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UNIVERSITAT AUTÒNOMA DE BARCELONA

The Love Marriage

Challenging Victorian Myths in Anne Brontë's
The Tenant of Wildfell Hall

Montse Estañol

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Supervised by Dr Sara Martín

To the women readers in my family

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Introduction

Back in February 2008, when I was still an undergraduate student, I visited a friend who was working as a teaching assistant in a town close to Leeds, Bradford and the famous Yorkshire Moors. At the time, I was already an avid reader of 19th century English novels, but had no formal studies in English Literature. Of the Brontë family, I was familiar with Charlotte because I had read *Jane Eyre* and loved it; and I knew about Emily and *Wuthering Heights* after listening to my grandmother's summary of the novel, which actually convinced me *not* to read it at the time, as I felt it was too tragic for my taste.

My friend, aware of my growing interest in literature, thought that a trip to the Brontë Parsonage Museum in Haworth and the Moors was in order, and I readily agreed. To my surprise, that day I learnt not only that there were *three* literary sisters instead of two, but also that they had a brother with artistic inclinations, the unfortunate Branwell. After the tour in the museum, I bought some merchandising in the shop, including four of the novels by the sisters. There was one in particular that looked very promising from the summary on the back cover: Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Back home, I read all of the novels I had bought, but *The Tenant* became a special favourite. My first thoughts after reading it were a mixture of awe and amazement at the fact that, back in the 19th century, someone was writing about women's abuse and actually having the protagonist run away from the husband. However, a question started bothering me: why hadn't I heard of Anne Brontë before? The fact was that the novel had transmitted to me what I considered a very modern and up-to-date message (i.e. that a woman has the

right to run away from domestic abuse) and I could not understand how I had missed her, knowing already about both Charlotte and Emily.

Four years later, as a postgraduate student, I have been able to confirm that Anne is not as popular as Charlotte or Emily, not even in academic circles. This is clear just by looking at the number of adaptations of her works in comparison to those of her sisters. At the end of her book, Ingham¹ lists the number of film and television adaptations of the Brontë's novels up to 2006. It is interesting to note that there are nearly thirty adaptations of *Jane Eyre*, more than fifteen of *Wuthering Heights* but only two of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (263–264). However, Ingham also points out the good reviews that the most recent TV adaptation (1996) of *The Tenant* received, quoting Showalter's claim that "[Anne's] abused and mutinous heroine was so far in advance of her time that she is only now getting her due" (247).

Unfortunately, the academic world has also taken a long time to see Anne Brontë as an author in her own right, and not as the *other* sister. Langland, in fact, goes as far as to say that Anne has suffered the fate of the "woman writer in patriarchal culture": her work has been measured by the same standards applied to her sisters, standards which are not appropriate for her work (*Anne Brontë* 29). Certainly, if we are to judge by the classical works of feminist criticism, Anne's work seems to have been little appreciated. *The Madwoman in the Attic* (Gilbert & Gubar), analyses in detail *Wuthering Heights* and all of Charlotte's novels, including the posthumous *The Professor*, which was deemed unworthy of publication during Charlotte's lifetime (Barker 932) and which is considered an inferior work (Gilbert & Gubar 335; Barker 590–591). Surprisingly, though, in spite of Gilbert and Gubar's

¹ I use the Modern Language Association (7th edition) style of referencing throughout this dissertation. The 7th edition uses the author-page format for in-text citations.

interest in the Brontës, Anne's novels are just mentioned in passing, although they acknowledge that *The Tenant* is the story of a "woman's liberation" and also the fact that Helen is a paradigm of the female artist (80–81).

Therefore, there are two main reasons that compelled me to write about *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. First of all, the fact that as a (non-academic) reader I loved it: I enjoyed the gripping storyline, and I was amazed at the contemporary (and current) message the novel transmits, not to mention the main character, Helen, who remains strong and upright despite the fact that she is quite alone. Secondly, I feel that this novel has not been treated as it deserves. With this dissertation, I hope to contribute my own bit towards highlighting and emphasising both the figure of Anne Brontë as an author and the relevance of her second and last novel, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This novel, written in the 1840s² but set two decades earlier, narrates the struggle of a young woman, Helen, who runs away from her abusive husband, Arthur Huntingdon, in order to protect their young son, also called Arthur, from his father's corrupting influence. Although Helen's relationship with Arthur is the centre of the story, the novel also relates her relationship with Gilbert Markham, whom she meets after running away and whom she marries after Arthur's death. Through Helen's diary, we get to know the evolution of her married life with her first husband; there is, however, virtually no information on her second marriage, as the wedding marks the end of Gilbert's own account of events in the novel.

When the novel was first published in 1848 it became a source of controversy, precisely because of the detailed description of Arthur's abuse and dissipation. Most

² The exact period of composition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not known. Barker believes that its writing was prompted by the visit of Mrs Collins to the parsonage in Haworth in April 1847. Mrs Collins had a vicious husband who had abandoned her and their children to total destitution. In spite of the difficult situation she had been placed in, Mrs Collins "survived the physical and mental degradation [and also] emerged as an independent and morally strong woman" (Barker 626). The novel had been finished by June 1848, when it was published by Thomas Cautley Newby (Barker 657).

contemporary critics censored it and one reviewer in particular complained that the writer showed a “morbid love for the coarse, not to say the brutal” (*Spectator*, qtd. in Barker 665). Even Anne’s sister Charlotte concurred with this opinion and decided to prevent the novel’s republication after Anne’s death: “‘Wildfell Hall’ it [sic] hardly appears to me desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake –it was too little consonant with the character– tastes and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer” (Charlotte Brontë, qtd. in Barker 772). As Langland explains, “Charlotte could have done little more to destroy her sister’s reputation for posterity” (*Anne Brontë* 50) as she kept it out of print for ten years after Anne’s death, until her own demise.

The fact that Anne, who never married, chose to write about marriage and abuse in the novel begs the question of whether she was challenging the marriage institution or, at least, a certain kind of marriage. There are many elements that point in this second direction. First of all, marriage is, for her protagonist, the beginning of all her troubles, instead of the beginning of the expected happiness. This contrasts with the majority of novels written up to that time, in which marriage represents the outcome of the story and not its focus (Merchant xviii). Examples of this range from Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela*, published in 1740, to all of Austen’s novels and even *Jane Eyre*, written by Anne’s sister Charlotte and also published in 1848. In these novels, marriage marks the end of the heroine’s growth, in contrast with *The Tenant*, where it marks its beginning (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 52). It is important to bear this in mind, as it implies that Anne Brontë did not have any literary references to take as a model. That is not to say that there were not any unhappy marriages in fiction, but that those marriages were not the focus of the novels. For instance, in Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, first published in 1813, there are at least three marriages which are more or less unhappy (Mr and Mrs Bennet’s, Charlotte Lucas and the

ridiculous Mr Collins', and Lydia Bennet and Wickham's), but there is very little time in the novel devoted to them.

Secondly, Brontë shows how even an apparently ideal choice of partner can have disastrous consequences. Helen actively chooses Arthur as her husband; she is aware of his debauchery and wishes to help and to reform him. She is neither forced nor coaxed into the marriage by her family. Helen's initial beliefs tally with the patriarchal discourse that women can act as nurturers and protectors of men (Kite 218; Connell 60); however, she fails in her role as Arthur's protector. Shortly into their marriage, she realises that, had she known Arthur's real self, she could never have married him. And, gradually, Helen becomes aware that she will never be able to change him. It is true that she nurtures and takes care of Arthur whenever he comes home ill from his London wild parties, but she is not able to cure his addiction to his bad habits such as drinking.

In spite of all this, Brontë seems to have some faith in the institution of marriage for, as I have mentioned previously, her novel ends with one that is apparently happy. Although she paints a bleak picture of Helen and Arthur's marriage, she seems to offer hope in the figure of Gilbert Markham, Helen's second husband. However, not all critics agree on this. Some believe that Gilbert becomes a good, civilised gentleman (Hallenbeck; Surridge; Langland) only thanks to Helen's influence; others believe that Gilbert is even worse than Arthur. Berg, for instance, censures Gilbert because he frames Helen's narrative within his own and uses the diary to atone for his lack of confidence in his brother-in-law (23–24). Westcott, on the other hand, believes that Gilbert only presents his best face in the narrative and "shape[s] the past so that it will conform to his own perspective" (220).

These differences in the interpretation of Gilbert's role mean that there are two possible readings of *The Tenant's* ending and therefore two ways of interpreting Brontë's challenge to marriage. Either Helen finally finds a good husband who respects her and with whom she is happy, or she falls into the hands of another tyrant who, besides, controls the telling of her own story. In the first case, Brontë's challenge to the romantic marriage myth could be said to be partial; in the second case, the challenge is complete.

