

**The Priceless Treasure at the Bottom of the Well:
Rereading Anne Brontë**

by

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I herewith declare that

**The Priceless Treasure at the Bottom of the Well:
Rereading Anne Brontë**

is my own work and that all the sources I have used have been acknowledged by means of
complete references.

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Abstract

Anne Brontë died in 1848, having written two novels, *Agnes Grey* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848). Although these novels, especially *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, initially received a favourable critical response, the unsympathetic remarks of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell initiated a dismissive attitude towards Anne Brontë's work. For over a hundred years, she was marginalized and silenced by a critical world that admired and respected the work of her two sisters, Charlotte and Emily, but that refused to acknowledge the substantial merits of her own fiction. However, in 1959 revisionist scholars such as Derek Stanford, Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin, offered important, more enlightened readings that helped to liberate Brontë scholarship from the old conservatisms and to direct it into new directions. Since then, her fiction has been the focus of a robust, but still incomplete, revisionist critical scholarship. My work too is revisionist in orientation, and seeks to position itself within this revisionist approach. It has a double focus that appraises both Brontë's social commentary and her narratology. It thus integrates two principal areas of enquiry: firstly, an investigation into how Brontë interrogates the position of middle class women in their society, and secondly, an examination of how that interrogation is conveyed by her creative deployment of narrative techniques, especially by her awareness of the rich potential of the first person narrative voice. Chapter 1 looks at the critical response to Brontë's fiction from 1847 to the present, and shows how the revisionist readings of 1959 were pivotal in re-energizing the critical approach to her work. Chapter 2 contextualizes the key legal, social, and economic consequences of Victorian patriarchy that so angered and frustrated feminist thinkers and writers such as Brontë. The chapter also demonstrates the extent to which a number of her core concerns relating to Victorian society and the status of women are reflected in her work. In Chapter 3 I discuss three important biographical influences on Brontë: her family, her painful experiences as a governess, and her reading history. Chapter 4 contains a detailed analysis of *Agnes Grey*, which includes an exploration of the narrative devices that help to reinforce its core concerns. Chapter 5 focuses on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, showing how the novel offers a richer and more sophisticated analysis of feminist concerns than those that are explored in *Agnes Grey*. These are broadened to include an investigation of the lives of married women, particularly those trapped in abusive marriages. The chapter also stresses Brontë's skilful deployment of an intricate and layered narrative technique. The conclusion points to the ways in which my study participates in and

extends the current revisionist trend and suggests some aspects of Brontë's work that would reward further critical attention.

Key Terms: Anne Brontë; Patrick Brontë; Charlotte Brontë; Emily Brontë; Branwell Brontë; Elizabeth Gaskell; *Agnes Grey*; *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*; feminism; Victorian patriarchy; coverture; ideology of separate spheres; evangelical Christianity.

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CHAPTER 1: THE CRITICAL RESPONSE 1847-2013

In 1959 Derek Stanford offered an important reading of Anne Brontë's fiction, blaming Charlotte Brontë's unsympathetic comments, made in 1850, for the way in which Anne Brontë had been ignored by the critical scholarship for more than a century. Stanford wrote:

there is not the slightest doubt that [Charlotte's] words – repeated parrot fashion by the critics, or echoed with a kind of timid variation – have kept the stone at the mouth of Anne's tomb for over a hundred years. It is time the stone was rolled away (Stanford, 1959: 245).

My thesis will argue that Stanford, together with Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin, set the tone for the revisionist trend in the scholarship regarding Anne Brontë's fiction that has resulted in a dramatic 'roll[ing] back' of 'the stone at the mouth of Anne's tomb'. For a hundred years, Anne Brontë was marginalized and silenced by a critical world that adored the work of her two sisters, Charlotte and Emily, but that refused to acknowledge the substantial merits of Anne's own fiction. My study therefore seeks to locate itself within this revisionist trend in critical studies that considers Brontë's ¹ own, specific contribution to the world of literature, and that moves beyond traditional critical approaches that always see her writing as inferior to that of her sisters. My work is revisionist in orientation, and the gist of what follows is therefore a study in revisionism. While this first chapter looks at the critical history of Brontë's work from 1847 to the present, it highlights the contributions of revisionist scholars such as Derek Stanford, Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin, whose more sympathetic readings of Brontë in 1959 were centrally important in liberating Brontë scholarship from the old conservatisms and directing it into new directions.

My central line of argument will integrate two principal areas of enquiry: firstly, an investigation into how Brontë interrogates the position of middle class women in their society, and secondly, an examination of how that interrogation is conveyed to the reader. My thesis thus looks at the way in which Brontë uses creative narrative techniques in order to reinforce her critique of some of the social, political, and economic issues that affected middle class women in

¹ Throughout the thesis I will refer to Anne Brontë as 'Brontë', unless it is necessary to use her first name 'Anne' to distinguish her from her sisters.

mid-Victorian England. My work therefore has a double focus that appraises both Brontë's social commentary and her narratology. The two aspects of my enquiry are inextricably linked; each one shapes, and is shaped by, the other.

The core issues at which the thesis looks are centrally important feminist issues that directly affected the human and civil rights, the happiness, the spiritual and physical welfare, and sometimes even the literal survival of middle class women in mid-Victorian patriarchy. These issues concern the position of the woman in the home as well as in the wider society. The most important is undoubtedly that of marriage: Brontë's analysis of marriage lies at the very heart of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and is also carefully considered in *Agnes Grey*. This provides an appropriate framework for her meticulous examination of many related issues with which she is concerned, such as the position of the single middle class woman, parenting, the custody of children, divorce and separation, the restitution of conjugal rights, women's education, and the paucity of respectable work opportunities for middle class women. Brontë is profoundly aware of the patriarchal constraints imposed on women, and she deeply resents such limitations and injustices. Her resentment and frustration are entrenched in her two novels to such an extent that the polemical nature of her fiction, especially *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is unmistakable. The consequence of her anger is that Brontë portrays many of the male characters in her novels as behaving inappropriately or inadequately in some context. Men are shown to be hypocritical, cruel, weak, selfish, and complacent. The hostility of her depiction of men stresses the intensity of her resentment and confirms her polemic. However, this does not mean that she portrays her female characters in hagiographic terms because they too are depicted as fallible and often flawed individuals. My study will argue that one of the strengths of Brontë's fiction is the way in which her characters possess psychological verisimilitude.

Brontë's fictional interrogation of the position of middle class women reflects her participation – even if she does not use the terms of the debate explicitly – in one of the most hotly contested ideological arguments of the Victorian era: the so-called Woman Question. The Woman Question is a term that loosely describes Victorian society's sustained interest in the position and role of women in that society: matters of female sexuality, class, money, respectability, and gentility were vigorously discussed but seldom agreed upon. The Woman Question is central to my study because the issues that inform the Woman Question are precisely those issues explored in Brontë's fiction. Her novels thus involve a fictional enquiry into the

same women-related matters that were being so robustly argued in British public life. In this way Brontë positions herself at the centre of one of the nineteenth century's most controversial and problematic debates. My thesis aims to locate her specific contribution to the Woman Question within the broader national dialogue and community.

To this end, my thesis will use the fictional and nonfictional work of other contemporary writers for comparative purposes, to contextualise and illuminate Brontë's position in the social, political, and cultural climate in which she was writing. The fiction of Charlotte and Emily Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, as well as the nonfictional work of Florence Nightingale (1820-1910), will be discussed when pertinent. The novels of Charlotte and Emily Brontë are in many ways informed by the same feminist enquiry as that pursued in *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

My thesis draws substantially on Florence Nightingale's important work of non-fiction, *Cassandra*, which offers an astringent attack on marriage and what Nightingale perceives as the futility of the lives of many middle-class women when they marry. Her impatient criticism of the restrictions placed on women, of their empty lives, and of their often unhappy marriages, functions as a very useful commentary on, and counterpoint to, similar fictional accounts in Brontë's novels. Nightingale's perspective on the Woman Question is also pertinent because it has significant affiliations with Brontë's focus on work and work opportunities for women. By initiating an important shift in the public perception of nursing, Nightingale opened up a new professional world of work possibilities for middle class women. Previously, nursing had been stereotyped as the preserve of alcoholic, sexually promiscuous, coarse working class women, but this perception slowly started to change as Nightingale's exploits in the Crimea became front page news items. Although she never uses the term 'career', this is in fact what Nightingale envisages in her focus on work for single women. A career has implications of self-fulfilment and personal satisfaction, notions which go far further than mere 'work', which has fundamentally economic connotations. Nightingale invites her readers to imagine a middle-class single woman who is self-employed and independent, one who moves beyond the traditional role of governess.

The second strand of my thesis discusses the creative and experimental use of narratology evident in Brontë's novels. Brontë knew that, no matter how gripping or inflammatory polemic may be, the method by which the polemicist's message is conveyed, is centrally important. To

this end, she demonstrates much care and skill in her determination to select the optimal narrative technique that will best convince the reader to share her opinion. For example, she distinguishes among several modes of the first person female narrator, so that she uses the diary and epistolary modes to achieve different purposes. This is particularly evident in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Brontë's meticulous planning of her work has a further consequence which is to develop the range and potential of fiction, and thus also to go beyond polemic. She has a powerful sense of audience; this is seen when she portrays Helen Huntingdon's great distress regarding the deterioration of her marriage in the confessional form of the diary, where there is no audience. However, when she wishes her readers to engage with a more powerful, assertive Helen, she uses the epistolary form whereby Helen's brother, Lawrence, and her admirer, Gilbert Markham, constitute an audience, a readership, for Helen's letters. My thesis will argue that an appreciation of the complexity and ambitious nature of Brontë's sophisticated deployment of narrative technique is central to a true recognition of her achievement and importance.

As I have already indicated, this chapter will offer a detailed description of the critical reception of Brontë's work from 1847 to the present. I will argue that it is essential to locate any revisionist reading of Brontë's fiction within a framework that looks very carefully at this critical history. We cannot appreciate the significance of the revisionist trend if we do not understand the significance of the silences and the misunderstandings regarding Brontë that informed a century of Brontë scholarship. My chapter will show very clearly that Brontë was systematically marginalized and ignored for well over a hundred years by a world that was infatuated with the work of Charlotte and Emily but that refused to consider the merits of their lesser known sister. Therefore it is crucial that my chapter provides such information and that it document this critical history that shows how revisionist scholars such as Derek Stanford, Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin helped to 'roll back' 'the stone at the mouth of Anne's tomb' (Stanford, 1959: 245).

Anne Brontë's two novels, *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, were two of seven novels published within a remarkably short space of time by Charlotte, Emily and Anne. Charlotte's *Jane Eyre* was the first novel to be published, in October 1847, and immediately received favourable reviews. Anne Brontë's first novel *Agnes Grey* was published in December 1847, together with Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, but received little attention because the critics focused principally on *Wuthering Heights*. *Agnes Grey* 'was briefly but not unfavourably

noticed. It suffered as an individual achievement because it was usually drawn into the current of the reviewer's general views concerning the [Brontë] family's literary characteristics' (Allott, 1974: 32). Anne Brontë's second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was published on or about 27 June 1848 to a shocked reception. Critics were virtually unanimous in their condemnation of the novel's alleged coarseness and detailed evocations of depravity. Most of these reviews are what Tom Winnifrith describes as 'prudish reviews' (Winnifrith, 1973: 116) which question the dubious morality apparently endorsed by the writer. Winnifrith accounts for this by arguing that

in her views on marriage as in other spheres Anne Brontë is a much more blatant preacher of unorthodox attitudes than her sisters; she is also a much less good novelist, and therefore gave reviewers less opportunity of softening their attacks on the doctrines which she appeared to be thrusting down their throats (116).

Winnifrith also establishes an interesting connection between the political climate of 1848, the year of revolutions, and the critics' hostility towards the perceived vulgarity of the novel: 'conservative critics have ever been ready to see a connection between sexual licence and political anarchy' (116).

In September 1848 *The Rambler* described Helen Huntingdon's diary in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as recording 'with offensive minuteness the disgusting scenes of debauchery, blasphemy and profaneness' (118), while a month previously in August 1848 *Sharpe's London Magazine* had complained about scenes in the novel where 'each revolting detail is dwelt on with painful minuteness, each brutal or profane expression chronicled with hateful accuracy' (118). The *Sharpe's* review concluded by regretting that the novel

is unfit for perusal of the very class of persons to whom it could be most useful (namely imaginative girls likely to risk their happiness on the forlorn hope of marrying and reforming a captivating rake) owing to the profane expressions, inconceivably coarse language and revolting scenes and descriptions by which its pages are disfigured (119).

However, as *The Brontës: The Critical Heritage* shows, there was also some more discerning and more independent critical praise for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. On 8 July 1848 *The Spectator* noted that '*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*...suggests the idea of considerable abilities ill

applied. There is power, effect, and even nature, though of an extreme kind, in its pages' (Allott, 1974: 250), while, also on 8 July 1848, *The Atheneum* claimed *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to be 'the most interesting novel which we have read for a month past' (251). And on 12 August 1848 *Literary World* wrote that Brontë's two novels 'boldly and eloquently [develop] blind places of wayward passion in the human heart, which is far more interesting to trace than all the bustling lanes and murky alleys through which the will-o'-wisp genius of Dickens has so long led the public mind' (261).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall 'was an immediate and sensational success, only exceeded by Charlotte's success with *Jane Eyre*' (Langland, 1989: 22). Indeed the novel sold so well that a second edition was hurried into print by 22 July 1848, a mere five weeks later. These early brisk sales suggested a bright future for the novel, despite the chorus of hostile reviews. However, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was in fact doomed to almost total obscurity for an entire century, an obscurity paradoxically encouraged by the comments of Brontë's own sister, Charlotte, and by Charlotte's biographer, Elizabeth Gaskell.

In 1850, when W S Williams suggested that the publishers Smith, Elder & Co. should reprint *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*, Charlotte responded enthusiastically, offering to write a preface and explanatory notice about the authors, her sisters Emily and Anne. Charlotte's enthusiasm apparently stemmed from her desire to protect her sisters from the allegations of coarseness and depravity contained in the two novels. This preface developed into the famous, or possibly infamous, 'Biographical Notice' to the second edition of September 1850. This was the document in which Charlotte's damning comments regarding *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared. As the sole surviving sister, Charlotte had the freedom to comment on her dead sisters' fiction in whatever terms she chose. Her comments have been variously seen as ignorant, overly defensive, or possibly even malicious. However, the consequence was that the remarks proved to be the proverbial 'kiss of death' for Brontë's reputation and the continued success of her novels.

Charlotte wrote:

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall by Acton Bell, had...an unfavourable reception. At this I cannot wonder. The choice of subject was an entire mistake. Nothing less congruous with the writer's nature could be conceived. The motives which dictated this choice were pure, but, I think, slightly morbid. She had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate, near at hand and for a long time, the terrible effects of

talents misused and faculties abused; hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail...as a warning to others. She hated her work, but would pursue it. When reasoned with on the subject, she regarded such reasonings as a temptation to self-indulgence. She must be honest; she must not varnish, soften, or conceal. This well-meant resolution brought on her misconstruction and some abuse, which she bore, as it was her custom to bear whatever was unpleasant, with mild, steady patience (Allott, 1974: 274).

Charlotte goes to great pains to present Emily and Anne as two unsophisticated, simple countrywomen, unfamiliar with the ways of the world, and thus undeserving of allegations of deliberate coarseness in their writing:

they were two unobtrusive women; a perfectly secluded life gave them retiring manners and habits...Anne's character was milder and more subdued [than that of Emily]; she wanted the power, the fire, the originality of her sister, but was well-endowed with quiet virtues of her own. Long-suffering, self-denying, reflective, and intelligent, a constitutional reserve and taciturnity placed and kept her in the shade, and covered her mind, and especially her feelings, with a sort of nun-like veil, which was rarely lifted. (274)

Charlotte had written in a similar vein, also in September 1850, to her publisher W S Williams:

Wildfell Hall it hardly seems to be desirable to preserve. The choice of subject in that work is a mistake...it was too little consonant with the character, tastes, and ideas of the gentle, retiring, inexperienced writer. She wrote it under a strange, conscientious, half-ascetic notion of accomplishing a painful penance and a severe duty (274).

However, Elizabeth Langland is only one of several Brontë scholars who challenge Charlotte's portrayal:

It is simply impossible to square Charlotte's portrait of her sister with the persona of the final contemplative poems or with the implied author of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. There we find a persona of great tenacity,

confronting her destiny, the ‘truth’, with immense courage (Langland, 1989: 48).

Langland points to the tendency of critics to ‘overlook the inevitable and longstanding friction between Charlotte and Anne’ (50), and argues that ‘we [must] acknowledge the differences rather than persist in a romantic myth of oneness’ (41).

Charlotte had immediately consented to the reprinting of *Agnes Grey*, but refused to allow the same privilege to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. ‘Charlotte’s distaste for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* kept it out of print for the duration of Charlotte’s life...[and] we must conclude that Charlotte could have done little more to destroy her youngest sister’s reputation for posterity’ (50). Langland looks carefully at the intertextual relationship between *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), and persuasively suggests that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* deliberately critiques certain key aspects of *Jane Eyre*. She then develops her hypothesis by arguing that Charlotte’s revenge was to convey her distaste for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* very obviously in the ‘Biographical Notice’ of 1850. This had the consequence, intended or otherwise, of causing the novel to disappear from print for ten years, so that ‘by 1856...Anne, after the flurry about her disagreeable subject matter in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* had died down, was already settled in her familiar shaded place beside her more famous sisters’ (Allott, 1974: 1-2).

Langland acknowledges that she has drawn substantially on similar ideas advanced more than sixty years earlier by the Irish writer George Moore in his *Conversations in Ebury Street* (1924). Moore was arguing the case for Brontë long before the revisionist work began, and my study will show that this was remarkably prescient. Moore blames Charlotte

who first started [the critics] on their depreciation of Anne...in one of her introductions [Charlotte] certainly apologises for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, pleading extenuating circumstances: Anne’s youth, her sickness, her inexperience of life. Three phthisis-stricken sisters living on a Yorkshire moor, and all three writing novels, were first-rate copy, and Charlotte’s little depreciations of the dead were a great help, for three sisters of equal genius might strain the credulity of the readers of the evening newspapers...My case against Charlotte [is based on her] implicit defamation of her sister...(Moore, 1924: 222).

But George Moore's implication that Charlotte had selfish motives for criticising Brontë's writing was challenged by Sir Linton Andrews forty years later in 1965. Writing in *The Brontë Transactions*, Andrews asks: 'Is there any reason [for George Moore] to accuse Charlotte of mean insincerity? She had the Brontë habit of saying what she thought. Whether she misjudged Anne's work is another matter' (Andrews, 1965: 29).

Although more contemporary Brontë critics have adopted a less critical stance than did George Moore towards the possible motives that inform Charlotte's 'Biographical Notice', it is significant that, as Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith show, Charlotte 'says nothing about the favourable judgments that critics had made on Anne's novel' (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 138). Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that Charlotte's commentary was biased and overly pejorative. Whatever her true motives, most critics concur with Moore that the consequence was to delete Brontë from the literary map for one hundred years. Lucasta Miller argues that the 'Biographical Notice' 'had been so apologetic of Anne that the youngest Brontë had been almost erased' (Miller, 2002: 150). Miller continues:

In her attempt to wipe the dust from her sister's reputation, Charlotte had described [*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*], the most shocking of the Bells' books, as a mistake which should never have been written. It is doubtful whether she truly and uncomplicatedly believed what she said: she was writing in a highly defensive mood, and her remarks were primarily designed to soothe the public into sympathy. Yet it was to Emily that Charlotte devoted the most space...Anne was left on the sidelines. The effect was to push her from the public eye. In the future, Anne would never gain the iconic status of either of her sisters, and it would take over a century before she was deemed interesting enough to deserve a proper biography to herself (157).

That biography was Winifred Gérin's *Anne Brontë* which was published in 1959.

Charlotte's criticism of Brontë and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was consonant with the approach adopted towards Brontë by Elizabeth Gaskell in her famous biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857). Gaskell invariably portrays Brontë as 'the little one' of the family, as sickly, weak, and passive. A typical comment reads: 'Anne Brontë had been more than usually delicate all the summer, and her sensitive spirit had been deeply affected by the great anxiety of her home' (Gaskell, 1857: 327). Gaskell's frequent use of the diminutive has the probably

unintended consequence of trivialising Brontë. Similarly, Gaskell offers scant praise or acknowledgement of the merit of Brontë's two novels. This dismissive attitude is clearly evident in her treatment of the publication of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey* in December 1847. She discusses the characteristics of *Wuthering Heights* in some detail, but is entirely silent with regard to *Agnes Grey*. Her silence is conspicuous: she apparently considers Brontë's first novel as undeserving of any commentary. Gaskell does refer to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, but her perspective is unflattering. She writes that the novel

is little known; the subject – the deterioration of a character, whose profligacy and ruin took their rise in habits of intemperance, so slight as to be only considered “good fellowship” – was painfully discordant to one who would fain have sheltered herself from all but peaceful and religious ideas (344).

In this way, Brontë is presented as a reluctant heroine or martyr who nobly and courageously writes about disgusting behaviours and aberrant individuals in an attempt to reform humankind. Gaskell thus perversely portrays Brontë as one who wrote what she could not truly have intended. She therefore ignores any sense of serious purpose in Brontë's work. Juliet Barker criticises Gaskell's approach to Brontë in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*: ‘Anne is simply a cipher, the youngest child, whose boldness in defying convention by adopting a plain heroine in *Agnes Grey* and advocating startlingly unorthodox religious beliefs and women's rights in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* finds no place in Mrs Gaskell's portrait’ (Barker, 1994: 829-830).

Brontë died in 1849, just before the middle of the nineteenth century, but the second half of that century witnessed the literary world's growing fascination or even obsession with the work and lives of Charlotte and Emily, and the complete eclipse of Brontë and her fiction. The official publication of the English Brontë Society, *The Brontë Transactions*, was first published in 1895. However, extremely revealingly, there are no significant articles or really enthusiastic mentions of Brontë until 1949. The 1902-1906 editions of *The Brontë Transactions* contain several articles that look at the four novels of Charlotte Brontë. In 1906 Ernest de Selincourt, in his article ‘The Genius of the Brontës’, refers favourably only to Charlotte and Emily because ‘Anne shews [sic] but slight traces of the family genius’ (de Selincourt, 1906: 240). Similarly, the 1912 article ‘Charlotte and Emily Brontë: A Comparison and Contrast’ (Vaughan, 1912: 217-235) and the

1915 article ‘The Place of the Brontës Among the Woman Novelists of the Last Century’ (Seccombe, 1913: 8-12) completely ignore Brontë.

1924 was an important year for Brontë in terms of literary criticism. A particularly hostile attack characterised the address ‘The Brontës To-Day’ by Lascelles Abercrombie, delivered at the annual meeting of the Brontë Society on 8 March, 1924. Abercrombie spoke patronisingly of Brontë:

Now the life of any one Brontë involves the lives of the others; and it has long been evident that it is solely our interest in the Brontë family which keeps one of them, Anne, reputedly alive as an artist. I think it is time we frankly made the necessary discrimination. We must have Anne along with the others if we are to appreciate the full appeal of the Brontë story: and that, now, is as far as her immortality extends. As an artist, as a composer of fiction – of significant imaginative experience – her existence has become so shadowy as to be almost negligible. Everyone knows how ruthlessly she flogged herself onward in her self-appointed and repulsive task of writing ‘The Tenant of Wildfell Hall’. The task sickened her, but duty insisted: the world must be warned, the horrid fable must be told to the end (Abercrombie, 1924: 185-6).

The disastrous consequence of Charlotte’s ‘Biographical Notice’ and of her inaccurate stress on Brontë’s purportedly reluctant sense of moral duty when writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is clearly evident in Lascelles Abercrombie’s remarks. Of course, there is an insistent moral impulse in Brontë’s work, but Charlotte defines this incorrectly, suggesting that Brontë approached her task out of a wearisome sense of duty. Rather my study argues that she wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with zeal and a passionate commitment to her feminist cause. Referring to her as ‘a determined moralist’ (186) and to ‘her shuddering labours over *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*’ (186), Abercrombie obviously believes implicitly that Brontë wrote out of a sense of duty and that she had hated the experience. He continues: ‘We may no longer be able to read her works, but we cannot ever forget her...[she] won some fame as a novelist. That has almost vanished: but her personality remains’ (186-7).

However, as I have already shown, it was also in 1924, in his work of literary criticism *Conversations in Ebury Street*, that George Moore put forward the unfashionable argument that

‘Anne’s genius exceeded her sisters’ genius, and that if she had lived for ten years more we should all be speaking of her as a rival to Jane Austen’ (Moore, 1924: 219). Moore explains:

my age could not have been more than ten or eleven when I read *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*...[which] belonged to my governess, and it was for the sake of the wonderful name of Wildfell that I borrowed the book from her....Anne’s story of a passionate love that came to naught sent me to Castle Carra a little scared lest I had been born into a world in which nobody transgressed. And it is with my boyish dread of a sinless world that Anne is associated, with pity for her early death, coming before any taste of life, for a virgin’s death is the very saddest thing that can befall. It was Anne who revealed this sadness to me, and I take this opportunity of paying my debt (214).

Moore especially praises the way in which Brontë ‘could write with heat, one of the rarest qualities’ (215), for while ‘*Wuthering Heights* is written with vehemence, with eloquence,... there’s very little heat in it, if any’ (217). He continues by saying that Brontë is ‘a born tale-teller’ (218), whilst

Emily, whose poems are above Anne’s as the stars are above the earth, was [not] intended by Nature to write prose narratives, and for different reasons Charlotte failed too; she wrote well – all three wrote well – but good writing did not help her, for she was afflicted with much congenital commonplace (218).

Moore’s self-appointed role of defender and protector of Brontë seems to have caused him to adopt a surprisingly aggressive attitude towards Charlotte:

My case against Charlotte does not end with an implicit defamation of her sister, for in her novel *Villette* she is guilty of the most bare-faced plagiarism...the story needed...a girl representative of her sex...and so it came to pass that Charlotte found herself constrained to lay hands on Miss Murray, which she could do easily, a mere change of name being enough to hide the theft, for nobody had read *Agnes Grey* (222-23).

Moore is thus suggesting a sort of sisterly plagiarism and a direct connection between Rosalie Murray and Ginevra Fanshawe in *Villette*.

George Moore is well aware of how Brontë's literary reputation has faded since 1850, as the reputation of her sisters has grown: 'I have often wondered why criticism should have raised up thrones for Charlotte and Emily, leaving Anne in the kitchen...a sort of literary Cinderella' (222). He refers to the critical silence surrounding Brontë's fiction as 'a blindness of fifty years...a long while to wait' (222), reserving his most enthusiastic comments for *Agnes Grey*. This championing of *Agnes Grey* over *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is most unusual in the critical literature pertaining to Brontë. Moore claims that

Agnes Grey is the most perfect prose narrative in English literature...a prose narrative simple and beautiful as a muslin dress...it's more difficult to write a simple story than a complicated one...[but] we know we are reading a masterpiece (219).

But Moore's enthusiastic reading of Brontë was not shared by other Brontë scholars for at least another twenty five to thirty years. It is clear that no genuinely revisionist approach had started in 1943 when *The Brontë Transactions* published an article entitled 'What the Brontës Mean Today' (*The Brontë Transactions*, 1943: 161-167). Fifteen eminent individuals across a broad social, professional, and cultural spectrum, were invited to respond to this issue in no more than one hundred words. Brontë is only mentioned, and then passingly and dismissively, in two of the fifteen responses. Thus the Marquess of Crewe, the first President of the Brontë Society, claims that '[t]he work of Anne was meritorious, but would not have lived possibly' had it not been for her connection with Emily and Charlotte (162). In a similar vein, Charles Morgan, novelist and dramatic critic of *The Times*, states:

I remember that George Moore used always to irritate me a little by insisting that the first part of Anne Brontë's *Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was better than anything else that any of [the sisters] had written (163).

And even the then editor of *The Brontë Transactions* only mentions the work of Charlotte and Emily, referring to 'the splendour of [their] achievements' (167). The Editor continues:

[f]or me, as for multitudes of others at this time, the Brontës, like Shakespeare, have pure and mysterious powers that we are content to

describe and revere as genius as we see them shed a new illumination upon the sufferings and hopes of mankind (167).

The way in which the Editor is completely silent about the fiction of Brontë highlights most clearly her powerful and sustained marginalisation at this time, ninety-three years after her death.

A slightly more enthusiastic perspective informs the address “A Novelist Looks at the Brontë Novels” presented by the novelist Phyllis Bentley to the Brontë Society in 1948 (*The Brontë Transactions*, 1948: 139-151). The text of this address spans twelve pages, yet Brontë is discussed in only one page, and then at the very end of the address. However Bentley does offer - within her criticism - some rather thin praise for Brontë’s novels:

The novels of Anne Brontë are milder in degree, narrower and more ordinary in kind, than her sisters’; nevertheless they are not without their individual qualities and merits...[although] there are chapters in the novels when we feel we are reading a Sunday-school prize for one of the younger classes (149).

Bentley also completely misses Brontë’s ambitious attempts at narratological and structural complexity in her fiction, especially in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: ‘Anne is not able in plot or construction; “Agnes Grey” has the simplest first-person narrative very slightly motivated, while her attempts to give “The Tenant” more plot simply result in a schoolgirlish artificiality’ (150).

Bentley continues:

Anne lacks breadth and depth and the imagination to supply her want of experience; she can only depict the surface she has seen. But what she has seen she portrays with an altogether admirable realism....The small incident, quietly observed from the governess’s corner and presented with a relentless, almost sardonic, realism, is Anne’s particular strength (150).

In conclusion, Bentley states rather tartly:

Her work makes upon me somewhat the impression of a good milk pudding flavoured with insufficiently grated nutmeg; while imbibing the

mild spoon food one suddenly bites into a strong, pungent, tasty realistic passage (p. 150).

Bentley's commentary is more perceptive than those of many former critics because she has the perspicacity to identify Brontë's talent for realistic description. But her focus is clearly principally on the work of Charlotte and, to a lesser degree, that of Emily. Brontë does not constitute a significant part of the address.

1949 marked the centenary of Brontë's death, an event which was commemorated by a thoughtful and insightful keynote address delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Brontë Society. This address, entitled 'Exiled and Harassed Anne', and presented by Ernest Raymond, took its title from a phrase contained in Emily's birthday paper written on 30 July 1845. Raymond's address is crucial because, perhaps for the first time in the critical literature concerning the fiction of Brontë, it contains a thorough and scholarly investigation of her work. Raymond is aware of her entrenched position outside the literary canon, and examines her work from a refreshingly independent critical perspective which offers a sympathetic critique of some of the ways in which she was exiled and harassed during her lifetime. He claims that she does not deserve to have been 'exiled' by former Brontë critics: 'Anne is in many ways the exiled sister...cast into the shadows by the blazing interest of Charlotte, Emily *and* [sic] Branwell, she is too often exiled from the consideration that is her due' (Raymond, 1949: 226). His project is not to elevate Brontë's artistic status to an unrealistic level, but rather to search for biographical reasons that shaped her fiction in such a powerful fashion. He finds the pivotal reason in her 'extreme piety' (229), a piety that, according to Raymond, cast a pejorative shadow over the quality of her art because, in his view, her moral impetus took precedence over her actual writing. He writes: 'My submission is that, but for her harassing conscience, she would have been an immeasurably greater novelist than she was' (227). Her 'too sensitive conscience, [her] overstressed sense of guilt' (228), Raymond argues, 'reined and whipped and disciplined her' (228) to the detriment of her art. He asks:

What might her two novels not have been...What might she not have written, with her really remarkable powers if she had lived longer and learned in the end to take [her puritan conscience's] nagging and pulling bit between her teeth? As it was, it drove her, in her first novel, into painting her good characters too white and her bad characters too black,

and thus drained the natural life-blood from *Agnes Grey* leaving it, not dead, but anaemic and pale. *The Tenant* which is in many ways a grand somber novel, is twisted to its loss in the direction of a temperance tract (228).

These remarks suggest that Raymond reads *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* essentially in terms of its being ‘a temperance tract’. He also focuses on *Agnes Grey*’s deficiencies as a text that is ‘anaemic and pale’. While my own interpretation of both novels differs substantially from that of Raymond, it is nevertheless significant that he felt Brontë’s fiction to be worthy of such a careful consideration.

The conclusion to Raymond’s address is important because it subverts and reverses the traditional argument that Brontë’s reputation and critical status benefit unduly from her position as sister to Emily and Charlotte:

Charlotte and Emily would not have been what they were, nor the Brontë legend what it is, without the third and *completely individual* [my italics] Anne.... She was not the equal of either of her sisters as a novelist, nor of Emily as a poet, because, more than either of them she allowed moralism rather than art to bank up and channel her native force; but she did write some things that endure in their own right, and shine of their own power and not because they catch the great light of her sisters’ fame; however she compares with those sisters as a writer she is their equal and their partner in courage and character (236).

Raymond’s claim that Brontë is ‘completely individual’ is further evidence of his willingness to consider her independently of her sisters, and his reference to her ‘courage and character’ also shows his respect for her brave approach to the controversial subject matter that informs her novels.

Raymond’s more thoughtful reading of Brontë and her fiction anticipates by ten years the real start of the revisionist trend that is still in progress today, fifty years later. I believe that the revisionist approach to Brontë started between March and May 1959, three crucial months which brought forth two valuable and carefully researched studies of Brontë: *Anne Brontë: Her Life and Work* by Ada Harrison and Derek Stanford, and *Anne Brontë: A Biography* by Winifred Gérin. However, it is essential to realise that both texts are, to a greater or lesser degree,

biographies: they follow the popular and well established critical trend in Brontë studies of linking the content of her novels with Brontë's life story. Phyllis Bentley reviewed both works in her article "Two Books on Anne Brontë" (Bentley, 1959: 357-359). It is significant that Bentley now affords Brontë a much more serious treatment, in contrast with her sometimes flippant approach evident in 1948 in 'A Novelist Looks at the Brontë Novels' (Bentley, 1948: 139-151), an article that I have already discussed. In 1948 Bentley had irreverently and facetiously described Brontë's fiction as resembling both 'a Sunday school prize' (149) and 'a good milk pudding flavoured with insufficiently grated nutmeg' (150). But now, eleven years later, she finds Brontë 'rather a formidable person' (Bentley, 1959: 359). She acknowledges that she has been 'hitherto neglected' (357), and shows that these two new studies 'correct the rather insipid impression given of her youngest sister – one might say almost her baby sister – by Charlotte' (359). Here once more we find an example of how Charlotte is blamed by an established Brontë critic for conveying a flawed image of Brontë, and of the long-term consequences of that unjust attitude. Bentley concludes by welcoming these new studies: 'This re-adjustment of the lens...has made Anne stand out...as a person in her own right' (359).

What I find to be of especial value is Bentley's searching, but not successfully answered, attempt to ascertain why two such important works on Brontë should have appeared unexpectedly within two months of the same year, and why that year should have specifically been 1959. Bentley believes that the writers of 1959 find 'any kind of pomposity or hypocrisy...particularly nauseating' (357), so that such individuals may be drawn to Brontë's quieter, more measured approach when compared with the work of her 'more dramatic and impassioned sisters' (357). She points to other contexts of her fiction that would appeal to modern writers: 'her quiet daring as a writer, her advanced views on morals and the position of women...her accurate, sober, unmisted fashion of writing, its precision and clarity' (357). It seems that the middle of the twentieth century marked an historical era that for the first time was willing to respond enthusiastically to the unconventional worldview and serious opinions of a relatively unknown writer from a hundred years back in time.

Anne Brontë: Her Life and Work comprises two parts: 'Anne Brontë: Her Life' by Ada Harrison and 'Anne Brontë: Her Work' by Derek Stanford. The work of Stanford is more ambitious in scope and depth than that of Harrison. At the outset of her investigation, Harrison asks: 'Is Anne Brontë worthy of a study in her own right?' (Harrison and Stanford, 1959: 11),

and then reformulates this question to read: ‘Is the author of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* worthy of a study in her own right?’ (11). She points to the way in which ‘[i]t has been Anne’s fate to be seen in an everlasting comparison, herself with her sisters and her work with their work. In this comparison she never claims attention; the result is that we know her without knowing her; she is a character who is present but does not speak’ (11). Harrison states clearly that her task as biographer of Brontë is to correct the distorted impression of her that was created by Charlotte Brontë. Indeed, she shows that the biographer of Brontë

cannot remove Anne from juxtaposition with Charlotte...almost all we hear objectively of Anne, which is very little, comes from Charlotte’s hand. Anne in this sense depends almost entirely on her elder sister. She peeps out from behind Charlotte; we never see her except through Charlotte’s eyes (11-12).

However, Harrison does offer a fair and unprejudiced critique of Charlotte’s portrayal of Brontë: ‘Charlotte loved her younger sister fondly, but she did not understand her and she underrated her’ (12). Harrison’s work is important because it invests Brontë and her novels with greater significance than had been the case in the past. But, after all, it still does not pretend to venture beyond the strictly biographical. As Bentley observes, it ‘does not add much factual information to what was already known’ (Bentley, 1959: 358).

However, Stanford’s meticulous analysis of Brontë’s poetry and the two novels is certainly ground-breaking, as Bentley notes: ‘No such intensive study of Anne’s writing has previously been made, and the result is highly rewarding’ (358). Stanford looks first at her poetry, and then at her novels. He is substantially more interested in the poetry than in the fiction: his analysis of the poetry occupies fifty-five pages (167-22), while that of the two novels only takes up twenty-four pages (pp. 221-245). His prioritising of the poetry over the fiction is discussed in Bentley’s review, where she writes that Stanford’s ‘main contribution, and it is an important one, is his subtle and coherent study of Anne’s poetry as a moral stock-taking of the emotional events of her life’ (Bentley, 1959: 358). But, as Bentley has noted, Stanford’s method is to identify the autobiographical resonances in Brontë’s poetry. He writes that her poetry ‘constitutes a sort of inner autobiography’ (Harrison and Stanford, 1959: 166), so that her imagination ‘functioned by working back over the events and impressions of her actual daily living, instead of inventing and

elaborating a set of fictions' (167). Stanford highlights the intensely personal nature of her poetry, whereby her poems look inward to her own life, wrestling with her own inner demons and dilemmas, and avoiding any tendency to moralise or function as moral arbiter for others:

Much of Anne's poetry is in fact didactic....Anne is a teacher with a difference, for she is concerned not so much in instructing others as in discovering what is right for herself....It is herself and her own problems which she examines, and herself whom she exhorts. She does not address her thoughts to the solution of wrong or evil in the abstract; nor does she universalize her own predicaments, although in themselves they are universal issues (168).

In his investigation of Brontë's poetry, Stanford makes another legitimate point when he reminds us that Brontë enthusiasts are hungry for knowledge of her attitudes and responses to key events in her life, a hunger that is fuelled by the existence of only five of her letters and a few birthday papers:

How Anne reacted to her sisters and brother; how far she was prepared to take her cue from Emily in the game of Gondal myth-making; what she thought and felt about the fall of Branwell; and what were her sentiments towards the Reverend Weightman – we seek enlightenment on these points and are grateful for what the poems can tell us (168).

Stanford is probably too eager to establish such connections between Brontë's pivotal life experiences and her poetry, but he also shows very powerfully how the poems undermine Charlotte's portrayal of Brontë as 'gentle, ineffectual, devout, obedient, and conventional' (169). Instead, the persona that he identifies is assertive, cogent, and questioning. It is surely in such new and fresh readings of Brontë's personality and world view that her literary rehabilitation starts.

Nevertheless, it is with regard to Stanford's analysis of Brontë's fiction, and not of her poetry, that we start to sense tentatively for the first time the birth of a real dialogue or debate among twentieth century critics of Brontë. I have already referred to Bentley's response to both Harrison's work and to Stanford's critique of Brontë's poetry. But now Stanford adds a third layer to the interaction between himself and Bentley. This is by his careful, if fairly brief,

discussion of George Moore's comments in *Conversations in Ebury Street* about Brontë's novels. In this way we now have the integration of the opinions of three critics of Brontë so that the material contained in the novels is being discussed, analysed, and disagreed about, in a fairly vigorous manner. Previously Brontë and her writing were not considered worthy of such debate, and the commencement of such a critical discourse confirms that her work was now being taken more seriously.

Stanford refers to George Moore's detection of the element of 'heat' in the relationship between Helen and Arthur Huntingdon, claiming that Moore had perceived this element in negative terms. While Stanford disagrees that this 'quality of "heat" in fiction' is 'negative' (224), he nevertheless salutes Moore for 'detecting its presence' (224). Moore had also felt that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall's* excellence had lain in the first 150 pages, and that Brontë's use of the diary mode then caused the quality of the novel to deteriorate because '[t]he diary broke the story into halves' (225). Stanford challenges Moore in this context. While acknowledging that 'the narration of the story, through the medium of the diary, does amount to an hiatus – a set-back, even' (225), he argues that

[the diary's] great interest and desperate events offer rich compensation for this. In every way, the characters and events which we encounter at one remove, here, are possessed of greater interest than those met within the first part of the book (225).

Stanford also discusses very briefly Brontë's use of different first person narrative voices, although he does not refer to them in such terms. He states that her deployment of the epistolary mode at the outset of the novel, in which we learn of Gilbert's initial response towards Helen, is a less effective method of story telling than that of Helen's diary. He writes that 'Helen, the author of the diary...appears to us as a tragic figure' (225) and that 'the group of cronies that surround Huntingdon...are engaged in a moral drama of more vital significance than the affairs of Gilbert Markham's friends' (226) who 'are not deeply portrayed' (227). Mere gestures as Stanford's cursory remarks may be, they are significant because, to my knowledge, they constitute the first attempt by any critic of Brontë to contrast and evaluate her use of different narrative voices.

Stanford praises the self-control and lack of melodrama in Brontë's novels, as well as what he terms 'her sense of character' (231) in that she successfully avoids 'the pitfall of making her creations into the stock figures of an ethical scheme' (p. 231). He also points to her bold approach to matters of sex:

What English novelist of that time, prior to the advent of Thomas Hardy, would have dared – well mindful of the unwritten law concerning conjugal obedience – to have shown the heroine bolting the door against her rightful but vicious husband, determined that a man so false and debauched should enjoy intimacy with her no longer (232).

It is Brontë's treatment of such issues that causes Stanford to describe her as 'our first realist woman author' (236), because Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*, published in the same year as *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848), was 'rather a story of social reform than a deep and subtle study of human intimacies' (236), while George Eliot's realist novels came ten years later.

Another important context of Stanford's work is that he quotes quite extensively from Brontë's *Preface to the Second Edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and then comments on her remarks with insight:

The Preface...assert[s] her moral position as a writer; in addition it makes a plea for the literary equality of the sexes. This emancipated view of artistic creation was something...quite startling in its day; for although it had long been taken for granted that the feminine mind might engage in novel writing, it was thought that its products should be restrained to a kind of sampler-stitching in words (238).

Stanford thus celebrates the robust and confrontational nature of Brontë's writing.

Ultimately Stanford makes a strong call for the urgent critical re-evaluation of Brontë. In common with so many other Brontë scholars, he condemns Charlotte's unfortunate comments about Anne and her work, concluding that for Anne, Charlotte 'proved something of an evil fairy' (241). He concludes his excellent appraisal by stating:

there is not the slightest doubt that [Charlotte's] words – repeated parrot-fashion by the critics, or echoed with a kind of timid variation – have

kept the stone at the mouth of Anne's tomb for over a hundred years. It is time the stone was rolled away (245).

In fact it was the pioneering work of Stanford himself that was part of the first attempt to roll away the stone from Brontë's tomb. Many of his views that I have discussed are consonant with my own reading of Brontë.

Winifred Gérin repeats the same plea as Stanford in her biography *Anne Brontë* that appeared in May 1959, two months after the publication of Harrison and Stanford's work. Referring to George Moore's description of Brontë as 'a sort of literary Cinderella' (Moore, 1924: 222), Gérin writes:

A tribute to Anne Brontë has long been overdue...It is time the ashes were shaken off Anne's rags, that she was raised from her humble position on the hearth and seated...whether beside, behind, or before her sisters matters little – but assuredly where the Immortals sit (Gérin, 1959: ix).

Bentley praises Gérin's biography, which she deems 'altogether more factual and substantial' (Bentley, 1959: 358) than the Harrison/Stanford text and which 'has two great merits...the [extent of the] local knowledge...and [its] meticulous chronology' (358). She describes the biography as 'the definitive biography of Anne Brontë' (358).

However, ever since its publication, the biography has been severely criticised for Gérin's overly naïve willingness to quote extensively from the novels in support of her claims about Brontë's life. Gérin sees a clear and unambiguous commonality between the works and the life, and seems unable to consider the possibility that the fiction may not possess such powerful autobiographical resonances as she claims to detect. In the Preface to the biography, Gérin argues that 'a close study of fiction and poetry alike can...tell us a very great deal about their author' (vii). On two occasions in the Preface, she quotes from *Agnes Grey* as proof of the truth of what she believes. Such a methodology informs the entire biography. Her disappointingly simplistic and reductive approach suggests that she is ignoring the complexity and purely fictional nature of some of Brontë's writing. Essentially Gérin sees her poetry and novels as a form of life-writing, and, while my own thesis too draws extensively on the details of Brontë's life, it also asserts that fiction can never be an exact representation of real lived experience. Gérin

wrote biographies of all four remaining Brontë siblings, but it is significant that the biography of Anne appeared first, before the biographies of Branwell (1961), Charlotte (1967), and Emily (1971). Edward Chitham in *A Life of Anne Brontë* (1991) suggests that when Gérin wrote *Anne Brontë*

she may not have discovered at that time how frail was the reliance which could be placed on published texts of the letters or the editions of poems and novels of the whole family, which had often been affected by the cavalier attitude of Wise and Shorter [early twentieth century Brontë biographers] to textual authenticity (Chitham, 1991: 3).

Therefore, while Gérin's study created a stir in 1959, it is now seen as dated and based on a flawed premise. More recent critics, such as Chitham, have provided a very necessary corrective to the excessive speculation and conjecture in Gérin's text.

In the fifty years subsequent to the pioneering works of Ada Harrison, Derek Stanford, Phyllis Bentley, and Winifred Gérin, Brontë has become the focus of an ever increasing corpus of serious revisionist scholarship. Her novels have been investigated carefully and independently from the works of her sisters, and new approaches towards her fiction have been suggested. She has undoubtedly been liberated to a considerable extent from the constraints previously placed on her by critics who refused to move forward from the stale context of comparing her unfavourably with her sisters. However, while these fresh revisionist perspectives towards her have led to robust critical debate, there is still a dearth both of informed analysis of her narratology, and of research that integrates her commentary on women-related issues with her use of narrative techniques. I am unaware of any full length study that adopts my own approach, and thus I believe that my work does contribute to the growing body of critical revisionist literature regarding Brontë.

An article published in *The Brontë Transactions* in 1965 entitled 'A Challenge by Anne Brontë' reflects the new direction being taken by the literary critics. The author, Sir Linton Andrews, argues that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* 'ought never to have been despised' (Andrews, 1965: 25) because, although '[i]t has its faults, and they are grievous, it also has its virtues – shining virtues' (25). There are two principal strengths to Andrews' article. Firstly, to my

knowledge, he is the first critic to identify clearly the powerfully feminist strand in Brontë's work. He writes:

What impresses me...is that [*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*] offers a sharp challenge to the conventions of Anne's day, an even sharper and more controversial challenge than she at first realised. Views of marriage and women's rights that would have seemed revolutionary in early Victorian times are now accepted without question (25).

This perspective is of course consonant with my own reading of Brontë.

Secondly, Andrews makes an especially interesting observation with regard to Brontë's narrative techniques. This again is breaking new ground and contributes to the critical literature pertaining to her narratology, a literature which was still in its infancy in 1965. Andrews is troubled by Brontë's failure to let Arthur Huntingdon offer his own version of the breakdown of his marriage. He advocates the deployment of yet another first person narrative voice, this time the male narrative voice of Arthur, so that Arthur can defend himself against the harsh allegations of Helen. This silencing of Arthur, Andrews argues, portrays Arthur 'who ought to be a tragic figure...[instead as] villainous....Anne, attempting a too formidable task, makes Huntingdon inhuman' (28). Andrews' legitimate, yet provocative, commentary on Brontë's narratology is again, I believe, the first really thoughtful and carefully considered response to Brontë's intentional silencing of Arthur, or indeed to any of her narrative choices. I do not agree with Andrews: Brontë deliberately silences Arthur because her project is to show this tragically flawed marriage exclusively from the wife's perspective. To allow Arthur his say might have robbed the novel of its polemical character, although it is also possible that Arthur's own narrative could have had the effect of damning him further. But, regardless of the diverse possible consequences, the main point is that Brontë's carefully considered agenda is to silence Arthur so that Helen's own utterances monopolise the reader's attention. Andrews' ideas are important and apposite because they direct the criticism of Brontë forward into new pathways.

Inga-Stina Ewbank's major work *Their Proper Sphere: A Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early Victorian Novelists*, published in 1966, stresses the way in which the Brontës overcame the prevailing patriarchal ideology of the 'separate spheres' in which middle-class women were seen

in an entirely domestic role as ‘angels of the hearth’. However, Ewbank’s discussion of narrative technique is incidental, and not her principal concern.

W.A.Craik’s *The Brontë Novels*, published in 1968, analyses Brontë’s novels in a methodical and objective manner. Craik devotes a long chapter to each novel. Her analysis, never effusive, but always dispassionate and measured, is thorough and independent. Her very act of investigating Brontë’s fiction so extensively shows that Craik considers the fiction worthy of such attention. Her reading of Brontë is admirable because it successfully navigates the fine line between seeing her entirely in comparison with her sisters, or not at all. Craik thus achieves a good balance, because she never forgets that Brontë has two more famous sisters, but also allows her her own critical space. Craik summarises her appraisal of Brontë in these lines: ‘No one could call Anne Brontë’s two novels masterpieces; but she deserves neither to be ignored, nor to be regarded only as a pale copy of her sisters’ (Craik, 1968: 202). Craik also invigorates the critical debate around Brontë by locating her within the broader community of writers and literary characters. In this way she suggests that Brontë possesses affinities with earlier eighteenth and nineteenth century women writers:

If the reader goes to Anne Brontë for what either Charlotte or Emily offers, he is disappointed. If he takes pleasure in Fanny Burney or Maria Edgeworth – or...Jane Austen – he will find her manner congenial and her writing attractive (202).

And Craik’s detection of a commonality between Agnes Grey as narrator with Esther Summerson in Charles Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-3) is thought-provoking and resonates with my own reading of Agnes’s narrative function in *Agnes Grey*:

[Agnes] has in common with Esther that she also is not the absolute centre of interest. She is what makes the action cohere, but she is not necessarily the protagonist. She is the means by which the novel progresses, the author’s purpose in it is achieved, and the events and characters are connected (205).

However, my study takes issue with Craik’s stance that Brontë ‘is always an unsophisticated writer, a primitive in the art of the novel, gaining her results by very simple

methods, which owe little to the techniques she might have learned from others' (230). Instead, my appraisal points to the sophistication of her narratology and to the skill with which she, for example, deploys different forms of the first person narrative voice in order to achieve different outcomes.

While I have argued that the genesis of the revisionist critical trend in response to the work of Brontë undoubtedly occurred in the late 1950s, it was only in the 1980s that the first really serious investigations were published that looked at her as a creative and highly original practitioner of narrative technique, and as a feminist. Since my own thesis focuses on these two specific personae of Brontë, I am especially interested in N M Jacobs' article 'Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*' (1986), and in Elizabeth Langland's full length study *Anne Brontë: the Other One* (1989).

Jacobs' assessment of Brontë's judicious use of narrative technique in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is far more sophisticated and much more respectful than any previous assessment, and signals her relocation closer to the centre of the new critical interest in narratology. Jacobs writes:

In both *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, we approach a horrific private reality only after passing through and then discarding the perceptual structures of a narrator – significantly, a male narrator – who represents the public world that makes possible and tacitly approves the excesses behind the closed doors of these pre-Victorian homes. This structure, appropriated and modified from the familiar gothic frame-tale, here serves several functions that are strongly gender-related: it exemplifies a process, necessary for both writer and reader, of passing through or going behind the official version of reality in order to approach a truth that the culture prefers to deny; it exemplifies the ways in which domestic reality is obscured by layers of conventional ideology; and it replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world (204).

These comments show that Jacobs has a very clear understanding of why Brontë has used two first person narrators, a male and female, in order both to protect and stress the 'horrific private reality' of Helen's marriage. Gilbert's solid, conventionally masculine narrative, as Jacobs suggests, represents 'the public world that makes possible and tacitly approves the excesses

behind the closed doors’ of these homes, but then, as she argues, we ‘discard’ that voice and move forward into the subversive details of the ‘truth that the culture prefers to deny’. Jacobs perceptively explains the ‘several functions that are strongly gender-related’ that are the intended consequence of Brontë’s deployment of this narrative structure. As my discussion in Chapter 5 will demonstrate, this narrative strategy allows Brontë to manipulate very skillfully the possibilities of the narrative voice to reinforce her feminist agenda. The larger portion of the article is devoted to Jacobs’ investigation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and she is apparently more interested in this novel than in *Wuthering Heights*, if only because Emily Brontë’s novel has already been the focus of so much attention. The article is also valuable because of the affinities that it establishes between the narrative techniques deployed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and the Gothic tradition. Although Jacobs never uses the term ‘female Gothic’, her description of Brontë’s exploitation of the gothic closely resembles what is today known as ‘female Gothic’. These affinities will be discussed at length in Chapter 5 of my study.

Elizabeth Langland’s *Anne Brontë: The Other One* (1989) is usually associated with its very thorough critique of the feminist strands in Brontë’s writing. The phrase ‘the other one’ in the title certainly signals both Langland’s awareness, and rejection, of the traditional marginalisation of Brontë within the canon. But ‘the other one’ could reflect too Langland’s emphasis on the many ways in which Brontë was different from her sisters. However, Langland’s study also offers a very useful description of the biographical and social influences that helped to shape her writing. The six chapters are structured to discuss Brontë’s life, her reading history, *Agnes Grey*, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and the critical response to her work from 1847 until the present (1989). Chapter One, ‘Anne Brontë’s Life: “age and experience”’, contains a thoughtful, if brief, summary of the position of women in the prevailing patriarchy of early and mid-Victorian England. Langland mentions the ‘longstanding Victorian debate on the Woman Question [which asked] what was woman’s nature and what was her proper sphere?’ (Langland, 1989: 23). This summary explores issues of female sexuality, women’s education, and the patriarchal ideology of the separate spheres.

Chapter Two, ‘Influences: “Acton Bell is neither Currer nor Ellis Bell”’, first makes the novel argument that Brontë ‘was self-consciously critiquing her sisters’ work and establishing alternative standards and values’ (29). Langland continues:

[i]ronically, Anne has played, *vis-à-vis* her sisters, the traditional role of the woman writer within patriarchy. That is, Anne is critiquing her sisters' works in the same way that women writers critique the values and standards of male writers.... We might also note that as the surviving sister, Charlotte was in the position of 'patriarch' to determine which of Emily's and Anne's novels were reprinted and which were not (29).

Langland shows how the narrative techniques and the subject matter of Brontë's novels are powerfully influenced by eighteenth century poets, novelists and essayists such as William Cowper, Charles Wesley, Daniel Defoe, and Samuel Richardson. I will consider the influence of Richardson on the shape and direction of Brontë's work in Chapter 3.

