

5-2019

# Reading Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's Early Writings as Colonialist Fantasy

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READING CHARLOTTE AND BRANWELL BRONTË'S EARLY WRITINGS AS  
COLONIALIST FANTASY

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A Thesis  
Presented to  
the Graduate School of  
Clemson University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
English

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by  
Kristian Nicole Wilson  
May 2019

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Accepted by:  
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## ABSTRACT

Charlotte and Branwell Brontë's collaborative writing project, the Glass Town saga, is rarely the subject of academic examination that does not analyze it as either a derivative of the works of Sir Walter Scott or a precursor to *Jane Eyre* and *The Professor*. This paper instead considers Glass Town as a work of early fantasy, a reading which allows for an examination of colonialism's relationship to the genre in its infant stages. Connecting Glass Town to nineteenth-century European theories of African history and development, and to articles of African exploration and conquest, I contextualize the colonialist messages contained in the Brontës' early writings. Establishing Glass Town as a created fantasy world, I show how the Faerie elements of the Brontës' stories support their fictional, British heroes' occupation and domination of West Africa. This work calls for a new consideration of the Glass Town saga, not as juvenilia, nor in terms of its relationship to Scott and the later works of Charlotte Brontë, but as a precursor to early-twentieth-century fantasy epics. Such an analysis allows for further examination of fantasy's relationship to nineteenth-century British colonial expansion.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis committee chair, Dr. David Coombs, and committee members Dr. Erin M. Goss and Dr. Andy Lemons, all of the English Department at Clemson University, for their sustained support and enthusiasm for this project. Without their thoughtful remarks and guidance, the completion of this paper would not have been possible.

I would also like to thank the larger faculty and staff of the English Department at Clemson University, who have made themselves available to help me throughout my research and writing process. Their support has been integral to the completion of this paper.

I am forever grateful to the May 2019 class of Clemson University's Master of Arts in English and Master of Arts in Writing, Rhetoric, and Media programs, for their open and honest discussions of literature, theory, and pop culture, and for being faithful friends and confidantes over the last two years.

Finally, I extend my deepest gratitude to my partner, Aaron S. Colyard, and to my mother, Lillian Jean Wilson, whose loving support for my work on this project has never wavered.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

In their teenage years, the four Brontë siblings—Branwell, Charlotte, Emily, and Anne—worked together to write a series of short stories and poems documenting the adventures of Arthur Wellesley, 1st Duke of Wellington and his sons, Arthur and Charles, in a fictional settlement on the West African coast. Emily and Anne Brontë eventually abandoned the project to create their own fantasy world, Gondal, but their siblings continued to compose new stories in their created world for a decade, until Charlotte bid “Farewell to Angria” in 1839. Originally called Glass Town, the colony grew, through Charlotte and Branwell’s writings, into a federation of occupier kingdoms, the chief of which was known as Angria. A reading of these early writings as speculative fiction offers insight into the fantasy genre’s function in the exploration, theorization, and imagination of colonialist identity and thought.

The Brontë siblings began work on their Glass Town stories in 1827, when Charlotte was eleven years old, and Branwell, ten. Inspired by a box of wooden soldiers in Branwell’s possession, the stories log the adventures of Charlotte’s chosen soldier, a toy she proclaimed to be the Duke of Wellington, whose real-life namesake was, at that time, serving as the Commander-in-Chief of the British Army. The Brontës’ Arthur Wellesley becomes the Duke of Wellington, not as the result of his performance in the Napoleonic Wars, but as a reward for his successful colonization of a spot of land near

what is now Calabar, Nigeria.<sup>1</sup> With that alteration of history, Charlotte and Branwell<sup>2</sup> departed from the real-life Duke of Wellington, and indulged themselves in crafting a narrative that, while loosely rooted to both the real world—in the form of Wellington’s sons, Arthur and Charles—and the historical novels of Sir Walter Scott—namely *Ivanhoe*—was simultaneously a wholly fictional work of literature.

Previous scholarship on Glass Town analyzes these early writings, either as a derivative of Scott’s *Waverley* novels, or as a stepping stone toward Charlotte Brontë’s more famous works. Rather than examining these stories in relation to *Waverley* and Charlotte’s gothic fiction, I appraise Charlotte and Branwell Brontë’s early writings as works of fantasy literature, produced by young authors who were, in ways quite mature, tuned into both the narrative conventions and imperialist news of their day. In doing so, I attempt to understand the colonialist origins of speculative fiction by way of these early stories, which the Brontës self-published for at-home consumption more than a century before the term “fantasy” first denoted a genre of fiction.

I acknowledge my use of the term “fantasy” is anachronistic in nature, at least so far as Glass Town is concerned. The word did not appear in any connection to genre fiction until the first issue of *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* hit store shelves in 1949. The sort of fiction that this paper examines fell, at the time of its

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<sup>1</sup> This placement is based on Christine Alexander’s *Map of the Glass Town Federation and the Kingdom of Angria*, not on any description of the colony’s location found in the Glass Town texts themselves (*The Brontës xxix*).

<sup>2</sup> Although I analyze Charlotte’s writing almost exclusively in this project, I credit Branwell as an author of the stories overall, not only because the siblings worked in tandem to create the world of Glass Town, but also because many of Charlotte’s narrative decisions seem to retaliate against her brother’s storytelling style in some way.

composition, into two distinct categories—the “romance” and the “fairy-story”—yet my analysis places stories of both types under the “fantasy” umbrella. In this, I draw from Tolkien, who also makes little distinction between “romance” and “fairy-story,” and who poses “fantasy” as a sub-type of the eponymous genre in his “On Fairy-Stories.” Tolkien writes that his use of the word *fantasy* “combines...the derived notions of ‘unreality’ (that is, of unlikeness to the Primary World), [and] of freedom from the domination of observed ‘fact,’” and he goes on to say that *fantasy*’s connection with *fantastic* allows the genre to also deal in “images of things that are not only ‘not actually present,’ but which are indeed not to be found in our primary world at all, or are generally believed not to be found there” (16). Putting it a bit differently, Brian Laetz and Joshua J. Johnston write that “fantasy...requires supernatural content” in order to be classified as such (164). My working definition of “fantasy” encompasses any work of speculative fiction that either creates radically new narratives out of existing figures and events, or places its characters in worlds colored by new myths, monsters, or gods.

