

An Overlooked Adulteress: Annabella's Irresistible Passion in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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ABSTRACT: Most critics and readers of Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) focus on the triangle formed by Helen Graham, her first husband Arthur Huntingdon and the second one Gilbert Markham. However, as I argue here, Brontë narrates yet another romantic story, that of Arthur and his mistress Annabella. Helen's unhappiness is actually caused by Annabella's earlier decision to marry a richer, aristocratic man rather than Arthur, whom she loves. Since Helen is Arthur's second choice he never truly loves her, nor does Annabella love her husband Lord Lowborough. Arthur and Annabella's irresistible passion and ensuing adultery ultimately destroys both marriages and are, thus, a central (but neglected) aspect of the plot. Likewise, both Annabella's unique characterization as an adulteress and her adultery with Arthur have been overlooked as Anne Brontë's singular contribution to the history of how this theme has been represented in British fiction.

KEYWORDS: Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, adultery, adulteress, divorce, Arthur Huntingdon, Lady Annabella Lowborough

Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) is habitually read as the story of how the unfortunate protagonist, Helen, finally finds true love with her second husband, the gentleman farmer Gilbert Markham, after being psychologically abused by the first, the wealthy landowner Arthur Huntingdon. Disobeying all legal and social regulations, Helen decides to abandon Arthur, mainly to protect her five-year-old son from his despicable, alcoholic father. Borrowing then her mother's maiden name, she passes herself off as the widowed Mrs. Graham and takes shelter together with little Arthur in the dilapidated maternal family home, Wildfell Hall, where she starts making a living as a painter. This new life, though clandestine and threatened by Huntingdon's legally sanctioned prerogative to take wife and son back if found, is usually celebrated as proof of Helen's feminine (perhaps even feminist) agency, as is her judicious management of her second love story with Gilbert.

Gwen Hyman offers an alternative reading by claiming that “Huntingdon is the central mover in the text, just as he is in his world of spirited ladies and boon companions, and his uncontrolled conduct and inability or unwillingness to reform provide the narrative action of the novel”.¹ Hyman’s reading emphasizes Anne Brontë’s moral preoccupation with the classic Regency trope of the rake’s reform, possibly inspired by her experience of living among the upper classes during her time as a governess, also the foundation for *Agnes Grey* (1846). *Tenant* is a novel written in defence of the middle-class, evangelical ideal of the companionate marriage (and of temperance), but also a novel that acknowledges the limits of individual moral reform.² Although critics have often found similarities between Branwell Brontë’s struggles with addiction and Huntingdon’s rakish behaviour,³ Anne Brontë’s declaration that she wished to “tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it”,⁴ appears to allude, rather, to social concerns connected with upper-class men like Arthur. Brontë actually opposes in *Tenant* a popular Regency saying, apparently inspired by Samuel Richardson’s *Pamela* (1740), according to which ‘reformed rakes make the best husbands.’ Arthur’s case shows that not all rakes can be reformed, despite the efforts of moral ‘angels in the house’ like Helen, though Brontë still maintains that all repentant individuals can be saved by God’s mercy, a tenet corresponding to the doctrine of universal salvation.⁵

Overlooked by most critics of *Tenant*, one of the most important factors in Anne Brontë’s critique of upper-class immorality and of Huntingdon’s outrageous behaviour is the strong, long-lasting attraction that he feels for the most ‘spirited lady’ in his circle, Miss Annabella Wilmot (later Lady Lowborough). Their adulterous relationship is presented as the opposite of true love and, thus, of the serene companionship eventually binding Gilbert and Helen.⁶ Still, the fact is that Arthur and Annabella are linked by a

¹ See Gwen Hyman, *Making a Man: Gentlemanly Appetites in the Nineteenth-Century British Novel* (Athens: Ohio University Press 2009), 57.

² Reverend Patrick Brontë was Anglican but influenced by John Wesley’s evangelical Methodism, an influence which critics have also found in his daughters’ novels. See, for instance, Marianne Thormählen’s *The Brontës and Religion* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³ Thormählen warns us that we should avoid the “misguided biographical speculation” linking Branwell to Arthur, or to any other male character created by his sisters, because he only came to his sad end when their novels had been already written. We must also treat with caution the supposed affinities between “the alleged liaison between Branwell and his employer’s wife, Mrs Robinson, often commented on in connection with the affair of Arthur Huntingdon and Lady Lowborough” (see “The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon,” *The Modern Language Review* 88.4 (October 1993): 831-841, 841). Post-1950s research, Thormählen notes, has suggested that “the former entanglement might have been a self-protective fiction on Branwell’s part” (841); her source for this contentious point is Daphne du Maurier’s *The Infernal World of Branwell Brontë* (London: Gollancz, 1960).

⁴ See Anne Brontë, “Preface to the Second Edition” in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, ed. Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 3-5, 3.

⁵ On this point, see Christine Colón, “Enacting the Art of Moral Influence: Religion and Social Reform in the Works of Anne Brontë,” *Women’s Writing* 11.3 (November 2004): 399-419.

⁶ A problem, often noted by the critics, is that we only have Gilbert’s word as evidence of their happiness. *Tenant* is composed of two texts: Helen’s diary, recording the courtship and marriage to Arthur, and a framing text, written by Gilbert, which narrates how they met and fell in love. The whole novel is, strangely, a gift from Markham to Halford, his best friend and brother-in-law (he’s married to Gilbert’s sister), intended to lure him back into their lost intimacy. This is why Carol Senf suspects that Markham “edits Helen’s story to his liking” (450), though this is

solid passion for years, always stronger on her side. Their reckless affair is, ultimately, the reason why Lord Lowborough, Annabella's cuckolded husband, and Helen herself are "eventually forced to confront the infidelity of their partners and the impossibility of their visions" of harmonious marriage.⁷ This is a failure which can only be redressed, in both cases, by finding a new spouse.