At this point it is important to establish the meaning, in this context, of the words *romantic* and *Romantic*. Romanticism is a "literary-historical classification which labels certain writers and writings of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century" (Perry 3). Although it is "a troublesome concept" (Perry 3) and it seems impossible to settle on a definition of Romanticism (Perry; Brown), traditional Romantic writing –derived from what is now called "High Romanticism" (1798-1816)– is characterised by an emphasis in the imagination, inspiration, individualism, radical questioning and introspection (Fay 12). On the other hand, *romantic* can be used, as I do here, as a word referring to stories "relating to love" ("romantic"). Both terms can be related to Anne's novel. As I have already mentioned, her novel challenges an apparently ideal, romantic (i.e. love) marriage. In contrast, Arthur's selfishness and sensuality can be seen as Romantic or Byronic traits (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 58), although he lacks the radical questioning and the introspection behind many Romantic heroes. However, Anne Brontë never cherishes Arthur's behaviour; quite the opposite, in fact.

Another aspect to consider is the context of the novel and the reasons why Brontë may have chosen a second marriage for her heroine. An easy answer to this question is that, since there was no novelistic precedent to her story, she chose to end her novel in a *traditional* way. However, Helen and Gilbert's marriage at the end of *The Tenant* may also

be interpreted as a way of showing that not all men are like Arthur and his friends, and that Brontë's marriage ideal is not based on social or economic equality, as I will discuss, but on intellectual equality and character compatibility. This would make the novel and its ending far from traditional and even subversive while still upholding the idealised love marriage.

Considering all this, the present dissertation will defend the thesis that, despite Gilbert's flaws, his marriage to Helen is meant to be a happy union; a true love marriage despite its unconventional and even scandalous beginning, according to Victorian conventions. I will do so by comparing the male characters in the novel, focusing on Arthur and Gilbert, and showing their evolution throughout the novel and the ways in which they differ. My particular interpretation will be based on the fact that Gilbert learns the lesson from Helen's diary and, although he has a hard time keeping his promise not to see the still married Helen again, as she demands in despair, he keeps to his word and respects her wishes. Moreover, Anne Brontë had no trouble giving Helen a voice through her diary when she needed it: the fact that she keeps silent at the end of the novel can also be understood as her way of acknowledging the truth in Gilbert's story and her happiness in their marriage. Finally, as I have mentioned previously, I will explore the possible reasons in terms of the narrative that may have led Anne Brontë to end her novel with a love marriage.

The research methodology that I follow in this dissertation is based on textual analysis. Textual analysis can be understood as "the close reading of cultural artefacts" (Griffin 11), and has to consider the context in which said artefact was produced. However, the process of creating meaning is understood differently according to the historical context and the person giving the meaning. This implies that no interpretation of a text is definitive; interpretations are, in fact, partial and specific (Griffin 11–12).

The use of textual analysis is appropriate for the present work because, first of all, we are dealing with a cultural artefact, i.e. a novel; and secondly, my answer to the research question is based on a particular interpretation of the novel. Consequently, the ideas presented in this dissertation will not be a definite solution of the problem regarding Anne's message, but I hope that they will contribute towards further discussion of the novel, in order to enhance its relevance today.

Finally, as the reader can observe, this dissertation is divided into an introduction, three chapters, the conclusion and an appendix.

Chapter 1 provides the background for the analyses in chapters 2 and 3. In the early 19th century, whenever women married they lost all claim to an identity of their own and everything they owned became their husband's property. Divorce was expensive and difficult to obtain, placing married women trapped in abusive marriages in a very vulnerable position. Moreover, custody of children was routinely assigned to the father in case of a divorce. However, the growing emphasis on the importance of family life led to a gradual change in the definition of masculinity, particularly upper-class: if in the 18th century being a man meant drinking, hunting and being promiscuous, during the 19th century it began to be defined as taking care of and providing for one's family. A consequence of this was that domestic violence was increasingly condemned, first socially and later legally. This is relevant because, as we shall see, *The Tenant* contrasts two models of masculinity and condemns domestic abuse.

Chapter 2 analyses the evolution of Arthur and Helen, from the moment they first meet, through their marriage and until Arthur's death, considering the context in which it takes place. I will give evidence of Helen's strength and morality throughout the hardships

of her married life and argue that Brontë not only shows the disastrous consequences of a match of opposite characters, but also unmask the reality behind the separation of spheres. The aim of this chapter is to provide the background for the comparison, in chapter 3, between Arthur and Gilbert and the different ways in which they relate to Helen.

Chapter 3 focuses on Gilbert, the runaway Helen he meets and the relationship between them. The chapter also compares Gilbert and Arthur, with the purpose of discussing whether Gilbert and Helen's marriage is meant to be a happy union. Along this line, the chapter also examines existing criticism that considers Gilbert just as another abusive husband and provides a different interpretation of the events that lead these authors to conclude that Gilbert is cruel and violent. More specifically, I will argue that Gilbert is transformed thanks to Helen's influence and that their marriage is meant to be happy.

Appendix A includes a timeline of some of the relevant events both in Anne Brontë's life and in the internal chronology of *Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It was created initially for my own use while I was writing this dissertation; I afterwards thought it would be useful to include here for quick reference.

Chapter 1: Marriage in Regency and Victorian England - An Overview

As the main events of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* take place between 1821 and 1829, this chapter provides a brief overview of the transformation of the existing beliefs, customs and legislation that took place during the first half of the 19th century regarding masculinity, women, marriage and the custody of children in order to offer a better understanding of the novel.

The idea of marrying for love is relatively new. Before 1660, families were authoritarian and patriarchal, and marriage was seen as a way to establish an economic and social exchange. However, during the 17th and the 18th centuries, families became closer and affection gradually played a bigger part in their definition (Phegley 2). According to Coontz, this was due to two main social changes: the spread of market economy and the advent of the Enlightenment (145–146). The Revolutions in America (1776) but especially in France (1789) also played a significant role in these changes, as their ideals challenged patriarchal authority and the traditional marriage (Coontz 148, 151) in order to favour the legal guarantee of individual rights.

During the 18th century Enlightenment “influential thinkers across Europe championed individual rights and insisted that social relationships [...] be organized on the basis of reason and justice rather than force” (Coontz 146). In fact, according to Watts, the Enlightenment “exalted marriage even further by making love the more important criterion in choosing a spouse” (qtd. in Coontz 146). The emphasis on individual rights also led to more freedom in the choice of partner. Therefore, at the beginning of the 19th century, the companionate marriage was already “a common aspiration” (Phegley 2).

In reality, however, the foundations of the companionate marriage were based on the attraction of opposites (Phegley 7). Men were expected to lead a rational, active life in the public sphere, whereas women represented feelings and compassion, and belonged to the domestic or private sphere. The general belief was that, in the domestic sphere, women were protected from all the turmoil and corruption of public life, thus preserving their innate moral qualities (Coontz 154–156). According to Steinbach, this notion of separate spheres was not really new; however, the emphasis on the connection between women and domesticity and the fact that women were considered morally superior to men but legally subordinate to them was enforced particularly from 1760 onwards (44). In the end, marriage came to represent the union of the men and women's complementary traits, and a love or companionate marriage, the perfect union (Coontz 156).

Despite this idealised view of marriage, the truth is that when women married they lost all claim to property and to an identity. By law, husband and wife were one, and the husband's identity subsumed that of the wife (Steinbach 267). Logically, the whole situation placed women in a difficult position as, if they married, their happiness depended very much on their husbands' goodwill. Before 1857, a divorce could only be obtained through the ecclesiastical courts or by private act of Parliament. This last route was the only way to obtain a divorce without making the children illegitimate. In any case, the whole process was very expensive and, especially in the upper classes, it carried a social stigma which probably did not make it worth the trouble for many (Steinbach 268). In 1857, the parliamentary divorce system was abolished, as the Matrimonial Causes Act of that year served to simplify the procedure and reduce the costs. This act allowed a husband to get a divorce if the wife was unfaithful, but a wife could only obtain a divorce if the husband was

unfaithful *and* committed another offense, such as being cruel or deserting her (Coontz 186–187; Steinbach 271).

Another problem derived from all these changes was the belief that women (at least, those considered to be *respectable*) were supposed to be passionless and asexual beings who had sex “in the interests of procreation, marital harmony, or motherhood” but not as a response to their own desire (Steinbach 114). This emphasis on women’s innate purity was also related to a higher emphasis on women’s virginity and their reputation, based on their sexuality. Only lack of sexual experience before marriage was acceptable in women from the middle and upper classes; whereas men’s reputation in the 19th century was judged by many factors, such as wealth and work (Steinbach 119).

The view of the family institution was also altered as a result of these changes: during the 19th century, the family went from being regarded as another patriarchal instrument for control to a “correlative figure of parliamentary democracy” (Donzelot, qtd. in Berry 34). This view, together with the emphasis on women’s morality and purity, led to changes on family law. The Custody of Infants Act passed in 1839 allowed a separated mother access to her children under seven years of age, and in some exceptional cases, temporary custody (Berry 34–35). Before the existence of this law, fathers had sole custody of their children (Steinbach 268).

This new emphasis on the importance of legislation regulating the family brought about a revision of the definition of manliness. If, during the 18th century, “[m]asculine nature, in gentry terms, was based on sport and codes of honor derived from military prowess, finding expression in hunting, riding, drinking and wenching” (Davidoff & Hall 110) through the 19th century “manly virtue came to be identified with [...] supporting one’s own

family and showing devotion towards one's wife and children" (Coontz 168). However, as Briggs points out, this was a gradual process: old and new customs and manners overlapped, especially during the first half of the 19th century. Therefore, during that time "there still existed a luxury-living, gay and dissipated, vain and exuberant minority" (452).

