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diretta da Anna Enrichetta Soccio

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METAMORFOSI VITTORIANE

*Riscritture, riedizioni, traduzioni,
transcodificazioni*

a cura di
Renzo D'Agnillo e Anna Enrichetta Soccio

Solfanelli

A VISIT TO THE BRONTË PARSONAGE:
METAMORPHOSES OF CHARLOTTE BRONTË
IN MICHÈLE ROBERTS' *THE MISTRESSCLASS*

Claudia Capancioni

In 1904, Virginia Woolf, then still Stephen and an apprentice journalist, undertook a literary pilgrimage that, by the Edwardian era, had ensured a sustainable legacy for the Brontë sisters: she visited Haworth to pay homage to “Emily, and Charlotte above all”¹. In “Haworth, November, 1904”², Woolf maintains a literary pilgrimage “is legitimate when the house of a great writer or the country in which it is set adds to our understanding of his books. This justification you have for a pilgrimage to the home and country of Charlotte Brontë and her sisters”³. A hundred years later, Michèle Roberts, a British writer whose work has been motivated by the Brontë sisters and Woolf, pays them homage in *The Mistressclass* (2003), a novel that reinvents the parsonage at Haworth in 1855 to resurrect Charlotte Brontë. This novel is the focus of this essay that investigates Roberts’s metamorphosis of the Victorian writer.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Brontë Society, formed in 1893, and the first Brontë museum⁴, which was opened in Haworth’s Yorkshire Penny Bank in 1895, reiterated a dual narrative, which Elizabeth Gaskell had created

¹ Andrew McNeillie (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, 1904-1914*, vol. 1, London, The Hogarth Press, 1986, p. 8.

² “Haworth, November, 1904” appeared in the Anglo-Catholic newspaper the *Guardian*, on 21st December 1904. It was her second publication. See McNeillie, *op. cit.*

³ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

⁴ The parsonage was donated to the Brontë Society in 1927 and was opened as a museum the year after. See Nicola J. Watson, *The Literary Tourist*, Basingstoke, Hampshire, Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, pp. 106-127.

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in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), depicting Charlotte Brontë simultaneously as a writer stimulated by the events of her life and a dutiful, self-sacrificing daughter at the parsonage in Haworth, a “wild Yorkshire village”⁵. In “Haworth, November, 1904”, a twenty-two-year-old Woolf places the Brontës among the great writers but also ponders on the effects of literary tourism on a woman writer, observing how through “the little personal relics, the dresses, the shoes of the dead woman [...] Charlotte Brontë the woman comes to life, and one forgets the chiefly memorable fact that she was a great writer”⁶. Woolf perceives what Lucasta Miller eloquently argues are the “two distinctive and conflicting myths”⁷ originating from the Victorian writer: “the positive myth of female self-creation embodied in her autobiographical heroines, Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe”, and the myth of “a quiet and trembling creature, reared in total seclusion, a martyr to duty and a model of Victorian femininity”⁸. Woolf herself never forgot that Charlotte Brontë was a great writer: she celebrated her legacy as a literary foremother in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938). In her fiction she adapted the “power of vision”⁹ of Brontë’s protagonist Jane Eyre, who “wished to behold” what she “believed in”¹⁰, through characters such as Lily Briscoe, who concludes *To the Lighthouse* (1927) affirming she has “had her vision”¹¹.

At a later date, as she returns to the literary pilgrimage as a means to stimulate and increase our understanding of great writers in “Great Men’s Houses” (1932), Woolf describes listening to the “voice” of the London house of Thomas Carlyle recounting a domestic fight “against dirt and cold for cleanliness and warmth” the mistress of the house and the maid “fought”¹². In “Haworth, November, 1904”, Woolf “picture[s] the slight figure

⁵ Elizabeth Gaskell, *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*, Chalford Stroud, Gloucestershire, Amberley, 2009, p. 123.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁷ Lucasta Miller, *The Brontë Myth*, London, Vintage, 2002, p. 2.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, London, Penguin Book, 1994, p. 110.

¹⁰ Brontë, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

¹¹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse*, London, Penguin Books, 2000, p. 226.

