

The Performance and Temporality of Illness in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*

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Illness pervades *Wuthering Heights*. Most characters become sick at least once in Emily Brontë's novel. When Catherine falls ill after Heathcliff's return, she tells her husband, 'I don't want you, Edgar; I'm past wanting you. [...] [A]ll you had in me is gone.'¹ Edgar exclaims, '[M]onths of sickness could not cause such a change!'² This 'change' Edgar observes is not simply physical deterioration or psychological distress. Catherine has so transformed that she is 'past wanting' her husband. He has no claim to her; her previous identity as his wife has disappeared. Both Catherine and Edgar link illness and its effects with temporal change. Wanting Edgar is a desire of the past. Catherine simultaneously enters a future beyond Edgar and returns to a past time before their relationship. Edgar identifies illness as the cause of this change: though he is shocked by its rapidity and extremity, he understands sickness as potentially transformative. This exchange between Edgar and Catherine reveals ideas central to reading illness in *Wuthering Heights*: an association between illness and time, and the power of illness to stimulate identity transformation.

What are the relationships between illness, time, and identity in *Wuthering Heights*? Previous scholarship on illness in the novel has explored its effects on plot (narrative time) and character (novelistic identity). Susan Gorsky argues that Brontë uses illness 'to elucidate other themes, control plot, direct meaning, and define the characters' identity, relationships, and

1 For clarity, I refer to Catherine née Earnshaw as 'Catherine' and to her daughter, Catherine Linton, as 'Cathy'. Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, ed. by Linda H. Peterson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 124.

2 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 125.

significance.³ While Gorsky focuses on reading Catherine through gendered perceptions of illness, Dennis Bloomfield builds upon her work by asserting that illness, injury, and death almost entirely drive the novel's plot.⁴ Lakshmi Krishnan presents illness as a narrative tool used by the characters themselves, arguing Catherine and Heathcliff create their escapes by willing themselves ill.⁵ Building on this scholarship, this paper interrogates the power of illness to both shape narrative time and transform characters.

A key to this connection lies in the novel's frame narrative, itself prompted by illness. Lockwood, the new tenant at Thrushcross Grange, visits Wuthering Heights and meets Nelly, who begins relating the history of the estates' inhabitants. Soon, Lockwood falls ill. Most of the novel is conveyed by Nelly to Lockwood—and, by extension, the reader—during his convalescence. Hosanna Krienke defines convalescence as a period of time rather than a bodily condition, 'a phase of ongoing recuperation following a serious health crisis' necessary to ensure full recovery.⁶ Krienke argues that Victorians viewed the convalescent individual as neither sick nor healthy, 'hovering between possible relapse and potential recovery.'⁷ Convalescence is a liminal period when time moves differently and one's identity, i.e., 'sick' versus 'healthy', is uncertain. Convalescence was often accompanied by novel reading; though viewed as overstimulating to women, novels were prescribed to convalescent men as therapeutic.⁸ Since he is 'too weak to read', Lockwood treats the story Nelly tells him as a novel, describing her 'tale', its 'chief incidents', 'hero', and 'heroine'.⁹ He expresses his belief in the restorative effects of stories: 'I'll extract wholesome medicines from Mrs. Dean's bitter herbs.'¹⁰ This statement reveals an approach to illness shared with the novel's other characters; the seemingly negative illness experience promises benefits to those who use it cleverly.

3 Susan Gorsky, "'I'll Cry Myself Sick': Illness in *Wuthering Heights*", *Literature and Medicine*, 18 (1999), 173–91 (p. 173).

4 Dennis Bloomfield, 'An Analysis of the Causes and Effects of Sickness and Death in *Wuthering Heights*', *Brontë Studies*, 36 (2011), p. 290.

5 Lakshmi Krishnan, "'It has Devoured My Existence': The Power of Will and Illness in *The Bride of Lammermoor and Wuthering Heights*", *Brontë Studies*, 32 (2007), 31–40 (p. 32).

6 Hosanna Krienke, *Convalescence in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: The Afterlife of Victorian Illness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 2.

7 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 4.

8 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 74.

9 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 95.

10 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 145.

Lockwood harnesses illness to serve his own ends. Nelly begins the story when he is healthy. As he becomes invested in the tale, he begs Nelly to continue storytelling late into the night, insisting that he will sleep late the next morning regardless because he will be sick: 'I prognosticate for myself an obstinate cold, at least.'¹¹ This promise of future illness is enough to detain Nelly and affect the time of the novel: by constructing imminent illness, Lockwood prolongs the story. While Gorsky and Bloomfield both mention illness as the catalyst for the novel's telling, neither analyses its implications. Lockwood's actions suggest that illness can be invoked strategically and can influence time for the novel and its characters.

Brontë situates the narrative not only within illness but also within a *performance*. Most of the novel is narrated by Nelly to an in-text audience, Lockwood. Nelly acts upon the narrative as Lockwood's illness does; controlling narrative time, abridging and prolonging the tale as she sees fit. Nelly as a character only falls ill once, but this illness permits the courtship between Catherine's daughter Cathy and Heathcliff's son Linton—as though the narrator Nelly renders the character Nelly ill to advance the plot. Nelly's narration and Lockwood's contrived cold link illness, temporality, and performativity, a key lens for understanding illness's effects on time and on identity formation. This understanding of illness as a performance that *both acts upon and is enacted by Brontë's characters* differentiates my analysis from previous scholarship.