In fact, according to McMaster, during the Regency "drunkenness, gambling, duelling and swearing" were not only tolerated, but even encouraged in the upper classes; whereas Victorians "no longer considered [these activities] right and proper, manly and admirable" and "were fond of contrasting their values with [them]" (353). As Davidoff and Hall explain, "[t]rue manhood was not to be gained through sexual adventure but by self-control through religious commitment" (401).

The bourgeois emphasis on domestic masculinity implied a shift in the perception of sexual and domestic violence, which were increasingly condemned in the 19th century (Coontz 187). According to Surrige, "many Victorians hoped to solve wife beating by reforming masculinity rather than by changing the rights of women" (73). In spite of this, the concept of rape within marriage did not exist (Surrige 91; Steinbach 126) and there was little progress in the protection of abused wives (Coontz 187).

A real, famous case that illustrates the situation of women married to abusive husbands is that of George and Caroline Norton (1808-1877). Their story is also worth mentioning because of its similarities with the main characters in the novel, Helen and Arthur Huntingdon. They married in 1827 when Caroline was only nineteen and George was twenty-six: the match was actively sought after by her mother. The couple had three sons, but the marriage was a complete disaster. Norton was a heavy drinker and abused his wife, as her family knew well (Steinbach 269). In 1836, George hid their sons from Caroline and

attempted to obtain a legal separation from her after accusing her falsely of committing adultery. When she tried to obtain custody of their sons, she found out that there was no law protecting women in her predicament and for this reason she decided to publish a series of works denouncing the situation (Martín 128). Despite the existence of the 1839 Custody of Infants Act, she only obtained custody after one of her sons died in 1842 and George allowed them to live with her (Steinbach 269; Surridge). Norton's real-life story shows that despite the advances in the 19th century in contrast to the 18th, women were still at a great disadvantage in contrast with men.

Not all men were like George Norton, though. John Stuart Mill (1806 – 1873), for instance, was one of the few men in the 19th century who argued for equality for both sexes. He realised that “[in some aspects] the wife's position under the common law of England is worse than that of slaves in the laws of many countries”, as they were not entitled to have their own money or property and had to submit to their husbands' will (“The Subjection of Women” 165). Mill believed that women ought to have the same rights as men and be protected by law, in order to avoid the abuses they could be victims of and to remove them from the vulnerability of their position (“The Subjection of Women”).

Apart from his radical views, what is also interesting about the figure of J.S. Mill is the fact that his personal life shares some characteristics with that of Gilbert, one of the main characters in *The Tenant*. He also fell in love with a married woman, Harriet Taylor, in 1830, and they were forced to wait for her husband's death in order to get married. Unlike Arthur, however, John Taylor –Harriet's husband– was a good man. According to Ryan, he was the “unsung hero of the union”, as he only asked them not to make him look ridiculous and accepted their friendship (xi–xii). The relationship Mill and Harriet Taylor built in the meantime was one of “strong affection and confidential intimacy only” (Mill, *Autobiography*

ch. VI), based on a “union of true minds” and “mutual intellectual and moral regard” (Ryan xii). When they finally married in 1851, Mill decided to renounce his rights as husband (Coontz 181), which shows how he abided by what he believed in.

To sum up, despite the advent of Enlightenment and the American and French Revolutions’ ideals, and the gradual change in the definition of manhood that took place in the 19th century, now seen as taking care and providing for one’s family, women were largely left to their own devices. A married woman’s identity was subsumed by the husband’s; therefore they could not have any property of their own and had to obey their husbands. There was no law to protect them from abusive husbands, and they had no right as mothers to the custody of their children, although this changed gradually from the middle of the century onwards. Taking all this into consideration, the following chapters will be looking at the main three characters in the novel: Arthur, Helen, Gilbert and the relationships that develop between them, in order to examine Brontë’s position regarding matrimony.

Chapter 2: The Regency Marriage – When Love Is Not Enough...

The present chapter will analyse Helen's first marriage to Arthur Huntingdon. It will look at the evolution of the characters from the moment they meet, through their marriage and until Arthur's death, considering the context in which the novel is placed and that I have described in the previous chapter.

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall has a peculiar narrative structure: its plot is embedded in two letters that Gilbert Markham sends to his brother-in-law, Jack Halford, narrating a story that took place about between twenty (when he met Helen) and twenty-six years before (when Helen met Arthur). The content of these letters can be divided into three different parts: the first section narrates Gilbert's acquaintance with Helen and how they fall in love, from Gilbert's point of view; the second section goes back six years and consists of Helen's diary, written between 1821 and 1827; finally, the last part resumes Gilbert's narration at the point where he left off in the first section, and the story progresses towards its resolution. As Arthur and Helen's marriage is mainly narrated through her diary, this chapter will focus on it, although it will also refer to the last section of the novel.

The Helen that first appears in the diary is only eighteen, a beautiful, intelligent young woman, protected by wealthy parents (her aunt and uncle). In many ways, she comes to represent the woman Mary Wollstonecraft wishes for in *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792): someone who is educated and rational, instead of vain, manipulative and only outwardly submissive. Helen precisely dislikes some ladies she meets because she finds them "mindless, heartless and artificial" (105). She refuses to be treated like a child by one of her suitors, Mr Boarham, who tells her that her "errors of judgement, opinion or manner"

are not “irremediable, but might easily be removed or mitigated by the efforts of a watchful and judicious adviser” (111). Instead, she thinks he is “narrow-minded and bigoted” (109). Helen’s maturity and rationality are shown in a conversation with her aunt. She tells her that:

I not only should think it *wrong* to marry a man that was deficient in sense or in principle, but I should never be *tempted* to do it; for I could not like him, if he were ever so handsome, and ever so charming [...]. I ought to be able to respect and honour the man I marry *as well* as love him, for I cannot love him without (104-105, original emphasis).

In spite of her own principles, Helen ends up falling in love with dashing Arthur Huntingdon. Ten years older than herself, he provides a breath of fresh air in contrast to Helen’s older suitors. Although gossip establishes him as debauched and a rake (117-118), Helen refuses to believe it. In fact, at one point she sees him as an angel who saves her from a purgatorial fiend (i.e. another suitor, Mr Wilmot, whom she abhors) (114). What is interesting is that she makes the mistake of falling in love with a man who “disarms her of her prudence [and] lays her apprehensions asleep” (More).

The warnings coming from Helen’s aunt –for Helen has lived with her aunt and uncle after her mother’s death when she was a child³– are also ineffectual against Arthur’s charms. When she asks Helen if she imagines that a “thoughtless profligate” would listen to the advice of a younger girl, Helen replies: “I think I might have influence [...] to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction” (117). There are two elements worth pointing out in Helen’s reply. First of all, as at the time women were considered to be asexual beings (Coontz 159;

³ Helen’s father is alive when she marries Arthur, and dies during their marriage (210). From the brief references to him in the novel, he seems to have been another worthless drunkard. Fortunately for Helen, she was brought up by her aunt and uncle as it was her mother’s express request that it should be so (138).

Steinbach 114), Helen transforms her sexual desire for Arthur into a “need to reform him spiritually” (Langland, “The Voicing of Feminine Desire” 117–118). Arthur himself contributes to this, as he tells her that, if he always had her by his side, he would never say anything reprehensible or act in an inappropriate way. Helen is aware that Arthur may be just flattering her, which shows that she is no fool, but she also believes there may be a grain of truth in what he says, and therefore, that it is worth sacrificing her happiness for his (118).

Secondly, ironically, she wishes to guide Arthur, just as Mr Boarham wished to guide her. However, there is an important difference: whereas her suitors wished to guide her intellectually, she wants to guide Arthur morally. Although this tallies with the roles assigned to men and women according to the separation of spheres, Helen violates conventions by rejecting the idea that she needs some kind of intellectual guidance. However, she does not realise that, despite Arthur’s assurances to the contrary, he will eventually act like her and refuse to be guided.

Arthur, in fact, is no saint. In her essay “On the Dangers of Sentimental or Romantic Connexions” (1778), More warns against the kind of man who “discovers on which side [the woman’s heart] is most accessible [and] avails himself of this weakness by addressing her in a language exactly consonant to her own ideas”. Arthur is one of them. For example, at one point, Helen and him are looking at a picture of a young girl watching a pair of birds that she has painted, and they have the following conversation:

‘Sweet innocent! she’s thinking there will come a time when she will be wooed and won like that pretty hen-dove [...], and how tender and faithful he will find her.’

‘And perhaps,’ suggested I, ‘how tender and faithful she shall find him.’

‘Perhaps, for there is no limit to the wild extravagance of Hope’s imaginings at such an age.’

‘Do you call that, then, one of her wild, extravagant delusions?’

