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A Mother Outlaw Vindicated: Social Critique in Anne Brontë's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*

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<1> Anne Brontë's novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared in the historically volatile year of 1848, sometimes called "the year of revolutions" because of insurrections that erupted across Europe in France, Italy, Austria, Germany and Hungary. While England saw no violent revolution, Brontë's novel, through its "radical vigour" and "searching reappraisal of orthodoxy" (Berry 71), attempted a quieter sort of revolution by challenging the very foundations of English upper-class society through a scathing critique of laws and ideologies governing the family, marriage and mothering. Brontë's story presents a significant subversion of English Common Law and the normative practices and ideologies surrounding the institution of motherhood in England in the early Victorian period (1832-48). Anne Brontë vindicates the outlaw "single" mother through her challenges to marriage and custody laws, childrearing practices, and attitudes towards maternal authority.⁽¹⁾ Brontë was part of a trend in Victorian thinking and practice which validated the mother's moral and spiritual role in the life of her children (Shoemaker 126), while, at the same time, she thwarted ideologies of female subservience within the patriarchal marriage which still took precedence over that role.

<2> Social historians have noted a change in England in the nineteenth century in which women were increasingly defined less by their sexuality and more by their roles as mothers.⁽²⁾ Helen Huntingdon's self-definition as mother first and foremost in an 1848 novel instantiates and validates this general trend. In Anne Brontë's work, even absent, the mother is a major influence on the development of the individual. Preliminary to the social critique of Victorian familial mores, Brontë highlights the impact of maternal absence on the future of a child. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, the young Helen initially makes a foolish love marriage to Arthur

Huntingdon, who is later shown to be morally corrupt – alcoholic, adulterous and verbally abusive. Anne Brontë suggests the orphaned Helen’s lapse in judgment about marriage is caused by a lack of maternal care. Maternal absence, moreover, had a particularly poignant resonance for Anne Brontë whose own “dear Mama” (164) died when she was less than two years old (1821), and, as in her heroine’s case, Anne was raised by a strictly religious, dutiful, but not very warm aunt, Elizabeth Branwell, who corresponds to Helen’s Aunt Maxwell in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Brontës (Charlotte, Emily, Branwell and Anne) lamented the loss of their mother and blamed many of their personal misfortunes on her absence. In literature and folklore, however, maternal absence “can also signify women’s powerlessness . . . The maternal absence in eighteenth-century fiction might be said to represent this essential powerlessness, displaying in high relief the solitary heroine in a field of patriarchal forces” (Perry 337). Helen’s own motherlessness may be read as symbolic of her persistent sense of isolation throughout the novel, an emotional solitude which initially renders her vulnerable to the false flattery and superficial charm of Arthur Huntingdon. And so, without maternal advice and protection, Helen finds herself deluded about the attractiveness of Huntingdon as a spouse.

<3> On a legal level, despite her obvious agency in selecting Huntingdon, Helen is an object of commercial exchange between her lover (we later discover he covets her fortune and is actually in love with Annabella Lowborough) and her uncle. Brontë provides many hints in her narrative that Arthur’s wooing of Helen is influenced by the combined wealth of her uncle and her father, but the naive Helen refuses to consider the idea of a “settlement” or jointure – one of the ways in which women of the upper classes bent without breaking the English law that their property would become their husband’s property upon marriage. The technical term for the husband owning all a woman’s possessions was “coverture”: “with her legal personhood in suspension,”(3) a married woman could own no property, no money, incur no debts, sign no contracts, could not keep her wages, and could never contradict her husband in financial matters, even if they involved the property or assets she brought to the marriage (Abrams, 250). In practice, the laws of coverture were not always followed, and middle and upper class women found they could occasionally control property through the use of “settlements” whereby a male relative would own the property or money (since a married woman could not legally own anything), but permit her to use it at her discretion.(4) This measure of protection, which did not benefit working class women, is what Helen’s uncle means when he raises the question of “settlements” (168). Her response to her uncle when he introduces the idea is “pray don’t trouble your head – or his, or mine about that; for all I have will be his, and all he has will be mine; and what more could either of