In the Brontës’ early writings, these fantasy elements appear in two connected ways: with the African landscape, as it is portrayed by the white, English Brontë siblings, and with the Chief Genii, whose names and abilities owe much to both the *Arabian Nights* and European assessments of indigenous African religion. In taking and re-using for white aims those resources created by people of color, the Brontës’ appropriation of the African setting and *Arabian* mythology mirrors the British imperialism that made headlines during their childhood. Writing in “Readers and Writers: *Blackwood’s* and the

Brontës,” Christine Alexander highlights the ways in which stories from *Blackwood’s Magazine* permeated the Glass Town narrative, observing that,

*Blackwood’s* regularly reported the travels of Mungo Park in the upper reaches of the Niger, the discoveries of William Edward Parry in the Polar Sea, the explorations of John Ross and others. Branwell frequently refers to Mungo Park, and Emily and Anne named their favourite soldiers after Parry and Ross. The names of numerous other characters in the Glass Town saga, such as the Duke of York and his physician Sir Henry Halford, can be found in the pages of *Blackwood’s*. Even Branwell’s earliest manuscript...was inspired by *Blackwood’s* 1821 reports on ‘Campaigns of the British Army at Washington.’ Here we also find the originals of Murray and Thornton, soldiers in the Brontës’ fictitious Duke of Wellington’s army. (58)

By grounding their stories in the contemporary news of the day, the Brontës, as Joetta Harty notes, “[mimick] in their literary play the acts of discovery, exploration, and colonisation that generate a shared history and create a national culture” (96). As I show in the next section, stories of West Africa published in *Blackwood’s* and other periodicals helped to shape the conflict between the white heroes and their colonized, black subjects in the early Glass Town stories.

Although these Glass Town stories, by virtue of being private projects written—or, at least, begun—by children, lack the power of the colonialist journalism that inspired their settings, their use of exoticist writing as a spark for fantasy creations ties the Brontës’ work to empire. In referring to the Brontës as “mature authors” above, I do not

mean to suggest that their early writings contain the same verbal power as the work of white, English adults writing about Africa in the nineteenth century. Rather, I argue that they, in their development as the authors of *Glass Town*, tap into both newspaper reportings and the style of fiction in ways that suggest a certain wisdom—and cognizance of authorship—beyond their years. As Alexander notes, the Brontës “absorbed not only geographical, political and military reports from [*Blackwood’s*], but most of their views on literature, philosophy and the visual arts” (“Readers and Writers” 59). Even the “early rivalry between” Charlotte and Branwell as “young authors is firmly in the *Blackwood* tradition” (61). The young Brontës were critically aware of the literary and journalistic traditions in which they wished to participate, even as they produced their works for private enjoyment.

It is worthwhile to note that, although magazine reports of British colonization and exploration efforts in West Africa inspired *Glass Town*’s setting, the motives of the Brontës’ heroes in their imagined Africa do not align with those of the British Empire on the real-world continent. The gold, ivory, pepper, and slaves that European colonizers removed from Africa to fill their home countries’ coffers do not drive the *Glass Town* Federation’s development. Although the Duke of Wellington and his compatriots enslave the vast majority of the native Africans in their initial push to control *Glass Town*, their intention is to occupy, dominate, and control the continent, to hold the land for Britain, rather than to drain it of its natural resources. Enslaving the Ashantee is part of *this* process, not a step toward generating income in the Caribbean or elsewhere.

The Brontës' early writings are stories of extraction, however, just as much as any other colonialist narrative. Instead of extracting the aforementioned resources—gold, ivory, pepper, and slaves—that increased Europe's wealth at Africa's expense in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the white founders and maintainers of Glass Town drain the land of its magical power through the process of Anglicization. The Glass Town saga becomes less of a fantasy narrative, and more a story of political intrigue, as it progresses, and the disappearance of *fantasy* coincides with the Anglicization of the African environment. Brian Attebery claims that the combination of nineteenth-century "European voyages of discovery and colonialism" with white supremacist "racial theory produced the somewhat sinister lost world romances of H. Rider Haggard, Talbot Mundy, and Edgar Rice Burroughs, which had a big impact on twentieth-century fantasy," a claim I extend, placing Glass Town in this tradition of fantasy creation (335). An examination of the dwindling presence of fantasy elements in the Glass Town saga's progression exposes the colonialist roots of fantasy as a genre that thrives on the acts of excluding and suppressing the Other.

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE COUNTERFACTUAL NARRATIVE OF GLASS TOWN

Charlotte and Branwell Brontë departed from their real-world inspirations early in the process of writing the Glass Town saga, moving quickly into what we can today identify as speculative fiction. The Brontës' versions of "real-life" figures, which include the Duke of Wellington and his sons, the Marquis of Douro and Lord Charles Wellesley, often differ greatly from the original men. With the exception of the fictional Duke of Wellington's African campaign, he and his real-world counterpart lived similar lives. They married women with identical names, and each produced two sons. It is with those sons that Charlotte and Branwell began to delve deeper into the construction of their fantasy narrative.