'No; my heart tells me it is not. I might have thought so once, but now, I say, give me the girl I love, and I will swear eternal constancy to her and her alone [...].' (125-126)

Despite Arthur's first answer that the young girl in the painting, who symbolises Helen, is delusional, he afterwards corrects his opinion and tells her what she wants to hear: that he will be constant to the girl he loves. Arthur probably knows that Helen cannot be seduced like other women and that the only way of getting her is by marrying her. It is not clear whether, right at this moment, he actually lies on purpose or he says what he believes; but in any case, he does not keep to his statement later on in their marriage.

Apart from this, Arthur's attitude towards Helen throughout their courtship resembles that of a child. Many times he disregards Helen's wishes in order to gratify himself. On a couple of occasions, he rummages through Helen's drawings in order to find pictures of himself, and even keeps one of the portraits without her consent. Clearly, he is only interested in her feelings towards him (Hallenbeck par. 15). When Helen, outraged at his impudence, burns one of his pictures, he gets angry and tells her he will turn to someone that values him (122-128). And indeed he does. Instead of trying to make things right with Helen, he just flirts with another *love* interest, Annabella Wilmot, to Helen's dismay. In the end, however, Arthur proposes to Helen after trying to force her to confess her love for him, in a very ungentlemanly way.

Therefore, and despite her aunt's misgivings, Helen marries Arthur. Thormählen believes that Helen's vanity is what induces her to marry him (840). However, it is important to bear in mind that this vanity is fuelled by the society she lives in: women were supposed to be nurturing and carers of the family, and therefore Helen feels it is her duty to help Arthur. As Langland points out, she falls into the trap of believing in the myth that, since

women require protection from the harsh world and are innocent of it, they can act as “redemptive angels to fallen men” (*Anne Brontë* 140–141). What Helen does not realise is that Arthur must want to change in order for her to be able to help him.

Helen and Arthur’s marriage follows an ideal, romantic pattern in many ways: Arthur and Helen supposedly love each other, they are not forced into the marriage and they both belong to the same social class, the gentry. However, the novel proves that these ingredients are not enough for a successful union. After being married for some months, Helen realises that, had she known Arthur’s real self, she could never have loved him, let alone married him, as he is self-centred and superficial. Despite this, she is aware that she has been “wilfully blind” and therefore resolves to try to love him in spite of his faults, as she feels it is her duty to love and be faithful to him (158).

Following the same pattern of behaviour in their marriage as in their courtship, Arthur turns out to act more like a child than an adult. He is selfish and envious. For instance, when their son is born, Arthur is jealous because Helen pays more attention to the baby than to him. He tells Helen: “I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! [...] As long as you have that ugly little creature to dote upon, you care not a farthing what becomes of me” (189). This reaction seems more appropriate for a little child that is competing with a sibling for his parents’ attention than an adult. Eventually, Arthur calls the baby a “little selfish, senseless, sensualist” (190), which is exactly “what the reader sees in [Arthur]” (Berry 47). Even Helen herself characterises him as childish in various instances. After coming home from a long stay spent alone partying in London, one day Arthur falls asleep on Helen’s lap and she describes him as looking “careless and sinless as a child” (177). And the next day, he becomes “as restless and hard to amuse as a spoilt child – and almost as full of mischief” (177).

Another interesting scene that shows Arthur's self-centredness takes place shortly into their marriage, when they return from church. Arthur tells Helen: "[Y]ou are too religious. [...] To my thinking, a woman's religion ought not to lessen her devotion to her earthly lord", because Helen had been paying more attention to her prayers than to him at church (160). Arthur's choice of words is interesting: referring to himself as *lord*, he implies that he believes that Helen should consider him some kind of god on earth. The laws of the time certainly encouraged this vision; as we have seen in Chapter 1, the husband's identity subsumed that of the wife when they married, as Anne's novel reflects.

Helen, far from being intimidated by Arthur, is actually angry at his attitude: "What are *you*, sir, that you should set yourself up as a god, and presume to dispute possession of my heart with Him to whom I owe all I have and all I am" (160, original emphasis). Her reaction shows that there are some limits which Helen, despite her husband's full authority over her and her will to please him, will not allow Arthur to cross. Her faith is one of them, as she is a very religious and devout person. And, although the conversation begins with Arthur being annoyed at Helen's piety, the tables turn and at the end Arthur is the one who asks Helen not to be so hard upon him, as he does not have "a proper organ of veneration"⁴ (160-161). This reply illustrates Arthur's typical behaviour: instead of assuming responsibility for his own actions, he either blames someone else or says he cannot help it. Even when Helen returns to take care of him after everyone else has deserted him, towards the end of the novel, he blames her for a relapse in his illness, when it had been entirely his own doing, and Helen had done her utmost to prevent it (345). Helen summarises Arthur's main

⁴ Arthur refers to the fact that his head sinks towards the middle. According to phrenology, "different aspects of character [...] were governed by organs in the brain, and that they were traceable by analysis of bumps on the skull" (Ingham 63-64).

problem really well: “he has no more idea of exerting himself to overcome obstacles than he has of restraining his natural appetites” (177).

Another example that shows Helen’s independent spirit takes place when, tired and hurt by Arthur’s boasting of his former lovers, she retires to her bedroom after arguing with him. When Arthur knocks a while later and asks her to let him in, she replies “No; you have displeased me [...] and I don’t want to see your face or hear your voice again till the morning” (164). In this instance, Helen acts in a way which would not be permitted by law: once married, a woman was not allowed to deny a husband his conjugal rights and the concept of rape⁵ within marriage did not exist (Surridge 91). Therefore, this is “remarkable in an early Victorian novel” (Thormählen 837).

At the end, Helen’s diary comes to depict a patriarchal society in which women are treated by their husbands as mere objects and possessions. Arthur certainly sees Helen as such. The only time they go together to London, Helen narrates he “seemed bent upon displaying me to his friends” and “he considers me a worthy *object* of pride” (170, my emphasis). She has to make a huge effort to gratify his wishes, going against her own principles of adopting a “plain, dark, sober style of dress” and having to “sparkle in costly jewels and deck myself out like a painted butterfly” (170). After two years of marriage, Helen writes in her diary:

[Arthur’s] idea of a wife is a thing to love one devotedly, and to stay at home to wait upon her husband, and amuse him and minister to his comfort in every possible way [...]; and, when he is absent, to attend to his interests, [...] and patiently wait his return [...]. (192)

⁵ In the 1996 TV adaptation of *The Tenant*, Arthur tries to rape Helen after she becomes aware of his affair with Annabella. However, seeing that she does not resist him, he abandons his attempt and leaves her (“Episode 2”).

And this is exactly what she is forced to endure. Every year during their marriage, Arthur spends long periods of time in London with his questionable friends, drinking heavily and committing all sorts of excesses, returning only when he is ill and needs to be taken care of. And, years later, when Helen is already aware of Arthur's affair with Annabella, he goes as far as to tell his friends: "My wife! what wife? I have no wife [...] or if I have, look you, gentlemen: I value her so highly that any one among you, that can fancy her, may have her" (277). At this point, Helen is, at least for Arthur, a worthless object.

Helen finally realises that she was a fool to think that she had "strength and purity enough to save [herself] and him" and that, in fact, Arthur's corruption is reaching to her, as things that "formerly shocked and disgusted [her], now seem only natural" (206). She becomes embittered, cold and wary. The hardships of her married life also take a toll on her physical appearance, as Lord Lowborough, himself married to the flirtatious Annabella, tells her (268). However, although they have both been cheated on by their spouses, their situations are very different, as Helen tells Lord Lowborough: "Two years hence, you will be as calm as I am now – and far, far happier, I trust, for you are a man, and free to act as you please" (268), which highlights the inequality between men and women during the 19th century (Senf 447). Helen is forced to stay at Grassdale with her husband, as he will not allow her to leave with their son and become "the talk of the country" (241), whereas Lord Lowborough is able to obtain a divorce from his wife the moment she runs away with another man to continental Europe (357).

Despite the fact that, legally, Helen is a *femme covert* and she has no rights of her own, she decides to defy the law and run away, "assert[ing] what what she perceives as her right to make moral decisions on her own behalf" (Surrige 92), in order to save her son from his father's bad influence:

[My son's] father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, and to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire – in a word, to 'make a man of him'. [He] learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr Hattersley, and to have his own way like a man, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. (273)

The passage above shows that, to Arthur and his friends, being a man basically means getting one's own way, drinking and swearing. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this tallies with the definition of manliness that prevailed in the 18th century and in the early 19th, particularly during the Regency. Moreover, as McMaster argues, Arthur and his friends carry out these activities "not out of simple inclination, but out of a sense of social obligation" (354), which shows that, during the Regency, they were perceived as "right and proper, manly and admirable" (353), at least by some members of the gentry. Helen's opposition to these activities makes her a "Victorian wife married to a Regency husband" (Surridge 74).

This contrast between Helen and Arthur's moral values makes their marriage to be doomed from the beginning. The situation only gets worse when Arthur decides to bring his new low-class lover to Grassdale as his son's governess. Despite the fact that Arthur had frustrated Helen's plans to run away on the first occasion, had confiscated most of her money and jewels and had destroyed her painting materials; the second time Helen asks her brother, Frederick Lawrence, for help and she is able to escape successfully.

