

# Distressed damsels and life's little misadventures

## Fugitive book engravings from the time of Charlotte Brontë

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At the time of Charlotte Brontë (1816–1855), novels and annuals were very reliant on illustrations. In fact, from 1750 to 1900 illustration in books was demanded by the public due to the need to explain the story visually.<sup>1</sup> There was a relatively low level of literacy in the general population in 18th- and 19th-century Europe. Some people could read print but not cursive script. Others could read the black Gothic script of the Bible but little else. In England, by 1800, some 60 per cent of men and 40 per cent of women were literate. Widespread publishing of illustrated books influenced reader reaction through exaggerated, contrived and often theatrical depictions of social adventures and misadventures. Given that illustrations in books were so prominent, and often attributed to well-known artists, it is unsurprising that the practice of 'book-breaking', through which images are separated from their source, became common.

Book-breaking refers to the removal of illustrations or maps from books to offer for sale as separate entities. Until recent times, book illustrations and maps were sometimes deemed by art dealers to be more valuable than the book of which they were a part.<sup>2</sup> Often the book was in poor condition and,

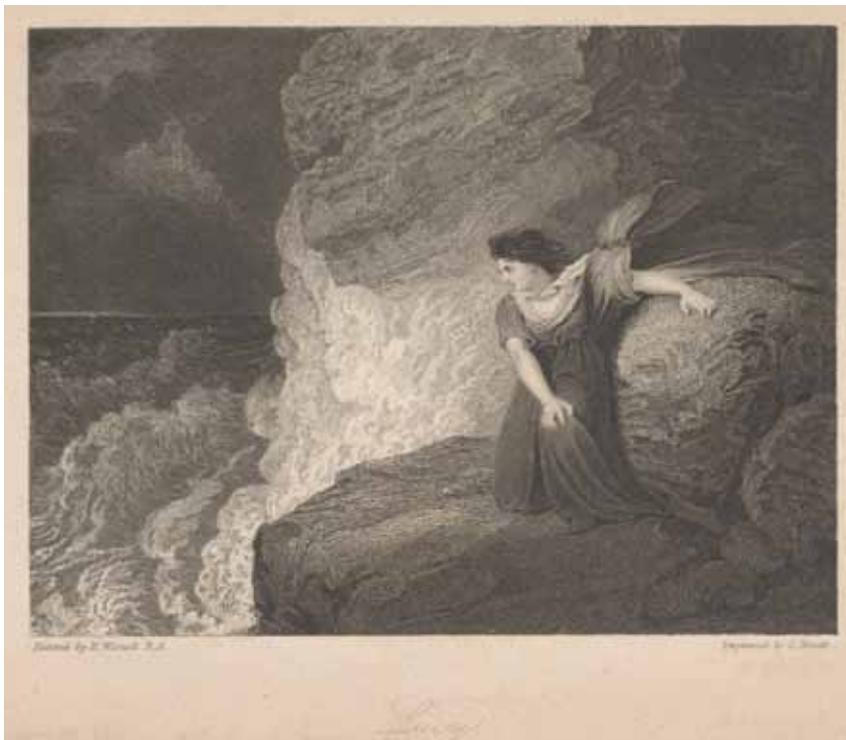
until the 19th century, knowledge of book conservation was limited. An interesting outcome of book-breaking is the way in which it alters how removed or 'fugitive' illustrations are read, particularly in a contemporary context; the image becomes transitory, elusive and open to interpretation. Comparisons can be drawn with the depiction of a classic book character on the film screen where a combination of artistic licence and the actor's persona radically alters the intention of the author. Many engraved prints originally from books were purchased from print dealers and became part of private collections; some were subsequently bequeathed to art museums and libraries, including the Baillieu Library Print Collection at the University of Melbourne. The prints referred to in this article are part of this collection.