us require?” (168-69). Helen’s youthful idealism about marriage, her acceptance of the patriarchal laws of coverture, and her faith in her future husband have serious and unhappy consequences for Helen and her child when she later discovers her son, also named Arthur, is being harmed by his father’s moral and physical influence, and that her only way of protecting him is to raise him as a fugitive in poverty: “my child must not be abandoned to this corruption: better far that he should live in poverty and obscurity with a fugitive mother, than in luxury and affluence with such a father” (336). Hence when Helen, in a seemingly touching expression of faith in the paternalist benevolence of her husband, rejects a settlement, a crucial turning point in the unfolding plot of marital incarceration and escape is established. Berry aptly describes the “overdetermined quality of nuptial impossibility” (32) in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and we, along with Helen, and implied readers, Gilbert and Halford, are educated in the foolishness of wifely innocence and blind faith. Although some have viewed the encasement of the proto-feminist plot in its container of masculine reading and interpretation as de-radicalizing it (Carnell 2), another way to view that double containment is as directing this revision of wifely submission specifically to those least inclined to sympathize with it, those whose legal and economic vested interests, like Markham’s and Halford’s, would appear to be in maintaining rather than changing marriage customs so as to render wives freer.

<4> Brontë’s critique of wifely obedience goes against the grain of social expectations of idealized motherhood, which was meant to operate strictly within the bounds and constraints of a paternalistic and hierarchical marriage: “paternalist ideology held that English society operated most efficiently and justly when those who held power in its hierarchical structure responsibly ruled. . . for its operative social metaphor of governance was the benevolent yet controlling relationship of a father to his wife and children” (Harsh 41). Thus, when Helen first makes the decision that she can no longer live with her drunken and adulterous husband, she is without economic recourse. She must rely entirely on his generosity and goodwill. So she presents him with her choice of solution, a separate life (294); she asks for the remainder of her fortune (most of which he has squandered through dissolute living) and for custody of young Arthur. He adamantly refuses (294). At this point in the narrative, Helen embarks on her career as outlaw. First, she denies Arthur her body (“I will exact no more heartless caresses from you – nor offer – nor endure them either” [295]), something which under the laws of coverture, she has no right to do. This moment is self-defining for Helen: “I am your child’s mother, and *your* housekeeper – nothing more” (295). The words chosen are hardly emancipating, since she makes no claims for self-determination here, only that she absolves herself of the “duties” of the marriage bed. The heroic tone, however, is unmistakable, and the choice to give herself a physical and emotional divorce from

her husband echoes a similar passionate moment in Wollstonecraft's *Mary, or the Wrongs of Woman* when Mary takes off her wedding ring, and, despite legal marriage persisting, proclaims herself unmarried (Wollstonecraft 162).

<5> Motherhood is both the main feature of Helen's heroism and its cause. Hence the next phase in Helen's marital apostasy is her battle over the love of and the right to nurture and raise young Arthur. Her husband spoils their son and encourages him, although he is only five years old, to drink alcohol, to curse, to degrade women, and to hunt for sport:

My greatest source of uneasiness, in this time of trial, was my son, whom his father and his father's friends delighted to encourage in all the embryo vices a little child can show, to instruct in all the evil habits he could acquire – in a word, to 'make a man of him' was one of their staple amusements. (335)

While Helen is willing to suffer an acrimonious marriage marked by insults, drunkenness and adultery, she is not willing to see her child morally corrupted and so she plans to escape. On the surface, this self-abnegation is another mark of Victorian repressive ideologies of motherhood which assume that a child, especially a male child, should take precedence over the mother.⁽⁵⁾ We might well challenge Helen's acceptance of her own degradation while she refuses to accept her son's: "I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer" (336). Nonetheless, Helen's ensuing act of rebellion is, in a nineteenth-century context, both heroic and radical; her attitude imitates the Romantic and Promethean rhetoric of many nineteenth-century heroines. She is defiant and proud: "*I* have no cause to fear; and if *they* scorn me as the victim of their guilt, I can pity their folly and despise their scorn" (296). Historical connections between Promethean rhetoric, the Chartist and Owenite women of the 1830s, the French Revolution and women's rights, both in the 1790s and the 1830s, are the backdrop on which this isolated domestic drama unfolds,⁽⁶⁾ informing the domestic scene with the hint of danger and a whiff of the political that was indeed detected by Victorian readers.

