Gender and Sexuality in the Works of the Brontë Sisters

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Introduction
My project consisted of a reading of the seven novels written by Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë. The Brontë novels are considered foundational texts of English literature and are often cited as early feminist works. My primary literary interests are in studies of gender and sexuality, with a focus on queerness. I supplemented my reading of the novels with readings of Brontë criticism as well as feminist literary criticism.

Primary Texts
Charlotte Brontë
Jane Eyre (1847): Governess narrative. 1st person narration, emphasizing female narrative authority. Also deals with cross-dressing, sexual violence.
Villette (1853): 1st person narration featuring “unreliable” female narrator. Deals with repressed sexuality, only Brontë novel with failed marriage plot.

Emily Brontë

Anne Brontë
Agnes Grey (1847): Governess narrative. 1st person female narration.
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall (1848): Layered narrative structure—same as WH. Most overtly feminist of the novels.

Selected Criticism
Charlotte Brontë
Jane Eyre (1847): Governess narrative. 1st person narration, emphasizing female narrative authority. Also deals with cross-dressing, sexual violence.
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Conclusions
Three analytic categories: “Narrative Structure” considers how the texts’ narrations, which mostly feature female narrators, support or complicate the agency of the women in the novels. “Androgyny & Cross-Dressing” considers how gender-bending characters both deconstruct and uphold the gender binary. “The Marriage Plot” considers the implications of sexual violence within the marriage plot as well as Villette’s singular failed marriage plot.

Next Steps
I have begun work on a thesis that will analyze Villette with attention to the novel’s themes of surveillance and observation as related to desire and will also provide a queer reading of the text. I plan to engage with criticism of Villette and with feminist and queer theory.