Drawing on Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity and on theories linking time to illness and identity, this article reads illness in *Wuthering Heights* as a performance which produces the ill subject and as a non-normative temporality. These powers of illness lead Brontë's characters to perform illness for their own gain. Focusing on Catherine's illnesses as case studies, I argue that, when ill, Catherine experiences time differently and changes as a subject. She ultimately turns to illness as an alternative to normative time and its expected performances. Reading illness as a performed temporality allows us to understand how Brontë treats illness not as a debilitating burden or a sanctifying ritual but as a liminal state filled with the potential for identity reformation and as a narrative model for *Wuthering Heights*.

In this paper, 'illness' refers to a range of mental and physical dis-ease, both literal sickness and more abstract conditions of disorder. Nineteenth-century medicine did not strictly differentiate between physical and mental illness. Many Victorian medical theorists believed mental dis-

11 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 71.

order resulted from physical impulses controlling the mind.¹² Conversely, mental overexertion could produce physical maladies.¹³ Given this relationship, and frequent associations of physical and mental dis-ease, like fever and delirium, this paper examines both physical sickness and mental disorder. Within ‘illness’ I also include convalescence; while acknowledging the peculiar liminality of convalescence, I use ‘illness’ to encapsulate the full experience beyond health’s boundaries, from sickness through convalescence. I do not conflate these states lightly; rather, I embrace the difficulty of delineating where sickness ends and convalescence begins in both nineteenth-century medicine and Brontë’s novel.

Some scholars exploring illness in *Wuthering Heights* focus on particular afflictions like psychiatric disorders (see Gorsky) and consumption (see Tankard).¹⁴ My reading will not significantly distinguish between diseases. While the novel’s illnesses are not all the same, they are all *individualized* ailments. Brontë does not depict contagious diseases sweeping across populations; instead, her illnesses seem akin to Susan Sontag’s description of consumption in *Illness as Metaphor*: ‘a mysterious disease of individuals [...] that singled out its victims one by one.’¹⁵ As Katherine Byrne explains in *Tuberculosis in the Victorian Imagination*, tuberculosis’s spread was not understood for most of the nineteenth century:

individual susceptibility seemed dictated by an unknown X-factor which could be perceived as the workings of fate or Providence, or which could be the result of the victim’s own actions, a comment on the inherent pathogenicity of their behaviour or their lives.¹⁶

Consumption’s perceived specificity encouraged the assumption that something about the individual predisposed them to illness. Catherine’s first fever, though contagious enough to kill Edgar and Isabella’s parents, is brought about by her own actions, resulting in specific, not mass, conta-

12 Krishnan, “It has Devoured My Existence”, p. 32.

13 Clark Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature: The Making of the Romantic Disease* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 114.

14 Gorsky, “‘I’ll Cry Myself Sick’”; Alex Tankard, “‘I Hate Everybody!’: The Unnatural Consumptive in *Wuthering Heights* (1847)”, in *Tuberculosis and Disabled Identity in Nineteenth Century Literature: Invalid Lives* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, Springer Nature, 2018), pp. 99–133.

15 Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor; and, AIDS and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books, 2002), p. 39.

16 Katherine Byrne, *Tuberculosis and the Victorian Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 3.

gion. While any illness can serve as a metaphor, particularly in literature, diseases of individuals easily accumulate personalized meanings.

The illnesses in *Wuthering Heights* are difficult to differentiate and conspicuously ambiguous. Even if, as Bloomfield contends, modern scholars can deduce specific illnesses based on their descriptions in the novel, Brontë is reluctant to diagnose her characters.¹⁷ Catherine's climactic illness is retroactively '*denominated* a brain fever', suggesting that naming the illness after the fact may not truly describe what Catherine experienced.¹⁸ While scholars have read Isabella, Linton, Edgar, and even Catherine as consumptive—see Tankard, Bloomfield, and Gilbert and Gubar—Brontë names 'consumption' explicitly only in reference to Catherine's sister-in-law Frances, a diagnosis vehemently denied by Frances's husband.¹⁹ Bloomfield acknowledges that diagnosis proved difficult in Brontë's time due to similarities in symptoms.²⁰ Brontë plays on this imprecision when describing Isabella and Edgar's fatal illnesses, evoking both consumption (itself an umbrella term for various 'wasting diseases') and fever (equally a symptom and a disease): they die from 'a kind of *fever*, slow at its commencement, but incurable, and rapidly *consuming* life towards the close.'²¹ The ambiguity of Brontë's illnesses reflects her understanding of illness as a state of unsettled categorical distinctions. Following Brontë, I avoid a diagnostic approach and employ scholarship on several illnesses—mainly consumption, fever (as 'brain fever' or symptom rather than epidemic), and madness—in my reading of illness in *Wuthering Heights* as a performance and a temporality.

Many characters in the novel, like Lockwood, manipulate if not summon their own illnesses. During a fight with Edgar, Catherine threatens to 'cry [her]self sick' if he does not leave.²² Nelly corroborates Catherine's power: 'you'd better be riding home, or else she will be sick, only to grieve us.'²³ According to Catherine, Edgar also strategically performs illness as an avoidance tactic: 'He always contrives to be sick at the least cross! I

17 Bloomfield, 'An Analysis', p. 293.

18 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 129. My emphasis.

19 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 72–73; Tankard, "'I Hate Everybody!'" ; Bloomfield, 'An Analysis'; Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1979).

20 Bloomfield, 'An Analysis', p. 292.

21 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 173. My emphasis.

22 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 79.

