as the least sympathetic to her brother's plight, perhaps because she has also been romantically interested, if not actively involved, with a married man, Constantin Heger. However, unlike her brother, she works privately to overcome her heartbreak.

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To emphasise this difference in character and conduct between the siblings, and also between genders, the next scene cuts once again to their childhood: as the young Branwell and Charlotte battle on the stairs with wooden swords, a thunderstorm raging outside. Anne and Emily bang pots, adding to the cacophony, so that it becomes nearly impossible to hear what they are saying. However, once deciphered, the conversation is anything but childish – Charlotte and Branwell are having the argument they wanted to have as adults in the previous scene. The young Charlotte, wielding her toy sword, finally concludes, “Under different circumstances we would make very stimulating company for each other”, to which the young Branwell responds, “I despise everything you stand for” (Wainwright 2016). This argument – out of the mouths of babes – maintains the tone of familial strain throughout the production, as the Brontë sisters’ struggle with feelings of sympathy, revulsion, resentment and anger towards Branwell, who drags the family down financially and emotionally. Currently, in neo-Victorian biofiction, there seems to be an emphasis on childhood or young adulthood, with depictions of Queen Victoria in *The Young Victoria* (2009) and *Victoria* (2017) proving good examples. While this may be an effort to attract younger viewers, it also serves to reveal dysfunctional family dynamics and the ‘nurture’ (or lack thereof) that would shape these historical subjects’ later personalities.

Whereas Branwell’s fire burns him alive, the sisters’ fire is one of abundant creativity and ambition, with Charlotte igniting a desire to “walk invisible” in the publishing world in order to find an audience and to support the struggling family financially. The constant juxtaposition of Branwell’s self-inflicted failure with his sisters’ quiet and steady success brings to light not simply the demanding expectations placed on eldest and only sons in the mid-Victorian era, but also the limitations of single women who could not rely on men to support them economically. For Emily, played by a moody yet compassionate Chloe Pirrie, and Anne, played by a soft-spoken Charlie Murphy, the incentive to publish is almost entirely practical. As Emily tromps through the heath, Anne manages to keep up with more delicate strides, and the sisters wonder what will become of them once their father and the parsonage are gone. Neither Emily nor Anne believe Branwell will prove a reliable resource. Anne asks, “Are we nothing to him? Does he even see us?” (Wainwright 2016). Once again, their invisibility has less to do with the publishing industry than the domestic and social sphere.

Still, Charlotte receives helpful information from a weeping and drunken Branwell when she discreetly enters his bedroom at Haworth, advising him to “exercise some restraint” (Wainwright 2016). Although he dismisses her advice, she takes his advice about writing: “Novels, that’s where the money is,” he slurs; Charlotte’s stern expression is quickly replaced by a contemplative one, and she mumbles to herself, “You’d need a good story for a novel” (Wainwright 2016). Thus the seed is planted. She then works to convince her sisters to publish a collection of poetry, followed by a novel each. Emily is the most resistant to the plan, refusing to share her writing with anyone. As a result, Charlotte violates her sister’s privacy, searching Emily’s room for the hidden verses. The attention to detail from the mid-Victorian era becomes apparent as Charlotte rifles through objects in her sister’s room. According to Deborah Lutz, the Brontës ‘layered’ items they wished to keep private: “The sisters’ predilection for hiddenness was shared during this time. Victorians [...] not only relished the practice of keeping things boxed up but also had a penchant for putting these boxes into other ones” (Lutz 2015: 162). The use of such authentic means of concealment in terms of the time period adds to the effect on viewers, who are made aware of the severe trespass Charlotte has committed against her sister, even with the best intentions.

Wainwright’s historical accuracy is accompanied with an evident appreciation of the Brontës’ oeuvre. In an interview, she admits her deep admiration of Emily’s poetry: “As an adult, I’ve been much more engaged by Emily’s poetry. I’ve never particularly got on with Charlotte’s work, although she is very clever, obviously” (Wainwright qtd. in Edalatur 2017). This engagement with Emily’s poetry in particular manifests in a sequence when Charlotte reads Emily’s ‘The Prisoner’ (1846) and we watch Emily make her way with her big dog, Keeper, across the stark Yorkshire landscape to stand alone on a cliff, the camera circling her, emotional intensity rising with the music. However, Emily’s reaction to Charlotte’s invasion shows that Branwell is not alone in his temper. She aggressively berates her sister, who tells her how “exceptional” her poetry is (Wainwright 2016), only to be smacked in the forehead twice by an indignant Emily.

