“The naked, solid truth”:
Subverting Expectations of Genre and Society in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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“The naked, solid truth”:

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When one hears “the Brontës,” one is most likely to think of Charlotte and Emily Brontë, if not by name, then by their endurably famous novels, Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights, respectively. More than 170 years after their publication, these works continue to capture the imaginations of readers and fascinate scholars with their Gothic mysteries and romance. Yet the third and youngest Brontë sister, Anne, is generally overlooked, forgotten, or worse, assumed to be the less talented writer. In 1990, Carol Senf wrote, “Anne has not fared as well with either readers or critics, and the consensus seems to be that she is not worth reading” (446). This consensus spread from the time of Anne’s untimely death in 1849 and has only begun to be challenged in the past forty or so years. As recently as 1973, in his book The Brontës and Their Background: Romance and Reality, Tom Winnifrith declared that, “Anne Brontë is a much more blatant preacher of unorthodox attitudes than her sisters: she is also a much less good novelist” (qtd. in Senf 446). He links Anne’s supposed role as the family moralist and his belief that she lacked literary talent, agreeing with some of Anne’s earliest critics that her writing—particularly her second, and final, novel, The Tenant of Wildfell Hall—is not artistic since it has a clear message. Though nineteenth-century critics were more apt to accept a “moralistic” tale when the novel was first published, in late June 1848, they were also more shocked by Anne’s “merciless depiction of vice” in the novel, than modern readers are likely to be (Thornålen 6). Even without proof of the author’s gender, critics could dismiss works of moral instruction “as reading matter for women and girls” (9), while the same critics
simultaneously struggled to see the merits of the novel’s treatment of violence and abuse for any readers.

Still, the tide has slowly been turning in Anne’s favor. The bicentenary celebrations of the Brontë siblings’ births began in 2016 with Charlotte’s and concluded with Anne’s on January 17, 2020. Marking these anniversaries has provided a rare opportunity to “focus on each of these writers out of their familiar context, celebrating their distinctiveness and dissimilarities. Anne Brontë is already emerging from this process as a writer whose position in the family may have adversely affected her reception” (Harman vii). In fact, the Brontë Society and Parsonage Museum are holding a conference with the title “‘I wished to tell the truth’: Anne Brontë at 200” dedicated to the objective of “challeng[ing] the long-held perception that the youngest Brontë sibling was the least talented, and lacked the genius of her sisters” (Bicentenary Conference 2020). More than a dozen scholars will be presenting papers on a diversity of topics relating to Anne and her works, including social context, realism, and visual art. Despite all the factors working against her, A. Brontë and the art, both visual and literary, that she was able to produce in her relatively short lifetime are steadily gaining the recognition and admiration they deserve. As for Anne’s masterwork, Marianne Thormählen contends that “it is the book itself that matters. Allowed to exercise its own fascination … The Tenant of Wildfell Hall emerges as a powerful work of fiction in the realist tradition” (6). By stripping away any preconceived notions about genre or content or authorial talent, the text is accorded the chance to speak for itself, and it has no shortage of things to say. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall is a masterwork because it incorporates, then subverts conventions of more archetypal, popular genres and unflinchingly depicts “the naked,
solid truth” of the female experience to critique the social custom and law of the time. In so doing, Anne Brontë creates a work in the early Victorian realist tradition that illustrates a progressive feminist agenda, placing the author and her novel firmly ahead of their time.

“More bitter than just”: A Brief History of the Perceptions of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Why then are this novel and its author so often dismissed, overlooked, or omitted? There have been quite a series of obstacles to their legacy, including critical reception, sisterly interference, and a less than trustworthy publisher. On the whole, the critical censures of the novel are “more bitter than just,” formed from the surface of the text, misapprehending its true depth (A. Brontë 3). Indicative of the majority of its contemporaries, a review of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* published on July 15, 1848, takes a somewhat conflicting view of the novel. The reviewer begins by praising the work, saying “it is clever, bold, animated with true passion, and in one sense highly moral” (*Douglas Jerrold’s Weekly Newspaper*). However, this commendable morality has transgressed the boundaries of what is acceptable: “its exposition of vice goes far beyond the limits of true art; it is absolutely painful and disgusting.” Beyond the highly subjective phrase “true art,” this reviewer has hit upon a common complaint: that the exposition and depiction of the vices of man laid out in the novel are “absolutely painful and disgusting.” Yet the complainers all seem to have failed to take into account that, in fact, this evocative exposition of man’s vices may have been the author’s intent. The reviewer goes on to assert, “Brutality is always dull, and on that account, if for no other reason, should always be suppressed in a work of art, whose main object should be to
elevate while it delights the mind.” Anne Brontë, nor indeed any of her creatively inclined family, could not agree that the *main* object of art was to “delight the mind,” and she so responded in her “Preface to the Second Edition,” dated a mere seven days after this particular review. As to her aim in telling this particular story, she declares, “My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral” (A. Brontë 3). To only elevate and delight the audience is not enough. For Anne, “true art” is that which is honest, to a fault. She insists of her “brutal” characters, “it is better to depict them as they really are than as they would wish to appear,” but truly she has applied this philosophy to all her characters (4). They are all, at one point or another, laid bare and their shortcomings exposed to and examined with varying degrees of scrutiny. In doing so, Anne placed her work in the crosshairs. As Priti Joshi explains, “Brontë had violated propriety; the things she spoke of might happen but should not be narrated” (Joshi 919). Even the newspaper reviewer is forced to admit that “the scenes would be positively true,” though they maintain that “such things could not take place under those circumstances.” By setting the heart of her novel in Georgian society and painting her characters with recognizable humanity, virtues and vices, Anne brought to light uncomfortable realities. Truths, especially unpalatable ones, must be visible to be dealt with. While the reviewers did not tend to agree with this approach, the novel sold its first five hundred copies in approximately six weeks, indicating that the public seems to have paid the reviews little mind, or been rather more intrigued than dissuaded by them.
In addition to their censure of the novel as "coarse" and "brutal," Anne Brontë's contemporary critics were intent upon uncovering the author's identity, or more specifically, their gender. The newspaper reviewer mentioned previously writes almost triumphantly, "we think we have discovered the author of this work to be a very woman." This "revelation" can then be used to further criticize the novel, presenting female fancy as a reason for any scenes or language that seem unnatural and female delicacy as a cause for increased disapproval of the subject matter. More than once, reviewers point to the characterization of the genders in the novel as inaccurate, holding this claim as proof of the author's femininity. Another critic suspects the novel to have been "written by some gifted and retired woman, whose principal notions of men are derived from other books" ("review," *Literary World* 259), while *Sharpe's London Magazine*, none too fond of the Brontës' works, proclaims that "none but a man could make so daring an exhibition as this book presents to us. On the other hand, no man...would have made his sex appear at once coarse, brutal, and contemptibly weak, at once disgusting and ridiculous" ("unsigned review" 265). Rachel Carnell notes that, "The obsession in early critical reviews of the Brontës' work with the sex of the authors or with the appropriateness of the subject matter for the female readers underscores the Victorian obsession with judging all behavior through a rigid lens of gender" (Carnell 8). This Victorian "rigid lens of gender" is part of what *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* aims to deconstruct, particularly by exposing the pitfalls of, for example, separate and differing educations. Additionally, Carnell reminds us that "even as Anne Brontë was participating in a tradition of rational debate about the larger public good, her position as a female novelist was diminishing in cultural authority vis-à-vis more scientifically trained writers" (Carnell 22). As the
demand for the writings of scientific discoveries (a masculine endeavor) increased, the novel again experienced a drop in its cultural capital. Female authors were becoming less of a novelty and more of a fact, reifying the novel as a feminine pursuit: less academic and more sentimental.

Furthermore, Anne’s novel had to contend with sibling rivalry. Though the three sisters often workshopped their writing together, reading their work aloud and inviting suggestions and critique from one another, it seems that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was, in part, a product of defiance, as Charlotte publicly disapproved of the novel. Joshi contends that this stems in part from Charlotte’s misunderstanding of Anne’s character (Anne was always closer to Emily and neither of them was outgoing) and partly from comparisons with *Jane Eyre*:

The greatest blow to Anne Brontë's reputation and the novel's survival was Charlotte Brontë's 1850 "Biographical Notice" in which she wrote that ‘the choice of subject was an entire mistake.’ The *Tenant*’s ‘unfavorable reception’ led Charlotte to single it out: when her publisher offered to reprint her sisters' novels in single-volume editions, Charlotte selected only *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, declaring: ‘*Wildfell Hall* it hardly appears to me desirable to preserve.’ Her decision was not, perhaps, made entirely for aesthetic reasons. Given Charlotte's customary condescension toward her youngest sister—she regularly referred to Anne as a ‘poor child,’ ‘quiet,’ ‘sweet,’ ‘patient,’ ‘simple’—it must have stung Charlotte that reviewers compared *Tenant* to *Jane Eyre*, Huntingdon to Rochester. Even William Smith Williams, the man who "discovered" Charlotte, noted a resemblance, to which Charlotte responded testily: ‘You say Mr. Huntingdon
reminds you of Mr. Rochester—does he? Yet there is no likeness between the
two. ‘To be compared not to Emily—whom Charlotte considered a genius—but to
Anne, who she believed was an ‘inexperienced writer,’ must surely have rankled.