Their marriage ends with Arthur's death, approximately a year after Helen runs away. Before this event, she returns to nurse him during his last illness, caused by a bad fall from his horse when drunk. Although she goes back to him out of a sense of moral duty, she takes advantage of the situation to establish the terms of their relationship and to ensure the protection of her son. For instance, when Arthur, bedridden, asks her to bring their son

to him, she tells him this will only be possible when he consents to sign a paper transferring young Arthur's custody to herself, so that she will be able to take him away again if she deems it necessary (334). At this point, "[t]he absolute power of male privilege and legal sanctions is not just overturned [...]. It is almost as if maternal custody is an established, even legal, fact" (Berry 44–45).

Ironically, despite the fact that Helen is there to "benefit [Arthur]: as well to better [his] mind, as to alleviate [his] present sufferings" (336), she also takes advantage of it. Arthur, in fact, sees her return as some kind of "sweet revenge", as she can enjoy the reversal in their situations "with [...] a quiet conscience [...] because it's all in the way of duty" (336). Although Arthur has a point, Helen is not vengeful and does not want to take revenge on him. If she forces Arthur to transfer the custody of their son to her it is because she believes she owes a higher duty to her son than to him (340). Moreover, as Arthur admits, she has taken care of him during his illness better than anyone else (336). To the last, Helen tries to guide him spiritually and make him repent his sins, to no avail. Despite this, she keeps her hope in universal salvation and that his soul will reach Heaven in the end (351).

This episode in the novel also highlights how pitiable and pathetic Arthur can be: unlike Helen, who is strong even in adversity, he is helpless and terribly scared of dying. Their last conversations are almost religious debates dealing with the existence of God, repentance and salvation. At this point Arthur can hardly be considered a Romantic hero. Although he possesses some Romantic or Byronic traits, such as his self-centredness and his sensuality, he does not reject the world nor established laws and customs, as Romantic heroes do (Wilson 246). As Matus has observed, the character of Arthur Huntingdon is a

response “to the tradition of the rake and its progress”, but for Brontë progress means decline (117). Therefore, he cannot be considered a hero, quite the opposite.

In conclusion, this part of the novel shows the evolution of Arthur and Helen and the relationship they are in. Although men were supposed to be “logical, more rational and more in control of their emotions than [...] women” (Ingham 146), the novel shows a male character, Arthur, who is not guided by rational decisions, but by his appetites and feelings. He is vain enough to believe that, as long as he claims that he still loves Helen, she will forgive and forget all his offences (Ingham 151). Helen, on the other hand, begins as a young, innocent and hopeful girl, but her marriage turns her into a cold, careful and wary woman. The married life of Helen and Arthur is characterised by a power struggle between the two. As we have seen, Arthur has the power given to him by law; Helen, despite having no legal power, is full of moral authority, which even Arthur recognises and submits to at certain points, especially at the beginning of their married life. I believe that this proves that Arthur is aware of Helen’s superiority, both intellectually and morally. However, the problem with Arthur is that he finally “realizes that he is powerless to control, or even touch, the core of his young wife’s nature and personality” (Thormählen 836) which, in a way, accelerates his downfall. However, for the sake of his manliness and keeping up appearances, he cannot accept Helen’s decisions as he needs to feel he is in control of their relationship. At one point, he tells Helen: “You promised to honour and obey me. [...] I won’t be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife” (185). Therefore, while they live together, Arthur’s legal power triumphs over Helen’s moral authority. However, when she returns to Grassdale after having run away, Helen’s moral authority is imposed on Arthur’s legal power even if, legally, Arthur is still the one who should be in charge. This power

struggle ends with Arthur's death. In the end, Helen's diary comes to show the "disastrous consequences of the imbalance of power resulting from separate spheres" (Ingham 152).

Chapter 3: The Victorian Marriage – Towards a Happy Ending?

The previous chapter has looked at the evolution of Helen and Arthur from the beginning to the end of their marriage. In contrast, in this chapter I will analyse the relationship that develops between Helen and Gilbert Markham after she runs away from Grassdale, with the aim of assessing whether their marriage is meant to be a happy union, as I believe. In order to do so, I will compare Arthur and Gilbert and the different ways in which they relate to Helen. For this reason, I will focus on the first part of the novel (from the beginning until Helen's diary) and its last part (when Gilbert resumes his narration after having read Helen's diary).

Before beginning the analysis, however, we should take into consideration Gilbert's reliability as narrator. This is important because he is one of the main characters in the story and an interested party. Pascal explains that "an autobiography is a shaping of the past" (qtd. in Westcott 215) and as such it is a "selective process" (Westcott 215). Westcott, therefore, believes that Gilbert attempts to "dress up his account in the most flattering style he can muster" in order to present his best face to his brother-in-law and best friend, Jack Halford (223). However, as we will see, Gilbert also narrates his brutal attack on one of his "friends" and clearly shows his irrational anger bursts. One could argue that someone who describes such unflattering episodes is not trying to "dress up" his story. Hallenbeck agrees, stating that Gilbert "never [...] feign[s] perfection, but looks back at his own mistakes with irony and honesty" (par. 22). Therefore, as readers of the novel, I believe that in general we can trust what Gilbert tells us.

Returning to the story, as we have seen in Chapter 2, Helen finally runs away from her husband in order to avoid his bad influence on their five-year-old son. She goes to Wildfell Hall, the house where she lived in when she was a little child and that, uninhabited for many years, now belongs to her brother, Frederick Lawrence. There, she is forced to disguise her identity in order to avoid detection as Arthur could legally force her to return home. For this reason, she poses as young widow named Helen Graham (her mother's maiden name) and earns her income by painting. Logically, no one is aware of her connection to her brother other than the fact that she is his tenant.⁶

Unfortunately for Helen, her new abode does not even begin to solve her problems. She soon becomes a source of gossip for her neighbours, something that is not helped by the fact that she is reserved and secretive: she avoids parties, does not go to church as much as her neighbours consider appropriate and refuses to let Arthur, her son, out of her sight. As Gruner explains, "Helen seeks to stench this flow of gossip by retreating further into domestic privacy; this retreat, however, only increases both the gossip and its wild inaccuracy" (311). Even though her son has now escaped his father's bad influence and she is no longer oppressed by her husband, she is perpetually worried about the fact that someone may take young Arthur away from her, something "made plausible by the stories retailed in the debates over the [Infant] custody bill and the novel's setting ten years prior to the bill's passage" (Gruner 310), as children remained their fathers' possession. This leads her to overprotect her son and to mistrust everyone that gets too close to him. For instance, at one point Gilbert saves Arthur from being hurt and Helen, misinterpreting the situation, orders Gilbert to give Arthur back to her, instead of thanking him (19-20).

⁶ As a side note, it would like to point out that a first-time reader of the novel is completely unaware of these facts and, like young Gilbert, can only guess at the reasons behind the actions of the unfathomable widow that has just moved into the neighbourhood.

Despite the fact that she is placed in a very vulnerable position, Helen's strength of character remains intact. She is not afraid to state her opinion and ideas clearly, even if they go against the general, established points of view. For instance, when, in a rare exception, she visits the Markhams' home, she offers her unconventional views on the education of children: "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 goes as far as to say that she would rather have her son die, than become "a man of the world" even if he finally managed to "sober down" and become respectable (27). As it is to be expected, this way of educating her son generates controversy and criticism among the Markhams, as they – particularly Gilbert's mother– believe that her method will make a "mere Miss Nancy" of young Arthur (26). Still, Helen does not change her mind and keeps to her principles, as she clearly wants to avoid her young son becoming a replica of his father⁷. Her voice is "rational, confident and self-sufficient" and "challenges the separate gendered spheres by offering herself as one of the rare enlightened women who could claim a voice in public debate" (Carnell 10–11). Like Wollstonecraft, Helen demands equality in the education of men and women.

However, Helen's strong beliefs also have their drawbacks. For instance, she judges Gilbert just as if he were another Arthur, although he proves to be quite different from him, at least at first sight. To begin with, Gilbert and Arthur have opposing views of their role as husbands and men. In the previous chapter, I argued that Arthur thinks of a wife more in terms of a servant than an equal. Gilbert's opinion, on the other hand, contrasts even with

⁷ I would like to point out that Helen's educational model is vindicated thanks to the happy marriage, twenty years later, of her son Arthur to Helen Hattersley and the fact that they live happily at Grassdale.

his mother's conservative idea of a wife, as he tells her: "when I marry, I shall expect to find more pleasure in making my wife happy and comfortable, than in being made so by her" (46). Moreover, he is aware of the extent to which his mother and sister tend to his needs and realises that this could easily lead to selfishness and carelessness about other people, as he explains to his mother:

But for you 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, while left in total ignorance of what is done for me —if Rose did not enlighten me now and then; and I should receive all your kindness as a matter of course, and never know how much I owe you. (45)

According to Languard, "[Gilbert] achieves this unusual self-knowledge partly to prepare for his ceding the position of subject to Helen and thereby crediting her story" ("The Voicing of Feminine Desire" 115) later in the novel when he reads her diary. In contrast, Arthur takes everything for granted and caters to his own satisfaction and needs, disregarding those of other people. Senf argues that Gilbert and the younger generation of men⁸ "seem to treat their wives with kindness and respect" (452) and this is probably a result of a change of mentality, which I believe applies to women as well. Some of them, as evidenced by Gilbert's sister Rose and Helen herself, no longer submit in complete silence to degrading situations, in contrast to women from the previous generation, such as Gilbert's mother, who did not expect her husband to "put himself out of his way" to please her and considers his duty was to be steady and punctual, not find fault without reason and do justice to her dinners (46).