23 Ibid.

gave a few sentences of commendation to Heathcliff, and he, either for a headache or a pang of envy, began to cry.²⁴ The verb ‘contrive’ emphasizes how Edgar fabricates illness to cut off the conversation. Linton similarly exaggerates his illness to punish Cathy for hurting him:

He sighed and moaned like one under great suffering; and kept it up for a quarter of an hour, on purpose to distress his cousin, apparently, for whenever he caught a stifled sob from her he put renewed pain and pathos into the inflexions of his voice.²⁵

Through Linton’s outward performance of his illness, he prolongs his pain and Cathy’s guilt. Perhaps the most comedic invocation of sickness, in its utter transparency, occurs when Cathy discovers, in front of her father, that Nelly has found her love letters to Linton. Desperate for a diversion, Cathy exclaims, ‘Ellen! come upstairs—I’m sick!’²⁶ Cathy does not perform illness beyond this declaration, yet even this is effective: she manages to detain Nelly and defer her father’s discovery of the relationship with Linton. Illness is not only a tool for the strong-willed, as Krishnan argues.²⁷ Any character can easily summon illness.

Why do Brontë’s characters turn to illness? In each of the above cases, the ‘ill’ person gains the ability to manipulate time and other characters; to prolong, truncate, detain. Other characters respond to the ill person’s demands: Edgar leaves Catherine, Nelly goes with Cathy. Susan Baur articulates this power of illness by describing illness as a socially constructed, ritualized ‘role’ with rules for ‘how sick persons ought to act and how others ought to treat them.’²⁸ This deference to the ill gives Linton power over Cathy and permits Edgar to cut off a conversation about Heathcliff. While the sick person gains certain privileges, ‘exemptions, services, and special gifts,’ they can only enter the ‘role’ once those around them agree that they are ill.²⁹ By extending Baur’s suggestion of illness’s performativity in her description of sickness as a *role* that allows a person to *act* in a certain way, we can say that illness requires an audience.

Brontë’s language emphasizes illness’s performativity: when Catherine falls ill after Heathcliff leaves Wuthering Heights, Nelly describes the

24 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 100.

25 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 211.

26 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 201.

27 Krishnan, “‘It has Devoured My Existence’”, p. 34.

28 Susan Baur, *Hypochondria: Woeful Imaginings* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1989), p. 41.

29 Baur, *Hypochondria*, p. 44.

‘scene she acted’; when Catherine is ill again after Heathcliff’s return, she ‘exhibit[s] a fit of frenzy’ and Nelly ‘could not get rid of the notion that she acted a part of her disorder.’³⁰ Catherine’s illness is a performance and Nelly is her necessary audience; the reader sees Catherine, and much of the novel, through Nelly’s eyes, the in-text audience to illness. In fact, when Catherine promises to ‘cry [her]self sick,’ she reveals that it is through the performance of illness that she makes herself ill. Butler’s theory of gender performativity helps us understand this constitutive nature of illness in *Wuthering Heights*. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler articulates how performative ‘acts, gestures, [and] enactments’ manufacture and sustain the appearance of internal identity; through these acts, the subject is constituted.³¹ Butler considers gender ‘a corporeal style, an “act,”’ that is performative, intentional, repeated, and public.³² Illness in *Wuthering Heights* can be read similarly; the performance of illness—Catherine’s crying, Linton’s sighs and moans—creates the ill subject. (Because illness does not rely, like gender, on an illusion of fixity—because illness can be a temporary state—it does not rely on repetition to simulate stable meaning. Illness performed once, like Cathy’s sudden sickness, can be effective.) Nelly’s scepticism regarding Catherine’s illness—her inability to ‘get rid of the notion that she acted a part’—only emphasizes the performativity of illness in the novel. Catherine is an obvious performer; her intentions are visible to Nelly, drawing attention to the constructed nature of the ill ‘role’ Catherine aims to assume. Just as Butler sees gender as ‘neither true nor false, neither real nor apparent’ because it is always performative, Brontë asks us not to interrogate whether her characters are ‘faking it’ or not but to resist that binary altogether.³³ Her characters’ illnesses are all real and fabricated. As we will see, the characters both construct their illnesses and are reconstructed by illness.

Catherine’s first transformative illness experience occurs when she is bitten by a dog at Thrushcross Grange. Though suffering from a wound rather than a disease, Catherine is ‘sick; not from fear [...] but from pain.’³⁴ This description elides injury and illness. Brontë again describes Catherine’s injury with the language of illness when she writes that Catherine

30 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 93, 117, 119. (My emphasis)

31 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York; London: Routledge, 2006), p. 185.

32 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 190.

33 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 193.

34 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 61.

remained at Thrushcross Grange until 'her ankle was thoroughly cured'.³⁵ The blurring of injury and illness, and the frequency with which nineteenth-century wounds resulted in illness through infection, invite us to read Catherine's five-week recovery as a convalescence.

After her convalescence, Catherine performs identity differently. Brontë parallels physical recuperation and behavioural reformation: Catherine leaves Thrushcross Grange when 'her ankle was thoroughly cured, and her manners much improved'.³⁶ While her ankle heals, her manners are cured, 'reform[ed]' to her sister-in-law's desires.³⁷ When Catherine returns to *Wuthering Heights*, Nelly finds that:

instead of a wild, hatless little savage jumping into the house, and rushing to squeeze us all breathless, there lighted from a handsome black pony a very dignified person, with brown ringlets falling from the cover of a feathered beaver, and a long cloth habit which she was obliged to hold up with both hands that she might sail in.