(920)

Joshi notes “Charlotte’s customary condescension” to Anne, an attitude that is evident in
Charlotte’s responses to Anne’s novel. It certainly seems likely that Tenant was, at least
in part, a response to Jane Eyre, but the comparison is an insult in Charlotte’s eyes,
whether because she viewed Anne as less talented or because she was stung by Anne’s
defiance or both. Another possible source of Charlotte’s disquiet at the subject of the
novel is her belief that Anne’s “villain,” Arthur Huntingdon, bore too much of a
resemblance to the sole Brontë brother, Branwell. Branwell was a bit of a ne’er-do-well,
ending his life largely unaccomplished under the control of alcohol and laudanum, but as
children, he and Charlotte were close. The four surviving Bronte children paired off, the
two elder, Branwell and Charlotte, and the two younger, Emily and Anne, each duo
creating an entire fictional world of their own. Though in adulthood these bonds were
somewhat weakened, Charlotte’s belief that Huntingdon could be based on Branwell
grieved her. But Huntingdon is not Branwell, their only similarity being their penchant
for Byronic behaviors. Nor was Anne the only Brontë who wrote this type of character;
all four of the Brontë siblings exhibited the influence of a fascination with Byron’s
biography in their works. It is much easier to see the autobiographical influence on
Anne’s first novel, Agnes Grey. The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, on the other hand, may have
been inspired by Anne’s front row seat to a man’s weakness of character,² but it is a
masterfully crafted work of fiction. When “biographically inclined critics beginning with
Charlotte Brontë offer the decline of Branwell as the standard explanation for the source of Anne’s dark tale ...; the biographical is used to reduce Anne to a scribe of life’s experiences, not to see her as engaging those experiences. This is a grave error ...” (Joshi 917). This is just one more way that Charlotte belittled Anne’s accomplishment, maintaining the position as the eldest and wisest sister, as it were, into posterity.

It was not only her critics, familiar or otherwise, who contributed to the sidelining of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. Anne’s publisher, Thomas Newby, though set to profit from the success of the work, still did his fair share of harm to the novel’s lasting impact. In an effort to boost sales, Newby attempted to piggyback on the successes of Anne’s sisters by “assuring an American publisher to whom he was offering sheets of Anne’s book that Jane Eyre, Wuthering Heights, and The Tenant of Wildfell Hall, which he pronounced superior to the other two” had all been penned by the same author (Haight 219). His declaration of the superiority of Tenant notwithstanding, this attempted confusion of the authorship of the novel only brought the ire of Charlotte and her publisher. After Anne’s passing, since Charlotte was uninterested in the legacy of Anne’s second novel, she did not intervene when “Newby sold the copyright of Tenant to Thomas Hodgson, on whose one-volume Parlour Library Edition most British editions of Tenant over the next century were based ... which omits chapter headings and the first four pages of the novel (the letter to J. Halford) thus destroying its initial epistolary structure” (Alexander & Smith 497). Editor Stevie Davies refers to these volumes as “corrupt” and “worthless” (xxxii). These carelessly edited versions of Tenant can still be found in circulation today and these haphazard cuts to the original volumes could certainly have contributed to the continuing undervaluation of Anne’s work.
Beyond these historical obstacles, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has suffered from growing in the shadows of both *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*. Because these two books are still so widely popular and acclaimed, it is more common to see Anne’s novel in comparison to its two elder sisters, leading to beliefs that either the similarities are just a poor attempt at copying something superior, which lessen the book’s worth, or that these same similarities are the only thing of value and that therefore Charlotte and Emily’s genius has boosted an author of lesser talents. However, these ideas both overlook the true style and substance of the work. Anne had already demonstrated a distinct style with her first novel, *Agnes Grey*, a more plain, direct approach, which can be seen again in large swaths of *Tenant*. All three of the Brontë sisters may have benefitted from their familial workshopping approach to writing, but rather than mimicking or profiting from the genius of her siblings, Anne incorporated common and popular conventions of the fiction of her time (for Charlotte and Emily certainly didn’t invent the Gothic or the Byronic hero) and utilized those ideas in her quest to tell the truth, creating a powerful, enduring work of Victorian realism. The novel is more of a response to *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* than a cribbing of them, and, arguably, improves upon their themes. Furthermore, “Anne Brontë’s novel represents something of a classic of mid-Victorian feminist protest,” with a heroine who exposes the legal and social shortcomings of Victorian ideology (Ward 151). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* takes on the legal rights and social positions of married women and their struggles for independent voices in the first part of the nineteenth century. Writing a defiant novel in an emerging genre, may have cost Anne and her work their understanding and recognition, but it is not too late to grant them their proper place.
The Angel and the Profligate: Exploring the Power Dynamics of the Domestic Sphere

The idea of fiction as a didactic tool, especially for morality, was particularly embraced in the Victorian era. Children and young ladies were the target audience for these types of works. For school-age children, this often took the form of quaint rhymes about wisdom or busy bees, but for young women coming-of-age, the educational aim was more focused on their incumbent role as wife and domestic goddess. In describing the works of prolific nineteenth century temperance author Sarah Ellis, Thormählen explains that “the changes in Ellis’s alcoholics are changes in opinion and behaviour, not in personality, and virtuous family members remain uncorrupted by their misconduct … there is no in-depth character development, and the stories unfold in a somewhat formulaic manner” (Thormählen 9). The characters in this literature were painted with a broad brush, indicative of “the nineteenth-century view that tended to separate women into two categories, angel and demon” (Senf 451). Although, this polarized characterization was not limited to didactic fiction, as Diane Long Hoeveler notes that “the female gothic participates in the paradoxical enterprise of both criminalizing and deifying women” (Hoeveler 4). While the influence of this thinking and this type of writing can be seen in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, A. Brontë goes beyond the formulaic and introduces complexity. The “angel” is Helen, our heroine, and the “demon” her primary rival, Annabella. While Annabella comes to a justifiably tragic end “in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness” (A. Brontë 456), Helen’s role as Huntingdon’s “angel monitress” (199) follows a less predictable arc.
Heroines like Jane Eyre embraced the idealized “domestic angel” and initially, Helen, too, rejoices in her role as the moral guardian of her marriage, insisting to her aunt that she longs “‘to do [her] utmost to help his better self against his worse’” (177). Nicole A. Diederich explains the dichotomy of this view of “women’s role as moral guardians,” which, admittedly, granted wives some measure of influence in their relationship, yet still imprisoned them in the domestic (Diederich 27). Furthermore, N. M. Jacobs equates Helen’s longing to fulfill this role with more than just a good nature or religious upbringing, saying that “Helen at first accepts the ideology of woman as man’s helpmate—particularly his spiritual guide and companion—because it offers her a personal importance that amounts to an almost divine power” (Jacobs 210). If she is to be Huntingdon’s guide and instructor in living wisely, “to deliver him from his faults,” she is elevated above a wife whose sole business it is to please her husband, to become a savior of his very soul (A. Brontë 176). This power, however, is contingent upon an earnest and willing pupil, and Huntingdon finds Helen’s attempts to encourage good behavior in him amusing rather than instructive, for he sees no need to change his lifestyle. After all, the only real incentive Helen can offer for Huntingdon to improve himself is her happiness and the only happiness he’s ultimately interested in securing is his own. Eventually, Helen realizes the futility of her efforts and gives up: “I spared him my exhortations and fruitless attempts at conversion too, for I saw it was all in vain: God might awaken that heart supine and stupefied with self-indulgence, and remove the film of sensual darkness from his eyes, but I could not” (259). She is not divine enough to save Huntingdon from himself; she must leave the job in the hands of the divine. This passage also recalls Helen’s debate with her aunt, where, despite her express desire to
“give [Huntingdon] an opportunity of ... shining out in the unclouded light of his own genuine goodness,” she insists that she and Huntingdon are on more equal footing than her aunt believes (176-77). Helen reproves her aunt, saying “I am not light, and he is not darkness” (177), yet is later forced to admit that Huntingdon is lost to “the film of sensual darkness.” She further renounces her title as “angel,” acknowledging her humanity: “I am tired out with his injustice, his selfishness and hopeless depravity ... I am no angel and my corruption rises against it” (267). Diederich notes in this passage specifically, that “This language, like her artistry itself, rejects the ‘angel’ ideal of the domestic sphere and its powerless position for Helen as a wife” (Diederich 32). Through her failure to rehabilitate Huntingdon and her acceptance of her own “corruption,” Helen reveals the impossibility of the domestic angel and highlights the truly powerless position of the nineteenth-century wife.