<6> Helen's defiance of social prejudice extends to her attitudes about the combination of mothering and waged labour. During the nineteenth century paid work and mothering were increasingly seen to be at odds. As a social ideology, the notion of "separate spheres" was by 1848 dominant (Levine-Clark 118), not least because it served as a way of securing full-time unpaid domestic help in the home (Abrams 12-15).⁽⁷⁾ Helen makes the point to her husband that he cannot afford to manage without her free services as a housekeeper (308). Nevertheless, the reality of women's lives was quite distinct from the ideology, since "in 1851, 75 per cent

of married women performed paid work” (Abrams 12). Anne Brontë explodes the false dichotomy between mothering and paid employment by demonstrating the reality that working for pay was in fact part of mothering, even for the upper-class Helen. Helen says of her decision to work, “oh, *how* I longed to take my child and leave them now, without an hour’s delay! But it could not be: there was work before me – hard work, that must be done” (346). A lady of the gentry, however, had more of a taboo against her work than did a woman of the working class, because she, unlike most working-class women, had the option of allowing her husband to support her financially. But Helen Huntingdon resists the dominant ideology of “separate spheres” and embraces the attractive prospects of both employment and ownership:

I shall have so much more pleasure in my labour, my earnings, my frugal fare, and household economy, when I know that I am paying my way honestly, and that what little I possess is legitimately all my own. (377)

Notably, Helen considers her wages legitimately hers, while under British law, they are not. She considers that her aunt, uncle and brother must not know of her plan to escape, for even if she told “*all* her grievances . . . [her brother] would be sure to disapprove of the step” (337).

<7> To understand why her relatives would disapprove, it is necessary to consider the strength and tenacity of the Victorian taboos against breaking the marriage bond, against an upper-class woman working for money, and against single mothers. Moreover, we must realize as well that many of Helen’s actions, though morally justifiable, are in fact illegal. Although an Infants and Child Custody Act had been passed in 1839, which allowed non-adulterous women to ask for the custody of children under 7, courts still favoured paternal over maternal custody. The law, in any case, would not have applied to Helen Huntingdon, since she abandons her husband in October 1827 (Lamonica 144), and it would not even have benefited her in 1848 when the novel was published, because she separates from Huntingdon illegally. Therefore, knowing that under the law of coverture, she has no legal right to the custody of her child, Helen realizes she must break the law covertly to deliver young Arthur from his father’s influence. She begins to save her money in order to make a secret escape and “steal” her son from him. This movement marks the second phase of Helen’s maternal and marital rebellion: the attempt to move out of domestic incarceration and into an alternate role as a professional single mother.

<8> Fostered perhaps by the Brontës’ own experience of poverty and the struggle for female economic independence, the fictional Helen conceives of a clandestine

plan whereby she will sell all her jewelery and all her existing paintings, and then paint new ones to sell so that she will have money to escape her home and to support her son. After several weeks of diligent planning, Helen is thwarted when Arthur Huntingdon reads her diary and confiscates or destroys all her belongings, including her easel, paints, canvasses, finished paintings, money, jewels and anything she might sell. The violence and injustice of this scene are exacerbated by our knowledge that under English law he is entitled to exact this revenge; the law sanctions his right to take away from her or destroy anything she owns or uses. Ironically, it is Helen's attempts to support, care for and protect her son which are illegal, whereas her husband's abuse of her and his son is legally sanctioned. Her position at this point is poignantly expressed: "I am a slave, a prisoner" (352). It is as a mother that she laments this slavery, because, through her legal and social position, she is "unable to rescue her son from ruin" (353).⁽⁸⁾ Laura C. Berry has convincingly argued for a relationship in all Brontë fiction between "imprisonment and caretaking in the debates over the Infant Custody Bill of 1839" (32) and the extent to which the child's centrality as a "self" or "person" emerges. Nonetheless, through this debate that privileged the child's wellbeing over the mother's, Helen's evolving and struggling selfhood, her unique individuality, is primarily highlighted by the narrative. Whereas the law, Victorian maternal ideologies and Helen herself relegate her interests to the status of lesser importance, Brontë's text interests the reader primarily in Helen's fate through an identification with her subjectivity, not her son's. Helen's attitude of selflessness reinforces her subservience to her child, a male heir, at the same time as it strategically enlists support for her. The way in which Brontë's story actually functions, then, by evoking readerly sympathy and desire on Helen's behalf, places Helen's centrality and best interests ahead of little Arthur's. Simply put, she wants to escape for Arthur's benefit, but the narrative obliges us to desire Helen's escape for her own sake.