Hindley lifted her from her horse, exclaiming delightedly, 'Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you—you look like a lady now.'³⁸

Catherine has learned to perform her class and gender; she knows how to look like a lady. She arrives on horseback rather than on foot, must be lifted from her mount, gives Nelly her hat and habit so she does not mess her tamed curls, and kisses the flour-covered servant as 'it would not have done to give [her] a hug'.³⁹ Catherine is no longer a 'wild, hatless little savage' but a 'very dignified person', so transformed that her brother scarcely recognizes her. Brontë omits Catherine's name from the description of her arrival, inviting us to imagine Nelly is truly describing two different people until Hindley names her: Cathy, a beauty, a 'lady'. Catherine 'pull[s] off her gloves, and display[s] fingers wonderfully whitened with doing nothing, and staying indoors', exhibiting her class and race through her clean, white hands.⁴⁰ The clean, white Catherine contrasts with the 'very black' and 'dirty' Heathcliff, who refuses to wash his face and brush his hair.⁴¹ His ap-

35 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 63.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 64.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

pearance displays his lesser status: working class, wild, and, given the novel's repeated emphasis on his dark features, not quite white. Nelly scolds Heathcliff for acting as though Catherine is 'converted into a stranger by her grand dress,' but her convalescence has indeed transformed her.⁴²

The potential for illness to transform the ill subject was recognized by Brontë's contemporaries. In "The Pleasures of Sickness"—published in 1822 in 'the most influential and innovative literary periodical of the era,' *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, which the Brontë children grew up reading—the anonymous essayist argues that sickness enables self-discovery:

How few, how very few, in this busy world of ours, have time to commune with their own hearts, and to be still! What discoveries does not such a state enable them to make! How many a man has run through a long career, without scraping the smallest intimacy with that important personage—himself!⁴³

Illness exchanges the too-fast time of 'this busy world of ours' with stillness and self-reflection. While ill, a man may discover himself a 'fine fellow' or a '*mauvais sujet* [literally bad subject], whose deceits he never detected': 'Although it will not be in his power to *cut* this very unpleasant connexion, he may do better by accomplishing the improvement and reformation of his inseparable companion.'⁴⁴ Illness enables more than self-reflection: it facilitates an encounter with one's subjecthood and the potential 'reformation' of this subject. Krienke identifies similar potential for identity reconfiguration in convalescence. A prolonged liminal state between sickness and health, convalescence avoids distinct narratives of illness; it is 'neither a medical crisis nor a static condition, but a transitional period (though a transition to *what* was uncertain).'⁴⁵ For Krienke, the power of convalescence, particularly in literature, is its ability to destabilize identities: 'During convalescent time, bodily states, social roles, and prognostic futures were all unknown and unsettled.'⁴⁶ While ill, one's subjecthood is in flux.

42 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 67.

43 Megan J. Coyer, *Literature and Medicine in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine, 1817–1858* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), p. 1; Carol Bock, "'Our plays': The Brontë Juvenilia," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Brontës*, ed. by Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), pp. 34–52 (p. 47); Anonymous, "The Pleasures of Sickness," *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 12 (1822), 199–205.

44 Anonymous, 'The Pleasures of Sickness,' p. 201. Original emphasis.

45 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 5.

46 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 7.

The performance of illness in *Wuthering Heights* thus not only creates the ill subject but also enables identity transformation in other ways. Through convalescence, Brontë transforms Catherine.

The rapidity of Catherine's change indicates illness's relationship with time. In only five weeks, spent out of the reader's sight, Catherine transforms from wild child into dignified lady. Emily Datskou reads Catherine's sudden maturation as an example of how Brontë 'creates a queer temporality in the narrative [...] by removing society's milestones that signify normative growth and the passing of time (e.g., adolescence, marriage, formal education).'⁴⁷ Jack Halberstam defines 'queer time' as existing beyond 'the temporal frames of bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance.'⁴⁸ Heteronormative time constructs itself through milestones—adolescence, marriage, reproduction—and values—the importance of passing wealth onto one's children—characterized by what Lee Edelman calls 'reproductive futurism', society's obsession with reproducing its own heteronormative culture and capitalist economy through the literal and symbolic Child.⁴⁹ In *Wuthering Heights*, Datskou argues, this heteronormative time is disrupted. Characters like Catherine are 'largely kept out of the narrative during their adolescence, re-emerging *after* they have matured': 'the middle stage of development is missing, and thus there is no sense of progression.'⁵⁰ While Datskou turns to queer temporalities because of her investment in familial dynamics, cyclical narratives, and the queer child, my reading finds queer time most useful in its similarities to and alliance with theories of illness as temporality. Many of the periods Datskou discuss as queer temporalities—Catherine's convalescence, Linton's childhood, pregnancies and subsequent deaths—are marked by illness.

Just as Butler assigns a temporal dimension to identity performance, describing gender as a 'constituted *social temporality*', I argue that Brontë writes illness as a temporality too.⁵¹ Several scholars of nineteenth-century illness describe how illness creates its own time. Krienke proposes that convalescence produces non-linear 'convalescent time', a lingering period

47 Emily Datskou, 'Queer Temporalities: Resisting Family, Reproduction and Lineage in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*', *Brontë Studies*, 45 (2020), 132–43, p. 138.

48 Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives* (New York; London: New York University Press, 2005), p. 6.

49 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2004), pp. 14–21.

50 Datskou, 'Queer Temporalities', p. 139.

51 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 191.

of fitful, uncertain transition not unlike Edelman's queer time.⁵² Sontag calls tuberculosis 'a disease of time; it speeds up life, highlights it, spiritualizes it.'⁵³ Whether lingering or lurching forward, illness, like queerness, exists outside normative time. Building on theories of queer temporalities, disability activists and academics theorized 'crip time' which Ellen Samuels quotes Alison Kafer summarizing: 'rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds.'⁵⁴ In language not unlike descriptions of queer time or convalescent time, Samuels writes: 'Disability and illness have the power to extract us from linear, progressive time with its normative life stages and cast us into a wormhole of backward and forward acceleration, jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings.'⁵⁵ Synthesizing queer time, crip time, and the time of nineteenth-century illness, I use the term 'ill time' to describe the temporalities of illness in *Wuthering Heights*.