Langland sees both of Brontë's novels as important feminist texts whose perspectives are conveyed by means of sophisticated narrative techniques. Her appraisal of *Agnes Grey* is perhaps more enthusiastic than that of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, but this could simply be in response to the generally hostile reception that *Agnes Grey* had received previously. Langland concurs with George Moore that *Agnes Grey* is an 'exquisite novel' (Langland, 1989: 97). Her exploration of this novel is assertive and celebratory, rather than defensively polemical, and she argues that the novel may be read as a female *Bildungsroman* which 'tells a story of female development' (96). This, Langland claims, 'makes [the novel] distinctive from previous novels by women with female protagonists [because] Agnes more closely follows a male pattern of development' (96). Brontë's 'commitment to women's activity and influence in the world and her suspicion of men as providers led her to promulgate a feminist thesis: that women must look to their self-provision' (p. 98). With regard to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Langland reads the novel as 'rewrit[ing] the story of the Fallen Woman as a story of female excellence' (119), arguing that '[i]n so doing, it takes on a radical feminist dimension' (119). She sees *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as 'a signal achievement' (147) whose 'structural, thematic, and psychological richness...should have earned for it a greater reputation than it has' (146).

Langland deplores the inadequate treatment afforded Brontë by many important feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s. Such works as Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (1977), Nina Auerbach's *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (1982), Sandra M Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), and Ellen Moers' *Literary Women* (1976) are either completely silent about Brontë, or

only make brief passing references to her. Therefore, the carefully argued *Anne Brontë: The Other One* may be better appreciated if it is contextualised in terms of the dismissive attitude of these other contemporary feminist critics.

My thesis draws substantially on Langland's work because she persuasively argues her point. What I find refreshing is that her agenda is not to evaluate the ultimate quality of Brontë's work in comparison with that of Emily and Charlotte, but rather to engage truly with her as an individual whose connection with Emily and Charlotte may at times be no more than incidental. Langland shows that

Anne Brontë is surely an author worthy of interest in her own right. Her thematic innovations place her in the forefront of feminist thought in the nineteenth century even as her formal and technical innovations demand that we look again at her contributions to the English novel (60).

Langland had criticised earlier feminist critics such as Gilbert and Gubar, Showalter and Auerbach for their dismissive attitude towards Brontë. However, this situation changed dramatically in the 1990s, possibly as a consequence in part of Langland's own pioneering work. Now a new generation of feminist writers started to pay serious attention to Brontë. For example, Jill L Matus' *Unstable Bodies: Victorian Representations of Sexuality and Maternity* (1995), Susan Meyer's *'Words on 'Great Vulgar Sheets': Writing and Social Resistance in Anne Brontë's Agnes Grey* (1996), and Betty Jay's *Anne Brontë* (2000) examine 'Anne Brontë's complex engagement with questions of power, oppression and resistance' (Jay, 2000: 3). Jay's text is the most important recent critical study of Brontë, and draws substantially on the work of Matus and Meyer. Jay makes a major contribution to recent feminist debates pertaining to Brontë's attitude towards the power struggles of women against male domination, class prejudice and women's position in the family in the context of early nineteenth-century society, culture and laws. Jay concludes that: '[t]hose who approach Brontë's work with an awareness of recent theoretical debates concerning feminism, subjectivity, power and agency...will quickly understand that she has much to offer' (5). A special focus of this book is Jay's investigation of Brontë's knowledge of the many governess debates of the 1840s. Jay's work is very useful in helping to illuminate my own appraisal of the feminist issues explored in Brontë's fiction, but there is little specific analysis of the narratology.

My study of Brontë's narratology has been rendered more difficult because of the serious dearth of earlier associated research. Indeed, very few full-length studies of the narratology used by the Brontës exist, and of these not one mentions the narratology of Brontë. For example, Esther Schönberger-Schleicher's important book *Charlotte and Emily Brontë: A Narrative Analysis of Jane Eyre and Wuthering Heights* (1999) completely ignores Brontë. Some of the best current analysis of the Brontës' use of narratology is found in general works that discuss a variety of authors, including Charlotte or Emily Brontë, but never Anne Brontë. Diane Long Hoeveler's *Gothic Feminism: The Professionalisation of Gender from Charlotte Smith to the Brontës* (1998) contains a useful chapter entitled "The Triumph of the Civilising Process: The Brontës and Romantic Feminism" (Hoeveler, 1998: 185-241) that offers a detailed investigation of the Female Gothic strands in *Wuthering Heights*, *Jane Eyre* and *Villette*. Another relevant study is E K Sedgwick's *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980). Sedgwick's chapter "Immediacy, Doubleness and the Unspeakable: *Wuthering Heights* and *Villette*" (Sedgwick, 1986: 97-139) is also useful in identifying the Gothic trends in the two novels. Eugenia C DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night: a Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic* (1990) examines the Gothic influences in *Wuthering Heights*. These silences and omissions in the critical literature paradoxically support my argument that the narratology deployed in Brontë's novels will reward further investigation.

Juliet Barker's *The Brontës*, published in 1994, 'is the first definitive biography of the Brontës' which 'demolishes many myths' (front cover). Today, the Barker text is regarded as the quintessential biography of the extended Brontë family. While Barker devotes her fair share of authorial focus to Brontë, she contributes to the revisionist trend by stating that 'Gentle Anne had a core of steel' and that 'as a writer she was more daring and more revolutionary than Charlotte' (front cover). In common with Langland, Barker offers an especially independent analysis of *Agnes Grey*, stating that

Anne's first novel had many strengths of its own. Enlivened by a quiet humour, it is a far deadlier exposé of the trials of being a governess than her sister's more famous *Jane Eyre*. It is also the first novel to have a plain and ordinary woman as its heroine (Barker, 1994: 503).

In the last twenty years, *Brontë Studies* has started to include many more articles about Brontë. The relative abundance of such articles suggests that my own study, with its argument for the re-evaluation of Brontë, is congruent with developing trends in Brontë scholarship. For example, ‘A New Reading of Anne Brontë’s *Agnes Grey*’ by Priscilla H Costello (1987), ‘Helen’s Diary Freshly Considered’ by Lori A Paige (1991), ‘The Impressive Lessons of *Agnes Grey*’ by Timothy Whittome (1993), and ‘*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*: What Anne Brontë Knew and What Modern Readers Don’t’ by Joan Bellamy (2005), suggest the greater interest shown by contemporary scholars in Brontë. Joan Bellamy’s very short article of two and a half pages anticipates my full length article ‘Why Anne Brontë Wrote as She Did’ (2007). My article shows how Brontë’s investigation of women-related issues in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflects and responds to legislation in mid-Victorian England that affected women.

Of especial interest in *Brontë Studies* is the address entitled ‘The Pilgrimage of Anne Brontë: A Celebration of her Life and Work’ given by Stevie Davies at Haworth in 1999 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of Brontë. Davies is more usually seen as eminent in studies of Emily Brontë, but in this address she shows how Brontë ‘became a radical feminist, protesting against the social injustices of education, property laws, men, even of God. Her novels are revolutionary tracts for the times’ (Davies, April 2000: 9).

Brontë may never be considered the literary equal of her sisters, and she may never become central to the literary canon. However, of much greater significance, is the increasing irrelevance of both these issues as criteria with which to judge her work. What is clearly evident is that she now receives a substantially more just and unprejudiced critical treatment from Brontë scholars. The revisionist critique which started in 1959 with the research of Ada Harrison, Derek Stanford and Winifred Gérin lost its impetus to a considerable extent in the 1960s and 1970s, but was re-invigorated by Elizabeth Langland in 1989. Since then Brontë has enjoyed a much more robust critical attention, to the extent that the University of Sheffield has created a website devoted exclusively to her. It seems that after 150 years the unfortunate consequences of Charlotte Brontë’s unhelpful remarks have finally been overcome.

CHAPTER 2: CONTEXTS

The purpose of this chapter is to contextualize many of the concerns that inform Brontë's fiction, and to demonstrate the extent to which a number of her core concerns relating to Victorian society and the status of women are reflected in her work. Her writing may thus be seen as participating in and entering into a critical dialogue with those debates. The chapter will therefore discuss the key contexts of Victorian patriarchy that so angered and frustrated feminist thinkers and writers, and that are confronted and challenged by Brontë in her two novels. My study argues that our true understanding of Brontë's literary project will be enriched if we are familiar with those social and legal issues regarding the position of women in Victorian society that are addressed in her writing. Therefore my chapter will show that this contextualization is relevant and indeed essential for any legitimate assessment of Brontë's fiction. This will become even clearer in the chapters that provide detailed analyses of the novels.

The profoundly patriarchal society in which Anne Brontë lived and worked had a major influence on the shape and direction of her writing, with the consequence that her fiction strenuously resists and interrogates some of the most cherished ideals and principles of patriarchy. Together with intensely felt familial influences (which will be described in Chapter 3), Victorian patriarchy was one of the most powerful impulses that led to 'Why Anne Brontë Wrote as She Did' (Leaver, 2007: 227-243). The fundamentals of Victorian society were based on the prevailing doctrine of the ideology of the separate spheres, whereby the lives and societal roles of men and women were predicated on the notion of a crucial, gender-specific difference. While men occupied a 'public' space in national life (earning money to provide for their families, organizing the affairs of state, fighting wars), women had an essentially 'private' or domestic role in society (bearing children and caring for them, sewing, cooking, and cleaning). Catherine Hall explains that this

separation between work and home had important effects on the organization of work within the family and the marking out of male and female spheres. Men were increasingly associated with business and public activities which were physically and socially separated from the home: women with the home and with children (Hall, 1982: 4).

The ideology of the separate spheres only became firmly established in the nineteenth century:

The hierarchical division of labour within the family which assigned the husband the role of breadwinner and the wife the role of domestic manager and moral guardian emerged clearly only in the nineteenth century and was associated with the growth of the middle class and the diffusion of its values (Scott and Tilly, 1982: 49).

The consequent patriarchal family structure led to the Victorian high ideal of ‘woman worship’ and to an excessive sentimentalisation of the home as a sanctuary and refuge from the tensions and turmoil of broader society. Ruskin’s famous statement ‘This is the true nature of home - it is the place of Peace; the shelter, not only from all injury, but from all terror, doubt and division’ (quoted in Shanley, 1989: 4), and popular songs and mottoes such as ‘Home Sweet Home’ and ‘East, West, Home’s Best’, point to the extreme idealisation of the home and of family life. Catherine Hall develops this idea by explaining that:

The domestic ideal which underpinned such a development was premised on the notion of a male head of household who supported his dependent wife and children. The women and children were able to be sheltered from the anxieties of the competitive public world by living in their ‘haven’ or home – away from the political dangers associated with such movements as Chartism and the business worries of the town (Hall, 1982: 6).

But the truth was that Victorian patriarchy resulted in the isolation and restriction of women, especially middle class women, from participation in the pulse and energy of mid-nineteenth century life. The ideology of the separate spheres left intelligent women feeling frustrated, bored and exceedingly disenchanted with the lot that patriarchy, that men, had allocated to them. These women realized that Victorian England was experiencing tremendously exciting and robust change, and thus they felt increasingly marginalized and alienated from these currents of progress and advance. In particular they chafed at patriarchy’s hostility towards the concept of middle class women working for money outside the home. This resentment is articulated in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s long feminist poem ‘Aurora Leigh’ (1856):

The honest earnest man must stand and work,
The woman also - otherwise she drops

At once below the dignity of man,
Accepting serfdom...
(Book VIII, lines 712-715, quoted in McSweeney, 1993: 282)

My study will show that Victorian feminists such as Florence Nightingale and Brontë believed very intensely in the many positive consequences enjoyed by women who were allowed to perform remunerated work in the public domain. Indeed the issue of work was probably one of the most hotly contested debates within Victorian society.

Thus, in all areas of activity, from science and technology to travel and industry, the sense of change was palpable. It was an era of major transition. New ways of being and thinking, of looking at the world and at one's own specific place in that world, were everywhere evident, perhaps reflected nowhere more clearly than in Elizabeth Gaskell's novella *My Lady Ludlow* (1858). The novella looks at the collision of two seemingly incompatible worlds: the old, slow, apparently guaranteed and traditional world of privilege and continuity, and the contemporary world of newness and innovation. Gaskell roots her critique in her portrayal of Lady Ludlow, the main character in the novella, who, although kind and generous in her treatment of others, is apparently hopelessly trapped in the past. She is, essentially, an anachronism, who is seemingly unable to change with the times. One of the pivotal remarks in the text occurs when Lady Ludlow asks plaintively on two occasions: 'What will this world come to?' (Gaskell, 1858: 50 and 200). But the novella shows that Lady Ludlow can change: she learns to accept 'the Dissenter, the tradesman, the Birmingham democrat, who had come to settle in "good, orthodox, aristocratic, and agricultural Hanbury"' (194). *My Lady Ludlow* optimistically suggests that the future will be informed by the radical restructuring of society, and that previously unthought-of possibilities and opportunities will be created. Such optimism is conveyed in such comments as Gaskell's ironic reference to the 'many other things which have been declared to be impossible' (194).

The mid nineteenth century world of Victorian England was therefore one in which the old shackles and fetters were being flung aside in favour of experiment and re-evaluation. It was also becoming a more secular age, in which the formerly entrenched Christian moral codes were being challenged by a more insistent emphasis on the role and function of the individual in society. For many Victorian men the mid century was a heady and liberating period in history. But England's restrictive and oppressive patriarchal laws continued to deny women the place in

society that they so earnestly claimed. This place was defined in a political, legal or social context, as seen in Brontë's fiction. Her novels argue for legal reform of the laws that had a pejorative impact on married women, especially middle class women, as well as for a societal and attitudinal shift that would result in a more enlightened approach towards the ideology of separate spheres. However, Victorian patriarchal constraints were also seen in a more 'existential' way so that many novels of the mid century contain powerful examples of internal dialogue in which female characters experience profound proto-existential *angst*. An excellent example are the novels of Charlotte Brontë, especially *Shirley*, which resonate with such silent female subversion. *Shirley* was published in 1849, very soon after Charlotte had lost her three remaining siblings in the space of eight months, and thus it is easy to understand why it is in this specific text that we find Charlotte's most thoughtful and most despairing analysis of the futility of much female existence. In *Shirley* a single middle class woman, Hortense Moore, whose life as housekeeper to her brother Robert is one of continuous *ennui*, is seen 'rummaging her drawers up-stairs, - an unaccountable occupation in which she spent a large portion of each day, arranging, disarranging, rearranging and counter-arranging' (Charlotte Brontë, 1849: 77). Hortense fills her days with meaningless rituals such as 'rummaging her drawers'. And her relation, the young Caroline Helstone, impatiently tells Mrs Pryor: 'It is scarcely *living* to measure time as I do at the Rectory. The hours pass, and I get them over somehow, but I do not *live*. I endure existence, but I rarely enjoy it' (375). Elsewhere Caroline ponders:

God surely did not create us, and cause us to live, with the sole end of wishing always to die. I believe, in my heart, we were intended to prize life and enjoy it, so long as we retain it. Existence never was originally meant to be that useless, blank, pale, slow-trailing thing it often becomes to many, and is becoming to me, among the rest (390).

She asks herself: 'How am I to get through this day?' (107), 'What was I created for, I wonder? Where is my place in the world?... Is this enough? Is it to live?' (174).

Charlotte's previous novel *Jane Eyre* (1847) also pursues similar questioning of the purpose of female existence, but less explicitly. Jane reminds Mr Rochester: 'I am a free human being with an independent will' (Charlotte Brontë, 1847: 266), but this brave assertion is not consonant with Victorian patriarchy. Elsewhere Jane thinks:

women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. It is thoughtless to condemn them, or laugh at them, if they seek to do more or learn more than custom has pronounced necessary for their sex (115).

And in *Villette* (1853), when the young Lucy Snowe arrives in London from the country, she repeats the thoughts of Caroline Helstone and Jane Eyre:

What prospects had I in life? What friends had I on earth? Whence did I come? Whither should I go? What should I do?...A strong, vague persuasion, that it was better to go forward than backward, and that I *could* go forward – that a way, however narrow and difficult, would in time open – predominated over other feelings (Charlotte Brontë, 1853: 57).

In practical terms, the ‘way forward’ for Victorian women demanded a fairer settlement within patriarchy and a more inclusive and liberal approach to women’s issues.

In her biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), Elizabeth Gaskell quotes from a letter that Charlotte had written in August 1841 after she had received a letter from a friend who had been on holiday to Brussels. Charlotte’s letter reflects the same intense desire for experience that is expressed by her female fictional characters:

I hardly know what swelled to my throat as I read her letter: such a vehement impatience of restraint and steady work; such a strong wish for wings – wings such as wealth can furnish; such an urgent thirst to see, to know, to learn; something internal seemed to expand bodily for a minute. I was tantalized by the consciousness of faculties unexercised,...Then all collapsed, and I despaired (quoted in Gaskell, 1857: 216).

Charlotte Brontë’s ‘thirst to see, to know, to learn’ is indicative of the frustration felt by intelligent women whose attempts to live a meaningful and independent life were thwarted on

every side by patriarchal restraints. It is therefore hardly surprising when her enthusiasm suddenly dwindles and she ‘despair[s]’.

Women novelists such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Charlotte Brontë were participating in a vast and pervasive culture of societal resistance to the patriarchal oppression of women. They were responding to contemporary intellectual and political currents of thought, but in most cases without referring explicitly to specific polemical debates. Anne Brontë, too, was but one small part of a much bigger community of thinkers and writers, feminists and activists, who, in different and separate ways, struggled throughout the nineteenth century to improve the position of women in society. Often working in isolation from one another, unaware of their shared vision, these individuals sought to overcome the domestic and political subjection of women. There is little evidence that Brontë ever directly acknowledged the influence of this community on her work, but it seems that by a silent process of cultural osmosis or dialogue, she was in fact responding to exactly this influence.

Men formed a not inconsiderable part of this community. Thoughtful men, such as John Stuart Mill, rejected the concept of the separate spheres and sought possible and just solutions to the sustained subordination of women. It would thus be naïvely simplistic to claim that all men supported a doctrine predicated on the subjugation of women because many men participated as vigorously in discussing the Woman Question as did women themselves. The Woman Question was a crucial space intersected by a multiplicity of debates, dialogues and interactions. It was characterized by extreme fluidity, suggesting that there was no one fixed perception of the position of women in nineteenth-century England. As Helsinger *et al.* have shown, this chorus of dissenting voices that informed Victorian thinking on women suggests that ‘the traditional model of “a” Victorian attitude - patriarchal domination, expressed publicly as “woman worship” - is inadequate’ (Helsinger *et al.*, 1983: xi). They continue:

The predominant form of Victorian writing about women is not pronouncement but debate. Moreover, the arguments in this debate were both more complex and more fluid than the model of a single dominant cultural myth would indicate. For Victorians...the Woman Question...really was a question. Almost any public statement bearing on the Woman Question – whether an essay, a review, a novel, a poem, a lecture, a cartoon, or a painting – was likely to generate a chain of responses, and to be read as a response to prior statements in an ongoing

public discussion. To view any of these statements out of context...can only distort our perception of Victorian thinking about women (xi).

Helsingier *et al* explain that all these contributors to the public discourse surrounding the Woman Question

were responding to one another in public forums – in books and pamphlets, from pulpits and lecterns, and above all, through the periodicals. For the most part, these exchanges did not take place on a high theoretical plane; they were precipitated by particular political, economic, scientific, religious, or cultural events, and they focused on specific and limited problems, [for example] should married women be granted property rights?Nearly every contemporary topic provoked controversy over women, but the diversity of opinions and issues should not obscure the crucial point: for literate Anglo-American Victorians, woman's nature and place were called into question (xii).

Helsingier *et al* suggest that there was a large community of thinkers and activists, such as Gaskell and Brontë, who were engaged in a national conversation regarding the rightful position of women in Victorian society. The fact that such individuals were frequently unknown to one another did not minimize the intensity and vigour of their dialogue.

Today scholars of the Victorian period use the term 'feminist' to describe those Victorians, both men and women, who argued for 'the individual autonomy of women, against their husbands, against the state and against prevailing stereotypes' (Rendall, 1985: 277). Although Rendall shows that this term was not in fact used in England until 1894 (1), she also explains that 'by the middle decades of the nineteenth century, the cause of feminism...had clearly emerged' (276). The assertive nature of feminism is reflected in Maria Weston Chapman's ironically amusing poem 'The Times that Try Men's Souls' written in 1837:

Confusion has seized us, and all things go wrong,
The women have leaped from 'their spheres,'
And instead of fixed stars, shoot as comets along,
And are setting the world by the ears!...

They've taken a notion to speak for themselves,
And are wielding the tongue and the pen;. [sic]
They've mounted the rostrum; the termagent elves,

And – oh horrid! Are talking to men!
(quoted in Rendall: 231)

Rendall shows that women confidently believed that the skills which they had acquired in the home could also be utilised in the public sphere:

Women did feel drawn by the argument that the qualities which they were expected to exercise in domestic life should be carried into the outer world, infused into public life...this understanding of the possibility of expanding and redefining the sphere of women's action is perhaps the most important element in the making of nineteenth-century feminism (232).

Victorian feminists realized that their campaign against patriarchy must operate on a bilateral approach: they must modify conservative cultural and societal attitudes to the oppression of women, and they had also to achieve significant reforms with regard to the position of women in family law. Brontë is especially interested in legal reform, and, as the discussion of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in Chapter 5 will demonstrate, looks very closely, albeit indirectly, at the laws that had so great and unjust an impact on Victorian women. In the mid nineteenth century, the legal status and position of women were indeed dire. In their chapter 'From disregard to disrepute: the position of women in family law,' in *The Changing Experience of Women* (1982), Julia Brophy and Carol Smart offer a useful overview of these circumstances. One of the key contexts for their enquiry is the issue of child custody. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* describes the futile initial struggles of Helen to save her young child, little Arthur, from the authority of his father. But the law was on Arthur's, not Helen's, side because, with regard to issues of children and custody,

the ideology of 'father right' was so taken for granted that a father's right to custody was treated as entirely uncontroversial. Even where the father was clearly shown to be unsuitable to have 'possession' of his children, the courts were unable to undermine his rights. Drunkenness and profligacy were viewed as insufficient [sic] grounds on which to prevent him regaining the 'possession' of his child even when combined with destitutionThese rights were automatically established on paternity and were not conditional upon the quality of care offered nor the degree of attachment felt by the father (Brophy and Smart, 1982: 208-209).

Helen's dilemma occurs during the 1830s, just before the passing of the Infant Custody Act of 1839 which had been brought about in part by the agitation of Lady Caroline Norton, who demanded legal recognition of mothers' rights to custody. In her *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill*, published under a male pseudonym, Norton wrote:

A woman may bear cheerfully the poverty which anomalies in the laws of property may entail upon her; and she may struggle patiently through such an unjust ordeal of shame...but against the inflicted and unmerited loss of her children she *cannot* bear up; that she has not deserved *that* blow, only adds to its bitterness: it is the master feeling of her life; the strong root of all the affections of her heart; and, in spite of the enumeration of every real or fancied grievance incidental to her position, she will still hold *that* injustice to stand foremost, distinct, and paramount above them all...[a mother] is under God responsible for the souls and bodies of the new generation confided to her care; and the woman who is mother to the children of a profligate and tyrannical husband, is bound by her *duty*, even if she were not moved by the strong instinct of her own heart, to struggle against the seizure of her infants. It is not *her* happiness alone that is involved, *theirs* is also at stake; their comfort, their well-being, perhaps the tenor of their whole future lives, depend on their not being legally permitted to be made the innocent victims of their father's caprice (quoted in Helsinger *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 12).

Norton's remarks concerning the way in which children could become 'the innocent victims of their father's caprice' are consonant with the situation concerning little Arthur in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Little Arthur is taught to drink, swear and disrespect women by his father and his boorish group of friends, and the situation becomes so grave that his mother, Helen, feels compelled to flee the marital home in order to ensure what Lady Caroline Norton describes as the child's 'comfort...well-being [and]...perhaps the tenor of [his] whole future li[fe]'.

The Infant Custody Act allowed the Court of Chancery to award mothers custody of their children under the age of seven, and access to their children under sixteen. The Act was an important step towards obtaining maternal custody rights. However, in terms of this Act, Helen does not qualify for maternal custody because 'only mothers who were wealthy, blameless of sexual misconduct, separated from their husbands, and whose children were under age seven might get custody under the Act' (Shanley, 1989: 137). Helen is not wealthy and she is not

separated from her husband; therefore the Act cannot help her. (In any case, the novel is set in the 1820s, before the Infant Custody Act of 1839 could have aided Helen.) John Stuart Mill showed that custody law was one of the most oppressive forms of a wife's subordination in marriage:

What is her position in regard to the children in whom she and her master have a joint interest? They are by law *his* children...No one act can she do towards or in relation to them, except by delegation from him. Even after he is dead she is not their legal guardian, unless he by will has made her so...This is her legal state. And from this state she has no means of withdrawing herself (quoted in Shanley, 1989: 139).

However, it is impossible to consider the status of Victorian women without considering also the status of Victorian children. The position of children in Victorian England was tenuous and the vexatious sociological question 'What is a child?' lies at the very heart of Victorian society. Victorian constructions of childhood have been described by James Kincaid as 'shifting, various, and mysterious' (Kincaid, 1992: 63). Kincaid revisits and questions some of those comforting but essentially empty stereotypes associated with the romantic mythology that encrusts Victorian childhood. He shows that the phenomenon of 'the child' only 'became a conceptual and thus biological and social category...in the nineteenth century' (61), because modern historical constructionists, such as Philippe Aries, 'can see little before the seventeenth century that is recognizable as a child' (61). Kincaid refers to 'Lawrence Stone's study of the historical development of family formation [that] lends further support to this conception of the child as a historical and linguistic phenomenon' (61), and to the research of Peter Coveney that has pointed to 'the unimportance of the child in literature until the last decades of the eighteenth century' (61).

Kincaid refers to the Victorian notion that 'the child was innocent, valuable, and weak' (72), citing some of the many official definitions of 'the child' that demonstrate 'quite a range both in concern for and in conception of what constitutes a child' (70). The uncertainties pertaining to the literal definition of children are reflected in the way in which the age of consent for a female to engage in sexual intercourse was constantly raised - from 10 to 12 in 1861, to 13 in 1875, and to 16 in 1885. Kincaid suggests that this specific 'tactic for defining childhood establishes ever more firmly at the center of the child a kind of purity, an absence and an

incapacity, an inability to do' (70). This construction thus has implications of the child as pure, innocent, and asexual, but also empty and feeble. It is disempowering and condescending, but, above all, profoundly hypocritical when situated within the 'thundering counter-chorus of carelessness, contempt, and abuse' (74) that informed the real lives of so many Victorian children, especially poor children. The sustained ill-treatment of children during the nineteenth century is well known and immortalised in the fiction of novelists such as Charles Dickens. Kincaid also describes the 'massive exportation of surplus children to all parts of the empire' (75), so that between 1868 and 1925 80 000 children 'were sent to Canada to work under indentures as agricultural labourers and domestic servants' (75).

The cruelties and atrocities endured by so many Victorian children contradict the sentimental notion of the child as precious and secluded from the hardships of life. Such conflicting experiences and attitudes, while perhaps impossible to reconcile, are cleverly reworked in the ambivalence that informs Gaskell's 'rigmarole of childhood' that serves as the opening of her final novel *Wives and Daughters* (1866). *Wives and Daughters* is an especially useful novel to discuss in any exploration of the fictional representation of Victorian childhood. The first lines of the text read:

To begin with the old rigmarole of childhood. In a country there was a shire, and in that shire there was a town, and in that town there was a house, and in that house there was a room, and in that room there was a bed, and in that bed there lay a little girl (35).

These lines point unambiguously to the centrality of the investigation of Victorian childhood, and of Victorian children, that informs her last novel. Although there are other important strands in this work, *Wives and Daughters* is clearly a child-centred text, and with these words Gaskell cleverly creates a framework into which that 'little girl', the novel's mediating consciousness and principal female protagonist, Molly Gibson, neatly fits. Written in the style of a children's story, the narrative steadily closes in on the little girl in bed; the deliberately self-conscious use of repetition and sing-song language emphasises Molly's youthfulness and innocence.

To understand the critique of childhood that informs *Wives and Daughters*, we must look carefully at the unusual word 'rigmarole' - the 'rigmarole of childhood'. 'Rigmarole' has various meanings, the most common of which is 'foolish talk or activity; words or actions

without meaning; nonsense' (*The World Book Dictionary*, 1989, 1988: Vol 2, 1798). This definition might presuppose that *Wives and Daughters* is nothing more than a sentimental and anecdotal wander through the uncomplicated lives of a number of children, a nineteenth century fairy tale where everything is perfect and children are free to indulge in 'foolish talk and activity', a mythical landscape of play. However, the Middle English derivation of 'rigmarole' means 'a list or catalogue' (1798). When we consider the complexity and sophistication of the treatment of childhood in *Wives and Daughters*, it seems naïve and uninformed to read the novel merely as a charming account of happy children. Rather, if 'rigmarole' is decoded, it suggests that the novel will offer a searching and thoughtful investigation of some of the central dilemmas that confront mid Victorian children. Thus these two meanings for 'rigmarole' possess an adversarial or conflictual relationship, so that the light-hearted, 'foolish' and 'nonsensical' definition, the traditional stereotype of childhood as something good and essentially optimistic, is powerfully subverted by the novel's earnest analysis of the sobering realities of Victorian childhood. Victorian childhood constitutes a complex, yet unfixed, space intersected by profound ambiguities, contradictions, and disagreements, a dislocated and imperfect landscape that dominates the first two chapters of *Wives and Daughters*.

Anita Wilson's 'Critical Introduction' to *Private Lives: the Diaries of Elizabeth Gaskell and Sophia Holland* (1996) provides invaluable further insights into Victorian childhood and motherhood. Wilson refers to 'the abundant public discourse of an era which bombarded mothers with advice and exhortations in newly fashionable child-care books and in the periodical press' (Wilson, 1996: 12). Supporting Kinkaid's claim that the institution of childhood only became properly recognized in the nineteenth century, Wilson explains that

the Gaskells were among the first generation of Victorian parents to experience the benefits and burdens of a plethora of prescriptive child-care literature....The number and diversity of authors attests to the veritable explosion of interest in child-care literature. All these writers catered to an avid audience which was eager to receive the latest advice on feeding, bathing, dressing, disciplining, and loving their children (12).

Of considerable interest is Wilson's suggestion that motherhood and parenting offered 'a socially sanctioned arena for female ambition and achievement' (16). However this was still subject to

patriarchal considerations, especially the ideology of separate spheres, because as Wilson goes on to point out:

Social constructs of femininity...placed limits upon maternal power and conveyed mixed messages to mothers, giving with one hand and taking away with the other....Motherhood...required the exercise of intelligence...but [did not grant] women either the kind or the degree of power which could undermine their feminine nature, as constructed by Victorian norms...[which encode] masculine and feminine spheres of power. Men wield weapons; women possess a subtle, personalized influence which is equally potent, but construed so as not to threaten essential ideas of masculinity and femininity (17).

So far this chapter has given very careful consideration to the issue regarding the position of the child within Victorian society because this has profoundly significant implications for Brontë's own work. The themes of children and parenting are very important in both her novels, which describe children who are abused in various ways, such as being spoiled, taught bad habits, and ignored by their parents. My study will argue that Brontë realizes that the issue of women's status in society cannot be separated from questions regarding childhood and parenting.

But it was not only in the context of parenting that Victorian patriarchy sanctioned the legal authority of the husband over his wife. Such authority was evident in many other contexts, several of which are explored in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

Common law provided that property could only be passed down through the male line...so that women's access to property and income was nearly always mediated through their relationships to their fathers or husbands....[A wife] had no right to leave her husband without his permission and if she did he could physically restrain her. She had no right to maintenance if she could not prove that her husband had committed a matrimonial offence....Her right to divorce...was also more restricted than her husband's, as he could divorce her on a single act of adultery whilst she had to establish adultery combined with another matrimonial offence (Brophy and Smart, 1982: 209-210).

The injustice surrounding married women's property rights, as described by Brophy and Smart, finds expression in the writings of many Victorian feminists, including Lady Caroline Norton. In her *A Letter to the Queen*, which she published under her own name in 1855, Norton states:

From the date of my mother's death, [Mr Norton] ²has with-held[sic] entirely, and with perfect impunity, my income as his wife. I do not receive, and have not received for the last three years, a single farthing from him. He retains, and always has retained, property that was left in my home – gifts made to me by my own family on my marriage, and to my mother by your Majesty's aunt, H.R.H. the Duchess of York....He receives from my trustees the interest of the portion bequeathed me by my father, who died in the public service....I have also...the power of earning, by literature – which fund...is no more legally mine than my family property...the copyrights of my work are *his*, by law (quoted in Helsinger *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 16).

Norton's complaints seem utterly reasonable, and it is easy for the reader to understand exactly why she feels so frustrated and impotent. But, because divorce was

a controversial and extremely disturbing issue, the majority of feminists avoided it, insisting that the political and educational changes they sought would contribute to the stability of marriage and the happiness of the home. Only the most radical – or the most desperate – espoused the cause (23).

However, John Stuart Mill placed much emphasis on this issue, writing:

The indissolubility of marriage is the keystone of a woman's present lotAnd the truth is, that this question of marriage cannot properly be considered by itself alone. The question is not what marriage ought to be, but a far wider question, what woman ought to be (quoted in Helsinger *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 22).

Mill's crucial reference to the 'far wider question, what woman ought to be' lies at the core of the many feminist issues that are explored in the novels of Brontë and other thoughtful Victorian writers and thinkers such as Gaskell, Charlotte Brontë and Florence Nightingale. The 'question'

² Lady Caroline Norton was a 'lady' in her own right.

of identity is key to our understanding the intensity of the feminist debates that so both vexed and intrigued the Victorians. The problem was that very few Victorians concurred with regard to what exactly a ‘woman ought to be’: should she ‘be’ a wife and a mother?; should she ‘be’ an individual who performed remunerated work outside the home?; should she ‘be’ autonomous and independent?; or should she ‘be’ submissive, docile and acquiescent?

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Brontë’s intention to tell ‘the unpalatable truth’ (Anne Brontë, 1848 [1998]: 4) is conveyed principally in terms of marriage, for Helen’s aunt warns her that ‘Matrimony is a serious thing’ (125). The social historian Pat Jalland has also shown that ‘marriage was the most important social institution for the great majority of women in Victorian...England’ (Jalland, 1996: 45). We can offer a more informed response to Brontë’s critique of marriage if we locate it within the broader debate on marriage, conducted firstly by Victorian feminists who wished to reform the marriage laws, and secondly by the non-fictional writings of Florence Nightingale in *Cassandra* and *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth*. The responses of such individuals indicate why Brontë wrote as she did. There is no documented evidence, in letters, diaries or her fiction, that Brontë held strong views about, or was even aware of, these public debates and controversies that looked at marriage in terms of theory, ideology, and, above all, the law. But a direct, if not explicitly articulated, connection exists between them and her exposure of the marital injustices confronting many middle-class wives. Her contribution to such debates is an essentially private one, conveyed by means of her fictional portrayal of troubled (usually female) individuals caught up in unhappy marriages. The feminists sought reform of marriage laws; Brontë sought reform at the level of the individual’s attitude and behaviour. This approach is in fact typical of the didactic impulse that informs a great deal of Victorian literature.

The reality was that under British common law a wife was in many ways regarded as a commodity, as the property of her husband. As Shanley shows:

The common-law doctrine of coverture dictated that when a woman married, her legal personality was subsumed in that of her husband. William Blackstone, in his *Commentaries on the Laws of England* [1765–1769], stated the rationale of the law succinctly: if a husband and wife were ‘one body’ before God, they were ‘one person’ in the law, and that person was represented by the husband. From the legal ‘unity’ of the husband and wife it followed that a married woman could not sue or be

sued unless her husband joined her, and could not make a valid will unless he consented to its provisions...Further, a man assumed legal rights over his wife's property at marriage, and any property that came to her during marriage was legally his...any rents or other income...belonged to him...a woman's personal property, including the money she might have saved before marriage or earned while married, passed entirely to her husband for him to use and dispose of as he saw fit. Other laws consonant with coverture reinforced a husband's authority: he decided the family domicile, he had the right to correct his wife physically, and he determined how and where their children would be raised (Shanley, 1989: 8–9).

But Victorian feminists showed that the doctrine of coverture contradicted some of the most cherished principles of English legal and political thought. Although coverture was consonant with the generally accepted gender ideology of the separate spheres, political theorists such as Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and John Stuart Mill argued that all human beings (male and female) were by nature free and equal, so that the consent of an individual (of either sex) must always be obtained in any negotiation or power relationship, and his or her personal autonomy never relinquished. This argument ran counter to Victorian marriage laws whereby a married woman's right to freedom and equality was overridden by the taking away of her independent legal personality. As Shanley explains:

Victorian feminists used the liberal principles of freedom and equality to pose a radical challenge to the assumption that family and state, private and public spheres, were of different conceptual and moral orders. Only by assuming that the principles of justice which should govern the public realm did not apply to family relations, feminists argued, could one rationalize the legal subordination of wives to their husbands in marriage. And only by assuming that being members of a family excluded women, but not men, from the public sphere could one justify women's disenfranchisement. Women's domestic and political subjection were interlocking and mutually reinforcing; only when married women had equal rights with their husbands in both the family and the state could either institution be based upon principles of justice...the legal [marriage] reforms won by nineteenth-century feminists were crucial preconditions for women's emancipation, and the feminists' analysis of the interlocking character of women's subjection in marriage and in the state was a major contribution to feminist theory (12–14).

Brontë's fictional focus on the private, the domestic and the individual, rather than the public, the state, the law, also finds powerful resonance in the non-fictional writings of Florence Nightingale in *Cassandra* and *Suggestions for Thought*. *Cassandra* was part of an ambitious three-volume work of philosophical and theological critique, *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth*, written by Nightingale just before she left for the Crimea. Although Nightingale has not previously been regarded as a true feminist, she shared a commonality of view with the social reform movements, especially with the feminist protest against the enforced idleness of middle-class women. Her central conviction was that work is the only true path to self-fulfilment and the advancement of God's purpose. In *Suggestions for Thought*, she challenged the ideology of the separate spheres, arguing that women living in idleness are forced to squander opportunities to work for God in the larger family of society. Thus, while her interest lies in the quest for increased work opportunities for middle-class women, and not in marriage *per se*, *Cassandra* and *Suggestions for Thought* nevertheless constitute a rich source of pithy and perceptively cynical remarks about marriage and the family, and the way in which these institutions frequently impede the personal growth and development of middle-class women.

In *Suggestions for Thought*, Nightingale likens the family variously to a 'prison' (quoted in Poovey, 1991: 119), a 'cage' (120), and an 'iron chain...drawn tight' (121). She asks: 'The prison which is called a family, will its rules ever be relaxed, its doors ever be opened? What is it, especially to the woman? The man may escape, and does' (119) but 'there is no tyranny like that of the family, for it extends over the thoughts' (121). This is a significant contrast to the perception of the family as a refuge and haven. This pejorative attitude extends to Nightingale's description of the *ennui*, the mediocrity, and especially the futility of a married middle-class woman's life:

A married woman's life consists in superintending what she does not know how to do. (1) She goes into the kitchen and orders the dinner, and tells the cook that it was very bad the day before, but she does not know how to tell her the way to do it right. (2) She goes into the larder and store-room. She does not know how much the servants ought to use. She is certain there is waste somewhere, but she does not know authoritatively that 'she will not have it', and to convince the family that she knows something wrong is going on. (3) She goes into the nursery, knowing nothing about young children, where she has a nurse with

whom she is much out of sorts, because the nurse actually does not like ‘mistress to come into the nursery when the baby cries’(4) She goes into the school-room, because she thinks it right to see ‘how the children are going on with the governess’....(5) She ‘looks in’ at the poor school, because ‘they want looking after’, and the master ‘requires a little stir now and then’....(6) She goes into the village to visit the poor people. And what is visiting the poor? Very like visiting the rich. We ask them how many children they have, and whether they go to school, and so on (189–90).

In *Cassandra*, Nightingale claims: ‘The true marriage - that noble union, by which a man and woman become together the one perfect being - probably does not exist at present upon earthMarriage...ought to be a sacred event, but surely not the only event in a woman’s life, as it is now’ (222–26). Elaine Showalter in *The Female Malady* offers a clear explanation and analysis of the origins of Nightingale’s *Cassandra*. *Cassandra* was initially conceived as an autobiographical novel but, in consequence of male criticism of its contents, was transformed into an essay, a work of non-fiction. Nightingale originally planned to use fiction as the context for this penetrating account of the trials and vicissitudes in the life of Cassandra, an intelligent but frustrated middle-class single woman. The obvious connections with Brontë are deepened when one realizes that *Cassandra* was also initially to be narrated by a first-person female narrator. Showalter describes how, after Nightingale’s return from the Crimea in 1858, she submitted *Suggestions for Thought to Searchers After Religious Truth* to several distinguished male intellectuals for comment. John Stuart Mill recommended publication, but Benjamin Jowett, Oxford Regius Professor of Classics, disliked the confrontational quality of the work, which he described as full of antagonisms which perhaps could be softened. Responding to Jowett’s criticisms, Nightingale deliberately edited her text, discarding all personal details, dramatic scenes and first-person statements. The result was a shadow of its former robust self. Showalter states:

To move through the multiple strata of the manuscript of *Cassandra* in the British Library is thus to observe a sad paradigm of Victorian female self-censorship. The gutted final work, with its mysterious allusions and abrupt transitions, was privately printed in 1860, and *Cassandra* was formally published for the first time in 1928 as the appendix to Ray Strachey’s history of the English women’s movement, *The Cause*. It is still not available in a complete and accurate text. In its history of

thwarted publication, as well as in its account of women's confinement in the family and the psychic costs of that confinement, *Cassandra* is one of the most striking examples of the Victorian silencing of female protest (Showalter, 1985: 66).

The Langham Place feminists made reform of married women's property laws one of their key demands in the 1850s, insisting that married women, like all other adults, had an inalienable right to their own property. Coverture, they claimed, was radically unjust. The Married Women's Property Committee, organized by the Langham Place Circle, demanded that the state recognize the fundamental and equal rights of men and women to possess property, regardless of marital status. But when, after years of lobbying and agitation, the Married Women's Property Act of 1857 was finally debated in Parliament, it was rejected as being too extreme in its demands. It was only in 1870 that a revised Married Women's Property Act was finally passed into law, but Shanley shows that

the bill which was finally adopted departed so substantially from the measure originally sought by its proponents that they were reluctant to accept it...the friends of married women's property reform scarcely knew whether to regard the Act of 1870 as a victory or a defeat (Shanley, 1989: 67-68).

Florence Nightingale also comments on the issue of reform of married women's property laws. Her remarks in *Suggestions for Thought* come at almost exactly the same time as the Married Women's Property Act of 1857, and show how Nightingale's views reflect very closely those of the Langham Place feminists:

...marriage does *not* give the woman independence. Thousands may be given her at her marriage, but the law gives it to the husband, *she* will not have half-a-crown of it; a married woman does not exist in the eyes of the law; she cannot sue or be sued; her husband gives her a cheque when he thinks right, or rather not when he thinks right (quoted in Poovey, 1991: 180-181).

In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, when Helen runs away from Arthur, leaving him ignorant of the location of his wife and child, she is transgressing a law that was only to be modified

partially in 1878, and more substantially so in 1895. Thus, when *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* pleads for understanding and compassion for Helen's need to separate unofficially from Arthur, it anticipates legal reform by at least forty years. Shanley shows that if a wife who was not a victim of wife abuse left her husband, she risked the possibility that he would obtain a court order for the 'restitution of conjugal rights'. The wife was then ordered to return to her husband. Her disobedience was punishable by imprisonment until she promised to comply. A woman therefore had the choice of returning to the husband she loathed, or going to prison (Shanley, 1989: 158). Of course, Helen is a victim of wife abuse, but because this has not been recognised in a court of law, she is not in legal terms an abused wife. The first legal reform regarding wives separating from their husbands came with the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1878 that in part allowed a wife beaten by her husband to apply for a separation order. Only in 1895 in the Summary Jurisdiction (Married Women's Act) did Parliament extend this relief to women who had already left their husbands because of assault, desertion, cruelty or neglect. This time the Act would certainly have applied to Helen had she been able to prove Arthur's cruel treatment of her.

The ideology of separate spheres also barred middle-class women from obtaining virtually all forms of remunerated work outside the home. The Ladies of Langham Place worked tirelessly to achieve more work opportunities for these individuals, starting many work-specific initiatives, such as the Society for the Promotion of Employment for Women, a reading room, an employment bureau, a middle-class emigration society, a law-copying office, the Victoria Press, a school to train women for clerical work, and the *Englishwoman's Journal* (Helsingier *et al*: 1983: Vol. 2, 147). The middle-class premium placed on gentility and respectability meant that it was almost impossible for middle-class women to find any paid work opportunities that received social sanction. The one exception was for poor single middle-class women to work as governesses. Work as a governess was socially acceptable, but the lot of the governess was generally a pitiful one. However, it has been estimated that approximately 25 000 women worked as governesses during the mid nineteenth century (Hughes, 1993: xi). The governess occupied a precarious and undefined place in her employers' household because she was neither a member of her employers' family, nor a servant. She was often treated with contempt by employers and servants alike, and she seems frequently to have felt intensely lonely and isolated. Thus the governess suffered the dilemma consequent upon her 'incongruent position, both within the household and in society at large' (85-86). Kathryn Hughes has explained how the figure of

the governess fascinated much of the literature of the nineteenth century, this literature ranging from novels such as *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair* through etiquette manuals to the middle-brow periodicals of popular journalism. Hughes shows that this fascination with the governess illuminates

the way in which the tensions which the governess seemed to embody – concerning social respectability, sexual morality and financial self-reliance – touched a raw nerve with a whole swathe of middle-class Britain. The figure of the governess took on a significance to her contemporaries out of all proportion to her actual numbers. Exploring the way in which her situation gripped the imagination tells us as much about the aspirations and anxieties of the mid Victorians as it does about the governesses' actual working conditions (xiii).

Hughes' reference to 'the governesses' actual working conditions' finds immediate resonance in Brontë's carefully detailed critique of the governess in *Agnes Grey*. Agnes has to endure extremely difficult and unpleasant 'working conditions' whereby she is subjected to persistent abuse at the hands of employers and servants alike. Chapter 4 will show that the exploration of the treatment of the governess in *Agnes Grey* constitutes a valuable contribution to the Victorians' debate about governesses and about the broader issue of suitable work for women. My study therefore argues that *Agnes Grey* is an important governess novel that occupies a significant position in the spectrum of governess novels.

Governess novels came into being in the mid eighteenth century and continued until well after the mid nineteenth century. Many of these novels were of dubious quality and peddled 'a careless stereotype of the plain clergyman's daughter, obliged to spend her time fending off slights from both servants and employers, before escaping a prim middle age by a last-minute marriage to the curate' (xiii). But it was only in 1847 that the publication of two fine governess novels, *Jane Eyre* and *Vanity Fair*, 'marked the governess's arrival at the very heart of the English novel' (1). However, despite some writers depending on the governess stereotype, Hughes warns against trying to identify a coherent genre of governess fiction. Approximately 140 governess novels were published between 1814 and 1865, and

[t]hese books span virtually every category of fiction, including melodrama, morality tale and silver-spoon....Fictional governesses are,

according to the demands of the story in which they appear, wicked and pious, French and English, victims and schemers. They play both major and minor roles, are observed from the outside, and minutely plotted from within (3).

Hughes shows very interestingly that women writers found the governess novel to be an appropriate way in which to resolve a tension that arose in the demands which these female writers and their readers made upon the novel form:

The novel had historically concerned itself with the social, moral and, above all, economic, journey of a man obliged to make his own way in the world without the normal resources of kith and kin. For female writers and readers these conventions presented problems, since women lacked access to the public world, the domain of action and doing, in which the narrative was necessarily set. It was to ease this tension that the governess began to appear as a central character in the novel. On the one hand, she was an orphan, propelled by economic circumstances into taking a moral, geographic and social journey similar to that of any male hero. On the other hand, she was a middle-class woman who could be re-incorporated at the end of the narrative into the domestic sphere, the proper realm of women, by means of a conventional marriage plot. Winning a husband who could restore her to her rightful social position, if not advance it a little, represented a reworking of the hero's goal of economic self-sufficiency, while still resisting any challenge to a social order which insisted upon women's financial dependence on men. Thus the governess provided a point of entry into the novel for both the female writer and reader (3).

Hughes' reference to 'a social order which insisted upon women's financial dependence on men' shows that Victorian patriarchy expected women to rely on men in financial and economic terms. Autonomous, independent women who earned their own living were frowned upon because they were transgressing the ideology of separate spheres and thus challenging entrenched notions of male superiority. However *Agnes Grey* does not conform to this conservative model: Agnes knows that she cannot depend on her father for financial support, and she therefore supports herself (and contributes to the family coffers) by working as a governess.

In common with Anne Brontë, Charlotte Brontë was twice obliged by economic necessity to work as a governess, and Gaskell's *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* documents in some detail Charlotte's intense suffering at the hands of her cold and indifferent employers. The biography

associates the governess's isolation, social humiliation, emotional and spiritual deprivation and general neglect with her inadequate income. In a letter dated 21 December 1839 Charlotte wrote:

I intend to force myself to take another situation when I can get one, though I *hate* and *abhor* the very thoughts of governess-ship. But I must do it; and, therefore, I heartily wish I could hear of a family where they need such a commodity as a governess (quoted in Gaskell, 1857: 195).

Elsewhere Charlotte wrote that 'a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living rational being' (187-188). She complained bitterly about her first employer:

She behaves somewhat more civilly to me now than she did at first, and the children are a little more manageable; but she does not know my character, and she does not wish to know it. I have never had five minutes' conversation with her since I came, except while she was scolding me (quoted in Gaskell, 1857: 189).

Elizabeth Gaskell offers a finely nuanced and generally sympathetic portrayal of the governess in her depiction of Mrs Kirkpatrick in *Wives and Daughters* (1866) [1969]. The portrayal of Mrs Kirkpatrick is far from stereotypical because Gaskell chooses to focus largely on her life after her time as a governess, and not during her actual employment. Gaskell carefully describes the indignities and subservience of Mrs Kirkpatrick's life as governess and unsuccessful school mistress. The trials and vicissitudes of her life are especially evident in the description of her relationship with her former employers, the Cumnors. Several years after Mrs Kirkpatrick leaves the Cumnors, she writes to Lady Cumnor, subtly begging for an invitation to the Cumnor estate, the Towers, but, once there, she is exploited and used by the Cumnors. Their careless and arrogant persistence in calling her by her maiden name of 'Clare', and not her married name of Kirkpatrick, underlines her precarious position and causes her tacit complicity in her own exploitation. She willingly accepts and almost encourages such aristocratic arrogance because she so passionately craves the social status and material comforts which her visits to the Towers bestow on her. She positively welcomes being at the beck and call of the Cumnors, and there is something both sad and undignified, yet almost cunning, in her attitude. Gaskell is especially interested in the slippery social status of the governess, because, as Mrs

Kirkpatrick remarks: ‘One has always to remember one’s position’ (Gaskell, 1866: 140). Although the Cumnors refuse to shed their customary attitude of authority over their former governess, she herself occupies a position of command over the servants at the Towers. She submits to the Cumnors’ condescending treatment because she, in turn, benefits from what Kathryn Hughes terms ‘the phenomenon of gentility-by-association’ (Hughes, 1993: 92).

In *Cranford* (1853) [1972] Gaskell describes the plight of a middle class single woman, Miss Matty, whose income is seriously depleted by the failure of her bank. Miss Matty, the daughter of the town’s former vicar, consequently occupies a high position in society. But her poor numeracy and literacy skills preclude her from becoming a governess. Thus her friends are sore pressed to arrive at a socially acceptable solution to her urgent need to supplement her paltry income. In the plight of Miss Matty, Gaskell thoughtfully revisits the prevailing Victorian ideologies of the separate spheres and the emphasis on gentility and respectability. Miss Matty’s young, able friend, Miss Smith, who is the novel’s first person narrator, explains:

I thought of all the things by which a woman, past middle age, and with the education common to ladies fifty years ago, could earn or add to a living, without materially losing caste; but at length I put even this last clause on one side, and wondered what in the world Miss Matty could do (Gaskell, 1853: 130).

Compounding the difficulty are the related facts that society will not sanction Miss Matty’s working outside her home and that middle-class society was traditionally hostile to any issues involving trade and tradesmen. However, Miss Smith quickly arrives at a solution that Cranford society will sanction:

Why should not Miss Matty sell tea – be an agent to the East India Tea Company which then existed? I could see no objections to this plan, while the advantages were many – always supposing that Miss Matty could get over the degradation of condescending to anything like trade....No shop window would be required. A small genteel notification of her being licensed to sell tea, would, it is true, be necessary; but I hoped that it could be placed where no one could see it....The only thing against my plan was the buying and selling involved (133).

Miss Smith's father, who, in his male capacity, is supervising Miss Matty's future plans, grasps at his daughter's suggestion 'with all the energy of a tradesman' (142) and thus Miss Matty becomes a vendor of tea. A year later Miss Smith records that Miss Matty

had made more than twenty pounds during the last year by her sales of tea; and, moreover, that now she was accustomed to it, she did not dislike the employment, which brought her into kindly discourse with many of the people round about (148).

'Like many other things which have been declared to be impossible' (Gaskell, 1858: 194), it has been possible to find a socially acceptable, income-generating solution to Miss Matty's economic woes.

In *My Lady Ludlow* Lady Ludlow asks hopelessly: 'What will the world come to?' (50 and 200). But it is in this same text that Gaskell puts forward a startling new suggestion as to the sort of paid work that a single middle-class woman may do outside the home. Lady Ludlow's estate steward, Mr Horner, is looking for an office assistant, and therefore it is highly ironic when Lady Ludlow suggests that Miss Galindo, 'a queer, abrupt, disagreeable, busy old maid' (205), should help Mr Horner with clerical duties such as writing letters and copying accounts. Miss Galindo will be remunerated and she will work in the estate office alongside Mr Horner, thereby subverting Victorian patriarchal norms. Gaskell highlights the complexity and ambivalence of the situation when Lady Ludlow also states: 'I am extremely against women usurping men's employments, as they are very apt to do' (131). Miss Galindo realizes that she will appease Mr Horner's resistance to her appointment if she conforms to the stereotype of a successful male clerk:

I try to make him forget I'm a woman. I do everything as ship-shape as a masculine man-clerk. I see he can't find a fault - writing good, spelling correct, sums all right. And then he squints up at me with the tail of his eye, and looks glummer than ever, just because I'm a woman - as if I could help that. I have gone good lengths to set his mind at ease. I have stuck my pen behind my ear, I have made him a bow instead of a curtsy, I have whistled - not a tune, I can't pipe up that - nay, if you won't tell my lady, I don't mind telling you that I have said "Confoundit!" and "Zounds!" I can't get any farther. For all that, Mr Horner won't forget I am a lady, and so I am not half the use I might be (136).

But Miss Galindo's high quality work soon wins Mr Horner over and even impresses a professional man from the city, 'Mr Smithson, my lady's lawyer from Warwick' (166).