This divergence from the standard moralizing tracts and temperance fiction plots, wherein the virtuous remain uncorrupted while inspiring the wayward to change their opinions and behavior, counters the argument that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* loses literary credibility by including a moral dimension. The novelist may have some designs on moral instruction, but the novel never devolves into a sermon. Interestingly, Thormählen sees this fixation on the “morality” of A. Brontë’s novel as another dimension of its history of undervaluation, as she writes, “Considered in relation to nineteenth-century didactic fiction, and other kinds of writing whose purpose was to improve society by encouraging moral behavior, Anne Brontë’s novel can be seen to subvert rather than resemble those genres—genres viewed with respect in their day but ignored, if not actively despised, in ours” (Thormählen 6-7). While the practice of writing
fiction for the sole purpose of instruction was a common practice in Brontë's time, her novel undermines the accepted conventions of those works. Additionally, readers from subsequent centuries would be put off by such moral-driven writing, seeing it as commercial or “preachy” rather than artistic. Yet, to view The Tenant of Wildfell Hall as falling into a singular category is reductionist. Thormählen describes the novel as possessing an “artistry where a moral dimension does not preclude complexity of ideas, gradual character development and stylistic variety” (10). In her preface, A. Brontë discusses this complexity, owning that one of her intentions was indeed to “warn[] one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevent[] one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine” (A. Brontë 4). Moral instruction is only one aspect of her inspiration, for she also remarks that she “love[s] to give innocent pleasure” (4). Her statement of purpose continues; she “shall not limit [her] ambition” to any singular aim in her writing, but again says that she will speak truth, no matter how unpalatable to the reader or prejudicial to her name (4-5). One way that she achieves this truth is in her “gradual character development,” which is aided by writing “the longest single-narrative, enclosing epistolary novel of the nineteenth century” (Gordon 719). Taking the time and space to “elaborate[] with ... fond minuteness” (“review, Athenaeum” 251), allows Brontë to paint her characters with depth and variety. Therefore, “unlike the cardboard cut-outs of didactic-fiction writers, Anne Brontë’s characters are a mixture of virtues and flaws” (Thormählen 15). Thormählen notes that even the “villains” of the piece, Huntingdon and Annabella, are not “utterly and exclusively evil,” as one might expect to find in conventional moralistic (or even Gothic)
fiction (15). By giving the heroine faults and her antagonists moments of hope, Brontë demonstrates her dedication to representing the nuance of humanity.

It is not merely Helen’s role as failed moral angel that puts her in a powerless position in her marriage, but the law itself. The nineteenth century saw a slow shift in the legal rights and protections for women, but in the period depicted in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*—the late Georgian and early Victorian years—women had little to no legal recourses, especially if they were married. Wives lived under “covenant;” legally, they were “covered” or “enclosed” by their husbands, no longer possessing individual personhood. Upon exchanging her vows, “A married woman, in essence, was divested of autonomous legal status—unable to sue, to contract, to bequeath property without consent, to enjoy autonomous control of property brought into a marriage, or subsequently earned or acquired, to enjoy custody of children, or to determine their education” (Ward 153). All property she may have possessed before her marriage, including her physical self, and any she may gain thereafter, including offspring, were no longer her own. Helen, like all wives, has relinquished her control over everything except the domestic affairs of her married household. Once she becomes fully aware of her lack of influence over her husband, her sole outlet of control is running the house, a role that Huntingdon not only allows, but desires her to keep, as he can’t be bothered with what he considers women’s work. For, despite his now open contempt for his wife’s happiness and comfort, he refuses to grant her a separation. Knowingly, Helen remarks, “as long as I discharge my functions of steward and housekeeper, so conscientiously and well, without pay and without thanks, you cannot afford to part with me” (A. Brontë 320). Here, Helen, and through her, Anne Brontë, hits upon a chief argument of women’s
advocates, that wives were little better than servants, only they received no payment and rarely gratitude. In his fascinating interdisciplinary article “The Case of Helen Huntingdon,” Ian Ward cites John Stuart Mill’s 1869 essay *The Subjection of Women*, wherein Mill likens the status of married women to that of enslaved persons. “*There are no legal slaves,*” Mill writes, “*except the mistress of every house*” (Ward 153). Helen continues to echo this sentiment, first when Huntingdon destroys her art supplies—“*I am a slave, a prisoner*” (A. Brontë 368)—and again, as she tends to him at his sickbed—“*he would make a complete slave of me*” (433). The domestic sphere, where the wife is meant to be the angel of the household, the lady of the manor, has been revealed instead as a trap, a cage, a prison. Yet, unlike other popular Victorian writers, “*Brontë does not support female passivity or the doctrine of the closed home.* Instead, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* criticizes marital coverture as an underlying cause of domestic assault and abuse” (Surridge 73). As Helen’s journal unfolds the story of her married life, this criticism is clear. She witnesses the physical brutality of her friend Milicent’s marriage and experiences her own emotional abuse from Huntingdon.

Financial stability as a deciding factor in marriage is a theme explored throughout nineteenth century literature, but A. Brontë does not shy away from showing the violence and despair that could arise from such matches. As Ward notes, “*The need for financial security, of course, as Anne Brontë repeatedly insinuates throughout her novel, was a critical measure in seeking suitable matches*” (164). Milicent and Esther Hargrave’s mother is a perfect example of a woman driven to find wealthy husbands for her daughters, regardless of the gentlemen’s other qualities.³ Milicent marries one of Huntingdon’s cronies, Ralph Hattersley, and their relationship yields the most explicit
scene of physical spousal abuse in the novel. Shedding tears of embarrassment at Hattersley’s drunken antics in a room full of their friends, she attempts to escape and weep in private, but he catches her and demands an explanation of what has so upset her. Not wishing to discuss private business in public, Milicent refuses to answer, replying “Do let me alone Ralph! remember we are not at home,” the chilling implications of which only grow as the scene continues (A. Brontë 277). Hattersley ignores the warning, “and he attempted to extort the confession by shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the grip of his powerful fingers” (277). Milicent’s brother attempts to intervene, but Hattersley throws him off and instructs Walter “not to interfere between me and mine again” returning to Milicent “with another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain” (278). At this, Helen speaks up for her friend, informing Hattersley that it is his very behavior that so upsets his wife. When Milicent reluctantly confirms this, he “throw[s] her from him with such violence that she fell on her side” (278). She quickly exits, but after witnessing this careless violence among company, it is easy to imagine what might transpire behind closed doors.4

With the passage of the 1828 Offenses Against the Person Act, accounts of marital violence and discourse on appropriate interventions became hot-button topics for newspapers in the late Georgian and early Victorian periods. By setting her novel between 1821 and 1847, Anne Brontë was able to directly address this discourse, “which linked marital violence to concerns over marital coverture” (Surridge 73). She also propels the conversation further, by showcasing that coverture could lead to abuses beyond physical violence. Although Huntingdon never employs the brute physical force
of Hattersley, he abuses his power over Helen by attempting to emotionally manipulate her. From early in their marriage, it is clear that Huntingdon takes great pleasure in playing with Helen’s feelings. In the chapter titled “First Quarrel,” she lays out his enjoyment in detailing his own character flaws and gauging her reaction. When he is bored by domestic life, “his favorite amusement is to sit or loll beside me on the sofa and tell me stories of his former amours, always turning upon the ruin of some confiding girl or the cozening of some unsuspecting husband; and when I express my horror and indignation, he lays it all to the charge of jealousy and laughs till the tears run down his cheeks” (208). As their marriage continues and Huntingdon’s character is further revealed (and continues to degrade), she learns to better hide any reaction to his tales of bad behavior, causing him to look for other outlets to exercise his control over her.

Once their relationship becomes openly hostile, after Helen discovers his continuing infidelity, Huntingdon looks to re-assert his domestic authority. He does his best to take away all of her autonomy, even that over her body, but here she draws a line. If she cannot quit his house, she will at least quit his bed: “‘henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name … I will exact no more heartless caresses from you—nor offer—nor endure them either—I will not be mocked with the empty husk of conjugal endearments, when you have given the substance to another!’” (306). Once he no longer has access to her physical affection, Huntingdon tries twice to exert his control by publicly offering her to his companions. When Lord Lowborough confronts him about his affair with Annabella, Huntingdon amusedly responds, “‘You may have [my wife] if you like, and I call that handsome—I can do no more than offer restitution, can I?’” (348). Later, in an attempt to convince Helen to engage in her own affair, Walter
Hargrave relays the following remarks to her: "‘My wife! what wife? I have no wife,’ replied Huntingdon, looking innocently up from his glass—‘or if I have, look you gentlemen, I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her and welcome—you may, by Jove and my blessing into the bargain!’" (355). The proposed wife-swap is not amusing or agreeable to the other parties involved. While there is some debate about whether or not Helen is tempted to acquiesce to Hargrave’s proposed affair, ultimately her principles win out. Any attraction she may have harbored toward Walter turns instantly to insult that he would suggest she is in any way similar to the philanderers she’s witnessed and eventually even he takes his affections too far, forcing Helen to defend herself with her palette knife.