Although Arthur's active role in Helen's unhappiness has been considered before—most notably by Marianne Thormählen in "The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*: Aspects and Prospects of Arthur Huntingdon"—Annabella has been neglected in the critical studies of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: this is the gap I aim at filling in here. Her presence and characterization are not only a negative, reverse image of her rival Helen but also an important reason to firmly place Anne Brontë's novel within the tradition of the adultery novel in British fiction, a tradition wrongly assumed to begin decades later. Headstrong, passionate Lady Lowborough is, arguably, the most often overlooked adulteress in the history of the anglophone canonical novel⁸ and this is an omission that needs to be corrected.

Adultery and Divorce: Framing Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

Although the theme of adultery has a long history in world Literature, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is clearly part of the newer literary tradition, focused on the tensions around the contract binding married couples during the transition from the aristocratic to the bourgeois family model. This is the idea expressed in the title of Tony Tanner's seminal volume *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (1979). Following his pioneering lead, Overton argues that adultery entered early the British novel and cites "writers of bourgeois fiction such as Aphra Behn and Daniel Defoe"⁹ as the main innovators. However, the topic eventually "shifted from adultery to marriage on one hand and seduction on the other", becoming "submerged"¹⁰ in the second half of the 18th century. Thus, in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), a novel frequently mentioned as the work that most deeply problematizes the treatment of adultery in British fiction, Maria Rushworth's affair with Henry Crawford—which has many points in common with that of Annabella and Arthur—"happens offstage".¹¹ In later English novels adultery is "more often displaced than given even this kind of marginal treatment".¹² Unfortunately, like most literary critics addressing this topic, Overton ignores Anne Brontë's *Tenant*. So does Tanner, though at least he mentions Emily and Charlotte Brontë in a footnote where he describes *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre*, and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* as "novels in which adultery is just, but sedulously,

possibly part of the author's feminist plan to make "readers quickly see that both law and custom give greater power (and voice) to men" (450). See Carol Senf, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: Narrative Silences and Questions of Gender," *College English* 52.4 (April 1990): 446-456.

⁷ See Drew Lamonica, *We Are Three Sisters: Self and Family in the Writing of the Brontës* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 141.

⁸ Quite another matter is the popular novel, in which adultery is far more common, from the silver-fork and dandy novels of the 1820s and 1830s to the sensation fiction of the 1850s and 1860s—such as *East Lynne* and *Lady Audley's Secret*—and beyond: for, instance the fiction by Ouida, penname of Maria Louise Ramé, active 1860s-1890s.

⁹ See Bill Overton, *The Novel of Female Adultery: Love and Gender in Continental European Fiction, 1830-1900* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), 9.

¹⁰ Overton, 9.

¹¹ Overton, 9.

¹² Overton, 9.

avoided”.¹³ Only later in the Victorian Age would English novelists, such as George Meredith, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, and George Moore, “begin to assume the explicit importance” which adultery had “on the Continent; and even then, if not veiled by art, under a barrage of protest.”¹⁴

Evidently, it is necessary to correct the wrong impression that no major English novel published in the first half of the 19th century addresses directly the theme of adultery, for this is what Anne Brontë’s *Tenant* does indeed. Brontë presents unambiguously the affair between Arthur and Annabella; in addition, she builds the core of her plot around the risk that married, runaway Helen runs of committing adultery with Gilbert Markham unless she restrains her obvious sexual attraction for him. The peculiar quadrangle that these characters form is conditioned, above all, by the legislation framing their sundry relationships. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Matus explains “depicts the consequences of dissolution, debauchery and extra-marital affairs, daring to expose the injustice of early nineteenth-century divorce and child-custody laws”.¹⁵ The situation is so impossible to solve by integrating contemporaneous legislation into the plot that Anne Brontë must kill Huntingdon for Helen to eventually find happiness in a second marriage.

Not only the faithful wife is the victim of restrictive English legislation but also the unfaithful one. Both Helen and Annabella stage their personal rebellions to the last personal consequences but with an important difference. Whereas Helen is celebrated for resisting her long ill-treatment by Arthur and also because by leaving him she rejects “all aspects of the role assigned to respectable nineteenth-century women,”¹⁶ the adulterous Annabella becomes “the pariah for whom no one will speak,”¹⁷ not even Anne Brontë. This is because this “irrevocably fallen woman”¹⁸ has transgressed the contract binding not just one but two marriages: Helen and Arthur’s, and her own to Lord Lowborough. She breaks, in addition, basic laws of hospitality by carrying on her affair with Huntingdon as a guest at Grassdale Manor, the home he shares with his wife. Nonetheless, “if Annabella’s fate suggests that the novel’s critique of domestic ideology has its limits, her role in Brontë’s treatment of domestic reform also indicates the

¹³ See Tony Tanner, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 12. Tanner announced in this footnote that he would produce a second volume on adultery which would consider fiction by Emily and Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, and the diverse European works he mentions. He never wrote it. The thesis he argues is that the modern adultery novel begins with Gustave Flaubert’s *Madame Bovary* (1856).

¹⁴ Overton, 10. Although Becky Sharp, one of the main female characters in William Thackeray’s *Vanity Fair* (1847-8), a novel contemporary of *Tenant*, is also an adulteress, adultery is not the main focus of the plot but an aspect of Becky’s immorality and opportunism. Oddly, Tanner mentions Thackeray just in passing (87). About the scandals connected with the late Victorian fiction on adultery in the British press, see Barbara Leckie’s *Culture and Adultery: The Novel, the Newspaper, and the Law, 1857-1914* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999).