<9> Motherhood, throughout the Victorian age, became the one legitimate rationale for female legal empowerment, and Helen develops out of this reification of the maternal. The next phase of her resistance is to throw herself actively into the role of caring for, nurturing, instructing and raising little Arthur. She trains him to despise alcohol by administering it to him whenever he is sick, along with tartar-emetic in order to induce nausea (354-55). Young Arthur quickly learns to despise the smell and taste of the substance which is so toxic to his drunken father. Helen dedicates her days to Arthur's education, spiritual and moral development, and playtime. In these useful and affectionate activities, she finds solace for her sufferings. Through this representation of intensive mothering, Brontë shows Helen's adaptability, purposefulness, and resilience. Helen's degradation, however, continues and the behaviour of her husband deteriorates; he even forbids her to teach

Arthur and hires a governess with whom he is having a sexual liaison to replace Helen. Since “‘Mother’ becomes Helen’s primary identity” (Lamonica 143), she once again decides the situation is unbearable.

<10> Since a married nineteenth-century English woman’s legal personhood was suspended during marriage, Helen’s only recourse is to plead her case to a male relative. Through her brother Frederick, who is at first much disinclined to help her, she manages to secure a safe retreat to one of his buildings – a dilapidated house called Wildfell Hall. Frederick agrees to make some rooms habitable and to furnish her with art supplies so she may earn wages to keep herself and Arthur. She changes her name to her mother’s maiden name “Graham” and, in order to protect her reputation, disguises herself as a widow. This act of adopting her mother’s maiden name as an alias is, of course, illegal, although poetically just; it argues the poignancy of the attachment Helen feels to her own absent mother (“therefore I fancy I have some claim to it [the name], and prefer it to any other” [372]) and the painful legacy of maternal absence. Interestingly, Helen feels freed and overjoyed as she makes her escape into the lowest of social positions available to a Victorian upper-class woman – a wage-earning single mother: “I could hardly refrain from praising God aloud for my deliverance, or astonishing my fellow passengers [on the coach] by some surprising outburst of hilarity” (374). Liberty is more than worth the price of this abject condition.

<11> Inevitably, Helen’s abdication of her married role and the secrecy she must maintain surrounding her situation, lead her neighbours to view her as a hardened, fallen woman. Reverend Millward can hardly conceal his glee at this conclusion as he irresponsibly reports his findings to his neighbours:

‘Hardened, I fear – hardened!’ he [Rev. Millward] replied, with a despondent shake of his head; ‘and at the same time, there is a strong display of unchastened, misdirected passions. She turned white in the face, and drew her breath through her teeth in a savage sort of way; – but she offered no extenuation or defence; and with a kind of shameless calmness – shocking indeed to witness in one so young – as good as told me that my remonstrance was unavailing.’ (92)

It is simply assumed by most people that a secretive single mother must be licentious. Lynn Abrams writes that “in nineteenth-century religious, moral and legal discourse, the single mother was represented as deviant, irresponsible and dangerous. Envisaged as either a fallen woman or a prostitute, the unmarried mother was held up as the archetype of the sexual woman; a woman who was not subject to

a man within marriage” (118). In defiance of this stereotype, Helen Huntingdon, however, is portrayed as strong-willed, morally superior to her husband, utterly chaste, entitled to her freedom, and defiant in the face of social opposition. She is the antithesis of the social reputation foisted on her by a judgmental society, since the situation for widows in Victorian England was also harsh and unfair: “many women – widowed as well as deserted – lived for years as single mothers, a position that was extremely difficult economically. This was especially true from 1834 to 1845, when the new Poor Law in its first and harshest incarnation made it almost impossible for unmarried mothers to get support from their children’s fathers” (113). Helen Graham, virtually a freed slave, acts as a corrective to negative stereotypes of widows and single mothers, both of whom were popularly regarded as sexually voracious and morally corrupt social outcasts. Helen is morally strong and able to exist without marriage; in fact, she blossoms as a mother and as a worker simultaneously without the support of a husband, friends or even the neighbours and acquaintances she meets in the neighbourhood of Wildfell Hall.