Still, as Helen is Huntingdon’s legal property, he is permitted to act towards his wife and on her behalf as he sees fit, barring causing significant physical harm.\(^5\) Luckily for our heroine, Huntingdon is more interested in emotional abuse, since there was no legal concept of spousal rape or wife pimping; “the offering of an unwilling wife to other men, was not held to represent a form of mental cruelty” (Ward 156). Therefore, failing to sexually humiliate his wife, he tries a different tactic and begins to gleefully corrupt their son. He begins teaching young Arthur “to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr. Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sen[d] mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him” (350). Helen comes to terms with her powerlessness over her husband, but she cannot accept the same powerlessness to save her young child. She begins to hatch a covert plan to flee. But to do so, she must break the law, as she has no legal rights to sole custody of her son. In fact, it would not be until decades after Anne Brontë’s death, when “The 1886 Guardianship of Infants Act for the first time appointed
a mother guardian upon a father’s death, provided there was no question concerning her suitability” (Berry 35). Even then, the bill is conditional; the mother is appointed guardian only upon the decease of the father and only then if she is deemed “suitable.” For Helen, sixty years earlier, to leave her marriage and separate her child from his father was a massive breach of the social and legal consensus. She is, in essence, becoming a thief in the night, taking herself, her son, her maid, and their necessaries, all the legal property of Huntingdon. This is when she seeks the refuge of Wildfell Hall, under an assumed name, in the protection of a brother she has had little relationship with since childhood, becoming an outlaw hoping to remain hidden from her husband. When Helen returns to nurse Huntingdon after his injury and subsequent illness, she continues to refuse him access to young Arthur until he agrees to sign a document that she’s drawn up, granting her power of custody. He agrees, but the document would never hold up in court, should he ever wish to contest it. Still, the dynamics of this interaction are significant. Laura C. Berry writes that, “The absolute power of male privilege and legal sanctions is not just overturned here. It is almost as if maternal custody is an established, even legal, fact” (44-5). Brontë treats this contract with the gravity of a legally binding accord, finally putting Helen back into the position of power, over both her husband and child.

With little to no legal standing, physical abuse was the only type of spousal abuse that women had any chance of proving. Even then, it was difficult to explain a marital separation initiated by a wife. When Helen’s Lindenhope neighbors become aware of her origins, the Reverend Millward “maintained that she had done wrong to leave her husband; it was a violation of her sacred duties as a wife, and a tempting of Providence
by laying herself open to temptation; and nothing short of bodily ill-usage (and that of no trifling nature) could excuse such a step—nor even that, for in such a case she ought to appeal to the laws for protection” (459). While it’s clear throughout the novel that the vicar and Helen have opposing views on most, if not all, topics, his opinions are those of the majority. It would, again, be decades after A. Brontë’s novel, until “the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 represented a key change in legislative emphasis, from punishing the male offender to securing financial independence for the abused wife” (Surridge 101). This shift was an important first step in how the law viewed women, moving from the covered wife to the (still deified) mother to, eventually, individual, independent persons.

Even if Helen could obtain a divorce, which was essentially impossible, it was not guaranteed that she would be granted custody of young Arthur or that she would be financially compensated. Therefore, in her escape plan, she must account for her accounts, as it were. “The separated wife, even more than the single woman, was subject to the prospect of acute poverty;” any and all assets she may have had before her marriage are no longer available to her, but she must be able to provide for her son if she is to take him from his father (Ward 164). As part of the campaign for legal rights and personhood, “the need to reform the law of property as it related to married women became a centerpiece of feminist political activity as the nineteenth century progressed” (164). Perhaps familiar with the very public saga of Caroline Norton, a woman who struggled to gain control of her life, her property, and her children from a powerful and terrible “gentleman” husband in the early years of Victoria’s reign, Anne Brontë uses her novel to directly address the results of the current state of the law. The legal discourse “Brontë articulated—resistance to coverture, claim to children, financial independence—
was to be the foundation of the liberal feminist response to marital violence for the next three decades” (Surridge 86). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is on the fore end of the Victorian feminist movement. A. Brontë’s novel is not just trying to caution young women or reform young rogues, but to influence the legislation of women’s lives.

Professional Femininity or Female Professional: Gothic Feminism and Financial Independence

These themes of nineteenth century feminism—coverture, custody, and financial independence—provide direct comparisons to Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights*, a connection that also invites an examination of the Gothic elements of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Though this comparison has often been unfavorable towards Anne Brontë’s novel, it can also show how *Tenant* deliberately subverts certain Gothic conventions that *Wuthering Heights* is more apt to embrace, like the inclusion of the supernatural. Still, both works exhibit the Gothic aesthetic of the sublime, described by Edmund Burke as “[w]hatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror” (Burke 113). That which is terrible excites the sublime, but it does not have to be supernatural. In fact, the sublime can be more powerful when it is natural. Therefore, while terror could be incited by Lockwood’s encounter with the ghost of Catherine, it also includes the very real abuses of Heathcliff and Huntingdon.

The common tropes of Gothic fiction are readily identified in the first section of *Tenant*. The titular character, known initially as Mrs. Helen Graham, presents herself as a young widow and mother, taking up residence in the hall seemingly out of nowhere. Her
new home has been long unoccupied and is falling into disrepair. Its appearance is dark and chilling, barely holding its own atop a hill against the harsh Yorkshire winds that have bent and stripped the surrounding trees. The word “gloomy” is used more than once to describe the place. Mrs. Graham is a reserved woman, rarely accepting visitors or venturing into the village society. She can occasionally be seen at church, occupying the Wildfell Hall pew in stern attention and mourning black. The close community of Lindenhope is anxious to learn her secrets, but none are forthcoming, so an air of mystery continues to surround her. This sudden arrival of a stranger occupying a dreary manor house is in keeping with the Gothic novel, reminiscent of Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights*. Also like Emily Brontë’s novel, the story is relayed to us (the readers) through an epistolary “frame” and everyman narrator, another common Gothic convention, to create distance between polite society and the horrors of the Gothic tale. Unlike more traditional Gothic novels, where this narrator is often removed from the action by both time and space, the Brontës have constructed characters who are both observers and participants in the story. As Jacobs elaborates, “The framing narrator ... generally belongs to the world of the reader, and is a conventional and pragmatic sort who is shocked by the gothic evils he encounters. Anne Brontë’s Markham and Emily Brontë’s Lockwood ... differ from their gothic predecessors in that they and the official standards they represent are shown to be in part the cause of the shocking reality they encounter” (Jacobs 206). These “official standards” are those unspoken rules of propriety and morality that strictly governed domestic society; Markham and Lockwood represent these standards through their position as members of the gentleman class, those who made and benefited from these rules.
By physically encompassing the inner narrative within the patriarchal framing narrative, the Brontës also use the Gothic structure and elements to simulate the reality of women's domestic position. These "femmes couvertes" fell under the legal principle of marital coverture, wherein, upon marriage, wives became "covered women" whose "legal identities were...subsumed into that of the husband" (Jacobs 207), is replicated in the novels by placing the female narratives within the male, epistolary frames. Rather than fully participating in the practice of legal coverture, which was used to silence women's voices, the narrative structure of the novels highlights the views and experiences of those women. This is particularly true of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, where the entire middle section is devoted to Helen's journal, as Gilbert does not re-insert himself into the narrative throughout the entire contents of this portion, but allows Helen's story to be told as she originally set it down. In this case, the female voice is bookended by the male, but not "subsumed," despite the unpleasant subjects it details. In their efforts to deploy Gothic elements in the service of truth-telling, "the evil hidden at the center of these pseudo-gothic narratives is not supernatural or even particularly diabolical; it is mundane, vulgar, and grounded in the legal and economic structures of the time and the effects of those structures on the consciousness of both those in power (the 'covering' narrators) and those without power (the 'covered' narrators)" (Jacobs 207). Just as the narrative is constructed to call to mind the patriarchal system that silences women, the villains of these stories illustrate the ways in which this system can so easily lead to a corruption of power. Though there is frequent reference to demons and devils in the texts (and the fact that male characters would use the devil's name in the presence of ladies was a sticking
point for critics), the heroines are faced with no supernatural enemies, only “gentlemen” who are the products of their environments.

The domestic sphere, or the family home, is the place where these “gentlemen” are bred and groomed. In a conventional piece of Gothic fiction, particularly those by female authors, the crumbling castle setting is contrasted with the family home, where the heroine is initially discontent. Hoeveler claims, “The paternal home as the site of patriarchally based, rather than emotionally based relationships, seems to deny women the chance to exercise their subjectivity, and thus their only means of rebelling is to escape, to run away from the paternal domicile” (Hoeveler 9-10). Hoeveler specifically notes the male-centeredness of both the structure and property of the home and the familial relationships found therein, which leaves the heroines little choice but to seek autonomy outside. Expanding on this plot structure, Hoeveler writes, “They run ... in a large circle that leads them back precisely to the paternal home, but this time the estate has been magically transformed” (10). This cyclic narrative of the female Gothic matches with Cathy’s journey in Wuthering Heights. She feels stifled by the guardianship of her father, Edgar, and her nursemaid, Nelly at Thrushcross Grange, the Linton family home, and yearns for the agency and love that, as a naïve young woman, she believes is waiting for her at the Heights. Eventually, she does manage to achieve these goals, despite Heathcliff’s manipulation and tyranny, and we are told at the end of the novel that she and Hareton plan to move into the Grange “as soon as they are married” (E. Brontë 316). Now that the previous generation (at least the biological parents) is dead and gone, and Cathy is owner and mistress of both properties, all that remains are the ghosts (some, literal) and those at Thrushcross Grange hold no horror.
However, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* flips this Gothic pattern, by having Helen run to her “paternal domicile,” which is also the spooky Gothic manor of the title, away from the marriage that she was allowed to choose for herself. When she leaves the guardianship of her aunt and uncle to marry Huntingdon, she is not running away, but when she returns to “the paternal home,” she is. She describes her return to the hall of her early childhood thus:

The scene, indeed, was not remarkably cheerful in itself, either within or without. The large bare room with its grim old furniture, the narrow, latticed windows, revealing the dull grey sky above and the desolate wilderness below, where the dark stone walls and iron gate, the rank growth of grass and weeds, and the hardy evergreens of preternatural forms, alone remained to tell that there had been once a garden—and the bleak and barren fields beyond might have struck me as gloomy enough at another time, but now, each separate object seemed to echo back my own exhilarating sense of hope and freedom: indefinite dreams of the far past and bright anticipations of the future seemed to greet me at every turn. (A. Brontë 392)

Wildfell Hall is “grim” and “dark,” but to Helen it is a source of “hope and freedom” that she has been living without for most of her married life. In this way, the “bleak” manor house that usually represents adventure or terror becomes a bright refuge. A. Brontë reminds us that appearances can be deceiving.