The problem of appropriate work opportunities for middle class women was clearly one of the most contentious issues confronting Victorian feminists. Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon, 'perhaps the most important unstudied figure of mid-century English feminism' (Helsing *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 147), discussed this matter in her strongly argued pamphlet *Women and Work* (1856). This is an absorbing document and clearly articulates the feminists' anger and frustration towards patriarchal restrictions regarding women's work. Bodichon is particularly forward thinking in her assertion that married women and mothers should also work, and that this need not be to the detriment of their families:

Every human being should work...fathers have no right to cast the burden of the support of their daughters on other men. It lowers the dignity of women; and tends to prostitution, whether legal or in the streets. As long as fathers regard the sex of a child as a reason why it should not be taught to gain its own bread, so long must women be degraded. Adult women must not be supported by men if they are to stand as dignified rational beings before God...will you [women] accept a dependent, ornamental and useless position [as wives], or an independent and hard working one? Never hesitate for one moment; grasp the hand that points to work and freedom....Say that you prefer to pay your own way in the world, that you love an honourable independence....Plan for yourselves a life of active single blessedness and usefulness....But is it certain that a girl will give up her occupation when married? There are thousands of married women...in want of...a profession. It is a mistake to suppose marriage gives occupation enough to employ all the faculties of all women....Women want work both for the health of their minds and bodies. They want it often because they must eat and because they have children and others dependent on them - *for all the reasons that men want work* (quoted in Helsing *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 148-149).

Bodichon's emphasis on the positive economic and therapeutic consequences of work for all women finds powerful resonance in Brontë's novels, and Chapters 4 and 5 will offer a careful assessment of the work opportunities available to Agnes and Helen. Both women need to work, but, as importantly, they also long to work because they feel that this will expand their lives and

lead to more enriching and stimulating circumstances. Agnes and Helen are given appropriate opportunities in the novels to find meaningful work. Brontë concurred with Bodichon, and her fiction is informed by a vigorous critique that emphasises the necessity for all women to have meaningful work to perform. And, as this chapter has already shown, Florence Nightingale believed that work was the only true path to self-fulfilment for women.

Another form of socially acceptable work for middle-class women in Victorian patriarchy was the writing of fiction. Of course this was hardly a new phenomenon; female novelists such as Ann Radcliffe, Fanny Burney and Jane Austen had been writing in earlier decades. But now many women writers, such as George Eliot, the Brontë sisters, and Elizabeth Gaskell, chose to write under male or androgynous pseudonyms. However, this was because they were anxious that their fiction be assessed on the same terms as the fiction of male writers, and not because they were worried that they would be censored for working as writers. Gaskell explains that Charlotte Brontë ‘especially disliked the lowering of the standard by which to judge a work of fiction, if it proceeded from a feminine pen; and praise mingled with pseudo-gallant allusions to her sex, mortified her far more than actual blame’ (Gaskell, 1857: 387). Inga-Stina Ewbank in her classic work *Their Proper Sphere: a Study of the Brontë Sisters as Early-Victorian Female Novelists*, writes that ‘*The Cambridge Bibliography of English Literature* lists at least forty women novelists, apart from the Brontës, publishing in the 1830s and ‘40s, accounting between them for at least three hundred new novels’ (Ewbank, 1966: 5). The novel had acquired a new sense of respectability in the first half of the nineteenth century, and ‘there is no doubt...that by the 1840s publishers, editors and public welcomed the woman author’ (6). However, as recently as the late 1830s, when Charlotte Brontë submitted some of her poetry to the celebrated poet Robert Southey for assessment, he had warned her that ‘literature cannot be the business of a woman’s life, and it ought not to be. The more she is engaged in her proper duties, the less leisure will she have for it, even as an accomplishment and a recreation’ (quoted in Ewbank, 1966: 5).

Not all Victorian female novelists produced work of similar high quality to that of their great women counterparts. This is suggested by the famous essay ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ written in 1856 by George Eliot for the *Westminster Review*. Eliot sternly admonishes the average ‘lady novelist’ for her slack approach to her craft, remarking:

it must be plain to every one who looks impartially and extensively into feminine literature, that its greatest deficiencies are due hardly more to the want of intellectual power than to the want of those moral qualities that contribute to literary excellence – patient diligence, a sense of the responsibility involved in publication, and an appreciation of the sacredness of the writer’s art...The foolish vanity of wishing to appear in print, instead of being counterbalanced by any consciousness of the intellectual or moral derogation implied in futile authorship, seems to be encouraged by the extremely false impression that to write *at all* is a proof of superiority in a woman (quoted in Ewbank, 73).

Eliot thus condemns female novelists who treat the writing of fiction in a trivial and superficial manner, and who thus degrade and undermine the professionalism of this important activity. She is heavily committed to the seriousness of the writing of significant fiction. This attitude finds a powerful commonality with Brontë’s own approach which is informed by her strong sense of the seriousness of the fiction writer’s responsibility to her art. Brontë’s awareness of the writer’s responsibility is reflected most clearly in *The Preface to the Second Edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where she outlines in unambiguous terms the didactic impulse that informs the novel. As I will indicate more fully in Chapter 5, Brontë writes in *The Preface* that her

object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify [her] own taste, not yet to ingratiate [herself] with the Press and the Public: [she] wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it (Anne Brontë, 1848: 3).

Elsewhere in *The Preface* Brontë explains that her project in writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is to ‘contribute [her] humble quota’ (3) to ‘so good an aim’ (3) which seeks ‘to reform the errors and abuses of society’ (3). In this novel Brontë is not dealing with trivial matters, but instead, and most explicitly, with very weighty social concerns regarding the position of women in Victorian patriarchy. And the same didactic imperative is seen in the opening sentence in *Agnes Grey*: ‘All true histories contain instruction’ (Anne Brontë, 1847: 1). It is therefore that Eliot’s remarks regarding ‘Silly Novels by Lady Novelists’ are extremely consonant with Brontë’s own sentiments.

Eliot's comments obviously did not apply to the leading novelists of the age, and Eliot, Gaskell, the Brontës and Charles Dickens belonged to the same generation of mid-Victorian writers whose work reflects that pivotal shift of narrative direction and focus identified by Kathleen Tillotson in her seminal work *The Novels of the Eighteen-Forties*. In the period immediately before the 1840s, many works of fiction had been set exclusively in an elitist world of rank, wealth and privilege: such novels were largely concerned with matters of romance and love, as Tillotson claims. But the influential Scottish thinker and writer Thomas Carlyle vigorously attacked the superficiality and artifice of these silver-fork novels and sought a new politically and morally aware fiction that would instruct, rather than merely amuse. Carlyle's political pamphlets, such as *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and Present* (1843), called for a new middle class vision of the poor, characterized by 'true insight', 'a genuine understanding' and 'a clear interpretation of the thought' of the poor (Carlyle, 1839: 6). Carlyle's abiding belief in the novelist's moral responsibility, and in the didactic potential of the novel, was centrally important in shaping the new direction taken by the novelists of the 1840s and their successors. Critics such as Tillotson have identified Carlyle's crucial influence on the evolution of a new type of novel, the Condition of England novel, revolutionary in its ideology, subject matter and perspective, and drawing on fresh and different source material, such as the destitute, the poor and the city, which were portrayed in terms of sympathy and reconciliation. Such novels are also significant for the breadth of their scope, as well as their emphasis on social reform and not merely the portrayal of society. Tillotson writes that 'the "novel proper" as distinct from the novel as the product of an "amusement-industry" was helped by Carlyle to a status in literature and life which it has hardly yet lost' (Tillotson, 1954: 156). Gaskell's fine pair of Condition of England novels, *Mary Barton* (1848) and *North and South* (1855), reflect Carlyle's call for a more socially aware type of fiction. Carlyle wrote glowingly of *Mary Barton*:

Your field...is new, important, full of rich material...the result is a book deserving to take its place far above the ordinary garbage of novels – a book which every intelligent person may read with entertainment; *and* which it will do every one good to read. I gratefully accept it as a real contribution...towards developing a huge subject, which has lain dumb too long (quoted in Haldane, 1931: 47-48).

But it was not only writers and thinkers such as Elizabeth Gaskell and Thomas Carlyle who contributed to the debate on the Woman Question. Any assessment of the prevailing Victorian social, political and literary conditions to which Brontë's work responds, would be incomplete without a discussion of two important feminists, already mentioned in this chapter, Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon and Lady Caroline Norton.

Barbara Leigh Smith Bodichon was one of the young women who were responsible for 'the beginnings of a feminist movement in the late 1850s' (Helsing *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 146). She was an unconventional woman of independent means with a talent for writing powerful political pamphlets (such as *Women and Work*, to which I have already referred in this Chapter) to convey her feminist perspective. Her father was a prominent Unitarian by faith. Unitarians held progressive political views and many great Victorian thinkers and writers, such as Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, Mary Wollstonecraft, and Florence Nightingale, were Unitarians.

She took advantage of her uncertain social position to move freely in and out of conventional society, working seriously as an artist, while actively supporting women's rights in law, work, and education (Helsing, *et al*, 1983: Vol. 2, 147).

Bodichon's pamphlet *A Brief Summary, in Plain Language, of the Most Important Laws Concerning Women* (1854) was a pivotal influence in the legal reform of married women's property rights. The pamphlet led to an 1856 parliamentary petition signed by more than twenty-six thousand women, including Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Elizabeth Gaskell, Harriet Martineau, Anna Jameson and Jane Carlyle. Bodichon also discussed her use of birth control devices in public in 1856. Furthermore, in the 1860s she was actively involved in the campaign for women's suffrage. Working closely with John Stuart Mill, who was a Member of Parliament, she helped other feminists to prepare a petition with 1499 signatures, which Mill presented to Parliament. Although the amendment was rejected in Parliament by 196 votes to 73, Bodichon's early contribution to the ultimate achievement of women's suffrage was considerable. She was very active in helping to establish the Langham Place Group of feminists in the late 1850s.

Lady Caroline Norton (1808-1877) was herself the victim of an abusive and tyrannical husband who removed their three sons from her care for many years, sending the boys to Scotland, far out of her reach. George Norton failed to support her financially, and also involved

her in a sensational divorce suit, *Norton vs Melbourne*, 1836. Norton accused his wife of committing adultery with the then Prime Minister, Lord Melbourne, a charge legally defined as ‘criminal conversation’. Melbourne was 51 years old, Caroline Norton 22, and it is clear that they enjoyed an intimate friendship. However it was by no means proven that this amounted to a sexual liaison, and the divorce suit was thrown out by the courts. Caroline Norton then started to use her skill with words to embark on a campaign to change the laws that affected women and children. Political pamphlets such as *A Plain Letter to the Lord Chancellor on the Infant Custody Bill* (1839) (already discussed in this chapter), *English Laws for Women in the Nineteenth Century* (1854), and *A Letter to the Queen on Lord Chancellor Cranworth’s Marriage and Divorce Bill* (1855) (already discussed in this chapter), helped to change public attitudes towards the plight of women in Victorian patriarchal society and thus to succeed ultimately in legal reform. Caroline Norton was also a poet and novelist of considerable, if not great, stature, but she is remembered now chiefly for her feminist writings.

This chapter has shown that the mid nineteenth century was characterized by a number of separate but related national conversations or debates about the position of women in Victorian society. It was surely unimportant that there was still only minimal agreement on what exactly that position should be; what was ultimately of much greater significance was that there was now a much greater public awareness that women still occupied a subordinate position in national life, and that a major intervention was required to ameliorate the injustices of this situation. The first faint glimmerings of a feminist consciousness were evident. High up on the Yorkshire moors in the Brontë Parsonage, as I have already shown, Brontë wrote vigorously and enthusiastically, anxious to offer her own ideas on how to ‘reform the errors and abuses of society’ (Anne Brontë, 1848: 3). The serious tone of *The Preface to the Second Edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* demonstrates the didactic impulse that informs the pages of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and illuminates Brontë’s feminist and social agenda.

CHAPTER 3: BIOGRAPHICAL AND OTHER INFLUENCES

In 1834, when Brontë was fourteen years old, she was described by Branwell in one of the Angrian tales as ‘nothing, absolutely nothing...next door to an idiot’ (Gérin, 1961: 82). Despite the probable tongue-in-cheek context for this patronising remark, it suggests Brontë’s sustained if probably unconscious struggle to challenge her family’s persistent perception of her as gentle and weak, and in permanent need of protection and shelter from the vagaries of daily life in Haworth. ‘The family’s protective care for the delicate, and later asthmatic, Anne’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 66) was of course sincerely meant. As the sixth and last sibling, who was only eighteen months old when her mother died, Brontë was obviously especially vulnerable, but it seems that the family’s understandable desire to shield her from the realities of life often deteriorated into the notion that she was altogether less and somehow inferior to Emily, Charlotte, and Branwell, her three remaining siblings. What was genuinely intended as caring and cherishing may have become unintentionally judgemental and dismissive. At best it was restrictive and unhelpful. Indeed, this perception has come to inform much of the Brontë critical literature. As Lucasta Miller explains: ‘The adjectives routinely applied to her are pretty, little, slight, [and] feminine’ (2002:158).

However, in truth Brontë in some ways was the strongest and most assertive of all the Brontës: she was the only sibling to become a successful governess or tutor who survived, even flourished, in such an awkward position for a lengthy period of time; and her second novel *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is arguably, of all seven Brontë novels, the text which offers the most aggressive and searching critique of prevailing social conditions in mid-Victorian England. Elizabeth Langland writes that ‘Anne was, of the sisters, perhaps the most rigorously logical, the most quietly observant, the most realistic, and, in certain spheres, the most tenacious, the most determined, and the most courageous’ (Langland, 1989: 4). Therefore this chapter will argue that the unfortunate image of Brontë as timid, passive, and ordinary, is both unjust and seriously inaccurate, and should be replaced with the image of a young woman who possessed a sturdy sense of self and who would pursue ‘the unpalatable truth’ (Anne Brontë, 1848: 4) unflinchingly.

The Brontë whose voice speaks to us so earnestly and insistently by way of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, was the sum of the many parts or contexts of her life that shaped her personality, her worldview, and the direction taken by her fiction. The chapter will discuss three pivotal biographical influences on Brontë: her family, her painful experiences as a

governess, and her reading history. I will first explore the complex and often problematic skein of family relationships through which Brontë had to navigate, and I will look especially closely at the unmistakable influence of her father, the Reverend Patrick Brontë. Patrick Brontë's evangelical Christian faith and his elevated sense of social awareness find powerful resonance in his youngest daughter's life and writing. Of her three siblings, Brontë was particularly close to Emily: Ellen Nussey, Charlotte's good friend, described how Emily and Brontë 'were like twins, inseparable companions, and in the very closest sympathy which never had any interruption' (quoted in Barker, 1994: 195). This intimacy led to the two sisters' collaboration over the Gondal juvenilia. However, Charlotte, as I have already shown in Chapter 1, definitely entertained ambivalent feelings towards Brontë and her work, while Brontë herself felt profoundly humiliated and betrayed by Branwell's descent into the murky world of substance abuse. Thus a sense of alienation between Charlotte and Brontë, and between Brontë and Branwell, is evident by the time of Brontë's death in 1849. The chapter will also show how the sustained emphasis on the denial of opportunities to some of the female characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is in part indicative of Patrick Brontë's constant privileging of Branwell over his sisters in terms of the allocation of resources, be these emotional, financial, or in the context of opportunity and potential. Of course, this also represents the broader social situation in terms of the marginalization of women in Victorian society. My analysis will then move forward to a consideration of Brontë's two periods of employment as a governess and of how this experience informs her critique of the governess in *Agnes Grey*. Finally, I will investigate Brontë's reading history and discuss the influence of Samuel Richardson on the shape and direction of her own writing.

The family's unintentional infantilising of Brontë apparently irked her. The dangers of assuming that episodes described in fiction closely reflect the real-life experiences of the writer are well known. This has already occurred frequently in Brontë scholarship, especially with regard to Winifred Gérin's identification of biographical resonances in Brontë's novels, especially *Agnes Grey*, as I have already shown in Chapter 1. Gérin has been heavily criticised for her naïve willingness to quote extensively from Brontë's novels in support of her claims about the writer's life. However, the way in which the young adult Agnes is treated as a child by her family in *Agnes Grey*, as well as Gilbert's patronising infantilisation of Eliza Millward in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, could well suggest that Brontë acutely resented such an attitude. Patrick

Brontë always referred to Brontë in terms of the diminutive as ‘my dear little Anne’; Ellen Nussey saw her as ‘Anne, dear gentle Anne’. Juliet Barker explains that ‘all her life she had been the cherished and protected “little one”, the baby of the family, who was always spoken of in terms of more than ordinary affection’ (Barker, 1994: 237). Brontë was Aunt Branwell’s obvious favourite, possibly because she was ‘docile [and] pensive’ (Gaskell, 1857: 198). Gaskell continues: ‘Miss Branwell had taken charge of her from her infancy; she was always patient and tractable, and would submit quietly to occasional repression, even when she felt it keenly’ (198). It would have been easy for Brontë to submit to this stifling environment, to succumb so that she could indeed have become the supine ‘nothing, merely nothing’ of the Angrian tale. The family’s energetic and sustained attempts to make her path even, regular and unimpeded could have had the unintended consequence of turning this ‘milder, more ordinary’ (Bentley, 1969: 55) child into a lazy, insipid woman. But instead Brontë proved to be tenacious and in some ways quite extraordinary.

Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith have confirmed the powerful impact of Patrick Brontë on Brontë: ‘He was a man of integrity, with a staunch evangelical Christian faith, a lively social conscience, and a deep attachment to his family. He had a profound influence on the character, development, and writing of...Anne’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 105). Ever since Elizabeth Gaskell’s famous biography *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), which contained many inaccurate or untruthful descriptions of Patrick Brontë, the debate surrounding Patrick Brontë has undoubtedly become one of the most hotly contested spaces in Brontë scholarship. It is essential to look carefully at the issues informing this debate: we cannot appreciate Patrick’s real influence over Brontë if we fail to penetrate the tissue of lies and distortions that surround him. Gaskell usually caricatured him as a misanthrope. As the former Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, recently observed: ‘Thanks to Mrs Gaskell, the world still has a vivid but pretty misleading picture of Haworth parsonage and its incumbent’ (quoted in Green, 2010: 7). Her overriding purpose when writing the biography was to defend Charlotte (and thus, indirectly Emily and Anne) from the many allegations of coarseness and unacceptable depravity in her fiction. Gaskell thus sought to portray the sisters as simple country recluses, as innocent young women who led lives of dreary isolation in the grim Yorkshire vicarage that they shared with a weirdly eccentric and selfish father. Her project was to argue that the sisters were the victims of their father’s often cruel or irrational behaviour, as detailed in the following example:

Mr Brontë wished to make his children hardy, and indifferent to the pleasures of eating and dress....Mrs Brontë's nurse told me that one day when the children had been out on the moors, and rain had come down, she thought their feet would be wet, and accordingly she rummaged out some coloured boots which had been given to them by a friend....These little pairs she ranged round the kitchen fire to warm; but when the children came back, the boots were nowhere to be found; only a very strong odour of burnt leather was perceived. Mr Brontë had come in and seen them; they were too gay and luxurious for his children, and would foster a love of dress; so he had put them into the fire (Gaskell, 1857: 88-89).

The catalogue of Patrick Brontë's misdeeds continues:

Long before this, some one had given Mrs Brontë a silk gown; either the make, the colour, or the material, was not according to his notions of consistent propriety, and Mrs Brontë in consequence never wore it. But, for all that, she kept it treasured up in her drawers, which were generally locked. One day, however, while in the kitchen, she remembered that she had left the key in her drawer, and, hearing Mr Brontë upstairs, she augured some ill to her dress, and, running up in haste, she found it cut into shreds (89).

However, when he read Gaskell's biography, the story to which Patrick Brontë took the most exception was that he did not allow his children to eat 'flesh-meat' so that 'they had nothing but potatoes for their dinner' (87). The unfortunate consequence of this litany of untruths is that many readers of the biography, then and now, have been manipulated into forming a hostile and resentful stance towards Patrick. Only much later was it revealed that Gaskell's source was a woman who had been hired to nurse Mrs Brontë in her last illness, but had been dismissed for her slovenly work. Gaskell might not have placed such trust in the woman's words had she been aware of their context. But the damage had been done, and it is only in the fairly recent past that we have been able to obtain a more balanced and generally fairer impression of Brontë's father.

The revisionist critique of Patrick Brontë has been substantially enhanced by the exhaustive research and scholarly writing of Dudley Green, whose recent works *Patrick Brontë, Father of Genius* (2010) and *The Letters of the Reverend Patrick Brontë* (2005) have done much

to correct Gaskell's disastrous portrait of Patrick. Green has summarized Gaskell's relationship with Patrick Brontë in what I believe to be a fair manner:

She was never willing to make the attempt fully to understand Patrick's character. Her single-minded devotion to the mission of exculpating Charlotte from the accusations of coarseness and insensitivity which had been levelled against her, and her obsession with what she took to be Mr Brontë's selfishness in his unwavering control over Charlotte's life, seem to have made Mrs Gaskell virtually blind to the sterling qualities which he showed (Green, 2010: 326).

Indeed it is easy to claim that Gaskell never liked or admired Patrick, even though he entrusted her with the task of writing the definitive biography of Charlotte, a task which Gaskell accepted very readily. Her enthusiastic agreement to write the biography was not because the request came from Patrick *per se*; it was not that Gaskell wished to gratify or please Charlotte's father. Rather it was because she would now have a very public space in which to defend her friend against the hostile reception that her novels had received from many critics. Even before Gaskell had met Patrick in person, and thus from mere hearsay, she had described him in her letter to Catherine Winkworth (25 August 1850) as 'the strange half mad husband' (Chapple and Pollard, 1997: 124). This insensitive stance also informs Gaskell's account of Patrick in October 1860, three years after the publication of the biography and shortly before his death, when Gaskell and her daughter Meta had visited the Parsonage. Gaskell wrote that Patrick 'still talks in his pompous way, and mingles moral remarks and somewhat stale sentiments with his conversation on ordinary subjects' (Green, 2010: 326). One might have expected that Gaskell would have developed a more respectful and sympathetic understanding of Patrick as the consequence of her close collaboration with him over the biography, but these remarks suggest that she still regarded him in an antagonistic manner.

More credible evidence than that of Gaskell shows that Patrick was in fact an excellent father whose parenting skills were noticed by others. For example, after Charlotte and Emily had returned from their studies at the Heger Pensionnat in Brussels in 1842, Monsieur Heger wrote to Patrick:

I have not the honour of knowing you personally, and yet I feel for you yourself a sentiment of sincere veneration, for in judging the father of a family by his children there is no risk of being mistaken; and in this respect the education and opinions we have found in your daughters could only give us a very high idea of your worth and your character (quoted in Green, 2010: 155).

Patrick himself proudly acknowledged the connection between his rather unconventional personality and his children's brilliance. Writing to Gaskell after the publication of the first edition of the biography, he explained:

I do not deny that I am somewhat e<x>ccentric [sic]. Had I been numbered amongst the calm, sedate, concentric men of the world, I should not have been As [sic] I now am, and I should, in all probability, never have had such children as mine have been. I have no objection, whatever to your representing me as a little excentric [sic], since you, and other learned friends will have it so; only dont [sic] set me on, in my fury to burning hearthrugs, sawing the backs off chairs, and tearing my wifes [sic] silk gowns (quoted in Green, 2010: 309).

Patrick also encouraged his children to read widely, and it seems that he seldom censored or restricted their choice of reading material. Juliet Barker has provided a carefully researched description of the many books in the Brontës' own library in the Parsonage. These books included 'standard educational texts of the day' (Barker, 1994: 145) such as Thomas Salmon's *New Geographical and Historical Grammar*, classical works from Patrick Brontë's student days at Cambridge, and basic religious texts. The children were also probably allowed to borrow books from the circulating library in Keighley and from the lending libraries kept by individuals such as Mr Hudson and Mr Robert Aked in Haworth. These libraries with their 'emphasis on the arts and on nineteenth-century publications, would seem to be a...likely source for the Brontës' reading' (149). However, Barker attaches particular significance to one specific periodical which Patrick regularly borrowed from a Mr Driver and which 'truly did change their lives' (149):

This was *Blackwood's Magazine*, a monthly journal...a potent miscellany of satire and comment on contemporary politics and literature [it] formed the tastes and fed the interests of the Brontës for many years. They absorbed its Tory politics, made its heroes, from the Duke of

Wellington to Lord Byron, into their own heroes and copied its serio-comic style. Its tremendously long and detailed reviews of new works of biography, history, travel, politics, and, to a lesser extent, fiction, gave them access to books and knowledge which were otherwise beyond their reach, especially as extensive quotations were given from the books under review (149).

Therefore the eclectic and intellectually challenging reading matter which Patrick Brontë sourced for his children is further proof of his powerful influence on their future careers as writers. He encouraged them to think independently and to take an active interest in politics and the vigorous debates that informed public life.

Any account of Patrick Brontë must look very carefully at his Irish roots and show how the qualities possessed by his forebears seem to find a commonality in his personality and political views. One is immediately struck by the energy and resourcefulness of these forebears. Patrick was the oldest child in a family of ten born in 1777 to Irish peasants, Hugh and Alice Brontë, who eked out a living on the Irish bogs and who lived in a humble two room cottage. Patrick explained to Gaskell that Hugh

was left an orphan at an early age...his lot in life, as well as mine, depended [on]...our own exertions....His pecuniary means were small – but renting a few acres of land, He [sic] and my mother, by dint of application, and industry, managed to bring up a family of ten Children [sic] in a respectable manner. I shew'd an early fondness for books, and continued at school for several years – At [sic] the age of sixteen, knowing that my Father could afford me no pecuniary aid I began to think of doing something for myself – and I therefore opened a public school – and <?> [sic] in this line, I continued five or six years; I was then a Tutor in a gentleman's Family – From which situation I removed to Cambridge, and enter'd St. John's College – After nearly four years' residence, I took the Degree <of> [sic] of Bachelor of Arts – and was soon after ordain'd to a Curacy in the South of England (quoted in Green, 2005: 233).

The Irish Brontës' initiative and strong impulse to improve their lot are clearly evident in these words of Patrick. Hugh Brontë also enjoyed a 'considerable local reputation as a storyteller' (Green, 2010: 20). His 'greatest claim to fame...was as a storyteller in the old Irish tradition, a role similar to that of the Homeric bard' (23), and this immediately resonates with the Brontë

sisters' story-telling abilities. Furthermore, Hugh Brontë obviously held strong political and social views because 'he also had a reputation as a passionate supporter of the rights of tenant farmers against their unscrupulous landlords' (23). In June 1798 Patrick's brother William fought in the battle of Windmill Hill in the rebellion against the Irish government by Irishmen who wanted to establish an Irish republic independent of British control. Patrick and his youngest daughter's powerful social conscience is hardly surprising in light of their Irish family's dislike of the abuse of power. Nor must one ignore Patrick's own determination to better himself, a determination which saw him, an Irish peasant born into poverty and with but a slender education, seek and win a place at St John's College, Cambridge. Brontë's own tenacity and courage have clearly evident antecedents in the actions of her father, uncle and grandfather.

However it is in the context of their shared evangelical Christian faith that the influence of Patrick on Brontë is most evident, and I wish to look at this matter in some detail. Patrick and Brontë shared an unswerving commitment to the values and tenets of this movement. It is imperative that a true understanding is attained of the great extent to which Patrick moved and worked in these circles all his life. He had first come into contact with the movement in Ireland, where his mentor the Reverend Thomas Tighe was a committed evangelical. St John's College, Cambridge, was well known for its close connections with the evangelical movement in the Church of England. After Patrick graduated from Cambridge and was ordained as a priest in the Church of England, all his appointments as either curate or perpetual curate were to important evangelical communities where he worked with many fine vicars. His first two curacies were under such vicars with strong interests in the poor and the sick, and in education. His first curacy at Wethersfield in Essex (1806-1808) was under a leading evangelical, the Rev Joseph Jowett; his second curacy at Wellington in Shropshire (1808-1809) was again under the evangelical Rev John Eyton, also a graduate of St John's College. Eyton was 'a powerful preacher and a conscientious pastor...a regular visitor of the poor and the sick,...[who] also took a keen interest in the running of the free Wellington Free School' (41). Wellington was a strongly evangelical town, and here Patrick also met the Rev John Fletcher, a 'model and inspiration for many young clergymen' (42). Patrick's third curacy at Dewsbury, near Bradford in Yorkshire (1809-1811), introduced him to his new vicar, the Rev John Buckworth, a talented evangelical preacher 'renowned for the pastoral concern which he showed for his parishioners' (46). 1811 saw an important promotion for Patrick when he received his first independent living as perpetual curate

of the parish of Hartshead in Yorkshire. In Hartshead, as in his next appointment as perpetual curate of Thornton, near Bradford in Yorkshire (1815-1819), Patrick was surrounded by evangelicals. His final appointment was as perpetual curate to the parish of Haworth, also near Bradford. Haworth was famous for the evangelical ministry of the Rev William Grimshaw sixty years before. Grimshaw was the incumbent at Haworth for twenty one years from 1742-1763. Thus it is easy to understand the powerful evangelical beliefs which shaped Patrick Brontë from his early days in Ireland until his final incumbency in Haworth. He was an ordained minister in the Church of England for fifty five years and incumbent of Haworth for forty one years.

It is almost impossible to find a critical work that offers a precise and satisfying definition of the evangelical movement. While evangelicals were always Protestant, and never Roman Catholic, they could belong either to the church of the Establishment, the Church of England, or to the dissenting churches such as the Methodists, the Baptists, and the Wesleyans. Owen Chadwick in his major work *The Victorian Church* explains that:

Evangelicals held certain broad principles. They were men of the Reformation, who preached the cross, the depravity of man, and justification by faith alone. Some of them were Calvinists, and more of them not. Most of them had little use or time for doctrines of predestination and reprobation...they respected...Calvinist dogmas where they did not share them...Rome they feared with the fear of the antichrist (Chadwick, 1966: *Part I*, 440-441).

Chadwick's description suggests the breadth and variety of evangelical beliefs and attitudes, but also stresses the shared antipathy towards, and the virtual hatred of, the Roman Catholic Church. The behaviour and attitudes of many Victorian clergymen are riddled with inconsistencies. The tolerance extended by evangelicals of one persuasion towards fellow evangelicals with different opinions, was not extended to Roman Catholics. Evangelical priests within the Church of England would cheerfully share with dissenters the platform at public meetings of bodies such as the Church Missionary Society, an evangelical body established in 1799 with the aim of sending out missionaries to Africa and the East. However, these same evangelical Anglicans were often vehemently opposed to other ideological groupings within their own Church of England. Evangelicals, who were low churchmen, were deeply suspicious of high churchmen, especially the Puseyites and Tractarians. By the term 'low churchmen', I mean clergymen who preferred

simple, unadorned forms of worship and who attached great importance to the quality of their sermons. Preaching was crucial for these men. However, they disliked the emphasis placed on ritual and the more ornate types of service by those clergy who were known as ‘high churchmen’.

As I will show in Chapter 4, Brontë provides excellent, if predictably tendentious, examples of these two types of clergymen in her portrayals of Reverend Hatfield and Reverend Weston in *Agnes Grey*. The Reverend Hatfield is a Puseyist, a man whose sermons are shallow and whose Christian benevolence extends only to the rich. The Reverend Weston, however, preaches excellent and profound sermons, and is himself a simple and humble man whose ministry extends to the furthest and poorest cottage in the community. Of Puseyism, Patrick Brontë wrote:

I thoroughly detest it both root and branch, Yea in all its bearings and habits, whether under the pretence of decency it appears in formal dresses...or whether it, [sic] may shew itself in candles or in crosses, or in vigils or in fastings, whatever colour or form it may assume, it is equally odious to me (quoted in Green, 2010: 256).

However, in one particular context, he had a possibly surprisingly tolerant attitude towards dissenters. In 1844 he confirmed in a letter to the *Bradford Observer* that he would continue to bury dissenters in the Haworth churchyard, even though this was a controversial stance. He explained:

as I wish the Dissenters to live long and to live well, it would be my desire that our burial ground of not narrow limits, would amply suffice for them all for many years to come (quoted in Green, 2005: 166).

The Reverend Carus Wilson of the infamous Cowan Bridge School and Patrick Brontë reflect these different schools of thought within the evangelical movement. Carus Wilson was a committed Calvinist who stressed ‘the sinfulness of human nature and the certainty of punishment, rather than...the mercy of God’ (Green, 2010: 105). However, Patrick Brontë rejected Calvinism in its totality, especially ‘the appalling [sic] doctrines of personal Election and Reprobation’ (quoted in Green, 2010: 120). The doctrine of personal election suggested that only

the predestined could achieve salvation, while the doctrine of reprobation argued that many individuals were rejected by God because they were hardened sinners. And yet ironically, despite Patrick Brontë's disgust with regard to these pivotal Calvinist doctrines, he still sent his children to the school of the Rev Carus Wilson. The low school fees at Cowan Bridge were probably more in the financially straitened Patrick's thoughts than the religious ideologies taught at the school.

Evangelical ministers put great emphasis on both the pastoral and practical needs of their parishioners. They placed a premium on the power and efficacy of preaching, so that most evangelical clergymen spoke with great skill in the pulpit. However, because 'social concern was a mark of the evangelical wing of the Church of England' (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 424), evangelical ministers also worked extensively with the poor, the sick, and the uneducated. In 1842 Patrick lost his fine young evangelical curate, the Rev William Weightman, who died of cholera. This was disastrous for Patrick both personally and professionally. He often referred to the 'father and son relationship' that he enjoyed with Weightman, and he had also greatly appreciated the young curate's hard work in the Sunday School and parish. In his address at Weightman's funeral, he shared with his congregation his thoughts on what 'every clergyman ought to be'. Patrick invariably preached *ex tempore* (without notes) but, because many requests had been received that he publish this particular sermon, he did this time write all his words down. This is one of the few known instances of one of Patrick's sermons being preserved for posterity, a fortunate situation as it is perhaps the clearest indication we have of his definition of an ideal evangelical priest. Of Weightman, he observed:

In his preaching and practising, he was, as every clergyman ought to be, neither distant nor austere, timid nor obtrusive, nor bigoted, exclusive, nor dogmatical. He was affable, but not familiar; open, but not too confiding. He thought it better, and more scriptural, to make the love of God, rather than the fear of hell, the ruling motive for obedience... Though he preached the necessity of sincere repentance, and heart-felt sorrow for sin, he believed that the convert, in his freedom from its thralldom, should rejoice ever more in the glorious liberty of the gospel... In the Sunday School, especially, he was useful in more than ordinary degree. He had the rare art of communicating information with diligence and strictness, without austerity, so as to render instruction, even to the youngest and most giddy, a pleasure, and not a task (quoted in Green, 2010: 153).

William Weightman was ‘an assiduous visitor’ of the poor (147). The mother of a dying girl who had been visited frequently by Weightman told Charlotte that he ‘had sent them a bottle of wine and a jar of preserves’ and that ‘he was always good-natured to poor folks, and seemed to have a deal of feeling and kind-heartedness about him’ (147). Brontë’s favourable portrayal of the Rev Edward Weston in *Agnes Grey* is commonly seen as having reasonably strong resonances with William Weightman. ‘Though the handsome, flirtatious Weightman differed in many ways from the plain, serious Edward Weston...both were sincere evangelical preachers and pastors, generous, gentle, and understanding in their care for poor parishioners’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 69).

Patrick Brontë believed that any form of writing, whether this was in the form of poems, short stories, pamphlets or letters to the editors of influential regional newspapers such as the *Leeds Intelligencer* and the *Leeds Mercury*, was an important way of extending both his evangelical ministry and his social commentary. Dudley Green looks in great detail at Patrick’s early writing and highlights his statement that writing ‘was full of real, indescribable pleasure such as he [Patrick] could wish to taste as long as life lasts’ (Green, 2010: 172). This remark, in which Patrick is speaking of himself in the third person, indicates the substantial sense of delight that the process of writing afforded him. His validation of the written word has inescapable links with the identical views of Brontë, who used her fiction to convey her reformist impulse. In 1811 when he was curate in Dewsbury, Patrick published a collection of twelve of his poems under the title of *Cottage Poems*. He described these poems as intended for the lower classes of society, ‘for the unlearned and poor’ (58). The poems are inspirational and mostly seek to encourage the poor to be satisfied with their lot. Green suggests that in one particular poem, ‘Epistle of the Labouring Poor’, ‘the gospel message conveyed...gives us a clearer impression of Patrick’s evangelical fervour as a young clergyman than is to be found anywhere in his later writings’ (175).

Considerably later in his life, in 1835, Patrick wrote a much admired pamphlet entitled ‘The Signs of the Times’:

This document set out his political beliefs in a measured and restrained style. The majority of the contents were aimed at defending the

established Church...Although the Church of England was best suited to be the Church supported by the state, there should be full liberty of conscience and all religions should be tolerated (Green, 2010: 191).

In a more secular context, ‘The Signs of the Times’ also argues for the right to freedom of speech, and supports the civilised values essential to any nation state:

If there be one privilege greater than another, in all our charter of liberty, it is that which consists in full permission to write and speak our sentiments with propriety and decorum. Take but this privilege away, under any name or pretence, and you sap and undermine the foundation, and ruin the very fabric of our freedom. No cause is good that will not admit of discussion; and no number of men can long benefit any undertaking by force and violence...Try to convince rather by reasoning than by violence: always taking the Scriptures for your rule of faith and practice; common sense and common decency will guide you, - your good conduct will go far towards recommending your good cause, - God will approve, - man will be convinced, - and the wicked will be intimidated and abashed, and you will finally prevail (quoted in Green, 2010: 191).

‘Patrick always considered it to be part of his role as a clergyman to make a public contribution to discussions of the major issues of the day’ (181). He had an eclectic range of interests which ranged from his spirited opposition to the widespread use of capital punishment, through his rejection of the custom of duelling, to his intellectual curiosity about new developments in medicine, such as ether. This was part of his wider ministry in which he was a relentless writer of restrained but strongly argued letters to the editor, as well as the co-author of petitions to Parliament. Patrick did not support the abolition of capital punishment in its entirety but abhorred the fact that in 1830 220 offences were defined as capital crimes. He disliked the indiscriminate use of capital punishment so that ‘if a man steals a sheep, or breaks into a dwelling house burglariously...he will be hanged. If, at the same time, he murders the owners, he will only be hanged’ (quoted in Green, 2010: 185). Another example of Patrick’s public conscience occurred when ‘He...wrote to the Master of the Ordnance advocating (with diagrams) improvements to the musket used by the British army, and an exploding projectile to be used in naval warfare’ (Green, 2005: 12). In general Patrick gives the impression of an

informed individual, possessed of a reformist tendency, and progressive and liberal in temperament. He was always a passionate advocate of the benefits of education, and during his incumbency at Haworth, and due largely to his unflagging efforts, an Anglican Sunday School and day school were established. His enlightened stance on so many centrally important aspects of national life finds an immediate affinity with Brontë's own highly developed sense of social conscience and commitment to the reform of laws and the shift in societal attitudes that affected middle class women. She was indeed her father's daughter in this, as well as in so many other ways.

Nowhere was this more evident than in Brontë's own evangelical faith, although this was more complex than Patrick's essentially simple form of Christianity. Alexander and Smith have summarized Patrick's religious beliefs in this way:

Mr Brontë's Christianity was an orthodox Trinitarianism based on the Bible and summed up in the Apostles' Creed. He emphasized the possibility and need for conversion from sin, and Christ's command to 'love one another'...religion was the only source of true happiness (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 424).

Alexander and Smith show that 'Hell was real to him' but that he also stressed 'God's love and mercy to all believers' (424).

Though none of his children accepted the Christian faith on such simple terms, its essentials formed the basis of Anne's and Charlotte's beliefs, and probably those of their sister Maria, modified by their unorthodox faith in the doctrine of universal salvation (425).

Brontë's belief in universal salvation was apparently not shared by Patrick, although, as I shall go on to indicate, the noted Brontë scholar, Juliet Barker, feels that he did secretly sympathise with the doctrine.

The doctrine of universal salvation is defined thus by Alexander and Smith:

Universalism, or apocatastasis, [is] the belief that hell is purgative and therefore temporary, and that ultimately all free moral creatures – angels, men and devils – will share in the grace of salvation (516).

Moravians and Unitarians believed in universal salvation, but it had minimal, and then covert, support within Church of England circles.

A close analysis of Brontë's correspondence with the Rev David Thom of Liverpool, a Universalist, probably offers us the best insights into her belief in universal salvation. On 30 December 1848, a few months before she died, in response to Thom, she explained that she had long held a deep belief in this doctrine. She wrote:

with a trembling hope at first, and afterwards with a firm and glad conviction of its truth. I drew it secretly from my own heart and from the word of God before I knew that any other held it. And since then it has ever been a source of true delight to me to find the same views either timidly suggested or boldly advocated by benevolent and thoughtful minds (quoted in Barker, 1994: 580-581).

Rev Thom was a renowned supporter of universal salvation and wrote several books on this doctrine such as *The Assurance of Faith: or Calvinism Identified with Universalism* (2 vols., 1828) and *Dialogues on Universal Salvation and Topics Connected Therewith* (1838; 2nd edition 1847; 3rd edition 1855). As Barker has shown:

He had written Acton Bell an enthusiastic and flattering letter, expressing the pleasure he had derived from the Bells' novels but especially congratulating her on her espousal of the doctrine of universal salvation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (Barker, 1994: 580).

Brontë felt gratified by Thom's letter of support, and in response she wrote:

I have given as many hints in support of the doctrine as I could venture to introduce into a work of that description. They are however *mere* suggestions, and as such I trust you will receive them (quoted in Barker, 1994: 581).

Barker has commented on Brontë's letter to Thom:

Though Anne's letter suggests she had discovered the idea of Universal Salvation for herself, I suspect that she was probably influenced by her father. Though he could not preach the doctrine openly, because

Anglican clergymen who did so were liable to be deprived of their livings, his liberal attitude towards, for instance, criminals... suggests that he did not believe in eternal damnation. It is also significant, I think, that Charlotte was also a believer in Universal Salvation. In 1850 she rounded on Miss Wooler who had dared to repeat clerical criticism of Charlotte's books: "I am sorry the Clergy do not like the doctrine of Universal Salvation; I think it a great pity for their sakes, but surely they are not so unreasonable as to expect me to deny or suppress what I believe the truth!" (941-2).

Barker's belief that Patrick Brontë secretly supported universal salvation is obviously radical, but seems plausible, thereby strengthening the argument that Patrick influenced Brontë in many ways, especially in the religious context.

Another revealing incident regarding Brontë and this controversial doctrine was her crisis of religious faith in 1837 when she was fifteen years old and studying at Miss Wooler's Roe Head School near Dewsbury, where Charlotte was now a teacher. Brontë's health had steadily deteriorated, and, although Miss Wooler diagnosed this as the result of a common cold, Charlotte was far more alarmed and disputed Miss Wooler's diagnosis. Eventually Brontë requested that she be allowed to consult the dissenting clergyman, the Rev James La Trobe, the minister and teacher of the Moravian chapel and school at Well House in nearby Mirfield. Barker shows Brontë 'had an almost embarrassing choice of [Anglican] ministers to call on in her hour of need' (283). However 'the whole circle of Dewsbury clergymen seems to have been hard-line and unduly censorious in its attitudes' (282) and 'Patrick himself had incurred their disapproval with his liberal views on politics and religion and, much later, Charlotte was to shock them with *Jane Eyre*' (282). Barker argues that 'the fact that [Brontë], an Anglican clergyman's daughter herself, chose instead to turn to a stranger and a minister of the Moravian church, suggests a rejection of the values of the Dewsbury circle' (283). La Trobe discovered that Brontë was suffering from a religious crisis about her own salvation. This was the direct consequence of the Dewsbury circle's Calvinist views and adherence to the doctrines of personal election and reprobation. La Trobe wrote:

I found her well acquainted with the main truths of the Bible respecting our salvation, but seeing them more through the law than the gospel, more as a requirement from God than His gift in His Son, but her heart opened to the sweet views of salvation, pardon, and peace in the blood of

Christ, and she accepted His welcome to the weary and heavy laden sinner, conscious more of her not loving the Lord her God than of acts of enmity to Him (quoted in Barker, 1994: 281).

It is highly significant that Brontë had called for a minister from a specific dissenting faith that believed in universal salvation, and suggests that she had indeed from her childhood adhered to this doctrine, only to find it challenged and disputed when she arrived at Roe Head. The Calvinist doctrines of the Dewsbury circle had so disturbed her that she had fallen gravely ill so that ‘her life hung on a slender thread’ (283).

So far this chapter has explored in much detail the profound influence of Patrick Brontë on his youngest daughter. However, the relationship between Brontë and Emily is, I believe, also crucial, and of secondary importance only to that of Patrick and Brontë. Of course, these two relationships are intrinsically different in that one is parental, the other that between two siblings. Therefore I wish to look very carefully at the relationship between Brontë and Emily. It is clearly evident that the sisters’ relationship, as their early collaborations over the Gondal juvenilia show, was a very close one. Langland claims that ‘the major influence in Anne’s childhood and adolescence was her sister Emily...[an influence which] cannot be underestimated’ (Langland, 1989: 9-10). While Charlotte and Branwell paired up to write the Angrian juvenilia, Emily and Brontë became ‘like twins, inseparable companions’ (Barker, 1994: 185). In *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* Gaskell also confirms that ‘Emily and Anne were bound up in their lives and interests like twins’ (Gaskell, 1857: 178). Ellen Nussey claimed that Emily and Brontë were closer even than Charlotte and Emily, or Charlotte and Brontë, or Charlotte and Branwell. Chitham suggests that Brontë’s more phlegmatic temperament was a soothing antidote to Emily’s more intense personality:

The personal effect of having a calmer sister, less prone to despair and incapable of being dislodged from her personal faith however sorely tried, a person of whom one might write “How still, how happy”, and who was said to have been guarded in infancy by a personal angel, was most important to Emily. She saw Anne as a co-operator, as a lighter part of herself; as one who shared the Gondal world, without whom “merry laugh and cheerful tone” are “fled from our fireside” (Chitham in Chitham and Winniffrith, 1983: 91).

Emily's and Brontë's version of Angria was the kingdom of Gondal, and over the years they wrote about this fantasy world in two genres, in prose and poetry. The earliest preserved poems of Emily and Brontë date from 1836. Chitham has suggested that the earlier poems were destroyed by Patrick Brontë in what he terms 'a parental holocaust' (96-97). But, while many of the Gondal poems are still extant, nothing of the Gondal prose has survived. In terms of Brontë scholarship, this is a tragic loss, because 'without the prose stories of Gondal, which have been lost or destroyed, it is...impossible to re-create that world' (Barker, 1994: 272). The only evidence that we have of what the Gondal prose was like is the Gondal poems that survive, as well as the names and brief details of some of the imaginary places [in Gondal] inserted in Emily Brontë's copy of the Rev J Goldsmith's *A Grammar of General Geography*. However, Lucasta Miller argues that the Gondal poems are not in fact of any substantial help in guiding us towards a more informed understanding of the Gondal prose: 'Posterity has been unable to do more than guess at the contents of this shadowy [Gondal] world, since Gondal allusions in the poetry are hard to interpret without the prose chronicles' (Miller, 2002: 182).

Miller shows that 'unlike Charlotte, who eventually abandoned Angria, Emily and Anne had continued not just to chronicle the Gondal saga but to "play" at it, taking on the roles of its dramatis personae in private games' (182). Emily's diary paper of 31 July 1845 contains two most illuminating comments about the sustained involvement of the two sisters in their Gondal project. The first comment describes a boring train trip to York, during which Emily and Brontë whiled away the time by fantasizing that they were Gondal characters. This is quite remarkable if we remember that Emily was nearly twenty-seven and Brontë was twenty-five. Emily wrote:

during our excursion we were Ronald Macelgin, Henry Angora, Juliet Augusteena, Rosobelle ?Esualdar, Ella and Julian Egramon[t] Catherine Navarre and Cordelia Fitzaphnold escaping from the palaces of Instruction to join the Royalists who are hard driven at present by the victorious Republicans (quoted in Miller, 2002: 182).

Emily's diary paper continues:

The Gondals still flo[u]rish bright as ever...I am at present writing a work on the First Wars – Anne has been writing some articles on this and a book by Henry Sophona – We intend sticking firm by the rascals as

long as they delight us which I am glad to say they do at present (quoted in Miller, 2002: 182).

The diary paper implies that, even in their twenties, the sisters continued to collaborate enthusiastically and possibly rather childishly over Gondal. But, while this primary evidence cannot obviously be disputed, it appears that Emily not only did most of the actual writing of the Gondal juvenilia, but also obtained more pleasure from the process.

There has been much speculation about how the Gondal prose became misplaced. In 1896 in his critical work *Charlotte Brontë and her Circle*, Clement Shorter suggested that Charlotte had probably destroyed Emily's and Brontë's letters and literary effects. Miller also points out that '[a] number of commentators have since concluded that Charlotte destroyed the Gondal legacy' (Miller, 2002: 183). These commentators included Winifred Gérin (1971: 262-263, 245) and the prominent critic Stevie Davies (1994: 238). But Miller warns:

In *A Life of Emily Brontë* (Oxford, 1987), Edward Chitham, however, suggests that Emily and Anne destroyed Gondal themselves, speculating, somewhat colourfully, that they either tipped the manuscripts on to a bonfire or threw them down the well (p.218) (Miller, 2002: 296).

Miller devotes an entire chapter, 'Interpreting Emily', to a painstaking and scholarly analysis of the likely possibility that Charlotte destroyed the Gondal prose. Her focus is essentially concerned with Emily, and more specifically with Charlotte's ambivalent relationship with Emily. Miller's principal interest is definitely not with Brontë, who merely exists in the margins of the analysis as a shadowy other, and therefore her intriguing study is not strictly relevant to the focus of my own chapter.

There are evident thematic and technical affinities between Brontë's work and *Wuthering Heights*, but the possible mutual influences and intertextual connections are complex and cannot be traced except in a thorough and detailed analysis. For that reason, they lie beyond the scope of this study.

While Brontë's relationships with her father and with Emily are very important influences on the shape of her writing, this is not so in the case of Charlotte. Chapter 1 of my thesis has already discussed Charlotte's problematic relationship with Brontë, and has cited

comments such as those of Elizabeth Langland, who refers to ‘the inevitable and longstanding friction between Charlotte and Anne’ (Langland, 1989: 50) and who argues that ‘we [must] acknowledge the differences [between the sisters rather] than persist in a romantic myth of oneness’ (41). Dismaying as this notion may be to traditional Brontë conservatives, it seems that Charlotte never had a genuinely high regard for the quality of Brontë’s writing or indeed a particularly close connection with her youngest sibling. Phyllis Bentley writes that ‘To Charlotte Anne was always the little sister....Though there was a deep affection between them, this was not quite so close an intimacy as between Charlotte and her other sister’ (Bentley, 1969: 49). Juliet Barker shows that Charlotte had a ‘low opinion of Anne’s talents’ (Barker, 1994: 596). Charlotte was less upset to lose Brontë than to lose Emily, writing:

[Anne’s] quiet – Christian death did not rend my heart as Emily’s stern, simple, undemonstrative end did – I let Anne go to God and felt He had a right to her [sic] I could hardly let Emily go – I wanted to hold her back then – and I want her back hourly now – Anne, from her childhood seemed preparing for an early death – Emily’s spirit seemed strong enough to bear her to fullness of years (quoted in Barker, 1994: 595).

Barker explains that

Anne’s early death was not as tragic [to Charlotte] as Emily’s, or even Branwell’s, because there was not the same sense of unfulfilled promise. As Charlotte could not admit to having this feeling, even to herself, she found acceptance of Anne’s death in believing that her sister was glad to die (596).

Langland points to the predictable differences between the three sisters, but the subtext suggests that she is thinking especially of Anne and Charlotte’s problematic relationship:

Previous studies of the Brontës have tended to focus on the close working relationship the sisters shared, a literary bond forged in childhood through the mythical worlds they jointly created. Less attention has been paid to the tensions and divergent interests among the three famous women, but it is here we must now focus because it is obvious that three people of such talent, even genius, and of increasingly divergent experiences as they achieved maturity would necessarily produce very

different kinds of novels, often to the distaste of one another (Langland, 1989: 2).

If Charlotte was not a major influence on Brontë, Branwell certainly was, but always in a pejorative manner. ‘There is little evidence of rapport between the brother and youngest sister’ (7). Brontë’s difficult relationship with Branwell contributed substantially to the development of her feminist sympathies. This was for two separate but related reasons. The first involved the way in which Branwell, as the only boy in the family, automatically received privileges from his father which were not granted to the sisters. The second reason is highlighted by Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith, who write that the impact of Branwell’s ‘downward slide into drink, drugs, and despair’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 498) was an undoubted pivotal influence on the moral purpose and content of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. This argument is corroborated by Juliet Barker, who claims that Brontë’s model for Arthur Huntingdon ‘was her brother Branwell’ (Barker, 1994: 530).

The insistent focus on the way in which women are denied access to economic, educational, and other resources in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and, to a lesser extent, in *Agnes Grey*, is very likely the consequence in part of Brontë’s resentment of the sustained uneven allocation of these resources in the family. Gaskell’s disapproval of the way in which Patrick treated Branwell differently from, and better than, the girls, simply because Branwell was a boy, is clearly conveyed in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë*. This positioning of Gaskell’s biography as a reliable source may seem inconsistent with my argument elsewhere suggesting that Gaskell’s assessment, such as her views regarding Patrick and Anne, is at times flawed. However there is undoubted value in her estimation of Branwell’s favoured status. A useful example of Branwell’s superior status at the Haworth parsonage is seen in the following extract from the biography:

In the middle of the summer of 1835, a great family plan was mooted at the parsonage. The question was, to what trade or profession should Branwell be brought up? He was now nearly eighteen; it was time to decide. He was very clever, no doubt; perhaps, to begin with, the greatest genius in this rare family. The sisters hardly recognized their own, or each others’ powers, but they knew *his*. The father, ignorant of many failings in moral conduct, did proud homage to the great gifts of his son; for Branwell’s talents were readily and willingly brought out for the entertainment of others (Gaskell, 1857: 153-154).

What is especially conspicuous in this passage is the sisters' willing concurrence that only Branwell's future is significant. There is no dispute, no challenge to the theory that all the family's resources must be devoted to Branwell. In fact the passage suggests the father and sisters' virtually idolatrous stance towards Branwell. The way in which the sisters collaborated with their own oppression by patriarchy is extremely telling, and reminds us of Milicent's remark in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to her husband Ralph, who has complained of her passivity. Milicent explains: 'I thought you liked to be yielded to, and I can't alter now' (Anne Brontë, 1848: 244). She has been culturally conditioned by patriarchal society into adopting this submissive behaviour. Her compliant attitude reflects the similar attitude of the Brontë sisters.

Gaskell explains that the family agreed that Branwell should become a painter:

But they all thought there could be no doubt about Branwell's talent for drawing...his family augured truly that, if Branwell had but the opportunity...he might turn out a great painter (Gaskell, 1857: 155).

The word 'opportunity' in this extract is crucial because Branwell's sisters were denied similar opportunities. When, after much family consultation, Branwell was sent to study at the Royal Academy in London. Gaskell explains wryly:

All his home kindred were thinking how they could best forward his views, and how help him up the pinnacle where he desired to be...these are not the first sisters who have laid their lives as a sacrifice before their brother's idolized wish. Would to God they might be the last who met with such a miserable return! (156)

Charlotte knew very well that her father 'would have enough to do with his limited income, should Branwell be placed at the Royal Academy' (156), and therefore she felt it incumbent on her, as the oldest sister, to look for a remunerated position as a teacher. She found employment with her former school mistress, Miss Wooler, at Roe Head school, but she was very unhappy: 'I am sad – very sad – at the thoughts of leaving home; but duty – necessity – these are stern mistresses, who will not be disobeyed' (156). Soon Emily, too, went to work as a

teacher at a school in Halifax with nearly forty pupils. Charlotte felt desperately worried about Emily, writing to a friend:

I have had one letter from her since her departure...It gives an appalling account of her duties; hard labour from six in the morning to eleven at night, with only one half-hour of exercise between. This is slavery. I fear she can never stand it (165).