¹⁵ See Jill L. Matus, “Sexuality,” *The Brontës in Context*, ed. Marianne Thormählen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 328-334, 330.

¹⁶ Senf, 454.

¹⁷ Senf, 454.

¹⁸ See Jennifer J. Carpentier, *‘How Should One Love?’: Alternative Love Plots and Their Ethical Implications in the Victorian Novel*. PhD dissertation (Kalamazoo: Western Michigan University, 2001). <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/1357>, 17.

limited efficacy of that ideology.”¹⁹ As I will explain later, Annabella even tries to justify her offensive behaviour on the grounds that she is a better companion for Arthur than Helen, arguing that she understands her role as his moral saviour better than his wife. Her line of reasoning is, in the context of the novel, an even worse affront against respectability than adultery.

The word adulteress is, as Tanner points out, closely connected to ‘adulteration,’ which “implies pollution, contamination, a ‘base admixture,’ a wrong combination.”²⁰ The adulteress, usually an unfaithful wife but also “by implication a bad mother,” is a social aberration, “an unassimilable conflation of what society insists should be separate categories and functions.”²¹ She must be expelled from society because she exposes the uncontrollable eroticism behind the respectable façade of the married woman, though this expulsion is not without a high cost for patriarchy. As Belsey notes, a wife’s unfaithfulness is not only “more devastating to marriage” than a husband’s, because of the moral double standard, but also “more self-evidently in need of explanation. To fail to explain it was to reopen the gap between desire and moral choice.”²² Besides, the fiction of female infidelity, “carries a powerful subtext that unconsciously undermines patriarchy—a subtext of the failure of masculinity.”²³ The deceived husband may attempt to regain his honourability by divorcing his wife, as Lord Lowborough eventually does, but we need to recall that whereas the new mid-19th century divorce laws liberated miserable individuals from unhappy unions, they also signalled “the fragility of state-sponsored idealism about the indestructibility of the married couple.”²⁴

It is important to note that, though published in 1848, the events that Helen narrates in her diary (the central document in *Tenant*) are set in the 1820s, past the Regency period (1811-1820) but before Victoria’s accession to the throne (1837). The novel’s internal chronology is easy to trace thanks precisely to Helen’s journal; in this way we know that her courtship and marriage take six years. Helen meets Arthur Huntingdon and marries him in 1821, when she is only 18 (he’s 26); she flees to Wildfell Hall in 1827 and, soon thereafter, she meets Gilbert (both are then 24). Helen is aware at least since 1824, three years into her marriage, that Annabella is having an affair with her husband, though their adultery may have started earlier, in 1822, when Arthur sends pregnant Helen back to Grassdale, remaining alone for months in London. If Helen can finally marry Gilbert in 1830, this is only because, as I have noted, Arthur dies, aged only 32 (in 1828). His ghastly death is caused by the internal injuries sustained when falling off his horse in a state of alcoholic daze. Brontë uses the weeks it takes Arthur to die not only to punish her villain very cruelly but also to give Helen a chance to guide him back onto the moral path and offer a chance of salvation, which he, not being a religious man, ultimately fails to take despite his superstitious fear of eternal punishment.

¹⁹ See Tess O’Toole, “Siblings and Suitors in the Narrative Architecture of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* 39.4, special issue *The Nineteenth Century* (Autumn, 1999): 715-731, 717.

²⁰ Tanner, 12.

²¹ Tanner, 12.

²² See Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 127.

²³ See Alison Sinclair, *The Deceived Husband: A Kleinian Approach to the Literature of Infidelity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 16.

²⁴ See Nicholas White, “Introduction: The Present State of Affairs,” *Scarlet Letters: Fictions of Adultery from Antiquity to the 1990’s*, ed. Naomi Segal & Nicholas White (London: Macmillan, 1997). 1-13, 3.

According to the legislation extant in 1827, the year when Helen abandons Arthur, she is technically a criminal, and so is whoever aids her (which explains why her brother Frederick drags his feet before offering Wildfell Hall, his property, to her). She tries to avoid her friendship with Gilbert because this can be used by Arthur to incriminate both as adulterers, obtain a divorce, and sole custody of their child. By starting a new life Helen, then, “repeatedly claims rights that the Victorian law did not accord to women.”²⁵ The new Matrimonial Causes Act, passed in 1857,²⁶ eleven years after the publication of Brontë’s novel, came to replace previous legislation which, basically, always privileged the husband. As Lawrence Stone explains, from the 1760s onward, married couples who no longer loved each other could sign a private separation deal, with the husband ensuring out of pure good will the economic welfare, choice of residence, and personal freedom of the wife. Essentially, this is what Helen demands from Arthur but he denies her, not wishing to become an object of gossipy mockery in his neighbourhood and social circle. However, as Stone adds, private deals still prevented both husband and wife from remarrying legally (this would constitute bigamy) and left the separated wife wholly in the hands of her husband. He could always sue her for “criminal conversation” with another man and divorce her.²⁷