Most book illustrations from 1750 to 1900 were engravings. These commercial book illustrations commonly featured a woman as the principal subject and the accompanying title included reference to her activity. The woman's activities, generally of a mundane, embarrassing or socially unacceptable nature, were demeaning but intended to be humorous. That is, engraved book illustrations often

made overt reference to women's social misadventures in a way that would today be classed as politically incorrect. Illustrated books of the 19th century generally perpetuated the doctrine of female subjection. In 1835 for example, an English pamphlet directed at women argued for women's restriction in all aspects of life: 'All independence is unfeminine: the more dependant that sex becomes, the more it will be cherished'.<sup>3</sup> Commercial book illustrations, however, disguised any gender bias in a way intended to appeal to a female romantic imagination. Some images showed the woman (protagonist) as a heroine or adventuress at the mercy of the elements, such as *Lucy* (opposite), stranded on the rocks with waves crashing about her.

*Lucy* is from *The Keepsake*, an English literary annual published each Christmas from 1828 to 1857.<sup>4</sup> *The Keepsake* was launched by the artist-engraver Charles Heath, and his name appeared on most of the engravings.<sup>5</sup> It contained stories, poems, and illustrations by well-known artists. *Lucy*, engraved by Heath from a painting by Richard Westall, illustrated a short story by Sir Walter Scott, which tells the tale of Lucy Hawkins, who met her first love again when he was rescued from

Charles Heath after a painting by Richard Westall, *Lucy*, from *The Keepsake*, 1829, etching and engraving, image: 9.3 x 12.1 cm. Reg. no. 1959.5061, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



the sea. *Lucy* can be seen as a *femme forte* or strong woman, rather than someone involved in frivolous social activity as were many of the women subjects in book illustrations. Heath used a comparable composition for his engraving *Zella* (1830, after Henry Corbould) to illustrate ‘The evil eye’ by Mary Shelley (also published in *The Keepsake*), thus indicating he based both on similar drawings: the subject is placed to the right of the

composition, while the rocks and waves have a strong resemblance. The woman subject *Zella*, however, appears less adventurous and more restrained than *Lucy*.

The 1829 edition of *The Keepsake* was memorable because Charles Heath, in an entrepreneurial manner, actively pursued well-known authors such as Mary Shelley, Thomas Moore, Walter Scott and William Wordsworth to contribute stories,

which he then illustrated.<sup>6</sup> It could be conjectured that Heath anticipated that inclusion of these high-profile authors would bring him both prestige by association and further monetary gain.

Comparison can be made between the subject *Lucy* and Charlotte Brontë’s novel *Jane Eyre*, in that both depict a non-stereotypical woman at a similar time in history: someone with strength and determination, pursuing a dream, undaunted by obstacles. Those attributes were not expected of women at the time but *Jane Eyre* was not a fashionable novel. It had an unfashionable setting and a plain heroine. Nonetheless, its topic of women and human relations has continued to engage readers since its publication in 1847, to the extent that the character, *Jane Eyre*, has been personified and separated from the novel. She has emerged from its pages as a romanticised, archetypal female, recast as something of an aspirational role model for women. *Jane Eyre* has not only been displaced from the confines of a book; like many engraved illustrations, she has become fashionable. It could similarly be said that the female protagonists in novels such as *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *The Eyre affair* have been altered to suit screen adaptation.

Artist unknown, *The pitcher broken*, from *The Lady's Magazine*, April 1778, engraving, sheet (irregular): 21.5 x 12.4 cm. Reg. no. 1959.5748, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

The duality of Jane Eyre's character makes her real, more human, particularly for the female reader. Charlotte Brontë invokes the trope of the female romantic imagination in *Jane Eyre*, with its promise of liberation from the actual world, and tells two opposing stories. The self is at the centre of each but portrayed in radically different ways: one is magically omnipotent and triumphant while the other is insubstantial and threatened by outside forces. Further, Brontë challenges the view that a woman was not made for independence—an opinion reiterated in mid-19th-century England. Brontë's creation of a heroine who opposed that commonly held view appealed to women then and now.