The Brontës' treatment of the Duke of Zamorna as an amalgamation of real life and fantasy exemplifies Catherine Gallagher's idea of the "counterfactual character." In *Telling It Like It Wasn't*, Gallagher describes the counterfactual character as "one of the [counterfactual-historical] mode's most distinctive features," writing that, "When a person or group is detached from what it actually thought, did, and suffered, a space opens up for the attribution of different characteristics to the same entity: different thoughts, actions, and experiences that might plausibly have belonged to it had it faced different conditions" (12). In Glass Town, Arthur Richard Wellesley, the Marquis of Douro, becomes Arthur Augustus Adrian Wellesley, Duke of Zamorna. Instead of Elizabeth Hay, whom the real-life Douro married, the Byronic Zamorna takes on a series of wives and lovers, including Mary Percy, who is the daughter of his fictional rival,

Northangerland<sup>3</sup>, as well as the title heroines of two Glass Town stories: Mina Laury and Caroline Vernon. Where Douro died childless, Zamorna—being one of the characters whom Charlotte killed, then revived for later entries in the saga—goes to his grave the second time having produced at least two sons.

Giving Zamorna a life and demeanor separate from that of Douro serves a purpose adjacent to, but separate from, the pursuit of pure fantasy, however. Zamorna is one of the two major players in the later Glass Town narratives—one that Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith term as Charlotte’s “occasional early pseudonym” (*The Oxford Companion*, “Zamorna, Duke of”). Zamorna’s rival Northangerland is a fictional creation with no ties to any real-world figure, and he serves as an outlet for Branwell Brontë’s masculine power fantasies and literary aspirations. Alexander and Smith write: “So close did Branwell's identification with this character become that most of his later published poetry (at least eighteen poems) appeared in local newspapers under the pseudonym ‘Northangerland’” (*The Oxford Companion*, “Northangerland, Duke of”). It is through these two characters, largely, that Charlotte and Branwell played their tug-of-war games with Glass Town’s history and future.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Many of the Brontës’ chief characters in Glass Town gain new titles and designations as the stories progress. For the reader’s ease, I refer to Northangerland and Zamorna as such, regardless of whether or not that is the name the authors use for them in a particular story. When the Brontës refer to a character by a different title—Northangerland as “Percy,” for example, or Zamorna as “Emperor Adrian”—I indicate the name used in the story, but continue to use Northangerland and Zamorna in my analysis.

<sup>4</sup> Charlotte highlights this tension in her epilogue to *The Spell*, a novella in which she kills Zamorna, perhaps to remove him from Branwell’s reach. Writing of Zamorna as his brother, Lord Charles Wellesley, she states: “my brother has too many reins in his hands.... He has gathered the symbols of dominion in a mighty grasp; he strains all the energy, all the power, all the talent of his soul to retain them; he struggles, he ponders, ...to hold the empire he has established” (237).

Aside from the aforementioned counterfactual characters, there is little in the Glass Town stories that may be read as a reiteration of real life. In her biography of Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell spends many pages discussing the local stories that likely inspired *Jane Eyre*, *The Professor*, and *Villette*, but devotes no time to exploring what historical events prompted the Brontës' private-fantasy venture. Perhaps that is because the Brontës cared little for historical accuracy. Glass Town departs almost entirely from real-world strictures with its second generation of heroes: the Dukes of Zamorna and Northangerland, and Lord Charles Wellesley. This may be the natural progression of the fantasy epic that begins with only a tenuous connection to reality in its early plays, or it may be that the Brontës had tired of historical re-enactment by the time they reached their early twenties. As Claire Harman notes, the Brontë children staged games as famous conquerors from their earliest years, with their father later recalling his "sometimes having to step in when contentions between Hannibal, Caesar, Wellington and Bonaparte got too rowdy" (43). In any case, Charlotte and Branwell Brontë were more concerned with developing their own histories of Glass Town than with subscribing to any reality of life on the West African coast.

The Anglo-Ashanti Wars, which were already raging when the Brontës began to write their earliest Glass Town stories, constitute the exception to this rule. The founding of the Glass Town settlement is timed to coincide with the end of the first of these conflicts, as "the Brontës founded their paracosm the same year that the first Anglo-Ashanti War (1823-1826) ended in a standoff, when the British defeated an army of the Ashanti Federation, which...controlled trade in the gold-producing region" (Harty 109).

This conflict between the British and the Ashanti bled into early parts of the Glass Town saga, which tell of fighting between the native “Ashantee” and their heroic colonizers. *The Green Dwarf* makes the last surviving Ashantee prince, Quashia Quamina, into a violent, but noble revolutionary, intent on taking his ancestral land back from the English invaders. According to Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith, Quashia’s name is related to “the West Indian racist epithet ‘Quashee,’” and he “degenerates” as the saga progresses, “[f]rom noble savage...into drunken murderer” (“Quashia”). By the time Quashia is executed in the last tale of Glass Town’s chronology, however, Charlotte has again raised him to the position of noble savage, writing in *A Leaf from an Unopened Volume* that:

Deep and fixed must have been that hatred which could have induced [Zamorna] to reject every suggestion of clemency in favour of a man in whose person all the virtues of the savage life were so nobly united, even although it cannot be denied that he possessed likewise many of its concomitant vices. (326)

Quashia embodies the racial tension and ignorance present, both specifically in Glass Town and in Charlotte Brontë’s writing more broadly, and serves as a relatively flat foil to the multifaceted, British heroes.