Emily and Charlotte’s battle is a rare scene that does not mention or feature Branwell. For most of *To Walk Invisible*, the process of composition, submission, rejection, publication, critical reaction, and eventual success continually revolves around the sisters discussing or handling Branwell’s

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latest fall from grace. The scenes with Charlotte, Emily, and Anne are led or followed by scenes featuring their rapidly crumbling brother. In one instance, a “stupefied” Branwell mocks their proof pages as an infuriated Charlotte tears them away with ink-stained fingers (Wainwright 2016). In a later scene, the sisters discuss their next submission prospect, before Branwell is shown sprawled across his bed, a somewhat tragically humorous twist on Henry Fuseli’s ‘The Nightmare’ (1781) where Branwell is the dreaming woman and the incubus his insatiable addiction. Still later, the sisters scribble their stories as Branwell scribbles a letter to a friend, asking for drinking money while sitting on a chamber pot. In another scene, the sisters walk to church, hymn books in hand, capes and bonnets on, as Branwell stumbles home across the frosted moor only to collapse in his backyard, his entire family, once again, running to his aid. The disparity is illustrated in the siblings’ appearance as well. Charlotte’s neatly parted hair and clean lace-trimmed collars parallel Branwell’s unruly hair and dirty shirttails that are always untucked, his socks in desperate need of darning. Although the sisters are shown scrubbing Branwell’s soiled room after a night of his excess, they are not responsible for his appearance outside the home or even in the home as they would have to literally wrestle the shirt off his back in order to launder it. Once again, Branwell refuses to be part of the domestic sphere to his own detriment, as it would improve both his appearance and hygiene.

Branwell’s failure as a poet and artist is contrasted not only with his sisters’ success but also the success of other artists, namely his friend Joseph Bentley Leyland, whom he visits when Leyland is in the process of chiselling a massive and majestic horse’s head from marble. Branwell takes Leyland out for a pint only to whine about his family: “I only live there because I’m such a fucking pauper” (Wainwright 2016). Branwell’s familial status as black sheep leads to scenes of extreme confrontation and reaction. When Branwell is carried home after a nervous breakdown, he hurls insults and curses at the entire household. Anne immediately goes to comfort her father, and Emily moves to help Arthur Bell Nicholls lift Branwell up the stairs. Only Charlotte does not react. She stares coldly, unpitying of his pathetic state. In the following sequence, one of her letters is read in voice over where she describes the situation with Branwell as “intolerable” (Wainwright 2016). In the role of eldest daughter, working to become the breadwinner for the family, taking her father to Manchester for eye surgery,

and being responsible for her family and her art, Charlotte rather than her brother is clearly the heir, regardless of gender. This portrayal of strong women fits perfectly with Wainwright's previous work where female cops take down killers, independent women raise their own children, and sisterhood often means relying on fellow women for support. Meanwhile, Branwell's weakness is juxtaposed with Charlotte's strength, not only in action but in emotion as well. If Branwell is not a prolific writer or artist, he is at least a prolific crier. Branwell's tears far exceed his sisters' combined tears or even their combined word count. Branwell weeps as he reads his poem, 'Real Rest' (1845), in a pub. He weeps in his room at Haworth. He sobs uncontrollably when told that Mrs. Robinson, now widowed, does not want him back. For Branwell, everything he is and does is exterior, while his sisters work inwardly, invisibly, and prolifically. Drama and depression flood his life like spilled ink so that there is nothing left for the page.