Modern technology, in the form of film and television series, has provided further agency for *Jane Eyre's* fashionable transformation, so the audience no longer need conjure an image of the heroine through written description or a small indistinct illustration as was the case in the early editions of the book. *Jane Eyre* now appears on screen for all to see. For some, the television series or film is the only version with which they are familiar, and recall of *Jane Eyre* is prompted by her image on an advertising billboard. Time,

context and new media have altered the way the audience interprets classic literature and historic images. The level of visual and textual literacy in the general public today is such that a few words accompanying an image can substantially alter or influence the viewer's opinion.

### It's all in the words

The number of books with illustrations in which women were the subject grew exponentially from 1750, and rather than portraying a mixture of triumphant women (such as *Lucy* or *Jane Eyre*) and insubstantial women, the latter became more common. Many book illustrations featured a woman alone or at the centre of the composition. It could be argued that pressure from the public to include illustrations in books generally led to stereotypical and less flattering representations of women. Books were in fact over-illustrated and any doubt as to the meaning of the image was dispelled by the descriptive wording, usually in large, cursive font at its foot. Supply and demand also led to non-attribution of the artist, engraver and date of each illustration. The quality of work was also variable, as orders were often rushed through to meet demand. Each of these factors has relevance in identification and



cataloguing once the plate has been removed from the book and on-sold. Across the broad spectrum of book illustrations, consideration of value and interpretation is made according to quality of image, name of artist, date, choice of subject and whether the image was illustrative of a text or a satirical comment.

The late 18th century also saw text and image bound together in

Artist unknown, *The widow bewitched with her passion*, from *The Town and Country Magazine*, vol. 19, May 1787, engraving, plate: 17.5 x 11.3 cm. Reg. no. 1959.5711, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

annuals and women's magazines, from which illustrations and engravings were later removed in a similar way to novels.<sup>7</sup> These less expensive and more widely distributed publications appealed openly to snobbery in that they depicted relatively affluent lifestyles. Regardless of a woman's social standing, these publications enabled her to imagine a comfortable life. Some included observations from a woman's travels—usually scenes of the local people going about their daily chores—although moral metaphors and allegories were still most common.

*The pitcher broken* (opposite) was originally part of a women's magazine and, in that context, probably alludes to the biblical proverb regarding the pitcher broken at the fountain (Ecclesiastes 12:6) on the subject of youth, old age and the remembrance of God. As such, it is an allegory. But because the artist is not identified and the image has been removed from its source, other interpretations are also possible, including that of sexual misconduct by the woman, or as a morally based double entendre alluding to both meanings. The male in this composition is seen uneasily climbing on the roof of the barn, although the viewer's attention is focused on the woman (who looks toward the man) and the broken pitcher at her feet.



James Heath after Richard Westall, *In cloister'd solitude she sits and sighs ...*, etching and burin, sheet: 10.7 x 7.4 cm. Probably removed from Samuel Rogers, *The pleasures of memory, the fifth edition, with some other poems*, London: printed for T. Cadell and C. Dilly, 1793. Reg. no. 1959.5021, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



The repercussions of being a woman alone or of losing one's spouse (or the trials of keeping him) were popular topics for illustrated stories. Death of one's spouse and widowhood were portrayed as ongoing tests of a woman's strength and morality. Again, captions under each illustration suggest less-than-perfect behaviour on the part of the woman, with judgement or temptation around every corner. *The widow bewitched with her passion* (page 27) shows a woman hopelessly overcome with either the passion of her grief or passion for a new suitor, who is shown coming through a doorway. Again, removal of the illustration from its source and attribution allows multiple interpretations.

Another devout woman (apparently a nun) is immersed in prayer in the illustration *In cloister'd solitude she sits and sighs* (above), taken from Samuel Rogers' book of poems *Pleasures of memory*.<sup>8</sup> The illustration was by Richard Westall, engraved by James Heath (of the same family as Charles Heath). The remainder of the verse, 'While from each shrine still small responses rise', suggests the poem may have been a devotion by Rogers to his deceased brother, whom he was known to have greatly mourned and to whom he

dedicated poetry. Unfortunately, due to separation of this illustration from its source, the viewer is inclined to be more intrigued by the alliteration in its title, *In cloister'd solitude she sits and sighs*.