In another departure from a typified Gothic heroine, Helen refuses to play the part of a demurring female; she is always unapologetically herself, at each stage of her life, regardless of societal expectations. The mystery that surrounds her is both one of
necessity and of her own comfort. We, along with Gilbert, are eventually invited into her secret: Helen is in hiding at the Hall from her alcoholic, philandering, emotionally abusive husband, in violation of both social custom and the law of the time. The Helen we first come to know is one who has already lived and learned, who is slow to trust and looking forward to her new solitary, peaceful, independent lifestyle. If Gothic feminism is characterized by “an ideology of female power through pretended and staged weakness” (Hoehler 7), then Helen does not fit the mold, for though she may be victimized, she is not a victim, nor does she ever act the part. Certainly, she is hurt and disappointed by Huntingdon, but she is pragmatic. In every situation, she looks for what action could do the most good. And when she is not practical, she is proud. Early in their marriage, she lets him see her distress, hoping it will inspire him to mend his ways, but it is natural, not forced. As the sight of her tears does naught to reform her husband long term, she resolves to keep them to herself. On her way to confront him after witnessing his infidelity, Helen writes, “I must see Arthur tonight, and speak to him; but I would do it calmly: there should be no scene—nothing to complain or to boast of to his companions—nothing to laugh at with his lady love” (A. Brontë 305). It is during this confrontation scene that Helen first proposes a separation, but Huntingdon refuses, more interested in his reputation than how his behavior affects his family. Hoeveler’s further definition of the female Gothic pinpoints a common “professionalization or masquerade of femininity: women’s supposedly passive acceptance of their newly proscribed social and educational identities as wives and mothers” (Hoehler 5). Yet Helen is not passively accepting, asking to be freed from her situation as a wife and when that is denied, setting clear boundaries for herself. 7
This professional femininity, like the domestic angel ideal, is exposed and dismissed by Helen’s experiences. For a period, she resolves to endure her lot, to stay at Grassdale and keep house for Huntingdon, leaving him to his own devices as long as she may be left to hers. Brontë names this chapter “Dual Solitude,” described as “two persons living together, as master and mistress of the house, and father and mother of a winsome, merry little child, with the mutual understanding that there is no love, friendship, or sympathy between them” (A. Brontë 320). During this time, two years by the dates in Helen’s journal, Huntingdon continues his campaign of emotional abuse. At first, Helen keeps her resolution to show no feeling to his jibes; “I believe he was much disappointed that I did not feel his offensive sayings more acutely, for when he had said anything particularly well calculated to hurt my feelings, he would stare me searchingly in the face” (321). Still, she cannot always contain her passion and writes that there are times when she is “roused to defend” herself against Huntingdon’s moanings (321). During the second year of this arrangement, she is “particularly silent and sad,” clearly miserable and depressed, but endeavoring to do her duty (325). By the conclusion of that year, she has begun planning in secret to achieve her escape. On her fifth wedding anniversary, she writes “My resolution is formed, my plan concocted, and already partly put in execution. My conscience does not blame me” (339). Helen is determined to take young Arthur away and save them both from his father’s corrupting influence. Rather than playing the victim, which can gain her no real victory, she prepares to gain her financial independence by becoming a different kind of professional woman.

Once decided on her plan to leave Huntingdon, Helen determines that she’ll support her son through her art, either by selling her paintings or teaching drawing. What
once was an enjoyable retreat becomes a means of survival. She writes, “Brilliant success, of course, I did not look for, but some degree of security from positive failure was indispensable” (A. Brontë 352). She therefore sets to work honing her craft “to produce something worthwhile as a specimen of my powers” (352). Furthermore, she determines to sell what little jewelry she still claims as her own— “the few I brought with me from home, and those my uncle gave me on my marriage”—to secure some start-up cash (352). Alas, tragedy strikes our heroine yet again! Undetected, Huntingdon reads Helen’s journal over her shoulder as she details these designs and destroys her painting supplies and confiscates her jewelry, as well as taking control of the household finances for good measure. In Helen’s ultimate escape to Wildfell Hall, she is aided by a small loan from her loyal maid Rachel, and it is her brother Frederick who provides her with shelter, furnishings, and the materials for her painting, replacing what she’s lost. Still, Helen is an independent spirit and she requires income to pay Rachel’s wages and repay Frederick’s kindness and run her modest house. “I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own” (393). So with Frederick’s help, she begins to sell her paintings.

Though drawing and painting were common accomplishments for fashionable young ladies of the early nineteenth century, the number of women who could transcend the boundary between amateurism and professionalism was purposely small. There was considerable public backlash over the potential damage professional women artists could do to the reputation of British art. Still, “Painting was one of the rare ways by which a woman from the middle classes in England could earn a living and support herself (or her
family),” and increasing numbers of women took advantage of this over the course of the century (Losano 10). Antonia Losano sees Helen at the cusp of this movement, marking “the scenes of painting in Tenant as barometers for the novel’s radical view of women’s role as creative producers during a particularly complex moment in art history—just at the time when early-nineteenth-century female amateurism is beginning its gradual transition into the artistic professionalism of the later decades of the century” (Losano 7).

Could Anne Brontë have foreseen this coming shift as part of the growing feminist movement? Why make her heroine an artist rather than a governess, like Agnes Grey and Jane Eyre? One of the benefits of Helen making a living as a painter is that it grants her some degree of anonymity. Even under her assumed name, getting a posting as a governess would have required, at the very least, directly involving one unknown family in her illegal activities. Nor does it suit her purposes in removing young Arthur from his father, as she would naturally have less time to devote to him if she were required to teach someone else’s children. As a painter, she manages to maintain a lower profile, avoiding the scrutiny incurred by other female painters of the time. As Losano points out, “The risk involved in the painter’s profession is precisely her public visibility, her intrusion as an economic producer (rather than a consumer) into a male business enclave” (17). However, Helen is looking to avoid public visibility at all costs, so she mislabels the scenes of her paintings, signs them with a nom de brosse, and sends them into town to be sold via Frederick, giving her a better chance of selling her work by presenting a male figure in the business dealings. She thereby circumvents some of the hazards of being an emerging professional female artist, but Helen is still breaking convention by painting for income rather than enjoyment or as an enticement for a future husband. Referencing
JoAnna Stephens Mink's "The Emergence of Woman as Hero in the Nineteenth Century," Diederich relays that the author "sees Helen's artistry as part of her emergence as a literary hero, using her paintings in a non-feminine way—to earn money" (Diederich 31). Helen's art is another example of her infringing on the male domain, like her separation from a spouse and taking custody of a child.

Beyond economics, female painters threatened the traditional aesthetics of the male-dominated art world. Professional art was primarily designed to fit the male gaze, but "a woman holding a brush threatened to disrupt the proper flow of desire" (Losano 11). Standing behind the easel, paintbrush in hand, intently studying a subject before them, this "flow of desire" was meant to go from male painter to female subject, but a woman creating the art instead of being created in it disturbed the natural order of female as decorative object. When Gilbert and Rose Markham pay their first visit to Helen at Wildfell Hall, she is in the midst of her work and attempts to converse with them as she continues, having not expected company and not lit a fire in the sitting room. This scene, early in their acquaintance, gives Gilbert an insight into Helen's true character; she is determined and self-sufficient, not overly concerned with the conventions of society and domesticity. Indeed, Gilbert writes that she is "startled into politeness," by his remarking aloud that her heart seems to be with her work and not her guests (A. Brontë 47).

Throughout this chapter, "Brontë represents Helen not in the feminine role of hostess but in the decidedly unfeminine role of preoccupied and grumpy genius" (Losano 30). The preoccupied and socially abrupt male artistic genius, who resents any interruption to "the work," and who, if left to his own devices, would forego all creature comforts in the throes of "the work," is still a recognizable character type, and here Anne Brontë casts
her heroine in that role. In her role as mature, professional artist, “Helen’s chosen genre is primarily realist landscape painting, but with a strong tinge of idealism” (Losano 27). By describing her style in this manner, Losano highlights two things: Helen’s progression from the mimetic recreations of female amateurism and the way in which Helen’s artistic style mimics A. Brontë’s own style in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. “Primarily realist...but with a strong tinge of idealism” seems like a precise description of the novel; there is still artistry in the representation of the world.