Gaskell explained that the sisters ‘felt that it was [their] duty to relieve their father of the burden of their support, if not entirely, or that of all three, at least that of one or two’ (165). What is so striking is the apparent willingness with which the sisters accepted the injustice of the situation, and their lack of resentment towards Branwell, even though he had not persisted with his studies at the Royal Academy. Gaskell explains tactfully:

I doubt whether Branwell was maintaining himself at this time. For some unexplained reason, he had given up the idea of becoming a student of painting at the Royal Academy, and his prospects in life were uncertain, and had yet to be settled. So Charlotte had quietly to take up her burden of teaching again, and return to her previous monotonous life (182).

Thus, while the spoiled son frittered away his educational opportunities, which exhausted the family’s slender financial resources, the patient, uncomplaining sisters took up the slack, either working in uncongenial teaching positions, or desperately casting around for a more stable and pleasant form of employment.

Lyndall Gordon writes that ‘Mr Brontë never showed the same anguish at the deaths of his daughters’ (Gordon, 1995: 184) as he did at the death of Branwell. Gordon continues:

Other comments of Charlotte after Branwell’s death bristle with jealousy for Papa’s favour: ‘My poor father naturally thought more of his *only* son than of his daughters, and, much and long as he [Patrick] had suffered on his [Branwell’s] account, he cried out for his loss like David for that of Absalom – my son! my son! – and refused at first to be comforted’ (Gordon, 1995: 184).

The way in which Patrick Brontë favoured his only son was typical of Victorian patriarchal society, and therefore it is unjust to criticise Patrick too harshly. He was only doing what countless other fathers around the British Isles were doing. But this does not minimise the acute sense of injustice and inferiority that the sisters obviously felt. While Gaskell's biography naturally focuses on Charlotte's reaction, it is reasonable to assume that Brontë (and Emily) experienced similar emotions of resentment and jealousy. Thus my chapter argues that Brontë's own experiences of the denial of opportunities because she was a woman, at the hands of Branwell and his father, find powerful resonance in her fiction.

The second way in which Branwell unconsciously helped to shape the direction of Brontë's fiction lay in his increasing dependence on substance abuse and Brontë's sense of the degradation and humiliation that he, the son of the vicar, brought to his family's name. Her silent observation of her brother's moral and physical degeneration had started several years before Branwell's untimely death on 24 September 1848 at the age of thirty-one, only a few months before her own death on 28 May 1849. Brontë was employed as a governess by the Robinson family of Thorp Green Hall near York from May 1840 until June 1845. Branwell himself arrived at Thorp Green in January 1843, employed as tutor to the only son, Edmund Robinson, and remaining there until his suspiciously sudden dismissal by the Reverend Edmund Robinson in July 1845. Gaskell alleges in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* that there was an affair between Branwell and Lydia Robinson, his employer's wife, but Alexander and Smith deny this, arguing that there was 'little evidence about an illicit affair' (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 498). On the other hand, in Brontë's Diary Paper of 31 July 1845, the same month of Branwell's dismissal from Thorp Green, she writes that she has just 'escaped' from Thorp Green, where she had witnessed 'some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human nature' (quoted in Alexander and Smith, 2006: 165). When one integrates these comments with her expression of hope that Branwell 'will be better and do better' (165), and the fact that she never contradicted the truth of the affair, it seems a reasonable assumption that what she observed at Thorp Green may well have involved a liaison between Branwell and Lydia Robinson. Of course, this is speculative and Brontë could merely have been referring to Branwell's dissipated ways.

After Branwell's dismissal from Thorp Green, he returned to the Parsonage at Haworth and remained there for the last three years of his life, during which time his debauched behaviour caused great distress and embarrassment to his family. In Charlotte's 'Biographical Notice of

Ellis and Acton Bell' written in September 1850 for the second edition of *Wuthering Heights*, her comments also seem to point unambiguously to the major impact that Branwell's behaviour had on Brontë:

She had, in the course of her life, been called on to contemplate near at hand, and for a long time, the terrible effects of talents misused and faculties abused; hers was naturally a sensitive, reserved, and dejected nature; what she saw sank very deeply into her mind; it did her harm. She brooded over it till she believed it to be a duty to reproduce every detail [. . .] as a warning to others (quoted in Langland, 1989: 47).

Despite the apologetic and defensive nature of Charlotte's remarks, they appear to corroborate Brontë's own comments in the Diary Paper.

So far this chapter has looked at Brontë's relationships with her family members, and has shown how these familial influences, to a greater or lesser degree, shaped the direction of her fiction. My analysis will now turn to a careful consideration of Brontë's experiences as a governess and of how these powerfully influenced her critique of the lot of the governess in *Agnes Grey*. The unfortunate plight of the governess in Victorian society has already been discussed at length in Chapter 2, but the difficulties confronting the position of the governess when in this situation now become more real as we observe Brontë herself struggling to cope in this hostile environment.

Her first employment came when she was nineteen and found herself a position as governess to the two older children of the wealthy and well known Ingham family at Blake Hall, near Mirfield. But this only lasted from April to December 1839, when she was dismissed. 'Despite having done her best to instill some order and learning into her charges, the Inghams had found no visible improvement in them and held Anne responsible' (Barker, 1994: 318). Brontë's two charges, a boy, Cunliffe, who was six, and his five-year-old sister, Mary, proved impossible for her to discipline. In a letter to Ellen Nussey, Charlotte described her sister's invidious position at Blake Hall:

both her pupils are desperate little dunces – neither of them can read and sometimes they even profess a profound ignorance of their Alphabet – the worst of it is the little monkies [sic] are excessively indulged and she is not empowered to inflict any punishment she is requested when they

misbehave themselves to inform their Mamma – which she says is utterly out of the question as in that case she might be making complaints from morning till night – ‘So she alternately scolds, coaxes and threatens – sticks always to her first word and gets on as well as she can’ (quoted in Barker, 1994: 308).

This account of Brontë’s dismal experience at Blake Hall is very similar to Agnes Grey’s first position as a governess. But within five months, by May 1840, she had obtained a second position, this time, as mentioned earlier, as governess to four of the five children of the Rev Edmund Robinson of Thorp Green, near York.

This was the furthest away from home that any of the girls had gone as governess. It was also the most prestigious appointment that any of them had ever had. The Robinsons lived in grand style...[they] employed three male and seven female servants, as well as a governess, all of whom lived in (329).

Brontë’s salary was a handsome forty pounds a year, despite her possessing only average qualifications for such a superior position. Nevertheless in her diary paper of 30 July 1841, she wrote of her position at Thorp Green: ‘I dislike the situation and wish to change it for another’ (quoted in Barker, 1994: 359). Nevertheless she continued in this position until June 1845. She was much loved by the Robinson daughters and was obviously regarded very highly by the Robinson parents, so much so, that she was able successfully to recommend Branwell as tutor to the Robinson son, Edmund. It is important to note that it was Brontë who submitted her resignation to the Robinsons, and not the reverse. The Robinsons were perfectly satisfied with her performance and had presumably hoped that she would continue as their governess for many more years. It is likely that she resigned in part because she could no longer endure observing Branwell’s degrading liaison with Mrs Robinson if, as I have already discussed, this was the case. But it is also noteworthy that she never described her general experience at Thorp Green in ecstatic terms. After she had resigned in 1845, she happened to reread her diary paper of 1841. She now commented:

How many things have happened since it was written – some pleasant some far otherwise – Yet I was then at Thorp Green and now I am only

<just>escaped from it – I was wishing to leave <it> then and if I had known that I had four years longer to stay how wretched I should have been...but during my stay I have had some very unpleasant and undreamt of experience of human <nature? nature – (quoted in Barker, 1994: 465).

This version of her life at Thorp Green is hardly rosy. Barker suggests that

Anne was aware of the relationship between her brother and Mrs Robinson, though not necessarily that it was about to be exposed. As she must have served out her notice, her resignation would seem to have been prompted by a growing sense of disgust with Mrs Robinson and her children rather than fear of a scandal involving her brother. Five years with the Robinsons had brought her to the end of her endurance (466).

Thus we can detect a definite ambivalence in Brontë's stance regarding her time at Thorp Green. We have very few of her comments about her experiences as a governess, and what we have are reticent and brief. But her fictional account of the governess in *Agnes Grey* is clearly hostile and bitter about the injustices of a governess's life.

Charlotte was far more forthright about her own unhappy fortunes as a governess, writing quite openly and unambiguously about them in her letters. Writing to Emily on 8 June 1839, soon after embarking on her first position as a governess, Charlotte writes:

I said in my last letter that Mrs Sidgwick did not know me. I now begin to find that she does not intend to know me, that she cares nothing in the world about me except to contrive how the greatest possible quantity of labour may be squeezed out of me....I see now more clearly than I have ever done before that a private governess has no existence, is not considered as a living and rational being (quoted in Smith, 1995: 191).

This first position had never been seen as a permanent one, but a few months later, after Charlotte had been back home for a while, she wrote to her friend Ellen Nussey on 21 December, 1839:

I intend to force myself to take another situation when I can get one. though [sic] I *hate* and *abhor* the very thoughts of governesship [sic] - But I must do it and therefore, I heartily wish I could hear of a Family

where they want such a commodity as a Governess (quoted in Smith, 1995: 206).

This intense hatred of the role of the governess may have been expressed more openly and more powerfully by Charlotte than by the quieter, more reserved Brontë, but the passionate sense of injustice and resentment that informs her own critique of the governess in *Agnes Grey* suggests that Brontë, too, strongly disliked the economic necessity that compelled the sisters to seek this kind of work.

My study will now move forward to a careful assessment of Brontë's reading history, of possible authors whom she had herself read as a child or young adult and who may have had a strong influence on the central concerns and the narrative style of her fiction. I concur with the viewpoint of Tom Winnifrith, who warns that when we try to trace literary influences on the Brontës, it is often very difficult to distinguish conjecture from certainty. He writes:

A considerable amount of work has gone into tracing literary influences on the Brontës. Inevitably much of this work is conjectural; a fancied parallel between some aspect of the Brontës' work and some other work of English literature may be coincidental or indirect. The Brontës could use the same image as Shakespeare and the same episode as Scott without conscious or unconscious plagiarism...Of course Scott and Shakespeare, together with the Bible, are the most obvious sources for the Brontës to draw upon. Not only does the multiplicity of allusions and borrowings make coincidence impossible in every case, but we also have direct evidence for the Brontës' deriving inspiration from these authors. It is when we come to less tangible pieces of evidence that conjecture must be distinguished from certainty (Winnifrith, 1973: 84).

The two writers who are mentioned twice here by Winnifrith are the novelist Sir Walter Scott (1771-1832) and Shakespeare. Brontë scholars are in general agreement with Winnifrith that Scott, as well as the poet William Cowper (1731-1800), powerfully shaped Brontë's fiction.

Other writers and texts that were pivotal influences in Brontë's reading history were John Bunyan's allegory *The Pilgrim's Progress, from this World to that which is to come* (1678) and Mary Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). The Bible is another obvious significant source, obvious because of the Brontë family's religious persuasions and the fact that Patrick Brontë was a man of the cloth. A recent article by Paul Edmondson (January 2011: 64-

74) has shown the extent to which Brontë's novels are filled with intertextual references to Shakespeare. However, there has been very little in the critical literature on the possible influence of Samuel Richardson's work on Brontë's novels, and therefore my study suggests that the influence of Richardson on Brontë is not well documented but nevertheless very persuasive.

Mindful of Winnifrith's distinction between conjecture and certainty, this chapter will argue that Richardson is an important formative influence on Brontë's reading history. This suggestion is based on two conspicuous similarities between Richardson and Brontë: firstly, that their novels are invariably informed by a powerful concern for the welfare of women; and secondly, that these same novels reflect their authors' shared interest in the potential of narrative technique.

Samuel Richardson (1689-1761) is best remembered for his three important novels *Pamela, or Virtue Rewarded* (1740), *Clarissa Harlowe* (1747-8), and *The History of Sir Charles Grandison* (1753-4). All three are epistolary novels in which Richardson experiments with different first person narrators, and they thus have an immediate affinity with the fact that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is also an epistolary novel in which Brontë uses a variety of first person female narratives, as well as the first person male voice of Gilbert Markham. Richardson's novels all explore the plight of women, usually unmarried single women, in a patriarchal world, thus again linking with the feminist critique in Brontë's fiction.

The Brontës' familiarity with the work of Samuel Richardson is well documented. In his chapter 'The Brontës and their Books' (Winnifrith, 1973), Winnifrith claims that '[i]t is not difficult to trace parallels between Richardson and the Brontës' (87). This is especially evident with regard to Charlotte. A pivotal example of how Charlotte was well aware of Richardson's works is her important letter of 10 December 1840 to the poet Hartley Coleridge. In this letter, she makes several allusions to Richardson, as for example 'the pith and perseverance of a Richardson' (quoted in Smith, 1995: 239). This letter is significant because Charlotte had sent an early draft of *Ashworth*, an incomplete, untitled story written in 1840-41, to Coleridge, whose opinion as to the merits of the draft she keenly anticipated. Coleridge had presumably criticized the length of the draft, a comment which elicited Charlotte's reference to the extreme lengths of Richardson's novels. Referring to her draft, Charlotte writes:

I should have made quite a <Sir Charles Grandison > ‘Richardsonian’ Concern of it [sic] Mr West should have been my Sir Charles Grandison – Percy my Mr B - and the ladies <you> should have represented - Pamela, Clarissa [sic] Harriet Byron, etc (quoted in Smith, 236).

These textual references to Richardson’s fiction reflect Charlotte’s thorough familiarity with his characters. For example, ‘Mr B’ is the principal male character in *Pamela*, a rake who tries to seduce Pamela, but who eventually marries her and reforms. ‘Harriet Byron’ eventually marries Sir Charles Grandison in Richardson’s novel of that name.

In common with Winnifrith, Christine Alexander also identifies literary affinities between Richardson and Charlotte Brontë. Alexander refers to *The Spell, an Extravaganza*, a novella in the Glass Town and Angrian juvenilia, in which Charlotte ‘experiments with the use of letters and extracts from a journal as part of her text, a possible borrowing from Richardson’ (Alexander, 1983: 232). Alexander also claims that Charlotte’s ‘early penchant for love stories was fostered by such popular works as *Evelina* and *Clarissa*’ (21). Thus it seems unambiguously clear that Charlotte was thoroughly conversant with Richardson’s fiction and that he constituted an important presence in her reading history.

However, Brontë’s own specific links with Richardson are much more tenuous and much less well documented. Nevertheless they do exist and are mentioned by a very few critics. For example, Alexander and Smith mention the two occasions when Brontë’s novels represent situations akin to those depicted by Richardson:

Anne Brontë had perhaps pondered...seriously on Richardson’s attitude to marriage, for in *Agnes Grey*, like Pamela, she dismisses the notion that ‘reformed rakes make the best husbands’, and shows Rosalie Murray bitterly repenting her marriage to Sir Thomas Ashby. In *Tenant*, Helen rashly thinks she can recall Huntingdon to ‘the path of virtue’, as Clarissa hopes to reclaim Lovelace (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 429).

In general, however, most Brontë scholars are either unaware of the affinities between Brontë and Richardson, or consider these to be so superficial that they are unworthy of mention. Thus Juliet Barker omits Richardson completely when discussing the Brontës’, let alone Anne’s, reading history. Elizabeth Langland also leaves Richardson out of her otherwise detailed study of Brontë’s literary precursors.

Pamela has particularly unmistakable connections with Brontë's fiction. The structural affinities are quite obvious. Both *Pamela* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* open with a *Preface*. Both *Prefaces* go to great pains to explain the serious intentions of the authors. In *Pamela*, the *Preface by the Editor* outlines what he [the Editor] terms 'the laudable and worthy recommendations' (Richardson, 1740: 31) of the novel. There are nine 'recommendations', or authorial intentions. The first 'recommendation' is 'to *divert* and *entertain*, and at the same time to *instruct* and *improve* the minds of the YOUTH of both sexes' (31). Another 'recommendation' is 'to paint VICE in its proper colours, to make it *deservedly odious*; and to set VIRTUE in its own amiable light, to make it look *lovely*' (31). Richardson's didactic and moral impulse, as well as his intention that his audience include young people of both sexes, is very similar to the sentiments expressed in the *Preface to the Second Edition of The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader...I wished to tell the truth...I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense [sic]...Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveler, or to cover them with branches and flowers? O Reader! If there were less of this delicate concealment of facts – this whispering 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace, there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience...I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet...I shall not limit my ambition to this...if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too; and when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth...I *will* speak it (Anne Brontë, 1848: 3).

In *Pamela*, in the *Preface by the Editor*, another of Richardson's 'recommendations' is 'to set forth in the most exemplary lights...the social duties' (Richardson, 1740: 31). Although he does not mention to whom 'the social duties' belong, it could be that his words embody a social critique in which he is arguing for improvements in eighteenth-century society. In light of the feminist sympathies that inform *Pamela*, it is probable that Richardson's focus on the issue of 'social duties' refers to the treatment of women in a patriarchal society. This social awareness again finds resonance in Brontë's explanation in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that she wishes 'to reform the errors and abuses of society' (Anne Brontë, 1848: 3). Finally, Richardson's *Preface* claims that the letters in the novel 'have their foundation both in *Truth* and *Nature*' (Richardson, 1740: 31), which again matches Brontë's claim that 'I know that such characters [the characters

in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*] do exist’ (Anne Brontë, 1848: 4). In these remarks, Richardson and Brontë are defending the psychological verisimilitude of their fictional characters, and arguing that these characters employ a realistic credibility in their personalities and worldviews. However there is one difference between the two *Prefaces* in that Brontë speaks to her readers unambiguously as the author, Acton Bell, whilst in *Pamela* Richardson distinguishes between the Author and the Editor, explaining that ‘an *Editor* can judge with an impartiality which is rarely to be found in an *Author*’³ (Richardson, 1740: 31). Richardson thus screens himself behind the persona of the Editor which is completely antithetical to Brontë’s purpose, although perhaps this is not strictly true because Brontë is also concealing her true identity behind her pseudonym of Acton Bell. However, I feel that the writers’ reasons for this concealment are very different in intention.

Although *Pamela* comprises four volumes, as I have indicated previously, the true interest undoubtedly lies with the first two volumes. Their narrative structure is extremely complex and difficult to unravel. For example, Volume I consists of thirty two letters, yet this last letter, letter 32, then continues into Volume II and only concludes at the very end of Volume II. The letters are written largely by the protagonist, the working class serving maid, Pamela, to either or both of her parents, Mr and Mrs Andrews. Several letters are written by Mr Andrews to Pamela, but there are no letters from Mrs Andrews, thus suggesting a silencing of this female voice. Letters 31 and 32 are divided by a seven page Editorial Commentary in which the Editor functions as an omniscient narrator who explains the actions of the various characters, and comments on these actions. This Editorial Commentary involves a further narrative layer because it includes two letters from two individuals other than Pamela and Mr Andrews. Letter 32 is of such great length because, enclosed within it, are innumerable Journal entries. Thus, what is ostensibly an extremely long letter has in fact become a Journal. But Pamela’s Journal entries are identical to her previous letters, and at one stage she actually refers to them as letters. Each Journal entry is headed by the name of a day in the week, such as ‘WEDNESDAY evening’ (364), but there are no actual dates. Volume II is introduced at an inauspicious phase of the story, and it is difficult to understand why Richardson did this. It is not that Volume I consists of letters, and Volume II of Journal entries, but a rather confused mixture of the two first person narrative genres.

³ All examples of italics in the quotations taken from *Pamela* are Richardson’s own italics.

In *Pamela* Richardson is clearly experimenting with different forms of first person narrative whereby Pamela is empowered by the Editor's deliberate decision to allow her to tell her own story. This experimental approach by Richardson is admirable and ambitious, but is rather confused and at times almost inaccessible. By contrast, Brontë's deployment of different modes of first person narrative, as I will show in Chapter 5, seems relatively sophisticated so that it enhances the story line rather than sabotaging it, as happens at times in *Pamela*.

If we turn away from the narrative structure of *Pamela* and look instead at its content, we note its further feminist affinities with both *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. However this is only true of Volume II of *Pamela*. Volume I is melodramatic and semi-Gothic at times, and describes Mr B's efforts to seduce Pamela at his Bedfordshire home. By Letter 32 Pamela has been incarcerated in Mr B's Lincolnshire mansion. In Volume I Mr B is an archetypal villain who is aided and abetted by Richardson's version of the wicked witch, Mrs Jewkes. The story is one of action and intrigue, but there is little serious analysis or overt social or moral commentary. However Volume II is written in a realist mode and contains serious commentary on important social issues to do with women, such as class, marriage, money, inheritance and primogeniture. Volume II also looks at moral qualities such as prejudice and snobbery, and explains the correct conduct of men and women in marriage. It is difficult not to read *Pamela* as a feminist text. The fact that the narrator is a working class woman who works for her living but who marries into a noble family is surely subversive of established notions of class and gender. This of course is different from Brontë's fiction which only looks at middle class women. The inset story of Sally Godfrey, a girl from a good family who is seduced by Mr B, gives birth to his child, but who is forced to give up her child and live in exile in Jamaica, while Mr B continues to live his life of ease and comfort, points to male hypocrisy. Sally Godfrey is a victim of male selfishness, greed, and lust.

What we find in Richardson are perhaps the seeds of the two core areas of Brontë's fiction on which my study focuses: her concern with the status and social circumstances of women, and her narratology. However, her fiction responds specifically to the conditions pertaining to the mid-Victorian period, and in her narratology, as the subsequent discussion in Chapter 5 of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* will show, there is a much more sophisticated deployment of narrative devices in support of her polemic.

This chapter has looked carefully at Brontë's reading history, arguing that Samuel Richardson plays a pivotal role in the shape and thematic concerns of Brontë's fiction. I have suggested that the affinities between Richardson and Brontë have so far been largely underestimated by revisionist scholarship, but that they would amply reward a full length investigation. The connections between the two writers, both in terms of content and authorial enquiry, definitely exist but require a determined unraveling by an interested researcher.

It is a truism that the identity of every human being is shaped by a plurality of influences. We are the consequence of our familial background, our social class, our economic status, our society, and ultimately our world. This chapter has pointed to the richness and variety of Brontë's world, to the many events and individuals who shaped her and caused her to become the antithesis of the 'nothing, absolutely nothing' 'idiot' predicted by the Angrian tale.

CHAPTER 4: AGNES GREY

Brontë's first novel, *Agnes Grey* (1847), is a perplexing novel. It is perplexing because it is a literary chameleon, a text that can be legitimately interrogated from an unusually large number of perspectives, and a text whose literary worth has received so many different and contradictory assessments from Brontë scholars. Thus feminist critics such as Jill L Matus and Susan Meyer read *Agnes Grey* as a powerful feminist text that engages with issues of power, oppression and resistance, while Winifred Gérin sees the novel as a form of life writing in which Brontë offers a fictional representation of her own experiences as a governess with the Ingham family at Muirfield and the Robinsons of Thorp Green Hall. Gérin's interpretation therefore links the perceived biographical resonances in *Agnes Grey* with its status as a governess novel. However, Betty Jay is principally interested in how *Agnes Grey* 'crucially focuses attention on the ways in which power is organised and sustained within a patriarchal society' (Jay, 2000: 9) and how 'from the outset, the text concerns itself with the many forms of power Agnes must negotiate' (9-10). Jay's reading of the power dynamics in *Agnes Grey* has obvious affinities with that of Matus and Meyer, but Jay investigates the issue of power on a much broader canvas, preferring to look at a number of power hierarchies that inform the novel, including those between parents and children, employers and employees, men and women, the rich and the poor, the middle class and the working class. Of course, all these hierarchies can be shown to conform loosely to a feminist perspective, because they must all be negotiated by Agnes, but Jay's reading of *Agnes Grey* is undoubtedly less specifically feminist than that offered by Matus and Meyer. And, while the interpretations of *Agnes Grey* as a feminist, or governess, or autobiographical text are the most prevalent, the novel has also been variously seen as a pedagogic treatise that looks at education and the place of the child in society, or as a romance, or as a critique of the Anglican priest.

This wide range of readings of the novel therefore suggests very persuasively that Brontë is working with a very large canvas that can support, and is enriched by, a plurality of different and at times mutually exclusive approaches. From this perspective, *Agnes Grey* is indeed a perplexing novel, but a rewarding text because it creates space for so many valid ways to gain access to its multiple meanings and truths. This surfeit of riches can, however, be problematic in that the reader may struggle to identify a principal thematic or ideological framework in which to position his or her reading of the novel. The reader may thus experience difficulty in locating the main thread that weaves its way persistently, if not always obviously, through the narrative.

Indeed, a legitimate criticism of *Agnes Grey* could be that the very abundance of lines of enquiry that inform the novel may have resulted in a certain diffuseness or lack of cohesion in the text. What some will perceive as a great strength of the novel, will be seen as a weakness by others.

Brontë scholars also differ in their evaluation of the literary merits of *Agnes Grey*. Betty Jay makes the telling point that *Agnes Grey* suffered initially because it was published in tandem with *Wuthering Heights*, and that it was also compared unfavourably with the other Brontë governess novel, *Jane Eyre*, published two months previously. It is only recently that *Agnes Grey* has come to enjoy a more positive press in the eyes of an increasing number of Brontë critics. The first chapter of this thesis has looked at the critical response to *Agnes Grey* from its publication in 1847 to the present, and has shown that George Moore in the 1920s was the first person truly to admire the novel. Moore's enthusiastic approach to *Agnes Grey* was not shared by other Brontë scholars of his time, because it was only much later in the 1980s and 1990s that *Agnes Grey* came to be regarded more highly in literary circles. While Moore's claims that '*Agnes Grey* is the most perfect prose narrative in English literature' (Moore, 1924: 219) may seem excessive, his awareness that 'it's more difficult to write a simple story than a complicated one' (219) and that the novel is 'a masterpiece' (219) will today resonate with many readers.

However, the prevailing critical response to *Agnes Grey* in the century after 1847 was usually either totally to ignore the novel while focusing on Charlotte and Emily Brontë's works, or to write disparagingly of its alleged lack of colour and intensity and its impoverished method of characterisation. An excellent example of what I consider to be this unsympathetic approach occurs in the comments of Ernest Raymond in 1947, which were quoted in Chapter 1. Raymond, as we have seen, complains that Brontë's lack of skill 'drove her, in her first novel, into painting her good characters too white and her bad characters too black, [a tendency that]... thus drained the natural life-blood from *Agnes Grey* leaving it, not dead, but anaemic and pale' (Raymond, 1949: 228). Virtually all the early responses to *Agnes Grey* were equally dismissive, or condescending, or overly sentimental. But even as late as 1982, Barbara and Gareth Lloyd Evans' grudging appreciation of the novel is tempered by their patronising attitude:

The result of [Brontë's recollections about her work as a governess] is charming. *Agnes Grey* engages any reader who is prepared to accept the unexceptionable in style and manner, the unsensational in theme and narrative, and the unrelentingly honest in sentiment. Despite the moods

of depression, malcontent and self-indulgence which the novel encompasses, it has a faint sweet smile on its face (Lloyd Evans, 1982: 317).

These same critics' conclusion that '*Agnes Grey* is like a totally unexpected but absolutely inevitable slow, sad smile on the face of the moors outside Haworth parsonage' (320) is consonant with the same kind of simplistic and patronising commentary that is sometimes directed at Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (1853). Some Gaskell critics see *Cranford* as possessing merely a quaint charm, as an uncomplicated story that narrates the conventional lives of a number of single women in a nineteenth century English village. However, more persuasive Gaskell scholars read the novel as a powerful feminist text that engages with the struggles of middle class single women who have been marginalised in a patriarchal society.

Brontë's refined and nuanced use of narrative technique to convey best her novel's central concerns has either largely escaped the notice of the early critics, or has been criticised. Such criticism informs Phyllis Bentley's argument that '*Agnes Grey* has the simplest first-person narrative very slightly motivated' (Bentley, 1948: 150). Claims of this nature are now being disputed by more contemporary critics who are conducting thoughtful and original research into Brontë's narratology. An excellent example is the essay by Sally Howgate (2011: 213-23) which explores Brontë's intelligent and creative use of *Agnes Grey* as the novel's first person female narrator, showing how Agnes's constant and very deliberate swings between self-effacement and self-assertion reflect her strength and courage and strategic skills in the context of her lowly and subordinate status as a governess.

Therefore *Agnes Grey* today receives a much more favourable response from many Brontë critics, including Juliet Barker who writes that

Anne's first novel had many strengths of its own. Enlivened by a quiet humour, it is a far deadlier exposé of the trials of being a governess than her sister's more famous *Jane Eyre*. It is also the first novel to have a plain and ordinary woman as its heroine (Barker, 1994: 503).

And Elizabeth Langland, whose study *Anne Brontë: The Other One* is discussed at some length in this thesis, believes, in common with Moore, that *Agnes Grey* is indeed an 'exquisite novel' (Langland, 1989: 97).

Navigating its way through this welter of different interpretations and responses, my chapter will concur with Langland's reading of *Agnes Grey* as an 'exquisite novel' (97) that validates George Moore's celebratory approach eighty years previously. I will argue that *Agnes Grey* is 'exquisite' for several related reasons. It is 'exquisite' because of the way in which it looks at the life of a poor, single, middle class woman living in a patriarchal society who achieves autonomy and success, especially in terms of her financial and emotional independence, before marriage, not after marriage. Agnes does not need to marry in order to find success or happiness. Although she presents herself as a plain, unprepossessing, quiet and often silent individual, Agnes in fact is a strong, assertive woman possessed of insight and great intelligence, who is arguably much stronger than Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I also find *Agnes Grey* to be an 'exquisite novel' in its celebration both of Agnes's unfailingly high standards of moral conduct, and of the way that she expects no less of others. We meet many thoroughly obnoxious, or selfish, or weak characters in this story, individuals who lack integrity and the courage or will to live their lives and treat others in ethical ways. It is therefore refreshing to observe these individuals through the lens of Agnes's steady, unsentimental and sometimes wryly humorous gaze, and to allow her to shape our understanding of these characters. Her ever-ready willingness to confront those whose conduct is inappropriate, her sensible and practical commentary on such individuals and activities, and her sheer common sense, persuade the reader that she is indeed a fine woman, despite her 'grey' persona. No-one is too great, or too rich, or too powerful, to escape her attention.

My chapter will therefore reject Ernest Raymond's claim that *Agnes Grey* is 'anaemic and pale' (Raymond, 1949: 228) because, beneath her calm, demure exterior, Agnes is a passionate, vivid character who experiences life intensely. *Agnes Grey* is 'exquisite' because it recasts the story of an ordinary woman into something rich and extraordinary. As Barker suggests, Agnes is 'plain and ordinary' (Barker, 1994: 503), but Brontë shows very convincingly that ordinary women can create significance and meaning in their allegedly drab lives. My reading is therefore that *Agnes Grey* is essentially a feminist text, which, through its deployment of Agnes as the novel's sole first-person narrator, interrogates many issues and concerns that confronted single middle class women in Victorian patriarchy. In this way, the various feminist critiques, such as those of the governess, of the family, and of marriage, are neatly integrated within the overarching story of *Agnes Grey*. I will also argue that it is even possible plausibly to locate the

novel's consideration of the Anglican priest, a consideration that might at first glance appear to have no affinities with feminism, within Brontë's feminist purpose. Thus I find Brontë's project to be ambitious and complex, but I believe that she succeeds in this project, and that her novel avoids becoming diffuse and overly loose in structure and methodology. As Sally Howgate claims, *Agnes Grey* is indeed 'a neglected novel written by an underrated author' (Howgate, 2011: 219). George Moore's perceptive comment that '[t]he simple is never commonplace' (Moore, 1924: 222) applies very well to *Agnes Grey*, a novel that documents the life of an allegedly 'simple' woman whose experiences reconfigure the 'commonplace' to become rare and quite remarkable.

My reading of *Agnes Grey* is contingent on what I consider to be the crucial opening lines of the novel:

All true histories contain instruction; though, in some, the treasure may be hard to find, and when found, so trivial in quantity that the dry, shrivelled kernel scarcely compensates for the trouble of cracking the nut. Whether this be the case with my history or not, I am hardly competent to judge; I sometimes think it may prove useful to some, and entertaining to others, but the world may judge for itself (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 1).

Agnes Grey contains many kinds of instruction. A number of Brontë scholars, such as Sally Howgate (Howgate, 2011: 213), Elizabeth Langland (Langland, 1989: 106), and Betty Jay (Jay, 2000: 11) argue convincingly that the novel can be read as a *Bildungsroman* which looks at the various formative life experiences that teach Agnes how to live a purposeful life. By means of Agnes's first-person female narrative, Brontë also teaches her readers about many political, social and moral issues. The novel possesses a powerful didactic impulse in its desire to educate the reader about the difficulties experienced by poor, single, middle class women such as Agnes Grey. A similar agenda is evident in the title of the second chapter 'First lessons in the art of instruction'. It is definitely worthwhile to go to 'the trouble of cracking the nut' (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 1) in *Agnes Grey*, and therefore my chapter will argue that the novel is indeed 'useful' (1) in its portrayal of the story of Agnes Grey and her many life experiences.

Agnes Grey is usually seen as inferior to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. However I prefer to approach *Agnes Grey* not in terms of inferiority or superiority to its sister text, but rather in terms

of difference. It is true that many of the central feminist concerns that inform *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, such as those of marriage, parenting, work opportunities, and the achievement of happiness, also appear in *Agnes Grey*. It is therefore possible in some ways to see *Agnes Grey* as an apprentice novel in which Brontë rehearses and experiments with issues that become more fully developed in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. But there are also substantial differences. As I have already observed, *Agnes Grey* is principally interested in the single middle class woman, whilst *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*'s primary focus falls on the lives of married middle class women. In *Agnes Grey* the critique of marriage is not Brontë's chief concern; it is subordinate to her more general investigation of the plight of the single woman in a patriarchal society. While *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is fundamentally informed by Aunt Maxwell's claim to Helen that 'matrimony is a serious thing' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 125), the same claim cannot be applied to *Agnes Grey*.

A further important difference occurs between the two novels in terms of their narratology. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is structured with a conventional and reassuring first-person male narrative that opens and concludes the story, so that the subversive first-person female narrative is enclosed within, and supported by, the male narrative. However *Agnes Grey* is narrated exclusively by Agnes herself, without the support of a male narrator. This has significant consequences in that Brontë invests Agnes with sole responsibility for telling her own story. This is empowering and liberating, but also potentially dangerous should Agnes fail to convince her reader of the authenticity of her tale. But for me there is an undoubted sense of plausibility and verisimilitude to her story. Brontë wants us to believe that Agnes is telling the truth because, as she claims with the novel's opening lines, 'All true histories contain instruction' (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 1). Therefore it is important that readers accept that the colourful events that inform Agnes's life are sincere fictional representations of things that really do happen, and are not merely the melodramatic figments of the fevered brain of an oppressed governess. At the end of the novel Agnes refers to 'my diary, from which I compiled these pages' (197). We can therefore more easily believe the truth of her story because she is not represented as writing from memory, but from an actual document in which she recorded the events, big and small, of her daily life. Brontë uses the same narrative technique in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where Gilbert, when writing his long letter to J Halford, confirms that he has quoted extensively from Helen's diary and letters. I would therefore argue that Agnes's voice speaks considerably more assertively and

authoritatively to the reader than does Helen's who, to the dismay of feminist critics, is silenced at the end of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

As I have already shown in Chapter 2, the Victorians were deeply interested in the institution of parenting, as well as in the position of the child in Victorian society. This interest is reflected in *Agnes Grey*, where Brontë offers a careful critique of Agnes's family and of the relationship that Agnes experiences with her parents and her sister Mary. The Greys have certainly not raised her to be strong and successful. As the younger of the two daughters, she has, from birth, been infantilised and treated as a feeble, weak individual who is incapable of achieving any degree of autonomy. Brontë is very troubled by the way that patriarchal society infantilises females, whatever their age, because she perceives this to be a practice that diminishes and belittles that individual's self-esteem. Although the context is different, Brontë also deprecates Gilbert's infantilisation of Eliza, and Arthur Huntingdon's infantilisation of Helen, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Just as Brontë's family had sought to protect her from the harsh realities of life, so too does Agnes's family try to cocoon her from the real world. Whilst these intentions are shown to be sincere and totally devoid of malice, Brontë still offers a hostile portrayal of Agnes's family, in particular of her mother, Mrs Grey, for their failure to empower her to become independent and assertive. However, she draws on her inner reserves of strength and determination when, at the age of eighteen, she unexpectedly announces that she wishes to go out to work as a governess. I will argue that she is motivated by her sense of adventure substantially more than by her desire to augment the family's reduced financial circumstances. By means of her account of Agnes's childhood and of her early quest for autonomy and independence, Brontë thus integrates her study of the predicament of the governess with her critique of the family and of parenting.

Brontë vigorously criticises Agnes's parents for their irresponsible and careless behaviour in their failure to prepare her to earn her own living. It was always very possible that Agnes, a poor clergyman's daughter, would be obliged to make her own way in the world as a governess, the only acceptable form of remunerated work for a poor, single, middle class woman in Victorian patriarchy. Patrick Brontë had sent his daughters to Cowan Bridge School with the specific intention of having them educated in the skills and accomplishments that would qualify them to attain good positions as governesses. But the Reverend and Mrs Grey reveal no such foresight. It is true that they give Agnes an excellent home-based education, but there is no

textual evidence that this is with the purpose of preparing her for work as a governess, or indeed for any work. In any case, their persistent infantilising of Agnes militates against the possibility that she will have the inner resources to confront the real world and survive the hardships and indignities experienced by many governesses.

Agnes clearly chafes against this restrictive role imposed on her by her parents:

I, being the younger [daughter] by five or six years, was always regarded as the *child*, and the pet of the family – father, mother, and sister, all combined to spoil me – not by foolish indulgence to render me fractious and ungovernable, but by ceaseless kindness to make me too helpless and dependent, too unfit for buffeting with the cares and turmoils of life (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 2 [emphasis in original]).

It is most significant that Brontë uses the key word ‘dependent’ in this pivotal paragraph because it is this very dependence, this dependence of women on men that society creates in women, that she seeks so earnestly to overcome. My submission is that the acquisition of autonomy and independence, both financial and emotional, is Agnes’s principal victory in this novel, and the reality that Brontë seeks for all middle class women, be they single or married. The same idea is repeated in a more robust manner in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* when Helen Huntingdon complains about a society where men’s rights are elevated above those of women, a society that

would have [a girl] to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant – taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 30).

Brontë’s iconic image of the ‘hot-house plant’ encapsulates her complete rejection of such patriarchal treatment of women.

The Grey children lead impoverishingly isolated lives as they are ‘brought up in the strictest seclusion’ (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 2) since there is ‘no society in the neighbourhood’ (2) and therefore the children’s

only intercourse with the world consisted in a stately tea-party, now and then, with the principal farmers and tradespeople of the vicinity, just to

avoid being stigmatised as too proud to consort with our neighbours, and an annual visit to our paternal grandfather's, where himself, our kind grandmamma, a maiden aunt, and two or three elderly ladies and gentlemen were the only persons we ever saw (2).

It is unfortunate that the Greys' snobbery and elevated sense of social status should confine their daughters' infrequent social encounters to interacting either with elderly relations or with individuals from a social class clearly considered as inferior. Agnes's understanding of the realities of life is thus minimal. It is remarkable that, reared in a family that refuses to allow her to grow up and that denies her all intercourse with the broader society, she should have the fortitude and determination to embrace enthusiastically the notion of going out into the world as a governess, albeit ill-equipped and naïve. On the other hand, it is perhaps *not* at all remarkable that Agnes should wish very intensely to escape the confines and limitations of her marginalised way of life that treats her – in Helen's words – like a 'hot-house plant' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 30).

When the Greys fall on hard times after Reverend Grey's financial plans fail, Agnes feels excited and strangely liberated. Her optimism reflects her buoyant and resilient response to adversity:

Though riches had charms, poverty had no terrors for an inexperienced girl like me. Indeed...there was something exhilarating in the idea of being driven to straits, and thrown upon our own resources. I only wished papa, mama, and Mary were all of the same mind as myself; and then, instead of lamenting past calamities, we might all cheerfully set to work to remedy them; and the greater the difficulties, the harder our present privations – the greater should be our cheerfulness to endure the latter, and our vigour to contend against the former (Brontë, 1998[1847]: 4-5).

This passage reflects some key aspects to Agnes's character and world view. She has the perspicacity to realise that she is 'inexperienced', an acknowledgement that becomes more conspicuous in subsequent pages when she has to persuade her reluctant family to allow her to go to work as a governess. Elsewhere in this passage, diction such as 'exhilarating', 'cheerfully', and 'vigour' reveals her wish to focus on the future, regardless of the 'privations' confronting the Greys, and her plucky determination to turn what the rest of the family see as 'past calamities' into something that offers growth and potential. Agnes is clearly not of 'the same

mind’ as the rest of the family, despite their perception of her as being ‘little Agnes’ (9) or a ‘dear child’ (7). The strength with which she faces economic ‘difficulties’ constitutes an inner resource that never abandons her.

Poverty now dictates that the Greys practise stringent economy. It is here, in Agnes’s desire to contribute to the running of the household, that we see very clearly how her family thwarts her every wish:

...all the cooking and household work, that could not easily be managed by one servant girl, was done by my mother and sister, with only a little occasional help from me – only a little, because, though a woman in my own estimation, I was still a child in theirs (p. 6).

The mutually incompatible personae of ‘woman’ or adult, and ‘child’, are juxtaposed in Agnes’s comments. Her understandable frustration is evident in the following passage:

whenever I offered to assist [my mother], I received such an answer as – ‘No, love, you cannot indeed – there’s nothing here you can do. Go and help your sister, or get her to take a walk with you – tell her she must not sit so much, and stay so constantly in the house as she does – she may well look thin and dejected.’

‘Mary, mama says I’m to help you; or get you to take a walk with me; she says you may well look thin and dejected, if you sit so constantly in the house.’

‘Help me you cannot, Agnes; and I cannot go out with *you* – I have far too much to do.’

‘Then let me help you.’

‘You cannot indeed, dear child. Go and practise your music, or play with the kitten’ (6-7).

Agnes’s mother and sister plainly regard her as a nuisance, and they have the self-righteous notion that they alone can run the house or help to address the impecunious circumstances to which Reverend Grey’s folly has led them. The most significant word in this passage is ‘do’. As I have already shown in Chapter 2, the conditions prevailing in Victorian patriarchal society led to seriously restricted lives and choices that were available to single middle-class women. Therefore the options that are open to Agnes are extremely limited. She yearns to *do* something constructive and helpful, but Mary, while bemoaning her own busyness, refuses to share her

chores with Agnes. There is an unpleasant sense of the martyr in Mary's complaint. She sees herself as a victim, but she in fact relishes this feeling of importance and superiority over her allegedly incapable sister. For a strong and willing young woman of eighteen to be told to go and 'play with the kitten' is an excellent example of how the family infantilises Agnes. But, despite her offers of work having been rejected, she still casts round for other ways in which to help. She thinks of sewing:

There was always plenty of sewing on hand; but I had not been taught to cut out a single garment; and except for plain hemming and seaming, there was little I could do, even in that line; for they both asserted, that it was far easier to do the work themselves (7).

Here again we see that Agnes is not even permitted to 'do' some sewing. As she observes rather bitterly: 'although I was not many degrees more useful than the kitten, my idleness was not entirely without excuse' (7).

Mary is a talented artist, and therefore it is agreed that she will try to sell her art. Again we detect the contrast between the useful, productive, busy Mary and the 'dear child' who must play with the kitten. When Agnes asserts: 'I wish *I* could do something' (8), her mother responds patronisingly:

'You, Agnes! well, who knows? You draw pretty well too; if you choose some simple piece of work for your subject, I dare say you will be able to produce something we shall all be proud to exhibit' (8).

Mrs Grey has a dismal opinion of Agnes's artistic abilities: she must choose something 'simple', something deficient when contrasted with the 'best style' (7) of Mary's drawings. Brontë therefore clearly condemns the way in which Agnes's mother and sister marginalise her and refuse to entertain the idea that she is an adult and wishes to 'do' something that will contribute to the family coffers. Brontë, and by implication we the readers, salute Agnes for her refusal to be silenced by her family. In this way, the condescending treatment of her by her mother constitutes an important strand in the critique of parenting which informs both of Brontë's novels. This first example of a mother who, though loving, is deficient, is particularly crucial in

that it has direct relevance to Brontë's feminist beliefs that young women should be helped to achieve independence and autonomy, and not thwarted.

Agnes knows that she is not artistic like Mary, but she has obviously been thinking for a while of a better way in which she can make money. It is interesting to observe that when she suddenly announces: 'I should like to be a governess' (8), the readers are as taken aback as are Agnes's family. This is the first example in *Agnes Grey* of the narrator's autonomy in choosing when to confide in the reader, and when to exclude the reader from her cogitations, as occurs here. Agnes's silence confirms her sturdy sense of self and her refusal to share all of her thoughts with her readers. Mrs Grey and Mary react in a predictably arrogant and offensive fashion:

My mother uttered an exclamation of surprise, and laughed. My sister dropped her work in astonishment, exclaiming: 'You a governess, Agnes! What *can* you be dreaming of?'

'Well! I don't see anything so *very* extraordinary in it. I do not pretend to be able to instruct great girls; but surely I could teach little ones...and I should like it *so* much...I am so fond of children. Do let me, mama!'

'But, my love, you have not learnt to take care of *yourself* yet...'

'But mama, I am above eighteen, and quite able to take care of myself, and others too. You do not know half the wisdom and prudence I possess, because I have never been tried.'

'Only think,' said Mary, 'what would you do in a house full of strangers, without me or mama to speak and act for you...with a parcel of children, besides yourself, to attend to; and no one to look to for advice? You would not even know what clothes to put on.'

'You think, because I always do as you bid me, I have no judgment of my own: but only try me – that is all I ask – and you shall see what I can do' (8).

This dialogue is one of the most important passages in the entire feminist critique in *Agnes Grey* because it highlights a major strand in Brontë's robust engagement with patriarchy. This strand reflects Brontë's fervent belief in the necessity of young women's being 'quite able to take care of' themselves and of their having the confidence to rely on their own 'judgment' so that they do not always have to 'look to' others, to men, or women who conform unquestioningly to conventional strictures, 'for advice'. Here Brontë celebrates Agnes's persistent struggle to surmount her female relatives' 'surprise' and 'astonishment' when she tries to overcome her dependent status in the family hierarchy. Mary's remark that Agnes 'would not even know what

clothes to put on' is fatuous. But Agnes's father is equally taken aback at her wish to become a governess:

'What, my little Agnes, a governess!' cried he, and, in spite of his dejection, he laughed at the idea.

'Yes, papa, don't *you* say anything against it; I should like it *so* much; and I'm sure I could manage delightfully' (9).

Agnes possesses an optimistic yet naïve trust in the inherent goodness of humankind, believing that she will be treated well and respectfully by any future employers. But Brontë's focus falls on her refusal to submit to the limits imposed on her by her well intentioned family. In a perfectly reasonable and polite way, she will not yield. Her stubbornness and tenacity of purpose suggest that she already possesses an indomitable belief in herself. She is a promising candidate for the achievement of autonomy. And, at this early stage of the novel, barely half way through the first chapter, Brontë has remained true to her opening premise that 'all true histories contain instruction' (1) for she is unambiguously teaching us that it is imperative for women living in a patriarchal society to become assertive and self-reliant. She is also showing us that women such as Mrs Grey and Mary are unconsciously collaborating with patriarchy because they are trying to instil a culture of dependence in Agnes, not necessarily a dependence on men, but a dependence on others, with a consequential loss of autonomy.

Brontë now proceeds to locate the novel's critique of the governess within this conceptual framework that she establishes so carefully at the outset of *Agnes Grey*. As I have already shown in Chapter 2, work as a governess was one of the very few possible work options for single middle-class women that were sanctioned by Victorian patriarchy. My study will therefore argue that the analysis of the plight of the governess in *Agnes Grey* is an important strand in the novel's overarching authorial quest for autonomy for all women. *Agnes Grey* is not a conventional governess novel that merely and rather unoriginally laments the trials and tribulations of a poor single middle class woman forced to earn her living as instructress to the children of the more affluent. Brontë's agenda is more sophisticated in *Agnes Grey* because she uses the critique of the governess to praise Agnes's admirable qualities of strength and self-belief, and her refusal to compromise her integrity in the face of the sustained hostility that confronts her in the homes of her two employers, the Bloomfields and, to a lesser extent, the Murrays. Therefore *Agnes Grey* is

not a governess novel *per se*, but rather a text in which Brontë integrates different lines of enquiry that all ultimately contribute to her feminist purpose and her endorsement of the value of autonomy and independence for women. As we move towards the end of chapter one, we can thus detect Brontë's seamless integration first of her study of the governess with her shrewd analysis of deficient parenting skills, and then of her location of both of these central concerns within the larger quest for female autonomy.

We have already seen that, even as a young child, Agnes had chafed against being 'brought up in the strictest seclusion' (2). When her mother had amused her young children 'with stories and anecdotes of her younger days' (2), these had frequently awoken in Agnes 'a vague and secret wish to see a little more of the world' (3). From her earliest days, it seems, Agnes has possessed an unquenchable thirst for freedom, escape and adventure. Work as a governess will, or so she believes, very conveniently and in a socially acceptable way, meet this need. In the following passage, Agnes provides many reasons for why she believes that work as a governess will be 'delightful' (9). It is significant that the economic benefits are located towards the end of the passage, thus suggesting their lowly position in her hierarchy of reasons. Of equal significance is that her thoughts regarding the actual experience of the governess come at the very end. Thus the sequencing of the reasons as to why she wants to work as a governess clearly suggests that she sees this principally as a mode of entry to a life of independence:

How delightful it would be to be a governess! To go out into the world; to enter upon a new life; to act for myself; to exercise my unused faculties; to try my unknown powers; to earn my own maintenance, and something to comfort and help my father, mother, and sister, besides exonerating them from the provision of my food and clothing; to show papa what his little Agnes could do; to convince mama and Mary that I was not quite the helpless, thoughtless being they supposed. And then, how charming to be intrusted [sic] with the care and education of children! (9)

This crucial passage reinforces Brontë's central premise that intelligent women such as Agnes resent what they perceive as their incarceration in the home, and yearn 'to go out into the world' where 'a new life' of relative autonomy beckons. Her 'unused faculties', so thwarted and unappreciated at home, will now be tested, and her 'unknown powers' will enable her to 'earn [her] own maintenance'. Agnes is supremely confident that she will make a great success of her

new position as governess so that she can prove to her disbelieving family that she is ‘not quite the helpless, thoughtless being’ they suppose her to be.

Agnes’s first position is with the Bloomfield family of Wellwood House. Here Brontë introduces the problematic notion of social class that vexed many governesses. As a clergyman’s daughter, Agnes is socially superior to the Bloomfields, who have made their fortune in trade. Mr Bloomfield ‘was a retired tradesman, who had realised a very comfortable fortune’ (10). The difference in rank is also carefully indicated in the reference to ‘the new...mansion of Wellwood’ (13). The Bloomfields are enjoying the benefits of their ‘new money’, wealth that has been created by the endeavours of Mr Bloomfield, and not inherited as is the case with ‘old money’. Kathryn Hughes has shown that

from the turn of the nineteenth century the richest members of the middle class began to copy the gentry’s custom of employing governesses....For many of these families one of the most important functions of the governess was to show off their own wealth and social prestige. Her presence in their midst was proof that the lady of the house could afford to absent herself from even the least degrading aspect of womanhood and dedicate herself instead to social duties and charitable pursuits (Hughes, 1993: 21).

Agnes therefore has to submit to the dictates of a family considered socially inferior to her own, and thus Brontë highlights one of the social dilemmas confronting the governess who works for a family that has become enriched by trade. Victorian society was super-sensitive to such notions of class and social mobility. For a young woman such as Agnes, who has been raised to believe that ‘there was no society in the neighbourhood’ (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 2) and that the annual tea-party with ‘the principal farmers and tradespeople of the vicinity’ (2) has the main purpose of preventing the Greys from becoming ‘stigmatized as too proud to consort with [their] neighbours’ (2), working for the Bloomfields must have been difficult. However, to her credit, she does not dwell on this, although, much later, her mother does refer to the Bloomfields in disparaging terms as ‘those purse-proud trades-people, and arrogant upstarts’ (52).

Agnes is governess to three of the four Bloomfield children: Tom, aged seven; Mary Ann, nearly five; and Fanny, four. The baby of the family, Harriet, who is two, is still too young to have a governess and is cared for by the nanny in the nursery. Brontë’s careful description of

Agnes's experience as a governess in the Bloomfield family is located within the context of the Victorian attitudes towards childhood and children that I have already investigated in Chapter 2. Agnes is required to draw heavily on her reserves of strength, courage, and perseverance when working with these three badly behaved, unpleasant, and extremely disagreeable children. A particularly interesting and relevant context to Brontë's description of Agnes's encounters with the Bloomfield children is her great interest in the patriarchal construction of notions of masculinity, of male power and violence, and the way in which women are expected to collaborate with this and accept that they occupy a subordinate position in patriarchal society. Brontë looks very carefully at how a patriarchal culture shapes very young children such as Tom and Mary Ann to conform to socially constructed gender stereotypes, and how such practices perpetuate this inequality. Her investigation of these gender stereotypes is obviously refracted through the observant eyes of Agnes. Perhaps unexpectedly, in light of Brontë's feminist concerns in *Agnes Grey*, Agnes focuses mainly on the behaviour of Tom, and to a substantially lesser extent on Mary Ann. However, one could also argue that the upbringing of the male child affects everything else. I have already shown how, at the end of the novel, Agnes explains that she has 'compiled these pages' (197) from her diary, and it is therefore very likely that she was so dismayed with the outrageous behaviour of Tom that she wrote chiefly about him in her diary. Brontë's concern falls principally on Tom because she so deplores the way that patriarchy automatically elevates males and subjugates females.

As soon as Agnes arrives at Wellwood, Mrs Bloomfield, 'a tall, spare, stately woman, with black hair, cold grey eyes, and extremely sallow complexion' (14), explains that Tom is 'the flower of the flock – a generous, noble-spirited boy, one to be led, but not driven, and remarkable for always speaking the truth' (15). She continues that 'he seems to scorn deception' (15). He appears to be a veritable paragon of virtue. It is quite obvious that Mrs Bloomfield, a good mother as defined by patriarchy, is heavily invested in her son, to the detriment of her three daughters. As the heir and only son, Tom automatically occupies a pivotal position in the family.

But Tom, in fact, is a thoroughly nasty child, violent, aggressive, and supremely aware that no-one will chastise him for his bad ways because he is a male and his mother's darling. Agnes realises very quickly that

Master Tom, not content with refusing to be ruled, must needs set up as a ruler, and manifested a determination to keep, not only his sisters, but his governess in order, by violent manual and pedal applications (24).

