

“Oh Drive Those Cruel Doubts Away”: The Scrupulous Conscience of Anne Brontë

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Figure 1. Marie-France Pisier as Charlotte and Isabelle Adjani as Emily in *Les soeurs Brontë* (1979).

Abstract

Published in the 1846 Brontë poetry collection, Anne Brontë's religious poetry explores the Christian conscience that references and departs from English devotional verse. Her poems express the Christian wrestling between doubt and assurance of faith. The poems document the historical tradition of scrupulosity, a condition recorded in Catholic religious literature before the development of 19th century psychology. The condition is characterized by sensitivity to sin and moral questions that consumes the Christian with thoughts of spiritual persecution and damnation. Modern psychology appropriated this older religious condition as a variant of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Complicating Anne's spiritual transformation is the English Church's transition from Calvinism to Methodism. Anne's poems reveal the possibility of a scrupulous conscience. The poems reflect psycho-religious tendencies within the young poet.

Definitions

Scrupulosity—clinicians classify the disorder as a psychological condition characterized by excessive, pathological guilt about moral or religious issues that impairs a client's mental and spiritual wellbeing. It is currently viewed as a form of obsessive-compulsive disorder.

Devotional Poetry—poetry composed for private or public worship that communicates the speaker's religious sentiments and experiences. The genre includes motifs and poetic devices from traditional hymns.

Calvinism—refers to the doctrines of reformer John Calvin (1509-1564) that emphasize predestination, the authority of the Scriptures, and man's depravity and inability to believe in God without His intervention.

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Introduction

Anne Brontë's status as a marginal writer within the Brontë family circle has been due to her work as a devotional writer, a label with not only literary but also personal significance of her own religious development as a poet. Her poems portray the 19th century concept of scrupulosity that manifest in her psycho-religious texts. Published in the Brontë 1846 collection, *Poems by Currer, Ellis, and Acton Bell*, Anne Brontë's poems from this period reflect her concern with the troubled, doubtful conscience progressing toward trust in God's grace and Christian sanctification. Taking into account Anne's Calvinist upbringing, the poems mirror her Methodist leanings in addition to the changing culture of the English church away from a strict, exclusivist doctrine of the Elect to the more mercy-inspired theology of the Wesleyan church. Anne's contributions to the collection include eight poems that express the soul transfixed with doubt and a poet preoccupied with a moralist vision contrasted with her sisters' Gothic literary explorations. Anne's poetry reveals her speakers' hesitance to embrace Calvinist doctrines while exposing her Methodist leanings. She is critical of Calvinism and sympathetic to the soul wavering between assurance and doubt of its salvation.



Figure 2. Holy Trinity Church at Little Ouseburn, North Yorkshire where Anne attended.

Results

The disorder's categorization moved from the confessional to clinical observations. For the purpose of this study, I used the two theoretical backgrounds of scrupulosity as a mental disorder and spiritual sickness to examine the emotional sentiment of Anne's poetry. I utilized traditional religious texts on scrupulosity, as well as medical literature on obsessive-compulsive disorder, to deduce whether Anne exhibited scrupulous tendencies. However, the scope of my research was not to diagnose Anne with a 21st century medical label of obsessive-compulsive disorder. Instead, I documented possibilities of scrupulous tendencies in Anne's poetry. My focus was not to assign a fixed medical diagnosis, but to explore the influence of biography and the theological climate of the English church on Anne's literary work. Any diagnosis is tentative, and only made to distinguish Anne as a devotional poet worthy of further investigation.



Figure 3. Isabelle Adjani as Emily, Isabelle Huppert as Anne, Marie-France Pisier as Charlotte in *Les soeurs Brontë* (1979).



Figure 4. Isabelle Huppert as Anne in *Les soeurs Brontë* (1979).

Analysis/Annotations

Despondency (1841)

I have gone backward in the work, (reflects the anxious conscience dwelling on past regrets)
The labour has not sped,
Drowsy and dark my spirit lies,
Heavy and dull as lead, (the soul is burdened/deadened by grief, also characterized as an object)
How can I rouse my sinking soul
From such a lethargy?
How can I break these iron chains,
And set my spirit free? (prison imagery denotes enslavement to doubts)

There have been times when I have mourned,
In anguish o'er the past;
And raised my suppliant hands on high, (more extroverted signs of congregational worship)
While tears fell thick and fast,

And prayed to have my sins forgiven
With such a fervent zeal,
An earnest grief --- a strong desire
That now I cannot feel! (indicates depression, which is spiritualized in the devotional genre)

And vowed to trample on my sins,
And called on Heaven to aid
My spirit in her firm resolves
And hear the vows I made.

And I have felt so full of love,
So strong in spirit then,
As if my heart would never cool (emotion is connected to faith)
Or wander back again, (condemning memories parallel the actual anxiety episode in obsessive-compulsive disorder)

And yet, alas! how many times
My feet have gone astray,
How oft have I forgot my God,
How greatly fallen away! (she characterizes herself as a repentant prodigal)

My sins increase, my love grows cold,
And Hope within me dies,
And Faith itself is wavering now,
O how shall I arise!

I cannot weep but I can pray, (speaker reverts to a Calvinist position of restrained emotion)
Then let me not despair;
Lord Jesus, save me lest I die,
And hear a wretch's prayer.



Figure 5. "What You Please" by Anne, July 25, 1840.

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