“The value of female rebellion”: Rejecting Nineteenth Century Gender Roles

Though no tangible proof, such as notes or correspondence, survives to “prove the degree of Brontë’s feminism,” it seems clear that Anne’s novel is concerned with questions of gender (Senf 446). The Victorian “rigid lens of gender” that allowed reviewers of the novel to criticize or dismiss *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as unsuitable for female readership or authorship was founded on the idea of gendered “separate spheres,” providing socially acceptable standards for each. Yet, from the outset, A. Brontë defies this concept by publishing her novels under a male pseudonym.\(^8\) Being “Acton Bell” in print allowed Anne to transcend the societal boundaries of propriety for female authors. Male authors would be more widely published, read, and accepted. Jacobs posits that “in approaching subjects they must have known would be controversial, [both Emily and Anne] seemed to find it necessary first to become that constructed creature, a man, to appropriate and delegitimize his power, before telling their anti-patriarchal truths” (Jacobs 205). The male pseudonyms are more than just a tool to get their foot in the door. Taking on the “role” of male author provides the power and freedom to tell the truth, not
just to other women, but to a general audience of readers. Though A. Brontë takes advantage of this masquerade, she makes it clear that she finds the separate spheres premise illogical, at least regarding art. In her preface, “Mr. Bell” writes:

As to whether the name be real or fictitious, it cannot greatly signify...As little, I should think, can it matter whether the writer so designated is a man, or a woman...I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming for a man. (A. Brontë 5)

These are the author’s final words directly to the reader before the novel begins, emphasizing her “direct opposition to the establishment of separate moral standards for men and women” (Jacobs 205). In due course, Helen continues this argument in word and deed throughout the novel.

Once we have completed the “inner narrative” of Helen’s diary, it is clear that our heroine “represents a woman who ... refuses the gender role dictated to her by her culture, insists on her status as a professional painter, pursues an affective and humanistic bond between herself and her loyal servant Rachel, and challenges the economic subordination of wives” (Carnell 23). Yet, since the text begins with Gilbert Markham’s account of the mysterious arrival of the titular tenant, the reader’s first opportunity to hear Helen speak at any length coincides with his, as he relays to us “Mrs. Graham’s” first visit to his farm, Linden-Car. We may not yet be privy to her history, but its effects
on her are an integral part of her character in the first third of the book. As with his two brief previous encounters with the stranger, it is quickly evident during her call at the Markham’s that she is none too concerned with the social niceties of small talk. She speaks “with a serious energy that startled the company,” when refuting Mrs. Markham’s remark that young Arthur would be ruined by doting and Gilbert notes “the lady’s temper is none of the mildest” (A. Brontë 29). As the visit continues, Helen continues to assert opinions that contradict the group, explaining that she has trained Arthur against the sight and smell of alcohol in hopes he will avoid the fate of a lush and getting into a debate with Gilbert over the illogical separation in the education and expectation for sons and daughters. Throughout, “Helen’s voice is rational, confident, and self-sufficient at this point in the narrative—and by the norms of the day, her discourse would certainly be deemed masculine” (Carnell 10). She does not politely agree with her hosts or demure to avoid offense, but stands her ground on all points, firmly believing in the sound rationality of her points. Her very argument “challenges the separate gendered spheres,” as she advocates for the equal treatment of boys and girls (Carnell 11). Gilbert claims that by making Arthur viscerally hate alcohol at such a young age, she is denying her son the chance to learn temperance through his own experience later on. “I only say that it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm and enfeeble the foe,” he explains (A. Brontë 33). Helen proceeds to systematically disassemble his logic, beginning by asking only if he would apply the same argument to the upbringing of a girl, to which he predictably replies in the negative. Responding, in a passage surely informed by her own life experience, she speaks passionately:
You would have us encourage our sons to prove all things by their own experience, while our daughters must not even profit by the experience of others. Now I would have both so to benefit by the experience of others, and the precepts of a higher authority, that they should know beforehand to refuse the evil and choose the good, and require no experimental proofs to teach them the evil of transgression. I would not send a poor girl into the world, unarmed against her foes, and ignorant of the snares that beset her path: nor would I watch and guard her, till, deprived of self-respect and self-reliance, she lost the power, or the will, to watch and guard herself .... (34)

Even before Helen’s past experiences are revealed to us, this speech reminds us of Anne’s words in the preface hoping to have “warned one rash youth ... or prevented one thoughtless girl” from an error of judgment (4). It is not just moral instruction that this passage strives for, but the equal instruction of the sexes. Girls should not be overly protected, while boys should not be allowed too much leeway, for the result of the combination is a miserable marriage like Helen’s to Huntingdon.

Helen’s experiences shed light on common plights of women, but her responses to those experiences are uncommon. Carnell points out that Helen is “exceptional;” she crosses the separate spheres and is the only woman shown to do so. In denoting her as a deviation from the standard, “Almost all of the other female characters in the novel prove that Helen’s experience is not necessarily being touted as a universal model for women” (Carnell 12). The other women in the novel all appear content, even happy, to stay within their domestic sphere, doing, as Mrs. Markham councils, “what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house” (A. Brontë 57). While this sentiment is grating to the nerves of
the feminist scholar, it is by no means unreasonable for the women in the novel to “go with the flow,” to some extent. Helen is indeed exceptional, as the odds are not in the favor of women in any way, and her endeavor for freedom and autonomy is fraught with perils. It would, realistically, be unlikely for another woman in her acquaintance to achieve the same success. If Helen was shown only amongst other women just like her, it would be odd that she never encountered those who identified with the majority of society. The variety of female characters, from promiscuous Annabella to meek Milicent, adds to the relatability of the story. Though they may not take Helen’s “radical” action, the “other women in the novel help[] readers to focus on issues that pertain to all women” (Senf 452). Therefore, it may not necessarily be that Helen is not “a universal model,” so much as that A. Brontë is presenting an honest spectrum of female experiences. As we are not invited into the intimate, interior lives of any of the other women, we can’t reliably comment on their views of domesticity. Mary Millward, for instance, is a character that Helen esteems, yet very little about her is revealed to the reader (Gilbert describes her as “sedate”). When Miss Millward marries “the quiet” (A. Brontë 37) Richard Wilson, their community reacts with “astonishment” (436), though the couple seems, to a more careful observer than our narrator, well-matched. Though very few words are devoted to them, this couple seems to fit within the concept of a marriage of equal partnership that is idealized in the novel.

Moreover, Richard Wilson seems to exemplify the same type of reserved, thoughtful masculinity that Anne Brontë portrays in Agnes Grey’s Mr. Weston and which Gilbert begins to learn throughout The Tenant of Wildfell Hall. These characters are in direct opposition to the Regency aristocratic masculinity exhibited by Huntingdon and his
cronies, who “spend little time in the company of women and are neither domestic nor domesticated,” nor, in Huntingdon’s case domesticate-able (Joshi 917). Until Helen’s return to Grassdale Manor, Gilbert is never in a company without a female presence, whether it’s his mother, sister, Eliza Millward, or Helen herself. This comfort with domesticity and women contributes to his evolution of character. In one memorable scene, he comes in late for tea and his mother instructs his sister to make him a fresh pot rather than allow her eldest son to drink over-steeped tea. Rose, in an “exceptional” moment, expresses the inequality of the separate spheres. She does as she’s told, but “with great commotion, and certain remarkable comments.” She lets her brother know, in no uncertain terms, “if it had been me now, I should have no tea at all … but you—we can’t do too much for you—It’s always so” (A. Brontë 57). Previously, Gilbert has admitted to being “a little bit spoiled by [his] mother and sister, and some other ladies of [his] acquaintance,” and here he further confronts this reality (36). He tells his mother that, “I might sink into the grossest condition of self-indulgence and carelessness about the wants of others, from the mere habit of being constantly cared for myself, and having all my wants anticipated or immediately supplied” (57-58). This astute observation can be used to partially explain the characters of Huntingdon and his lot, while also proving that Gilbert is set apart from this type of man, as he recognizes the privilege of his position. He goes on to say, “I was not sent into the world merely to exercise the good capacities and good feelings of others … but to exert my own towards them; and when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her: I would rather give than receive … we must bear one another’s burdens” (58). His mother brushes these sentiments off as naïve, and as the
novel unfolds, the reader could well agree with Mrs. Markham. The unhappiness of so many of the couples “makes the reader wonder whether any two individuals could achieve the kind of equal partnership that Gilbert seems to desire in a society that encourages inequality” (Senf 449). Yet the mere fact of Gilbert’s desire for this companionate marriage, especially so early in his arc, suggests that all his time spent in female company has influenced him for good.