That the Brontës chose Africa as the setting of their fantasy epic bears some focus here. Rebecca Fraser remarks that “The Brontës’ view of the world...had an essentially otherworldly frame,” and it is difficult to imagine a locale more “otherworldly” than Africa for white English children in the nineteenth century (48). Writing about Bernardin de Saint-Pierre’s 1788 novel, *Paul et Virginie*, which is set on a tropical island, Wilhelm

Graeber posits that that book's "success...is mainly based on [an] exoticism," which "satisfies the post-revolutionary desire of many contemporaries for an idealized virtue and a pure primordial state, such as before the Fall of Man" (91). Echoing that sentiment, Tanya Llewellyn claims that, for the Brontës, "the Orient...becomes ultimately synonymous" with "imagination itself" (217). Shaped, undoubtedly, by accounts of conflict published in *Blackwood's Magazine* and other periodicals, and by representations of non-European soil as the site of great and wicked magicks, the Brontës' version of Africa serves as nearly blank space for them to build their fantasy kingdoms. Harty argues that, "as they constructed their imaginary kingdoms to populate the blank spaces on the map, these little Britons were also engaged in projecting 'home' upon an imaginary 'away'; they were imagining empires" (96-97). Much in the same way as their colonizing countrymen, who raze Africa to build a new world, so too do Charlotte and Branwell eliminate the indigenous populations of the unnamed—and supposedly *unformed*—land that will become Glass Town.

The Brontës' treatment of Africa and Africans falls very much in line with European thought in the early nineteenth century, particularly that expressed in G.W.F. Hegel's *The Philosophy of History*. For Hegel, Africa and its people exist outside of history, to the extent that Africans are not even to be considered human: "The Negro...exhibits the natural man in his completely wild and untamed state. We must lay aside all...feeling...if we would rightly comprehend him; there is nothing harmonious with humanity to be found in this type of character" (*Philosophy* 111). The continent, in Hegel's view, is simultaneously infantile and static in its development, a contradiction

that plays out as a colonialist trope. Africa's supposed backwardness would, consequently, allow it to progress forward in a model of linear time, when given either the centuries needed to develop, or pressure from Anglicizing forces. And yet, Hegel presents Africa as hopelessly static, writing that "it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit.... What we properly understand by Africa, is the Unhistorical, Undeveloped Spirit, still involved in the conditions of mere nature" (117). For the Africa of Hegel and the Brontës, there is no way forward to progress without European intervention.

Yet another contradiction exists here, regarding the Brontës' use of Africa as a world imbued with latent magic. Glass Town's Faerie/fantasy elements do not reside in Zamorna and Northangerland, but in the Chief Genii: powerful, godlike beings that oversee the reality of that particular corner of Africa. In his essay, Tolkien writes that "a 'fairy-story' is one which touches on or uses Faerie," noting that "Faerie itself may perhaps most nearly be translated by Magic—but it is magic of a peculiar mood and power, at the furthest pole from the vulgar devices of the laborious, scientific, magician" ("On Fairy-Stories" 4). For Tolkien, then, Faerie is that particular breed of magic that would be irreplicable in the world of men, but one which may lead to "the satisfaction of certain primordial human desires" (5). Fulfilling the innately human desire for immortality, the Chief Genii constitute the bulk of the Faerie that exists in the Glass Town saga. As I show in the next section, these Faerie elements are inherently linked to the colonialist cause of the Brontës' heroes. An analysis of these Faerie phenomena exposes how fantasy justifies colonialism in the Glass Town stories.

CHAPTER THREE  
ON THE COLONIALIST USE OF FAERIE

As a genre, fantasy often centers itself around conflicts involving people of different races and cultures—such as the Dothraki, Wildlings, and Westerosi in George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, for example, or the Gelflings, Mystics, and Skeksis of Jim Henson’s *The Dark Crystal*. Attebery observes that “the fantastic is a powerful tool for examining all things human, including our tendency to gang up on one another based on any perceived physical or cultural dissimilarity” (334). The Brontës populated their created world with a variety of “races,” from the English, French, Irish, Ashantee, Turkish, and Persian peoples who acts as citizens, slaves, and visitors to Glass Town, to their fantasy bogeymen, the Chief Genii. The Brontës’ fantasy landscape draws clear lines between the white Europeans—the English and French—and the native peoples of the land they occupy, and the land itself is imbued with latent magic that often appears to only put itself at the colonizers’ disposal.

By the mid-1830s, Glass Town is a land in which bloody-eyed gods, known as the Chief Genii, brood on bloodshed and human anguish, revel in the conflicts—both serious and for sport—that bring about those fell trials, and bring dead heroes back to life as they please—presumably so that they can continue to fight and kill each other mercilessly. Llewellyn draws a line between the Chief Genii’s power to revive fallen heroes, and the siblings’ authorial license to retcon, saying that “the genii’s ability to rewrite events serves as a parallel for the seductive freedom that the children first tasted as authors,” and observing that “the genii of the *Nights* were the most enticing symbols of power that the

Brontës could imaginatively appropriate” (217). However, genii do not only exist in the *Nights*, and the Chief Genii are not the only element of those fantastic tales that the Brontës appropriate for their Glass Town stories.

Llewellyn’s interpretation of the Chief Genii as an adaptation of the Islamic djinn is not inaccurate, but it imposes obvious limits on any interpretation of the Brontë siblings’ avatars as African beings. Writing on the subject of African religious beliefs and practices, Hegel reasons that “even Herodotus called the Negroes sorcerers,” writing that, for Africans: “it is they who command the elements, and this they call ‘magic’” (*Philosophy* 111). This magic becomes embodied in African spiritual belief, and its practitioners “giv[e] an outward form to this supernatural power — projecting their hidden might into the world of phenomena by means of images. What they conceive of as the power in question,...they exalt to the dignity of a ‘Genius’”<sup>5</sup> (112). Although the “*Fetich*” objects Hegel goes on to describe do not appear in the Glass Town stories as totemic representations of the Chief Genii’s power, his statement here introduces the possibility that the Brontës grounded their avatars in what they had read about the continent of Africa and its people.