¹² Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene: Six Essays on London Life*, New York, HarperCollins, 1975, pp. 32-33.

of Charlotte trotting along the streets in her thin mantle, hustled into the gutter by more burly passers-by”¹³. She evokes Brontë shopping in Keighley and her heroine Lucy Snowe in the dangerous streets of the fictional Belgian town of Labassecour. But, instead of revealing the parsonage’s voice, she states that, if she were the “incumbent” of the Brontë parsonage, she “should often feel inclined to exorcise the three famous ghosts”¹⁴. In *The Mistressclass*, Roberts invokes the famous ghosts of the Brontë parsonage and reimagines the life of Charlotte Brontë to give her a voice as the writer and the mistress at the parsonage. In this novel the parsonage is “a house in which unspoken and unwritten words fly about trapped like moths at night attracted by lit lamps, rattling and bumping in the small rooms, [Charlotte’s] cramped heart, blundering at mirrors, trying to find a way out again”¹⁵. Roberts’s Charlotte listens to them and finds a means to free them by writing them down in letters she does not post, before she can return to writing fiction.

The Mistressclass simultaneously tackles Brontë’s two inconsistent myths through two intertwined narrative strands that feed off each other but are presented distinctly in alternative parts: a neo-Victorian epistolary narrative signed by Charlotte and a third-person narrative telling the story of two sisters in their fifties, Catherine and Vinny, their love for the same man, Adam, and for literature, set in the early twenty-first century. These two narratives share a retrospective, reflective perspective that is reminiscent of *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Villette* (1853). This essay studies how Roberts pursues the ‘power of vision’ to reclaim the unreliability of auto/biographical writing and affirm the alternative, diverse, multiple visions of the past fiction provides. To use Lorna Sage’s words, “in reinscribing the boundaries of fiction”¹⁶, Roberts demonstrates “its power to define an invented place”¹⁷. In *The Mistressclass*,

¹³ McNeillie, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8. Woolf discussed this topic also in “Literary Geography” (1905).

¹⁵ Michèle Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, London, Little, Brown, 2003, p. 8.

¹⁶ Lorna Sage, *Women in the House of Fiction: Post-war Novelists*, London, Macmillan, 1992, p. x.

¹⁷ *Ibidem.*

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I suggest, Roberts conceives a literary class that unravels the conflicting dichotomy between a woman's imaginative power and her domestic life by granting Charlotte Brontë the same power of vision her heroines Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe possess. Following in Woolf's steps, I argue, Roberts imagines a literary, textual pilgrimage to reinvent the Brontë parsonage as a space of female self-realisation. In *The Mistressclass*, the Victorian past and the present day coexist so that both protagonists, Charlotte and Vinny, have their vision. Before examining Brontë's metamorphoses through these two characters, this essay expands on the significance of the Brontës' legacy in Roberts's work.

Haunting Villette

The legacy of the Brontë sisters can be traced throughout Robert's literary career, and yet recent studies such as *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* (2017) and the second edition of Patsy Stoneman's seminal *Brontë Transformations: The Cultural Dissemination of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (2018) do not examine how Roberts's *The Mistressclass* contributes to the Brontë myth. This novel's fusion of literary genres and multiple layers of intertextual connections to the Brontës' and Woolf's *oeuvre*, as well as Roberts's own, may be the reason why it does not lend itself to easy categorisation. Stoneman's text focuses on transformations of *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* in specific. Among the derivatives of *Wuthering Heights*, it lists Roberts's short story, "Blathering Frights: A Novel in Three Chapters", whose protagonist Cathy affirms she is a "reincarnation of Emily Brontë"¹⁸. However, "Fluency", published in the same collection, *Playing Sardines* (2001), does not make it into the selective list, "*Jane Eyre* derivatives 1995-2017", under the category for incidental references, though Roberts's protagonist, Pauline, thinks she "sounds just like Charlotte Brontë berating her plain heroines"¹⁹ Jane Eyre and Lucy Snowe. This short story anticipates some of the narrative elements Roberts expanded on, two years later,

¹⁸ Michèle Roberts, *Playing Sardines*, London, Virago, 2001, p.114.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

in *The Mistressclass*. The absence of any of Roberts's contributions to Brontë's afterlives is noticeable in the appendix of Brontë's cultural legacy between 1848 and 2016 included in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*²⁰, given that Emma Liggins's contribution to this volume, acknowledges *The Mistressclass* as a novel that questions, "the public image of Charlotte as a restrained spinster"²¹.