<12> Furthermore, in Helen’s new-found independence she continues to exhibit strength of character and purpose both as an individual and as a mother. Her strong opinions about staying with and caring for her son represent mothering as a valid and important vocation for women of the gentry in contrast to the widespread practice of having servants care for upper-class children under the legal domain of fathers. Anne Brontë was specifically responding to the parental neglect she witnessed among the upper classes when she was an unhappy governess for Edmund and Lydia Robinson beginning in May 1840. She blamed the unruly behaviour of her charges on negligent and lax parenting. She witnessed Lydia Robinson, who is the basis for the portrait of Annabella Lowborough in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, frivolously occupied with her attempt to remain beautiful and with an adulterous liaison with Branwell Brontë, Anne Brontë’s brother and the children’s tutor. Anne Brontë felt an obligation to represent gentry life realistically as she had witnessed it: “she must not varnish, soften or conceal” (Charlotte Brontë 439) the unpleasant reality of parental neglect, blood sports, and sensual preoccupations. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as in *Agnes Grey*, “Anne Brontë follows the aims of domestic advice literature in criticizing mothers for relinquishing the responsibility to educate their children’s minds as well as mould their characters” (Lamonica 127).

<13> In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, there is also an explicit defence of a virtuous mother’s methods of child-rearing. Helen faces constant criticism from neighbours about her manner of raising her son and about the fact that she is raising him alone. Mrs. Markham says Arthur is too much with his mother and that she will

“ruin” him by spending so much time with him: “even at *his* age, he ought not to be always tied to his mother’s apron string; he should learn to be ashamed of it,” Mrs. Markham lectures Helen (26). This accusation is repeated by Reverend Millward, the Vicar, who believes that consuming alcoholic beverages is manly and should be encouraged rather than restrained (38). Both Mrs. Markham and the Vicar are proven wrong in Arthur’s future, since the boy grows into the ideal adult man – a loving husband, and unlike his own father, neither alcoholic, adulterous nor misogynistic. Markham narrates “that pretty child is now a fine young man: he has realized his mother’s brightest expectations, and is at present residing in Grassdale Manor with his young wife, the merry little Helen Hattersley, of yore” (496). In this way, Anne Brontë anticipates Adrienne Rich’s argument against maternal complicity in patriarchal motherhood in her classic feminist text *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (1976). Rich has been cited as one of the first feminists to recognize and subvert the ways in which women raise boys to patriarchal entitlement (O’Reilly 160), but Anne Brontë reached the same conclusion more than a hundred years before Rich. Despite the constant interference of her misguided neighbours, Helen manages successfully to nurture in Arthur Jr. positive moral values and a proper respect for women. She does so despite her lack of interest in and her “lamentable ignorance” (13) of housework, which provokes Mrs. Markham’s judgement and pity.

<14> One of the reasons maternal authority and power increased throughout the nineteenth century was that in the influential Romantic literature, most notably the poetry of Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley, children were idealized and valued in new ways. Hence, the relationship of mother and child in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is not merely a reaction against the corruption of alcoholic paternity. Rather the mother-child bond is presented positively as a norm against which the biting social satire of prejudice and injustice is all the more effective. Anne Brontë portrays the friendship between Helen and her son with genuine sensitivity and poignancy. Helen is by no means the “perfect mother,” as she herself points out. In her diary Helen admits, “I am not well fitted to be his only companion, I know; but there is no other to supply my place. I am too grave to minister to his amusements and enter into his infantile sports as a nurse or a mother ought to do” (311). Juliet McMaster offers a useful and detailed discussion of Helen’s maternal limitations (11). But Helen is, despite her deficiencies, undoubtedly more qualified for the task of educating and raising Arthur than anyone else because of the depth and intensity of her love. Our introduction to her interactions with her son is described thus: “she stooped to kiss the child, and fondly clasped her arm round his neck” (22). While she speaks to Markham, she continues to stroke Arthur’s head. Helen welcomes Markham into her life solely because he

provides pleasure for her son: “her son derived a great deal of pleasure from the acquaintance, that he would not otherwise have known” (47). That such maternal displays of affection are not for show is indicated by the moments of affection in which mother and son believe themselves unobserved: “her little boy on the other [side], who stood leaning his elbow on her knee, and reading to her, with wonderful fluency, from a small volume that lay in her lap; while she rested her hand on his shoulder, and abstractedly played with the long, wavy curls that fell on his ivory neck” (56). In this description, the mutual love of mother and son is underscored while it is implied that Arthur’s great ability at reading is in some way a result their bond.