Through convalescence, Catherine experiences ill time. Her convalescence becomes a condensed adolescence; ill time lurches her forward into ladyhood. This temporal shift is emphasized by the evocation of colonial historical time: the 'wild [...] savage' Catherine progresses into a tamed lady. Though pre-dating Darwin's theories of evolution, the text implies the savage and primitive (racially connotated) has been replaced by the civilized and cultured (and white), entering on horseback as master of nature. Rather than providing an escape from normative time, Catherine's convalescence hastens her maturation into a racialized, classed, gendered subject. Brontë's ill time is thus not necessarily liberatory. Samuels begins 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time' by considering 'the less appealing aspects of crip time, aspects that are harder to see as liberatory, more challenging to find a way to celebrate.'⁵⁶ Like crip time and gender, illness, for Brontë, can be both constricting and enabling.

Catherine constructs her next illness when Heathcliff leaves *Wuthering Heights*. Facing Edgar's marriage proposal and Heathcliff's disappearance, she spends hours in the cold and rain displaying her distress—pacing, crying, yelling—before becoming delirious, feverish, and 'dangerously ill.'⁵⁷ If

52 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 1.

53 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 14.

54 Ellen Samuels, 'Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time', in *Disability Visibility: First-Person Stories from the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Alice Wong (New York: Vintage Books, 2020), pp. 189–96 (p. 189).

55 Samuels, 'Six Ways', p. 190.

56 Samuels, 'Six Ways', p. 189.

57 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 93.

fever is ‘a tactic deployed by the body as it responds to a stressful stimulus or internal disorder’, fever is here deployed by *Catherine* in response to stressful stimuli and internal disorder.⁵⁸ Byrne argues that nineteenth-century illness offered ‘a means of resisting time’, and Catherine turns to it for that purpose: to resist time and the (hetero)normative expectations that come with it.⁵⁹ Catherine refuses to remove her wet clothes or go to bed, as though refusing to move could prevent a future as Edgar’s wife without Heathcliff.

Catherine again emerges from convalescence performing new identities: ‘she esteemed herself a woman, and our mistress’.⁶⁰ Illness thrusts Catherine into adulthood. Brontë calls her a ‘woman’ for the first time, and Catherine acts as ‘mistress’ of both *Wuthering Heights* and *Thrushcross Grange*. Causing the death of Edgar’s parents, Catherine’s fever remakes hierarchies and hastens time: Catherine and Edgar must grow up and inherit the roles of Mr. and Mrs. Linton, master and mistress, husband and wife. Brontë treats illness as a more significant rite of passage than their marriage, jumping forward ‘three years’ and mentioning their marriage in passing as ‘the day he led her to Gimmerton Chapel’.⁶¹ Rather than removing the markers of heteronormative time altogether, as Datskou argues, Brontë instead replaces them with ill time. Heteronormative stages of subject formation such as adolescence, marriage, and, as we will see, pregnancy are obscured or infected by illness.

Although Catherine does not permanently resist time with this illness, she refuses to relinquish the ‘privileges’ illness affords her, insisting her ‘recent illness gave her a claim to be treated with consideration’.⁶² Among the ‘exemptions, services, and special gifts’ afforded to the sick, Baur emphasizes ‘above all, attention and reassurance’.⁶³ The doctor prescribes Catherine reassurance, warning the others that ‘she would not bear crossing much, she ought to have her own way; and it was nothing less than murder, in her eyes, for any one to presume to stand up and contradict her’.⁶⁴ In the 1825 essay ‘The Convalescent’, Charles Lamb describes how illness allows the sick man to act like a king, lording over his household: ‘To be

58 Christopher Hamlin, *More than Hot: A Short History of Fever* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2014), p. viii.

59 Byrne, *Tuberculosis*, p. 53.

60 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 93.

61 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 94.

62 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 93.

63 Baur, *Hypochondria*, p. 44.

64 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 93.

sick is to enjoy monarchical prerogatives.⁶⁵ Baur writes that privileging the ill is usually ‘a temporary state of affairs, but it can be incorporated [...] into a family’s routine.’⁶⁶ Such is the case in *Wuthering Heights*: the doctor ‘tutor[s]’ Hindley in attending to Catherine’s demands, and Edgar and Isabella indulge Catherine, ‘honeysuckles embracing the thorn.’⁶⁷ Catherine—‘saucier, and more passionate, and haughtier than ever’—enjoys the monarchical prerogatives of Lamb’s sick-made-sovereign man beyond the confines of the sickroom.⁶⁸ Through illness, she seeks control she did not have when faced with Edgar’s marriage proposal and Heathcliff’s disappearance.

When Heathcliff returns, however, Catherine must face the limitations of her situation. Gorsky attributes Catherine’s final illness to this internal conflict: ‘Suffering from not being allowed to be herself, from conflict with society, and from thwarted love, divided from her soul and her soul-mate, she both acts out and falls ill.’⁶⁹ I argue that Catherine acts out *by* falling ill. While Gorsky reads Catherine’s illness as a destruction caused by breaking society’s rules, I, like Krishnan, see it as a means of resistance. Catherine initially performs illness to punish Edgar and Heathcliff. She orders Nelly to tell Edgar she is ‘in danger of being seriously ill’ to ‘frighten him’ and declares ‘if I cannot keep Heathcliff for my friend—if Edgar will be mean and jealous—I’ll try to break their hearts by breaking my own. That will be a prompt way of finishing all.’⁷⁰ Catherine’s true desire emerges here: to finish all, to end this existence. Unlike Heathcliff, who, as a man, can pursue revenge via property transfers and inheritance schemes, Catherine can only exert her will on her body.⁷¹ While Krishnan reads Catherine’s illness as an escape enabled by her strong will, I argue that this escape is only possible because of illness’s performative nature and non-normative temporality: Catherine turns to it to resist normative performances and expectations.