Themes that are present in *The Mistressclass* already appear in Roberts's "At Haworth", a poem published in 1991, which imagines the parsonage as "the Father's house" and a grieving Charlotte who "could not forget/ the dying Emily"²² who "appears to [her] / in sickness and suffering"²³. In her 1994 lecture "The Place of the Imagination", Roberts draws on the biographical interpretation of Jane Eyre's "longing to be seen as equal to the man she loves" through "Charlotte Brontë's unrequired love for her professor in Brussels, Monsieur Héger"²⁴ but with an opposing scope to the one Roberts develops in *The Mistressclass*. In her lecture, she uses it as evidence that "we do not need to know the biographical facts of a writer's life to understanding her work"²⁵. In "A Note on *Jane Eyre* as a Vampire Novel", she claims *Jane Eyre* is "perhaps [her] favourite novel"²⁶, but her writing appears haunted more by *Villette*, a novel that incorporates French in the English language without translation: a meaningful feature for Roberts, who celebrates her Anglo-French bilingual identity in her own writing. The title of the novel she published after *The Mistressclass*, *Reader I Married Him* (2004), is a quotation from *Jane Eyre*, but the

²⁰ Kimberley Braxton, "Appendix: Charlotte Brontë's Cultural Legacy, 1848-2016", in *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives*, ed. Amber K. Regis and Deborah Wynne, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, pp. 280-293.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 171.

²² Michèle Roberts, *Psyche and the Hurricane: Poems 1986-1990*, London, Methuen, 1991, p. 91, ll. 7-8.

²³ *Ibidem*, ll. 23-24.

²⁴ Michèle Roberts, *Food, Sex, and God: On Inspiration and Writing*, London, Virago, 1998, p. 18.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

²⁷ Michèle Roberts, *Reader, I Married Him*, London, Virago, 2004: p. 213.

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protagonist, Aurora, compares herself to Lucy Snowe²⁷, who has a vision of herself as “a rising character”²⁸ evolving into the person she wants to be, beyond a Victorian model that envisages her only as a dutiful daughter or wife.

In *The Mistressclass*, the intertextual significance of the last novel Brontë published is central and perceptible starting with the title. *Villette* tells the story of a schoolteacher through her first-person narrative, but this novel also reworks material Brontë firstly experimented with the initial title of “The Master”²⁹, which was revised and edited by her husband, the Reverend Arthur Bell Nicholls (1819-1906), and published posthumously under the title, *The Professor*. This is the story of William Crimsworth, who also succeeds in becoming a teacher, from the protagonist’s perspective. Both *Villette* and *The Professor* are informed by Brontë’s time in Brussels. Furthermore, *The Mistressclass* opens with a letter signed by Charlotte and addressed to “dear master”³⁰ evoking the letters the Victorian writer wrote to Constantin Héger (1809-1896), who taught literature at the school where Brontë studied in 1842 and returned as a teacher in 1843, in Brussels. Brontë addressed him as *Monsieur* and identified him as “my literature master – the only master I ever had”³¹. In *The Mistressclass*, the master is identified as Héger and, resembling Brontë’s real correspondence, he is a silent addressee who has no lesson to impart.

Roberts’s deep familiarity with Brontë’s life and fictional writing, and with biographical studies which revise Gaskell’s portrait of the Victorian author, such as Lyndall Gordon’s *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life* (1994) and Juliet Barker’s *The Brontës* (1994) and *The Brontës: A Life in Letters* (1997), informs the text that fluently weaves historical persons and facts with fictional transformations. Roberts’s novel shows awareness, first of all, of the four letters Brontë wrote between July 1844 and November 1845, which were donated to the

²⁸ Charlotte Brontë, *Villette*, Ware, Hertfordshire, Wordsworth Editions, 1999, p. 289.