⁸ Gilbert would also be included in the younger generation of men, as he is approximately Helen's age, whereas Arthur is ten years older than Helen.

It is really interesting to notice that this contrast between Arthur and Gilbert also extends to the way they each get acquainted with Helen. Unlike Arthur and Helen's first meeting, when Gilbert and Helen see each other for the first time they are not favourably impressed with each other. He believes that she shows "no very soft or amiable temper" and that he "would rather admire [her] from this distance, than be the partner of [her] home" (14). Helen, on the other hand, shows a look of "quiet scorn" towards Gilbert (14). In a way, both Helen and Gilbert are prejudiced against each other. In the case of Helen, it is not surprising, as Gilbert himself realises later on: "I could readily forgive her prejudice against me, and her hard thoughts of our sex in general, when I saw to what brilliant specimens her experience had been limited" (309). This is probably aggravated by the fact that Helen initially sees Gilbert as a proud and conceited man, not unlike the society of men she has left behind. The young Gilbert, logically, feels misjudged and believes Helen to be "a woman liable to take strong prejudices [...] and stick to them through thick and thin [...] – too hard, too sharp, too bitter for my taste" (34), but at the same time he is perceptive enough to realise that "thought and suffering seem equally to have stamped their impress [on her face]" (23).

In this state of things, the main element that helps Helen and Gilbert develop their acquaintance is, in fact, young Arthur. He acts as a mediator in their relationship, "as Gilbert brings him books and a dog, plays with him and takes him riding" (Gruner 310). Moreover, as Gruner further points out, "Gilbert's approach to Helen through her son guarantees him a greater success than her husband, Arthur, who can see a child only as a rival for his wife's now divided attentions" (312). Although Helen initially objects to Gilbert and Arthur's friendship, she slowly realises that the former is harmless and, in fact, provides enjoyment for Arthur that she cannot give him. Gilbert's interest in young Arthur brings him closer to

the Victorian manliness ideal, based on providing and caring for one's family – although Gilbert is not Arthur's biological father, he takes care of him, which shows that he will be an affectionate father to the little boy.

It is also during these meetings that Gilbert and Helen talk about “painting, poetry, music, theology, geology and philosophy” (57). Gilbert, although a gentleman farmer far less *polished* than Arthur, relishes these, as he himself explains:

Where her opinions and sentiments tallied with mine, it was her extreme good sense, her exquisite taste and feeling that delighted me; where they differed, it was still her uncompromising boldness in the avowal or defence of that difference - her earnestness and keenness, that piqued my fancy: and even when she angered me by her unkind words or looks [...] it only made me the more dissatisfied with myself for having so unfavourably impressed her, and the more desirous to vindicate my character and [...] win her esteem. (51)

Through these discussions, Helen challenges Gilbert in ways that his former love, Eliza Millward, cannot. After his conversations with Helen, he finds Eliza “rather frivolous and [...] insipid” (41). Ironically, just as Eliza is starting to feel threatened by Helen, Eliza starts showing her worst side to Gilbert, thus justifying his opinion of her. On the other hand, Helen finds out that he is not “that empty-headed coxcomb” she had thought (57). Langland explains that “Gilbert Markham must learn to distinguish between an Eliza Millward [...] and Helen Graham just as Helen must distinguish Markham from Huntingdon. Both must learn to recognise what is desirable in a partner” (*Anne Brontë* 129). This changes Gilbert's appreciation of other women, the most notable example being Mary Millward, Eliza's sister. Gilbert describes her initially as a “plain, quiet [and] sensible girl [who] was trusted and valued by her father, loved and courted by all dogs, cats, children, and poor people, and slighted and neglected by everybody else” (15), whereas towards the end of the novel she becomes “[a] girl [...] whose sterling worth had been so quickly perceived and duly valued by

the supposed Mrs Graham, in spite of her plain outside" (341). Although Gilbert's first description is not negative, he implies that she is not valued by the community they live in, poor people excepted. He does not emphasise her worth until he meets Helen.

Despite the fact that, as they become closer, Helen tries to keep Gilbert from crossing the boundaries of friendship, she herself has trouble remembering her situation. At one point, he holds her hand and looks into her face. Although for an instant he believes "[his] hour of victory was come" due to "a flash of brilliance in [Helen's] eye" and "a glow of glad excitement on her face", Helen seems to remember something painful and withdraws her hand with "a sudden effort" (72). The scene shows the conflict between passion and reason that is taking place within Helen. In her courtship with Arthur, she already had displayed signs of her sexual desire, masked as a desire to reform Arthur. In her relationship with Gilbert, these signs are repeated without, apparently, an explicit desire to reform him, as shown in the quotation above; however, this time she is not free to act upon her growing feelings for Gilbert.

At the same time, more rumours about Helen start spreading around, and Gilbert becomes angrier as a direct consequence: he trusts Helen completely and is enraged at whoever dares to blacken her name. Unfortunately, right before Helen has decided to tell him the truth, he ends up overhearing a conversation between Helen and Frederick Lawrence, her brother, that leads him to believe that they are lovers. The mistake is understandable: he has had to listen to gossip and insinuations that Lawrence is Arthur's father for months, he believes that Lawrence is romantically interested in Helen, and finally

Helen herself tells him that, after hearing her story, he may resign her as not worthy of his regard⁹ (82).

Logically, Gilbert is completely broken after witnessing what he believes is the encounter between the two lovers. That he is passionately in love with Helen is evident by what he tells her right before believing her to be guilty: "I would rather have your friendship, than the love of any other woman in the world!" (82). His belief that he has been misused, however, brings out to light his faults more clearly. He becomes temperamental, even violent; he snaps at everyone and refuses to acknowledge his errors (86-87). Therefore, although "the novel contrasts Gilbert Markham and Arthur Huntingdon, it [...] suggests that Gilbert too has excessive and violent urges that he must learn to restrain" (Surridge 81).

The clearest example is his attack on Frederick Lawrence, one of the most controversial aspects of the novel. Meeting him by chance while they are both on horseback, Gilbert tries to ignore him at first, but when Lawrence insists on talking to him about Helen, Gilbert cannot take it anymore and hits him with his whip. He describes it as a moment of "savage satisfaction" when a "deadly pallor [...] overspread [Frederick's] face [...] and then fell backward to the ground" (91). He even believes Lawrence has received his due and consequently leaves him thus wounded to his fate.

The elder Gilbert (i.e. the narrator) admits that, if he analysed his feelings at the time, "the result would not be very creditable to [his] disposition" (91). Eventually, after a few minutes, Gilbert's conscience forces him to go back and help Lawrence, and he tries indeed to do so. Understandably, Lawrence does not react very favourably to Gilbert's

⁹ At this point it is clear that Helen feels guilty for having run away from her husband. Although the novel reinterprets the myth of the fallen woman (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 123), Helen is plagued by a feeling of having acted wrongly towards Gilbert by not disclosing her real situation.

attempts and therefore Gilbert ends up doing little to aid him. This is a moment in the novel in which we can clearly distinguish the contrast between the elder Gilbert and young Gilbert:

I left him to live or die as he could, well satisfied that I had done *my* duty in attempting to save him—but forgetting how I had erred in bringing him into such a condition, and how insultingly my after services had been offered—and sullenly prepared to meet the consequences [...].

I ought to have helped him in spite of himself—to have bound up the wound he was unable to stanch, and insisted upon getting him on his horse and seeing him safe home; but, besides my bitter indignation against himself, there was the question what to say to his servants—and what to my own family. (92-93, original emphasis)

If as a young man he acted rashly, impulsively and violently, the elder Gilbert is aware that he did not act properly and regrets his actions. More importantly, the narrator does not try to excuse his behaviour or embellish it in any way, which shows that Gilbert is being honest. Westcott believes that “Markham’s contrition results only from the recognition of [having mistaken Lawrence for Helen’s lover], not from any revulsion at the deed itself, a fact that calls his morals into question” (218), but I think that her statement needs some clarification. It is true that young Gilbert regrets his attack mainly because it was based on mistaken information, but the elder Gilbert, as it can be seen in the passage above (“I had erred in bringing him into such a condition”), is clearly aware that he never should have acted as he did. However, it is also true that Gilbert does not have the courage to tell Helen about his brutal attack on Lawrence, and Lawrence himself never does (321).

Another example of Gilbert’s flaws is shown in his attitude towards Helen after overhearing her conversation with Frederick. When Helen, who does not know he overheard them, tries to talk to him, Gilbert remains cold and feels glad to be able to torment her (97). The next day, when he visits her at Wildfell Hall to hear her explanation

and excuses, he wants to “crush [Helen’s] bold spirit” and “dally with [his] victim like a cat” (99). He clearly wants “to punish Helen for her imagined faithlessness” (Berg 34) and hurt her. However, what begins as an argument soon ends in a conversation in which Helen gives Gilbert her diary in order to acquaint him with her *real* circumstances.