From these European representations of African spiritual belief, Charlotte and Branwell Brontë crafted Glass Town’s Chief Genii, manipulating the source material in much the same way that they transformed Douro into Zamorna. In these early stories, Charlotte and Branwell become Chief Genius Tallii and Chief Genius Brannii,

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<sup>5</sup> The word “Genius” is the same in the original German translation, *Sämtliche Werke, Band VIII: Philosophie der Weltgeschichte* (212).

respectively, and they, along with Chief Genii Emmii and Anni, serve as the saga's protectors and antagonists. Alexander and Smith write that the "Glass Town characters...see the dimly focused huge creatures who read their minds and intervene in their events, transporting them to safety and resurrecting them when necessary, as guardians of the land, protectors, and often arbitrary judges" (*The Oxford Companion*, "Genii, Chief"). When their champions fall in battle in the early plays, the Chief Genii resurrect them to continue the fight, acting as the guardians to the Duke of Wellington's African campaign. Even after the Chief Genii disappear in Charlotte's 1831 poem, "The Trumpet Hath Sounded," their magic returns later in the Glass Town saga, bringing both Zamorna and his wife Mary Percy back from the grave with an unseen hand.

The Chief Genii last appear in earnest in Charlotte's 1834 work, *A Leaf from an Unopened Volume*, but another piece of writing from that year, a novella titled *The Spell*, tells of a much different fate for her Byronic hero, Zamorna. In the epilogue to *The Spell*, Charlotte, writing as Lord Charles Wellesley, beseeches the "Mighty Genii" to "draw a veil over the scene" of Zamorna's downfall, which has come for the "young man of promise...at the early age of twenty-two" (237, 238). Zamorna's devoted wife, Mary Percy, dies in exile in the story, cruelly separated from her husband, children, and father. Charlotte's decision to revive both Zamorna and Mary Percy in her 1838 novelette *Mina Laury* constitutes a double retcon in the case of the former, as *A Leaf*—which was written only a few months prior to *The Spell*—sees Zamorna enthroned as the flawed and hubristic Emperor Adrian in the Glass Town of 1858. *Mina Laury* and the other, later tales give no hint at any magical reason for Zamorna and Mary Percy's resurrection, but

it is clear that Charlotte, in her writerly authority, revives her characters in accordance with rules laid down early on in the saga. The Chief Genii have it within their power to bring fallen heroes back to life, an action that she, working in the background as one of them, takes.

The Glass Town stories' Faerie elements serve, at least in part, to legitimize the heroes' colonialist cause. Not only do the Chief Genii consistently revive the Brontës' heroes when they fail in their attempts to dominate the African continent, but they also favor the white invaders from the outset. "The Twelve Adventurers" establishes the Chief Genii's goodwill toward the Duke of Wellington and his comrades, with the narrator even suggesting at one point that the storm that forced the colonizers to African shores was magical in its design. When Wellington declares that "magic has been used in [Glass Town's] construction," he goes on to theorize that, "if the Genii have built us our city," then they "will...likewise help us to call our countrymen to defend what they have built against the assaults of the enemy" (Charlotte Brontë, "The Twelve Adventurers" 10). Later in the story, one of the Chief Genii<sup>6</sup> takes hold of "A[rthur] W[ellesley] and exclaim[s], 'This is the Duke of Wellington!'" (11). The Brontës' version of Arthur Wellesley receives his title, not by royal decree, but through the benevolence and excitement of the Faerie. Not only have the Chief Genii shown favor to the British invaders, but they have also aligned themselves with the Duke of Wellington and his men, making the native Africans into their mutual enemies. In this way, Charlotte and

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<sup>6</sup> Presumably Chief Genius Tallii, as Charlotte said these exact words when she "snatched up one" of Branwell's toys—the figures that would become the Twelves (qtd. in Harman 61).

Branwell Brontë use the Glass Town stories' Faerie elements to prop up their fictional, British heroes' claims to dominion over Africa and the Africans.

The earlier incorporation of Hegel's thoughts on Africa does not preclude the ways in which the Glass Town stories lean on the *Arabian Nights* for inspiration. Early in her Glass Town compositions, Charlotte links the Chief Genii to Maimoune, a fairy from the *Nights*, in a move that, Alexander argues, also creates "a traditional European connection with the land her adventurers are about to colonize" (*The Brontës* 500). In the story, the narrator tells of giant Britons and Gauls who were rumored to have traveled to Africa and died in antiquity. When he later discovers "an immense skeleton...bound with a long chain of rusty iron," he theorizes that the reader "may fairly conclude that these skeletons are evil genii chained in these deserts by the fairy Maimoune" (Charlotte Brontë, "The Twelve Adventurers" 5-6, 6). Yet the moment that is perhaps the most obviously lifted from the Middle Eastern tales is the event described in the "Arthuriana," when Zamorna—then known as the "Marquis of Duoro"—requests help from "old Branni" to transport himself to Persia (259). With his petition for aid accepted, Zamorna uses "the very carpet on which...Prince Houssain used to travel" to take his own trip to Shiraz, where he steps into what Judith E. Pike calls "a paradisiacal, Orientalist vision" (Charlotte Brontë, "Arthuriana" 259; Pike 217). For Charlotte, "the Orient had become ultimately synonymous" with "imagination itself," thanks to her exposure to the *Nights* and to Lord Byron's *Turkish Tales* (217). However, like Tolkien, who could not accept any existing mythos as uniquely English, Charlotte and Branwell Brontë could not find

sufficient magic in their home country, and were forced to find it in the British colonies—real and imagined—instead.