²⁹ McNeillie, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

³⁰ Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, *cit.*, p.3.

³¹ Muriel Spark (ed.), *The Brontë Letters*, London, Macmillan, 1966, p. 115.

British Museum by Héger's children, Louise and Paul, in 1896. He had destroyed them but, it appears, his wife recovered and kept them. They were published in *The Times* on 29 July 1913, when they changed the characterisation of Brontë as a woman and a writer by suggesting biographical patterns of interpretations in her novels: for example, they associate Héger with *Jane Eyre*'s Mr Rochester, Paul Emanuel in *Villette*, and William Crimsworth in *The Professor*. Significantly for Roberts, Brontë's letters are in French; however, Roberts does not translate or adapt them but appropriates Brontë's epistolary voice to give life to an older and wiser Charlotte who decides to write to Héger again because she cannot write a novel. This time, she "shall never send"³² her letters. Roberts appears to agree with Gordon's interpretation that drafting *The Professor* and *Jane Eyre* between 1844 and 1846 was Brontë's "deepest response to [Héger]"³³ in so far as the letters in *The Mistressclass* stimulate Charlotte's imagination and enable her to emerge from her crisis. It is not a correspondence she is interested in but a means to meditate on the past in order to move forward.

At Haworth: Charlotte's Letters

In Roberts's fictional parsonage, Brontë did not die on 31 March 1855 but survived. She is Mrs. Nicholls and lives with her husband and father. She mourns the death of her daughter and is aware that she is in a critical phase of her life. Like Orpheus, she "pursued [her] daughter into the land of the dead. [She] sojourned there for some substantial time, wandering in the darkness, seeking her. Finally [she] decided to return. Back to the ashy world"³⁴. Having surfaced back to life, she writes to the person whose name she "planned"³⁵ to give to her daughter, Constantin Héger. Roberts is mindful that Héger had stopped responding to Brontë and thrown away her letters, so her Charlotte deals with this historical past at the start of the novel as she declares, "I told myself to obey you and never to write to

³² Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, cit., p. 6.

³³ Gordon Lyndall, *Charlotte Brontë: A Passionate Life*, London, Chatto & Windus, 1994, p. 96.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

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you again. Witness my weakness, then, that after this long silence I dare to address you once more”³⁶. This is a fierce Charlotte who will not be banned from writing but, on the contrary, composes nine letters. She will not be a “wretched hypocrite”³⁷ but will express her frustration caused by her marriage, her isolated life as wife and daughter, her grief for the loss of her daughter and her sister Emily, her impossibility to write another novel. She has no space in which to write because there “is no corner which is safe from”³⁸ her husband: the “whole of the parsonage is his domain”³⁹. It is writing that gives her a space, even though temporary and uncertain, in which she can remember her childhood and her sister and, in particular, Brussels, and her love for Héger. She also describes her dreams in which she imagines being with Héger and being imprisoned by Madame Héger. In one of them Madame Héger is transformed into “Madame Bluebeard”⁴⁰ who keeps the key to the room where Charlotte is entrapped and wants her to confess so “that she can punish [her] again”⁴¹. In this letter, Charlotte becomes “the madwoman”⁴² revealing her sympathy with *Jane Eyre*’s Bertha. In ‘Part Eleven’, in fact, some of the gothic scenes of Brontë’s novel, which is an intertextual archetype in both narrative strands, are reimagined by Charlotte, who sees herself as “that monster you hear racketing to and fro, locked up in the cellar, rattling the lock and crying to be let out”⁴³. Contrary to Bertha, however, she cannot “break in and bite, tear your flesh, sink her teeth into your neck”⁴⁴. Her “mouth [is] stuffed speechless with one of [her] own blank manuscripts”⁴⁵. As the monster, Charlotte cannot write successfully and satisfactorily; as the monster she cannot find support in a master. It is a fellow writer, Madame Sand, who