It is significant that Agnes defines Tom from the outset in terms of male power and violence. Brontë wishes us to understand that his arrogance and abusive ways are the direct consequence of his being spoiled simply because he is a male. She also seems to suggest that, if Tom can behave in this fashion now at the tender age of seven, he will be much worse as an adult. The patriarchal cycle of male violence and superiority, and the consequent marginalisation of women, will be repeated because Tom's parents are blind to their deficient parenting skills. He is indeed, as Betty Jay states, a 'little patriarch-in-waiting' (Jay, 2000: 17). The Bloomfield parents, in common with Agnes's own parents, lack insight into the unfortunate consequences of the manner in which they raise their children. The difference is that the Bloomfields are influenced by patriarchal values, while the Greys do not appear to have deliberately ideological reasons for their treatment of Agnes.

From the outset, Tom is shown to be aggressive and more powerful than his sisters. He controls the classroom. On the first evening he

claimed all [Agnes'] attention to himself: he stood bolt upright between [Agnes] and the fire, with his hands behind his back, talking away like an orator, occasionally interrupting his discourse with a sharp reproof to his sisters when they made too much noise (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 16).

Agnes clearly finds his body language and arrogant attitude displeasing. He then insists on demonstrating his prowess on his rocking horse which

with a most important bustle, he dragged forth from its corner into the middle of the room, loudly calling on [Agnes] to attend to it. Then, ordering his sister to hold the reins, he mounted, and made [Agnes] stand for ten minutes, watching how manfully he used his whip and spurs (17).

Agnes's ironic description of 'how manfully he used his whip and spurs' suggests her distaste for his propensity for male violence and the abuse of power, even though he is only seven and the rocking horse is just a toy. She is further disturbed when Tom admits that he is

‘obliged to [strike his sister] now and then to keep her in order’ (17). This is the first of many occasions on which Agnes tries but fails to correct Tom: ‘Surely Tom, you would not strike your sister! I hope I shall *never* see you do that’ (17). Later that first day Tom takes Agnes on a conducted tour of the garden, pointing out his many bird traps. Agnes is deeply shocked when Tom tells her that he does ‘different things’ (18) to the birds that he catches, explaining: ‘Sometimes I give them to the cat; sometimes I cut them in pieces with my penknife; but the next, I mean to roast alive’ (18). Agnes then learns that Tom’s father positively encourages this barbaric behaviour, for Tom continues:

‘Papa knows how I treat them, and he never blames me for it; he says it’s just what *he* used to do when *he* was a boy. Last summer he gave me a nest full of young sparrows, and he saw me pulling off their legs and wings and heads, and never said anything, except that they were nasty things, and I must not let them soil my trousers’ (18-19).

Agnes then hopefully asks: ‘But what does your mama say?’ (19), evidently in the belief that at least Tom’s mother, a member of the allegedly gentler sex, will not condone such activities. But Tom replies:

‘Oh! she doesn’t care – she says it’s a pity to kill the pretty singing birds, but the naughty sparrows, and mice and rats, I may do what I like with. So now, Miss Grey, you see it is *not* wicked’ (19).

At this, Agnes can hold her tongue no longer. Although it is not strategic to criticise Tom’s parents to his face, she refuses to compromise her integrity and thus we can see her bravery and strength of purpose when she replies: ‘I still think it is, Tom; and perhaps your papa and mama would think so too, if they thought much about it’ (19). Recalling his mother’s warm account of Tom’s virtues, Agnes ‘looked in vain for that generous, noble spirit, his mother talked of’ (19). Mrs Bloomfield clearly lacks any insight into her son’s true nature.

Brontë also examines the same issues of masculinity, power, and violence in the context of the pernicious influence on Tom of his Uncle Robson. Agnes’s resolution in standing up to Uncle Robson’s deplorable behaviour again reminds us of her strength of character and of the way in which she exercises her autonomy in refusing to bow to his insolent treatment of her.

Robson, who ‘habitually swallowed great quantities of wine, and took with relish an occasional glass of brandy and water’ (43), encourages Tom to

imitate him in this to the utmost of his ability, and to believe that the more wine and spirits he could take, and the better he liked them, the more he manifested his bold and manly spirit, and rose superior to his sisters (43).

Robson is therefore encouraging Tom to equate the consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol with the acquisition of manliness and male superiority. Drinking alcohol is seen as a strictly male pursuit; the consumption of alcohol in a reckless and mindless way therefore defines who is and who is not a real man. This false argument is repeated in a more conspicuous manner in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* when Arthur Huntingdon and his reprobate friends try to encourage little Arthur to develop an inappropriate taste for alcohol. It is this behaviour that finally causes Helen to take her son and run away from her husband, an action that causes her to be seen as a criminal in the eyes of the law.

Agnes reports that ‘Mr Robson likewise encouraged Tom’s propensity to persecute the lower creation, both by precept and example’ (43). Even though she feels that she is at last slowly starting to inculcate ‘some general sense of justice and humanity’ (43) in Tom with regard to the slaughter of baby birds, she is constantly undermined by Uncle Robson, who often accompanies Tom on his raids on birds’ nests. On the one occasion when they do return with a nest of young birds, Agnes bravely stands her ground and warns Tom that he must either kill the nestlings at once, or return them to the nest. When Tom refuses, Agnes threatens that she will kill the birds herself. Even when Tom reminds her that this will incur the wrath of his parents and his uncle, she stoutly replies:

‘I shall do what I think right in a case of this sort, without consulting any one. If your papa and mama don’t happen to approve of it, I shall be sorry to offend them, but your uncle Robson’s opinions, of course, are nothing to me’ (44).

Brontë repeatedly implicitly lauds Agnes's insistence on behaving in a morally acceptable way, regardless of the possibly pejorative consequences. Rather than let Tom or his uncle torture the birds, Agnes explains that

urged by a sense of duty – at the risk of both making myself sick, and incurring the wrath of my employers – I got a large flat stone, that had been reared up for a mouse-trap by the gardener, then, having once more vainly endeavoured to persuade the little tyrant to let the birds be carried back, I asked what he intended to do with them. With fiendish glee he commenced a list of torments, and while he was busied in the relation, I dropped the stone upon his intended victims, and crushed them flat beneath it (44).

This reflects Agnes's great courage in the way in which she, a young woman of eighteen, stands up to a powerful man, who is considerably older than she and who is closely related to her employer. Tom is furious that Agnes has killed the nestlings, a reaction which makes Uncle Robson '[laugh] excessively at the violence of his nephew's passion, and the bitter maledictions and opprobrious epithets he heaped upon [Agnes]' (45). Robson is clearly delighted with Tom's insolent refusal to accept his governess's actions. His patronising attitude towards women in general is reflected very well in his remark to Tom:

'Well, you *are* a good un!....Damme, but the lad has some spunk in him too! Curse me, if ever I saw a nobler little scoundrel than that! He's beyond petticoat government already: - by G-, he defies mother, granny, governess, and all! Ha, ha, ha! Never mind, Tom, I'll get you another brood to-morrow' (45).

Robson, a typical patriarchal male, defines a 'good' boy as someone who has the 'spunk' to ignore or disobey any instruction emanating from a female, be this a relative or a teacher. He is encouraging Tom to adopt gendered behaviour patterns and to regard all women as inferior and unworthy of respect. Robson is a minor character in *Agnes Grey*. However, my submission is that, of all the male characters in the novel, he most explicitly embodies the male qualities of arrogance and hostility towards women that Brontë so despises.

Although she is only six years old, Mary Ann already conforms to patriarchally constructed gender stereotypes. The first thing that Agnes notices about Mary Ann is a 'certain

affected simper, and a craving for notice' (16). Mary Ann has obviously developed strategies such as a 'simper' that will gain the attention of others. She is aware of the way that, as a girl, she is marginalised in favour of Tom. Thus, the brother and sister are already behaving in accordance with the gendered ideology that informs patriarchy. While Tom has a rocking-horse that he can mount and whip and dominate, his sister has a doll, a toy clearly associated with stereotypical notions of women as nurturers and mothers. Mary Ann is obviously very keen to gain Agnes's attention because Agnes writes that 'Mary Ann brought me her doll, and began to be very loquacious on the subject of its fine clothes, its bed, its chest of drawers, and other appurtenances' (16). At this early age, the little girl defines herself as a potential mother, as an individual whose primary concerns will be the care of others.

Patriarchal expectations have also created an unpleasantly adversarial relationship between Tom and Mary Ann. When Tom wants to show Agnes 'my school-room, and my new books' (16), Mary Ann immediately counters: 'And *my* school-room, and *my* new books, Tom....They're mine too' (16). To this, Tom replies: 'They're *mine*' (16). Tom is obviously unwilling to acknowledge shared ownership of the children's toys and facilities with a girl, even though she is his sister. This superior attitude obviously frustrates Mary Ann because a little later, when Tom tells Agnes that he will take her to see 'my garden' (17), she retorts: 'And *mine*' (17). When Tom leads Agnes round the garden to display his bird traps, Agnes first notices 'a pretty little rose tree' with 'lovely blossoms' (18). Tom tells Agnes 'contemptuously' (17) that 'That's only *Mary Ann's* garden' (18). Girls are thus associated with things that are decorative but passive and incapable of opposing male prowess, unlike the bird traps which highlight Tom's brutality and power over the helpless victims.

Tom and Mary Ann, therefore, behave, think and speak in gender-specific ways that have been instilled in them by patriarchy. They have been culturally conditioned to live according to the expectations of a gendered world. But Brontë suggests that these expectations are created by society, and that young boys and girls are in fact innately much the same. This is evident on Agnes's second day at Wellwood when she accompanies her charges into the garden for a walk before lunch. Both the children show that they 'prefer the dirtiest places, and the most dismal occupations' (21). They share a mutual 'particular attachment to a well at the bottom of the lawn, where they persisted in dabbling with sticks and pebbles, for above half an hour' (22). Agnes is

in constant fear that their mother would see them...and blame me for allowing them thus to drabble their clothes, and wet their feet and hands, instead of taking exercise, but no arguments, commands, or intreaties [sic] could draw them away (22).

In this instance, Tom and Mary Ann are behaving like normal children who, throughout history, have enjoyed getting dirty and muddy, thereby ignoring the polite yet artificial conventions of civilised life. It is refreshing to observe their having fun in a natural, simple way, a way that is dependent on their youth rather than on their sex. The absence of conflict between brother and sister, as they concentrate on poking around in the well, is also most striking: Tom does not assume his customary leadership role, nor Mary Ann her traditionally subservient position.

Agnes also experiences great difficulties in the school room because she quickly discovers that her pupils are ‘very backward indeed’ (20). Neither Tom nor Mary Ann, and later Fanny, places any value on education and the acquisition of knowledge, and therefore Agnes can achieve very little because she is not allowed to punish or threaten the children in any way. She explains that ‘as for punishments, I was given to understand, the parents reserved that privilege to themselves; and yet they expected me to keep my pupils in order’ (24). A lesser governess might have resigned her position in the face of such relentless opposition, but here again we see Agnes’s bravery and refusal to compromise in the professional conduct of her duties. She explains that, as the months passed,

[m]y task of instruction and surveillance, instead of becoming easier as my charge and I got better accustomed to each other, became more arduous as their characters unfolded. The name of governess, I soon found, was a mere mockery as applied to me; my pupils had no more notion of obedience than a wild, unbroken colt (24).

Tom is so disobedient that often ‘he would positively refuse to learn, or to repeat his lessons, or even to look at his book’ (25). Sometimes ‘he would determine to do his writing badly’ (26) so that Agnes has ‘to hold his hand to prevent him from purposely blotting or disfiguring the paper’ (27). But Mary Ann is even worse because she prefers ‘rolling on the floor to any other amusement’ (27) and she refuses to comply with the simplest of Agnes’s requests. Agnes recalls that

[i]n vain I argued, coaxed, entreated, threatened, scolded; in vain I kept her in from play, or, if obliged to take her out, refused to play with her, or to speak kindly, or have anything to do with her; in vain I tried to set before her the advantages of doing as she was bid, and being loved, and kindly treated in consequence” (28).

In truth, Agnes occupies an untenable position at Wellwood because the Bloomfield parents have deliberately deprived her from resorting to any forms of authority, or strategies, that might effectively discipline their unruly children. Although individuals who had become rich by means of trade were traditionally regarded with condescension by the more established ranks of Victorian society, the Bloomfields nevertheless go to great efforts to stress that, as the mere governess, Agnes is their social inferior. Agnes in fact comes from a most respectable family, not only because her father is a clergyman, but because her mother is ‘a squire’s daughter’ (1) and therefore a member of the landed gentry. The Bloomfields’ robust efforts to stress what they perceive as the disparity of rank between themselves and Agnes are probably indicative of their deep-seated awareness that they are actually social upstarts, a family that does not yet feel comfortable or accepted within the top echelons of polite society. They are so determined to emphasise Agnes’s subordinate status that they even insist that she address Tom and Mary Ann as ‘Master’ and ‘Miss’ Bloomfield. At the time Agnes confines her response to this instruction to a mild ‘I was surprised’ (22), but it is ridiculous, even in the bigoted context of Victorian society, that a young woman, the daughter of a clergyman, should be compelled to address two children of seven and six, whose father is a tradesman, in this overly formal manner. It is only much later, once Agnes arrives at Horton Lodge, that she admits to her readers that

it seemed to me a chilling and unnatural piece of punctilio between the children of a family and their instructor and daily companion, especially where the former were in their early childhood, as at Wellwood House (58).

Although she realises that her ‘calling the little Bloomfields by their simple names had been regarded as an offensive liberty’ (58) by the parents, she explains that ‘the whole affair struck me as very absurd’ (58). Agnes dislikes hypocrisy and humbug, and her forthright criticism of this

fatuous requirement is further proof of her refusal to sanction a type of behaviour that she finds offensive. She is of course obliged to co-operate with the Bloomfields, but inwardly she rejects their instructions with contempt.

Therefore Agnes receives no support or encouragement or understanding at all from the Bloomfield parents. Mr Bloomfield is possessed of a ‘waspish temper’ (43) and always speaks ‘uncivilly’ (22) to Agnes, while Mrs Bloomfield is the antithesis of the ‘kind, warm-hearted matron’ (20) Agnes had hoped her to be. Agnes receives no praise or compliments, because the parents are invariably dissatisfied with her endeavours. This is very distressing for her, because, from her first days at Wellwood, she is full of plans and ideas and strategies as how best to win her young charges over and teach them facts and morals. She has a healthy self-esteem and truly believes that she can succeed. She confesses that by these means

I hoped, in time, both to benefit the children, and to gain the approbation of their parents; and also to convince my friends at home that I was not so wanting in skill and prudence as they supposed. I knew the difficulties I had to contend with were great; but I knew, (at least, I believed,) unremitting patience and perseverance could overcome them (26).

Agnes’s strong resolve not to give up is encapsulated in her reference to ‘patience and perseverance’. But the outcome is very different from what she had so optimistically and naïvely believed it would be:

But either the children were so incorrigible, the parents so unreasonable, or myself so mistaken in my views, or so unable to carry them out, that my best intentions and most strenuous efforts seemed productive of no better result, than sport to the children, dissatisfaction to their parents, and torment to myself (26).

Despite her admission that her work at Wellwood is ‘torment’, Agnes persists. Although she gives the impression of being quiet and withdrawn, passive and unemotional, she confesses that the parents’ constant innuendos regarding her inefficiencies ‘affected me far more deeply than any open accusations would have done’ (31). Nevertheless, she ‘earnestly wish[es] to retain’ (p. 31) her place as governess. She believes that her ‘wisest plan’ (31) is to ‘go on perseveringly doing [her] best’ (31) because the children will ‘in time, become more humanized...wiser...and,

consequently, more manageable' (31). Her frequent references to the notion of 'perseverance' reveal her seemingly inexhaustible reserves of tenacity, energy, and stubbornness. While she is understandably proud that she is able to help her family financially, this same strong streak of pride in her character will not let her give in:

it was by own will that I had got the place, I had brought all this tribulation on myself, and I was determined to bear it; nay, more than that, I did not even regret the step I had taken (31).

Her mention of her 'own will' suggests that Agnes relishes the sense of autonomy and independence that her procurement of the position of governess at Wellwood has afforded her. Her initiatives have rendered her the creator of her own destiny and path in life, and this, despite all the difficulties, humiliations, and pressures confronting her, is enormously liberating. As I have already shown in Chapter 2, Victorian feminists such as Florence Nightingale and Barbara Bodichon had pointed very persuasively to the therapeutic consequences of interesting, remunerated work for all women.

The readers of *Agnes Grey* can therefore readily understand Agnes's dismay when, less than a year after her arrival at Wellwood and just as she is 'congratulating [herself] upon having made some progress with [her] pupils' (47), she is dismissed. Mrs Bloomfield explains to her that although her 'character and general conduct were unexceptionable' (47), 'the want of sufficient firmness and diligent, persevering care on [her] part' (47) has had very unfortunate consequences. The children 'were decidedly behind [other children] in attainments, their manners were uncultivated, and their tempers unruly' (47). Mrs Bloomfield's criticism of Agnes's having failed to 'persevere' with her charges is especially hurtful because in fact, as we have seen, she repeatedly explains to the reader that she has tried extremely hard to 'persevere' in her work as governess. She is devastated and deeply resents the unjust nature of Mrs Bloomfield's allegations:

Unshaken firmness, devoted diligence, unwearied perseverance, unceasing care, were the very qualifications on which I had secretly prided myself, and by which I had hoped in time, to overcome all difficulties, and obtain success at last (47).

But she realises the futility of trying to defend herself. She therefore exercises impressive self-control and decides to avoid any further interaction with Mrs Bloomfield regarding her dismissal. Far from wishing us to perceive this as a weakness in Agnes, Brontë is celebrating her strength and resourcefulness in identifying the best strategy with which to respond to Mrs Bloomfield:

I wished to say something in my own justification, but in attempting to speak, I felt my voice falter, and rather than testify any emotion, or suffer the tears to overflow, that were already gathering in my eyes, I chose to keep silence (47-48).

By making the conscious choice or decision ‘to keep silence’, Agnes behaves in an autonomous and independent way, thereby reversing what is in fact a humiliating and unfair situation.

So far I have argued that Brontë uses Agnes’s experiences at Wellwood in a number of fruitful ways that contribute to the feminist critique that informs *Agnes Grey*. While mindful of my suggestion that Brontë’s principal concern in the novel is to praise Agnes’s strength and bravery as she insists on exercising her autonomy, I have shown that Brontë also looks at specific feminist issues such as the cultural conditioning of young children so that they conform to the expectations of the gendered ideology of patriarchy. Agnes’s degrading treatment at the hands of the Bloomfields, a *nouveau riche* family, is investigated in detail so that Agnes’s observation in the first lines of the novel that ‘All true histories contain instruction’ (1) is proved true and the didactic impulse of the novel is clearly evident. Agnes explains:

my design, in writing the few last pages, was not to amuse, but to benefit those whom it might concern...if a parent has, therefrom, gathered any useful hint, or an unfortunate governess received thereby the slightest benefit, I am well rewarded for my pains (33-34).

Agnes returns home, disappointed but not defeated, because, after a few brief months with her family, she begs her mother: ‘Let me try again’ (51). Her difficult experiences at Wellwood have changed her for the better, because she is now more sophisticated, more poised, and less *gauche*, an outwardly confident young woman who firmly believes that the lessons and insights gained at Wellwood will stand her in good stead in her second situation as a governess. Nor has

she lost her appetite for adventure and change, so she is elated when she obtains a position as governess to the family of Mr Murray of Horton Lodge, seventy miles from her home. She shows that this was ‘a formidable distance to me, as I had never been above twenty miles from home in all the course of my twenty years sojourn on earth’ (53). Agnes explains that Mr Murray’s

rank, from what I could gather, appeared to be higher than that of Mr Bloomfield, and, doubtless, he was one of those genuine thorough-bred gentry my mother spoke of, who would treat his governess with due consideration as a respectable, well educated lady, the instructor and guide of his children, and not a mere upper servant (54).

It is clear from this last comment that the Bloomfields’ inappropriate treatment of Agnes still rankles with her. But she feels exhilarated at the new direction her life is now taking:

I had now, in some measure, got rid of the *mauvaise honte* [painful diffidence] that had formerly oppressed me so much; there was a pleasing excitement in the idea of entering these unknown regions, and making my way alone among its strange inhabitants; I now flattered myself I was going to see something of the world (53).

At Horton Lodge, Agnes will be governess to much older children than Tom and Mary Ann. She will now be responsible for the education of Rosalie, aged sixteen, Matilda, fourteen, and two boys, John and Charles, the youngest child being only ten years old. Brontë’s principal focus falls on Rosalie and Matilda, although she does use the Murray boys in her thoughtful study of the different types of education experienced by boys and girls. In this way, Brontë uses Agnes’s experiences at Horton Lodge as the framework for a broad and ambitious cluster of lines of feminist enquiry. The critique of education is an important focus and constitutes a significant strand in this enquiry.

So far in this chapter, I have argued that by means of her account of Agnes’s life at Wellwood, Brontë considers how the gendered ideology of patriarchy shapes young children to conform to the expectations of that ideology. At this early stage of Agnes’s life story, Brontë is considerably more interested in patriarchal constructs of masculinity, and therefore she looks at Tom in much more detail than she does Mary Ann. However, now Agnes is at Horton Lodge,

Brontë soon discards the Murray boys by sending them to boarding school and thus removing them from her story. She expands her initial enquiry of how Mary Ann has been moulded by patriarchy into a much more robust and centrally important study that evaluates the impact of patriarchy on Rosalie and Matilda. Brontë is thus still looking at gender stereotypes, but here specifically female gender stereotypes. Because Rosalie and Matilda are much older than Mary Ann, the pernicious influence of patriarchal values is much more obvious, and thus offers more material for Brontë to analyse. I will show that, while Rosalie complies with patriarchal expectations by behaving in predictably conventional and socially acceptable ways, Matilda challenges those same expectations by insisting on acting, thinking, and speaking like a man. Brontë devotes much more attention to her investigation of Rosalie because she broadens this investigation into an entirely new line of feminist enquiry, that of marriage. This is significant because I will argue that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* the critique of marriage constitutes Brontë's primary interest. However, I will also suggest that Brontë's consideration of Matilda is problematic from a feminist point of view because the manner in which Matilda seeks to mimic male behaviour is obviously not the best way of establishing a healthy female identity.

However, before Brontë embarks on these investigations, she returns to the traditional complaints to be found in most governess novels regarding the rude treatment of the governess by employers and servants alike. The humiliations Agnes has to endure on arrival at Horton are emblematic of the socially precarious position of the governess who occupies an unstable middle ground, belonging neither to the family nor the servant class. Thus, on her very first day at Horton, Agnes has to negotiate various problematic hierarchies of power. When Rosalie instructs Matilda to escort Agnes to her room, Agnes describes how Matilda 'shrugged her shoulders, and made a slight grimace, but took a candle and proceeded before me, up the back stairs, a long, steep, double flight, and through a long, narrow passage' (56). The front stairs are too good for the governess, and Matilda's deliberate choice of the back stairs sends a firm signal to Agnes that, despite her being a clergyman's daughter, she is still the social inferior to the Murrays. When Agnes wishes to go to bed, she finds that 'none of [her] luggage [has been] brought up' (57), doubtless a conscious snub on the part of the servants. She is therefore obliged to go in person in search of her missing luggage as there is no bell in her room, indicative of her unimportance in the household hierarchy. 'Meeting a well-dressed female on the way' (57),

Agnes is unsure as to whether this woman is ‘one of the upper servants, or Mrs Murray herself’ (57) as the latter has not yet deigned to welcome her in person. Agnes explains:

I did not see her till eleven o’clock on the morning after my arrival, when she honoured me with a visit, just as my mother might step into the kitchen to see a new servant girl – yet not so, either, for my mother would have seen her immediately after her arrival, and not waited til the next day; and moreover, she would have addressed her in a more kind and friendly manner, and given her some words of comfort as well as a plain exposition of her duties; but Mrs Murray did neither the one nor the other (59).

However, this stranger whom Agnes encounters on the stairs is in fact the lady’s maid, who treats Agnes, her social superior, ‘with the air of one conferring an unusual favour’ (57), although she does condescend to have her luggage sent up. Agnes waits for what seems to be an interminably long time before the luggage is ‘brought in by a rough-looking maid and a man, neither of them very respectful in their demeanour’ (57) to her. Most governesses would surely quail when confronted with this sustained hostility and indifference, but it says much for Agnes’s indomitable spirit and resilience that her predictably ‘strange feeling of desolation [is] mingled with a strong sense of the novelty of [her] situation’ (57). Few people would describe her treatment in such relatively enthusiastic terms as a ‘novelty’.

This humiliating treatment that Agnes receives from both employers and servants on her first day continues throughout her time at Horton Lodge. The children are almost invariably inconsiderate, disrespectful, or indifferent to her own needs and wants. She finds it impossible to teach them effectively because they lack the discipline to attend properly to their lessons, and, as had occurred at Wellwood, she knows that she cannot rely on Mr and Mrs Murray to support her demands that the children focus on their studies. There is no formal lesson timetable, with the consequence that the children decide when they will study. Sometimes this is early in the morning before breakfast; at other times lessons start much later because the children lie in bed late. Agnes complains: ‘My judgment or convenience was never once consulted’ (68). The children also occasionally want to be taught in the open air, instead of in the classroom. This often causes Agnes to catch a cold, and again she grumbles that the children ‘might have been

taught some consideration' (68) for other people. When the lessons do take place in the schoolroom, the children behave in an 'indecorous manner' (68). She writes:

While receiving my instructions, or repeating what they had learnt, they would lounge upon the sofa, lie on the rug, stretch, yawn, talk to each other, or look out of the window (69).

It is difficult to condone Agnes's silence on these occasions and to understand why she fails to rebuke her charges. This is especially so when, as I will show, she continues to behave in an assertive and confrontational manner at other times when she disagrees with Rosalie's or Matilda's behaviour. However, I believe that her silence must not be construed as cowardice or evasiveness, but rather as a deliberate strategy that reflects her strength and spirit. Because she knows that she cannot depend on the parents for support, I feel that she has made a conscious decision not to direct her energy into conflictual situations where she knows that she cannot win. She rather chooses to conserve her energy for other, more promising areas of disagreement. Therefore I do not see her silence as a softening or weakening of her strong sense of purpose and independence, but instead as an empowering strategy to help her to survive. However, with hindsight, Agnes does realise that she might have responded to these situations in a more assertive fashion. Looking back on these unhappy days, she reflects:

I must not blame [the children] for what was, perhaps, my own fault; for I never made any particular objections to sitting where they pleased, foolishly choosing to risk the consequences, rather than trouble them for my convenience (68).

Similarly disrespectful behaviour is also evident when Agnes is obliged to walk home from church with Rosalie and Matilda and their fashionable young friends such as Harry Meltham or the Green sisters. Because no-one ever speaks to Agnes or acknowledges her presence in any way, she dislikes this intensely. She explains that 'it was disagreeable to walk beside them' (106) because they would talk to one another over or across her so that 'if their eyes...chanced to fall on me, it seemed as if they looked on vacancy' (106). But it is much more 'disagreeable...to walk behind' (106) because Agnes is extremely sensitive to the implication that she is inferior to the others:

in truth, I considered myself pretty nearly as good as the best of them, and wished them to know that I did so, and not to imagine that I looked upon myself as a mere domestic, who knew her own place too well to walk beside such fine ladies and gentlemen (106).

In such instances, it is very easy to identify Agnes's strong sense of autonomy and independence. On one specific occasion she deliberately allows herself to fall back, far to the rear of the others, so that she can avoid their offensive attitude. She is in control, directing the proceedings, even if they are unaware of this. It is then very interesting to notice how she uses unusually sophisticated language to stress her superior educational attainments to those of the Murray girls and their friends. She now explains that she begins to 'botanize and entomologize along the green banks and budding hedges' (107), activities that indicate her considerable knowledge of, and interest in, the world of nature and science. Her use of such elevated language is a conscious strategy that she deploys to console herself in the face of the sustained rudeness of the others.

Rosalie and Matilda Murray certainly treat Agnes very badly, because they have never been taught how to behave correctly, and not because they are pursuing a deliberately antagonistic agenda. This is how most governesses were treated in a patriarchal culture. However, Mr and Mrs Murray behave generally better to Agnes than do Mr and Mrs Bloomfield. Mr Bloomfield, in particular, could not speak to Agnes in a civil tone of voice. But at Horton Lodge, possibly because the Murrays are confident of their relatively elevated position in society, they do not seem to feel the same necessity constantly to emphasise their superior rank to Agnes by means of offensive and haughty behaviour. They are neither very rude nor very warm and friendly, and their failings are much more the consequence of omission than of commission. Agnes has minimal contact with Mr Murray because he is always in the stables or out hunting and shooting. Therefore, it is Mrs Murray who tends to communicate with her. On one occasion, when Mrs Murray is explaining how she should treat the children, Agnes

observed that while Mrs Murray was so extremely solicitous for the comfort and happiness of her children, and continually talking about it, she never once mentioned mine, though they were at home surrounded by friends, and I an alien among strangers (61).

Mrs Murray's deficient attitude towards Agnes is thoughtless and selfish, but not deliberately intended to degrade her. Another time, when Mrs Murray lectures Agnes on Matilda's refusal to behave like a young lady and not a boorish male, Agnes

was about to give the lady some idea of the fallacy of her expectations; but she sailed away as soon as she had concluded her speech. Having said what she wished, it was no part of her plan to await my answer: it was my business to hear, and not to speak (153).

A policy of dialogue and genuine communication with her governess is obviously a foreign concept to Mrs Murray, who prefers a monologue to a conversation. However, the best example of her lack of sensitivity and compassion occurs when Agnes hears that her father is dying and asks for permission to return home at once. Mrs Murray can see no reason for Agnes to hurry home because 'it might prove a false alarm after all; and if not – why, it was only in the common course of nature; we must all die sometime; and I was not to suppose myself the only afflicted person in the world' (157).

The Murrays' dismissive attitude towards Agnes is copied by the servants who 'seeing in what little estimation the governess was held by both parents and children, regulated their behaviour by the same standard' (69). Throughout her time as a governess, Agnes is particularly touchy about her treatment by the servants, and at Horton she feels especially aggrieved because, as she explains:

I frequently stood up for *them*, at the risk of some injury to myself, against the tyranny and injustice of their young masters and mistresses; and I always endeavoured to give them as little trouble as possible; but they entirely neglected my comfort, despised my requests, and slighted my directions (69).

Although Agnes is not rewarded for her defence of the servants, she is nevertheless acting with integrity and courage when confronting the 'tyranny and injustice' of the Murray children on behalf of the disempowered. Her powerful sense of justice and truth is particularly evident here, and shows how she can be strong and resolute when speaking out in defence of the marginalised.

Agnes's difficult experiences as governess at Horton Lodge constitute the framework for Brontë's careful if relatively brief assessment of the different and generally inadequate educational opportunities experienced by the Murray children. Brontë reworks her initial interest in how patriarchal expectations have forced Tom and Mary Ann Bloomfield to conform to this gendered ideology, so that she now shows how these same expectations influence the different types of education received by the Murray sons and daughters. It is true that all the Murray children have so far received a deplorably poor education. However, significantly, Mrs Murray gives Agnes discrepant directions regarding the curriculum to be followed by her children. With regard to Rosalie and Matilda,

she seemed anxious only to render them as superficially attractive, and showily accomplished, as they could possibly be made without present trouble or discomfort to themselves; and I was to act accordingly – to study and strive to their part, and no exercise of authority on mine (60).

Thus Agnes's mandate is to prepare the Murray girls for their debut into polite society and, by implication, to ensure their eligibility for the Victorian marriage market. Brontë condemns the way in which the girls are associated with everything that is artificial, gaudy and shallow, and totally devoid of anything of substance and depth. Mrs Murray's instructions thus focus on the cosmetic and the superficial, completely ignoring the academic or more cerebral contexts of learning and the acquisition of wisdom and knowledge. Brontë also criticises Mrs Murray's insistence that Rosalie and Matilda must not be required to exert themselves in their attainment of these accomplishments. Everything must be easy, smooth, trivialised. Intelligent, well educated women are not admired in a patriarchal society that, instead, wants its wives not only to be docile and submissive but also to possess the many social accomplishments that can be displayed to guests in the drawing room after dinner. Agnes is displeased with Mrs Murray's directions. She herself possesses impressive social and more academic qualifications, 'Music, Singing, Drawing, French, Latin, and German' (52), skills which are imparted to her by her parents:

My mother, being at once highly accomplished, well informed, and fond of employment, took the whole charge of our education on herself, with

the exception of Latin – which my father undertook to teach us – so that we never even went to school (2).

As I have already argued, there is no textual evidence to suggest that the Reverend and Mrs Grey educate Agnes with the specific intention of preparing her for the life of a governess. However they have taught her very well, so that she is able to insert ‘an advertisement...in the paper’ (52) with confidence.

Mrs Murray’s instructions to Agnes regarding John and Charles’ curriculum differ in that Agnes must focus on getting ‘the greatest possible quantity of Latin grammar and Valpy’s *Delectus* into their heads, in order to fit them for school – the greatest possible quantity at least, *without* trouble to themselves’ [Brontë’s italics] (60). The explanatory notes to the Oxford World’s Classics edition of *Agnes Grey* explain that ‘Richard Valpy’s *Delectus Sententiarum et Historiarum* was a widely used Latin textbook. Anne Brontë’s inscribed copy (dated November 1843) of the 1841 edition is in the Bonnell Collection at the Brontë Parsonage Museum’ (205). Agnes’s task is therefore simply to cram as much Latin as possible into the boys’ heads, with the functional purpose of ensuring that they can pass the entrance exam to the exclusive boarding school to be selected by their father. Mrs Murray’s instructions do not suggest that she possesses an enlightened attitude towards the study of Latin, or that she regards Latin as the noble language of an ancient civilisation. She does not admire the language *per se*. Nor do John and Charles Murray have respect or affection for Latin. Their study of this venerable language is for purely utilitarian outcomes. John has a ‘scandalous ignorance’ (65) of the language, while Charles merely learns to regurgitate it like a parrot. Agnes reports that ‘his minute portions of Latin grammar, &c., were to be repeated over to him, til he chose to say he knew them, and then, he was to be helped to say them’ (66).

Therefore John and Charles do not benefit from their study of Latin. Brontë is concerned to show the discrepancy in that, while the girls are never exposed to Latin and will never have the opportunity to enjoy it and develop their language skills, the boys do at least acquire a rudimentary knowledge of it. The fact that John and Charles do not avail themselves of the advantages offered by the study of Latin is secondary to Brontë’s implicit belief that boys and girls must receive the same education. The fact that studying Latin is beneficial, is immaterial in this context. Indeed Brontë is silent on this point. Latin *per se* is not the topic under discussion. The crux of the argument is that Brontë condemns an education that varies according to the sex

of the pupils. Agnes, a humble curate's daughter, has herself been taught Latin by her father, but the Murray daughters, groomed for greater social destinations than is Agnes, are denied all access to the study of this language.

By means of Agnes's interactions with Rosalie, Brontë suggests that, for young middle class Victorian women, education is confined to three specific contexts. Brontë places a particularly high premium on the academic aspect of education, as seen in the teaching of Latin and other languages, but Rosalie, in common with the rest of her family, clearly does not value academic studies. A second kind of education is the teaching of social accomplishments to young girls to equip them with the skills necessary to marry well. Brontë seems to consider this as a debasement of the true meaning and significance of education. However, the third type of education, the inculcation of morals and good values in young people, receives Brontë's enthusiastic support and informs Agnes's assessment of Rosalie's 'sad want of principle' (62). Agnes 'really like[s]' (62) Rosalie, but laments her many moral failings, which Agnes believes are 'rather the effect of her education than her disposition' (62). She comments that Rosalie

had never been properly taught the difference between right and wrong; she had, like her brothers and sisters [sic], been suffered from infancy to tyrannize over nurses, governesses, and servants; she had not been taught to moderate her desires, to control her temper or bridle her will, or to sacrifice her own pleasure for the good of others (62).

Rosalie has been spoilt and allowed to have her own way throughout her life, hence her many 'faults' (62). Her moral education has been seriously deficient, and Brontë shows that this has resulted in the young girl's selfishness and generally disrespectful treatment of others. Such behaviour and attitudes are disappointing traits in any young person, but especially so in young women because Brontë seems to suggest that it is women, in their role as mothers and wives, who have the potential to make the world a better and more moral place.

Rosalie is naturally indolent and has never bothered to exert herself in her educational pursuits. Agnes complains that Rosalie's 'mind had never been cultivated' (62) and that her 'intellect at best was somewhat shallow' (62), although she concedes that she 'possessed considerable vivacity [and] some quickness of perception' (62). Rosalie is obviously reasonably intelligent, and she would have made good progress had she been taught so well that her

intellectual curiosity had been stimulated. She does have ‘some talent for music and the acquisition of languages’ (62), but ‘till fifteen she had troubled herself to acquire nothing’ (62). These were therefore sadly wasted years for her. But at fifteen Rosalie suddenly realises that she will soon, as Agnes puts it, ‘emerge from the quiet obscurity of the school-room into the full blaze of the fashionable world’ (71), and that she must therefore improve her ‘more showy accomplishments’ (62). She neglects anything that she cannot ‘display’ (62) to her drawing room audience. Therefore she concentrates on polishing up her ‘French, German, music, singing, dancing, fancy-work, and...drawing’ (62). But there is something intrinsically dishonest about her approach to her drawing and fancy-work. Because she is so lazy, she only focuses on ‘such drawing as might produce the greatest show with the smallest labour’ (62). The ‘principal parts’ (62) of all her drawings are ‘generally done’ (62) by Agnes. Agnes also has to assist Rosalie in her fancy-work in ‘twenty different ways’ (63), so that ‘all the tedious parts of her work were shifted onto my shoulders; such as...putting in the grounds, counting the stitches, rectifying mistakes, and finishing the pieces she was tired of’ (63). Rosalie thus basks in the praise of the drawing room for work that is essentially not hers.

Rosalie’s preference for all things showy, her intense wish to display herself and her social accomplishments to a world of men, a world of potential husbands, is a powerful indictment of the way in which patriarchy compels many young middle class women to prioritise the shallow and the artificial over the pursuit of true knowledge and learning. Young women such as Rosalie quickly learn to define themselves in terms of the male gaze, and to assess their intrinsic worth in the context of their success in attracting men. The cultivation of the mind, the love of truth and beauty, the high regard for integrity and virtue, are discarded in favour of the superficial and the fake. Brontë thus strongly condemns patriarchal society that forces women to seek happiness and success in terms of the validation of men, rather than in a more independent and autonomous sense of self. She shows that Agnes revels in her own sense of autonomy and in her strength of purpose to live her life in the way that she deems best. She does not define herself in terms of men, or indeed of anyone else. She does not need the approbation of men to make her feel good about herself. She has a healthy sense of self-worth because she knows that she leads a life of moral rectitude. She confirms that she ‘was the only person in the house who steadily professed good principles, habitually spoke the truth, and generally endeavoured to make inclination bow to duty’ (62). Although she quickly adds ‘and this I say, not of course in commendation of

myself, but to show the unfortunate state of the family to which my services were...devoted' (62), it is nevertheless apparent that she is deservedly proud of her admirably moral way of life. She also knows that Rosalie and Matilda have a grudging respect for her integrity:

Miss Grey was a queer creature; she never flattered, and did not praise them half enough, but whenever she did speak favourably of them, or anything belonging to them, they could be quite sure her approbation was sincere...She had her own opinions on every subject, and kept steadily to them – very tiresome opinions they often were, as she was always thinking of what was right and what was wrong, and had...an unaccountable liking for good people (69-70).

The most significant comment in this self-portrait is her insistence that she is 'always thinking of what was right and what was wrong'. This proves the moral frame of reference by which she conducts her life, and also highlights the crucial differences between Agnes and the fundamentally dishonest Rosalie. Another crucial observation that attests to Agnes's sense of autonomy is her claim that she 'had her own opinions on every subject'. Such opinions are not derivative, but fiercely independent.

So far I have shown that Rosalie, pretty and socially ambitious and comfortably conventional, is thoroughly content, even eager, to fulfil the frivolous role of the painted butterfly that patriarchy requires of her. She has no criticisms of such a life; in fact she revels in it. I have also argued that Agnes is impervious to patriarchal expectations. Despite her situation as an impecunious, young, single, middle class woman in a rigidly patriarchal world, she reaches out to that world, and increasingly confidently navigates her way through its many incongruities and injustices. She is not always happy; she often feels degraded and unappreciated; but Brontë celebrates her strength of character and her determination to become as independent both emotionally and financially as her circumstances will permit.

However, Matilda's response to patriarchal demands is completely antithetical to that of her sister. Although Agnes dismissively claims that of Matilda 'little need be said' (63), she (and therefore Brontë) in fact has much to say about Matilda. This is rich, interesting and highly controversial commentary that plays a significant role in the novel's feminist critique. Matilda refuses to engage with the gendered conventions and stereotypes that patriarchy prescribes for women, preferring instead to adopt the manners, attitudes and discourse of men. Brontë argues

that Matilda's mimicry of male behaviour does not imply female liberation, but rather suggests that Matilda is as much defined by patriarchy as is her sister. She is completely at home in the world of men, in the world of the kennel, the hunt, and the stables, where the coachman, the grooms, and the stable hands are her preferred companions. She is therefore as indifferent to matters of class as she is to gender. She is 'reckless, headstrong, violent, and unamenable to reason' (64) and she is much closer to her father than her mother. Her father acknowledges that '“Tilly”...would have made a fine lad' (151). Agnes describes Mr Murray as 'a blustering, roistering country squire, a devoted fox-hunter, a skilful horse-jockey and farrier' (59), and Matilda has clearly internalised his love of traditional country pursuits that revolve around horses and the hunting of foxes. She is rough and unpolished, she 'swear[s] like a trooper' (64), and she is 'as happy as a lark' (64) when 'riding her spirited pony, or romping with the dogs, or her brothers and sister, but especially with her dear brother John' (64).

The fundamental difference between the two sisters is seen when Agnes returns to Horton after her Christmas holidays: while Rosalie longs to describe the ball that signalled her 'coming out', Matilda enjoys telling Agnes about 'her splendid mare, its breeding and pedigree, its paces, its action, its spirit, &c., and of her own amazing skill and courage in riding it' (74). Rosalie complains to Agnes that Matilda '*will* call her horse a mare; it is so *inconceivably* shocking! and then she uses such dreadful expressions in describing it: she *must* have learnt it from the grooms' (75). Victorian prudery disapproved of female animals being described in gender-specific terms, but Rosalie's distress at hearing Matilda use the technically accurate term 'mare' is mocked by Matilda:

'I learnt it from papa, you ass! and his jolly friends,' said the young lady, vigorously cracking a hunting-whip, which she habitually carried in her hand. 'I'm as good a judge of horseflesh as the best of 'em' (75).

Brontë's deliberately satirical description of Matilda as a 'young lady' can be contrasted with Agnes's image of Matilda as 'a veritable hoyden' (63). Matilda's wish to live according to a set of principles and values derived from patriarchal models is no less problematic in gender terms than the more conventional route chosen by Rosalie.

But patriarchy and Mrs Murray cannot allow Matilda to continue with her mannish ways. Having married Rosalie off successfully to Sir Thomas Ashby, Mrs Murray now has the time to seek ‘a reform’ (151) in Matilda, so that Matilda is

denied the solace which the companionship of the coachman, groom, horses, greyhounds and pointers might have afforded...and...prohibited entirely[from] the yards, stables, kennels, and coach-house (151).

Matilda is ‘not quite what a young lady ought to be’ (151) from a patriarchal perspective, and therefore Agnes is commanded by Mrs Murray to ‘amuse Miss Matilda with other things, and to *remind* her of her mother’s precepts and prescriptions’ [Brontë’s italics] (152). Although Agnes ‘did so to the best of [her] power’ (152), Matilda is stubborn and refuses to ‘be amused against her will’ (152). Mrs Murray is very disappointed that Agnes fails to reform Matilda, but Brontë suggests that a strong character such as Matilda will not bow easily or cheerfully to social pressures. Despite Agnes’s and Mrs Murray’s best efforts, Matilda continues to love the outdoor life of hunting, dogs, and the chase. One day, when she is out on an ostensibly sedate walk with Agnes, as prescribed by Mrs Murray, her dog chases after a leveret. Matilda comes ‘panting back, with the lacerated body of the young hare in her hand’ (154), her ‘gleeful countenance’ (155) suggesting that she is exhilarated by the chase and the death of the hare. She admits that she is ‘pleased to see it killed’ (155) because it was ‘a noble chase’ (155). She asks Agnes: ‘Didn’t you see how it doubled – just like an old hare? and didn’t you hear it scream?’ (155). Although Matilda admits that the leveret ‘cried out just like a child’ (155), she feels no compassion for the animal’s suffering and brutal death. While her callous attitude towards the cruel treatment of the hare is most unattractive, Brontë suggests that Matilda is unlikely ever to become the refined lady who will dazzle the drawing room and ballroom. The problem is exacerbated in that Matilda does not ‘care about the cultivation of her mind, and the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments’ (63) which she ‘despise[s]’ (64). Agnes explains that

as an animal, Matilda was all right, full of life, vigour, and activity; as an intelligent being, she was barbarously ignorant, indocile, careless, and irrational (64).

Brontë's unappealing portrait of Matilda is as problematic as that of Rosalie, and suggests that the responses of both sisters to the expectations of patriarchal society are equally deficient. While Brontë rejects the way in which Rosalie unthinkingly conforms to such pressures, she also condemns Matilda's crude mimicry of male behaviour. Her boorish mannerisms are an inadequate response to patriarchal demands.

Agnes Grey offers no closure to Matilda's story. We do not know what happens to her, or how she turns out in the end. It would have been intriguing, had Brontë written a sequel to *Agnes Grey*, to observe her treatment of this interesting but problematic character. With all her eccentricity and genuine love of traditionally masculine country pursuits, Matilda may have become increasingly marginalised as she grew older and refused to submit to the dictates of polite society. Patriarchy has no patience or tolerance for females such as Matilda, born into wealthy, socially ambitious families, but who do not conform to its strictures.

Matilda, however, has not entirely ruled out the idea of marriage. She merely has a very clear idea about the kind of husband she would choose. Rosalie warns her that 'Nobody will ever admire you till you get rid of your rough, awkward manners' for 'you may captivate old men, and younger sons; but nobody else...will ever take a fancy to you' (83). To this, Matilda replies gruffly:

'I don't care: I'm not always grubbing after money, like you and mama. If my husband is able to keep a few good horses and dogs, I shall be quite satisfied; and all the rest may go to the devil!' (83).

Matilda speaks honestly, but it is not likely that her gendered world will provide her with a progressive husband with a sufficiently independent worldview to accept such a masculine wife. But what is quite evident is that Brontë has created in Matilda a character who offers rich potential for feminist critics. Matilda has to negotiate the powerful corridors of patriarchy, but the novel is unclear as to the extent to which she may have to compromise her own values and moral code. She is no more Brontë's heroine than is Rosalie.

However, it is through her portrayal of the conventional Rosalie, and not Matilda, that Brontë is able to look at the institution of marriage, an institution about which Brontë entertains very robust opinions and about which she certainly wishes to 'instruct' her readers. The depiction of Rosalie, her suitors, her ambitious mother, and her unhappy marriage to Sir Thomas

Ashby provides an ideal framework for Brontë to investigate issues that she holds particularly dear, and which she will explore more fully in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. However, the analysis of marriage in *Agnes Grey* is certainly much thinner than the critique that informs *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. I will show that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Brontë carefully locates her analysis of marriage within Victorian legal and social realities, such as the law of coverture and the ideology of separate spheres. But now, in *Agnes Grey*, Brontë confines her principal investigation of marriage to the much more limited treatment of Rosalie before and after her marriage. Matters such as the custody of children, conjugal rights, and remunerated work opportunities for married women, pivotal to the assessment of marriage in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, are absent here. Because it is Agnes, who looks at the world in steadily unsentimental, yet morally correct, ways, who narrates the story of Rosalie and her romantic intrigues, we can be reasonably certain that we are receiving a truthful account unclouded by emotion or prejudice. From the outset, Agnes stresses that in general she ‘really like[s] Rosalie’ (62) who is ‘a very lovely girl’ (61) in ‘her form and face’ (61), although ‘her mind and disposition’ (61) are problematic. She bears no malice towards her, and her version of the latter’s conduct with her various suitors can be considered honest and ultimately reliable. Agnes has no agenda save to tell the truth; Brontë’s intention is to make Rosalie’s story ‘useful’ so that other young women are warned to avoid following her sad example.

The story of Rosalie and her lovers can thus best be seen as a moral fable. Brontë paints a sobering picture of her as naïve, immature, and utterly foolish, having but one goal: the ensnaring of a very rich, preferably titled husband who will offer her a life of material wealth and privilege. Morality, principle, integrity do not feature in Rosalie’s criteria for a perfect husband, nor does she seriously object to his being ugly, stupid, or boring. Wealth is her primary objective: she will overlook many other failings in a suitor should he be rich. This materialistic aim ultimately proves to be her downfall. Brontë punishes her for her avarice and folly in failing to consider carefully any other attribute in a husband save his fortune, but also recognizes the extent to which she is the product of her mother’s negative ‘education’. As soon as she turns eighteen, her ‘coming out’ into fashionable society is Rosalie’s sole preoccupation:

She was to make her debut...at a magnificent ball, which her mama proposed to give to all the nobility and choice gentry of O- and its neighbourhood for twenty miles round (71).

Rosalie's shallow and rather unpleasant personality is already clearly evident in the account of the ball that she gives to Agnes. She adores her 'exquisitely lovely dress...white gauze over pink satin...and so *sweetly* made! and a necklace and bracelet of beautiful, large pearls!' (75). It is of course quite understandable, indeed normal, that a young woman would wish to wear a beautiful gown at her coming out ball, but Rosalie's almost obsessive focus on the gown offends Agnes, who replies rather primly: 'I have no doubt you looked very charming; but should that delight you so *very* much?' [Brontë's italics] (76). But Agnes is much more shocked when Rosalie tells her that she had enjoyed flirting with other women's husbands, and that she had also felt no contrition in causing their wives to become jealous. She explains complacently that

'Lord F- , who hates his wife, was evidently much struck with me. He asked me to dance with him twice.... and [he] was very complimentary too – rather too much so in fact...but I had the pleasure of seeing his nasty, cross wife ready to perish with spite and vexation' (76).

Rosalie's selfishness and contemptuous treatment of other men's wives anticipates the way in which she will toy with Mr Hatfield's affections. Her culpability is exacerbated by her admission to Agnes that 'I mean to be good sometime' (76). This remark suggests that her thoughtless behaviour is deliberate, and that she gets a sick sort of pleasure from hurting other men's wives.

The unspoken but fully understood intention behind Rosalie's 'coming out' is that she will quickly find a suitable, very rich husband and marry him. Once she is off Mrs Murray's hands, her mother can then focus on preparing Matilda, a more unlikely candidate, for her own 'coming out' and subsequent marriage. Such was the chief preoccupation of the middle class Victorian mother of daughters. As we have seen, the Murray sisters' entire education has been designed to prepare them to achieve the superficial and ornamental accomplishments that will help them to catch rich husbands. Brontë shows that Rosalie and Matilda are mere commodities in the marriage market that is such a crucial aspect of patriarchal society and its denial of female autonomy and independence. Rosalie willingly collaborates with her own oppression, but Matilda is much more cautious.

Rosalie describes some of her principal ‘admirers’ (76) to Agnes. This is an important passage in *Agnes Grey* because it explains the characteristics requisite in an allegedly ideal husband:

‘Sir Thomas is young, rich, and gay, but an ugly beast nevertheless: however, Mama says I should not mind that after a few months’ acquaintance. Then, there was Harry Meltham, Sir Hugh’s younger son, rather good-looking, and a pleasant fellow to flirt with; but *being* a younger son, that is all he is good for: then there was young Mr Green, rich enough, but of no family, and a great stupid fellow, a mere country booby’ (76-77).

Mrs Murray has obviously singled out Sir Thomas as the best candidate for her daughter’s hand, and her culpability is already evident in the way that she encourages Rosalie to ignore his ugliness, an aspect of his personage that Rosalie clearly finds unappealing. The important issue of primogeniture, by which the oldest son inherits his father’s property and most of his material assets, is seen in Rosalie’s dismissive reference to Harry Meltham as being the ‘younger son’. This automatically renders him suitable only for purposes of flirtation. Mr Green has ‘no family’ and is deplorably rustic in his ways, ‘a mere country booby’. Such a man, with no pedigree or intelligence or sophistication, no matter how rich, cannot compete with Sir Thomas, who has wealth, a title, and a magnificent property, Ashby Park. Rosalie is quite unashamed in her admission to Agnes that ‘I *must* have Ashby Park, whoever shares it with me’ (177). The absence of love or any romantic interest in her list of characteristics is conspicuous. She can see no value in love, observing:

‘To think that I could be such a fool as to fall in *love*! It is quite beneath the dignity of a woman to do such a thing. Love! I detest the word! as applied to one of our sex, I think it a perfect insult! a preference I *might* acknowledge’ (116).

Love is unimportant when compared to material issues such as wealth and rank. Rosalie’s speech shows that marriage was an important legal and social institution by which the property, assets, and social position of middle class families were carefully preserved, and preferably expanded and improved. Sentiment had no place in Victorian considerations of marriage.

In both her novels Brontë is intensely critical of socially ambitious mothers who encourage their young, naïve daughters to marry for reasons of social prestige or wealth. In *Agnes Grey* Brontë's criticism is directed towards Mrs Murray; in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, towards Mrs Hargrave, who forces Milicent to marry Ralph Hattersley purely because he is rich. Well before her engagement, Rosalie already knows that of all her admirers Sir Thomas is 'the wickedest' (77) and 'the greatest scamp in Christendom' (116). Agnes incredulously asks her: 'Is it really so, Miss Murray? and does your mama know about it, and yet wish you to marry him?' (116). Rosalie's innocent response condemns Mrs Murray for ever in Agnes's eyes:

'To be sure she does! She knows more against him than I do, I believe: she keeps it from me lest I should be discouraged; not knowing how little I care for such things. For it's no great matter really: he'll be all right when he's married, as mama says; and reformed rakes make the best husbands, *every* body knows' (116-117).

Rosalie's unthinking repetition of Richardson's famous remark in *Pamela* is indicative of the degree to which she has been manipulated by her irresponsible mother. However, because she 'shouldn't greatly object to being Lady Ashby of Ashby Park' (77), she will ignore his moral failings. Agnes asks disbelievingly how Rosalie could want to marry Sir Thomas 'if he's so wicked' (77), to which Rosalie replies: 'Oh, I don't mind his being wicked; he's all the better for that' (77). After the engagement, Agnes confesses that she is 'amazed and horrified at Mrs Murray's heartlessness, or want of thought for the real good of her child' (140). Here we can easily detect her strength of purpose in attempting to persuade Rosalie to revisit her decision to marry Sir Thomas in her comment that 'by my unheeded warnings and exhortations, I vainly strove to remedy the evil' (140). But 'Miss Murray only laughed at what I said' (140). Even though she is powerless against her employer's wishes, Agnes has shown yet again that she is fearless in her brave confrontation of what she perceives as evil. She behaves in a fiercely independent way, but when she observes Rosalie 'plunge more recklessly than ever into the depths of heartless coquetry' (141), she has 'no more pity for her' (141). Rather than continuing to perceive Rosalie as the innocent victim of her ruthless mother's machinations, Agnes now sees her in part as the architect of her own destiny.