Catherine exhibits her most extreme performance of illness. She makes a spectacle of illness, ‘exhibiting a fit of frenzy’: ‘she lay dashing her head against the arm of the sofa, and grinding her teeth [...]’. In a few seconds

65 Charles Lamb, ‘The Convalescent’, in *The Last Essays of Elia* (London: Bradbury and Evans, 1833), pp. 70–77 (p. 74).

66 Baur, *Hypochondria*, p. 44.

67 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 93, 95.

68 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 93.

69 Gorsky, “‘I’ll Cry Myself Sick’”, p. 178.

70 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 115–16.

71 Krishnan, “‘It has Devoured My Existence’”, p. 36.

she stretched herself out stiff, and turned up her eyes, while her cheeks, at once blanched and livid, assumed the aspect of death.⁷² Catherine performs as a ‘stiff’, a corpse marked by ‘the aspect of death’, as though death, like illness, can be created through performance. Brontë leaves Catherine’s illness ambiguous; it is simultaneously a return of her earlier delirium, a seizure, and consumption; Edgar is horrified by the blood on Catherine’s lips, which can be read as evidence that she bit her tongue during her fit or as the tell-tale bloody mouth of tuberculosis.⁷³

Catherine’s illness induces a period of transition; though, as in convalescence, transition *into what* is uncertain. Like the convalescent hovering between relapse and recovery, Catherine is initially torn between life and death: ‘as soon as I learn how [Edgar] feels, I’ll choose between these two—either to starve, at once, that would be no punishment unless he had a heart—or to recover, and leave the country.’⁷⁴ Catherine’s illness is an in-between, hybrid place. She is simultaneously strategic and irrational, lucidly weighing how to cause Edgar the most pain, then babbling about the moors. One moment, she is ‘violent’, tearing apart her pillow; the next, she is ‘childish’ and calm, ‘supported on one arm’ as she sorts the pillow’s feathers.⁷⁵ Though Catherine’s illness is not diagnosed, her fever is emphasized. She taunts Edgar with her ability to make herself feverish: ‘Your cold blood cannot be worked into a fever—your veins are full of ice water—but mine are boiling, and the sight of such chillness makes them dance.’⁷⁶ After her fit of frenzy, she ‘increased her feverish bewilderment to madness.’⁷⁷ The delirium associated with fever serves as a potent example of the unsettled state of illness. Christopher Hamlin describes fever as a state in which ‘all aspects of being are simultaneously under attack’, leaving them open to alteration:

Just as deathbed performance displayed important truths of character, one’s enactment of fever revealed otherwise inaccessible elements of self, if in a more ambiguous way. [...] Reason and control no longer rule; the will succumbs to an abject sensate body; the senses fail or plumb new, barely expressible realities. [...] Delirium may obliterate

72 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 117.

73 Ibid.; Bloomfield, ‘An Analysis’, p. 294.

74 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 119.

75 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 120.

76 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 116–17.

77 Ibid.

the self altogether, usually temporarily but sometimes permanently, or it may reveal a self normally hidden.⁷⁸

Through the 'enactment' of fever, one can obliterate the self or reveal a self 'otherwise inaccessible', accessing 'new, barely expressible realities'. Hamlin's description emphasizes illness as both an intentionally performed 'enactment' and a state in which 'the will succumbs'. Illness acts upon the subject as the subject enacts illness. Catherine's fever 'obliterates the self', at least temporarily. Looking at her reflection, she asks, 'Is that Catherine Linton?' and, later, 'Who is it?' as she becomes further alienated from herself.⁷⁹

Illness not only unsettles Catherine's identity but also disrupts her experience of time. She becomes a girl again as the room transforms into the moors where she played as a child. At the same time, she sees Nelly as she will appear 'fifty years hence'.⁸⁰ Time further folds on itself when Catherine thinks her reflection is a ghost. She is haunted by herself, a ghost by its nature outside of normative time. Convinced she is in her bedroom at Wuthering Heights, where she spent her past, she seems to glimpse her future, a ghostly waif appearing to Lockwood in that Heights bedroom years later.⁸¹ In the disorientation of ill time, she cannot believe only a few days have passed since she fell ill.⁸²

Catherine's pregnancy adds to our reading of this ill time. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar propose that Catherine learns through her consumptive sister-in-law that 'to be a lady is to be diseased'; this 'social disease of ladyhood' will 'eventually kill Catherine, too'.⁸³ If performing ladyhood means performing illness, pregnancy serves as another manifestation of diseased Victorian womanhood. Pregnancy, like sickness or convalescence, is a period of 'confinement' in which bodily states and social roles are in flux. Unable to recognize herself in the mirror, Catherine is alienated from her changing body; her desire to escape the confinement of the room can be read as a desire to escape the pregnant body, which physically traps her in a normative role. Catherine refuses to perform healthy motherhood by rejecting food, denying nourishment to her body and the baby within it. Strikingly, Brontë does not mention Catherine's pregnancy

78 Hamlin, *More Than Hot*, p. 126.

79 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 119, 121.

80 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 120.

81 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 121.

82 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 122.