Relationships in *To Walk Invisible* continue to be examined in terms of expectations between father/son and father/daughters. Patrick Branwell is depicted as a kind but ineffectual father, who is a perpetual enabler and occasional victim of his debauched and violent son. He claims, "I think with kindness and understanding and prayer we might still be able, in spite of his naiveté and his nonsense, be able to get him back on a proper path" (Wainwright 2016). Charlotte is, once again, silent and dry-eyed on the subject. However, Reverend Brontë's disappointment and sorrow over his son's addiction is tempered by his pride in his daughters' accomplishments. The scene when the sisters finally reveal their secret success to their father is filled with genuine sentiment, the quiet excitement bubbling over as critical responses are read out loud, and the Reverend Brontë's pride is balanced with relief that his daughters have found some financial stability. Branwell, on the other hand, simply wants money from his father, and when begging fails to work, he bullies him, sometimes even becoming physical. This contrast is perhaps most explicitly revealed when the sisters need fifty pounds to publish their writing and immediately a magistrate arrives at the door, demanding Branwell repay a debt in Halifax, or be taken to debtor's prison.

Even the most triumphant scene in *To Walk Invisible*, when Charlotte and Anne reveal their identities in Smith, Elder, and Co., their London publishing house, with *Jane Eyre* prominently on display, is marred by spliced shots of Emily taking care of Branwell back at Haworth. When

he vomits into a container held by Emily, his blood splashes across her face. The assumption that she contracts tuberculosis from her brother is later confirmed by information displayed before the credits at the end, claiming that Emily's death was "triggered by a chill caught at Branwell's funeral" (Wainwright 2016). However, as with the scene where Reverend Brontë expresses his pride in his daughters, the effusive and sincere excitement of the publisher George Smith (Luke Newberry) upon meeting the authors of *Jane Eyre* and *Agnes Grey* still radiates an electric quality. And those fans and/or scholars, who have studied Charlotte Brontë's life after this meeting, know what awaits her when Smith beams, "Literary London is waiting for you!" (Wainwright 2016). In *A Fiery Heart* (2016), Claire Harman recreates Charlotte's trip to London in the summer of 1850 when she dines with William Makepeace Thackeray and visits a phrenologist with George Smith, as all of "literary London" are chafing to meet "Currer Bell" (Harman 2016: 334). In *To Walk Invisible*, Wainwright hints at this future without letting Charlotte's literary success pull viewers away from the immediate time frame being presented. Moreover, Wainwright likely does not want this adaptation to be all about Charlotte, who has already received much attention, but about all three sisters equally, and also about their collaborative creativity within the 'invisibility' of the domestic sphere.

The most visually powerful scene in *To Walk Invisible* occurs on the moor when Ellen Nussey (Gracie Kelly) visits the Brontës. As the four women step through thick gorse, they look up into the sky to see three suns, a particularly rare atmospheric occurrence, often called a 'sun dog'. The sisters shade their eyes and gaze out at the fiery haloes on each side of the sun, and Ellen remarks, "It's you three" (Wainwright 2016). The scene then shifts to childhood once more. The sisters, still wearing their fiery haloes, sit at a table. They push a closed box of toys to young Branwell, who does not sit with them at the table and who no longer wears a halo. "You can go now," they tell him (Wainwright 2016). Even in death, Branwell does not come across as dignified. His jaw is tied shut, blood spots mark his pillow, and the girls must wash his body. Yet there is a tragic note in that he was not included in his sisters' creative trinity. It was a conscious and perhaps wise decision for the sisters to exclude him, but the sense of having been so close to greatness yet never a part of it, finally makes him sympathetic. Because who among us can achieve the quality and quantity of their creative output?

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After Branwell's death, the adaptation shifts to the Brontë's very visible legacy in modern-day Haworth. The Brontë mugs, pens, and t-shirts sold at the museum gift shop are as much a part of their heritage now as the books they composed so modestly. Wainwright's choice to bring the Brontë biography into the present via the tourism industry is not necessarily in keeping aesthetically with the rest of the production, but it does underline the lasting quality of their writing, while also commenting on the commercialisation of their writing, and perhaps neo-Victorianism in general. In the end, *To Walk Invisible* is all about process, not product, as the Brontë sisters devotedly practice their craft despite distraction, opting for hard work and usefulness over sloth, choosing dependence and invisibility over fame.

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