Some element of magic appears in every British colony mentioned in the Glass Town saga, as part of a worldbuilding decision that inseparably links Faerie to colonization in the Brontës' early writings. After the first appearance of Chief Genius Brannii—dubbed “The Genius of the Storm”—one of the Twelves recalls “the storm that drove us on the coast of Trinidad,” and the Duke of Wellington intimates that Brannii, or another of the Chief Genii, may have been behind their eventual landing on African soil, saying: “I am not so rash as to suppose we of ourselves could cross the ocean in the damaged and leaky vessel we possess” (Charlotte Brontë, “The Twelve Adventurers” 9, 9-10). In “An Adventure in Ireland,” the narrator encounters “a skeleton wrapped in a white sheet,” who transports him to “the mines of Cracone...whose glittering splendour was never excelled by the brightest fairy places,” and then to “a wide desert full of barren rocks and high mountains,” where he spies, “by the unearthly light of his own fiery eyes a royal lion” (16, 17). In the Glass Town stories, the British colonies in Trinidad, Ireland, West Africa, and Persia become sites of emergence for magic and Faerie. Kim Wilkins claims that “borrowing from indigenous culture cannot be but a political act,” and indeed, the Brontës' use of African and Middle Eastern myth as “flavoring” in Glass Town serves no purpose but to further exoticize and alienate the Other in their stories, a move that the adult Charlotte later makes in her novels (136). As the next section will show, this confluence of fantasy with colonial territory could only be achieved by a particular

variety of temporal play—one which strips the colony of its history and allows the author to insert a romanticized English past into its environment.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### TEMPORALITY, FANTASY, AND THE IDEALIZED PAST

This representation of Africa as ahistorical facilitates Charlotte and Branwell Brontës' manipulation of Glass Town's historical aesthetic. Readers of the genre will recognize this as a foundational trope in fantasy literature, because, as Helen Young points out in her "Approaches to Medievalism," such "texts engage with multiple temporalities" (166). Because "[r]ace played a big part in nineteenth-century thinking about culture and the past," it is impossible to divorce the Brontës' fantasy narratives from their relationship to British colonialism (Attebery 335). The historical revisionism inherent in nineteenth-century European opinions of Africa allows Charlotte and Branwell to erase and rewrite both African and British history to their their own liking, crafting out of them a sandbox in which they can establish their own fantasy kingdoms.

Tolkien complicates the relationship between historical fiction and fantasy, preempting Young's analysis of the connection between medievalism and Faerie stories. He writes that his "basic passion," at the outset of writing his Middle-earth stories, was for a "heroic legend on the brink of fairy-tale and history" (*The Silmarillion*, "From a Letter"). There can be no doubt that Tolkien succeeded in making Middle-earth just that, and I argue that the Brontës, through their meddling with historical events and aesthetics, did the same in Glass Town. In their Glass Town stories, Charlotte and Branwell Brontë compose contemporaneous adventure stories, transplant medieval European entertainment into colonial Africa, and revive Renaissance methods of execution and torture in a tale of Glass Town's future.

Charlotte's 1833 novella, *The Green Dwarf*, is perhaps the most anachronistic of the Glass Town tales. In it, Charlotte describes the disguise of Northangerland—then known as Percy—as “a green vest and tunic reaching a little below the knee, laced buckskins, a large dark robe or mantle which hung over one shoulder in ample folds and was partially confined by the broad belt which encircled his waist, and a green bonnet surmounted by a high plume of black feathers” (137). These are not the trappings of a nineteenth-century archer, not even of the sort of dandy who would appear before the likes of Napoleon Bonaparte.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Northangerland's later tongue-lashing of antagonist S' death sounds as if it comes from another time entirely: “Curse you for the hardiest scoundrel that ever deserved a hempen neckcloth...Curse you ten thousand times, I say. How in the name of body and soul dare you face me alone and without arms after our last transaction?” (167). Although it takes place in 1814, *The Green Dwarf* lifts the aesthetic of *Ivanhoe*'s twelfth-century setting, along with its narrative. In doing so, the novella displaces a medieval English society and tournament into the colonial Africa of the early nineteenth century.

Many of the Glass Town tales feature dialogue and events suited to the years in which they occur. Written in 1829, Charlotte's story of “The Twelve Adventurers” lays out the history of Glass Town, which begins when the Duke of Wellington and his comrades “moo[r their] battered ship” on African shores in 1793, and ends with Wellington's crowning as King of “our city”—the unnamed Glass Town—in 1827 (7,

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<sup>7</sup> A favorite figure of Branwell Brontë's, Napoleon appears in *The Green Dwarf*, labeled simply as the Emperor of France.

14). Although nothing in “The Twelve Adventurers” feels inherently anachronistic, it is worthwhile to note that the Twelves’ safe journey from Trinidad to Nigeria—a journey of more than 4,700 miles—in such a damaged vessel alone constitutes what John Clement Ball describes as “an odd blend of [the] spatial and temporal” (169). Writing about *Where the Wild Things Are* as colonial fantasy, Ball argues that “[Max’s] journey is described in an odd blend of spatial and temporal language” (169). In the same nebulous way that Maurice Sendak writes of Max “sail[ing] off through night and day / and in and out of weeks and almost over a year to where the wild things are,” Charlotte Brontë’s narrator claims that, to record the Twelves’ twenty-eight-day journey<sup>8</sup> as it occurred would be “endless” (qtd. in Ball 169; “The Twelve Adventurers” 7). Instead, he writes, “Suffice it to say that after many storms, in which we were driven quite out of our course and knew not in what part of the world we were, we at last discovered land. We sailed along the coast for some time to find a good landing-place. We at last found one” (7). The language that Charlotte Brontë uses here—*out of our course, in what part of the world, at last, for some time, at last*—situates Glass Town in a nebulous space-time, which makes available space for fantasy play within its borders.

