

# SPEAKING CANDIDLY

## DEVOTION

(Warner Bros.)

THIS film is an important event in the world of literature as well as of the cinema; or rather, it would be if it bore anything more than a merely superficial relation to fact, since it solves the mystery, which has puzzled biographers and critics for 100 years, of how the secluded daughters of a Yorkshire clergyman named

Brontë were able to write such remarkable novels as *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Shirley*, and why *Wuthering Heights* is a more intense and powerful work than the others. The reason is that Emily and Charlotte Brontë were both in love with the same man, their father's curate, but Emily's passion went unrequited.

Until now, it would appear, the only person who had held the key to this fascinating literary secret was the

Brontë sisters' dissolute brother, Branwell. It came to him on his death-bed when, after reading *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* and drinking a bottle of brandy, he confided to Emily, "Of course it is clear that you are both in love with the same man, only I don't suppose anyone but your discerning brother will ever notice." I do not know what stimulants produced in the Messrs. Warner Bros. of Hollywood the necessary state of illumination one hundred years later; but how fortunate we are that they were discerning enough! It is so comforting when everything, even a writer's afflatus and style can be reduced to the nice, simple formula of LOVE and the Eternal Triangle.

But, though we should be used to such behaviour by now, it is also a little disconcerting when one finds a movie studio as irresponsible as is the case in *Devotion*. Whatever the title means, it isn't devotion to truth. I shall not go over the pros and cons of the old argument about authenticity versus dramatic license and the box-office; but shall confine myself to observing that, from an educational point of view, *Devotion* is about as pernicious as any film could be, since — apart from the major stupidity I have mentioned — it reduces Charlotte Brontë (as played by Olivia de Havilland) to the stature of a cute little man-mad hussy, and will fix in the minds of almost all who see it an almost equally gross misconception of the character of Emily (Ida Lupino) and of the life led by the three Brontë sisters (Anne, played by Nancy Coleman, is the third, but is so colourless as to be almost unnoticeable).

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TRUE, there is the admission in the film that *Wuthering Heights* is a greater novel than *Jane Eyre*; but we have to take Thackeray's word for this, and no real evidence is produced to support the claim. On the contrary, the circumstances which we are now likely to remember as chiefly influencing the creation of one of the world's literary masterpieces — in addition, of course, to the unrequited love motif — are that Emily used to go gallivanting round the moors in the rain, spent hours in contemplation of a ruin on the skyline which she called "Wuthering Heights," and had a recurrent nightmare about a grim rider on a black horse who galloped out of the night upon her. On this last point, I think Emily must have been guilty of some curious kind of sub-conscious plagiarism; surely that dark-cloaked horseman touch comes out of Mr. Orson Welles's screen version of *Jane Eyre* by Sister Charlotte?

Branwell, the spoilt, erratic, brandy-guzzling brother who causes many of the heartaches and some of the inspiration around the vicarage at Haworth, is closer to history than most of the other people in the story; and perhaps for this reason Arthur Kennedy is able, in spite of the theatricalism of the role, to convey something of the tortured frustration of the young man. For some reason best known to themselves or the box-office, the Messrs. Warner have chosen a Frenchman to play the role of the English curate, Arthur Nicholls, who stimulated the literary genius of the Misses Brontë, and actually married Charlotte (after Emily had died of unrequited passion combined with influenza). In this role M. Paul Henreid is handsome, dashing, and doubtless as impeccable in the performance of his

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