In fact, Gilbert seems to struggle with forming male friendships, as we see in his relationships with Lawrence and Halford (the recipient of the letters that frame the novel), unlike Huntingdon, who was always at his worst when surrounded by his male cohorts. Gilbert’s relationships with these two men also reveal his growth and sincere attempts at change. His opening letter to Halford explains that Gilbert is unfolding the story of his relationship with Helen in hopes of ameliorating the emotional injury he inflicted on his friend by not sharing this confidence earlier. This gesture, sharing stories to soothe hurt feelings, carries the feminine influence of the sitting rooms Gilbert has spent so much time in, but also shows significant growth from the youth who assaulted Lawrence on the road in a savage fit of jealousy. That incident is one of the more shocking scenes of violence in the novel, but, like Hattersley after his public abuse of Milicent, we are meant to see Gilbert as reformable. More than that, the novel “suggests that Markham ought to reform—and reform by becoming more feminine” (Joshi 915). Despite already being fairly domesticated, Gilbert still has to tend with the effects of being so coddled by his mother, as well as the societal views of men and masculinity. His sudden outburst of physical violence indicates that in spite of all his differences from Huntingdon—class, occupation, education—Gilbert is still susceptible to the influence of
traditional masculinity. Therefore, before he and Helen can be true equals, he has more to learn. After Helen’s failure with Huntingdon, she is not interested in taking on the role of “angel monitress” again, yet her mere presence in Gilbert’s life kickstarts the process of his reformation. Before their acquaintance, Gilbert admits to being spoiled and though he denies to Halford that he was a bit foppish, it seems as if he doth protest too much. We certainly see him flirting shamelessly with Eliza Millward. However, as his friendship with “Mrs. Graham” blossoms, he becomes more self-aware and as his affection for her grows, he re-evaluates his previous convictions and behaviors. Then, Helen gifts him her journal, which allows him to not only discover how misplaced his jealousy of Lawrence was, but to more fully understand Helen, for to read her story, set down in her own words as it unfolded, with all the emotions fresh, is as near as he can get to having lived those years himself. This experience, of seeing through Helen’s eyes, “of being admitted into the reality hidden within and behind the conventional consciousness in which he participates—is revolutionary, and absolutely instrumental to the partnership of equals their marriage will become” (Jacobs 213). Gilbert has been granted a view behind the veil of women’s lives, shown what happens beyond the parlor, and absorbed this deeper understanding of the female experience into his own. In this way, he becomes more feminine, which, as Joshi points out, is the reverse of the feminist dictum of Mary Wollstonecraft urging “women to ‘imitate manly virtues’” (Joshi 915). After reading the diary, Gilbert writes that he felt “shame and deep remorse” for his conduct (A. Brontë 398), likely foremost in his violence against Lawrence, when earlier he felt “no generous impulse—no kind relentings” towards his victim (117). Thereafter we see a more thoughtful Gilbert, one who is compelled to apologize to Lawrence and who very
carefully follows Helen’s wishes regarding their continued acquaintance, despite his protestations.

Then, Gilbert carefully copies the contents of Helen’s journal in his correspondence to Halford, giving his friend the opportunity to learn in the same way he has. Tess O’Toole engages with Linda Shires’ “Of Maenads, Mothers, and Feminized Males: Victorian Readings of the French Revolution,” by examining this claim that:

Gilbert and his correspondent Jack Halford are both educated by their reading of Helen’s diary: “[The novel] counsels an inscribed male friend that what he may perceive as overly independent female behavior is a strong woman’s only way to maintain integrity in a world where aristocratic male dominance can easily slip into abusiveness. It is important that the text addresses a man, for the counterhegemonic project of the text is not merely to expose a bad marriage but to teach the patriarchy the value of female rebellion.” (O’Toole 719)

By reading Helen’s first-hand account of her experiences, Gilbert, and through him, Halford, are not just privy to the inner lives of women and thereby feminized; they are instructed in the “value of female rebellion,” by seeing and understanding that it is the only right course of action in some situations. Gilbert easily recognizes Huntingdon as the villain and Helen as the heroine. Her radical, exceptional actions are not “overly independent,” but justified and natural. The readers of Helen’s story follow her logic and come to the same conclusions she does. In this way, Helen and her life serve to educate and improve two men in her circle, without taking on the role of moralizing angel (as, indeed, the novel itself may also serve to do). Furthermore, by sharing this with Halford, Gilbert is not only strengthening his relationship with his friend and brother-in-law, but
also participating in Halford’s instruction. This is significant, as Joshi writes, because
“That the exchange [letters] is between two men—not a man and a woman as in so many
English novels in which a woman tutors a man to know his emotions—indicates Brontë’s
interest, given her skepticism about women’s influence, in probing alternate avenues for
the development of masculine sensibility” (Joshi 918). When Helen tries to directly assert
her influence over Huntingdon, she finds that she has none. When it comes to Gilbert,
and, by extension, Halford, she ends up indirectly influencing them to develop a deeper
emotional intelligence, to incorporate more femininity into their masculinity.

Anne Brontë’s writing repeatedly emphasizes the social construction of gender in
its argument for equal treatment. Jacobs notes that the novel reveals a lack of faith in the
cultural “separate spheres” attitude towards gender. Rather, Anne believes that “gender is
a ragged and somewhat ridiculous masquerade concealing the essential sameness of men
and women” (Jacobs 204-5). This is a belief she shared with her sister, Emily, as
evidenced by their emphasis on the relationships of souls, rather than bodies, that of the
human essence, rather than physical differences. As Catherine famously proclaims in
Wuthering Heights, “‘Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same’” (E.
Brontë 75). Gilbert echoes a similar sentiment on the communion of souls, saying to
Helen, “‘if they can part our bodies, it is enough, in God’s name, let them not sunder our
souls!’” (A. Brontë 403) and in the midst of Gilbert’s clumsy proposal, Helen declares
“‘the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust
in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly
loving, sympathizing hearts and souls’” (485). By having Helen and Gilbert both cross
the boundaries of their gendered spheres and cultivate a relationship based on the cores of
their beings, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* advocates for the “essential sameness” and equality of the sexes.

“Before me truth can stand alone”: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*’s Legacy

Though it draws on and employs some aspects from the popular genres of the early nineteenth century, Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is ultimately a triumph of Victorian realism, yet predating the mid-to-late-century boom of that genre that would be characterized by the popularity of such notables as Charles Dickens and George Eliot. Its invocation of the Gothic conventions of secrecy, suspense, the epistolary framing device, and the “crumbling castle,” along with the romantic ending, “does not prevent the reader from concentrating on the significance of what happens” (Senf 449); indeed, these devices make the novel more compelling and entertaining for the reader. The novel lies in the central overlap of a Venn diagram that includes the Gothic, the didactic, and Victorian realism, with each contributing to the emphasis on interrogating the separate gendered spheres and Victorian morality, but without lending “credibility to the supernatural” (Davison 126). In this way, the Gothic elements never leave the realm of the real but serve to expose the “dark, sometimes criminal, underbelly” (Davison 127) of the idealized domestic, revealing the truth: “social power legitimizes violence” (Jacobs 214). The use of Gothic conventions, like the framing letters and the spooky abandoned manor house, prepare the reader for the coming horrors of Helen’s life, but the expectations are subverted when the dark dreary house is her sanctuary and the villain is a seemingly charming gentleman. Using the social mores of the domestic angel, the woman as moralizing influence, but allowing the exceptional Helen to fail in
this role, while she succeeds everywhere else, showcases the unrealistic expectations of
this concept. Furthermore, A. Brontë uses this subversion to emphasize her belief that
“each individual is responsible, and accountable, for his or her own fate,” that any
character that wishes to reform themselves can, like Hattersley or Gilbert, and any
character who wishes to take control of their circumstances, like Helen, can do so, despite
any and all obstacles (Thornählen 8). Carol Margaret Davison, in her chapter “The
Victorian Gothic and Gender,” characterizes the text as a “Gothic temperance novel,”
highlighting the influences of these two other genres that, ultimately, make “Brontë’s
indictment of wife-abuse, custody issues and the debilitating restraints placed on …
women who are disallowed gainful employment and granted love as their only rightful
domain, … nothing if not prescient and courageous” (130). Helen’s troubles are
reflecting and anticipating the feminist movements of the Victorian era. The novel
engages with and complements the legal and political discourse that began to gain public
momentum in the late 1830s and would continue through the rest of the century.

As the understanding and appreciation of Anne Brontë and her novel grow, the
modern critic is more apt to categorize The Tenant of Wildfell Hall as a work of Victorian
realism. Senf calls it “the portrait of an age,” saying “the characters [A. Brontë] paints
represent almost every kind of individual who might have inhabited the English
countryside during the third decade of the nineteenth century” (450). However, even
Bronte’s contemporary critics, who censured the harshness and brutality of the novel,
were unable to overlook her skill in observing and evoking her society. E. P. Whipple, in
the North American Review, like so many others, complains of “the prominence given to
the brutal elements of human nature,” yet is forced to admit that “All the characters are
drawn with great power and precision of outline, and the scenes are vivid as life itself” (359-60). This praise of A. Brontë’s characterization becomes especially poignant, as one of the most highly regarded social realists of the Victorian age, George Eliot, valued characterization over descriptive detail as the key to writing realist fiction, according to John Mullan. Kristen A. Pond describes this attention to character by saying, “realism includes the contradictory impulse to create individualized characters that must also be typical and plausible” (Pond 473). Citing a piece from The Westminster Review in April of 1856, Mullan relays Eliot’s definition of realism “as ‘the doctrine that all truth and beauty are to be attained by a humble and faithful study of nature, and not by substituting vague forms, bred by imagination on the mists of feeling, in place of definite, substantial reality’” (Mullan). Going back to Anne’s “Preface,” she responds to the critical condemnation of her “unhappy scapegrace with his few profligate companions” by writing “I know that such characters do exist” (A. Brontë 4), advocating for the plausibility and, ultimately, truth of her writing. Truth is a common thread in her writing, appearing in her novels and her poetry. “‘Before me truth can stand alone,/The naked, solid truth,’” she writes in the poem “The Three Guides” (Complete Poems 63), published in a periodical in August of 1848, the same month that the second edition of Tenant was released with its new preface. A. Brontë proves again and again that she intends to shine the piercing light of honesty on her society. Quoting scholar George Levine, Pond explains, “‘it is no accident that realism tended to be the dominant narrative mode of Victorian England in which perhaps the greatest of all virtues…was truth-telling’” (Pond 472). Eliot, too, uses “truth” in her definition of realism. When situated in
the timeline of Victorian realism, Brontë’s contribution seems poised to add a feminist perspective that pre-dates Eliot.