Composed ten years after “The Twelve Adventurers,” the last Glass Town tale, *Caroline Vernon*, is devoid of all magical influence. The plot is foregrounded upon Zamorna and Northangerland’s continued rivalry, as Zamorna—who has previously married Mary Percy, and used her as a pawn for revenge against her father in *The Spell*—

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<sup>8</sup> Writing about sailing times, Gregory Toth states that the journey from New York to Liverpool, which is roughly one-thousand-miles shorter than that from Trinidad to Nigeria, took between twenty-one and twenty-nine days in the early nineteenth century (par. 6).

seduces Northangerland's illegitimate teenage daughter, the eponymous Caroline Vernon. Like "The Twelve Adventurers," *Caroline Vernon* feels particularly contemporaneous, but it lacks the magic that once ran so rampant through the Brontës' tales of colonial Africa. Instead, "the Glass Town capital more closely resembles London as described in Branwell's copy of William Darton's *A Description of London*...than the historical [Ashanti] capital of Kamasi" (Harty 111). If the Twelves achieved the same feat Ball attributes to Max, however, that of "journey[ing]...*back* in time," to either "an earlier historical or evolutionary time, or outside of time altogether," then *Caroline Vernon*'s lack of magic may be attributed to the Glass Town colonizers' accomplishments in civilizing their corner of Africa sufficiently to bring it forward, through time, and into the modern world (169). I argue that this is precisely what happens to Glass Town as the Brontës construct it. The colony becomes more and more Anglicized, and the Faerie, which is inextricably linked to the land and its Africanness, dissipates.

Perhaps the most interesting temporal bend in the Brontë children's African stories occurs in Charlotte's attempt to craft the future of Glass Town. Written in 1834, the same year Zamorna becomes King of Angria in the saga's chronology, *A Leaf from an Unopened Volume* tells of his 1858 rise to power as "Emperor Adrian." The story revolves around Quashia's execution and the attempts of three individuals—Quashia's daughter, Zorayda; Zamorna's servant, Finic; and Finic's uncle, Shungaron—to avenge his death by assassinating the new emperor. Both Quashia's decapitation by axe and the rack torture Finic endures have no place in an 1834 narrative, much less one set in 1858. Geoffrey Abbott writes that "In 1820 the Cato Street Conspirators...became the last

persons to be beheaded by ax in England” (“Beheading”). By the time Charlotte Brontë wrote *A Leaf*, it had been fourteen years since England last imposed such a sentence as Quashia’s, and even then, although it was utilized as a punishment for treason, the act was carried out on the criminals’ corpses. Similarly, the rack had not been in use in England since at least 1628, when, David Jardine claims, “all the Judges of England...delivered an unanimous opinion against the legality of torture” (10). Although *A Leaf* contains the same anachronistic language of *The Green Dwarf*, its return to outdated methods of execution and torture are a much more concrete display of the way in which Africa’s supposed ahistorical nature makes it an open sandbox for the Brontës’ exploration of fantasy.

More interesting than the temporal weirdness of the Glass Town saga itself is the way in which it allows the Brontës to use Quashia’s presence to represent the African otherness that the European colonizers attempt to stamp out. In the opening pages of *A Leaf*, it appears that their mission has finally been accomplished. According to Alexander, the story contains “The last reference...in which the Genii are taken seriously,” as Charlotte’s early writings after *A Leaf* relegate them to the mild oath, “By the Genii!” (*An Edition* 332n). Leaving the non-linear composition of the stories aside, that the Genii last hold any power at all over the Glass Town Federation in this story lends credence to the theory that Quashia’s death signals the full Anglicization of Africa. However, the revelations of miscegenation at the end of the story prove that, even in the period of intrigue in Glass Town, Africa’s exoticized power to corrupt remains.

*A Leaf* comprises Zorayda and Finic's connected revenge plots, and it is in this tale of Glass Town's future that we can see the true nature of the Brontës' narratives of colonialism. At the story's climax, a triple reveal unfolds regarding Zorayda's lineage. First, she dramatically declares herself to be "Quamina's daughter, ...the avenger of the unjustly slain," after Zamorna's son, Prince Adrian, seeks her hand in marriage (Charlotte Brontë, *A Leaf* 371). Zamorna immediately reveals Zorayda to be the daughter of two white parents, commanding her to, "look at your father, heroine. It is to a white man you owe existence" (372). Northangerland later reveals himself to be Zorayda's grandfather, as her biological father, Sir William, was his illegitimate son.

Running concurrent to these plot twists are those regarding Zorayda's conspirator Finic, who reveals himself to be the emperor's son—the child who resulted from Zamorna's relationship with an African woman. Although Zamorna refers to Finic's mother Sofala as his "wife," Shungaron tells a different story, calling himself "The brother of one who fell victim to thy perfidy" (376, 374). The text does not offer certainty as to whether that "perfidy" was rape or mere abandonment, but Pike makes it clear that Sofala was "a victim of [Zamorna's] colonial and sexual conquest" (120). Finic is executed for treason, and the white European Zamorna does not incur any social or moral damage from his relationship with the African Sofala.

Cursed by his mother at the time of his birth, Finic grows up with his morality tainted by his African heritage. Like Quashia, he is welcomed into the households of his colonizers, but is unable to feel gratitude toward them for the acts they interpret as kindness. Both black men attempt to fight back against the Brontës' white heroes, and are

eventually executed as Glass Town looks toward a new, white dawn in the union of Zorayda and Prince Adrian. In the case of Zorayda, the racial dynamic is inverted, and we see a white European, raised as the daughter of the Ashantee prince Quashia Quamina, become an “avenger” and “heroine” (Charlotte Brontë, *A Leaf* 371, 372). Zamorna tells her that “such a form was never the daughter of darkness,” indicating that it would be impossible for her to have these designations and lofty aims if she were of African heritage (372). The Africanness of Glass Town can corrupt through miscegenation, but its white European heroes and heroines are left untouched by its darkness.