Divorce was, nonetheless, a hard to attain dispensation which could only be obtained in very limited circumstances; it was, besides, an extremely expensive procedure that required a Private Act of Parliament. In any case, most of the 314 divorces granted between 1700 and 1857 were instigated by husbands for, although both members of the couple could apply on the grounds of adultery, the wife’s plea had to be accompanied by proof of “life-threatening cruelty,”²⁸ a stipulation which did not include psychological abuse of the kind Helen suffers. Logically, whereas being caught in flagrant adultery had hardly any consequences for men (a wife could not even deny her husband his ‘conjugal rights’ as Helen does), upper-class wives committing the same breach of matrimonial contract “were often tormented with guilt and shame”²⁹ and ruined by scandal. They could easily lose both lover and husband to “face total separation from all their children, severe financial hardship, loneliness, and social ostracism.”³⁰

What is intriguing in Brontë’s novel is that it ends up offering two possible versions of Annabella’s fate after divorce. In the ‘official,’ overt version, when Arthur finally abandons Annabella she elopes with another man to the Continent. This second offence gives her loving, patient husband the determination he initially lacks to divorce her and deprive her of her two children (the elder boy and heir, but also a girl fathered

²⁵ See Lisa SurrIDGE, “From Regency Violence to Victorian Feminism: *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Bleak Houses: Marital Violence in Victorian Fiction* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005). 72-102, 92.

²⁶ This was actually a reform enhancing the grounds for divorce. Most importantly, it took divorce away from the hands of the ecclesiastical courts—which were connected with civil legislation through the Doctors’ Commons or College of Civilians, where a young Dickens was employed as a reporter—to place it squarely within the domain of the civil courts. See Allen HORTSMAN, *Victorian Divorce* (London: Routledge, 1985).

²⁷ See Lawrence Stone, *Road to Divorce: England 1530-1987* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 153.

²⁸ See the section “Living Heritage. Relationships: Divorce” in the website of the British Parliament, <<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/private-lives/relationships/overview/divorce/>> (accessed 10 September 2018).

²⁹ Stone, 339.

³⁰ Stone, 339.

by Arthur). Gossip presents divorced Annabella sinking “in difficulty and debt, disgrace and misery” and dying “in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness”³¹ away from England. However, Gilbert, the narrator at this point, adds that gossip is always unreliable: “she may be living yet for anything I or any of her relatives or former acquaintances can tell; for they have all lost sight of her long years ago, and would as thoroughly forget her if they could” (p. 389 [chap. 50]). This allows us to imagine the ‘other’ story which Anne Brontë never tells, perhaps because she dared not imagine it: the one in which the former adulteress and divorced wife overcomes her attachments to both lover(s) and husband, frees herself from the twin ideologies of domestic bliss and romantic love, and runs her life as she pleases, far from oppressive England.

Early Stages: Arthur and Annabella before Marriage

In the few studies of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that pay Annabella any attention, she is just the object of a few passing remarks. These seem to hint, nonetheless, at a slow but steady change in critical awareness about what she represents in Brontë’s novel and regarding her potential as a rebellious figure opposite Helen, a point already noted.

Elizabeth Langland simply observed, back in 1989, that “Annabella Wilmot also echoes the name of a character in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, a pure and loyal woman who provides a contrast to Anne Brontë’s *corrupt* character.”³² The use of the adjective ‘corrupt’ seems singularly outdated, particularly if we bear in mind that a few years later Langland published an article acknowledging “The Voicing of Feminine Desire in Anne Brontë’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.”³³ Still, whereas Langland celebrates Helen as a desiring woman, she fails to see that Annabella’s desire is even more potent; as it is often the case, Lady Lowborough is just named as the partner in Arthur’s adultery. This pattern is repeated in other studies: Helen’s contradictory eroticism is examined, while Annabella’s more open sexuality is taken for granted or plainly ignored. Berry notes that “A powerful physicality defines Helen’s relationship to Arthur Huntingdon; they cannot keep themselves to themselves,”³⁴ both during courtship and in the early stages of their marriage. The same could be said of Annabella and Arthur, even for more years, but no critic judges this a situation worth commenting on. The difference between the two women is that whereas Annabella, as we must infer, has an accurate understanding of her own sexuality, Helen, as Langland explains, is not comfortable with the overwhelming force of her initial passion for Arthur. This is why she “sublimates her physical desire,” transforming it into “a need to reform him spiritually. So, women’s physical desires, because illicit, are often encoded in literature as spiritual ones.”³⁵ When Annabella’s erotic allure spoils Helen’s efforts to reform her rakish husband, her “desire to redeem becomes a desire to punish.”³⁶ Helen denies Arthur access to her body

³¹ Anne Brontë, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), ed. Herbert Rosengarten (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 389 (chap. 50). Page (and chapter) numbers for subsequent quotations will be given parenthetically in the text.

³² Elizabeth Langland, *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1989), 52, my italics.

³³ In *Gender and Discourse in Victorian Literature and Art*, ed. Anthony H. Harrison & Beverly Taylor (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1992), 111-123.

³⁴ Laura Berry, “Acts of Custody and Incarceration in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *Novel* 30.1 (Fall 1996): 32-55, 43.

³⁵ Langland, “The Voicing of Feminine Desire,” 118.

³⁶ Langland, “The Voicing of Feminine Desire,” 118.

but this decision turns out to be quite impractical, for it reinforces Annabella's appeal and intensifies the affair while depriving Helen of her own sexual life.

Their triangle, however, is born long before actual adultery, in the very early stages of the relationship between Helen and Arthur, to the point that Brontë introduces Huntingdon and Annabella in the same paragraph: she is "a fine dashing girl, or rather young woman, of some five-and-twenty, *too great a flirt to be married*, according to her own assertion, but greatly admired by the gentlemen, who universally pronounced her a splendid woman" (p. 121 [ch. 17], my italics); Huntingdon first appears portrayed as a smitten guest in the same party, one more among her many admirers. Annabella, not yet a fallen woman at this stage but just a coquette, behaves in a way that her male circle finds "predictable, comforting, gratifying" as "communication means coy banter, flashy repartee, playful flirtation."³⁷ Miss Wilmot enjoys coquetry because she revels in the gentlemen's admiration but also because she hopes to catch a suitable husband in this way, whereas Helen "is unwilling, even unable, to play the game"³⁸ as their shared male social circle requires.