Reading Helen’s diary has a profound impact on Gilbert’s attitude. He is humbled by it: he believes Helen’s opinion of him is probably better than he deserves (309), and feels “shame and deep remorse” (311) at his own conduct. And, although he would have loved to continue reading Helen’s diary and see the evolution of her regard for him, he admits that “I had no right to see it: all this was too sacred for any eyes but her own, and she had done well to keep it from me” (309), thus recognising Helen’s rights and her own good sense. This also contrasts with Arthur, who had taken and read Helen’s diary against her will (284-285).

In their last encounter, when Gilbert returns Helen’s diary, she tells him that they must not meet again, but Gilbert is unwilling to comply. They have the following conversation:

‘But, Helen! [...] that man is not your husband: in the sight of heaven he has forfeited all claim to—’ [...]

‘*Gilbert, don’t!*’ she cried, in a tone that would have pierced a heart of adamant. ‘For God’s sake, don’t *you* attempt these arguments! No *fiend* could torture me like this!’

‘I won’t, I won’t!’ said I, [...]; almost as much alarmed at her vehemence as ashamed of my own misconduct.

[...]

‘Forgive me, Helen!’ pleaded I. ‘I will never utter another word on the subject. But may we not still meet as friends?’

‘It will not do,’ she replied, [...] with a mildly reproachful look that seemed to say, ‘You must know that as well as I.’

‘Then what *must* we do?’ cried I, passionately. (313, original emphasis)

I believe that the passage above is revealing in many ways. First of all, Gilbert is attempting to use an argument previously used by Walter Hargrave, another of Helen’s suitors who

actually harasses her and whom she ends up hating. Gilbert is ashamed to do so, but he is grasping at straws, trying to convince Helen that they do not have to be apart. Helen's reply, on the other hand, offers an interesting insight into her feelings. The fact that she does not argue back, but almost begs Gilbert not to try this reasoning with her, shows that she probably *feels* that Gilbert is right, but her *reason* tells her that this is not so. Therefore, she is in a very vulnerable position. Still she manages to show Gilbert that he is not acting properly, by giving him to understand that she did not expect him (see the emphasis on "don't *you* attempt these arguments") to tell her this. Gilbert's reaction, instead of taking advantage of the situation, is to be ashamed, ask for forgiveness and to promise he will never repeat the offence. This also contrasts with Hargrave's failed attempt at seducing Helen and letting Arthur and his friends believe Helen had succumbed, who is supposedly one of Arthur's most *loyal* friends (278-282).

Finally, Gilbert's question at the end of the passage, "what must we do?", also deserves to be looked at. It is a really good question because, first of all, it shows Gilbert's despair at the fact that there is nothing Helen and him can do to be together without defying their own principles and morality. Secondly, it is a question that Anne Brontë must have asked herself while she was writing *The Tenant*. As I have already explained in Chapter 1, married women who were in unhappy or abusive marriages could do nothing to get out of them other than wait for their husband's death. Logically, running away with their lovers was an option, but not one that Anne Brontë or her heroine would have approved of on moral grounds¹⁰. The only consolation that Helen and Gilbert are afforded is to exchange their thoughts by letter while waiting for Arthur's demise. However, Helen is aware of the

¹⁰ Precisely because of this Walter Hargrave is not an appropriate suitor for Helen, as he repeatedly tries to seduce and convince her to run away with him.

dangers of this correspondence, as she tells Gilbert: "I fear any kind friend would tell us we are both deluding ourselves with the idea of keeping up a spiritual intercourse without hope or prospect of anything further" (315); sadly, this is the only comfort they have left.

After this meeting, Helen asks Gilbert to promise not to come to Wildfell Hall, and not to get in touch with her until six months have gone by. Unlike Arthur who could not keep his promises, Gilbert keeps his. In the meantime, Arthur dies painfully and horribly and leaves Helen full control of her own fortune (368). A couple of months later, Helen's uncle dies as well leaving her heiress to his estate, Staningley Hall (371). Due to these events and to Gilbert's insecurities, he and Helen do not meet again until sixteen months after the last time they saw each other. During this time apart, Gilbert has become "silent, submissive, passive, and acquiescent" (Langland, "The Voicing of Feminine Desire" 121). By the time they meet again, Gilbert is overwhelmed by the fact that Helen's rank is above his. He is reluctant to confess his love for her, as he feels she is too far above him and that asking for her hand would be presumptuous. In consequence, Helen is the one who takes the reins of the situation, thus "transgress[ing] the boundaries of the masculine and the feminine" (Langland, "The Voicing of Feminine Desire" 121):

'The rose I gave you was an emblem of my heart,' said she; 'would you take it away and leave me here alone?'

'Would you give me your hand too, if I asked it?'

'Have I not said enough?' she answered, with a most enchanting smile. [...]

'But have you considered the consequences?'

'Hardly, I think, or I should not have offered myself to one too proud to take me, or too indifferent to make his affection outweigh my worldly goods.'

[...]

'But if you should repent!'

'It would be your fault,' she replied: 'I never shall, unless you bitterly disappoint me.'
(379)

It is interesting to see the roles Helen and Gilbert play in this conversation. She is the one who is confident about their relationship, whereas his rationality prevails over his feelings for Helen. This contrasts with their previous conversation, in which Helen provided the rational voice and Gilbert poured out his feelings. That is not to say that he is not in love with her, but he does not exteriorise his feelings as he did in his last meeting with Helen and worries instead about their future together and Helen's happiness, thus showing Gilbert's evolution. Helen's reply is really interesting: if she is not happy in their marriage, it will be Gilbert's fault and not hers. This implies a shift in the existing conventions, as Langland points out: "[w]hereas the angel could only fall in the previous narrative [...] here only Gilbert can fall" ("The Voicing of Feminine Desire" 122), so it is no longer the woman who falls or fails, but the man.

Although it is not the main focus of this dissertation, I believe it is relevant to point out that this violation of conventions and stereotypes goes further than that. In most novels written up to that time, it is the woman who marries up the social scale to a wealthier partner; in this case, Gilbert is the one who marries a rich wife. Moreover, "[Helen] raises him, not only in rank, but in moral and spiritual status as well" (Matus 109). He also leaves his home to live with Helen at her estate, Staningley, and there he stays¹¹. He hands down the farm to his younger brother, Fergus, again defying the primogeniture tradition through which the elder son inherits the whole of the father's property (382-383).

In spite of all the elements suggesting that Gilbert has some good qualities and that he learns the lesson from Helen's diary, he has been criticised precisely because he edits and includes it in his letter to Halford. Berg claims that "[t]he whole point of the missive

¹¹ However, we should bear in mind that after Helen and Gilbert's marriage, all her properties actually belong to him, as the novel does not mention any particular trust to keep her property out of her husband's control.

which constitutes the novel is Gilbert's right to dispose of his wife's story" (35) and that "[h]e asserts control by recasting Helen's story, appropriating her perspective, and circulating it among men" thus *abusing* Helen's diary (35–36). Although Berg has a point, why should we consider that he does not have Helen's permission to do so? It is true that Gilbert never says that he has asked for her leave, but he does ask for her consent before telling her real story to his neighbours.

Another reason against Berg's argument has to do with the role of the diary within the narrative. Before examining it, however, it is necessary to establish the importance of "the truth" in the novel. As Langland explains, "the novel is alive with rumour, scandal, conjecture, slander, gossip [...] and they are largely discredited or, at least, highly suspect" (*Anne Brontë* 121). Helen is a victim of gossip based on conjecture, and even Gilbert makes the mistake of misinterpreting Helen and Lawrence's words and ends up believing something which is completely false. This is why the *truth* is so important. The only way of controlling the circulation of rumours and gossip is "by writing [and] becoming author and authority" (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 122).

For this reason, at the very beginning of the novel, Gilbert emphasises the fact that he is basing his narrative on his old journal (8), thus giving authority to his narration. The same can be said of Helen's diary: its inclusion is a testimonial of the truth. The fact that it is Gilbert, and not Helen, who offers her diary to Halford, may also be interpreted not as an *abuse* (to use Berg's word) on his part, but rather as a way of vindicating Helen's story before a patriarchal society in which women were relegated to the private sphere and had no voice in public affairs; thus reinterpreting the Fallen Woman myth and transforming it into a "model of excellent womanhood" (Langland, *Anne Brontë* 123). Not only this, but both Hallenbeck and Jacobs believe that Brontë uses a male narrator to obtain the narrative

authority she would be denied as a woman, or with a female narrator. I concur with them: Anne Brontë published her works under a pseudonym, Acton Bell, in order to avoid being judged as a *woman* rather than as a writer. In fact, in the preface to the second edition of *The Tenant*, Brontë had to defend herself from those critics who attacked her because of her gender: “[T]hough I am bound to attribute the severity of my censors to [the suspicion that I am a woman], I make no effort to refute it, because [...] I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be” (5).

