

Reconceptualizing the plight of isabella



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Readers of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Maryse Conde's *Windward Heights* can easily become overwhelmed by the deluge of voices that permeate each of the respective novels. After sorting through the complicated filtering of narratives in Brontë's novel and the multitude of voices in Conde's text, the reader can find that the presence of a letter offers a refreshing opportunity to receive unmediated information. A letter provides a first person account, eliminating the possibility of mistranslation or distortion of a character's experience. Yet letters raise equal complications, as the writer of a letter is free to narrate what she chooses, and the events she describes are mediated by her personal subjectivity. This subjectivity is key in understanding the letters by Isabella and Irmine, where the characters' partiality determines their accounts of their respective marriages to Heathcliff and Razy. A straightforward analysis suggests that Irmine suffers far greater indignity and horror than Isabella, who is much more superficial in her complaints. Deeper study, however, shows that it is impossible to project a clean dichotomy between the two women, and ultimately shows that Conde works with the same themes that Brontë employs to cast a new understanding of this forlorn character. Despite preliminary evidence that superficial concerns primarily define Isabella's misery, careful reading reveals that her suffering is comparable to that of Irmine. Isabella devotes a large portion of her letter to describing in detail how debased and degrading her new circumstances are compared to her previous life at Thrushcross Grange. She "sobs" (Brontë, 138) after learning that there is no maidservant to help her to bed and insists that she "could not taste the liquid treated so dirtily" (Brontë, 140) after Hareton drinks the milk from the pitcher. She orders the servant Joseph to provide her "

instantly with a place of refuge, and means of repose” (Brontë, 141), and when he scoffs at her request becomes so distraught that she stubbornly throws her tray of food on the ground. These actions all smack of a spoiled child incapable of coping with a life devoid of luxury, and seem especially trivial when compared to the events that Irmine describes. She details how she suffers “ repeated rapes” (Conde, 78) at the hands of Razy and how he has “`given’ her to Justin” (Conde, 79) to be at the mercy of his sexual whims. Following this comparison, the characterization of Isabella’s suffering as such appears almost offensive when contrasted with the horror that Irmine must endure. Yet a more careful perusal shows that Isabella’s emphasis on the superficial serves to focus her complaint on what is merely trivial instead of on a horror so terrifying she cannot articulate it. She hints at this coping mechanism when she writes: It is to amuse myself that I dwell on such subjects as the lack of external comforts; they never occupy my thoughts, except at the moment when I miss them- I should laugh and dance for joy, if I found their absence was the total of my miseries, and the rest was an unnatural dream! (Brontë, 134-5). Some great horror clearly lurks beyond the “ lack of external comforts” if their being the sum of her problems would provoke her to “ laugh and dance for joy,” because the rest would be merely an “ unnatural dream.” She claims that this misappropriation of her complaints serves only to “ amuse” her, but the extent of her terror suggests that this statement is, as well, a mask of her true feelings. Towards the end of her letter, she chooses not to name the “ language” and “ habitual Condeuct” that Heathcliff uses to ensure her “ abhorrence” (Brontë, 143), as she claims. Yet the phrase immediately preceding suggests fear rather than repugnance, “ I sometimes wonder at him with an intensity that deadens my

fear-yet, I assure you, a tiger, or a venomous serpent could not rouse terror in me equal to that which he wakens” (Brontë, 143). Here, she recharacterizes her principal emotion toward Heathcliff as being not only “fear,” but a fear that surpasses that which a wild beast might inspire. Isabella does not elaborate the source of her terror, yet her allusions to it imply that an extremely formidable force inspires it. Irmine, on the other hand, clearly delineates the origin of her horror. Her candor in characterizing her suffering could explain why she appears relatively sane in the face of her terrifying ordeal, while Isabella seems to hover on the verge of madness. Irmine clearly endures tremendous agony; she frequently characterizes her plight as being in “hell” or “burning.” Yet she is able to accept the blame for her actions, acknowledging that she “greatly offended” (Conde, 77) her family and that it is “rightly so” (Conde, 79) for them to ignore any communication from her. She is also able to admit her ambivalence toward Razy, a man who despises her and yet “despite everything, [she has] never stopped loving” (Conde, 79). Isabella, on the other hand, who refuses to articulate her suffering, projecting it onto material losses, becomes consumed by violent urges. Seeing Earnshaw’s knife, “a hideous notion” overcomes her as she examines it not with “horror” but with “covetousness” (Brontë, 138). Despite characterizing Earnshaw’s desire for revenge as being “on the verge of madness” (Brontë, 139), she is unable to realize that her own vengeful fantasy should by extension also be considered a form of insanity. Isabella does not have an outlet to express the agony of what she is experiencing, resulting in a state bordering on madness. Irmine, however, is able to express her circumstances and thoughts, and even acknowledge their contradictions. Following this line of argument, one would

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naturally conclude that Irmine occupies a better position than Isabella since she is able to express her suffering and avoid the madness one feels in suppressing one's pain. However, once again it is impossible to create a clear dichotomy of one character having a better situation and the other occupying a worse one. Irmine may be more forthcoming in her letter, but nothing results from her effort. Lucinda reads it, does not "take the trouble to mention this letter to Cathy" (Conde, 79), and gives no indication of ever visiting, helping, or even sympathizing with Irmine. Isabella's letter, on the other hand, is saved for years by Nelly, who may not be able to help her with her current situation, but who can at least listen and empathize. One of the most fundamental attributes inherent to letters is that they are intended to be read by another, not kept as a personal rumination, like a diary. In being barely received, Irmine's letter ultimately serves little purpose in communicating her distress, while Isabella's letter succeeds in gaining her an audience. These two women may suffer and express their suffering in divergent manners, but ultimately both endure tremendous pain that cannot easily be stacked against each other. In the end, despite differences between their suffering and responses, both women function similarly as tools upon which their husbands to enact their revenge. Both are reduced to objects whose value lies in their ability to harm the offending competitor, whether Linton or Linseuil. Immediately after writing how Razy profits from Justin's passion for her "to strip him of his property," Isabella states, "L'Engoulvent is already heavily mortgaged" (Conde, 79). This immediate juxtaposition of her body with a piece of land shows that in Razy's eyes she serves only as a piece of property like L'Engoulvent, one that can be bargained for and used for whatever devices he chooses, and also suggests

that she has begun to accept this role for herself as she is the one to juxtapose these two statements. Similarly, Heathcliff's marriage to Isabella functions as a method to obtain rights to the Linton inheritance and disrupt the family. He openly tells her that she, " should be Edgar's proxy in suffering, till he could get a hold of him" (Brontë, 143). The husbands of these parallel characters view their wives not as people, but as tools, as objects to be manipulated to enact their own will. In writing a letter, a person is only as honest as she chooses to be as she pours her heart out into what she hopes will be the willing ears of the receiver. Yet, writing letters does not constitute a one-way movement, as it requires the willing participation of the reader to listen and to empathize. In comparing the candor or delusion of the letters, the reception or ignoring of them, one realizes the impossibility of characterizing which character suffers the greater injustice. In rewriting a canonical work, an author has the liberty to alter aspects of the story, yet ideally will retain some of the core elements essential to the original. Conde chooses to articulate the unspoken in Brontë's text, yet still remains true to the essence of the original by preserving the perhaps most important aspect of the Isabella/Irmine character as being employed as a tool of revenge by Heathcliff/Razy. Having a new knowledge of what had previously been hidden while still preserving some of the key themes of Brontë's original makes Conde's novel an entertaining, engaging, and effective rewrite of a classic work.