³⁶ Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, cit., p. 3.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 183-184.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 183.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

helps her appearing under a “lovely disguise: lady wolf dressed up as virtuous chatelaine”⁴⁶. Charlotte writes two letters in Nohant, where she is the guest of the French novelist George Sand, whom she calls by her first name, Aurore. In Sand’s château, she learns what it means to have a warm, “enormous”⁴⁷ room of one’s own, and the importance of nourishing food and conversation as she dines with Sand and Gustave Flaubert. Brontë discovered Sand’s novels in 1840⁴⁸; in *The Mistressclass*, Roberts creates an opportunity for Charlotte to transform a literary influence into what Woolf would define as a literary mother she can think through and learn. Her time with Sand is also a turning point for Charlotte. By wandering to France in her mind, she finds a way to return to “write another novel”⁴⁹. Sand saves her by supporting her in finding a space congenial to her writing.

In her final letter, Charlotte describes her “retreat for writing”⁵⁰, a new space of her own mapped out in the garden at the parsonage, where no-one can see her; it is a “temporary house”⁵¹ she made herself out of white sheets, which are “like very old paper, almost transparent, and the waving shadows of the ferns dance over them like writing”⁵². Like Lucy Snowe in the garden of Madame Beck’s *pensionnat*, she can find refuge and solitude outside, in the back garden, where she can be in touch with nature and free to write in the “study”⁵³ she made herself with bedlinen used on the bed she shared with Emily when they were children. Now she can see her addressee as a friend, not a master anymore. She reclaims a space to write that recalls Woolf’s demand for a room of one’s own for women in which to turn the power of vision into literature. In closing this novel, however this letter ends without a signature. This emphasises the openness of the novel’s ending and questions

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 227.

⁴⁸ See Miller, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, cit., p. 293.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

⁵¹ *Ibidem*, p. 295.

⁵² *Ibidem*.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 293.

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the identity of the letter-writer. For reasons of consistency, I have referred to the letter-writer throughout as Charlotte but only the first five and then the seventh of nine letters include a signature. The absence of Charlotte's name casts doubts after Roberts is initially identified as the writer who resurrects Charlotte. The homogeneity of the letters' themes and language sustain this first impression; however, layers of interpretations are added by the novel's present-day narrative that casts two female writers. The two sisters, Catherine and Vinny, also have an excellent knowledge of Brontë's work. Vinny is a poet and Catherine is a teacher who writes sado-masochistic novellas that represent a "container for her secret feelings"⁵⁴. Like Roberts's Charlotte, Vinny loves a married man, travels to France, and, in the last scene of the third-person narrative, she is depicted in a garden "with her hands folded over the novel and the exercise book in her lap"⁵⁵. Among the multiple features that question the authorship of the epistolary historiographic metanarrative, I examine those leading to Vinny because they are more convincing and worthwhile investigating, starting with Vinny's familiarity with and understanding of Brontë's letters.

In London: Vinny's 'solo pilgrimage'

In *The Mistressclass*, the significance of Brontë's letters in the Brontëan myth is explained by Vinny to Adam when she suggests he should not think, "she's merely a woman novelist [...]. But [he] should read her"⁵⁶. During this conversation she talks about Brontë's "juvenilia's mad Gothic stuff, really wild and all over the place" and "her learning to write with Monsieur Heger"⁵⁷. Her account refers to a common interpretation of Brontë's relationship to Héger and how it was transmitted: "That's how we know how desperately Charlotte was in love. She broke her heart over Monsieur Heger and as a result was inspired to write her masterpiece"⁵⁸. Vinny also underlines a

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 66.

⁵⁷ *Ibidem*. In Roberts's text Héger is spelt without the acute accent.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