<15> Although Helen’s initiation into motherhood is a mixed blessing because of her unhappy marriage, we are shown that Helen’s attachment to and love for her son are constant and unchanging, biologically and divinely ordained. Despite unhappy circumstances, Helen’s response to Arthur Jr. from infancy is filled with love and delight:

My little Arthur! there you lie in sweet, unconscious slumber, . . . He wakes; his tiny arms are stretched towards me; his eyes unclose; they meet my gaze, but will not answer it. Little angel! you do not know me; you cannot think of me or love me yet; and yet how fervently my heart is knit to yours; how grateful I am for all the joy you give me! (229)

Unfortunately, this newfound maternal love is a further source of marital disharmony. Helen’s husband denounces the baby because of his jealousy (“Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it” [229]). In fact, the father’s neglect is a factor in the escalation of the mother’s love, since Helen “gave [her] little one a shower of gentle kisses to make up for its other parent’s refusal” (230). However genuine Helen’s love and attachment to her son, she cannot help but be aware of the dangers of over-attachment and over-indulgence, “for I never knew till now how strong are a parent’s temptations to spoil an only child” (232). Therefore her maternal love is tempered and strengthened by rational principles, and this combination of discipline and devotion serves to vindicate her maternal vocation. Even in the middle of her misery Helen cannot fail to be delighted by the time spent with her son, “forgetting, for the moment, all [her] cares, laughing at his gleeful laughter, and delighting [her]self with his delight” (239).

<16> These idealizing vignettes of childhood are widespread in nineteenth-century literature. The pervasive belief of the Renaissance and the eighteenth century was

that evil was inherent in children and required strict and even harsh handling in order to be eradicated (Hardyment 8). Beginning with Rousseau and moving through English Romanticism, the opposite view gradually gained prominence: the idea that children were purer and closer to God than their fallen adult counterparts. Thus Helen's closeness to her offspring may be read as symbolic of her greater purity, her religiosity, her moral virtue and her essential goodness. These contrast sharply with Annabella Lowborough's heartless indifference to children, which may be seen as symptomatic of her general moral depravity. While Annabella lies "on the drawing-room sofa, deep in the last new novel," Helen "had been romping with the little creatures, almost as merry and wild as themselves" (270). While we are to pity Helen's lack of custody rights to her child, Brontë suggests that Annabella deserves the hard fate of being separated from her daughter. Helen writes, "that mother never loved children, and has so little natural affection for her own that I question whether she will not regard it as a relief to be thus entirely separated from them, and delivered from the trouble and responsibility of their charge" (333). Such a demonization of the fallen woman, altogether typical of Victorian sexist ideology, weakens the otherwise compelling vindication of maternal rights, for one sexist prejudice that Brontë refuses to break is the taboo against female sexual desire. Annabella Lowborough, the sensual woman, is construed as morally irredeemable. Yet, it is only supposed, not known, by Helen that Annabella may be happy to be rid of her children, and this supposition is self-congratulatory and self-serving on Helen's part. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* tends to polarize mothers into a false dichotomy of "bad" (Anna Lowborough) and "good" (Helen Graham/Huntingdon), but it does so subversively by attributing the "good" to a single mother, a rebellious mother, an independent-minded woman, a wage-earning mother, and a literal outlaw. Nonetheless, Annabella serves as a contrast to Helen's chastity, a scapegoat for Helen's conscience, and an ironic commentary on Helen's own emerging reputation as a fallen woman.

<17> Markham, before he falls in love with Helen, shares in the general prejudice against her as a woman ("I would rather admire you from this distance, fair lady, than be the partner of your home" [15]). Wildfell Hall is a symbol of Helen's isolation, unhappiness, and individualism. Markham's first impression of it echoes his first impression of its tenant: "built of dark grey stone, – venerable and picturesque to look at, but, doubtless, cold and gloomy enough to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation" (20). He, like his mother and Rev. Millward, thinks Helen overprotective of her son, because she panics when she sees Arthur with Markham,⁽⁹⁾ who, like the reader, is at this point ignorant of the real possibility of Arthur being kidnapped by his father. Markham, acting as implied reader of Helen's story, gradually overcomes

his prejudices through a process of education in both knowledge and sympathy. Despite suspicious appearances and the judgement of the neighbourhood, Markham learns to defend Helen against unjust accusations.