Anne Brontë’s novel presents an author and heroine who both break with convention. The author, often characterized as the patient, spiritual, quietly reserved sister, clearly had strong opinions and ideas she felt compelled to share, uncomfortable truths that needed to be spoken. Despite coming from a family of writers, Anne Brontë seems to have been generally misunderstood and underestimated by those around her. Both of her heroines defy the familial and social expectations placed on them, echoing her own struggle against the assumptions of her sisters and critics. In her last piece of correspondence, Anne writes to Charlotte’s closest friend, Ellen, to ask Ellen to accompany her to the seaside, against Charlotte’s wishes, in the hopes that the crisp, clean air would restore her failing health. Though the sea cure was unsuccessful, Anne’s words in this letter resonate across the years. She writes, “I long to do some good in the world...before I leave it. I have many schemes in my head for future practise [sic]—humble and limited indeed—but still I should not like them all to come to nothing, and myself to have lived to so little purpose” (qtd in Ellis 5). As with her preface, Anne reveals here that there is purpose to her writing, that she has certain things she wishes to achieve. And as for her heroine, Helen represents the feminist protests of her time, revealing the flaws in the systems of marital coverture and domestic ideology. The themes and messages of Helen’s story address “the effect of law on the lives of real women and the extent to which this law might be challenged...that spoke, and continues to speak, to issues of burning immediacy to generations of wives and mothers” (Ward 152). The Tenant of Wildfell Hall celebrates Helen’s active resistance. The courts may
not have offered any support, but that does not keep her from acting in the best interests of herself and her son, by leaving the domestic arena of abuse. Though the laws no longer support coverture or deny mothers custody of their children, spousal abuse, both physical and emotional, still exists. Only five years ago, a woman published an anonymous account in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, in which she found inspiration to leave an abusive marriage after reading *Tenant* and recognizing too many similarities between her spouse’s behavior and Huntingdon’s. As she recounts, “if Anne Brontë (who was a daughter of an Anglican clergyman) could write a novel in Victorian England where the heroine could leave an evil man like that, what was I doing staying with one 150 years later?” (Young). Anne may have died before she could carry out her “schemes,” but what she left behind did not “come to nothing.” Her second novel was not meant to be her final novel, but in spite of everything—its fraught publication history, its public dismissal by critics and Charlotte, and Anne’s posthumous relegation as the “other” Brontë—the legacy of this work has survived. It is still telling the truth and doing some good in the world, standing as “a feminist manifesto of revolutionary power and intelligence” (Davies xi). While some of the narrative structures and themes look back to the Georgian period and its popular genres, the novel is ultimately prophetic, anticipating the progress of the realist genre and the feminist movement of the Victorian era. As *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* continues to gain recognition among readers and scholars, this exceptional work, and its author, should assume their rightful place in the literary canon of nineteenth century fiction. This work and its author bring a fresh voice to the study of Victorian realism and offer an insight into gender norms and domestic abuse that remains relevant and powerful to even casual readers.
Notes

1. From the poem “The Three Guides” by Anne Brontë, see p. 43 & Works Cited.

2. During Anne’s tenure as governess at Thorp Green, she secured a position with the family for Branwell as a tutor. Unfortunately, he became more invested in an illicit relationship with the lady of the house than in instructing the young master. Upon Anne’s resignation (she wrote that she was “[s]ick of mankind and their disgusting ways”), Branwell was subsequently fired, placing them both back at the Parsonage (Ellis 195). As it became clear that his romance with Mrs. Robinson (yes, really) was ended, he quickly descended into drunkenness and opiate dependency. Branwell’s sisters watched, mostly helpless, though Anne and Emily did rescue him one night after he inadvertently set fire to his bedclothes (which is eerily similar to a scene from *Jane Eyre*, but reportedly occurred after the publication of both that novel and *Tenant*).

3. Though Helen’s guardians allow her the freedom of choice in her husband, A. Brontë also shows women with less freedom. In her enclosed journal, Helen writes of Mrs. Hargrave: “Poor Milicent, I fear, has already fallen a sacrifice to the manoeuvrings of this mistaken mother, who congratulates herself on having so satisfactorily discharged her maternal duty, and hopes to do as well for Esther” (231). Having experienced first-hand the pitfalls of “marrying well,” Milicent enlists Helen to pass on their wisdom to Esther, imploring, “I wish you would seriously impress it upon her, never, on any account, or for anybody’s persuasion, to marry for the sake of money, or rank, or establishment, or any earthly thing, but true affection and well-grounded esteem” (282). As this exchange continues, Helen makes a unique observation:
“I assure you her ideas of love and matrimony are as romantic as anyone could desire.”

“But romantic notions will not do: I want her to have true notions.”

“Very right, but in my judgement, what the world stigmatizes as romantic, is often more nearly allied to the truth than is commonly supposed; for, if the generous ideas of youth are too often overclouded by the sordid views of after-life, that scarcely proves them to be false.” (282)

This passage serves two purposes. The first is Helen’s purpose in hoping to assuage her friend’s sisterly concern and to attempt to mitigate their own “sordid views of after-life.” The other purpose, to my reading, is Anne Brontë’s defense of her own “ideas of love and matrimony.” She has a romantic happy ending in store for her heroine, one in which Helen is financially independent, reunited with her beloved aunt, and free to choose a partner. Is this a realistic outcome? Literary scholars and critics have persistently looked down upon the romantic novel as the purview of women, unlike Romantic poetry, which is “high art” (and the most enduring Romantic poets, Keats, Wordsworth, Shelley, etc., are men). In a 1797 review of Ann Radcliffe, Arthur Aiken elaborates this consensus, by separating the true novelistic form as that which is representative of society from the romantic, which is gimmicky and feminine. As Robert Miles explains, “Aiken concedes that women may master the more difficult [representative/realist] novel …but implies that romance is their natural sphere…[leaving the female novelist] some ways behind even the laggards in the male ranks ahead…proper novelists staggering under the masculine burden of rigorous truth” (Miles 180). Like Brontë’s critics some fifty years later, Aiken is relegating the fanciful to the feminine and claiming the genuine for “the
masculine burden of rigorous truth.” However, in the exchange between Helen and Milicent, A. Brontë equates the stigmatized “romantic” with “the truth,” that which she holds in highest esteem. Romantic ideas are associated with the feminine and belittled, but that does not mean they are not real and true ideas, which women and female authors are capable of expressing and representing.

4. This chapter is entitled “Social Virtues,” one of several chapter headings that highlight the irony of their contents.

5. Surridge cites a report from the *Times* in August 1846 of a husband convicted of “common assault” after his wife was hospitalized for ten days showing “‘marks of extreme violence’” (83).

6. When Huntingdon discovers Helen’s first escape plan by covertly reading her journal over her shoulder, he accuses her of attempting to steal from him, musing “you thought to rob me of my son too…?” (366-7). He frames young Arthur as a possession or even trophy, rather than a child, saying “my son” instead of “our son.” In this exchange Huntingdon is upset that Arthur would become “a dirty Yankee tradesman, or a low, beggarly painter,” but doesn’t express any emotional attachment to his son, nor has he previously, often jealous of the attention paid to the child as an infant. It is only when he is bedridden that Huntingdon wants to see Arthur for himself and not as a manipulation tool.

7. *Wuthering Heights*’s Cathy can also be seen ignoring the “code of conduct that spelled out a proper woman’s behavior and responses” (Hoeyer 5). She does not gain her inheritance through any action or performance. She does not manipulate and outwit a villainous, but hapless relative with her naïveté and chastity. On the contrary, she is
overtly hostile towards her “evil uncle” (Hoeveler 7) Heathcliff, more often than not arguing with him and “returning his angry glare” (E. Brontë 300). As property of the patriarchy, women and children were to be seen and not heard, gazed upon, not gazers. Yet Cathy insists on being disagreeable, voicing uncomfortable truths when silence is wished for and staring back with fire and ice when her presence is unwelcome. Cathy, especially, provokes those around her with her eyes as much as her tongue. Joseph and Heathcliff marry the dark power of her look with her femininity, calling her “insolent slut” (300), “graceless,” and “forrard” [forward], finding a witchcraft in “her bold een” [eyes] (299). Her gaze transforms her from a passive object to be admired or ignored, into an assertive subject, a woman who exists outside the narrow confines of the male spectators, neither passive nor proper.

8. All three of the sisters originally took on the nom de plume and persona of one of the “Bell brothers,” but while Charlotte was eager to take credit for her own success, Emily preferred to continue to be referred to as Ellis Bell.

9. The only times we see him alone with Mr. Lawrence or the Reverend Millward are in brief passing exchanges on the road.
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& organizing shelves; and maintaining a tidy & inviting store 
environment

◊ Book Seller Borders  Bridgeport, WV  05/2009-01/2010

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◊ Ronald McDonald House  Morgantown, WV  2009-2012

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