Young Annabella is a rich heiress and, thus, free to choose a husband or even to remain single. What is ironic is that for all her erotic knowingness, Annabella cannot resist the appeal of Arthur, "a handsome, indulgent, Byronic rake."³⁹ He, King adds, is yet another version of the "dark libidinal Lotharios" that "girls desire and fear"⁴⁰ in which the Brontë sisters specialised but without the Romantic depths of a Mr. Rochester or a Heathcliff. Huntingdon is certainly characterised as a very attractive man and, as Thormählen observes with a peculiar bias, Helen "is not alone in finding him physically attractive;" Annabella, "the seasoned flirt," is "similarly affected from the outset."⁴¹ Since, however, she wishes to marry a man with a title and dashing Huntingdon is not an aristocrat, Annabella sets her cap at the unattractive but pliant Lord Lowborough. The flirtation is successful but even the virginal, naïve Helen can see that Annabella's attentions also extend to Arthur. Using Helen's manifest jealousy to seduce her, Huntingdon plainly admits that he is romantically connected to Annabella (which might be true), right before compromising Helen's reputation by forcing her to kiss him. With her judgement clouded by her unexpected sexual arousal and by her pious ideas about his moral salvation, Helen accepts Arthur's rash marriage proposal as a triumph over her rival, trying to justify her poor choice to her appalled aunt and guardian on religious grounds. Pragmatic Annabella, trapped like Helen by the need to avoid spinsterhood, also deceives herself into believing that she is making the best possible choice. The problem in her case is that Lowborough gives her the title she craves for but not the excitement she also needs. This is the main dilemma in her life and the reason why Annabella cannot control her attraction for Huntingdon.

Lowborough soon proposes marriage and Miss Wilmot finds some comfort in assuming that Helen feels envy at her superior match but when Helen declares that Arthur's love is all she craves, Annabella feels discomfited and resentful. Helen is perplexed by this reaction and Miss Wilmot explains herself, trying to downplay her disappointment:

³⁷ Carpentier, 24.

³⁸ Carpentier, 24.

³⁹ See Kenneth King, "Obsession: Beginning with the Brontës: A Revisitation," *Antioch Review* 73:2 (Spring 2015): 225-241, 233.

⁴⁰ King, 233.

⁴¹ Thormählen, "The Villain of *Wildfell Hall*," 833.

‘I wish,’ returned, she, with a short laugh, ‘that all the attractive points and desirable qualifications of the two gentlemen were united in one—that Lord Lowborough had Huntingdon’s handsome face and good temper, and all his wit, and mirth and charm, or else that Huntingdon had Lowborough’s pedigree, and title, and delightful old family seat, and I had him; and you might have the other and welcome.’ (p. 154 [ch. 21])

This singular declaration should call Helen’s attention to Annabella’s excessive fondness for Arthur but despite her jealousy of other women in Huntingdon’s past, which he enjoys fuelling, Helen dislikes scandal. As Joshi argues, “Had Helen listened to the word about town on Huntingdon, had she learned to gossip, she would not have undertaken her disastrous marriage, nor would she have been so isolated once in it.”⁴² As for Annabella, since she cannot merge the two men into one, nor be a bigamist, she eventually decides to be both wife and mistress—a disastrous solution to her romantic dilemma.

Arthur’s stance is far less easy to read; arguably, he just finds Annabella’s pragmatism quite convenient. With no apparent jealousy, he reports to Helen that Annabella herself, sounding frustrated, has acknowledged to him that she has chosen to marry Lowborough simply because “if I waited for some one capable of eliciting my esteem and affection, I should have to pass my life in single blessedness, for I detest you all!” (p. 167 [ch. 22]). Amused, Arthur adds that “the cream of the jest (...) is, that the artful minx loves nothing about [Lowborough] but his title and pedigree, and ‘that delightful old family seat’” (p. 167 [ch. 22]). Helen replies scandalized that he ought to warn his friend about Annabella’s dishonourable intentions, but Arthur shows a different view of loyalty: “What! and spoil all her plans and prospects, poor girl? No, no: that would be a breach of confidence, wouldn’t it, Helen? Ha, ha! Besides, it would break his heart” (p. 168 [ch. 22]). His blasé laughter probably exposes a hidden insecurity about his inability to meet Annabella’s demanding social qualifications, though Arthur seems satisfied with Helen at this point. Huntingdon, however, misreads the situation for he wrongly supposes that whereas self-confident Annabella may be impossible to control, gentle Helen will be easy to dominate. When, once married, Helen shows her unbending determination to carry out her plans to reform Huntingdon, he drifts back to his former life as a London playboy and, presumably, begins the affair with the newly married Lady Lowborough.

Returning home after one of his long absences in quite an altered state, Arthur tells his wife that he has lived “more in these four months, Helen, than you have in the whole course of your existence, or will to the end of your days, if they numbered a hundred years” (p. 218 [ch. 30]). She threatens then to withdraw her affection, “if *that* is of any value to you” (218 [ch. 30], original italics) and Arthur, piqued but not angry, clarifies what he seeks in his wife, an ideal embodied by Helen’s best friend, Millicent:

‘(...) If you don’t mind, my pretty tyrant, you’ll make me regret my choice in good earnest, and envy my friend Hattersley his meek little wife: she’s quite a pattern to her sex, Helen. He had her with him in London all the season, and she was no trouble at all. He might amuse himself just as he pleased, *in regular bachelor style*, and she never complained of neglect; he might come home at any hour of the night or morning, or not come home at all; be sullen, sober, or glorious drunk; and play the fool or the madman to his own heart’s desire, without any fear or botheration.

