

Major Authors on CD-ROM

The Brontës

Platform: Windows

Requirements: PC with at least 8MB RAM, CD-ROM drive and sound card

Available from: Primary Source Media, PO Box 45, Reading, RG1 8HF. Tel: 0118 957 7213. Fax: 0118 939 4334. Email: sales@psmedia.co.uk. URL: <http://www.psmmedia.com/site/cd-rom.html>.

Price: £495 (single user) £750 (4 user)
Primary Source Media offers a free 30-day trial of the online version to institutional libraries. See <http://www.majorauthors.psmmedia.com/>
Edited by: Tom Winnifrith

This project of putting on CD-ROM a complete Brontë library potentially offers a wonderful tool for teaching and private study. It contains the complete works of the four Brontë siblings, Anne, Emily, Charlotte and Branwell alongside biographical information, correspondence, Elizabeth Gaskell's *Life of Charlotte Brontë* and reproductions of paintings and photographs. It has several strengths. First, the inclusion of most of the surviving Brontë correspondence. Second, the fact that it reflects current interest in the origins and versions of the Brontës' work and in the juvenilia and in the poetry. (The package also includes Victor Neufeldt's Garland editions of the poems of Charlotte and Branwell.) Yet it does not claim to be a new work of scholarship. Nor is there any secondary material. Rather, it presents itself as a comprehensive database designed to provide the student-researcher with a vast amount of primary material which might otherwise be difficult to gain access to. The disk includes the first draft of Emily's recently 'rediscovered' second novel and early versions of the poems published by Currey, Ellis and Acton Bell, as well as works by the young Patrick Brontë. An important omission, however, is the sense of any contemporary response to the novels, along the lines of Miriam Allott's *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* which reprints early reviews that are otherwise difficult to obtain but which reveal how contemporary readers dealt with and came to terms with these often controversial works.

The drawbacks of this package are not technical although the Borland Database used may not be suitable for all networks. Rather, they lie more generally at the level of the user interface. This (to use Victorian terminology), is 'utilitarian' rather than 'aesthetic'. Perhaps this is no bad thing; there is no multimedia to disrupt its undeniable usefulness; the CD-ROM could be run on most machines. Yet while the interface doesn't 'get in the way', there is a case for arguing that more thought could have been put into making it more attractive. The screen colours, tending towards an unimaginative black and white, are a disappointment. The graphics seem a secondary consideration. This has more serious implications for, although there is a nice viewer, allowing the opportunity to zoom in and out, the quality of the reproductions can best be described as poor-to middling. The close-up of Branwell Brontë's famous painting of his sisters (now in the National Portrait Gallery) would not please an art historian who wanted to study it in any detail. The same is true of the portraits of Mr and Mrs Brontë and the illustrations reproduced from the novels and notebooks. One

wonders who was operating the scanner and why the decision to use monochrome rather than grayscale was taken. The manuscripts also suffer this fate. Given the much-vaunted emphasis placed by the manufacturers on the incorporation of manuscript material this is disconcerting. Although each manuscript is accompanied by a useful summary of what it contains this is no substitute for the fact that it is often difficult to pick up detail and to decipher characters. This may be read as symptomatic of the joys and hazards of manuscript study but the monochrome scan doesn't help. There is certainly no possibility of viewing watermarks or of getting a sense of texture.

Although a dedicated student or teacher will learn a great deal about the Brontës' lives and work by a painstaking perusal of its contents, the CD-ROM is not always easy to manipulate, nor is navigation around it entirely obvious. The introduction to the family, has excellently thought out hyperlinks which back up Winnifrith's account with primary materials, but the page numbering is not clear. There is a useful table of contents grouped together under such headings as 'Introduction', 'Novels', 'Poems', 'Paintings and Photographs' and 'Year'. This last heading leads to a chronological index which collates letters, poems and novels by date so that it is possible to trace the Brontë output and something of their activities from 1799 until Charlotte's death in 1855. These are impressive and accessible features.

What I found to be slightly confusing, and ultimately unhelpful, was the package's search facility. In theory, there is the potential to conduct various word searches, to summon up cross references, to juxtapose on screen beside the published texts and letters manuscript materials. In practice, this advanced technology seemed to fail me. The word 'love' produced 32 hits in the letters and critical commentaries but not in the text themselves. Typing 'temperament' into the Natural Language Search produced 16 hits but the fact that there is no thesaurus search means that related terms such as 'mood' did not appear. It was also difficult to read a manuscript and transcript in parallel. Unless I completely misunderstood it, the user has to first locate the manuscript and then do a Phrase Search on one of the lines contained in a manuscript (I typed in 'one is absent') to get a transcript of the poem. There is a steep learning curve involved simply in mastering these and other frameworks and in seeing how the various elements interact.

In terms of potential users it seems that the package is designed for people with a clearly defined interest in the Brontës and who know what they want to look for. It is not suitable for student-centred learning. Nor could it be used to give students a comprehensive overview of the Brontës' lives and times. They would need carefully planned research assignments in order to use it productively. For example, it is possible to imagine it being used as part of a project tracing textual variants or recurring motifs in the poems or novels. From the teacher's perspective there is also the fear—as with so many packages of this kind—that the lazy student will simply download sections of critical commentary before pasting them into an assignment with a minimum of thought. Nonetheless, for the conscientious student there are productive possibilities. *The Brontës* is packed with information; the biographical and critical commentaries are clearly written and illuminating and it makes available on screen the contents of an extensive Brontë library.

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