# *Emily Brontë* THE PALACE OF DEATH

*We start our exploration of the battle between life and death with a little-known piece by Emily Brontë (1818-48). Renowned for* Wuthering Heights *(1847), Emily was the most precocious and strong-willed of the surviving Brontë sisters, though Charlotte was the eldest. All three sisters wrote from an early age, together with their brother Branwell, setting stories in their imaginary kingdoms - Gondal in the case of Emily and Anne. By the time she turned twenty, Emily had completed many stories and poems, though none had been published. In 1842, Charlotte and Emily, now in their mid-twenties, were sent to Brussels to expand their education. While there, under the stern steward-ship of Constantin Heger, the two women completed several writing assignments, one of which was ‘Le Palais de la Mort’ (‘The Palace of Death’), written in October 1842. It was composed in French and was not translated into English for over a century. Even now it is one of Emily Brontë’s least-known works. The following translation by Sue Lonoff was included in the volume* The Belgian Essays *(1997) featuring the work of both Charlotte and Emily.*

# The Palace of Death

IN TIMES PAST, when men were few in number, Death lived frugally and husbanded her means. Her sole minister then was Old Age, who guarded the gate of her palace and from time to time admitted a solitary victim to appease the hunger of her mistress. This abstinence was soon recompensed; Her Majesty’s prey increased prodigiously, and Old Age began to find that he had too much to do.

It was at this time that Death decided to change her way of living, to appoint new agents, and to take a prime minister.

On the day set for the nomination, the silence of the sombre palace was broken by the arrival of candidates from all quarters; the vaults, the chambers and the galleries resounded with the noise of steps that came and went, as if the bones that lay strewn about the pavement had suddenly come back to life; and Death, looking down from the height of her throne; smiled hideously to see what multitudes hastened to serve her. Amongst the first arrivals were Wrath and Vengeance, who hurried to the station themselves before Her Majesty, loudly arguing about the justice of their particular rights. Envy and Treason took their positions behind in the shadow. Famine and Plague, attended by their companions Sloth and Avarice, secured very convenient places in the crowd and cast a scornful eye over the other guests. None the less they were forced to give way when Ambition and Fanaticism appeared; the retinues of those two personages filled the council chamber, and they imperiously demanded an immediate audience.

‘I doubt not,’ said the former, ‘that Your Majesty will be fair in her decision, but why waste time in vain disputes when a glance will suffice to determine the one who is alone worthy of the office in question? Who are all these pretenders who besiege your throne? What can they do in your service? The ablest amongst them is no more capable of governing your empire than is a soldier, with no quality other than his courage, of commanding an army. They know how to strike one victim here and another there; they know how to entrap feeble prey, the men on whom those are your mark has been visible since birth, and those are the limits of their usefulness; as for me, I will lead the elite of the race to your portals, those who are furthest from your power. I will harvest them in their flower and offer them to you as troops at the same stroke. Besides, I have so many means; it is not the sword alone that wins my victories; I have other agents, secret but powerful allies. Fanaticism himself is but an instrument that I shall employ for my profit.’

On hearing these words, Fanaticism shook his savage head, and, raising toward Death an eye burning with the fire of obsession, he began: ‘I know this blusterer will happily borrow my weapons and march under my banners, but is that any reason that she should presume to compare herself with me? Not only will I be as powerful as she at overturning states and desolating realms, but I will enter into families; I will set the son against the father, the daughter against the mother; inspired by me the faithful friend will become a mortal enemy, the wife will betray her husband, the domestic his master. No sentiment can withstand me; I will banners traverse the earth beneath heaven’s banners and crowns will be as stones beneath my feet. As for the other candidates, they are unworthy of attention; Wrath is barbarism; vengeance is partial; Famine can be conquered by industry; Plague is capricious. Your prime minister must be someone who is always close to men, who surrounds and possesses them. Decide then between Ambition and me; we are the only ones between whom your choice can hesitate.’

Fanaticism fell silent, and Her Majesty seemed to waver in doubt between these two rivals when the door of the hall opened, and there entered a person before whom everyone fell back in astonishment, for she had a figure that seemed to glow with joy and health, her step was as light as a zephyr, and Death herself appeared uneasy at her first approach; however, she soon reassured herself. ‘You recognize me,’ the stranger said to her; ‘I arrive later than the others, but I know that my claim is certain. Some of my rivals are formidable, I admit, and I may perhaps be surpassed by several in striking deeds that draw the admiration of the mob, but I have a friend before whom this whole assembly will be forced to succumb. Her name is Civilization: in a few years she will come to dwell on this earth with us, and each century will amplify her power. In the end, she will divert Ambition from your service; she will put the brake of law on wrath; she will wrest the weapons from Fanaticism’s hands; she will chase Famine off amongst the savages. I alone will grow and flourish under her reign; the power of all the others will expire with their partisans; mine will exist even when I am dead. If once I make acquaintance with the father, my influence will extend to the son, and before men unite to banish me from their society, I will have changed their entire nature and made the whole species an easier prey for your Majesty, so effectively, in fact, that Old Age will have almost a sinecure and your palace will be gorged with victims.’ ‘Say no more,’ said Death, descending from her throne and embracing Intemperance (for that was the stranger’s name). ‘It is enough that I know you. For the others, I have lucrative and important offices; they will all be my ministers, but for you alone is reserved the honour of being my viceroy.’