⁴² Priti Joshi, “Masculinity and Gossip in Anne Brontë’s *Tenant*,” *SEL* 49.4 (Autumn 2009): 907-924, 918.

She never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will. (...)’ (p. 218 [ch. 30], my italics)

Conveniently, Arthur overlooks the fact that Millicent behaves so submissively because her husband Hattersley is, as Helen later learns, abusing her physically and psychologically. At this early stage in their marriage, when Arthur’s behaviour towards Helen is not yet openly abusive, she still insists on offering her help. Huntingdon, however, “declines Helen’s guidance,”⁴³ at first teasingly but soon regarding her constant battling for his reformation as “nagging interference.”⁴⁴ Although there is no direct reference to its onset, Arthur possibly finds in the affair with Annabella a haven from domestic hassle. This might also be the case for her, since Lord Lowborough, a victim of several addictions which include drinking and gambling, is not as easy to manage as Annabella had supposed, in spite of his devotion to her.

Ironically, Arthur’s own addiction to alcohol, which increases along the years of his married life, sets wife and mistress competing not only for his love but also for his redemption from vice. This is what eventually undermines Annabella’s erotic power over him and destroys any affection that Arthur may have had for Helen.

Later Stages: The Affair

Although Arthur is probably already engaged in some sort of extra-marital affair with Annabella, as I have suggested, a new phase begins when he invites Lowborough and his wife to Grassdale Manor. Arthur intends to spice up his marriage by exciting Helen’s jealousy, which is why following his announcement of the invitation he asks, with a “mischievous twinkle in his eyes” (p. 192 [ch. 25]), whether she is afraid of Annabella. Helen answers with a negative but Arthur soon starts provoking his wife by behaving publicly in an increasingly intolerable way with Lady Lowborough. Annabella, as Helen is quick to note, is following the same course of action regarding her husband: her “way of tormenting him” consists of “openly, but not too glaringly, coquetting with Mr. Huntingdon, who is quite willing to be her partner in the game” (p. 193 [ch. 26]). Helen writes in her diary that she feels no jealousy, attributing Arthur’s flirting to vanity and Annabella’s matching behaviour to the same “mischievous desire to excite” jealousy, albeit with “more of malice and less of playfulness in *her* manoeuvres” (p. 192 [ch. 25], original italics). Curiously, Helen grants that she does feel bitterly jealous when Annabella plays and sings. Huntingdon, she writes, “hangs over the instrument, and dwells upon her voice with no affected interest; for then I know he is really delighted, and I have no power to awaken similar fervour” (p. 194 [ch. 26]). Readers need not be too sagacious to understand that Helen’s envy of Annabella’s power to please refers to more private areas of performance. On his side, Arthur, who despises Lowborough for being a cuckold, participates very actively in degrading him, trapping Annabella’s husband even further in the vicious circle of his various addictions. As Lokke points out, “Brontë chooses Huntingdon as the narrator of Lowborough’s story [to Helen] in order to emphasize the heartlessness and depravity of his response to his ‘friend’s’ desperation.”⁴⁵ Arthur combines, thus, two offences

⁴³ A.J. Drewery, “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: A Woman’s Place?*,” *Brontë Studies* 38.4 (November 2013): 339-347, 342.

⁴⁴ Drewery, 343.

⁴⁵ Hare Lokke, “*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *A Companion to the Brontës*, ed. Diane Long Hoeveler & Deborah Denenholz Morse (London: Blackwell, 2016), 115-135, 122.

against Lowborough, as a husband and as his close friend, showing that in their patriarchal upper-class context men are easily disloyal to each other.

The flirtation soon escalates, with other reprehensible public manifestations which include Arthur's clasping and kissing Annabella's hand; even then, he still claims to Helen that this is "a jest, a mere nothing" for (and this can be hardly reassuring) if "I ever give a thought to another, you may well spare it, for those fancies are here and gone like a flash of lightning, while my love for you burns on steadily, and for ever, like the sun" (p. 198 [ch. 27]). To her surprise, Arthur tells Helen that he would murder any man who behaved towards her as he behaves towards Lowborough's wife, but when she highlights this incongruity, Arthur argues that Helen is the one breaking their marriage vows:

'You promised to honour and obey me, and now you attempt to hector over me, and threaten and accuse me, and call me worse than a highwayman. If it were not for your situation, Helen, I would not submit to it so tamely. I won't be dictated to by a woman, though she be my wife.' (p. 199 [ch. 27])

The 'situation' alluded to here is Helen's advanced pregnancy, which makes the relationship with Annabella perhaps explicable by Arthur's sexual frustration but also doubly inexcusable.