parallel between her identity as a writer and the Victorian author: she believes her inspiration has come from her broken heart. In this scene, set at her sister's housewarming, Vinny is reminded that Adam, her sister's husband, was her own 'Monsieur Héger': the man she loved and with whom she shared her writing⁵⁹. She also associates Brontë's love story to one untitled 'masterpiece', which, the contemporary narrative suggests, is *Jane Eyre*. Vinny knows it "almost by heart"⁶⁰ and keeps rereading it in difficult times because it "comfort[s] her [that] Jane was so fierce"⁶¹. In particular, Vinny read it in 1974, after her sister's betrayal, which led her to break with her sister, end her pregnancy, in 1974, and become a writer. *Jane Eyre* plays an important role in both sisters' stories: the older sister, Catherine teaches *Jane Eyre* together with Jean Rhys' postcolonial prequel *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), whose impact on the reading of Brontë's novel is comparable to the publication of her letters to Héger. But Catherine does not share her writing with her husband: instead, she keeps it secret. Moreover, Catherine is the character that interweaves references to Woolf's *Orlando* and *Mrs Dalloway*. In her last scene, for example, walking through the busy streets of London, as she grieves the end of her marriage with Adam, Catherine realises that "she had to plunge in and be with all the others [people in the past who walked down the same streets], and love them"⁶²; that "grief delivered you back into the world"⁶³. Like Clarissa Dalloway, she buys flowers for her party and, as the quotation shows, she reassesses her present by examining her past.

For Vinny, *Jane Eyre* is "alive, made of the same stuff as herself"⁶⁴. She perceives it intersecting with her own life and giving her ways of interpreting the world anew. At the start of Part Four, she reads a copy of the novel her mother gave to her "forty years before"⁶⁵ and compares its narrative to a sea that

⁵⁹ Adam is a novelist who has difficulties with writing.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 250-251.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

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she can swim in trusting the current to “carry [her] where it would”⁶⁶; to “[i]nhabiting a new country”⁶⁷. In *Jane Eyre*, she “vanished; dissolved”⁶⁸; “no longer existed”⁶⁹. Roberts is influenced by French Feminisms, in particular H el ene Cioux’s call to the woman to “write her self”⁷⁰; to “write about women and bring women to writing”⁷¹; to “put herself into the text – as in the world and into history – by her own movement”⁷². The images describing Vinny’s pleasure in reading as “transformative like an act of magic”⁷³ through her favourite novel recall the concept of woman’s pleasure as *jouissance* and notions of women’s creative power developed by French feminists which explore ways to understand and represent women’s physical, psychological and spiritual experiences by inventing a new, “impregnable language”⁷⁴ that can permeate through imposed taxonomies, conventions, and norms. Prose gives Vinny pleasure and books satisfy her as if they were “[m]agic bread and wine, like Holy Communion”⁷⁵. Educated by Catholic nuns, she compares her reading to a spiritual union of body and mind capable of renewal. To her, literature is “heaven”⁷⁶. Most significantly, she defines reading as a “work of resurrection”⁷⁷, making apparent the role readers too have in *The Mistressclass* in bringing Bront e back to life. Language, Vinny suggests, is a means of resurrection because it “triumphs over”⁷⁸ death. In language Vinny sees “the skein that binds the generations”⁷⁹ of which she is keen to be “an agent”⁸⁰, as she maps the presence

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁶⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁷⁰ H el ene Cioux, “The Laugh of the Medusa”, in *New French Feminisms: An Anthology*, ed. Elaine Marks and Isabelle de Courtivron, New York and London, The Harvester Press, 1981, p. 245

⁷¹ *Ibidem*.

⁷² *Ibidem*.

⁷³ Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, cit., p. 50.

⁷⁴ Cioux, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁷⁵ Roberts, *The Mistressclass*, cit., p. 53.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

of dead writers in London “to be connected with them”⁸¹, and to reclaim their past into the present. “Dead people are [her] companions”⁸² and she walks the streets of London to map where dead writers stayed. She inscribes London’s pavements with quotations, poems and biographical details written in chalk to celebrate their writing. Her map does not locate those writers’ houses that have been long valued and visited, but she is on a “solo pilgrimage to other, unmarked shrines”⁸³, the dwellings of less celebrated women writers, who lived in poor rented accommodations, such as Jean Rhys, that are not identified by blue plaques. On the streets of London, she reclaims women writers’ contribution to literature, their presence, their voice, and their stories. Among them there is also Charlotte Brontë who, in London, visited her publisher three times, met William Thackeray, and sat for a portrait. Vinny’s mapping is temporary because the rain can easily remove it, but it is all the more important because, with the chinks in her pockets, she leaves inscriptions that keep on changing the urban landscape with the writing and stories she wants to share.