<18> Among these accusations is the neighbourhood suspicion of her lack of chastity. Female libido was demonized in Victorian consciousness with its tendency “to divide women into virtuous and fallen camps” (Abrams, 126). Ever since the early nineteenth-century attacks on Mary Wollstonecraft, uncontrollable sexuality was projected on to a woman who subverted the patriarchal model of the family. In the community to which she escapes from her marriage, therefore, it is assumed that Helen is a “fallen woman,” that she is carrying on a sexual relationship with her landlord, and that she is either trying to ensnare or is having an illicit affair with the farmer Markham. Helen is almost unbelievably chaste and none of the rumours about her “fallen” nature is true. With this characterization, Anne Brontë is able to vindicate the marital rebellion to her puritanical readership by upholding Victorian standards of sexual chastity in her heroine. It is nonetheless the fate of Helen, who dares to assert her authority and power in the face of a patriarchal culture of masculine entitlement, to be considered sexually impure and thus degenerate by all those around her.

<19> Helen’s sexual purity is not the only element of the book which adapts her to conventions of the Victorian novel. Her marriage to Markham at the end of the book might be also critiqued as a hegemonic impulse which defeats Helen’s proto-feminist victory. According to this view, the necessity of a husband for our heroine prevents the novel from being as radical or subversive as it might have been. Surely, the only way for Helen to exist comfortably in a world of overt hostility is through a companionate marriage with a good man, but such a marriage may, on the level of narrative, represent an element of conventionality. Nonetheless, Markham is far from being an ideal husband, and he is selected by Helen despite his lower class (he is a farmer), his lack of wealth and his earlier prejudices. In 1848 most women of Helen Huntingdon’s class married within their class and there were powerful social proscriptions to ensure such marriages. The fact that Helen chooses someone so far beneath her in rank and wealth, but whom she and her son both like immensely, suggests that her marriage is a matter of preference rather than necessity and that the power balance is likely to be more even than in the typical Victorian marriage. Custom and law grant him superiority whereas wealth and class grant her superiority. The factors of social discrimination weigh fairly evenly on both sides. That Markham concedes her social superiority is apparent in that when he discovers Helen is sole heir of her uncle’s estate, he declares “my love had been cherished in vain; my hope was gone forever” (456-57). In addition to the problem

of class, remarriage for women was less common than for men and was generally frowned upon, since it was assumed that a woman should be faithful to the memory of her departed husband.(10) Widows were suspected of sexual motivations if they remarried. Given, then, that remarriage for widows was subversive and marrying far beneath one's rank was suspect, there remains substantial apostasy in this seemingly conventional ending.(11) Such a conclusion is entirely consistent with Anne Brontë's gynocentric domestic ideology. All the Brontë novels adopt a pattern of movement from "a family that cannot accommodate the self to one that can" (Lamonica, 7) with the family unit ultimately redeemed.

<20> Helen Huntingdon is a paradoxically powerful and subversive heroine whose challenge to Victorian social expectations of wives and mothers, and whose breaking of the unjust English laws which governed these roles, come from her inner moral strength. With naturalistic force and imaginative power, Anne Brontë forges a heroine whose self-claimed power is over "the private sphere," which, as Constance Harsh writes, "is no trivial one, . . . since the private sphere provides the fundamental reality of these fictional worlds" (45). With her religious piety, forbearance, acceptance of the domestic ideology of intensive mothering, sexual chastity and duty to her sick husband, Helen represents, on the one hand, the perfection of Victorian womanhood. Like many of the female victims of injustice in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century fiction, her stance is heroic and virtuous. But as with many Victorian women reformers, her very respectability and her seeming indifference to public and political life, both cloak and bolster her profound challenges to Victorian laws and customs:

those women who are the foremost initiators of reform assume an almost sacramental importance in society and point the way toward an England reorganized on principles other than the patriarchal ones. (Harsh, 8)