In the course of the following visit, a year later, it becomes apparent that Lowborough's life with Annabella is quickly deteriorating, in part because of his unmanageable alcoholism. Helen becomes then aware that, paradoxically, Arthur's restrained use of alcohol is not due to her injunctions but to those of her rival. Nevertheless, Annabella's authority over her lover is quite tenuous, as Helen learns when overhearing a comment from one of Arthur's coarse guests, Grimsby: "But he'll change again when he's sick of her. If we come here a year or two hence, we shall have all our own way, you'll see" (p. 251 [ch. 33]). These shocking words are followed by an almost comical case of misidentification when Helen, still reluctant to admit that the flirtation has escalated into adultery, accidentally walks into the spot of the garden where Arthur is waiting for Annabella and is mistaken for her. Pretending to leave, as the flustered Arthur orders her, Helen hears how Lady Lowborough extracts from Huntingdon the declaration that he no longer loves his wife and is only keeping up appearances. When Helen demands an explanation, Arthur initially denies her angry accusations but at last faces her with the "calm insolence of mingled shamelessness and desperation" (p. 260 [ch. 33]). Their quarrel, nonetheless, leads to a stalemate for, as I have noted, Huntingdon coldly rejects Helen's request for a separation, out of concern that this might damage his public image: "Do you think I'm going to be made the talk of the country for your fastidious caprices?" (p. 260 [ch. 33]).

Huntingdon, Ward writes, "is typically unapologetic"⁴⁶ because the law is on his side, regardless of his behaviour. His wife's confrontation with Annabella, in contrast, "makes the appalled Helen a culpable accomplice after the fact to a 'connection' that she accurately depicts as being 'criminal',"⁴⁷ for she has seemingly allowed it to progress under her very roof. Far from showing remorse, Annabella's only worry is that Helen might unmask her immediately before Lord Lowborough to the point that she even offers her astonished rival a deal. Showing her most profound contempt, Helen commands Annabella to renounce at once her "guilty connection" with Arthur, to which the adamant Lady Lowborough replies that "I cannot renounce what is dearer than life"

⁴⁶ See Ian Ward, "The Case of Helen Huntingdon," *Criticism* 49.2 (2007 Spring): 151-182, 156.

⁴⁷ Ward, 157.

(p. 265 [ch. 34]). This sudden romantic disclosure is particularly surprising because it comes from the lips of a woman thus far characterized by Brontë as a shameless flirt. Lady Lowborough's words appear to be those of a woman in love, involved in much more than just a thrilling sexual adventure but, whatever Brontë intended, critics have offered no comments on Annabella's bold declaration, which has no counterpart on Arthur's side.

Helen's absurd decision to keep the pathetic Lord Lowborough unaware of the liaison makes Annabella even more "audacious and insolent" (p. 267 [ch. 35]). Since Arthur cannot ask his guests to leave without awakening Lowborough's suspicions, his mistress passes the remaining time of her visit tormenting Helen. In the process, Annabella lets her deepening passion for Arthur break all boundaries dictated by decorum or propriety regarding Helen. She even tells her enemy that "You need not grudge him to me, Helen, for I love him more than ever you could do" (p. 268 [ch.35]). If this were not sufficient insult, Annabella further aggravates Helen by impudently asserting that she has done her the service of keeping Arthur sober. Helen's efforts to rid him of his bad habits were, Annabella explains:

'without success, until I came to your assistance. I told him in few words that I could not bear to see him degrade himself so, and that I should cease to—no matter what I told him, but you see the *reformation* I have wrought; and you ought to thank me for it.' (p. 271 [ch. 35], my italics)

Arthur, unaware of the course which this singular rivalry is taking, "rewards" Annabella, as an embittered Helen writes in her diary, "by such smiles and glances, such whispered words, or boldly-spoken insinuations, indicative of his sense of her goodness and my neglect, as make the blood rush into my face, in spite of myself" (p. 267 [ch. 35]). Between visits, for this situation is prolonged several years, Arthur tortures Helen by forcing her to read Lady Lowborough's letters, "full of extravagant protestations of affection; impetuous longings for a speedy reunion—and impious defiance of God's mandates, and railings against His providence for having cast their lot asunder, and doomed them both to the hateful bondage of alliance with those they could not love" (p. 275 [ch. 36]). Significantly, he does not show Helen his own letters for, as his friends correctly guess, Arthur is not truly in love with his mistress.

Trying to feign indifference in order to give her rival no easy satisfaction, Helen fails to secure an ally in Lowborough, who is understandably angry with her when he finally learns the truth about his wife and Arthur. Helen acknowledges that she has made a mistake by concealing the affair from him but still tries to justify her blunder "Because I knew it would be painful to you" and because she hoped against all odds that Annabella "would return to her duty" (p. 289 [ch. 38]). Lowborough is absolutely right to stress that Helen has actually "injured" him "by this ungenerous concealment!" (p. 289 [ch. 38]) since her long silence of two years has also contributed to concealing that Annabella's daughter is Arthur's child. Out of pity for the innocent girl, and although "the unfortunate little Annabella was a source of perpetual bitterness to his soul" (p. 389 [ch. 50]), Lowborough keeps this "nominal daughter" (p. 389 [ch. 50]) even after divorcing her mother. Helen, in contrast, and as I have noted, "cannot divorce Arthur because she has neither sufficient grounds nor funds, and a yet more pressing barrier in the shape of her young son,"⁴⁸ whose custody she would immediately lose.

⁴⁸ See Jill L. Matus, "'Strong Family Likeness': *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*," *The Cambridge Companion to The Brontës*, ed. Heather Glen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 99-121, 108.

Arthur, incidentally, never shows any awareness of the existence of his daughter, further evidence of how little he cares for his mistress beyond sexual gratification.