Although book illustrations pertaining to love, marriage and betrayal were common in the 19th century, maintaining a happy marriage did not seem any easier than coping on one's own. According to illustrations such as *Bold stroke for a husband* (opposite), dramatic outbursts and confusion were regular events. *Bold stroke for a husband* appears to be based on the play of the same name by Hannah Cowley (1743–1809). The play was written in 1783, is set in Madrid and tells of Don Carlo, who has fled his wife, Victoria, for a courtesan, Laura. Don Carlo has given the deeds of his land to Laura and when the relationship ends she attempts to keep them. This scene shows Laura tearing up the documents after she has been duped into believing they are worthless. Don Carlos and his wife are then reconciled.

The untitled engraving (Ballroom with fainting woman) (page 30) appears to be from the same story as *Bold stroke for a husband* in that it is in a similar style and continues the narrative

of the Cowley play. This engraving also depicts betrayal and social *faux pas* with the arrival of a woman dressed in a dark-coloured gown (presumably the Spanish courtesan Laura) which causes a delicate, palely attired young woman (Victoria, the wife) to faint while the other women stare in horror. It is clear from this print that the woman in black is morally tainted and should not be there. Neither of these engravings has artist attribution, but they may have been made by Charles Heath or his contemporaries. Heath was known to distribute engraving commissions among associates, resulting in variable quality.<sup>9</sup> Although the original play on which these images are based was written well before Heath's heyday, it was performed and republished regularly and indeed is still performed on stage today. It is evident from recent billboards for *Bold stroke for a husband* that the courtesan Laura is still portrayed wearing black, sometimes with the addition of a mask.

Book illustrations were also a trend from the 17th to the 19th century due to lack of literacy and demand from the public for visual description. It can be surmised that the generally typecast portrayals of females in illustrations were the result of social attitudes at that time and the

Artist unknown, *Bold [stroke] for a husband*, engraving, c. 1783, sheet: 15.9 x 8.9 cm. Removed from a book or magazine, and illustrating possibly the premier performance of the 1783 play of the same name by Hannah Cowley. Reg. no. 1959.6015, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



way in which women were valued as individuals. Looking at those same book illustrations in a contemporary context, away from the book in which they were originally situated, is an interesting exercise in subjective analysis whereby gender and bias of the viewer come into play. However, any viewer would find it difficult to ignore, and not be influenced by, the large cursive titles on many of the images. These titles may or may not have been understandable to those who first viewed them due to lower levels of literacy. Today we see that text as over-summarising the image in order to influence our reading of it, in a similar way to advertising jargon. That is, history and context influence our opinions, we bring more knowledge (and scepticism) to the task and realise there are several ways to read an image, although it is hard to ignore large font. The commercial book illustrations analysed in this article may not have revealed all their secrets.

In *Jane Eyre*, Charlotte Brontë invoked tropes of controlling a woman's voice and sight, but used to the heroine's advantage. Jane may have been plain and not well placed socially, but she steadfastly maintained her voice even when she was discouraged from speaking. She went away (removed contact)

Artist unknown, Untitled (Ballroom with fainting woman), c. 1783, engraving, sheet: 7.9 x 6.2 cm. Removed from a book or magazine, and illustrating possibly the premier performance of the 1783 play *Bold stroke for a husband* by Hannah Cowley. Reg. no. 1959.5883, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton, 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.



and her absence was keenly felt by Mr Rochester. In the time of Charlotte Brontë, it was fashionable to stereotype women into certain categories, which did not include assertive and independent. Charlotte Brontë chose an unfashionable stance and created Jane Eyre as an archetypal woman who was both assertive and independent.