83 Gilbert and Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic*, pp. 268–69.

until after her death. Queer, ill time so effectively supplants heteronormative time that it obscures reproduction altogether, treating pregnancy only as illness.

Through ill time, Catherine faces 'otherwise inaccessible elements of self' and 'barely expressible realities'.⁸⁴ The jerkiness of ill time reveals her unhappiness with the roles facing her. She becomes a child again, unable to recall the past seven years, miserable because her brother separated her from Heathcliff. Then, she is 'wrenched from the Heights, and every early association, and my all in all, as Heathcliff was at that time' and 'converted, at a stroke, into Mrs. Linton, the lady of Thrushcross Grange, and the wife of a stranger; an exile, and outcast'.⁸⁵ As Heathcliff saw Catherine 'converted into a stranger' after her first convalescence, the twelve-year-old Catherine is 'converted, at a stroke, into Mrs. Linton'. Catherine's current distress is equated with her childhood pain; time doubles back, each separation from Heathcliff compounded. Through illness, Catherine sees herself as a subject; exiled from childhood, trapped in marriage and rapidly approaching motherhood. She enters a state like the 'paradoxical longing' Samuels describes as her experience with chronic pain: 'I wish to be both myself and not-myself [...]. I wish for time to split and allow two paths for my life and that I could move back and forth between them at will'.⁸⁶ Catherine is caught between two paths: life and death, Edgar and Heathcliff. She has always been herself and not-herself, as she expresses in her oft-quoted declaration, 'I *am* Heathcliff!'⁸⁷ Separated from Heathcliff, separated from herself, she wishes illness could reunite her with Catherine Earnshaw: 'I wish I were a girl again, half savage and hardy, and free...and laughing at injuries, not maddening under them! Why am I so changed?'⁸⁸ Catherine longs for the queer temporality of illness to turn the clock back, to make her a 'wild, hatless little savage' again.

Illness allows Catherine to be as violent and childish as she wants. In *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, Miriam Bailin understands illness as a reprieve from normative performances: 'Illness authorized the relaxation of the rigidly conceived behavioural codes which governed both work and play within the public realm'.⁸⁹ Performances expected by heteronorma-

84 Hamlin, *More Than Hot*, p. 126.

85 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 122.

86 Samuels, 'Six Ways', p. 192.

87 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 59.

88 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 123.

89 Miriam Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction: The Art of being Ill* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 12.

tivity and capitalism are disrupted or supplanted by illness. Given one's inability to perform 'healthy' societal roles, illness permits, even requires, deviance. While ill, one need not act normally; one could perform *differently*. In Butler's theory of gender, the possibility of performing differently grants the individual 'agency' to find new ways of being.⁹⁰ Illness creates space for non-normative existence outside of normative performances and temporalities. While Bailin argues the Victorian sickroom typically quarantines this radical potential through a sanctioned performance of illness, Brontë's characters perform illness *badly*.⁹¹ Rather than writing illness, like many Romantic poets and Victorian novelists, as a sanctifying ritual prior to a heavenly ascent, Brontë resists the appropriation of transformative illness by a moral code; instead, her characters perform illness to pursue self-serving, worldly goals.⁹² Brontë's characters turn to illness when they feel out of control; as Bailin writes, illness 'substitutes the sick body for the troubled self' as 'a way of accommodating desires which are not legitimated in the society at large.'⁹³ When faced with desires deemed impossible, Catherine employs illness, using the privileges and exemptions associated with it to escape normative temporalities and performances.

Unlike the typical Victorian characters studied by Bailin, whose deviances are confined to the sickroom until they revert to normative expectations by recovering or ascending to heaven, Catherine continues to perform differently after death. On one level, she leverages illness to embrace the queer drive toward death that Edelman finds characteristic of queer time—refusing the future, exiting the narrative, and obliterating the self. However, Catherine also emerges from her illness as a new subject: her daughter, Cathy. Brontë signals this transformation when describing Catherine's death and Cathy's birth: 'About twelve o'clock, that night, was born the Catherine you saw at Wuthering Heights, a puny, seven months' child; and two hours after the mother died.'⁹⁴ By specifying 'the Catherine you [Lockwood] saw', Brontë emphasizes the multiplicity of Catherines in the novel. She gives Catherine's name to the child, referring to the origi-

90 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 198.

91 Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, p. 1, 21.

92 Bailin *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*; Byrne, *Tuberculosis*.

93 Bailin, *The Sickroom in Victorian Fiction*, p. 21.

94 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 152. The birth time, twelve o'clock, recalls Catherine's delirium: when she is frightened by her reflection and Nelly explains she is seeing herself, she responds, 'Myself! [...] and the clock striking twelve! It's true, then; that's dreadful!' (Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 121). In the folds of ill time, has Catherine somehow glimpsed her death or her daughter's birth?

nal Catherine only as 'the mother'. Catherine's identity is transferred the moment Cathy is born; the daughter becomes the mother's 'surrogate'.⁹⁵ This duplication is highlighted in Nelly's description of Edgar's relationship with his daughter: 'The little one was always Cathy: it formed to him a distinction from the mother, and yet, a connection with her; and his attachment sprang from its relation to her, far more than from its being his own.'⁹⁶ The pronoun 'it' ambiguously refers to the baby and its name. Datskou finds in this passage evidence that 'the child is a structuring relation, not an emotive entity; it does not signify the future but reproduces the past.'⁹⁷ Cathy inherits her mother's eyes and narrative function, eventually replacing her as mistress of Wuthering Heights and Thrushcross Grange. Through the novel's 'queer circular structure', Catherine lives again as her daughter.⁹⁸