Although Brontë offers no comment, we can assume that Annabella must be mortified by Arthur's brazen suggestion to her husband, in the scene of their rushed departure once their affair is known, that they should swap wives because "I'd never give up an old friend for the sake of a wife. You may have mine if you like, and I call that handsome; I can do no more than offer restitution, can I?" (p. 295 [ch. 38]). Helen writes in her diary, that, still laughing, Arthur "expressed himself rather glad [his mistress] was gone" for, in his own words, Annabella "was so deuced imperious and exacting (...). Now I shall be my own man again, and feel rather more at my ease" (p. 295 [ch. 38]). Arthur's relief at her absence shows that Annabella "like the naïve, younger Helen (...) is deluded about the strength of her power to change Arthur, as his subsequent reversion to his dissolute habits and descent into alcoholism clearly show."⁴⁹

Huntingdon's plunge into intemperance is combined with erotic degradation. Although at first he resists the idea of a separation, soon Arthur tries "to trap Helen into committing adultery, or even the possible appearance of it," rightly "assuming that she was vulnerable to divorce proceedings while he, for the same transgression, was not."⁵⁰ Grimsby's earlier comment that Annabella would soon be 'fair game' to all the men in Arthur's circle is then applied to Helen. One of these discreditable men, Walter Hargreaves, tries to take her into his trust by reporting a conversation between Arthur and Ralph Hattersley (his sister Millicent's husband), already a reformed abuser at this stage of the novel. Arthur wonders, in the company of his cronies, why he should change his behaviour:

'To turn over a new leaf, you double-dyed scoundrel,' shouted Ralph, 'and beg your wife's pardon, and be a good boy for the future.'

'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!'

I—hem—someone asked if he really meant what he said; upon which he solemnly swore he did, and no mistake. (p. 301 [ch. 39])

Helen is profoundly disgusted by Arthur's heartless attitude and also by Walter's strategy of seduction, which necessarily fails with her. She, however, remains by her husband's side until another woman appears in his life. As Hyman writes, proof that Huntingdon's "appetites have become thoroughly debased, just as his taste in women" is that he chooses as his lover "the toadying Miss Myers, the supposed governess,"⁵¹ possibly a prostitute. After this humiliation, Helen decides to leave Arthur, for, sickened as she was by their affair, at least she could see that Annabella felt something akin to love for him, whereas the liaison with Myers, whom she also despises for class reasons, is a dismal, sordid affair. This other, unladylike woman is proof that, in the end, Arthur deserves neither Helen's devotion nor Annabella's passion; both women deceive themselves into loving him and, above all, into believing that they are corresponded. The rake is, simply, too selfish to be reformed.

⁴⁹ Lokke, 121.

⁵⁰ See Joan Bellamy, "The Tenant of Wildfell Hall: What Anne Brontë Knew and What Modern Readers Don't," *Brontë Studies* 30.3 (2005 November): 255-257, 256.

⁵¹ Hyman, 77.

Conclusions

We cannot know how Annabella feels when she understands that her “passion, the nearest thing to love Arthur Huntingdon ever experiences, has [no] real staying power,”⁵² for this a tale that Brontë only narrates between the lines. Whereas Lady Lowborough loses all she ever ambioned because of her unrestrained passion for Huntingdon, he is too self-centred to really understand what she risks because of their affair. It is his patriarchal privilege as a man to keep Annabella romantically attached to him and Helen legally tied to their sham marriage, although his degraded behaviour in the last period of their life together arguably shows that patriarchy also has some disadvantages. Helen may be a prisoner at Grassdale Manor but Arthur is himself enslaved to his alcoholism, which is part of his reckless macho behaviour, and to his fear of losing face before his male chauvinist circle of friends if Helen abandons him, as she does.

Carol Senf may be right in claiming that Annabella “epitomizes” another kind of degradation, the one “that the unequal relationship between the sexes can produce.”⁵³ I disagree, however, with her diagnosis that “[h]aving internalized the male standard that sees piety and kindness as weakness, Annabella tries to act like a man,” which “begins her road to ruin.”⁵⁴ Actually, as I hope to have shown, Annabella is trapped by the same early 19th century feminine mystique that chains Helen to Huntingdon: the poisonous idea that a loving woman can always reform a rakish man, in or outside marriage. If we apply Langland’s argument, it appears that Annabella lies to Helen and to herself about her wish to keep Arthur on the straight path because she is also affected by the illicit nature of her sexual attraction and wishes to sublimate it. The fact is that, though desired, neither Helen nor Annabella are really loved by Arthur, a realization which helps the wife to sever her romantic attachment as soon as the adultery is proven but that, in contrast (at least in the ‘official’ version) ruins his mistress’s life. She pays a very high social penalty for her behaviour whereas Helen learns to keep a low profile and avoid scandal until, providentially, Arthur’s death frees her from her shackles and she can marry a much better man.

In conclusion, although Arthur and Annabella seem very much suited to each other, her social ambition and his personal egotism lead them to marry persons they do not love. Marriage becomes for each of them a disappointment and, so, they find a solution for their dissatisfaction in an adulterous relationship, necessarily limited by how long it takes Lowborough to become aware of the deception but also by Arthur’s decision not to divorce Helen. Whether connected just by a strong sexual passion or by true love, Arthur and Annabella do manage to establish a long-lasting relationship against many odds. This alternative love story was not yet a narrative that the mid-Victorian readership could welcome. It is, however, as I have hopefully shown, a serious critical oversight to dismiss Arthur and Annabella’s adultery as not even a minor footnote in the history of the 19th century English novel, for it is actually a relevant episode. It is now time to redress this wrong and consider how overlooked characters, like Annabella, offer keys to new readings.

⁵² See Marianne Thormählen, “Aspects of Love in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*,” *New Approaches to the Literary Art of Anne Brontë*, ed. Julie Nash & Barbara Suess (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 153-171, 159.

⁵³ Senf, 453.

⁵⁴ Senf, 453.

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