It is notable that Charlotte Brontë also withheld information and was quite secretive (as were her author sisters) when *Jane Eyre* was first published. None of the Brontë sisters revealed their gender when submitting manuscripts for publication. They were aware of gender bias. *Jane Eyre* was released under the pseudonym Currer Bell. The assertiveness of the novel's female protagonist did not raise much public concern until Charlotte Brontë, who had used the first-person pronoun 'I' throughout the novel, admitted she was female. Much controversy ensued. *Jane Eyre* had been accepted by the publisher prior to that revelation but was subsequently described as 'coarse writing' by some critics.

Going back a century, another development in fashionable 18th-century society encouraged the practice of book-breaking. A gentlemen's pastime known as the

'Grangerising' or 'extra-illustration' of books emerged, named after the Reverend James Granger (1723–1776), clergyman and print collector, who began the practice. This involves incorporating extra illustrations, annotations or pages, often engravings taken from broken books, into another existing volume or into one's own accounts of travel, social observations, favourite poems or stories. The appropriated sections are seamlessly integrated with the main narrative. The result is a sophisticated volume, all of which is important to its owner, rather than a scrapbook or photo album. The Grangerised book was professionally bound, often with a leather cover, and became part of the owner's library, placed on the bookshelf alongside works by Shakespeare, Scott, Wordsworth, Shelley, Brontë and so on. This hobby became very popular among well-bred gentlemen, some of whom accrued large collections of their own (and others'), beautifully bound Grangerised books. It could be seen as a way to truly personalise one's home library. A modern equivalent could be the books of travels, family occasions and the like that can be made through online printers such as [www.blurb.com](http://www.blurb.com), although these modern versions do not necessarily use appropriated image, text and

verse. The contemporary, self-revelatory online fad of Facebook can be said to have similarities to Grangerising.

Through the passage of time, Grangerised books have fluctuated as desirable collector's items. When sought by collectors, it is due to their quirky uniqueness and substantial bound quality. Many Grangerised books are located in the Baillieu Library's Rare Books Collection as part of Dr J. Orde Poynton's Walter Scott collection and other holdings.

Grangerised books rely on illustrations and engravings to complete the volume. Classic stories, personal anecdotes, poems and book engravings combine to make the book. The fugitive engravings to which I referred at the beginning of this article may have been separated from their original source, but have found new homes and perhaps greater notoriety—in solander boxes amidst the print collections at libraries or as part of the treasured rare book collections. The engraver Charles Heath would surely approve.

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**Author's note:** This article is the result of part of the research I conducted among the print collections at the Baillieu Library, the Ian Potter Museum of Art and the National Gallery of Victoria, as the 2011 recipient of the Ursula Hoff Internship. I chose to study prints from the 17th to the 20th centuries in which women are the subject. I have looked at many wonderful and interesting prints from the collections and for that reason have divided my research papers into several categories to address different themes. This is one of those papers.

Items from the **Baillieu Library Print Collection** may be requested for research purposes, and exhibitions are held from time to time. For more information see [www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints/](http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/prints/).

- 1 Margaret R. Slythe, *The art of illustration 1750–1900*, London: The Library Association, 1970, p. 12.
- 2 Nicholas A. Basbanes, *Patience and fortitude: A roving chronicle of book people, book places and book culture*, New York: Harper Collins, 2001.
- 3 *Woman: As she is, and as she should be*, London: James Cochrane and Co., 1835, p. 3.
- 4 Basil Hunnisett, *Engraved on steel: The history of picture production using steel plates*, Aldershot, UK, and Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate, 1998, p. 113.
- 5 Basil Hunnisett, *An illustrated dictionary of British steel engravers*, Aldershot, UK: Scolar Press, and Brookfield, Vermont: Gower Publishing, 1989, p. 47.
- 6 Hunnisett, *Engraved on steel*, p. 113.
- 7 Michel Melot, Anton Griffiths and Richard S. Field, *Prints: History of an art*, Geneva: Albert Skira, 1981, p. 50.
- 8 Samuel Rogers, *The pleasures of memory* (5th edition), London: T. Cadell, 1793.
- 9 Hunnisett, *Engraved on steel*, p. 112.