

VIEWS & REVIEWS

IN AND OUT OF HOSPITAL

Saving Charlotte Brontë

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With Dickens' 200th birthday only days away, Britain's love affair with 19th century novelists continues. The Brontë sisters have another film out, and it is only two years since Elizabeth Gaskell's work was last on television. What impresses me is how productive they all were in their short lives.

Emily and Anne Brontë died in their 20s, and Gaskell and Dickens in their 50s, but the death that still grieves me, as a Yorkshire obstetrician, is that of Charlotte Brontë. Newly married and pregnant at 38, she soon began vomiting. Her friend and biographer Mrs Gaskell later wrote that "a wren would have starved on what she ate during those last six weeks."

Today her hyperemesis would be treated with a routine drip, but sometimes cure can be elusive, particularly if the patient resents the pregnancy. When I was a student, before the Abortion Act of 1967, our textbooks pointed out that hyperemesis can lead to liver failure and it may be necessary to terminate the pregnancy.

This, I assumed, was not an option for Miss Brontë—sorry, Mrs Nicholls—in 1854. Recently, however, I was invited to write a review of the history of abortion. I was surprised when my online searches of the *BMJ* and the *Lancet* revealed that criminal abortion was available then in England's industrial cities. That and infanticide, as the millponds testified.

I wondered if Mrs Gaskell knew. She wrote about Manchester's slums but she was married to a Unitarian minister. Had she heard what women resorted to, long before contraception? Did she sympathise?

Coincidentally, another invitation arrived soon afterwards, to speak to the Gaskell Society. It meets in Knutsford (the real life Cranford of Gaskell's novel of the same name) in a Methodist chapel. I felt hesitant about raising this question but it was answered matter of factly, and I was sent a photocopy from Gaskell's collected letters: "How I wish I had known!" Gaskell wrote. "I do fancy that if I had come, I could have induced her,—even though they had all felt angry with me at first,—to do what was so absolutely necessary, for her very life. Poor poor creature!"

But nobody had told Mrs Gaskell about Brontë's sickness. Charlotte was a parson's daughter, and in her poignant final letters she seems to accept God's will. Could her friend have persuaded her? If she had, would we ever have known?

Cite this as: *BMJ* 2012;344:e567

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