Rosalie is an obsessive flirt, or as Agnes terms it, a coquette. Before and after her engagement to Sir Thomas, she never tires of trying to exert an illicit power over both her acknowledged admirers as well as over utterly unsuitable and uninterested men such as the curate, Mr Weston. Rosalie has sinister and predatory intentions because, once she has persuaded her victim to fall in love with her and propose marriage, she immediately rejects him. She has no desire to marry anyone except Sir Thomas; she is not in love with any man, even Sir Thomas; but she seems to have a deep-seated and compulsive need to prove that she can make any man ‘lay his heart at [her] feet’ (137). The best example of a man who falls victim to her evil schemes is the rector, Mr Hatfield. Rosalie cruelly and arrogantly toys with his emotions, and she derives a perverse and sick amusement from encouraging his protestations of love, and then observing his pain and humiliation when his proposal of marriage is turned down. Agnes does not try to speculate as to why Rosalie behaves in this way, but it seems to indicate something horribly deficient and unpleasant in her character. However, her treatment of Mr Hatfield does also indicate her exploitation (albeit in a negative and destructive way) of one of the few forms of power available to her: the power of being sexually attractive, and the power to decline an offer of marriage. Therefore, as I will discuss later in this chapter, the issue of Rosalie’s rejection of Mr Hatfield’s proposal is substantially more complex than being merely indicative of her unattractive character.

Before her engagement to Sir Thomas, Rosalie pursues Mr Hatfield with wilful and single-minded zeal. As the rector of Horton, Mr Hatfield enjoys a respectable position in the community and is regarded as a most eligible bachelor by many women. However he should have had the common sense to realise that Rosalie Murray, with her pedigree and wealth, was beyond his reach, and that Mr Murray, let alone his aggressively ambitious wife, would never agree to the match. Mr Hatfield’s blind optimism that social realities will permit him to marry Rosalie, incriminates him and shows him to be naïve. Rosalie takes the initiative in arranging to meet him one day when she has ‘gone forth to enjoy a quiet ramble with a new fashionable novel for her companion’ (113). This persuades Mr Hatfield that she is genuinely interested in him. This meeting alarms Mrs Murray because if Sir Thomas learns about it, he may lose interest in marrying Rosalie. He has not yet proposed. Mrs Murray therefore instructs Agnes to go to the field and

‘just gently remind [Rosalie] that it is not proper for a young lady of her rank and prospects to be wandering about by herself in that manner, exposed to the attentions of any one that presumes to address her, like some poor neglected girl that has no park to walk in’ (113).

Rosalie must conduct herself in a way that is ‘proper’ for a young woman who hopes to become the wife of a baronet. Patriarchal society was obsessively judgmental regarding the appropriateness of women’s relationships with men: any whiff of scandal or impropriety will ruin Rosalie’s chances of becoming Lady Ashby. It is surely indicative of her alarming lack of intellect and common sense that, despite her strong wish to marry Sir Thomas, she should risk this by flirting with Mr Hatfield, especially in a public space such as a field where anyone might come across them. After Agnes has conveyed Mrs Murray’s message to Rosalie, she retorts:

‘Oh, mama’s so tiresome! As if I couldn’t take care of myself! She bothered me before about Mr Hatfield; and I told her she might trust me – I never should forget my rank and station for the most delightful man that ever breathed....I must have *somebody* to flirt with, and no one else has the sense to come here’ (116).

Her remark that her mother has ‘bothered’ her about this issue previously, tells us that this is not the first time that Rosalie and Mr Hatfield have met.

Rosalie is obviously succeeding in her project with the rector, and therefore it is no surprise when, a few days later, during another ramble in the field, he proposes to her, confident that she will accept his offer. Her flirtatious manner, her willingness to meet him in the field, and her apparent pleasure in his company, have persuaded him that his love for her is requited. But, in accordance with her plan, Rosalie rejects him indignantly. However, Mr Hatfield, although bitterly disappointed, is also angry with her, saying in a proud and dignified way:

‘I certainly did not expect this, Miss Murray. I might say something about your past conduct, and the hopes you have led me to foster, but I forbear, on condition....that you will not mention this affair to any one whatever’ (121).

Mr Hatfield threatens Rosalie that, if she does not keep his secret, he will retaliate by informing others about her inappropriate behaviour. Understandably, he does not wish to be the laughing stock of the community. His threats smack of the bully, but probably for the only time in *Agnes Grey*, we feel some sympathy and respect for the hapless rector. He says:

‘I will try to forgive, if I cannot forget the cause of my sufferings...if, in addition to the injury you have already done me...by giving publicity to this unfortunate affair, or naming it *at all*, you will find that I too can speak’ (121).

Rosalie is ‘quite frightened’ (121), but he continues aggressively:

‘I never was so ill-treated by any [woman]....There are many ladies – some even in this parish – that would be delighted to accept what you have so scornfully trampled under your feet....a single hint of the truth, from me to one of these, would be sufficient to raise such a talk against you as would seriously injure your prospects, and diminish your chance of success with any other gentleman you or your mama might design to entangle....this affair from beginning to end appears to me like a case of arrant - flirtation...such a case as you would find it rather inconvenient to have blazoned through the world’ (122).

Rosalie knows that Mr Hatfield is speaking the truth. She has already been warned by her mother that she is taking foolish risks, and now her possible future as the next Lady Ashby hangs in the balance. She therefore promises to keep silent. But, as soon as Mr Hatfield departs, she hurries to tell Agnes who is ‘truly horrified at her perfidy’ (123). Agnes knows that Rosalie will also tell her mother, her father, and her maid, Brown. Not only is this behaviour imprudent, but it also indicates her utter lack of integrity. She is extremely fortunate that Mr Hatfield does not discuss the situation with anyone.

Brontë uses Rosalie’s relationship with Mr Hatfield to ‘instruct’ her readers on a number of important matters. Firstly, she wishes to remind her readers that patriarchal society is hypocritical, with double standards for men and women. While Sir Thomas is known to be a reprobate and a rake, he is still regarded as a highly eligible husband. Mothers such as Mrs Murray conveniently ignore his misdemeanours and focus on his wealth, his title, and his splendid estate. However, if a woman ever so slightly transgresses the rigid conventions and

expectations of patriarchy, she is immediately labelled as loose and dissolute, a female whom no respectable man would wish to marry. Brontë vehemently condemns this hypocrisy, but she also condemns Rosalie's cruel treatment of Mr Hatfield, suggesting that no human being, male or female, should manipulate and deceive others as Rosalie does Mr Hatfield. Brontë seeks respectful and dignified interactions between all people. Thirdly, she points to Rosalie's and Mrs Murray's folly in preferring Sir Thomas to Mr Hatfield. Although Mr Hatfield is regarded as pompous and arrogant by Agnes, Rosalie admits to her that he is

‘decidedly good-looking...bewitchingly handsome...a very clever, witty, agreeable companion – not what *you* call clever, but just enough to make him entertaining; and a man one needn't be ashamed of anywhere, and would not soon grow tired of; and – to confess the truth, I rather liked him...and he evidently idolized me' (124).

Mr Hatfield has no history of debauchery and dissipation as does Sir Thomas, but he is relatively poor and has no title, and therefore he is passed over in favour of Sir Thomas, who is ugly and wicked, but also rich and a baronet. Brontë suggests that society has false and twisted values that legitimate the wrong people and the wrong moral codes. Finally, Brontë celebrates Agnes's tenacity and strength of purpose in openly criticising Rosalie's behaviour and motives, and for refusing to compromise her own high standards of integrity and virtue. Quiet, prim Agnes can always be relied upon to confront evil and wickedness in her quest for truth and probity. Agnes's character and her moral role in the novel possess strong affinities with those of Fanny Price in Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814).

However, while she is undoubtedly horrified at Rosalie's ruthless treatment of Hatfield, Agnes does also query the sincerity of his protestations of love by suggesting that these may have been influenced by a more materialistic impulse. The law of coverture meant that, upon marriage, Mr Hatfield would have gained control of all of Rosalie's material assets. Agnes cogitates:

He had been disappointed in his certain hope of obtaining not only a beautiful and, to him, highly attractive wife, but one whose rank and fortune might give brilliance to far inferior charms (127).

Agnes is not by nature a cynical individual, but it is important to note that she is not overly sentimental in her observations of human nature. Her sturdy common sense empowers her to read other people and their motives in a most insightful and mature way.

Rosalie, having disposed of Mr Hatfield, now turns her attention to Mr Weston, the curate, with whom Agnes is falling in love. Although Agnes strives to keep her feelings to herself, it is likely that Rosalie realises the situation, and therefore gets the same perverted sense of pleasure from causing Agnes to experience pain and jealousy. This is yet another distasteful example of her heartlessness. Within a week of her rejection of Mr Hatfield's offer, she tells Agnes:

'I mean to take up Mr Weston instead of Mr Hatfield....if I am to be married so soon I must make the best of the present time: I am determined Hatfield shall not be the only man who shall lay his heart at my feet, and implore me to accept the worthless gift in vain....I intend him to feel my power' (136-137).

Rosalie's reference to her 'power' is highly significant, as I have argued previously in this chapter. Her disempowered status, as a woman in Victorian patriarchy, makes her long for power, even of a negative sort. Agnes is disgusted with Rosalie's behaviour:

Such conduct was beyond my comprehension. Had I seen it depicted in a novel I should have thought it unnatural...but when I saw it with my own eyes, and suffered from it too, I could only conclude that excessive vanity, like drunkenness, hardens the heart, enslaves the faculties, and perverts the feelings (142).

Agnes suggests that Rosalie's outrageous behaviour is more improbable than anything that might conceivably be depicted in a fictional text. This is an interesting comment for three reasons. Firstly, it highlights the extent of Rosalie's callous and thoughtless conduct and her contemptuous disregard for Agnes's feelings. Secondly, it points to the disempowerment in real terms of women in a patriarchal society because the only way in which Rosalie can exert any modicum of power is by means of her abusive manipulation of the emotions of fundamentally decent men such as Mr Hatfield and Mr Weston. Thirdly, Agnes's remark reminds her readers that such women as Rosalie can be readily encountered in real life, and that her readers do not need to turn to fiction to engage with such individuals. Fortunately on this occasion Rosalie fails,

because Agnes becomes ‘a close and resolute dissembler’ (146) who refuses to let her observe her inner pain, and Mr Weston remains impervious to Rosalie’s charms.

Brontë takes care to add a significant postscript to the story of Rosalie and her marriage to Sir Thomas. Approximately a year after the marriage, Agnes receives an unexpected invitation from Rosalie to visit her at Ashby Park. In the intervening year, Agnes’s father has died, with the consequence that she has resigned from her position at Horton Lodge and has helped her mother to open a very successful school for young ladies in a neighbouring town. Although she has never heard again from Mr Weston, she has achieved emotional and financial independence, and is a confident and successful single woman. Nevertheless, she is surprised to receive this invitation because she knows that Rosalie never considered her to be a friend, but was always very conscious of the social divide between the two women, one the employer’s daughter, the other the employee, the governess. Rosalie acknowledges this sensitive issue of class by stating: ‘I want you to visit me as a *friend*’ (173). During her visit Agnes is dismayed to observe how twelve brief months of marriage and motherhood have aged and embittered the young wife, ‘reducing the plumpness of her form, the freshness of her complexion, the vivacity of her movements, and the exuberance of her spirits’ (176). Rosalie herself confirms that she is now ‘quite a grave old matron’ (174).

Rosalie is clearly very unhappy and is paying a heavy price for her previous misdemeanours and imprudent choice of husband. Agnes can understand why she had longed so intensely to ‘have Ashby Park’ (117) because it is

certainly a very delightful residence. The mansion was stately without, commodious and elegant within, the park was spacious and beautiful – chiefly on account of its magnificent old trees, its stately herds of deer, its broad sheet of water, and the ancient woods that stretched beyond it (175).

The drawing-room is ‘an imposing apartment, and very elegantly furnished’ (177), and Rosalie is proud to show off

her fat French poodle that lay curled up on a silk cushion...the two fine Italian paintings...the little jewelled watch she had brought from

Geneva...the elegant little time-piece, and several busts, small, graceful figures, and vases, all beautifully carved in white marble (177-178).

But these material things no longer compensate for her suffering and misery as Sir Thomas's wife. Agnes notices that her 'smile of pleasure' (178) soon vanishes and is replaced

by a melancholy sigh, as if in consideration of the insufficiency of all such baubles to the happiness of the human heart, and their woeful inability to supply its insatiate needs (178).

Rosalie is discontented and bored, despite the birth of her daughter eight weeks previously. Sir Thomas is displeased that the baby is a girl and not a boy, as this has serious implications in terms of inheritance, money, and property. Rosalie's only response to motherhood is that she does not have to nurse or breastfeed the baby: this is indicative of her lack of maternal love and concern for the baby, and reminds us of her innately selfish personality. Nor does she like her mother-in-law, the older Lady Ashby, who lives with her son and his wife, and whose constant presence she finds irksome.

However, Rosalie's strongest antipathy is reserved for her husband. Agnes has never seen him before this visit, but when he rides past the two women, she has 'a good opportunity of seeing what he [is] like' (183):

He was tall, thin, and wasted, with a slight stoop in the shoulders, a pale face, but somewhat blotchy, and disagreeably red about the eye-lids, plain features, and a general appearance of languor and flatness, relieved by a sinister expression about the mouth and the dull, soulless eyes (183).

Agnes now understands why Rosalie had always complained that Sir Thomas was ugly. When Rosalie confirms that she 'detests' (184) her husband, Agnes very reasonably reminds her: 'But you knew what he was before you married him' (184). Rosalie replies:

'No; I only thought so; I did not half know him really. I know you warned me against it, and I wish I had listened to you – but it's too late to regret that now – and besides mama ought to have known better than

either of us; and she never said anything against it – quite the contrary’ (184).

Rosalie is now wiser and sadder. Sir Thomas is selfish because, as she explains, ‘*he will do as he pleases*’ (184):

‘with his betting book, and his gaming table, and his opera girls, and his Lady this and Mrs that – yes and his bottles of wine, and glasses of brandy and water too – filthy beast!’ (184).

But Sir Thomas insists that Rosalie remain incarcerated in the countryside, leading ‘the life of a nun’ (184), with no friends or amusements, apparently because he is concerned that she will ‘dishonour him or bring him to ruin’ (184). She admits that, when she had been in London with Sir Thomas, she had seen ‘a great deal’ (179) of Harry Meltham, her former suitor, who had followed her, like a shadow, at every turn. Although she assures Agnes that she had been ‘very discreet’ (179) in her encounters with Harry, it seems probable that she had been unable to resist flirting with him, and that this had caused her husband to hurry her down to the country ‘to play the hermit’ (179). She has therefore had ample time to consider the error of her ways:

‘Oh, I would give ten thousand worlds to be Miss Murray again! It is *too* bad to feel life, health, and beauty wasting away, unfelt and unenjoyed, for such a brute as that!’ (184).

Brontë therefore punishes Rosalie very harshly for her youthful follies and errors of judgment. Agnes is greatly distressed but tries to improve the situation by offering Rosalie much wise and practical advice. Agnes has travelled a very long way from the infantilised daughter and sister who had to work hard to persuade her family to let her go out into the world as a governess. Her confidence and life experiences now empower her to act as Rosalie’s mentor and moral compass. With regard to Sir Thomas, Agnes suggests that Rosalie try hard ‘to ameliorate’ (185) him by ‘gentle reasoning, by kindness, example, and persuasion’ (185), but that, if this fails, Rosalie should ‘endeavour to abstract herself from him – to wrap herself up in her own integrity, and trouble herself as little about him as possible’ (185). Rosalie must do ‘her duty to God and man’ (185), ‘put her trust in Heaven’ (185) and ‘solace herself with the care and nurture

of her little daughter' (185). But Rosalie complains that she cannot devote herself to her child because 'it may die' (185) and she will get no pleasure 'in seeing a girl grow up to eclipse' (185) her, and 'enjoy those pleasures that [Rosalie is] for ever debarred from' (185). Pinning all one's hopes to a child, Rosalie claims, 'is only one degree better than devoting one's self to a dog' (185). Her innate vanity and selfishness persist, and she seems an unlikely candidate for happy wifehood and contented motherhood. Agnes's final piece of advice is that Rosalie make a friend, and not an enemy, of her mother-in-law, because 'though so blindly attached to her son, she is not without good principles, or incapable of hearing reason' (186). This advice is eminently sensible. Agnes believes that 'she would, in time, become [Rosalie's] faithful friend, and a comfort and support to you' (186).

But Rosalie seems reluctant to follow any of Agnes's suggestions because, as Agnes recalls, her advice 'had little effect upon the unfortunate young lady' (186). Thus she records that 'it was with a heavy heart that I bid adieu to poor Lady Ashby and left her in her princely home' (186). It seems likely that Rosalie is too indolent and passive to heed Agnes's suggestions, and will probably live out her days at Ashby Park as a discontented, querulous woman. She is also too much a product of the false 'education' she received from her foolish mother. The lives of Rosalie and Agnes have been reversed, because Rosalie, once the rich, pampered, spoilt darling of her parents, is now an unhappy, bitter, lonely wife and mother, whereas Agnes, formerly a shy, if resolute eighteen year old, is now a confident and assertive young woman who has negotiated her way to autonomy and independence. Rosalie is unfulfilled; Agnes is supremely fulfilled. Marriage has failed Rosalie; Agnes has achieved freedom and fulfilment without a husband. Brontë's 'instruction' seems obvious.

I would now like to move away from this consideration of Rosalie's marriage, in order to look at another strand of the novel. This strand is the account of the Anglican priest that, I believe, adds another important dimension to this 'exquisite novel'. My submission is that Brontë's careful assessment of the three priests whom Agnes encounters, does contribute to the feminist critique because it substantially enriches *Agnes Grey*'s portrayal of Agnes as a fearless crusader for what is right. Her robust interrogation of the moral frames of reference informing these men's lives is antithetical to the 'anaemic and pale' quality attributed to the novel by Ernest Raymond (Raymond, 1949: 228). My chapter has argued persistently that Agnes's strength of character is reflected in her high moral standards and her refusal to condone anything less in

others. She can perhaps at times be seen as a nag and a scold, someone whose voice must always comment on situations where she detects lack of principle or integrity. She functions as Brontë's spokeswoman, as her voice, so that her views on marriage, on gender stereotypes, on bad parents, are refracted through the words of Agnes. In keeping with my reading of *Agnes Grey* as a feminist text, I believe that Agnes's opinions and comments invariably support Brontë's feminist sympathies. But Agnes's good values are also consonant with her sincere Christian beliefs, and thus her Christian persona complements, rather than subverts, her sustained image of female strength and power.

Chapter 3 has shown that Brontë was an evangelical Christian. It is therefore hardly surprising that her 'plain and ordinary' (Barker, 1994: 503) heroine in *Agnes Grey* is also an evangelical. In the course of the novel, Agnes comes into contact with three men of the cloth, these being Mr Hatfield, Mr Weston, and her own father, the Reverend Richard Grey. Her commentary on their behaviour, in a religious and secular context, is always bold and unflinching. A familiarity with the religious beliefs of Anne and Patrick Brontë and William Weightman, and of the contemporary Anglican controversies current when Brontë wrote *Agnes Grey*, as described in Chapter 3, is essential for a proper understanding of her portrayal of the priests in *Agnes Grey*.

Agnes reserves her most vitriolic criticism for Mr Hatfield. As I have shown, it is true that she does feel a certain compassion for the vicar when he is humiliated by Rosalie. However, in general terms, for Agnes, Hatfield is a lamentable failure, both as a clergyman and a man. Her hostility towards Mr Hatfield is consonant with her observation to Rosalie that 'the end of Religion is not to teach us how to die, but how to live' (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 186) because Hatfield fails to live by the Christian principles in which he allegedly believes. His conduct of the service, his doctrinal beliefs, his vanity and worldliness suggest very persuasively that he is not an evangelical. Agnes's hostility towards Hatfield is conspicuous from the outset. Consider her first deliciously satirical description:

[He] would come sailing up the aisle, or rather sweeping along like a whirlwind, with his rich silk gown flying behind him and rustling against the pew doors, mount the pulpit like a conqueror ascending his triumphal car; then sinking on the velvet cushion in an attitude of studied grace, remain in silent prostration for a certain time; then, mutter over a Collect, and gabble through the Lord's Prayer, rise, draw off one bright lavender

glove to give the congregation the benefit of his sparkling rings, lightly pass his fingers through his well-curled hair, flourish a cambric handkerchief, recite a very short passage, or, perhaps, a mere phrase of scripture, as a head-piece to his discourse, and, finally, deliver a composition which, as a composition, might be considered good, though far too studied and artificial to be pleasing to me; the propositions were well laid down, the arguments logically conducted; and yet, it was sometimes hard to listen quietly throughout, without some slight demonstrations of disapproval or impatience (81).

While Hatfield's pomposity and pride in his appearance are deplored by Agnes, her even harsher criticism is reserved for his sermon, which she finds dry and insincere. Here it is helpful to compare Mr Hatfield with Patrick Brontë's curate, Willie Weightman, who was discussed at some length in Chapter 3. Hatfield's conduct and sermon are antithetical to Patrick Brontë's description of Willie Weightman as 'affable' (Green, 2008, 153) and 'open' (153), as a minister whose sermons made 'the love of God...the ruling motive for obedience' (153). Weightman had been praised for being 'neither distant nor austere' (153), whereas Agnes shows Hatfield to be arrogant and more interested in the fashionable figure he cuts than in the quality of his sermon. Her description suggests the distance that Hatfield's behaviour establishes between himself and his congregation, and implies that he lacks Weightman's 'rare art of communicating information with diligence and strictness, without austerity, so as to render instruction, even to the youngest and most giddy, a pleasure, and not a task' (153). Hatfield apparently views the church service more as a display, a performance, than a spiritual experience. The congregation are his audience, his admirers, and he is presenting a theatrical show that celebrates his skills rather than the love and benevolence of God.

Agnes holds especially strong views about the material contained in Hatfield's sermons, in which Ritualist and Tractarian sympathies are expressed which are profoundly different from the simplicity and sincerity of the sermons of evangelicals such as the Reverend Edward Weston. She vigorously disapproves of the content of Hatfield's sermons, explaining:

His favourite subjects were church discipline, rites and ceremonies, apostolical succession, the duty of reverence and obedience to the clergy, the atrocious criminality of dissent, the absolute necessity of observing all the forms of godliness, the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves in matters connected with religion,

or to be guided by their own interpretations of Scripture, and, occasionally, (to please his wealthy parishioners,)[sic] the necessity of deferential obedience from the poor to the rich – supporting his maxims and exhortations throughout with quotations from the Fathers, with whom he appeared to be far better acquainted than with the Apostles and Evangelists, and whose importance he seemed to consider at least equal to theirs (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 81).

Agnes's description contains much rich material which invites comparison with Patrick Brontë's view that Willie Weightman's sermons were neither 'bigoted, exclusive, nor dogmatical' (Green, 2008, 153). Hatfield preaches a classist creed of social hierarchy with the clergy and the rich elevated above the poor, who must serve their social superiors with 'deferential obedience' (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 81). The narrowness and intolerance of Hatfield's condemnation of 'the atrocious criminality of dissent' (81) and 'the reprehensible presumption of individuals who attempted to think for themselves' (81) contrast unfavourably with Weightman's stress on God's love and tenderness towards his people. Thus the harsh and judgemental tone of Hatfield's sermons opposes Agnes's (and therefore Brontë's) evangelical beliefs and her emphasis on social inclusivity and the pastoral care of the poor. From every perspective, be this doctrinal, social, or personal, Hatfield fails to meet Agnes's criteria for what she deems to be a worthy man of the cloth.

Nor does Agnes flinch from condemning Hatfield's 'sunless and severe' (82) portrayal of God 'as a terrible task-master, rather than a benevolent father' (82). This reminds us of the discussion in Chapter 3 of the adolescent Brontë's own crisis of faith at Roe Head when she had been so troubled by her Anglican advisers' image of God as a deity of wrath and brimstone, rather than a God of mercy and love.

However my reading of Agnes's opinion of Mr Hatfield concludes that her most rigorous criticism is directed towards his failure to offer adequate pastoral care to his poor parishioners. Hatfield thus ignores this crucial context of an evangelical clergyman's duties. His impatient and dismissive attitude towards the poor cottagers in his parish is especially evident in his behaviour towards Nancy Brown, 'a widow, whose son was at work all day in the fields' (87), and 'a woman of a serious, thoughtful turn of mind' (87). Nancy explains to Agnes, who visits her regularly, that she 'was so ill troubled in [her] mind' (89) that she 'made bold to send for' Hatfield who 'came right enough'. 'When he came, [she] telled him all [her] troubles' (89).

Hatfield advises Nancy to come to church regularly, despite her rheumatism, because ‘if [she] went on doing [her] duty, [she] should get a blessing at last’ (90). But Hatfield also warns Nancy: ‘If you get no comfort that way...it’s all up’, continuing: ‘if you do your best to get to Heaven and can’t manage it, you must be one of those that seek to enter in at the strait gate and shall not be able’ (90). Hatfield clearly does not share Agnes’s (and thus Brontë’s) belief in universal salvation. But, despite Nancy’s following all of Hatfield’s advice, her Christian faith continues to be ‘barren an’ dark’ (91) and ‘them dreadful words “Many shall seek to enter in, and shall not be able”... fair dried up [her] sperrit’ (91). Therefore Nancy makes a second attempt to approach Hatfield for help: ‘I thought when my soul was at stake, I shouldn’t stick at a trifle. But he said he hadn’t time to attend to me then. “And indeed”, says he, “I’ve nothing to say to you, but what I’ve said before...take the sacrament of course, and go on doing your duty; and if that won’t serve you, nothing will. So don’t bother me any more” ’(91).

Agnes does not only condemn Mr Hatfield in terms of religious doctrine and practice. He is represented as a despicable human being: vain, arrogant and an appalling snob. Although he never speaks to Agnes at church, apparently because it is below his dignity to speak to a lowly governess, she describes how she thought

it somewhat derogatory to his dignity as a clergyman to come flying from the pulpit in such eager haste to shake hands with the squire, and hand his wife and daughters into their carriage...nearly shutting me out of it (80).

However, the Reverend Edward Weston serves as a welcome contrast and respite to Agnes’s pejorative treatment of Mr Hatfield. Weston occupies a position of great responsibility in *Agnes Grey*. Brontë is heavily invested in her portrayal of him because he is the priest entrusted with reflecting her most cherished evangelical values and principles. Agnes’s reaction to him is unfailingly admiring and enthusiastic, especially in the contexts of his sermons and his work with the poor. When she hears him preach for the first time, she is ‘decidedly pleased with the evangelical truth of his doctrine, as well as the earnest simplicity of his manner, and the clearness and force of his style’ (80-81). She continues that ‘it was truly refreshing to hear such a sermon, after being so long accustomed to the dry, prosy discourses of the former curate, and the still less edifying harangues’ (81) of Mr Hatfield.

Edward Weston treats the parish poor, the cottagers, in an exemplary way, and thus in his conduct conforms with Patrick Brontë's view of what 'every clergyman ought to be'. When Agnes visits 'a poor labourer who [is] in the last stage of a consumption' (95), she is 'gratified with the praises of Mr Weston, both from the sick man and his wife' (95), who describe the curate's numerous deeds of kindness, such as supplying them with a sack of coals. However, because Mr Hatfield resents Mr Weston's popularity with the cottagers, the Rector apparently orders that Mr Weston leave the parish. Rosalie tells Agnes that

'...the people made a great rout about his leaving...much to Mr Hatfield's displeasure, for Hatfield didn't like him, because he had too much influence with the common people, and because he was not sufficiently tractable and submissive to him – and for some other unpardonable sins, I don't know what' (179).

Agnes's powerful sense of propriety and respect for others causes her silently to praise Mr Weston, who visits Nancy Brown regularly, reads to her from the Bible, and restores her lost cat to her arms. And it is Mr Weston who, without criticizing Mr Hatfield, his superior, manages to console Nancy and to encourage her in the belief that she will indeed gain access to Heaven. Nancy tells Agnes that Mr Weston 'listened to me as steady an' patient as could be, an'never a bit o'scorn about him' (93), and

'then he took that Bible, an'read bits here and there, an'explained 'em as clear as the day: and it seemed like as a new light broke in on my soul; an' I felt fair a glow about my heart' (94).

When Nancy asks him: 'How can I love my neighbours – when they vex me, and be so contrary and sinful as some on 'em is?' (93), Weston replies:

'It may seem a hard matter to love our neighbours, who have so much of what is evil about them, and whose faults so often awaken the evil that lingers within ourselves, but remember, that *He* made them, and *He* loves them....And if God so loveth us that He gave His only begotten son to die for us, we ought also to love one another....If we love God and wish to serve Him, let us try to be like Him, to do His work, to labour for His

glory....The more happiness we bestow, the more we shall receive, even here, and the greater will be our reward in Heaven' (94).

Weston's religious views are clearly shared by Agnes, who rejoices to hear Nancy Brown repeating Mr Weston's words. Weston's remarks also have important doctrinal implications for Brontë's version of what 'every clergyman ought to be', especially in terms of her belief in the doctrine of universal salvation and her emphasis on a merciful God. Weston's language, so beautiful in its simplicity, stresses the supremacy of love in terms both of humankind's relationship with God as well as of all human relationships. Weston argues that if we strive to make others happy, we will be rewarded on earth and in Heaven. His focus on the evangelical values of brotherhood, peace and reconciliation, suggests why Agnes describes how 'Mr Weston rose at length before me, appearing like the morning star in my horizon, to save me from the fear of utter darkness' (98).

While Agnes admires Mr Weston from the outset, her attitude towards her father, the Reverend Richard Grey, is much more ambivalent and complex. As a dutiful and loving daughter, Agnes tries hard to portray herself as having a respectful and admiring attitude towards him. However, the subtext in *Agnes Grey* suggests otherwise. I believe that in fact Agnes secretly has a pejorative opinion of her father, whom she regards as a weak, querulous and disastrously ineffective man, who is content to rely on his strong, capable wife to run his home and organise his life for him. Her descriptions of her father focus entirely on his secular life, as a husband and father, so that there is a complete absence of information about his work as a priest. This is most unexpected in light of his position as the father of the novel's first-person narrator, a young woman who knows that the Murray girls see her as having 'a strange reverence for matters connected with Religion' (70). He is presumably an evangelical, but, except for providing the information that he has been the vicar in the same parish for thirty years, Agnes remains utterly silent about her father's religious views and practices.

We must therefore ask why Agnes, usually so quick to comment on the deeds and views of others, in this case 'chose to keep silence' (48) about her father's performance as a priest. The answer may possibly lie in the fact that, apart from the first chapter which describes Agnes's childhood at the vicarage, *Agnes Grey* narrates her experiences when she is governess to the Bloomfield and Murray families. The novel's focus falls heavily on her life at Wellwood and

more so at Horton Lodge, and it is at Horton that Agnes meets Mr Hatfield and Mr Weston, and records their activities and her responses to those activities, in her diary. It is therefore logical to argue that it would be difficult and unrealistic for her to comment meaningfully on her father's priestly duties when she prefers to confine most of her 'true history' (1) to that period of her life after she has left home. However, in terms of Brontë's feminist project in *Agnes Grey*, she identifies clearly the rich potential in the character of the Reverend Grey that would strengthen her study of marriage and the family, and her celebration of powerful women such as Mrs Grey. She therefore ensures that Mr Grey becomes a significant character in the novel's feminist critique. But why she should use a priest to reinforce her investigation of Victorian patriarchy, while ignoring his work as a man of the cloth, is not clear, and in that respect Mr Grey is indeed an enigma.

My chapter has argued that Brontë's portrayal of the three priests substantially enriches the novel's feminist project because it shows that a governess, a quiet and apparently conventional single woman, has the strength and agency to offer incisive commentary on the conduct of three men who, as clergymen, occupy a position in society that is decidedly more elevated than hers. Agnes's perceptive and often astringent assessment of the three men of the cloth is concerned not only with their performance in the context of religious doctrine and dogma, but also with their conduct as human beings. Although, as I have claimed elsewhere, 'the critique of the priest [in *Agnes Grey*] offers invaluable insight into Anne Brontë's evangelical beliefs' (Leaver, 2012: 345), it is nevertheless equally true that her treatment of the three men helps us to appreciate more clearly that Agnes endorses the highest standards of personal conduct. While her moral commentary is present everywhere in *Agnes Grey*, her analysis of Mr Hatfield, Mr Weston and Mr Grey powerfully strengthens the depth and rigour of that moral commentary. Therefore I believe that the critique of the priest is indeed highly relevant to Brontë's feminist enquiry.

A powerful strand of this feminist enquiry is the thoughtful depiction of Mrs Grey, in which the Reverend Grey is an essential presence. From a young age, Agnes cannot ignore her father's melancholia and supine personality. Although he 'was deservedly respected by all who knew him' (1), she shows him to be a morose, weak man who has 'whims' (2) and whose 'temper was neither tranquil nor cheerful by nature' (3). Nor can she conceal his foolish and irresponsible attitude towards financial matters because, although initially his family 'lived pretty comfortably on the joint income of a small incumbency, and a snug little property of his own'

(1), Mr Grey constantly tries to devise impractical and unnecessary ways to augment his income. To this end, he sells his patrimony and invests the money with a merchant friend who needs new capital to purchase more goods overseas. When the boat founders and all is lost, the Greys are thrown into penury. This distress causes him to be ‘confined to bed through illness’ (6), suggesting his hypochondriacal tendencies. It is therefore most surprising that Mrs Grey, “a woman of spirit” (1), chose to marry him, especially when Agnes informs us that her mother, a member of the landed gentry, had married him against her father’s wishes. Mrs Grey, ‘a squire’s daughter’ (1), presumably saw so much to love and revere in Richard Grey that she was willing to sacrifice ‘her carriage and her lady’s-maid...and....an elegant house and spacious grounds’ (1) for a ‘homely village parsonage among the hills of –’ (2).

But Agnes’s covertly unenthusiastic portrayal of her father suggests that he is not a man fully worthy of his wife’s love and reverence. Although Agnes goes to great lengths to assure us of the felicity of their union, explaining that ‘you might search all of England through, and fail to find a happier couple’ (2), it is quite obvious that the husband and wife are mismatched and reverse the patriarchal stereotype of powerful husband and submissive, docile wife. Brontë is therefore describing an unusual marriage where traditional gender and spousal stereotypes are discarded. Both spouses seem to enjoy this unconventional arrangement whereby Mrs Grey, whilst continuing to respect her husband as the alleged head of the house, is in fact the dominant partner. Brontë thus looks at an unorthodox marriage in which a new hierarchy of power operates very successfully. But Mrs Grey is always mindful of patriarchal expectations of the traditional wife, and so Agnes again stresses her mother’s dutiful attempts to keep up good fires for her husband and feed him his favourite dishes.

The reality is that Mr Grey is quietly marginalised whenever any important family plan is mooted. It is Mrs Grey who has the initiative, the drive, and the vision to consider the viability of new projects. Elizabeth Langland has commented that Brontë’s

commitment to women’s activity and influence in the world and her suspicion of men as providers led her to promulgate a feminist thesis: that women must look to their self-provision (Langland, 1989: 98).

Thus, when Agnes first announces her wish to seek work as a governess, she first consults her mother, not her father, and then relies on her mother to implement this initiative. It is only when

this process has started, that her ‘father’s reluctant consent [is] next obtained’ (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 10). In tacit acknowledgement of patriarchal norms, Mr Grey’s permission is required to confirm the plan that the women of the house have devised, but he is not approached, nor his opinion sought, in the initial stages. And when Agnes decides to ‘try again’ (50) and seek another position as governess, she waits until she can ‘find an opportunity of speaking with [her mother] alone’ (50), before broaching the subject. The father is clearly peripheral in such family discussions. Brontë shows this in a symbolic way when Agnes leaves home en route for Wellwood:

The gig rolled on – I looked back – my dear mother and sister were still standing at the door, looking after me, and waving their adieux: I returned their salute, and prayed God to bless them from my heart (12).

Agnes does not find it strange that her father is not also ‘standing at the door’, perhaps because he occupies a superfluous position in the family. And it is this very redundancy that is consonant with my suggestion that Mr Grey’s principal function in *Agnes Grey* is to serve as the foil to the novel’s celebration of Mrs Grey as a powerful woman.

Mrs Grey is the one who supports and binds the family together through all its vicissitudes and misfortunes, such as poverty and the death of Mr Grey. She is a bold, industrious, resourceful woman with whom Agnes frequently associates the idea of ‘management’. Thus Agnes describes her mother as an ‘active, *managing*’ (6) woman, and later tells Mr Weston that her mother ‘*manages* things so well’ (190). When the family falls on hard times, Mrs Grey encourages her husband ‘to trust everything to her *management*’ (4) [all my italics]. The notion of ‘management’ suggests that Mrs Grey is a natural leader and a capable organiser who likes to take control of all situations. Thus Agnes defines her mother in terms of authority and strength, referring to her ‘high spirit’ (2) and her ‘strong mind’ (159). It is hardly surprising that Agnes, as Mrs Grey’s daughter, should also seek autonomy and a sense of independence, exactly the qualities that her mother had exhibited when refusing to obey her father’s strictures regarding her marriage to Mr Grey. Mrs Grey must have been very headstrong and stubborn as a young woman, although life as a clergyman’s wife has schooled her to adopt a more moderate stance. When Mr Grey’s irresponsible commercial venture fails, it is Mrs Grey who takes control of ‘paying [their] debts and retrenching [their] expenditure by every available means’ (5). She also

has the insight to realise that her husband's commercial venture may fail. Agnes describes how her mother 'feared he was setting his heart too much upon the matter' (4), but refrains from criticising or warning him in case this undermines his position as the head of the family. She is a 'splendid, highly accomplished woman' (5) who thrives in the face of adversity, while, in contrast, her feeble husband, the cause of the family's setback, is 'completely overwhelmed by the calamity – health, strength, and spirits sunk beneath the blow; and he never fully recovered them' (5). Agnes's impatience with her father's impotence is as evident as is her admiration for her mother's fortitude. She carefully lists the many economies in the family budget that Mrs Grey deems it prudent to introduce and that soon return the family to solvency:

The useful pony phaeton was sold, together with the stout well-fed pony...the little coach-house and stable were let, the servant boy, and the more efficient (being the more expensive) of the two maid servants were dismissed. Our clothes were mended, turned, and darned to the utmost verge of decency; our food, always plain, was now simplified to an unprecedented degree (6).

But Mrs Grey jealously clings onto her power and is unwilling to share it with her daughters by delegating some of her responsibilities to them, as Agnes explains:

My mother, like most active, managing women, was not gifted with very active daughters; for this reason – that being so clever and diligent herself, she was never tempted to trust her affairs to a deputy, but on the contrary, was willing to act and think for others as well as for number one; and whatever was the business in hand, she was apt to think that no one could do it so well as herself (6).

Perhaps rather smugly, Mrs Grey is very well aware that she is 'so clever and diligent', but there is a certain arrogance implicit in her opinion that no one else can 'do it so well as herself'. This must be the reason why she insists on infantilising Agnes and marginalising her by excluding her from important family decisions. From this perspective, Mrs Grey behaves reprehensibly in not granting her younger daughter the same autonomy that she herself enjoys in her marriage to the weak Mr Grey. But we have also seen that it is to her mother, and not her father, that Agnes instinctively turns for advice and support. She clearly loves and trusts her mother very much,

despite the frustrating and irrational restraints that her mother imposes on her, such as refusing to allow her to help the family introduce strategies to overcome their poverty. This is rendered even more problematic when we recall that Mrs Grey actively encourages the older daughter, Mary, who is six years older than Agnes, to help restore the family's fortunes by selling her art works, as does Helen Huntingdon in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. We must ask why Mrs Grey treats her two daughters in such different ways. Such behaviour must challenge the accuracy of Barbara and Gareth Lloyd Evans' sentimental reading of Mrs Grey:

The presence of Mrs Grey, representing stability, love and wise advice, is not only credibly maintained but suffuses the whole novel with a warmth, a sense of domestic security which does not exist in any other Brontë [sic] novel (Lloyd Evans, 1982: 320).

Mrs Grey is altogether a more complex and tricky character than the conventional domestic angel of the hearth suggested here.

Brontë's portrayal of Mrs Grey therefore seems to be problematic because it is difficult for us to reconcile this powerful woman's two seemingly antithetical personae: the first being that of the strong, assertive, capable woman who willingly assumes the role of the head of the household when her husband proves unable to do so; and the second that of a mother who tries to thwart her daughter from growing up into the same autonomous woman as she is. I would argue, however, that the two personae can be reconciled. They are in fact not antithetical, but rather both depict a woman who so revels in the power and freedoms that a weak husband has conferred on her, that she has become excessively possessive and territorial about that power. Brontë suggests that it is very difficult for a naturally strong woman such as Mrs Grey to negotiate a balance between her confidence in her own ability and leadership skills, and the traditional patriarchal wifely role of the submissive and quiet woman who passively occupies a subordinate position in the family hierarchy. Mrs Grey has a healthy sense of self-esteem, she knows she is a very capable woman, but she also knows that she must appear to defer to the wishes of her husband. She is in fact in an untenable position: if she does not assume responsibility for the welfare of the family, the family will suffer because Mr Grey cannot fulfil the role that patriarchy requires of him; but she cannot seem to wield this power in an overly aggressive or dominant way as this will subvert traditional power structures in the family.

A good example of this is when the profligate Mr Grey, before their ship of alleged good fortune has even returned from its voyage, starts to run up large accounts with the village shop owners. Mrs Grey is worried and reminds her husband that they ‘had better keep within bounds’ (4) of financial discipline. She realises that it would be expedient for him to relinquish control of the family expenditure to her, but this is a delicate issue in a patriarchal society. She explains to her husband that if he ‘would only trust everything to her management, he should never feel himself stinted’ (4). In order to avoid her husband’s feeling threatened by her assuming authority over the family budget, she is obliged virtually to bribe him by assuring him that, even if the rest of the family has to practise economy, he will not. Common sense and logic are of no use, so she has to seek a strategy that will allow her husband to retain his sense of dignity and self-respect. But her strategy fails, because ‘he, for once, was incorrigible’ (4).

Brontë shows that strong, successful women such as Mrs Grey experience profound frustrations when required to collaborate with prevailing patriarchal expectations. Mrs Grey in practice, though not in theory, is the most powerful individual in the Grey family, a family whose future depends ultimately on her resourcefulness and skill. Hindered by a weak and feckless husband, who is reluctant to relinquish the powers conferred on him by patriarchal society, she has constantly to navigate her way through the seemingly endless maze of difficulties and social pressures that attend her every decision and deed. Her one persona, that of the submissive patriarchal wife, must co-exist with her other persona of the leader and head of the household. To achieve such a reconciliation requires constant vigilance.

Mrs Grey’s struggles bear strong affinities with the similar portrayal of Frances Crimsworth in Charlotte Brontë’s first novel, *The Professor* (published posthumously in 1857). In common with Mrs Grey, Frances is ‘a curious mixture of tractability and firmness’ (Charlotte Brontë, 1991 [1857]: 228). In the evenings, Frances enacts the traditional wife and home-maker whose ‘pleasure [and] joy [is] to make [her husband] still the Master in all things’ (232). She acknowledges him as ‘her senior and director’ (233), she pays him ‘gentle homage’ (233), and she is ‘a submissive and supplicating little woman’ (233). While these images are conventional and predictable, Charlotte Brontë writes much more vigorously about Frances Crimsworth as the owner of her own school, a school she has started and developed to become ‘one of the most popular in Brussels’ (230) and that accepts pupils from ‘the best families in Belgium’ (230). Her husband, William, the narrator of the story, confesses: ‘I seemed to possess two wives’ (230)

because during the day Frances becomes ‘another woman’ (230). Charlotte Brontë, in common with Anne Brontë, investigates the problematic interface between a woman’s persona as a wife and mother, and her other, more unorthodox persona as a woman who works in the public domain. Mrs Grey and Frances both flourish as entrepreneurs. William’s description of Frances could as easily describe Mrs Grey:

I knew she was not one who could live quiescent and inactive or even comparatively inactive. Duties she must have to fulfil, and important duties; work to do, and exciting, absorbing, profitable work; strong faculties stirred her frame and they demanded full nourishment, free exercise (229).

Agnes Grey, too, attests to the liberating effect that ‘exciting, absorbing, profitable work’ has on Mrs Grey and Agnes. Patriarchal expectations have required Mrs Grey to a considerable extent to lead ‘a comparatively inactive’ life, but once she is widowed, her ‘strong faculties [stir] her frame’ and she embarks on her new career as the proprietor of her own school.

Mr Grey is unfortunately a hindrance and impediment to Mrs Grey in her quest for personal growth and self-development, even if she and Agnes apparently do not realise this. As I have shown, it is only after he dies that his widow is able to demonstrate in an uninhibited and unfettered way that she is an extremely strong and powerful individual with abundant resources of initiative and resolution. When Agnes returns to the vicarage upon news of her father’s death, she finds that ‘my mother’s strong mind had not given way beneath even this affliction: her spirit, though crushed, was not broken’ (159). Despite Mary’s wish that her mother should join her and her husband, the Reverend Richardson, at their home, Mrs Grey refuses. She ‘was determined not to go’ (159) because she does not wish to be dependent on anyone else, planning instead ‘to earn her own livelihood, and be chargeable to no one’ (159). She says:

‘I will exert myself and look out for a small house commodiously situated in some populous but healthy district, where we will take a few young ladies to board and educate...and as many day-pupils as will come, or as we can manage to instruct’ (160).

The school prospers in the capable hands of Mrs Grey and Agnes so that Agnes can report to Mr Weston that they are doing ‘very well’ (190), that they ‘had had a considerable addition to [their] pupils after the Christmas vacation, and expected a still further increase at the close’ (190) of the present vacation. Mrs Grey is now a single woman, a widow, but Brontë praises her perseverance and determination to make her own way in the world, which she does most successfully as an entrepreneur. As a single woman, Mrs Grey achieves financial and emotional independence. She refuses to look backwards nostalgically to her time as a wife, but rather engages with the future in a bold and direct manner.

This chapter has argued consistently that Agnes is also a strong and resolute single woman, very much her mother’s daughter, an individual who takes control of her destiny and creates a life of significance and meaning for herself. The chapter has described her refusal to allow herself to be infantilised by her overly protective family, her determination to seek work as a governess, and her sustained struggle to survive the indignities and difficulties of her experiences at Wellwood and Horton. As Elizabeth Langland has observed, Agnes

may adopt a policy of compliance to her employers, but the fact that it is a policy suggests the measure of control she preserves. She always has the choice of returning to her home; thus, she assesses her situation on the basis of the autonomy she has achieved rather than on the difficulties she encounters (Langland, 1989: 105).

Her insistence that she practise the highest standards of personal moral conduct, her astringent criticism of those, such as Reverend Hatfield, who do not practise such standards, and her unflinching sense of life as an exhilarating adventure, suggest that Agnes is a remarkable and extraordinary individual, completely antithetical to the ‘anaemic and pale’ (Raymond, 1949: 228) woman suggested by Ernest Raymond.

Brontë stresses that Agnes achieves financial and emotional independence before she marries Mr Weston. Agnes does not see marriage as the only route to fulfilment, and therefore Brontë emphasises that Agnes only marries him after she has achieved autonomy as a single woman. She does not need a husband to define her sense of self-worth. Agnes chooses to leave the Murrays in order to work with her mother in their own school, and she also reveals her great emotional strength when she overcomes her bitter disappointment when Mr Weston apparently

makes no attempt to find her after she leaves Horton. At first she expects to see him again, and when this does not occur, she is sunk in gloom. But she soon rallies, explaining that ‘[a]s time wore on and nothing was seen or heard of Mr Weston, I gave up hoping, for even my heart acknowledged it was all in vain’ (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 171). After her return from Ashby Park, Agnes feels powerful and invincible when she walks on the sands early one morning:

There was a feeling of freshness and vigour in the very streets....My footsteps were the first to press the firm, unbroken sands....Refreshed, delighted, invigorated, I walked along, forgetting all my cares, feeling as if I had wings to my feet, and could go at least forty miles without fatigue, and experiencing a sense of exhilaration to which I had been an entire stranger since the days of early youth (188).

She is experiencing a sense of intense well-being and euphoria, even though Mr Weston has abandoned her. She has survived this crisis, and although she faces life as a spinster, a single woman who must navigate her own way through a profoundly patriarchal world, she feels free and liberated. Her subsequent encounter with Mr Weston on the beach, and her marriage, provide a traditional comedic closure to the novel but, I would argue, function as a mere postscript to the main story of her life as a single woman.

Therefore, one of the principal issues about which *Agnes Grey* seeks to ‘instruct’ its readers is that single women can achieve autonomy and independence and can lead lives characterised by personal freedom and happiness. Mrs Grey and Agnes are fine examples of this, whilst Rosalie Ashby proves that marriage is not always the best option for a woman. A woman need not marry to succeed. This attitude is evident when Mr Grey is concerned that his daughters will never marry because they are so poor, saying: ‘*Them* married – poor penniless things!...who will take them I wonder!’ (50), and his wife retorts briskly: ‘But it’s no matter whether they get married or not: we can devise a thousand honest ways of making a livelihood’ (50).

There is, however, another highly significant strand to the depiction of Agnes as powerful and in fact surreptitiously manipulative. This is the absolute power that she wields as the sole and therefore unchallenged narrator in *Agnes Grey*. On a first reading of *Agnes Grey*, it is easy to miss the extremely rigid control that Agnes exercises over precisely what material she will share or will not share with her readers. She is, in her own words, ‘a close and resolute dissembler’ (146). Despite her apparently cordial and frank treatment of her readers, Agnes is in fact quite

tyrannical with regard to her decisions about the information to which we are granted access. We are utterly at her mercy. She seduces us with her very full descriptions of those incidents, individuals, and experiences that will help to ‘instruct’ us about a variety of matters. These detailed descriptions encourage us to trust her and to accept the truth of her account, an important issue if she is successfully to ‘instruct’ us about matters that concern her. Therefore she devotes many pages of her story to the account of Mr Weston’s visits to Nancy, found in Chapter XI, ‘The Cottagers’, because she wishes to stress Mr Weston’s kindness to his parishioners. At fifteen pages, this is the longest chapter in the novel. Another leisurely chapter, Chapter XIV, ‘The Rector’, takes thirteen pages to describe Rosalie’s heartless treatment of Mr Hatfield, a description intended to emphasise her emotional abuse of the rector, and his reaction. But at other times Agnes maintains complete silence about developments, or summarises them very curtly in a few words. Thus her father’s funeral is summarily dismissed in ten brief words: ‘My father’s mortal remains had been consigned to the tomb’ (158). She can also be secretive, as when she describes how she ‘was perusing a long and extremely interesting letter of [her] sister’s’ (70). We have no idea at the time as to why the letter is ‘extremely interesting’, and, although she does explain a little later that it contains news of her sister Mary’s forthcoming marriage to the Reverend Richardson, we do not understand why Agnes chooses to be so secretive about such an important family affair. Another unpredictable narrative habit of Agnes is to start to confide in the reader, and then suddenly to pause, as seen in the following example:

When we hear a little good and no harm of a person, it is easy and pleasant to imagine more – in short, it is needless to analyse all my thoughts (98).

However, in a revealing observation, Agnes does attempt to explain away these inconsistent silences, interruptions, and pauses, but in a rather ambiguous and unsatisfactory manner:

I began this book with the intention of concealing nothing, that those who liked might have the benefit of perusing a fellow creature’s heart: but we have *some* thoughts that all the angels in heaven are welcome to behold – but not our brother-men – not even the best and kindest amongst them (110).

Agnes's coyness is partly the consequence of her growing attraction for Mr Weston and her apparent reluctance to bare her soul to the readers. However, this reticence is baffling because, at other times, she devotes many pages of her story to the systematic analysis of her ambivalent feelings for the curate. This confessional mode of narrative is completely antithetical to the resolute silence that she maintains elsewhere. Indeed Chapter XVII is entitled 'Confessions', and starts with the words:

As I am in the way of confessions, I may as well acknowledge that, about this time, I paid more attention to dress than ever I had done before (138).

These confiding overtures to the reader serve to foster a partial sense of intimacy between author and reader, partial because they are juxtaposed with bewildering silences, but highly emblematic of the great power granted to Agnes in *Agnes Grey*'s narrative structure. This inconsistent treatment of the reader by Agnes can also be seen as further evidence of her complexity and depth of character, as well as proof of her desire to be wholly in charge of her own narrative.

Of especial interest is Agnes's method of focusing her story on her experiences away from her home and family. She wants to 'instruct' us about her life as a governess, and therefore, after the first chapter, she devotes minimal space to the descriptions of her return home for her holidays. Nor do these sojourns at home 'instruct' Agnes herself, or help her to grow as an individual. A useful example of this acceleration of the storyline occurs at the beginning of chapter IV:

I spare my readers the account of my delight on coming home, my happiness while there – enjoying a brief space of rest and liberty in that dear, familiar place, among the loving and the loved – and my sorrow on being obliged to bid them, once more, a long adieu (33).

It is not that she does not deeply appreciate her periods of rest and recreation at home, but they do not contribute in a substantial way to the critique of the governess that is such an important aspect of the novel's feminist purpose. Nor does *Agnes Grey* provide the slightest detail

regarding Mary's marriage to the Reverend Richardson. Indeed Agnes's brother-in-law never features in the story.

Agnes has no first person male narrator to support her story, thereby investing her with absolute responsibility for the story line. The success of *Agnes Grey* rests entirely with Agnes who, while apparently exulting in the absolute power and freedom that the novel's narrative structure grants her, does have to accept ultimate responsibility for the success or failure of the story. The situation is different from that pertaining to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where Helen's subversive first person female narrative is enclosed within, and therefore protected by, Gilbert's soothingly conventional male narrative. Brontë expects Agnes to cope on her own, and this chapter has argued that she has indeed coped very well.

Finally, I would like to look at the novel's ending. It is true that to a limited extent Brontë does empower Agnes by allowing her to conclude her story herself, and not as occurs in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* where Helen's voice is disappointingly silenced by Gilbert. Nevertheless, the ending of *Agnes Grey* is in general extremely conventional and does not reflect the novel's powerful feminist agenda. Agnes marries Mr Weston, the man she loves, a decision she has 'never...found cause to repent' (198). She has three children, informing us that 'our children, Edward, Agnes, and little Mary, promise well' (198) and that 'Edward [her husband], by his strenuous exertions, has worked surprising reforms in his parish, and is esteemed and loved by its inhabitants' (198). Therefore from a feminist perspective, this traditional comedic and romantic ending may be seen as disappointingly conventional and as creating an unsatisfactory conclusion to this 'exquisite' novel, a feminist novel that tells the story of a plain and ordinary single woman who finds success and happiness in a patriarchal world, and who is granted the supreme privilege by her creator, Anne Brontë, of being allowed to narrate her own story as she deems fit. But the feminism in *Agnes Grey* surely lies not in the ending itself, but in the path that Agnes takes to get there.