Another aspect of the novel that generates controversy among critics is the lack of Helen’s voice at the end of the narrative, when we are given a bland account of their married life by Gilbert: “I need not tell you how happily my Helen and I have lived together, and how blessed we still are in each other’s society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us” (383). Westcott argues that “[Helen’s] very silence suggests that her views might not coincide with those of her husband” (220). Although she makes a valid point, I disagree with her. It is true that the fact that the narrative ends with Gilbert’s voice may seem a return to the traditional *status quo*, in which men belong to the public sphere (and therefore, we hear their voice) and women remain at home, in the private sphere. However, if Gilbert was meant to be another Arthur, I am certain we would have heard Helen’s voice in some way or another. As I have already shown, Helen is an exceptional woman who is not afraid to voice her opinion when she disagrees with the established views and customs. Moreover, she manages to escape from her first marriage and later on make her story known through Gilbert. Therefore, as Carnell explains “it would be implausible to claim that Brontë intended her pointed denouement – in which Gilbert must once again learn from Helen the power of humility [...] – as merely ironic” (23).

To sum up, this chapter has analysed the characters and the relationship between Gilbert and Helen, and contrasted it to the analysis made in Chapter 2 of Arthur and Helen. Although as readers we never get to see the married life of Gilbert and Helen, I believe that the way they get to know each other and the friendship that develops between them show that their marriage is meant to be a happy union, a true love marriage as I claim. For instance, they get to know each other before falling love, and they take longer than Arthur and Helen to get married. They have similar intellectual interests and Gilbert actually respects Helen's wishes, something which Arthur hardly ever does.

In spite of his good qualities, Gilbert is portrayed as flawed character who has to learn to restrain his violent impulses and his temper. Some critics believe that Gilbert does not learn his lesson and is therefore worse than Arthur, because of his gentlemanly appearance. As I have shown, there are hints in Gilbert's narration that prove that he has changed for the better. Enclosing Helen's narrative within his can be a way of giving authority to a woman's narration at a time when women were relegated to the private sphere and it was not acceptable for them to have a public voice. Anne Brontë was aware of it, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that she used a male narrator in her novel because of this.

Conclusions

In the present dissertation I have focused on analysing the two main male characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Arthur Huntingdon and Gilbert Markham, together with the relationship they develop with Helen, as suitors or husbands. My main purpose was to compare and contrast the two characters, in order to find out whether Helen's marriage to her second husband, Gilbert, was meant to be a happy union, and therefore ascertain whether Anne Brontë's novel could be considered to be a partial or a complete challenge to the marriage institution in the Victorian age. In relation to this, another goal of this dissertation was to determine the reasons behind Anne Brontë's apparently *traditional* happy marriage ending.

As I have already explained in Chapter 1, when women married in the 19th century they lost all claim to an identity of their own, and everything they owned became their husband's property. Between 1821 and 1829, when the main events of the novel take place, divorce was expensive, difficult to obtain and carried a social stigma for the upper classes which not many were willing to accept. If a divorce was obtained, custody of the children was assigned to the father. In consequence, women in disastrous marriages were in a very difficult situation. However, the importance placed on the family during the Victorian age meant that masculinity started to be defined as providing for and taking care of one's family and, therefore, more and more people condemned domestic violence.

In many ways, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* represents these changes in mentality. Arthur's character is modelled after the 18th century and Regency manliness ideal: he is promiscuous, a heavy drinker and enjoys country sports. Helen, on the other hand, is an

intelligent and upright woman who wishes for a husband who will be her companion and not her master, following the Victorian ideals. Arthur and Helen get married without really knowing each other; their marriage shows the disastrous consequences of doing so. To begin with, as we have seen in Chapter 2, one of the consequences is Helen's vulnerability at the hands of an abusive husband. However, what is striking in the portrayal of their marriage is Helen's strength throughout its duration. Despite the fact that Arthur has legal power over Helen, I have shown that Helen has moral authority which even Arthur recognises sometimes. This moral authority is almost translated into legal power when she returns to nurse Arthur, after having run away to protect their son from his bad influence, resulting in a role reversal of their situations. Despite this, the only way for Helen to become completely free is with Arthur's death, as he is unwilling to divorce her to avoid becoming a source of gossip. In the end, Arthur and Helen's marriage shows that, despite the existing beliefs that women could be nurturers and protectors of men, a woman will not be able to change and save a man of dissolute habits if he is not willing to be helped, thus fighting what Langland calls the "redemptive angel" myth (*Anne Brontë*).

Gilbert, on the other hand, is much closer to the Victorian ideal of manliness than Arthur. In fact, he becomes friends with Helen due to his interest in her son, who will eventually become his by marriage (381). As I have argued, Gilbert is in general portrayed in a positive light, although he is far from perfect. In this sense, the novel can be said to debunk the existence of the so-called *prince charming* myth, as both main male characters are flawed human beings who need to learn and grow. Arthur never matures; Gilbert does thanks to Helen's influence and his willingness to become worthy of her. Although some critics consider that Gilbert can be interpreted as another abusive husband, due to his violent outbursts and Helen's silence at the end of the novel, I have given my arguments

against this interpretation. First of all, the elder Gilbert is aware of his mistakes and shows repentance. Secondly, as I have explained, Helen's silence can also be understood as a way of showing her agreement with Gilbert's story, as she is a resourceful woman who has already escaped from her first husband and who manages to make her voice heard when it is necessary. In relation to this, I have also shown that the fact that Helen's diary and letters are embedded within Gilbert narrative is Anne Brontë's way of giving authority to Helen's version of events, at a time when women generally lacked a public voice.

Finally, in spite of the fact that the novel shows the dreadful consequences of an unsuitable marriage, it ends with one. It seems as if Brontë, after writing what is a certainly daring novel, had decided to atone for its transgressive nature by having a traditional ending. Certainly, this is a possible reading, albeit a limited one. In many ways, the novel can only end with Gilbert and Helen's marriage: if Anne Brontë had only wanted to tell the story of an abused wife who decided to defy conventions and run away, there was no need to include Gilbert, as she could have had another character, such as her brother, narrate the story. After all, Frederick Lawrence probably knows as much as Gilbert about Helen's marriage to Arthur and, being a man, has the same authority as Gilbert in that respect.

The use of Gilbert as narrator allows Brontë to compare and contrast two models of masculinity in two different ways: how they relate to women and the attitude they have towards children. Ultimately, the goal of this comparison is to, first of all, to warn off young girls from making the same mistake as her heroine and falling for a rake like Arthur and, secondly, to show the desirable qualities in a husband. In consequence, the novel advocates marriages based not on social or economic equality, like Helen and Arthur's union, but on intellectual and moral equality, like Gilbert and Helen's. Therefore, despite the apparently traditional ending, Gilbert and Helen's marriage is subversive: the flawed *hero* marries up

the social scale and hands down his property to his brother, leaves his family behind and takes up residence at his wife's estate. Towards the end of the novel, we can hear Brontë's voice in Helen's words: "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, sympathising hearts and souls" (380).

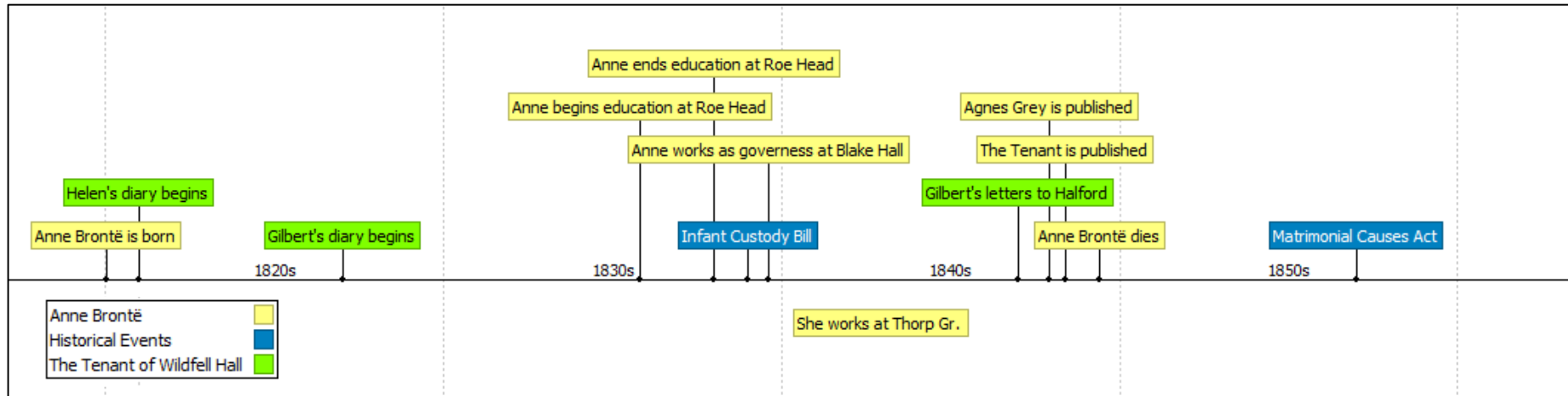
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Appendix A: Timeline



For a more detailed and interactive version of the timeline, check the following link:

<http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/51510/Bront-The-Tenant-of-Wildfell-Hall>