Catherine also escapes normative time and performances by becoming a ghost on the moors, where she promises she 'shall remain, for ever'.⁹⁹ Catherine refuses to conform to Victorian expectations of an ill woman gradually dematerializing until she ascends to heaven, a metaphorical angel converted into a literal one.¹⁰⁰ If tuberculosis typically ends in apothecosis, Catherine's illness ends in exorcism, her soul freed from the 'shattered prison' of her pregnant body: 'I'm tired, tired of being enclosed here. I'm wearying to escape into that glorious world, and to be always there.'¹⁰¹ Catherine leaves her body behind but refuses to leave her earthly home. As she prophesied in a childhood dream:

heaven did not seem to be my home; and I broke my heart with weeping to come back to earth; and the angels were so angry that they flung me out, into the middle of the heath on the top of Wuthering Heights; where I woke sobbing for joy.¹⁰²

Resisting even the normative performance of death, Catherine becomes a ghost, free from time and social identity.

Like a perpetual illness, Catherine's death is a liminal state. Her identity was already multifarious in life, indicated by the three names carved into

95 Datskou, 'Queer Temporalities', p. 134.

96 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 168.

97 Datskou, 'Queer Temporalities', p. 139.

98 Datskou, 'Queer Temporalities', p. 133.

99 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 129.

100 Lawlor, *Consumption and Literature*, p. 165.

101 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 50; Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 150.

102 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 86.

the ledge in her bedroom: ‘*Catherine Earnshaw*, here and there varied to *Catherine Heathcliff*, and then again to *Catherine Linton*.’¹⁰³ In life, Catherine could not perform all these identities at once, but her hybrid ghostly state, tied to the earth yet without physical form, allows for multiplicity. Lockwood watches as ‘a glare of white letters started from the dark, as vivid as spectres—the air swarmed with *Catherines*.’¹⁰⁴ Catherine’s ghost appears with ‘a child’s face’, presumably the twelve-year-old Catherine Earnshaw once again half savage and free, yet she suggests another Catherine by calling herself by her married name, Catherine Linton.¹⁰⁵ Her desires, like her identity, are torn; she is still in a state of paradoxical longing. Catherine died longing to be let out, free on the moors, yet Lockwood describes her spirit begging to be let into *Wuthering Heights*.¹⁰⁶ Catherine’s ghost evades a clear reading; at the novel’s end, Brontë leaves open the question of whether Heathcliff and Catherine still wander the moors or, as Nelly insists, sleep quietly in the earth.¹⁰⁷ In its ambiguity, inconsistency, and eternity, Catherine’s ghostly existence evokes Edelman’s queer time and ‘its insistence on repetition, its stubborn denial of teleology, its resistance to determinations of meaning.’¹⁰⁸ This queer time works hand in hand with Krienke’s liminal convalescent time and Samuels’ uncertain, ambivalent crip time, all permitting, even requiring, a different relationship with performed identities and the ‘constituted social temporalities’ associated with them.¹⁰⁹

Through Catherine’s illnesses, we have seen how Brontë writes illness as a performance enabling non-normative and liminal experiences of time and identity. This power of illness is not limited to individual characters. By setting the narration itself in ill time, Brontë infects it with temporal and categorical uncertainty, resulting in the narrative’s abrupt stops and starts, uneven pacing, and vocal instability. Shifting like Catherine’s identities, Brontë’s narrator interrupts itself and morphs from Lockwood into Nelly, Heathcliff, and Isabella. Characters blur as Brontë recycles names, plot functions, and physical features, her narrative ‘return[ing] to the beginning’ and ‘suggest[ing] a moving backwards instead of forwards.’¹¹⁰ In

103 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 38.

104 Ibid.

105 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 42–43.

106 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, p. 42.

107 Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*, pp. 287, 288.

108 Edelman, *No Future*, p. 27.

109 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, p. 191.

110 Datskou, ‘Queer Temporalities’, p. 183.

its insistent repetitions and resistance to linear time—in its ‘jerky stops and starts, tedious intervals and abrupt endings’¹¹¹—the narrative emerges *in* and *as* queer, ill time.

Sontag describes illness as a ‘kingdom’:

Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use only the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.¹¹²

Brontë sets *Wuthering Heights* in a nineteenth-century kingdom of the sick, an extreme and unstable world that is more a temporal landscape than a spatial one. This kingdom is, as *The Examiner* describes *Wuthering Heights* in its 1847 review, ‘wild, confused, disjointed, and improbable’.¹¹³ Rather than dreading the journey to the kingdom of the sick, Brontë reveals how a trip there can prove useful; in the case of Catherine, a permanent move can enable an escape from normative constrictions on time and identity. By setting her novel in that kingdom, Brontë avoids a clear or sanctifying narrative of illness—a steady sickening until a heavenly ascent or a miraculous recovery. Instead, *Wuthering Heights* follows a more complex model of illness—an ‘unknown and unsettled’ convalescence, a ‘wild ride’ of a fever that is ‘dangerous, dramatic, and unpredictable’, a consumption that leaves the ill person ‘a hectic, reckless creature of passionate extremes’.¹¹⁴ In *Wuthering Heights*, Brontë embraces an illness experience that is dynamic and transformative—where the result of that transformation is left radically and liberatingly uncertain.

111 Samuels, ‘Six Ways’, p. 190.

112 Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 3.

113 Quoted in Dinah Birch, ‘Emily Brontë’, in *The Cambridge Companion to English Poets*, ed. by Claude Rawson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 408–21 (p. 409).

114 Krienke, *Convalescence*, p. 7; Hamlin, *More Than Hot*, p. 126; Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor*, p. 36.

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