CHAPTER 5: THE TENANT OF WILDFELL HALL

As I have already shown in Chapter 1 and elsewhere, the Irish poet George Moore was arguably the first individual truly to admire Anne Brontë's art. Moore does indeed 'fulfil the part of the fairy godmother' (Moore, 1924: 222) who rescues and helps to rehabilitate Brontë from her initial role as 'a sort of literary Cinderella' (222), forced into the shadows of critical scholarship by the ostensibly more powerful and dramatic narratives of her sisters, Emily and Charlotte. Moore is thus a pivotal figure in anticipating the subsequent revisionist critique of Brontë's fiction that started in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In *Conversations in Ebury Street*, Moore nostalgically recalls his rather sentimental initial encounter with *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* when, as a lad of ten or eleven years, he had stumbled across the novel in his family's library. He explains: '*The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* belonged to my governess, and it was for the sake of the wonderful name of Wildfell that I borrowed the book from her' (214). Although it is for *Agnes Grey* that Moore reserves his highest praise, describing it as 'the most perfect prose narrative in English literature' (219) and 'a masterpiece' (219), it is in fact *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that dominates his lengthy discussion with Edmund Gosse regarding the literary merits of Brontë's fiction. In Moore's commentary on the merits of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* he observes that Brontë 'could write with heat, one of the rarest qualities' (215). He defines 'heat' as a 'torment of passion' (216), continuing: 'I must not be afraid of repeating the word heat; it is essential that I should repeat it, for what I am thinking of is heat and not violence, rhetoric or vehemence' (216). He claims that, while 'men rarely, if ever, have the power, I will not say of feeling, but of transferring it into written words' (216), Brontë does have the requisite power to capture this 'almost animal emotion' (217) of 'the burning human heart' (217) so that this 'heat' informs and enriches her fiction.

When Moore acknowledges that 'the quality of heat I don't put forward as a very high literary quality; it doesn't exist in Shakespeare, in Dante, in Homer; but it's the rarest of literary qualities' (217), Gosse responds, rather sarcastically: 'An emotion enkindled by spiritual or physical love. I think you exaggerate its rarity, and that were an adequate search made for it in the works of religious reformers you would have to add to your list' (217). Brontë is certainly not the only individual on Moore's list of those writers who can write with 'heat': he also includes the writings of Saint Paul, *Sense and Sensibility* by Jane Austen, and the love letters of Héloïse to Pierre Abélard (1079-1142). Of Saint Paul, Moore claims: 'Paul introduced heat into literature'

(215), because Paul ‘was the first to translate the heart’s heat without loss. The Lord Jesus was Saint Paul’s inspiration’ (216). He also praises Jane Austen’s skill in depicting ‘the almost animal emotion that consumed Marianne when she went up to London in search of Willoughby’ (217), while ‘the paper on which [Héloïse’s letters to Abélard] are written seems to shrivel up, so intense is the heat of her passion’ (216). However, while Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* is widely considered to be the most searingly intense of all seven of the Brontë novels, Moore dismissively argues: ‘*Wuthering Heights* is written with vehemence, with eloquence, but there’s very little heat in it’ (217).

Despite his lavish praise of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Moore only provides one specific example of ‘heat’ in the novel. This involves Gilbert’s passionate love for Helen as expressed when he rushes to console her at Wildfell Hall after learning of the pernicious rumours circulating in the Linden-Car community about Helen’s alleged liaison with Frederick Lawrence. However, my chapter argues that Moore’s coining of the term ‘heat’ has a much broader and more general application to the novel and functions as an apposite metaphor for several different lines of enquiry that can be usefully applied to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. If ‘heat’ is taken to symbolise strength and intensity and conviction, it can then plausibly be seen to encapsulate such diverse but related issues as the powerful feminist critique that informs the novel, as well as the courage of Helen Huntingdon, the novel’s principal female character. The term ‘heat’ thus applies to the emotional intensity of many of the scenes in the novel, and to the depth and power of many of its Romantic tropes. George Moore’s identification of the quality of ‘heat’ in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* ninety years ago in 1924 was therefore more prophetic than he would perhaps ever realise because today Brontë’s second novel is indeed the focus of ‘heated’ and robust critical attention.

However, one word of caution must first be made. We cannot ignore the fact that Moore’s admiration for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is reserved entirely for what he sees as Brontë’s great skill in portraying a very intense love story. He interrogates the novel only from this one important but limited perspective. He misses Brontë’s feminist agenda, her focus on gender disparity, completely. Therefore, while his celebration of one strand of the novel is significant, it is also very clear that he does not understand her project to ‘reform the errors and abuses of society’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 3) and to tell the ‘unpalatable truth’ (4) about the injustices of patriarchy.

Nevertheless, Moore's focus on the 'heat' of Brontë's writing finds great resonance in the 'heated' critical response to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that is so conspicuously evident in the abundant research concerning this novel that appears in editions of *Brontë Studies* that span the most recent five year period of 2008-2012. My exploration of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has been enriched by four such articles that offer significant commentary on the novel. Each reading will be used individually for specific analytical purposes later in this chapter, but when considered together, as one substantial body of contemporary research concerning Brontë, they point unambiguously to the sustained revisionist critique that is helping to reposition Brontë at the centre of current research on the Brontës. However none of these articles looks at Brontë's use of narrative strategy, and there is little current evidence that this aspect of Brontë's work attracts contemporary scholarship.

The most relevant article for my purposes is Judith E. Pike's investigation of the critique of fatherhood in Brontë's two novels which shows that she offers a new model of warm, caring, almost maternal fatherhood in the persona of Gilbert Markham and his role as stepfather to young Arthur Huntingdon. This new model is antithetical to debased forms of Victorian masculinity whereby a 'real' man is assessed in terms of his capacity to consume large quantities of alcohol, to swear, to disrespect women, and to see violence as the best form of conflict resolution. There are also, of course, positive forms of Victorian masculinity, even if they are patriarchal. Another extremely useful article that will be used in conjunction with Pike's research is Kristin A. Le Veness's consideration of the novel's investigation of the institution of motherhood. Le Veness focuses specifically on Mrs Markham and Helen. Just as Pike revisits conventional Victorian notions of fatherhood, so too does Le Veness analyse Brontë's new construction of motherhood, especially of how a mother should raise a son. Le Veness shows that Brontë is especially interested in those mothers, such as Mrs Markham and Helen, who are the single parents of sons, and, in Helen's case, the single mother of an only child.

Two other recent articles in *Brontë Studies* argue that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* possesses a commonality of interest with novels from widely divergent periods of the nineteenth century. According to these interpretations, the novel not only shares affinities with other feminist literature of the 1840s, but also anticipates the New Woman fiction fifty years later. The first of these articles is Christine Colón's study which links Brontë's second novel with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847). Colón suggests that, while *Jane Eyre* and Mr Rochester withdraw

into an isolated romantic utopia ‘deep buried in a wood’ (in Colón, 2008: 23), where romantic love is all sufficient, Anne Brontë broadens the focus so that Helen and Gilbert’s marriage is integrated within a new awareness of social responsibility and community. While Colón thus connects *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* (1848) with another strictly contemporary novel, *Jane Eyre* (1847), the second article by Jessica Cox shows ‘the striking similarities between the two works [which] emphasise the challenge they both pose to Victorian notions towards marriage, gender roles and propriety’ (Cox, 2010: 31). Cox argues that Brontë’s novel has strong connections with the New Woman fiction of writers such as Sarah Grand, Mona Caird and Olive Schreiner at the *fin de siècle*.

However, as I have shown in some detail in Chapter 1, this contemporary willingness of Brontë scholars to engage with Brontë’s fiction in an unbiased and intellectually curious manner, is antithetical to the generally hostile and dismissive treatment meted out to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in 1848. The ‘heat’ and robustness of current research into Brontë and her writing can be juxtaposed quite tellingly with the pejorative commentary of Victorian critics of the mid-nineteenth century who were virtually unanimous in their condemnation of the novel’s alleged coarseness and detailed evocations of depravity. And we can refine even further our understanding of just how the critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has changed, if we return to the findings of Elizabeth Langland and her sensitive study *Anne Brontë: the Other One*. The publication date of Langland’s work, 1989, is significant because it is located roughly equidistant between the start of the revisionist critique of Brontë’s fiction in the late 1950s and early 1960s, and the contemporary critical scholarship.

Langland’s commentary shows how *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has moved on ahead of *Agnes Grey*:

In writing *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Anne Brontë achieved a dramatic narrative and philosophical advance from *Agnes Grey*. Although we can trace the continuity in certain themes between the two novels, the manner, style, technique, character, and episode through which those themes are developed and examined differ substantially. There is also a new thematic depth, an increasingly mature handling of theme, and a deepening grasp of the ways in which form and subject interpenetrate. Instead of presenting the quiet story of one individual’s growth related through that individual’s perspective, Anne Brontë’s second novel details the growth or deterioration of several characters and employs a

sophisticated technique of layered narratives that undergirds the novel's preeminent [sic] theme. (Langland, 1989: 118)

Langland's reference to Brontë's 'deepening grasp of the ways in which form and subject interpenetrate' is particularly significant, and my chapter will discuss very carefully the substantially more polished and confident way in which Brontë exploits the rich possibilities of narrative technique, such as her use of both male and female first person narratives, and of her recasting of the Gothic tradition, to convey the novel's central concerns most effectively. Langland continues:

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall engages us, through complex and psychologically convincing characters, in an action that uses a series of embedded narratives to underscore its central themes of interpretation, evidence and conclusions, of gossip, reliability and belief, and of reason, education and virtue. Finally, in their synthesis of possibility and actuality, of vision and reality, the embedded narratives encourage and enable the reader's own discernment, interpretation, and reeducation [sic]. It is a signal achievement. (147)

Langland's mention of Brontë's 'complex and psychologically convincing characters' finds much resonance in the perspective adopted by this chapter towards many of the characters in the novel, including Helen, Arthur and Walter Hargrave. Such characters are undoubtedly 'complex' because they can be legitimately read in different ways, but Brontë also has the skill to imbue them with contemporary attitudes and insights, thereby supporting Langland's claim that they are 'psychologically convincing'. And, significantly, in *Anne Brontë: the Other One* Langland specifically mentions Moore's reference to the 'quality of heat' in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, concluding that his 'compliment is deserved' (147).

However, despite the perceptive and nuanced engagement of contemporary critics with Brontë's work, it is both surprising and disappointing that, to a large extent, they persist, in common with their predecessors, in neglecting the Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The Preface offers rich potential to those readers who study its brief but dense three pages. Brontë had been dismayed by what she considered to be the ignorant responses of many critics to the first edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, which was probably published on 27 June 1848 (there is some divergence of critical opinion regarding the precise date). Stung by

the hostile reviews, she took advantage of the publication of the second edition, six weeks later in early August 1848, to write a Preface which sets out in plain and unambiguous terms exactly what she wished to achieve in and with her second novel. The Preface is dated 22 July 1848.

For the Brontë sisters, the use of a Preface for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was not unprecedented. Of the first three Brontë novels to be published (*Agnes Grey*, *Jane Eyre*, and *Wuthering Heights*), *Jane Eyre* had already employed such a technique. Charlotte Brontë felt compelled to add a Preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* (December 21st, 1847) as well as a much briefer Preface to the third edition of the same novel (April 13th, 1848). The Preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* is used by Charlotte to confront her readers who identify in the novel's 'protest against bigotry – that parent of crime – an insult to piety' (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 3). Charlotte explains that she 'would suggest to such doubters certain obvious distinctions' (3) and that she 'would remind them of certain simple truths' (3). This carefully argued, three page Preface to the second edition of *Jane Eyre* therefore fulfils the same function as the Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because both Charlotte and Anne Brontë felt the need to defend their respective novels against uninformed and prejudiced criticisms, criticisms that reflected the failure of readers to understand the novelists' true intentions. However, of the other three novels still to be published (*Shirley*, *Villette*, and *The Professor*), it was only for *The Professor* that a Preface was eventually added. While *Jane Eyre* received a favourable public reception from the outset, it is most significant that it was eventually only for the two novels that experienced extensive hostility from the public that their authors felt obliged to write an explanatory Preface. While I acknowledge that *Wuthering Heights* also received a great deal of criticism, I would argue that the intensity of this criticism was less than that levelled against *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *The Professor*. *The Professor* was Charlotte Brontë's first novel, written in 1845-6, but was offered without success to various publishers until it was finally published posthumously in 1857, two years after her death in 1855. The Preface to *The Professor* has no date, but it was presumably written as the consequence of the series of rejections that the novel was experiencing. Charlotte Brontë apparently felt it necessary to explain her intentions in *The Professor*, but her Preface is short and not as helpful as is Anne Brontë's Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

Although the strategy of inserting a Preface was thus only used judiciously by the Brontë sisters, it is nevertheless true that the inclusion of a Preface was not unusual for Victorian novels.

The great early and mid Victorian novelists who were born in the decade before Brontë's birth in 1820 all resorted to this device on occasion. Thus Charles Dickens (1812-1870) used a Preface in *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), and George Eliot (1819-1880) inserted a Prelude to *Middlemarch* (1871-2). Thomas Hardy, a late Victorian novelist (1840-1928), relied heavily on both the Preface and the Postscript, so that *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1874) and *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) have a Preface, while *The Return of the Native* (1878) and *Jude the Obscure* (1895-6) employ a Preface and a Postscript. *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) has no fewer than three Prefaces written at different times during the novel's long run as a successful text that went into several editions.

While a close examination of the function of the Preface in Victorian literature *per se* obviously lies beyond the scope of my study, this chapter will look carefully at the Preface to Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton*. Significantly, *Mary Barton* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* were both written in 1848, and I will show that a striking commonality of authorial purpose can be identified in the two Prefaces, and, indeed, in the two novels. I am unaware of any similar comparative study of these two Prefaces having been undertaken previously in the critical literature. Such a comparative study is legitimate because it enriches our understanding of Brontë's own Preface, as well as of the philosophical and political impulses that influenced the strong sense of social awareness that informs her text. However, it is first necessary to consider this Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in some detail because, without a clear understanding of Brontë's agenda, it is impossible to compare it with Gaskell's Preface in any meaningful way.

The tone and careful reasoning of the Preface suggest that Brontë did not write it in a fit of pique, because she was angry with the generally antagonistic response to her second novel, but rather because she was deeply distressed that her didactic intentions had apparently been missed by the critics. The Preface therefore functions as a corrective. It is important to recall that Brontë had not written a Preface to *Agnes Grey*: the device was not something that she was instinctively inclined to employ. Therefore, the Preface is indicative of the very serious and earnest motivation that lies behind the creation of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Brontë explains that she had been 'little prepared to expect' ((Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 3) the 'asperity' (3) with which the novel had 'been censored' (3), a criticism that was 'more bitter than just' (3). She clearly feels that the integrity of her intentions has been impugned, or at best misunderstood. She continues:

I may be allowed to make here a few observations with which I would have prefaced the first edition had I foreseen the necessity of such precautions against the misapprehensions of those who would read it with a prejudiced mind or be content to judge it by a hasty glance. (3)

The most significant word here is ‘prejudiced’. Brontë is already sadly aware of the refusal of her critics to approach her subversive text with an open mind, and this signals the bias and hostility that would inform the critical reception of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* from 1848 right through until the commencement of the revisionist critique in the late 1950s.

Having explained why she feels that the Preface is necessary, Brontë immediately outlines her project:

My object in writing the following pages, was not simply to amuse the Reader, neither was it to gratify my own taste, nor yet to ingratiate myself with the Press and the Public: I wished to tell the truth, for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it. (3)

The issue of ‘truth’ is key to our true understanding of Brontë’s intention in her second novel. A little later in the Preface, she returns twice more to the same issue, stating: ‘If I can gain the public ear at all, I would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than much soft nonsense [sic]’ (3) because ‘when I feel it my duty to speak an unpalatable truth, with the help of God, I *will* speak it, though it be to the prejudice of my name and to the detriment of my reader’s immediate pleasure as well as my own’ [Brontë’s italics] (4).

Brontë’s ‘truth’ in part is that patriarchy is an inappropriate form of social organisation, an unjust configuration of Victorian society because it favours men and marginalises women who must occupy a subordinate position. Chapter 2 has already shown in some detail that feminist writers and thinkers resented patriarchal laws and social conventions, such as the ideology of separate spheres, that sought to subjugate women. This ‘truth’ is ‘unpalatable’, or unpleasant and uncomfortable, for many of her readers who believe that patriarchy is a legitimate form of social arrangement. It is obvious why many men would support patriarchy because, as Gilbert observes, it is a ‘very convenient doctrine’ (53). Patriarchy is ‘convenient’ because of the power and privileges it affords to men. But Brontë was also quite aware that many unthinking,

culturally conditioned women, such as Mrs Markham and Eliza Millward, believed unequivocally in the alleged merits of a patriarchal society, thereby collaborating with their own oppression. She wrote *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* in part to challenge views such as those expressed by Mrs Markham, namely that the elevation of men's wishes and desires over those of women is 'a very good doctrine' (53).

Brontë's insistence on her quest for the 'truth' attests quite unmistakably to the novel's didactic impulse. Her dismissive attitude towards novels that contain 'much soft nonsense [sic]' (3) shows her impatience with works that lack a serious social commentary. She has identified what she considers to be a major flaw of mid-Victorian society, and she has used her skill as a writer of fiction both to expose this flaw and to offer possible solutions. Thus, for her the deficiencies of her society are perceived to a large extent in terms of gender inequality. However, it is important to point out that her feminist agenda is embedded within other characteristic Victorian preoccupations, such as class and social mobility. Class plays a significant role in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, as seen in Gilbert's reluctance to approach Helen after Arthur's death. Elizabeth Gaskell also experiences much anxiety about the same world, the same society, in exactly the same year, 1848, but her investigation focuses to a much greater degree on issues of class disparity. Therefore, both Brontë and Gaskell are concerned with matters of social injustice, but their investigations emphasise different contexts of that social injustice. The problems confronting mid-Victorian society thus profoundly disturb two intelligent, thinking women who have never met and who live in Haworth and Manchester, two different areas of northern England. The differences between Brontë and Gaskell continue: Brontë is a single woman; Gaskell is a wife and mother. Brontë is the daughter of an Evangelical Church of England priest; Gaskell is the wife of a dissenting Unitarian minister. Yet both women feel so intensely, so 'heatedly' about these social ills that, independently, they both write works that explore these ills in fictional terms and both use the technique of the Preface to explain the didactic thrust that informs the novels.

Mary Barton, Elizabeth Gaskell's first novel, explores the effects of the Industrial Revolution on mid-Victorian England. The Preface to *Mary Barton* is dated October 1848, a mere three months after Brontë's own Preface. Just as Brontë stresses her desire to tell the 'truth', so too does Gaskell emphasise that she has 'tried to write truthfully' (Gaskell, 1985 [1848]: 38). Living in the great industrial city of Manchester, and as a consequence of her

parochial duties as a minister's wife, Gaskell came into daily contact with the poor, and was thus thoroughly familiar with the severe difficulties experienced by those eking out an existence in Manchester's slums and back streets. Describing her interactions with members of the working class, Gaskell writes:

I saw that they were sore and irritable against the rich, the even tenor of whose seemingly happy lives appeared to increase the anguish caused by the lottery-like nature of their own...this belief of the injustice and unkindness which they endure from their fellow-creatures, taints what might be resignation to God's will, and turns it to revenge in too many of the poor uneducated factory-workers of Manchester. (37)

As I have shown in my study "Fact and Fiction: Developments in Social Perceptions and Narrative Strategies in Four Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell" (1997), 1848 was 'a critical year in the history of nineteenth-century Europe' (Leaver, 1997: 24), a year marked 'by a series of revolutions and uprisings in Italy, Germany, Austria, Hungary, France and Switzerland' (24) which coincided with a 'series of poor harvests that had prevailed from the mid-1840s [and had] resulted in widespread starvation and a spiralling cost of living' (24).

Gaskell refers directly to this in her Preface when she describes 'events which have so recently occurred...on the Continent' (Gaskell, 1985 [1848]: 38). The English middle class was concerned that working class insurrection from Europe would spread to England. The rise of Chartism, a British working and lower middle class political movement, exacerbated middle class apprehensions. Therefore it is true to a certain but limited extent that Gaskell was motivated to write *Mary Barton*, and to offer such a clear explanation of her project in the Preface, for reasons of self-interest as a member of the middle class. However, it is incorrect to suggest that self-preservation was her primary motivation. Just as Brontë cared deeply for her society, so did Gaskell. She states:

The more I reflected on this unhappy state of things between those so bound to each other by common interests, as the employers and the employed must ever be, the more anxious I became to give some utterance to the agony which, from time to time, convulses this dumb people. (37-38)

Gaskell's awareness that fiction can be a powerful tool for the amelioration of society is echoed in a remarkably similar way by Brontë who argues in her own Preface:

To represent a bad thing in its least offensive light, is doubtless the most agreeable course for a writer of fiction to pursue; but is it the most honest, or the safest? Is it better to reveal the snares and pitfalls of life to the young and thoughtless traveller, or to cover them with branches and flowers? (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 4)

Whether the 'snares and pitfalls of life' occur in the context of gender or class inequality, it is abundantly clear that both Brontë and Gaskell are deeply troubled by specific deficiencies in mid-Victorian society.

However, these two novelists are not content merely to use their Prefaces to highlight these deficiencies because both Prefaces offer possible, but extremely vague, solutions. Brontë explicitly wishes 'to reform the errors and abuses of society' (3) because she 'would fain contribute [her] humble quota towards so good an aim' (3). Her Preface gives no specific details on how she would do this, although the novel itself suggests that she seeks legal reform of those laws that have a pejorative impact on women, especially on married, middle-class women. However, a very important aspect of the didactic purpose of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is reflected in the way in which the novel also wishes to accomplish a change in attitudes and people's perceptions. Gaskell's remedy is slightly more explicit, but more diffuse and emotive than that of Brontë:

...whatever public effort can do in the way of legislation, or private effort in the way of merciful deeds, or helpless love in the way of widow's mites, should be done, and that speedily, to disabuse the work-people of so miserable a misapprehension. (Gaskell, 1985 [1848]: 38)

Gaskell is thus arguing for better treatment of working-class people, but this does not imply a challenge to class structure itself. It is true that Gaskell does suggest that 'legislation' may help to solve the problem of class disparity, but what prevails is the more sentimental and subjective voice of the Christian, of the minister's wife, with its insistence on 'merciful deeds' and 'widow's mites'.

Thus striking similarities in terms of authorial purpose can be detected in the Prefaces to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and *Mary Barton*. Both novelists share a powerful impulse for social reform and clearly reject the genre of the ‘silver-fork novel’ that had been so popular in the decades before the 1840s. Christine Alexander and Margaret Smith define this genre as a novel of ‘fashionable life, melodramatic romances, and tales dealing with adventurers and highwaymen, fox-hunting and gentry life, and naval life’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 348). In contrast to this, Alexander and Smith also explain that ‘novels that held an analytical mirror up to their world appealed strongly to mid-19th-century readers increasingly preoccupied with social problems’ (348). Brontë is evidently thinking of works such as the ‘silver-fork novels’ when she explains that she ‘would rather whisper a few wholesome truths therein than *much soft nonsense* [sic]’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 3) (my italics).

This chapter argues that it is possible that the social commentary in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* was in part the consequence of Brontë’s awareness of the writings of the prominent Victorian essayist, historian and biographer Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881). Brontë’s familiarity with the work of Carlyle is confirmed by Alexander and Smith, who explain that ‘in *Fraser’s Magazine* the young Brontës would have read Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*’ (Alexander and Smith, 2006: 117). Carlyle’s powerful influence on the shape and direction of the fiction of Elizabeth Gaskell is well documented. For example, the motto on the facsimile title page of *Mary Barton* is taken from his essay ‘Biography’, first published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, XXVII (1832). Carlyle’s political pamphlets, such as *Chartism* (1839) and *Past and Present* (1843), ‘called for a new middle class vision of the poor’ (Leaver, 1997: 27) and ‘propounded a philosophy of social reconciliation founded on individual intercourse’ (27). Carlyle also censured writers of ‘silver-fork novels’ and ‘instead sought a new politically and morally aware fiction that would instruct, rather than amuse. His abiding belief in the novelist’s moral responsibility, and in the didactic potential of the novel, was centrally important in shaping the new direction taken by the novelists of the 1840s and their successors’ (27-28). Although I am unaware of any tangible evidence that Brontë ever acknowledged any indebtedness to Carlyle, her observations in the Preface do resonate with sentiments akin to Carlyle’s political and social philosophy:

I love to give innocent pleasure. Yet, be it understood, I shall not limit my ambition to this, - or even to producing ‘a perfect work of art.’ [sic] time and talents so spent, I should consider wasted and mis-applied. Such

humble talents as God has given me I will endeavour to put to their greatest use; if I am able to amuse I will try to benefit too. (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 4)

She wants ‘to benefit’ her readers, thus highlighting the profound sense of social responsibility that imbues her writing. Nor is she overly concerned with the aesthetic qualities of her fiction: the production of ‘a perfect work of art’ is not her primary concern.

So far this chapter has looked at the affinities between the Prefaces of *Mary Barton* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. However, there are many other important aspects to Brontë’s Preface that are not evident in Gaskell’s Preface to *Mary Barton*. For example, Brontë uses two unusual and frequently misunderstood metaphors to elevate the serious subject matter of her novel. She writes:

But as the priceless treasure too frequently hides at the bottom of a well, it needs some courage to dive for it, especially as he that does so will be likely to incur more scorn and obloquy for the mud and water into which he has ventured to plunge, than thanks for the jewel he procures. (3)

Brontë’s metaphors of ‘the priceless treasure’ and ‘the jewel’ are sometimes read to suggest her excessive pride and arrogance, her hubris, in the quality of writing in her novel. This is not so. Rather these symbols refer to the ‘truths’ in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that are hidden and difficult to bring forth, and may be scorned or misunderstood socially, but which nevertheless have great value. The wish to reform society is a ‘priceless treasure’ and a ‘jewel’. The symbols suggest how invested Brontë is in the novel’s critique and her desire to reshape society. The image of the individual who must dive deeply, down to the very bottom of the well, in his determined hunt for ‘the priceless treasure’, seems to refer principally to the bringer of the message rather than to the recipient. However, it is likely that Brontë is also acknowledging how difficult it will be for those readers who believe in the value of patriarchal government to change their conservative attitude in favour of a more enlightened and liberal perspective. It will therefore be a significant challenge for Mrs Markham to revisit her deeply rooted belief that a social organisation that elevates men’s wishes and desires over those of women is informed by a ‘very good doctrine’ (53).

Although Brontë admits that she ‘may have gone too far’ (4) in her portrayal of ‘the proceedings of the unhappy scapegrace with his few profligate companions’ (4), she nevertheless stresses that she knows that ‘such characters do exist’ (4). This, as indicated in Chapter 3, is commonly taken to refer to her brother Branwell, thereby pointing to the biographical resonances that inform the novel. But Brontë stoutly defends her inclusion of such characters. Their role is to serve as a warning to young readers of both sexes:

If I have warned one rash youth from following in their steps, or prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain. (4)

The didactic role of the novel, to educate and to inform, is again clearly evident in these lines.

The Preface concludes with an important comment regarding the relationship between fiction and gender. Brontë believes that the gender of either the reader or the author of a good novel is of no consequence:

I am satisfied that if a book is a good one, it is so whatever the sex of the author may be. All novels are or should be written for both men and women to read, and I am at a loss to conceive how a man should permit himself to write anything that would be really disgraceful to a woman, or why a woman should be censured for writing anything that would be proper and becoming to a man. (5)

Brontë is thus insisting on equality between the sexes, for a shared humanity which supersedes gender, and arguing for society to move away from sexist gender constructs in terms of the writing and reading of fiction. Patriarchal oppression is not only reprehensible in politics and the law: its consequences also extend to prescriptive and sexist practices in the creation and consumption of literature, practices which Brontë rejects in their entirety.

The Preface to the second edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* constitutes invaluable primary source material and therefore, unlike the situation prevailing with *Agnes Grey*, Brontë’s agenda for the novel is clearly apparent. My chapter seeks to demonstrate what Langland identifies as Brontë’s ‘deepening grasp of the ways in which form and subject interpenetrate’ (Langland, 1989: 118). *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is an epistolary novel, comprising two

letters that Gilbert Markham writes to his friend and brother-in-law J. Halford. The first letter is very short, consisting merely of a type of preamble or introduction addressed to ‘J. Halford, Esq.’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 7) and starting ‘Dear Halford’ (7), before continuing into Chapter I, ‘A Discovery’. Gilbert’s first words: ‘You must go back with me to the autumn of 1827’ (9) introduce the complex use of chronology and place that informs *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. The chapter describes the life of the Markhams on their farm in the community of Linden-car in Yorkshire, and focuses on the unexpected news of Gilbert’s younger sister, Rose, that Wildfell Hall ‘has actually been inhabited above a week! – and we never knew!’ (11). Brontë therefore wastes no time in initiating the central strand of her narrative, the arrival of a mysterious young widow, accompanied by a young son and attended only by an elderly maid, as a tenant at the ruined Wildfell Hall, a large Gothic farmhouse occupying an isolated position on a high hill two miles beyond Linden-car. The neighbourhood of Linden-car, remote and removed from the busy discourse of a more sophisticated world, is absurdly excited at the sudden appearance of this tenant, so that the female members of the community can talk of little else. Brontë thus establishes a very tight and restrictive social context for the rumours and gossip that will soon start to circulate in the community regarding Helen’s allegedly inappropriate behaviour that challenges conventional patriarchal notions of female respectability and socially acceptable conduct.

This first letter seeks to establish a plausible narrative framework for the novel’s sustained enquiry into middle class female experience because it is crucial that this investigation possesses a powerful sense of legitimacy and verisimilitude. Halford has already given Gilbert ‘a very particular and interesting account of the most remarkable occurrences of [his] early life’ (7), but Gilbert has never returned the favour. Therefore Gilbert now offers to provide Halford with ‘the minute details of [the] narrative’ (8) of his life, so that Halford can understand Gilbert’s experiences and reflections. The second letter constitutes a dramatic narrative that describes the varying experiences of Helen Huntingdon. The second letter starts with chapter II, ‘An Interview’, and concludes with Chapter LIII, ‘Conclusion’, thereby extending through fifty one chapters and running from pages 9 to 471. Gilbert’s voice introduces and concludes the entire narrative, and thus it is his words that the reader encounters first and last in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. It is also important to notice that the entire novel is comprised of a male to male form of communication. However, incorporated within Gilbert’s second letter are the various

forms of first person female narrative, such as Helen's very long diary, her letters, and her important female to female conversations with her aunt Maxwell and other significant female characters such as Milicent and Esther. Milicent's own crucial letter to Helen, written just before Milicent marries Ralph Hattersley, is also embedded within Gilbert's narrative. Thus the novel is shaped by a hierarchy of first person narratives, all operating within Gilbert's second letter to J. Halford, a silent recipient whom we never meet in person. A letter of such excessive length is obviously unrealistic, even in the nineteenth century, when letters still comprised the normal and regular mode of communication. Indeed it could be argued that Brontë's choice of the epistolary form of novel *per se* is injudicious and lacks credibility, perhaps immediately encouraging a certain cynicism in the reader. As Elizabeth Langland has observed: 'Many critics have objected to the artistic infelicity of such a device, particularly to the huge chunk of diary (parts of volumes I and III and all of volume II)' (Langland, 1989: 120). The reader is certainly required to suspend his or her sense of disbelief, and to accept Brontë's selection of the epistolary form as the form of narrative that best served her novel's didactic impulse.

But even Brontë's most loyal of supporters, George Moore, failed to understand her project of an epistolary novel with its embedded narratives, writing that 'the diary was a mistake and that it would have been better if the heroine had told her story herself' (Moore, 1924: 218). For Moore, 'the diary broke the story in halves' (216). He writes:

Anne broke down in the middle of her story, but her breakdown was not for lack of genius but of experience. An accident would have saved her; almost any man of letters would have laid his hand upon her arm and said: You must not let your heroine give her diary to the young farmer, saying, 'Here is my story; go home and read it.' Your heroine must tell the young farmer her story, and an entrancing scene you will make of the telling. Moreover, the presence of your heroine, her voice, her gestures, the questions that would arise and the answers that would be given to them, would preserve the atmosphere of a passionate and original love story. (216)

Moore thus dislikes Brontë's device of the diary, and desires a different narrative structure for her novel. He also misses her didactic agenda when he explains that Brontë's 'heroine must tell the young farmer her story' (216) herself. It is true that Helen does give her diary to Gilbert, who reads it and then, many years later, repeats it verbatim in his second letter to Halford. But Moore

does not perceive that in fact Helen is telling her story herself: the inclusion of her diary successfully allows Helen to describe her experiences in her own words. Brontë empowers Helen by letting her voice speak directly to the readers, even though it is refracted through Gilbert's letter.

I take issue in this chapter with Langland's claim that the epistolary form is an 'artistic infelicity' (Langland, 1989: 120), as well as with Moore's suggestion that 'the diary was a mistake' (Moore, 1924: 218). Rather the epistolary form, with the hierarchy of first person narratives and the deliberate positioning of Helen's diary at the heart of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, supports Langland's claim regarding Brontë's increasingly skilful interpenetration of form and content. The epistolary form helps to reinforce her expressed wish 'to reform the errors and abuses of society' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 3) and to tell 'an unpalatable truth' (4). My favourable stance in relation to this concurs with that conveyed in N. M. Jacobs's article 'Gender and Layered Narrative in *Wuthering Heights* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*' (1986: 204-19). While this article is discussed at some length in chapter 1, its principal argument is worth repeating here, because it explains very clearly why Brontë wished to use the epistolary form of the novel for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

This structure, appropriated and modified from the familiar gothic frame-tale, here serves several functions that are strongly gender-related: it exemplifies a process, necessary for both writer and reader, of passing through or going behind the official version of reality in order to approach a truth that the culture prefers to deny; it exemplifies the ways in which domestic reality is obscured by layers of conventional ideology; and it replicates a cultural split between male and female spheres that is shown to be at least one source of the tragedy at the center of the fictional world. (Jacobs, 1986: 204)

In this important comment, Jacobs argues that the true details about 'domestic reality' in mid-Victorian society are often masked by the platitudes of patriarchal discourse. Jacobs suggests that, by enclosing the subversive and radical feminist discourse of Helen's diary within the reassuring and conventional voice of Gilbert, Brontë is stressing that 'the official version of reality' (204) is a male, patriarchal reality, and that the unofficial, female version of reality is 'a truth that the culture prefers to deny' (204).

This narrative structure with the first person female voice enclosed within that of the male, the voice that introduces and concludes the novel, appears to have substantial affinities with the similar structure of Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847). *Wuthering Heights* can also be read as a feminist text because it is informed by a significant criticism of the narrow lives and restricted choices available to women in patriarchal England. Isabella Linton experiences an abusive marriage even worse than Helen's, and also flees. I have shown why Brontë deliberately uses such a structure, but in *Wuthering Heights* Mr Lockwood and Nelly Dean are not traditionally read as narrators whose voices in themselves offer strong feminist implications. Therefore my study has not considered the narrative similarities between the two texts. Instead, I have looked at the epistolary form of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and have argued that this narrative structure is not the consequence of an inexperienced amateur. Rather it reflects Brontë's great skill in locating a space within the orthodoxies of patriarchal discourse that allows her to offer such a subversive story that challenges the very fundamentals of that same discourse.

However, it is implausible that Gilbert would be offering this 'full and faithful account of certain circumstances connected with the most important event of my life' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 8) to Halford, a man who is married to Gilbert's sister, Rose. Halford and Rose make 'an annual visit' (471) to visit Gilbert and Helen at Staningley, and therefore it is not convincing that Halford be the recipient of Gilbert's two letters, especially the very long, meticulously detailed second letter. Gilbert's preamble to Chapter I is awkward, and suggests a certain hesitance on the part of Brontë as she struggles to establish the credibility of his correspondence with Halford. This is not one of the novel's more persuasive episodes. Gilbert reminds Halford that the latter had previously given Gilbert 'a very particular and interesting account of the most remarkable occurrences of [his] early life' (7), and had requested 'a return of confidence' (7) by Gilbert. But Gilbert had declined, 'not being in a story-telling humour at the time' (7), a response which had apparently offended Halford, whose appearance resembled that of a 'deeply injured man' (7), and whose letters 'have, ever since, been distinguished by a certain dignified, semi-melancholy stiffness and reserve' (7). Gilbert now offers to atone for these 'past offences' (7) by 'amusing [Halford] with an old world story' (7) that will be 'long' (7). In light of Gilbert and Halford's long established intimacy as brothers-in-law whose families apparently spend long, leisurely Victorian summers in each other's company, the excuse or reason that Gilbert offers for his sudden willingness to send Halford this 'tale of many chapters' (8) in letter form, cannot be

defended in rational terms. This could therefore be described as an ‘artistic infelicity’ (Langland, 1989: 120).

However, it is also important to note Brontë’s considerable anxiety that her readers accept the accuracy of Gilbert’s ‘tale of many chapters’ (8), in particular the accuracy of the events described in Helen’s diary. It is the diary that best explains why Brontë rejects Mrs Markham’s claim that the ideology that seeks to elevate the position of men over that of women is a ‘very good doctrine’ (53). The diary is the subversive heart of the novel, and therefore it is essential that readers accept that Helen’s words reflect the ‘unpalatable truth’ (4) of what a middle class Victorian wife was expected to endure at the hands of a reprobate husband such as Arthur Huntingdon. It would have been impossible in realistic terms for Gilbert to recall with any accuracy what he had read in Helen’s diary twenty years previously, and therefore Brontë was deeply aware that her readers might cynically but justifiably approach the events portrayed in the diary as being grossly exaggerated and lacking in verisimilitude. Therefore she carefully arranges that Gilbert explain to Halford that he is not writing from memory, but rather from the diary itself, which Gilbert has retained down the years:

Among the letters and papers I spoke of, there is a certain faded old journal of mine, which I mention by way of assurance that I have not my memory alone – tenacious as it is – to depend upon; in order that your credulity may not be too severely taxed in following me through the minute details of my narrative. (8)

If Brontë is to persuade her readers of both sexes that patriarchal oppression is wrong and unjust, in part because of the infelicitous position of the wife in a traditional Victorian marriage, such as that of the Huntingdons, it is obviously essential that such readers trust the truth of Helen’s unhappy experiences. Gilbert’s ability to consult the diary when describing its contents to Halford ensures that the ‘credulity’ (8) of the readers, let alone of Halford, is not ‘too severely taxed’ (8).

Therefore the epistolary form of the novel does to a large extent suggest that Brontë has achieved a successful interpenetration of form and subject. While my chapter has looked critically at some weaknesses in Brontë’s method, such as the unconvincing justification for Gilbert’s letters to Halford, it can nevertheless be argued that her choice of this genre has

allowed her to portray the vicissitudes of female experience in a reasonably authentic manner. Her emphasis on her quest for the ‘truth’ (3) in the Preface is, of course, anticipated by her earlier identification of *Agnes Grey* as belonging to the fictional genre of ‘all true histories that contain instruction’ (Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 1). The twin imperatives of ‘truth’ and ‘instruction’ are thus the two principal contexts that inform Brontë’s fiction.

Chapter 4 has stressed that *Agnes Grey* is principally interested in issues concerning the single middle class woman, whilst *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*’s primary focus falls on the lives of married middle class women. Thus, while both novels are concerned to investigate middle class female experience in a patriarchal society, each text has a different priority. *Agnes Grey* does, however, offer a substantial appraisal of marriage in its analysis of the Ashby and Grey marriages, and I have looked very carefully at these marriages, especially that of Sir Thomas and Rosalie Ashby, in chapter 4. In Chapter 5 I argue that the feminist critique in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* centres on the novel’s critical enquiry into the institution of marriage, and that Brontë seamlessly integrates her investigation of most other contexts of female experience, such as those of parenting and work opportunities for married women, within this principal line of enquiry. Brontë uses *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* to warn her readers of both sexes about ‘the snares and pitfalls’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 4) of an unhappy marriage. Her purpose is to reveal, not to conceal, the ‘unpalatable truth’ (4) about marriage. This will benefit her young readers of both sexes who will thus become more aware of the sober realities of marriage. In this way ‘there would be less of sin and misery to the young of both sexes who are left to wring their bitter knowledge from experience’ (4). The novel therefore has an educative purpose, claiming that it is better to acquire essential information about marriage at a certain remove in a fictional format, than by actual experience. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is thus intended to reinforce Aunt Maxwell’s two key pronouncements regarding marriage, namely that ‘matrimony is a serious thing’ (125), and ‘a subject which demands mature and serious deliberation’ (159). Where the novel does look at the single woman, such as Esther Hargrave, this is usually investigated in the context of marriage, and reflects Brontë’s concern that young unmarried women should make sensible choices when selecting their future husbands. Nowhere in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* does she devote any significant space to investigating the plight of the single woman *per se*, independent of considerations of marriage.

Brontë's wish to reform the injustices within the patriarchal system of marriage is predicated on twin imperatives: firstly, legal reform of those four laws that have a pejorative impact on all married women, especially those from the middle class; and secondly a societal and attitudinal shift regarding the subordinate position of women, with a particular emphasis on the ideology of separate spheres. Brontë resents the inequality and subjugation of all women in Victorian patriarchy, but her prioritising in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* of the experiences of middle class wives, is clearly evident. She never refers specifically to the four laws, or to the ideology of separate spheres, in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, nor is there any tangible evidence elsewhere to prove that she ever used this terminology, or was indeed even aware of the precise names of the laws against which her novel argues so fiercely. Chapter 2 has looked carefully at these laws, namely the laws of coverture, of conjugal rights, of the custody of children, and the law that forbade a wife from separating from her husband without his permission. Chapter 2 has also discussed the ideology of separate spheres in some detail. The laws relating to marriage, as well as the ideology of separate spheres, are silent but ever present reminders throughout the novel that the elevation of men's rights over those of women is indeed not a 'very good doctrine' (53).

However, it would be wrong to assume that in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* Brontë automatically takes the side of the female characters against the males. She is of course enormously sympathetic to the marginalisation of all women in a patriarchal society, but this does not suggest that she wishes either to portray all her female characters in hagiographic terms, or to present her male characters en masse as villains. She points to the fallibility of all humankind, and it would be impossible to prove conclusively that women are generally described as superior to, or better than, the men in the novel. She often shows that women, such as Helen, are the architects of their own downfall, and she is also too aware of the complexities of the situation to allow herself to succumb to the dangers of gender stereotyping. In fact the novel argues very strongly against this tendency, so that for example the pejorative stereotype of the 'old maid' in the person of Mary Millward is challenged very stoutly.

Chapter 5 will interrogate the marriages of the Huntingdons, the Markhams, and the Hattersleys, focusing on the significant role played by Helen in each relationship. While Brontë uses each of these marriages to reinforce specific strands of the novel's critique of marriage, it is to Helen's marriage to Arthur Huntingdon that she devotes the most attention and energy. Her

foregrounding of the Huntingdon marriage is anticipated in the Preface with her mention of ‘the very natural error of my heroine’ (4), which refers to Helen’s disastrous mistake in marrying Arthur.

I do not find Brontë’s portrayal of the marriage of Lord and Lady Lowborough to be as sophisticated or convincing as that of the other three principal marriages in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Her depiction of the Lowboroughs is often predictable because it largely consists of a sustained description of Annabella’s adultery with Arthur. It is true that Brontë does use the marriage of the Lowboroughs as the context for her reference to the important social institution of divorce, but this indeed is a mere mention. Her treatment of divorce is disappointingly thin because she fails to explore its intricacies in even the most minimal of detail. Instead she restricts it to one brief sentence which explains that after Lady Lowborough commits a ‘second misdemeanour’ (439) ‘Lord Lowborough...immediately sought and obtained a divorce’ (439). Such commentary suggests that Brontë was perhaps poorly informed about the complexities and specificities of the divorce process. I acknowledge that Lord Lowborough himself is an interesting figure in whom moral complexity is embodied; the refusal of his reprobate friends to help him overcome his addiction to gambling and drinking constitutes one of the more shocking incidents in the novel. However, the portrayal of the Lowboroughs lacks the psychological complexity associated with most of the other important characters in the novel, such as Helen, Arthur and Ralph. While Lord Lowborough’s suffering and betrayal are rewarded with a happy second marriage to a woman ‘remarkable neither for beauty nor wealth, nor brilliant accomplishments; nor any other thing...except genuine good sense, unswerving integrity, active piety, warmhearted benevolence, and a fund of cheerful spirits’ (440), Lady Lowborough is punished for her dissolute ways by dying alone on the continent ‘in penury, neglect, and utter wretchedness’ (439). I find this schematic treatment of reward and punishment to be problematic because it lacks the thoughtful consideration devoted to the other three marriages in the novel.

Brontë’s analysis of Helen’s marriage to Arthur is enriched by her deliberate deployment of the first person female voice. As suggested earlier, she seeks to empower Helen by allowing her to tell her own story. Just as Agnes narrates her story in *Agnes Grey*, so too does Helen use her own words to describe her life before and after she meets Arthur Huntingdon. The female voice was silenced, or at best repressed, in Victorian patriarchy, and therefore, while Brontë’s decision might appear unimportant from a twenty-first century perspective, it was highly

significant in 1848. Helen's thoughts and experiences are validated and given legitimacy and agency by the use of the first person female narrative. The first person voice creates a sense of intimacy and immediacy between the reader, the text and the author. Brontë's choice of the diary form of first person narrative is effective because a diary has no audience other than the diarist herself, and therefore the writer does not have to shape his or her words to meet the needs of the reader. A diary is the most private form of writing, and therefore an honesty and integrity of intent can reasonably be supposed in what the writer entrusts to the pages of the diary. Helen confides her deepest and most sensitive thoughts and experiences to her diary, and thus we, as privileged insiders to those thoughts and experiences, can legitimately trust them to be true. This is essential if we are to accept that the unhappy experiences of Helen's marriage are representative of what occurs in real life, in Victorian patriarchy. Our willingness to accept the veracity of the events in the diary is essential if we are to understand the intensity of Brontë's didactic impulse.

Helen is undoubtedly the centrally important character in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Hers is the prevailing consciousness, and her diary, letters, and crucial conversations with other women such as Aunt Maxwell, Milicent, and Esther, constitute a hierarchy of first person female narratives that provides an appropriate context for Brontë's investigation of feminist issues. The descriptions of many crucial events and important personalities in the novel are refracted through her consciousness, except when Gilbert narrates the story, so that we are always mindful of Helen's power and authority and their influence on our response to her opinions and perspectives. Even in those parts of the novel that are narrated by Gilbert, Helen is a powerful presence, visible or invisible, speaking her mind in forthright terms or silent. Brontë's representation of characters such as Mrs Markham, Eliza and Rose, shows that they are all in some way connected with Helen, be this in the context of the little microcosm of that society, of the power of gossip, or of social pressure. Brontë's treatment of such characters is invariably conducted in such a way that we automatically, if perhaps unconsciously, compare that character with Helen. Helen is the benchmark, the standard, by which everyone and everything else is judged and assessed. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is Helen's story; without her, there would be no story at all. She is Brontë's 'heroine' (4), her star, and all other characters play a subsidiary or supportive role to her.

The critique of the Huntingdon marriage commences when Helen is eighteen years old and accompanies the Maxwells to London for her first experience of the season. Brontë shows that courtship and engagement are essential components of the holistic experience that constitutes marriage, and her persistent criticism of Helen's behaviour before she marries Arthur, is unexpectedly strong. Helen may be Brontë's 'heroine' (4), but she is a heroine who is nevertheless shown to make many foolish mistakes.

In keeping with prevailing cultural norms, it is quite possible that Helen could become engaged, or even get married, by the end of the season. It is therefore incumbent on Aunt Maxwell to ensure that Helen, fresh from a very protected childhood at Staningley and knowing nothing of men and their ways, realise that 'matrimony is a serious thing' (125). The two long, earnest conversations that Aunt Maxwell conducts with her niece reflect Brontë's most cherished values and attitudes regarding the institution of marriage. It is also highly significant that she sequences these conversations in the first chapter of Helen's diary, Chapter XVI, 'The Warnings of Experience'. The prominent position allocated to the conversations attests to the importance attached to their content matter by Brontë. The conversations are important because they offer guidance to (young) readers on how to avoid the 'snares and pitfalls' (4) of an undesirable marriage. In light of their female-to-female structure, they can also be considered to constitute a type of female narrative, a narrative that is incorporated within Helen's first person female narrative in her diary. Langland refers to such a narrative structure in her mention of 'a series of embedded narratives' (Langland, 1989: 147) in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

The first conversation takes place on the last night at Staningley before the family removes to London for the season. Aunt Maxwell goes to great pains to advise Helen about the qualities and characteristics she should look for in an ideal husband:

'Principle is the first thing, after all; and next to that, good sense, respectability, and moderate wealth. If you should marry the handsomest, and most accomplished and superficially agreeable man in the world, you little know the misery that would overwhelm you, if, after all, you should find him to be a worthless reprobate, or even an impracticable fool.'
(Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 125)

Unlike other female characters in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, such as Mrs Hargrave, Aunt Maxwell claims to attach little priority to wealth as a pivotal requirement for a suitable husband.

In fact ‘moderate wealth’ comes last in her list of desired qualities. However, she puts pressure on Helen to marry Mr Boarham, who is wealthy, and thus her valuable insights are compromised by her conduct. This problematises the moral value of her advice to Helen. Nevertheless, throughout the novel Aunt Maxwell remains convinced that principle, integrity and moral rectitude are the most important characteristics which a woman should seek in her future spouse. She completely rejects superficial notions of good looks and a handsome appearance because these are deceptive and can lead to a miserable marriage for a wife who has been manipulated by her husband’s external features. Aunt Maxwell warns Helen not to fall for the first man who possesses ‘the fascinations of flattery and light discourse’ (125), but rather to ‘first study; then approve; then love’ (125), because:

‘A girl’s affections should never be won unsought. But when they *are* sought – when the citadel of the heart is fairly besieged, it is apt to surrender sooner than the owner is aware of, and often against her better judgement and in opposition to all her preconceived ideas of what she could have loved, unless she be extremely careful and discreet. Now I want to warn you, Helen, of these things, and to exhort you to be watchful and circumspect from the very commencement of your career, and not to suffer your heart to be stolen from you by the first foolish or unprincipled person that covets possession of it.’ (124)

Aunt Maxwell knows that Helen is young and giddy, strong-willed and impulsive, a young woman who could very easily forget her aunt’s exhortations and make an injudicious choice. In this comment, Aunt Maxwell has again referred to ‘principle’ and the dangers inherent in an ‘unprincipled person’ becoming Helen’s husband. It is also very interesting to observe that Aunt Maxwell uses the term ‘career’ to describe Helen’s future path as a woman looking for a husband. Because middle class women such as Helen were denied real careers in terms of the ideology of separate spheres, marriage was indeed their ‘career’.

Aunt Maxwell explains that Helen possesses all the social requirements for a marriageable female: ‘There will be no lack of suitors; for you can boast a good family, a pretty considerable fortune and expectations, and...a fair share of beauty’ (124). Pedigree, wealth, and beauty are the characteristics for which a man will look in a prospective wife, but significantly there is no mention of ‘principle’ or integrity. Aunt Maxwell is well aware that probity and good values are

not highly valued by either men or women seeking a marriage partner. But, despite an initial flippancy which distresses her aunt, Helen hastens to reassure Aunt Maxwell:

‘I not only should think it *wrong* to marry a man that was deficient in sense or in principle, but I should never be *tempted* to do it; for I could not like him, if he were ever so handsome and ever so charming in other respects; I should hate him – despise him – pity him – anything but love him. (125)... Firstly, he [Mr Boarham] is, at least, forty years old - considerably more I should think, and I am but eighteen; secondly, he is narrow-minded and bigoted in the extreme; thirdly, his tastes and feelings are wholly dissimilar to mine; fourthly, his looks, voice, and manner are particularly displeasing to me; and finally, I have an aversion to his whole person that I never can surmount.’ (131)

The reader must feel a great sympathy for Helen who speaks rationally and sincerely about her antipathy towards Mr Boarham. She is clearly not attracted to him sexually; his conservative and prejudiced worldview is unattractive; and his interests and enthusiasms are antithetical to hers. Above all, he is more than double her age. Brontë wishes us to admire Helen for her assertiveness and strength of spirit, even though Aunt Maxwell is grievously disappointed. She fully believes that Mr Boarham would make an excellent husband for Helen, warning her:

‘It is in your power to secure that inestimable blessing for life – a worthy and excellent husband, who loves you tenderly, but not too fondly so as to blind him to your faults, and will be your guide throughout life’s pilgrimage, and your partner in eternal bliss.’ (131)

Aunt Maxwell thus defines a husband as an ‘inestimable blessing for life’. In itself this is not problematic, but *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* queries Aunt Maxwell’s choice of Mr Boarham as an ‘inestimable blessing for life’, and asks us to celebrate Helen’s sturdy sense of independence, an independence that is even more evident when Mr Boarham does propose and she rejects him politely but very firmly:

‘In such important matters, I take the liberty of judging for myself; and no persuasion can alter my inclinations, or induce me to believe that such a step would be conducive to my happiness, or yours.’ (133)

Brontë is already indicating that Helen's assertive, unorthodox behaviour is antithetical to the submissive, docile, passive behaviour expected of a traditional female. In a patriarchal system such women would be unlikely to behave as does Helen when she insists: 'I take the liberty of judging for myself' because they have been culturally conditioned by patriarchy to behave as 'a hot house plant – taught to cling to others for direction and support' (30). This memorable simile of the 'hot house plant' is used by Helen during her spirited argument with Mrs Markham and Gilbert about the best way to educate girls. Helen wants girls to be educated to become autonomous and self-reliant so that they do not need to depend on 'others' [men].

Brontë uses Aunt Maxwell's conversations with Helen, as well as Helen's encounters with Mr Wilmot and Mr Boarham, in several ways that seek to reinforce the novel's investigation of marriage. Aunt Maxwell offers Helen what might be described as a formula that will empower her to choose a good husband, a recipe that advises Helen to ignore superficial issues such as good looks and charm, and to focus on substantial matters such as the man's integrity and reliability. However, Brontë also supports Helen's refusal to be manoeuvred into an undesired marriage simply to please her aunt and uncle because the husband happens to be their close friend. Because *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* calls for women to be strong and independent in all they say, do and think, Brontë celebrates Helen's strength and courage in rejecting Mr Boarham's proposal. She also points to the dangers of incompatibility in marriage, a danger that will become much more prominent in the novel when Helen marries Arthur. Helen feels a strong aversion towards marrying a much older man. She finds Mr Wilmot 'disgusting' (137) and 'coarse-minded' (137), while Mr Boarham is patronising and humourless. Therefore it is perhaps not their age *per se* that is problematic, but rather that they are much older and morally unattractive individuals as well.

Finally, Brontë is making a strong social comment regarding the unfortunate ways of Victorian patriarchy whereby young women are completely shielded and protected from the realities of life, before suddenly being catapulted into adult life with the expectation of an early marriage. She uses the example of Helen to show how this extremely naïve and ignorant girl, whose life has been restricted to the quiet backwaters of rural Staningley, is then expected to cope with the strenuous demands of the London season and the overtures of the many men who are attracted to her. The abrupt transformation required of Helen is excessive and unrealistic, and

Brontë implies that a more gradual and less frenetic move from childhood into adulthood is essential if a young woman is to make a more prudent choice of husband than does Helen. Helen is simply not equipped with the knowledge and experience to make wise choices, she is not mature, and a couple of earnest lectures by her aunt are woefully inadequate to bridge the divide between girlhood and womanhood. This is one of the ways in which Brontë wishes ‘to reform the errors and abuses of society’ (3).