In other words, the growing power and autonomy of women in the private sphere, their increasing moral authority in that sphere, and the public attention being given, in the 1840s, to husbands who exploited and abused their power over women and children in their legal care all gave impetus to reform movements on public and political levels. With all the discretion of a pious Victorian lady and without using, by Victorian standards, "unfeminine" words such as "legislation," "law," "politics," "parliament," "chartist," "suffrage" or "rights," Anne Brontë serves the ball of domestic oppression directly and unswervingly into the reformist court. English novelists of the second half of the century, such as Charlotte Brontë, Elizabeth Gaskell, Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Sarah Ellis, and Charlotte Elizabeth, were to intensify the political in their championing of domesticity and maternal moral

authority. Susie Steinbach asserts that “the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social theory saw domesticity, family and female influence as the key to solving a wide range of social problems” (67). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* constitutes a passionate defence of a woman’s legal rights, as yet unwon, for improved divorce laws, child custody rights, and authority over child-rearing; it clearly anticipates “the late-nineteenth-century Married Women’s Property Acts (1870, 1882) and Custody of Infants Act (1886)” (Lamonica 31). In the second half of the nineteenth century, the laws and social expectations governing mothers were to change in exactly the directions Anne Brontë proposed, and it is clear that the sympathetic and subversive efforts of writers were instrumental in promoting the legal and social transformations which afforded women some measure of protection.(12)

<21> In conclusion, Anne Brontë issues a complex and sophisticated challenge to her society’s laws, institutions, and expectations, through her heroine, Helen Graham, who asserts her maternal autonomy heroically in the face of legal, social and economic restraint. Although Helen does not suffer physical abuse (which, if severe, sometimes constituted legal grounds for separation or divorce), she leaves her husband and takes her son with her. Through this emancipating act, Anne Brontë critiques a host of Victorian norms and customs in her sympathetic portrayal of marital and maternal apostasy. Anne Brontë, like Mary Wollstonecraft before her, suggests that in the nineteenth century, in some cases the only moral way to raise a child was to break the law, to become a mother outlaw.

Notes

(1)Robert Shoemaker has summarized the historical research by asserting that “increasing ideological emphasis was given to maternity during this period” (127).(^)

(2)The legal theorist William Blackstone (1732-80) wrote “the very being or legal existence of the woman is suspended during marriage”.(^)

(3)(^)

(4)“Women from the affluent middle and upper classes could often use a special form of law called equity law to put their property in trusts, out of the hands of their husbands’ control. Even then the trusts were controlled by other men, usually relatives” (Abrams, 251).(^)

(5)“Charlotte, Emily, and Anne Brontë wrote in a historical moment when family almost universally defined and positioned female identity” (Lamonica, 5).(^)

(6)Linda M. Shires provides an excellent discussion of the connections between these radical and elements as a social and political context for Brontë’s novel” (149-53).(^)

(7)Constance D. Harsh writes by the 1830s and 40s, “women were expected to tend to the home rather than pursue directly remunerative activities” (18).(^)

(8)(^)

(9)“‘Give me the child!’ she said in a voice scarce louder than a whisper, but with a tone of startling vehemence, and, seizing the boy, she snatched him from me, as if some dire contamination was in my touch, and then stood one hand firmly clasping his, the other on his shoulder, fixing upon me her large luminous eyes – pale, breathless, quivering with agitation” (21).(^)

(10)“In an earlier period, of course, they [widows] had often been suspected of witchcraft. Yet, there was also social and religious criticism of widows remarrying, which is reflected in negative stereotypes. Because widows were expected to remain loyal to their deceased husbands, remarriages were thought to result from base motives. . . . this popular belief provides further evidence of the prevailing hostile attitude towards remarrying widows” (Shoemaker, 137).(^)

(11)Berry writes that providing a stepfather for Arthur Jr. suggests, along with other elements in the novel, a mistrust of mothers (52). I would argue that the novel conveys much more mistrust of marriage (even Helen’s second marriage) than of mothers, although this dark side of domesticity is consistent in all aspects of family life portrayed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Despite the pervasive tone of critique, however, the most affirmative rhetoric in the book is reserved for Helen’s interactions with her son which are, I would argue, ultimately affirmed.(^)

(12)The 1857 Divorce Act made it possible for legally separated women to have the rights of single women. It gave women the right to sue their husbands for divorce on grounds of his adultery if there was another aggravating factor. Women were not able to sue for divorce on the same grounds as men until 1923. In 1870 the Married Women’s Property Act gave women the right to control of any wages they earned while they were married. This change in the law normally benefited only the working class, but it would have benefited the fictional Helen Huntingdon. In 1878 the Matrimonial Causes Act gave divorced women custody rights over children

under the age of 10. In 1882 another version of the Married Women's Property Act gave women the right to keep property they brought into a marriage.(^)

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