At the house-warming party, when Vinny talks about Brontë’s letters with Adam, she admits that she “sometimes wonder[s], [...]: what would have happened if Charlotte hadn’t died in early pregnancy. If Monsieur Heger had somehow come back into her life. Perhaps they would have had an affair after all”⁸⁴. This is the subjunctive mode of possibility that inspires Roberts’s novel. In *The Mistressclass*, Charlotte does not have an affair, but reclaims her identity as a writer through the help of another woman writer who supports her in reawakening her “pleasure in others’ word-spinning”⁸⁵, in “com[ing] back to reality. Which is the world of imagination”⁸⁶. Like Vinny, Charlotte trusts the transformative power of reading and writing; she questions the arbitrary nature of language and

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

⁸² *Ibidem.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 231.

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therefore the fallibility of history and asks, “Who wrote my story and described the devoted daughter, good wife, hard-working teaching assistant, devout churchgoer? Who fitted me in?”⁸⁷ Charlotte claims “a true self” who is comfortable with the mutability, unreliability of being which, like Vinny, she sees reflected in the imagination. With Charlotte’s epistolary narrative, Vinny’s story also shares an open ending after she goes to France. On her sister’s request, she returns to *Les Deux Saintes*, the house in the country owned by Adam’s father, who recently passed away. Here in 1974, Adam arrived with Vinny as his girlfriend and left with Catherine, whom he later married. Vinny’s relationship with the house had not been pleasant from the start; she liked the garden where she could lose herself in nature and be “grass light earth [...] the hedge the water the trees she’s all of them she’s purest happiness”⁸⁸. Thirty years later, she remembers the girl she had been and her need for belonging and, on the front step looking into the garden, she has her vision:

she lounged on the front step, sipping a glass of Muscadet. This was her favourite place, she had discovered, half in and half out of the garden. You hovered, part of both. Able to enjoy both at the same time. The house braced her back and the garden opened before her⁸⁹.

In this case, there is no image of Vinny writing but, through her memories, she reconstructs what could be seen as a sad, difficult, traumatic summer of her youth into a story of choice, of sacrifices made to live “the writer’s life she’s aimed for when she was young”⁹⁰. In this symbolic image of Vinny sat both in the patriarchal house and in the garden of Eden, *The Mistressclass* celebrates the power of vision that transforms reality into fiction and fiction into reality through language. Both the present-day narrative and Charlotte’s correspondence conclude by suggesting ways in which to belong in the house of fiction

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 265.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 277.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 276.

by reclaiming and (re)inscribing one's life story. They assert the creative power of fiction as a dialogic intertextual interaction of reading, writing and imagination where the borders of autobiographical and fictional writing are permeable. They also demonstrate Roberts's debt to Charlotte Brontë as her literary foremother.

Roberts's *The Mistressclass* contributes to the Brontë myth with ingenious metamorphoses that expand our understanding of Charlotte Brontë's legacy in the twenty-first century. It questions the reliability of biographical writing by asserting the creative power of fiction as an atemporal space where the Victorian and the contemporary women writer coexist in an intergenerational literary dialogue. In envisaging an afterlife for Brontë at Haworth, Roberts blurs the boundaries between life and fictional writing and claims the heterogeneous, polyphonic form of the twenty-first-century novel as the house of fiction where the woman writer can live creatively. Susanne Gruss maintains, *The Mistressclass* "explore[s] and undermine[s] the construction of literary biography"⁹¹. Moreover, as this essay shows, it examines fictional writing as "a safe place, in which to let go of old certainties, let boundaries dissolve, experience the kind of chaos necessary for new life, new ideas"⁹². Roberts transforms the relationship between the present and the past to deconstruct dated concepts of history and literary canons and map a female literary genealogy that celebrates women's contribution to literature. Roberts pursues the potential of a literary pilgrimage through the writing of Charlotte Brontë, to claim stories of female self-realisation that are still powerful today.

⁹¹ Susanne Gruss, *The Pleasure of the Feminist Text: Reading Michèle Roberts and Angela Carter*, Amsterdam and New York, Rodopi, 2009, p. 266.

⁹² Roberts, *op. cit.*, 1998, p. 22.

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