Charlotte Brontë juxtaposes her unfavorable depictions of Quashia and Finic with the image of a docile and subservient European slave in Persia. When Zamorna travels to the Middle East in “Arthuriana,” the narrator—his brother, Lord Charles Wellesley—remarks on the placid nature of the Persians’ slaves, observing that the Persian doctor’s “Greek...slave lighted a kaleoon, poured out a cup of coffee, and then, with hands folded on his breast, stood waiting further orders” (Charlotte Brontë 260). It is impossible to read this representation of enslaved Europeans without thinking of the way in which the Brontës depict Quashia and other people of African descent as ungrateful barbarians. For Charlotte and Branwell, the Orient offers contradictory views of the world—first, as a place in which European slaves accept bondage with grace, and second, as a world in which time has stopped and magic may flourish.

The representation of part of the real world as a static location that exists outside of history and time allows the fantasy writer to superimpose an idealized version of history onto its surface. Paraphrasing Lee D. Rossi, Wilkins writes that “fantasy fictio[n]”

has a “longing for a (perceived) uncomplicated medieval past” (136). The Brontës, however, are not writing for an uncomplicated past, but for an uncomplicated present instead. Although the Anglo-Ashanti wars rage for the greater part of the nineteenth century, their bloodshed is relegated largely to the margins of the Glass Town stories, which prefer to summarize large-scale conflicts in an effort to emphasize the heroism of the colonizers and the weakness of the indigenous. In “The Twelve Adventurers,” the first encounter with Quashia Quamina’s tribe is described thusly, in its entirety: “It was a very fierce encounter, but we conquered: killed ten, took the Chief prisoner, wounded five, and the remaining four retreated” (Charlotte Brontë 8). The short battle, in which the white Europeans dominate, is described with no gore, merely a tally of casualties, and Charlotte Brontë devotes at least as much attention to the “treaty of peace” made between the British and the Ashantee (8). That the Twelves “achiev[e] dominion over the wild things and their exotic land right away,” and manage to conquer Africa “so easily and non-violently marks the degree to which [their] colonial fantasy *is* a fantasy” (Ball 169). The Duke of Wellington and his men must engage in some violence in order to be heroic, because “ideal manhood [in the nineteenth century] was often expressed through violent action,” but the glossy account of their African landing told in “The Twelve Adventurers” sets up a new, idealized face of modern empire (Wilkins 141). The geopolitical world described in Glass Town is one in which white Europeans are magically—or divinely—and unfailingly called to paternalistic dominion over darker-skinned peoples and their lands.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Although Charlotte and Branwell did not write their stories in order of Glass Town's chronology, a look at the saga's progression reveals that the stories, novellas, and novelettes morph from colonialist fantasy narratives into tales of court intrigue. This transformation coincides with the receding of their setting's Africanness, which dwindles from the ever-imposing threat of Ashantee violence and genii magic in "The Twelve Adventurers" to complete nonexistence in *Caroline Vernon*. Glass Town becomes a non-magical place, once the threat of the dangerous Other has been eliminated. With the threat stamped out, the colonizers may return to a homeland untouched by foreign invaders, but the colonized have had their world destroyed entirely. The magic has been removed from it, cutting them off from the Faerie, but their oppressors are free to travel to a new location and draw out its magic for their own use.

By its very nature of otherworldliness, fantasy opens up a safe space, in which writers and readers can experience lavish adventures, mortal peril, and brushes with evil without putting themselves at risk. Ball quotes Albert Memmi to define the role of the colonizer, who must choose between the "privilege" that colonial life provides, "and a 'mother country,' where he would 'cease to be a superior man'" (176). The Brontës' heroes travel freely throughout the Glass Town Federation, and even to the Middle East, but none of these early stories ever follows them home to England. Although we hear of the occasional return trip, the Duke of Wellington, Northangerland, and Zamorna choose to remain, largely, as virtual kings in their African colony. More important than their

choice to remain in Glass Town, however, is the fact that the Brontës' version of England, unseen in the stories, awaits these heroes with open arms, always ready to welcome them home. They, in turn, welcome darker-skinned, free people from the Orient—who have been either successfully colonized or otherwise vetted by their association with the white Europeans—into their society, but exclude those—such as the Ashantee—that they deem unworthy.

No part of this argument should be taken to mean that fantasy created colonialism or vice-versa. Such a mode of linear causality falls into the trap Wilkins outlines when she writes that “Perspectives that identify medievalism with colonial violence ultimately project that violence into the past, and the present becomes the site of its legacy rather than its ongoing existence” (144). However, “The history of fantasy is bound together with Romantic nationalism, pseudoscientific racism, and empire” (Attebery 336). To that end, the Faerie elements in the Brontës' stories are only present so long as there is an Other left to suppress and colonize. Once eradication has been achieved, the pursuit of empire has been reached, and the fantasy is no longer necessary. Thus, the link between colonialism and fantasy is on full-display in the Glass Town saga.

So now, finally, we can return to the question of what a reading of Glass Town as fantasy offers us. If it is true, as Ursula K. Le Guin posits, that “Our society...can perhaps only describe itself in the global, intuitional language of fantasy,” then taking the Glass Town stories at face-value will turn up only a fraction of their intended meaning and purpose (12). On their face, the Faerie elements of the Brontës' early stories serve as a means of furthering the colonialist power seized by their fictional heroes. In these

writings, fantasy became a medium that allowed the Brontës to crystallize their juvenile understanding of the Victorian period into a narrative that converted modern empire into the stuff of myth and legend. Reading the Glass Town stories as fantasy literature allows us to see how the saga combines Faerie and the exoticism of Africa and the Orient into a narrative vehicle designed to explore the Brontës' relative positions in life: as collaborators to one other, as authors to their works, and as British citizens living in a rapidly expanding empire.

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