Catherine Earnshaw and feminist literature
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A gripping characterization for its time, Emily Brontë's Catherine Earnshaw, the female protagonist of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), shocked readers by exhibiting rapacious sexual desire. In an era that lauded the domesticity of Queen Victoria and her rapidly growing family, Catherine displays an unswerving love of horses and freedom on the English moors, a subtextual rejection of the homeyness and sedate behavior demanded of a genteel landowner's daughter. From early girlhood she is the "wild, wicked slip" (Brontë, 45). She demands adventure by pairing with Heathcliff, a Gypsy boy her father rescues and rears. She bonds with Heathcliff, embracing him as her "all in all" (*ibid.*, 124). In her diary she confesses, "H. and I are going to rebel—we took our initiatory step this evening," the preface to their "scamper on the moor" (*ibid.*, 25, 27). She expresses a gendered duality by adopting Heathcliff's persona; as though seeing herself as a male child, she declares, "He's more myself than I am" (*ibid.*, 82). Her need for liberty parallels his misery at Wuthering Heights, where Catherine's brother, Hindley, browbeats and demeans the boy as an unfitting addition to the Earnshaw dynasty.

In a subtextual expression of the many sides to the female personality, Catherine's ambivalence flickers between two extremes—the gentrified daughter and the headstrong hoyden. Her inability to settle on a single personality type dooms her to a conflicted adulthood as first one, then the other side of her nature takes control. After one of her rovings with Heathcliff near Thrushcross Grange, she suddenly drops the pagan side of her nature to develop courtesies suited to the Lintons' stable lifestyle. After a five-week stay while her foot heals after a bite by the dog Skulker, she discovers that sparkling chandeliers, gilt edgings on the ceiling, and deep red carpets are elements of the good life that gratify and elevate her. To make herself worthy of the neighbors' hospitality, she abandons her Gypsy near-brother, abjures the wanderings that have bound them, and wears the ill-fitting mask of a lady. For the time being suppression of the natural woman affords her a happiness and belonging that she has never known at Wuthering Heights.

Brontë dramatizes the way self-deception takes its toll. The change in Catherine bodes ill for her and for Heathcliff by forcing him into the role of hostile aggressor. Having sold out her real self for the position of self-centered, spoiled wife of Edgar Linton, Catherine tries to maintain a private love for Heathcliff, her male alter ego. Failing to convince herself that marriage to Edgar gives her a chance to refine Heathcliff, Catherine discovers that a passive husband has no chance of satisfying her sexual longings. Brontë punishes her heroine for betrayal by picturing Heathcliff wooing Isabella Linton and by causing Catherine to die young in the days after childbirth. As she slips away, Heathcliff charges her with self-deceit: "*Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy. . . . You have killed yourself" (*ibid.*, 158).

The author uses Catherine's sickroom ravings to exhibit the error of suppressing the sexual side of human nature for the sake of wealth and prestige. Despairing in a predelivery fever, Catherine lashes out at the housekeeper, Nelly Dean, her surrogate mother, and dies two hours after giving birth to a seventh-month baby. Catherine's soul, still vital with unrequited passion, refuses Christian burial. Wandering the moor in a downpour of sleet and snow, like an Irish banshee or the mythic La Llorona, after 20 years of solitude, she scratches at the window and wails for her childhood love.
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