The Tenant of Wildfell Hall shows that Helen makes a deplorable choice of husband in Arthur Huntingdon. Brontë does refer to such imprudent decisions as ‘very natural’ (4), suggesting that she understands how easy it is for impressionable young women such as Helen to fall for the flattery and charm, for the ‘laughing blue eyes’ (129), of handsome reprobates such as Arthur. However, Brontë uses Helen’s injudicious choice as a cautionary tale that highlights Helen’s own folly, especially in light of the incontestable evidence that Arthur is an established rake. What exacerbates Helen’s culpability is that she ignores not only the many warnings that other people give her, but also her own powerful awareness of Arthur’s many flaws. Indeed, in the very first chapter of her diary written after her marriage, Chapter XXIII, ‘First Weeks of Matrimony’, she confesses: ‘To be sure, I might have known him, for everyone was willing enough to tell me about him, and he himself was no accomplished hypocrite, but I was wilfully blind’ (191). It is such deliberate wilfulness that Brontë deplors.

Aunt Maxwell, Milicent, Rachel, and Annabella all advise Helen against Arthur. Aunt Maxwell puts up an especially strenuous assault, revealing that Uncle Maxwell has described Arthur as ‘a bit wildish’ (128). When Helen asks her aunt to define the exact meaning of this term, Aunt Maxwell responds: ‘It means destitute of principle, and prone to every vice that is common to youth’ (128). Her emphasis on the need for ‘principle’ in a husband resurfaces here. A few days later she repeats to Helen: ‘Is he a man of *principle*?’ [italics in original] (140), to which question Helen is obliged to answer truthfully: ‘Perhaps not exactly’ (140). Defending Arthur against her aunt’s criticisms, Helen continues: ‘You have no right to call him a profligate, aunt: he is nothing of the kind’ (141), but she is silenced when her aunt replies: ‘Who told you so, my dear? What was that story about his intrigue with a married lady – Lady who was it – Miss Wilmot herself was telling you the other day?’ (141). Aunt Maxwell is also opposed to Arthur’s unsuitable male companions:

‘Well my dear, ask your uncle what sort of company he keeps, and if he is not banded with a set of loose, profligate young men, whom he calls his friends – his jolly companions, and whose chief delight is to wallow in vice, and vie with each other who can run fastest and farthest down the headlong road to the place prepared for the devil and his angels.’ (142)

Aunt Maxwell’s opposition to Arthur is encapsulated in her remark: ‘Oh, Helen, Helen! you little know the misery of uniting your fortunes to such a man!’ (142)

Milicent forms an immediate aversion to Arthur. When Helen tells her that she is engaged, Milicent is shocked, saying that she ‘can’t help feeling surprised that [Helen] should like him so much’ (170) because Helen is ‘so superior to him in every way, and there’s something so bold – and reckless about him’ (170) that Milicent always ‘[feels] a wish to get out of his way, when [she sees] him approach’ (170). She can detect ‘nothing noble or lofty in his appearance’ (170) and his ‘face is too red’ (170), implying that Arthur drinks heavily. This criticism is repeated in Rachel’s warning: ‘...if I was you, Miss Helen, I’d look *very* well before I leaped. I do believe a young lady can’t be too careful who she marries’ (189). Rachel has heard the servants gossiping about Arthur and saying ‘some things’ (189) about him. Annabella takes a different, more philosophical approach to Helen’s engagement, asking perspicaciously: ‘And does he love you – I mean, does he idolize you as much as you do him?’ (171). Annabella is focusing on the unhealthy way in which Helen worships Arthur, and is suggesting that the relationship is disproportionate because Helen’s reverential regard for Arthur is not returned equally. These various warnings prove prophetic, but Helen refuses to listen, defending Arthur against all criticisms.

Nevertheless Helen is no fool and she quickly identifies inappropriate behavioural traits in Arthur. When she meets him for the first time at the ball, she writes in her diary: ‘There might be, it is true, a little too much careless boldness in his manner and address’ (128). A few days later, at Mr Wilmot’s dinner party, she describes Arthur as behaving overly ‘familiarly’ (136) and ‘carelessly’ (136); thus from the outset Brontë portrays Arthur as lacking the respect and formality expected of a young man in polite society. This excessive informality is also evident in the way in which he speaks to Helen, who explains: ‘...he frequently called me Helen, and I never resented the freedom’ (138). She realises that, by addressing her by her first name, Arthur is transgressing the bounds of accepted behaviour among the landed gentry, but she is too much

in love with him to allow this to bother her. Arthur is then invited to Uncle Maxwell's shooting party, a traditional social event held every autumn, a house party that extends over many weeks. Helen thus has ample opportunity to get to know him better, and to observe his conduct in company. His deliberate pattern of flirting first with her, and then with Annabella, is cruel and manipulative. One particular evening this pattern is so conspicuous that it causes the wretched Helen to withdraw to the library: '...sitting down on a low stool before the easy chair, I sunk my head upon its cushioned seat, and thought, and thought, until the tears gushed out, and I wept like any child' (158). Unfortunately her thoughts fail to persuade her to resist Arthur's overtures. Once they are engaged, Helen is also shocked to observe the delight and pride with which Arthur recounts his leading role in refusing to help Lord Lowborough overcome his addiction to gambling and drinking, two obsessions that had made him so destitute that the woman to whom he was engaged, broke off the relationship. At this stage, Helen writes in her diary:

I cannot shut my eyes to Arthur's faults; and the more I love him, the more they trouble me. His very heart, that I trusted so, is, I fear, less warm and generous than I thought it. (175)

Therefore, as sympathetic as Brontë is to Helen's 'very natural error' (4), she shows unequivocally that Helen causes her own downfall in her obduracy and refusal to listen to the promptings of her own conscience as well as to the warnings of other people.

Brontë vigorously condemns Helen's naïve belief that she can help Arthur to overcome his moral deficiencies. Aunt Maxwell is scandalised when Helen tells her: 'I think I might have influence sufficient to save him from some errors, and I should think my life well spent in the effort to preserve so noble a nature from destruction' (141). She envisages a life dedicated to 'saving him from the consequences of his early errors, and striving to recall him to the path of virtue' (142). Aunt Maxwell finds it preposterous that Helen is willing to devote her future to the rehabilitation of such a reprobate. Helen is foolish, firstly in her unrealistic belief that she can succeed in her quest, and secondly in her very willingness to sacrifice her entire life to this cause. Arthur is twenty eight years old; Helen is eighteen. When Helen assures her aunt that 'my sense and my principle are at his service' (141), Aunt Maxwell responds dryly:

‘That sounds presumptuous, Helen! Do you think you have enough for both; and do you imagine your merry, thoughtless profligate would allow himself to be guided by a young girl like you?’ (141).

Brontë uses this incident to warn her young female readers that they must never go into marriage with the principal intention of rescuing or saving their husband from the consequences of his own dissipated conduct. Marriage must not be perceived as a form of moral crusade to reform debauched husbands. Such a selfless attitude is indicative of the traditional wife in a patriarchal system who is expected to put the needs of her husband and children first, a wife who lacks the sense of agency and autonomy that Brontë seeks for every woman.

Helen’s engagement to Arthur facilitates Brontë’s first covert reference to the law of coverture. The novel is vague and inconsistent on this point because it is often difficult to assess Arthur’s financial situation accurately. From one perspective, it seems unlikely that Arthur marries Helen for pecuniary reasons because he is apparently a wealthy man, as he explains to Helen:

‘...my property is mostly entailed, and I cannot get rid of it. There may be a few mortgages on the rest – a few trifling debts and encumbrances here and there, but nothing to speak of; and though I acknowledge I am not as rich as I might be – or have been – still, I think, we could manage pretty comfortably on what’s left.’ (162-63)

However, it is also possible that Arthur’s finances are not in a good state, largely because of his irresponsible conduct. Nevertheless, despite Brontë’s lack of clarity regarding his wealth, Arthur must be aware of Helen’s wealth because her father is rich and will leave his fortune to her and her brother Frederick, while Helen’s guardians, the Maxwells, have no children and are therefore likely to make her their heiress. When Helen naïvely asks Arthur: ‘I suppose you *know* I am not an heiress?’ (164), he ‘protested he had never given it a thought, and begged [she] would not disturb his present enjoyment by the mention of such uninteresting subjects’ (164). Helen’s insistence that she is ‘not an heiress’ runs counter to Aunt Maxwell’s claim that Helen has ‘a pretty considerable fortune and expectations’ (124). Brontë’s inconsistency regarding Arthur’s intentions and Helen’s professed ignorance is thus problematic, but money does not appear to be Arthur’s reason for wishing to marry Helen.

Uncle Maxwell goes to great pains to try to protect Helen's financial interests and to discuss money matters such as 'settlements' (168) with Arthur. But, when Uncle Maxwell invites Helen to participate in these financial discussions, saying: 'I suppose now, you'd never dream of looking into the state of your husband's finances, or troubling your head about settlements, or anything of that sort?' (168), Helen foolishly replies: 'I don't think I should' (168), and then continues: 'But 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?' (168-9) Brontë exposes Helen's extreme naïvete and immaturity in refusing to become involved in these important arrangements that will have such an impact on her future welfare. In this way she is knowingly conferring the power to shape her economic future on to two men, her uncle and her fiancé. She is thus collaborating with her own oppression as a woman, a woman whose material assets on marriage will automatically be ceded to her husband's control. Although Brontë is again vague on the specific details, it is apparent that Uncle Maxwell does his best to protect Helen's wealth from Arthur's authority. But Helen's reaction is antithetical to Brontë's wish for women to act as autonomous independent human beings who do not need to rely on men for support.

So far my chapter has shown that Brontë devotes the first seven chapters of Helen's diary to a meticulously detailed investigation of how she has ample opportunity to realise Arthur's deficiencies and thus to avoid marrying him. It is therefore very clear that the period before marriage, when a young woman first meets and is courted by her future husband, and then becomes engaged to him, is invested with much importance by Brontë, who sensibly believes that prevention is better than cure. In many ways, these early chapters are the freshest and the most revealing in the novel's lengthy description of Helen's infelicitous marriage. Once she marries, her diary comprises a repetitive catalogue of Arthur's flaws, and charts an important process, whereby she gradually realises that life with him is untenable. Arthur's behaviour steadily deteriorates over the next six years, but Helen is trapped by the laws of patriarchy and can do nothing legal to ameliorate the situation. Her unhappy predicament, however, provides a suitable locus for Brontë's careful interrogation of the laws which she seems to wish to reform.

When Helen wants to leave Arthur, she is severely restricted by her lack of economic resources, and realises that she has paid dearly for her refusal to accept Uncle Maxwell's suggestion that she take part in the financial negotiations before her marriage. The law of

coverture means that Arthur now enjoys legal control over all of Helen's material assets and that he is under no legal imperative to return any of these assets to her. After Helen sees Arthur embracing Annabella in the shrubbery, and realises that he is committing adultery, she asks him: '...will you let me take our child and what remains of my fortune, and go?' (294). She is merely asking Arthur to return the money that she has brought to the marriage. When he refuses, Helen modifies her request: 'Will you let me have the child then, without the money?' (294). But he again refuses, confident in the knowledge that women have no custody over their children. Helen therefore plans to run away from Arthur, but her lack of ready money is a severe hindrance. When Arthur reads her diary and discovers that she is planning to support herself and little Arthur by selling her artwork, he sabotages her plans by destroying her art materials and confiscating the money and jewels in her safe. All of her painting materials are cast into the fire: '...palette, paints, bladders, pencils, brushes, varnish – I saw them all consumed – the palette knives snapped in two – the oil and turpentine sent hissing and roaring up the chimney' (350). Arthur knows that Helen has no recourse to the law, for the law ordains that he can do as he wishes with her assets and with her equipment. Brontë thus points to the crippling consequences of the law of coverture on wives in Victorian patriarchy.

However, Helen is more successful in challenging the law of conjugal rights. After a mere four months of marriage, she and Arthur have 'a downright quarrel' (198) concerning his former liaison with a married woman, Lady F. Helen finds his attitude utterly despicable:

Without another word, I left the room, and locked myself up in my own chamber. In about half an hour, he came to the door; and first he tried the handle, then he knocked.

'Won't you let me in, Helen?' said he.

'No; you have displeased me,' I replied, 'and I don't want to see your face or hear your voice again till the morning.' (199)

Helen knows that English law does not permit her to lock her husband out of her bedroom, an action that denies him his conjugal rights and the opportunity of having sexual intercourse with her. She is therefore theoretically breaking the law. But on another occasion, when Arthur is extremely drunk, she is too slow to prevent his entering her bedroom. She writes that '[h]e...was no longer laughing now, but sick and stupid – I will write no more about *that*' (268). It is highly

probable that Arthur either rapes her, or at least assaults her very severely, for his behaviour is so vile and degrading that she cannot even confide these events to that most private of places, her diary. However, she does deny him his conjugal rights once her suspicions regarding his adultery with Annabella are confirmed. She tells him: ‘...henceforth, we are husband and wife only in the name’ (294) because ‘I am your child’s mother, and *your* housekeeper – nothing more’ (295).

Despite the importance of the laws of coverture and conjugal rights, it is the law of custody that captures Brontë’s attention most ‘heatedly’, suggesting that she had a particular interest in the rights of children and the rights of mothers to have a voice in decisions regarding those children. Parenting is an especially important strand of the novel’s critique of marriage because Helen leaves Arthur for the sake of her child, and not for her own advantage. As a committed Christian, she takes her marriage vows very seriously, but when her duties as a wife collide with her duties as a mother, her maternal responsibilities prevail. Arthur is shown to be a deficient father from the outset. In Chapter XXVIII, ‘Parental Feelings’, which describes the birth and early weeks of little Arthur, Arthur is inconsolably jealous of his son who, he feels, is diverting Helen’s attention away from him. Such paternal jealousy is psychologically plausible, and reinforces the validity of Langland’s view that Brontë successfully creates ‘complex and psychologically convincing characters’ (Langland, 1989: 147) in her novel. Nevertheless, Brontë stresses the irrationality of an adult’s experiencing such hostility towards a helpless infant. While Helen attends to their son, Arthur sits morosely on a chair, miserable and allegedly neglected. He impatiently exclaims:

‘Helen, I shall positively hate that little wretch, if you worship it so madly! You are absolutely infatuated about it...You have not a thought to spare for anything else...I may go or come, be present or absent, cheerful or sad; it’s all the same to you. As long as you have that ugly little creature to doat upon, you care not a farthing what becomes of me.’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 229-230)

As a patriarchal male, accustomed to wielding uncontested power over women, especially his wife, Arthur cannot accept that his son should receive preferential treatment from Helen.

But, while Arthur’s jealousy is condemned by Brontë, Helen is also culpable. Her conduct is ‘psychologically convincing’ (Langland, 1989: 147) because it is highly probable that she is using their son as a means for seeking revenge on Arthur, whose intense flirtation with

Annabella, now Lady Lowborough, is causing her grave disquiet. Helen does not confess her desire for revenge; perhaps she is unaware that she entertains such hostile intentions. But the strong possibility must be considered. Her deliberate use of certain pronouns suggests her proprietorial attitude towards little Arthur, and her desire, conscious or otherwise, to exclude Arthur from the parenting process. The use of a child as a pawn or bargaining tool between antagonistic parents is of course commonplace, and Brontë is seen to possess powerful psychological insights in her identification of such an issue. Helen describes little Arthur as ‘*my child*’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 228), writing that ‘God has sent *me* a soul to educate for Heaven, and given *me* a new and calmer bliss, and stronger hopes to comfort *me*’ (228) (my italics).

As little Arthur grows up, his father’s early jealousy transforms into an unhealthy possessive love that seeks to separate the son from his mother’s direction and guidance. If Helen does initially seek to exclude Arthur, this process is now reversed substantially and more aggressively by Arthur. His behaviour has legal sanction in that the law of custody grants him exclusive power to raise his son as he deems fit. Patriarchy dictates that Helen has no voice in such parental decisions, and she is therefore powerless to intervene. Arthur wishes to imbue little Arthur with patriarchal values and behavioural traits, despite his being only three or four years old. His intention is to turn his son into a miniature version of a typical patriarchal male, an individual who reflects debased Victorian patriarchal notions of masculinity, which involve the consumption of large quantities of alcohol, the use of foul language, and a persistent disrespect for women. This attempt to inculcate ‘manly’ values in little Arthur reminds us of the similar treatment afforded to young Tom Bloomfield by Uncle Robson in *Agnes Grey*. The fact that Brontë returns to the same issue in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* suggests her powerful resentment of such behaviour. Helen writes:

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

Helen understands full well that Arthur wants to train his son in allegedly ‘manly accomplishments’ (336) so:

...the little fellow came down every evening, in spite of his cross mamma, and learnt to tipple wine like papa, to swear like Mr Hattersley, and to have his way like a *man*, and sent mamma to the devil when she tried to prevent him. (335) (my italics)

The skilful way in which Brontë captures Helen's despair and sense of overwhelming impotence helps the reader to grasp the cruelty and injustice that are consonant with the law of custody, and we are therefore better equipped to understand Helen's plans to run away from Arthur:

But this should not continue; 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...his child's worst enemy...(336)

Brontë stresses that Helen regards it as her sacred duty to remove little Arthur from his father's contaminating influence: 'I could endure it for myself, but for my son it must be borne no longer' (336).

But her first plan of escape is impractical and overly ambitious:

Oh, I would take my precious charge at early dawn, take the coach to M-, flee to the port of -, cross the Atlantic, and seek a quiet, humble home in New England, where I would support myself and him by the labour of my hands. The palette and easel, my darling play-mates once, must be my sober toil-fellows now. (337)

When she revisits this plan, she realises that her skills as an artist require further refining and that New England is 'a strange land' (337), on the other side of the Atlantic Ocean, where she will be 'without friends and without recommendation' (337). She therefore drops this plan, realising that she 'must wait a little' (337) and 'labour hard to improve [her] talent' (337) while accumulating some money. But she is strong and tenacious and refuses 'to relinquish the project altogether, or delay the execution of it to an indefinite period' (338). However the sustained sexual harassment by Walter Hargrave and the arrival of Arthur's new mistress, Alice Myers, who masquerades as little Arthur's governess, prove that it is time for Helen to implement her revised

and more achievable plan to escape to Wildfell Hall far away in Yorkshire. Wildfell Hall, the home of her family, the Lawrences, for generations, the place where she was born, is now largely a ruin but still owned by her brother, Frederick, who lives nearby. Frederick has agreed to make some rooms in Wildfell Hall habitable for Helen, and has sent her some money as a loan. Therefore Helen, Rachel and little Arthur slip out of Grassdale Manor while it is still dark. Helen is a fugitive, a single woman doing what she deems best for her son, but operating outside the law and with virtually no-one to turn to, except for her elderly companion, Rachel.

At this stage of Helen's story, Brontë inserts a crucial sentence, apparently unimportant but in fact resonating with her radical feminist sympathies:

As I bade farewell for ever to that place, the scene of so much guilt and misery, I felt glad that I had not left it before, for now there was no doubt about *the propriety of such a step* – no shadow of remorse for him I left behind: there was nothing to disturb my joy...(373) (my italics)

Because Helen is breaking several laws, Brontë must assure her readers that Helen really has no alternative, and that her behaviour is appropriate. Because she breaks the law of custody by removing little Arthur from his father's authority without his permission, and because Arthur has already refused to let her leave him in a lawful manner, she is technically a criminal who can be arrested and either thrown into jail or, probably worse, forced to return to Arthur. By running away, Helen is denying Arthur his conjugal rights, and, finally, she has worked vigorously and fairly successfully to circumvent the law of coverture. When taken at face value, her deeds suggest that she has no respect for the law of the land, which she is willing to flout for the purposes of self-interest. Brontë is thus asking her readers not only to condone the behaviour of a woman who transgresses the law, but also to admire a criminal, an individual whom she describes as her 'heroine' (4). For Victorians of both sexes who believed that patriarchy was a 'very good doctrine' (53), this was demanding a colossal shift in attitude. But Brontë had expressly stated in the Preface that she wished to tell the truth, 'for truth always conveys its own moral to those who are able to receive it' (3), and it says much for her trust in the innate goodness of humankind that she believed that even conservative Victorians had the capacity to receive the moral that patriarchal oppression was bad and had to be reformed.

So far my chapter has shown how Anne Brontë uses Helen and her marriage to Arthur Huntingdon as the context for a detailed interrogation of the four laws that so profoundly disempowered women, especially married middle class women, in Victorian patriarchy. However Brontë also exploits the potential afforded by this marriage to expand her critique of marriage into a number of further lines of related enquiry. Her investigation of the ideology of separate spheres is of especial relevance. When Helen leaves Arthur and is obliged to earn her own living, she realises that her considerable skills as an artist must now become a money-generating resource. As the wife of a wealthy man, she has regarded her artistic endeavours as an enjoyable hobby, but now they must assume a more serious aspect. Play must be replaced by hard work. In Chapter V, significantly entitled ‘The Studio’, Gilbert and Rose visit Helen for the first time at Wildfell Hall and quickly notice her professional approach towards her painting:

To our surprise, we were ushered into a room where the first object that met the eye was a painter’s easel, with a table beside it covered with rolls of canvass, bottles of oil and varnish, palette, brushes, paints etc. Leaning against the wall were several sketches in various stages of progression, and a few finished paintings – mostly of landscapes and figures. (42)

Helen welcomes her unexpected visitors, but immediately resumes her place at the easel where she is working on a view of Wildfell Hall. Gilbert realises that he and Rose are probably ‘unwelcome intruders’ (42), although Helen denies this. But it is quite apparent that she cannot waste time on trivial chatter:

‘Then you don’t intend to keep the picture?’ asked I...
‘No; I cannot afford to paint for my own amusement.’
‘Mamma sends all her pictures to London,’ said Arthur; ‘and somebody sells them for her there, and sends us the money.’ (43)

Helen must possess considerable artistic talent if her paintings sell readily in London, the cosmopolitan centre of the art world.

Helen in this way is transgressing the ideology of separate spheres because she is working in the public domain and is performing remunerated work, although it is true that someone else does the selling. However Brontë shows that Helen is capable of integrating her domestic duties

as a mother with her professional ability to work as an artist. Domesticity and work are not necessarily mutually incompatible activities. Helen is an excellent mother, as evidenced by her removing her son from the pervasive influence of his father, and by the great care she always takes to put her child's interests first. In no ways does little Arthur suffer because his mother is working: she works at home and is always able to attend to his needs. This 'truth' thus challenges one of the great orthodoxies of Victorian patriarchy, disproving its central premise that a wife cannot successfully combine work inside and outside the home. Brontë develops this notion even further by showing that women who work for money can also enjoy their occupation for its own intrinsic merits. Helen confirms such an attitude when she explains that 'perhaps few people gain their livelihood with so much pleasure in their toil as I do' (80).

Brontë's radical feminist views regarding appropriate models of parenting, especially those of mothering and motherhood, are refracted through the voice of Helen. In Chapter III, 'A Controversy', Helen pays a return visit to the Markhams, and Brontë uses this encounter as the context for a lively, sometimes even 'heated', argument between Helen and Mrs Markham and Gilbert concerning two controversial issues: firstly, that of appropriate modes of education for boys and girls; and secondly, the debate regarding the consumption of alcohol by young boys.

While Mrs Markham (the conventional mother) and Helen Huntingdon (the new rational model of motherhood) arguably both reap some success, their opposing stances and exchanges offer Anne the opportunity to open a dialogue on both mothering and education. (Le Veness, 2011: 349)

It is important to note that both these issues are directly associated with Brontë's feminist agenda and the novel's careful interrogation of Victorian notions of masculinity.

The first disagreement occurs when it becomes obvious that Helen has no intention of following the customary route of sending her son away to school, but will instead educate him herself. Mrs Markham is shocked: '...let me warn you in good time against the error – the fatal error, I may call it – of taking that boy's education upon yourself' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 29). But Helen does not agree: '“I am to send him to school, I suppose, to learn to despise his mother's authority and affection!” said the lady, with a rather bitter smile' (29).

Victorian patriarchy ordained that middle class boys from the landed gentry should be sent away to school to ensure that they became strong and tough and internalised masculine ideologies away from the allegedly overwhelming domestic influence of their mothers. When we consider the extent to which Victorian notions of masculinity were embedded within the mid-nineteenth century patriarchal psyche, we can understand why Mrs Markham becomes so agitated at Helen's unconventional plans for little Arthur: 'Well, but you will treat him like a girl – you'll spoil his spirit, and make a mere Miss Nancy of him...' (29) A 'Miss Nancy' was the local terminology for an effeminate man, and Mrs Markham is horrified that such a fate should await little Arthur, as it allegedly will if his mother educates him herself at home. Gilbert supports his mother, arguing that sending little Arthur away to school is preferable because 'it is better to arm and strengthen your hero, than to disarm and enfeeble the foe' (30).

Helen then develops the conversation by asking Gilbert if he 'would use the same argument with a girl?' (30). The notion of a girl's being sent away to school is anathema to Gilbert, who answers tersely: 'Certainly not' (30). Helen is arguing, on Brontë's behalf, that boys and girls should receive the same education. Brontë wishes to move away from the inequalities of patriarchy, and the notion of equal educational opportunities for both sexes seems the logical consequence of that worldview. Helen neither wishes for her son to be sent away to school at a ridiculously young age, nor for girls 'to be tenderly and delicately nurtured, like a hot-house plant – taught to cling to others for direction and support, and guarded, as much as possible, from the very knowledge of evil' (30). As I have already indicated in Chapter 5, the simile of the 'hot-house plant' is one of the great images in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because it encapsulates the central premise of patriarchy, which is that girls must be treated as fragile beings who lack the agency or capacity to function autonomously and independently. Consequently they must 'cling to others for direction and support', meaning that they must rely on men for guidance and protection. This results in young women who are acquiescent and submissive, and who are culturally conditioned to believe that the male gender is superior and more powerful.

Helen asks Gilbert 'why [he] make[s] this distinction' (30) between boys' and girls' education. Is it perhaps, she asks, because Gilbert considers girls to have 'no virtue' (30) and therefore to be at risk of inappropriate influences when sent away to school? She ruthlessly and systematically dismantles Gilbert's false reasoning:

‘It *must* be, either, that you think she is so essentially so vicious, or so feeble-minded that she *cannot* with-stand temptation, - and though she may be pure and innocent as long as she is kept in ignorance and restraint, yet, being destitute of *real* virtue, to teach her how to sin, is at once to make her a sinner, and the greater her knowledge, the wider her liberty, the deeper will be her depravity...’ (30-31)

Helen shows that patriarchy irrationally equates female purity and innocence with ignorance. By means of Helen’s relentlessly logical stripping away of the layers of Gilbert’s faulty argument, Brontë is exposing patriarchy’s infantilising attitude towards girls, an attitude that argues that girls are inherently weak and feeble and therefore need to be sheltered from the harsh realities of life. She shows that such protection, even if it is sincere and well intended, is patronising and disempowering to women because it assumes that they are lesser beings. Patriarchy, consciously or otherwise, thus manipulates the institution of education so that it becomes the locus for a ‘heated’ contest for power, a contest that seeks to elevate men by prioritising their educational opportunities, and to control women by severely restricting their access to such (equal) opportunities.

Helen and the Markhams also disagree on the propriety of offering alcohol to young children. It was the accepted custom to offer hospitality in the form of cake and wine to guests of all ages and both sexes, but when these are offered to Helen and little Arthur, the little boy shrinks ‘away from the ruby nectar as if in terror and disgust’ (27). Helen explains in an unembarrassed way: ‘He detests the very sight of wine...and the smell of it almost makes him sick...in fact I have done what I could to make him hate [alcohol].’ (27) Mrs Markham is obviously unaware of the history regarding little Arthur and alcohol, and she laughs in bemused astonishment: ‘Well, Mrs Graham...well, you surprise me! I really gave you credit for having more sense – the poor child will be the veriest milksop that ever was sopped! Only think what a man you will make of him if you persist in – ’ (28). Mrs Markham, that great supporter of patriarchy, knows that the patriarchal litmus test of a ‘real’ man is his ability to consume large amounts of alcohol, and she is genuinely concerned that little Arthur will be seen as effeminate and will therefore be marginalised and excluded from male circles of friendship and association. She cannot entertain such a possibility: to deviate from the norm is not a consideration for her.

Kristin A Le Veness provides important insights into Brontë's construction of the mother in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*:

[Brontë's] feminism is best evidenced through her characters, particularly the mother, and her rational feminist approach to mothering. This philosophy links her to an earlier radical feminist tradition, yet it also advanced her modern notions of motherhood. Her radical rendering of the mother – best articulated in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* – challenges existing standards and proposes new possibilities for active mothering and rational motherhood. (Le Veness, 2011: 344)

Le Veness argues that Brontë is working within the radical feminist tradition, a 'reason-based ideology [that] based its foundation on Enlightenment beliefs in the mind's rational capability' (347). Because rational feminists 're-envisioned motherhood as primarily an *intellectually* charged duty...imbued with rationality, agency, self-determination and radicalism' (345), they supported 'an improved and even reconfigured motherhood' (345). Le Veness's perspective is valid because this chapter has shown that Helen's behaviour is the consequence of her strong sense of agency and her insistence on self-determination, an attitude that is first seen when she rejects Mr Boarham's proposal and that later informs her rationally-considered decision to flee Arthur.

Helen considers his father's pernicious influence on her son in strictly rational terms: the consequences are that little Arthur will develop into a debased version of the traditional patriarchal male, who will drink and fornicate his way through life. Such an outcome is unacceptable to her, and she therefore again looks rationally for the best solution. She knows that the law of custody allows Arthur to do as he will with the child, and she therefore makes a rational, logically-based decision that the only thing she can do, the only outcome over which she has any control, is to run away. This is extremely brave because, as Walter points out to her: 'But what can you do in the cold, rough world alone? you, a young and inexperienced woman, delicately nurtured...' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 341). Similarly, because Helen understands in rational terms that the consequence of little Arthur's enjoyment of alcohol will be that he will become an alcoholic like his father and his reprobate friends, she encourages her son to drink

quite as much as his father was accustomed to allow him – as much indeed, as he desired to have, but into every glass [she] surreptitiously introduce[s] a small quantity of tartar-emetic – just enough to produce invariable nausea and depression. (354)

The consequence of such psychological astuteness on Helen's part is that very soon little Arthur becomes 'thoroughly disgusted' (355) with alcohol, an aversion which she wishes 'to be so deeply grounded in his nature that nothing in after life may be able to overcome it' (355). She thinks carefully about how to break her son 'of those evil habits his father had taught him to acquire' (354), an approach that is indicative of the '*intellectually* charged' (Le Veness, 2011: 345) reconfiguration of motherhood to which Le Veness refers.

Le Veness also briefly explores Brontë's interest in the single mother, the single parent who has been obliged to raise her children on her own, and shows that Brontë 'particularly emphasizes the dangers of spoiling sons' (349). Thus she suggests that Brontë's focus lies on the relationship between the single mother and her son/s. Helen is herself deeply aware of the pitfalls associated with spoiled children: '...I never knew till now how strong are a parent's temptations to spoil an only child' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 232), while Aunt Maxwell warns Helen: '...if you spoil [little Arthur] to gratify your present feeling, it will be too late to repent it when your heart is broken' (253). This theme of the spoiling of children is, of course, also explored in *Agnes Grey* as I have indicated in Chapter 4.

This chapter has shown that Brontë's feminist views regarding the institutions of marriage, parenting, motherhood and education in a patriarchal society, are clearly articulated in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Conveyed in the context of Helen's marriage to Arthur, such views, while controversial to more conventional readers, are unambiguously presented and therefore unmistakable. However, I would now like to turn to a consideration of three other aspects of Helen's marriage about which there is less unanimity: firstly, her reasons for returning to nurse Arthur; secondly, possible factors that may mitigate Arthur's level of culpability in the marriage; and thirdly, her relationship with Walter Hargrave. Each of these issues can legitimately support a plurality of dissenting points of view. These are the controversies that lead to the most robust and 'heated' arguments whenever, in my experience, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is studied in any formal academic environment. Such debates are mentioned by Elizabeth Langland when she refers to the embedded narratives that 'encourage and enable the reader's own discernment,

interpretation, and reeducation [sic]' (Langland, 1989: 147). The ways in which the novel makes divergent interpretations possible thus allows Brontë's readers to consider the issues independently before arriving at their own autonomous views.

The 'truth' of exactly why Helen returns to nurse Arthur is particularly hard to ascertain. There are three valid possibilities: firstly, that she goes back for reasons of revenge, whereby she gloats over the pathetic figure of Arthur, disempowered, vulnerable, and increasingly dependent on the wife whom he treated so unjustly; secondly, that she takes advantage of his weakness and desire to see his son once more, to extract a signed contract from him that gives her legal control over little Arthur and also allows her to leave Arthur whenever she wishes; and thirdly, that Helen's belief in the doctrine of universal salvation prompts her to try to save the reprobate Arthur from going to hell. All three possibilities are introduced in Helen's first letter, and then developed in subsequent letters. But Brontë deliberately ensures that Helen's diary concludes several months before Arthur's hunting accident, and therefore there can obviously be no discussion in the diary of her possible motives for returning. Brontë's adroit use of chronology ensures that we will never know the 'truth'. Essentially we must ask if Helen returns for her own benefit, or for that of Arthur, or for both.

Helen's letters constitute another significant form of first person female narrative embedded within the conventional male narrative framework of Gilbert's letter to J. Halford. Brontë skilfully manipulates the various types of first person female narrative in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* so that they achieve different outcomes. Thus the diary, the most intimate and confessional mode of life writing, is reserved exclusively for Helen's marriage because, as we have shown, this is the subversive heart of the novel, the locus for Brontë to articulate her most astringent criticism of patriarchal oppression within marriage. The letters, written from Grassdale Manor where Helen is nursing Arthur, are addressed to her brother Frederick in Yorkshire. The letters have an audience, a very limited but nevertheless public function; the diary is private because it is written for Helen's eyes only. Some readers query the veracity of the content of the letters because Helen presumably shapes and constructs her narrative for her reader, Frederick. But there is only one reader because Helen never intends Frederick to show her letters to Gilbert. Frederick and Helen have a deep affection for each other, and Frederick has been instrumental in helping Helen make a successful escape from Arthur. Therefore it is unlikely that Helen has embroidered or distorted the 'truth' of events at Grassdale.

In Brontë's quest for verisimilitude and her desire that her readers accept the 'truth' of the material in the letters, she shows that Frederick allows Gilbert to keep Helen's letters. Therefore Gilbert can quote verbatim from these letters in his own letter to Halford, although later he ostensibly quotes extracts from memory, which strains credibility even further. His promise to provide 'a full and faithful account' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 8) is credible because he mentions that he has 'been looking over certain musty old letters' (8) that he has retained, a claim supported by his confirmation that he kept Helen's first letter (415), for 'otherwise, Halford, you could never have become so thoroughly acquainted with its contents' (415). Furthermore, readers often miss the fact that Gilbert himself keeps a regular diary in which are entered 'the remarkable events of the day' (423). He tells Halford that when Frederick allowed him to read Helen's other letters, 'I devoured those precious letters with my eyes, and never let them go till their contents were stamped upon my mind; and when I got home, the most important passages were entered in my diary...' (423).

Helen returns to nurse Arthur at Grassdale after Frederick tells her that Arthur has had a fall from his horse when out hunting, and that Miss Myers, his mistress, 'had left him some time ago' (406). It is not clear how Frederick acquires this information. In her first letter, written from Grassdale, Helen states: 'I found the house in sad confusion: Mrs Greaves, Benson, every decent servant had left, and those that were come to supply their places were a negligent, disorderly lot, to say no worse...' (407). Matters have obviously worsened at Grassdale since Helen fled. Not only have the servants of many years abandoned him, but so has Miss Myers. His reprobate friends have all deserted him. Arthur has been reduced to a querulous wreck of what he had been previously in his days of glory and power. Helen informs Frederick that Arthur's immediate injuries from the accident would not normally be worrying, but, because he is not 'a man of temperate habits' (407), the injuries could have potentially serious consequences. Since he has only 'a grim, hard old woman' (407) to nurse him, he needs a skilled, decent individual such as Helen to assume responsibility for his medical care.

Helen therefore occupies a very powerful position. He is so weak that she can control his behaviour very easily, and she also appears in a very favourable light to the public. The fact that she had been willing to break the law by running away from Arthur with their son had implied that she was bitterly unhappy with her life at Grassdale. But now the situation is reversed, with the abused wife voluntarily returning out of 'her own sense of duty' (406), as Frederick explains,

to nurse her sick husband. Helen is now behaving exactly as a good wife in a patriarchal system should: she is loyal, responsible, putting his needs first, and apparently forgiving him for his past deeds. Whether or not she deliberately intends the public to place this construction on her behaviour is irrelevant; what is extremely relevant is that the public perception of Helen's return must now be one of admiration because she has seemingly seen the error of her ways, has remembered her wedding vows, and is doing what she can to rectify her mistakes of the past. It is true, however, that the novel remains silent as to where or how such a public perception is conveyed.

But, from the outset, Arthur is suspicious of Helen's true intentions. Although in their very first dialogue, she assures him that she has come 'to offer [him] that comfort and assistance [his] situation require[s]' (409), he does not trust her, saying: 'Oh! I see...it's an act of Christian charity, whereby you hope to gain a higher seat in Heaven for yourself, and scoop a deeper pit in hell for me' (409). Until the last few hours of his life, and ironically as he comes to need her more and more, Arthur places an unfavourable, cynical construction on her returning to Grassdale, sneering at her alleged 'Christian magnanimity' (412), and sarcastically asking her: 'This is delightful, isn't it?...you never hoped for such a glorious opportunity' (412). His suspicion that she has returned for reasons of revenge is encapsulated in the following lines:

'Oh, this is sweet revenge!' cried he, when I had been doing all I could to make him comfortable and to remedy the carelessness of his nurse. 'And you can enjoy it with such a quiet conscience too, because it's all in the way of duty.'

'It is well for me that I *am* doing my duty,' said I, with a bitterness I could not repress, 'for it is the only comfort I have, and the satisfaction of my own conscience, it seems, is the only reward I need look for!' (412-3)

Here Helen carefully portrays herself as the stereotypical wife, dutiful, caring, self-sacrificing. It is certainly psychologically plausible that, as Arthur suggests, his illness does provide her with an unexpectedly 'glorious opportunity' (412) to adopt the false persona of the noble martyr who returns to her brute of a husband, but who, under this guise, actually revels in his disempowerment and enjoys 'sweet revenge' (412) over him. For readers who have formed a deep attachment for Helen, and who may consequently entertain a strong antipathy for Arthur, this reading of her project is very attractive and seems to align itself quite logically with Brontë's feminist

sympathies. Such readers will receive vicarious pleasure from the perception that Helen is at last able to reverse the situation on Arthur, while simultaneously benefiting from the very favourable public perception of her behaviour. This reading of her actions sees her as returning exclusively for her own advantage.

However, it is also very possible that Helen decides to return to Arthur because she identifies the potential that Arthur's illness affords her to persuade him to sign a legal document that will rid of her current status as a criminal, and will give her complete (legal) autonomy concerning the future welfare of herself and her child. This reading of her project is legitimate in light of Brontë's implicit abhorrence of the patriarchal laws that subjugate married women so unfairly. The validity of such an interpretation is strengthened when we realise that Helen wastes no time and ensures that she extracts such a document from Arthur in her very first morning back at Grassdale. She realises that he has not seen his son for thirteen months, and so she uses his natural eagerness to see little Arthur as a powerful bargaining tool to force him to sign the document before she allows him to see the child. She wields her power in an extremely successful way, so that the laws of custody and conjugal rights and the law that forbids a wife from leaving her husband without his permission, are all waived by Arthur. This is a supreme triumph for Helen. When Arthur asks to see little Arthur, Helen responds without hesitation: '...you will not see him till you have promised to leave him entirely under my care and protection, and to let me take him away whenever and wherever I please...' (410). She is relentless, telling Arthur: 'But I cannot trust your oaths and promises: I must have a written agreement, and you must sign it in presence of a witness...' (410).

Helen's behaviour is calculating and deliberate, and suggests that she has probably anticipated such a possibility and is well prepared to exploit such a favourable opportunity. Her letter explains to Frederick: 'But I was determined my son's interest should not be forgotten; and having clearly written out the promise I wished Mr Huntingdon to give upon a slip of paper, I deliberately read it over to him, and made him sign it in the presence of Rachel' (410). The reversed positions of power and powerlessness are beautifully portrayed in this simple description. Diction such as 'determined', 'clearly', 'deliberately' and 'made him sign it', is indicative of Helen's complete authority over Arthur. This situation could also be read as another context of her experiencing 'sweet revenge' (412) over Arthur. The final irony is that the document that transfers so much power from man to woman, from husband to wife, is witnessed by another woman,

Rachel, a working class woman to whom Arthur had once insultingly referred as ‘that old bitch’ (350). Arthur offers a number of unconvincing reasons as to why he cannot sign the document: ‘he plead[s] inability to hold the pen’, ‘he [cannot] see to write’, and ‘he ha[s] not the power to form the letters’ (410). But Helen is ‘inexorable’ (410), and so he eventually signs the document and is permitted to see little Arthur. Helen and her son are now free of any future control by Arthur, with the exception of the law of coverture. This is a remarkable achievement on her part.

However, while it is tempting to argue that Helen goes back to Arthur for her own benefit, be this a desire for revenge, or the intention of achieving legal freedom for herself and her son, her Christian sympathies cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is highly likely that her return is motivated at least in part by her altruistic desire to save Arthur from ‘howling in hell-fire’ (425). If Helen’s strong Christian beliefs are recalled, and if we also understand Brontë’s need to rehabilitate her in the eyes of her readers, it is very possible that she is sincere in her protestations that she wishes to ‘benefit [Arthur’s] soul as well as [his] body, and awaken some contrition’ (409) in him. Her belief in the doctrine of universal salvation persuades her that even a reprobate such as Arthur can be forgiven by God and accepted into Heaven. When Arthur asks her if his illness could have ‘a fatal termination’ (413), she immediately replies: ‘If a consciousness of the uncertainty of life can dispose you to serious and useful thoughts, I would not deprive you of the benefit of such reflections, whether you do eventually recover or not’ (414).

Arthur is clearly terrified of going to hell, but Helen is infuriated by his refusal to do anything himself to avoid such a possibility. The solution is simple: he must confess his sins to God and atone for his previous misdeeds. She asks him exasperatedly: ‘Do you prefer sinking, without an effort, into the state of torment you picture to yourself?’ (425). She encourages him: ‘...there is joy and glory after, if you will but try to reach it!’ (429) Ultimately, he is responsible either for his salvation or for his downfall. Helen tells him: ‘I do pray for you – every hour and every minute, Arthur; but you must pray for yourself’ (431). But Arthur is ambivalent about the existence of God and the concept of hell. At one moment he explains: ‘...oh, if I *could* believe there was nothing after!’ (429), before asking: ‘What *is* God? – I cannot see Him or hear Him. – God is only an idea’ (429) because the notion of Hell is ‘all a fable’ (425). Helen’s letters thus document her strenuous but unsuccessful attempts to persuade Arthur to pray. When he dies, she tries to believe that he has been saved, but she is unsure:

How could I endure to think that that poor trembling soul was hurried away to everlasting torment?...but thank God I have hope – not only from a vague dependence on the possibility that penitence and pardon might have reached him at the last, but from the blessed confidence that...God, who hateth nothing that He hath made, *will* bless it in the end! (431)

Helen's hopes reflect her belief in the doctrine of universal salvation, which I have already discussed in some detail in Chapter 3. It is important that we are familiar with Brontë's own belief in this doctrine because it is otherwise impossible to understand Helen and her actions.

Brontë thus requires her readers to participate in the construction of the 'truth' contingent on the various possibilities for Helen's return to Arthur. There is textual evidence to support all the readings discussed in this chapter. Thus readings of revenge, of legal sanction, or of Christian notions of forgiveness and possible redemption for Arthur, are all legitimate. The Christian reading is probably more likely, if more conservative and unsatisfactory for readers determined to receive vicarious pleasure from Arthur's suffering. Although Helen's determination to gain custody of little Arthur from his father, and her desire for contrition in Arthur, are clearly evident, she is ultimately silent about her intended project, and therefore we shall never know the truth.

A second ambiguous situation in the novel arises when we consider the extent to which Arthur is responsible for the failure of his marriage. There is a considerable body of textual evidence that mitigates Arthur's culpability. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is an unabashedly polemical text, and the deliberate manner in which Arthur is prevented from narrating his side of the story is a conspicuous narrative strategy of Brontë's. But there is also an intriguing subtext that offers glimpses of various possibilities that may perhaps soften our severe stance towards Arthur. One legitimate argument is that his profligacy is the consequence of his difficult childhood because he is the confused product of parents who adopted antithetical models of parenting. Helen believes that Arthur would have been much better

...if he had not, from the beginning, had a bad, selfish, miserly father, who to gratify his own sordid passions, restricted him in the most innocent enjoyments of childhood and youth, and so disgusted him with every kind of restraint; - and a foolish mother who indulged him to the top of his bent, deceiving her husband for him, and doing her utmost to

encourage those germs of folly and vice it was her duty to suppress...(165-6)

Arthur's father was a miser, but his mother spoiled him recklessly. Helen sees this as 'the ruin' (214) of Arthur, and attributes his behaviour 'to the charge of his harsh yet careless father and his madly indulgent mother' (214). And Arthur himself acknowledges that his immoderate ways with money are because his father 'saw no pleasure in life but to amass riches' so that it was 'no wonder that his son should make it his chief delight to spend them' (163). This situation reflects Brontë's concern with good and bad parenting, as seen also in *Agnes Grey*.

We may also feel a certain sympathy for Arthur because, while his aberrant behaviour before and during his marriage gets worse, Helen also changes quite radically. Arthur is no hypocrite, and his deplorable conduct as a confirmed rake and reprobate is clearly evident from the outset. He consumes too much alcohol, has an established reputation as a philanderer who has enjoyed liaisons with married women, and shows no respect for women. However, Helen becomes sour and bitter, admittedly as the consequence of Arthur's misdeeds. She is aware of the change in her personality, admitting to herself that 'I am no longer the happy, lively girl I used to be' (270). When she first meets Arthur, she is a gay, merry young woman of strong will, and her freshness and mischievous spirit appeal strongly to him. But her unhappy marriage causes her to become sharp-tongued and morose, so that Ralph Hattersley makes the revealing comment to Helen that Arthur is 'afraid of you, to be sure – that is, he's always on his best behaviour in your presence' (280). Brontë points to the dangers of incompatibility in marriage. Helen's strong Christian principles collide with Arthur's lack of religious faith, and her lectures on religion must be irksome. Her piety and rather humourless approach to religion thus constitute a form of nagging that Arthur resents. Therefore, while it is Brontë's project to blame Arthur very largely for Helen's unhappiness, it is nevertheless true that their marriage provides a framework for a number of alternative perspectives that undoubtedly help to soften our unreserved criticism of Arthur. It would have been fascinating had he been allowed to speak directly to the reader, but his deliberate disempowerment by Brontë prevents such an intriguing possibility.

The final aspect of Helen's marriage that occasionally leads to dissent among readers is her relationship with Walter Hargrave, Arthur's friend who lives at The Grove, the adjacent estate to Grassdale Manor. My reading of Walter is that he is a sexual predator who deliberately preys on

Helen in an opportunistic way when she is at her most vulnerable during Arthur's protracted absences. I believe that Brontë uses Walter to highlight the powerlessness of women such as Helen who have no-one to turn to when they are the victims of what is now known as sexual harassment. However some readers feel that Walter genuinely loves Helen. It is true that Helen finds him very congenial. He is intelligent and cultured and a good conversationalist, all attributes which Arthur lacks. Walter is sensitive to Helen's feelings when Arthur is behaving especially wildly, and he helps her by preventing Arthur from drinking to excess. Helen thus often feels 'not a little indebted' (249) to Walter. And when he learns that Arthur is committing adultery with Annabella, he tries extremely hard to tell Helen, but is repeatedly rebuffed because she fears that he is going to make more protestations of passionate love to her. He asks Helen to meet him at her convenience, assuring her that it is 'from no selfish motive that I ask it' (282) because 'I feel it my duty to disclose it to you' (282). Nevertheless, these glimpses of a more positive, genuine side to him cannot outweigh the relentless campaign that he wages to persuade her to become his lover. When he challenges Helen to a game of chess, she understands that the game has 'a double meaning' (288) and that if she loses, this will encourage 'his dream of future conquest' (288). The significance of Walter's ominous words: 'We shall have a long game, and you will give me some trouble; but I can be as patient as you, and, in the end, I shall certainly win' (288) is not lost on her.

However, Brontë also uses Walter to celebrate Helen's bravery and strength in resisting his campaign of seduction. On one occasion, he is so aroused that Helen 'snatch[es] up [her] palette-knife and [holds] it against him' (342-3). He accuses her of being 'the most cold-hearted, unnatural, ungrateful woman' (343) he has ever met. Her clear, firm response reflects both her appreciation of and disgust for him:

'No, Mr Hargrave, I am not [ungrateful]. For all the good you ever did me, or ever wished to do, I most sincerely thank you: for all the evil you have done me, and all you would have done, I pray God to pardon you, and make you of a better mind.' (343)

Therefore, while some readers prefer to see Walter in romantic terms, I feel that the overwhelming evidence points to Brontë's strong condemnation of Walter's sustained attempts

to manipulate Helen into committing adultery. The example of Walter Hargrave thus reveals a more subtle and complex instance of the abuse of women by men.

So far this chapter has considered the Huntingdon marriage from many perspectives, showing how Helen's experiences are located at the heart of Brontë's feminist critique and provide an appropriate framework for her to explore a richly diverse cluster of different experiences that affect women, especially married middle-class women, in a patriarchal society. My chapter has supported Langland's claim that *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflects Brontë's 'deepening grasp of the ways in which form and subject interpenetrate' (Langland, 1989: 148). To this end, the chapter has discussed Brontë's use of narrative techniques such as the epistolary novel, the Preface to the second edition, male and female first person narrative voices, and different forms of first person female narrative.

To conclude my assessment of Helen's marriage to Arthur Huntingdon, I would like to investigate Brontë's creative use of the female Gothic genre of writing to highlight both Helen's bravery and her desperation when she escapes. My investigation draws on the findings of Kate Ferguson Ellis's *The Contested Castle: Gothic Novels and the Subversion of Domestic Ideology*, and Eugenia DeLamotte's *Perils of the Night: a Feminist Study of Nineteenth-Century Gothic*. Ellis shows how a

typological conception of 'domestic happiness' emerged toward the end of the eighteenth century, as the middle-class home, distanced in ideology and increasingly in fact from the place where money was made, became a 'separate sphere' from the 'fallen' world of work...Alongside this preoccupation with the ideal home ... the Gothic began to make its appearance...Focusing on crumbling castles as sites of terror, and on homeless protagonists who wander the face of the earth, the Gothic, too, is preoccupied with the home. But it is the failed home that appears on its pages, the place from which some (usually 'fallen' men) are locked out, and others (usually 'innocent' women) are locked in. (Ellis, 1989: ix)

Ellis thus suggests that in Gothic fiction the image of the home is antithetical to the heavily idealised and sentimentalised Victorian portrayal of the home as sanctuary and refuge. Homes in Gothic fiction are instead the site of female incarceration and often villainous male domination.

Brontë draws on such Gothic literary traditions to create her own unique representation. In *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Grassdale Manor is the site of female suffering, humiliation and

intense pain, and of male debauchery, lechery and infidelity. Arthur enacts the nineteenth-century equivalent, yet recast and humanized, to the cruel villain of the classical Gothic novel, treating Helen and little Arthur so despicably that she feels compelled to flee the marital home with her son. Despite his strenuous attempts to prevent her from leaving him, she escapes and goes into voluntary exile as she wanders far from home. But, in a startling reversal of the Gothic convention, she finds refuge in a crumbling old ruin, Wildfell Hall, her childhood home. Thus Wildfell Hall, far from being the locus of tyranny and imprisonment for a helpless female, shelters Helen and becomes her sanctuary.

Chapter XLIV, 'The Retreat', is an important chapter because it best reflects Brontë's reconfiguration of traditional Gothic fiction. The very title of 'retreat' suggests the withdrawal from a battle zone, from a war zone, a site of sustained conflict. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is informed throughout its many pages by Brontë's playing with notions of light and dark, notions that are emblematic of good and evil, happiness and suffering. Here she uses such notions with great skill to highlight Helen's unhappiness at Grassdale Manor and her regained confidence and happiness at Wildfell Hall. As she leaves the house, Benson, the faithful butler, 'stood ready with a light to open the door and fasten it after us' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 373). Once out in the park, Helen looks back at Grassdale: 'All was dark and still; no light glimmered in the windows' (373). For her, Grassdale is 'the scene of so much guilt and misery' (373), of Arthur's guilt and her misery. But, once they are safely embarked on their long journey to Wildfell Hall, Brontë introduces much light imagery to signal the more optimistic mood. '...the round, red sun arose to welcome our deliverance' (373), for 'Oh, what a delight it was to be thus seated aloft, rumbling along the broad, sunshiny road,...surrounded by an unknown country all smiling...in the yellow lustre of those early beams' (374). Helen is leaving Grassdale, 'a prison and despair behind' (374) her, and 'liberty and hope' (374) await her at Wildfell.

Grassdale is thus portrayed as grim, saturnine, and evil. This conforms to traditional Gothic conventions. When the little party arrives at Wildfell Hall, it is late at night, but now the darkness is invested with optimism. As the cart climbs up the 'terribly steep and stony lane' (374), Arthur lies 'asleep in Rachel's arms' (374) and Brontë achieves a skilful connection of past and present, a cyclical sense of continuity, by means of Rachel's comment that 'she remembered well: she had often walked there with [Helen] in her arms' (374). Again, in keeping with Gothic tradition, Wildfell Hall resembles a 'grim, dark pile' (375), a 'ruinous mass' (375).

Helen wonders: ‘Was it all blackness and desolation?’ (375). But ‘No; one faint red glimmer cheered us from a window’ (375), and the old servant soon ‘procured [them] a light, [and] roused the fire to a cheerful blaze’ (375). When she awakes the next morning, with her son ‘safely clasped in [her] arms, and many leagues away from his unworthy father!’ (376), it is significant that ‘[b]road daylight illumined the apartment, for the sun was high in heaven...’ (376).

As suggested earlier, Brontë thus reverses Gothic traditions because Wildfell Hall, despite its ‘gloomy’ (375) and ‘stern-looking’ (375) features, offers Helen respite and security. She feels ‘an exhilarating sense of hope and freedom’ (376), so that ‘indefinite dreams of the far past and bright anticipations of the future seemed to greet [her] at every turn’ (376). This subverts the Gothic image of the ruined castle that imprisons powerless women. However, the physical description of Wildfell conforms to Gothic conventions; it is what occurs inside Wildfell that challenges Gothic norms. Very early in the novel, in Chapter II, Brontë deliberately inserts a carefully detailed description of the old building. Wildfell stands on ‘the wildest and the loftiest eminence’ (19) in the neighbourhood, the ‘hedges, as well as the trees, become scanty and stunted’ (19), and the fields are ‘rough and stony’ (19), the soil ‘thin and poor’ (19). Wildfell is old, dating back to the Elizabethan era, ‘built of dark grey stone...cold and gloomy to inhabit, with its thick stone mullions and little latticed panes, its time-eaten air-holes, and its too lonely, too unsheltered situation’ (19). A profoundly elegiac air pervades this ‘stern and gloomy’ (19) building, once a family home resonant with childish love and laughter. The garden is ‘untilled and untrimmed, abandoned to the weeds and the grass, to the frost and the wind, the rain and the drought’ (20). The consequence is that the vegetation has ‘sprouted into such fantastic shapes’ (20) that the plants possess ‘a goblinish appearance, that harmonized well with the ghostly legends and dark traditions...respecting the haunted Hall and its departed occupants’ (20).

Wildfell Hall therefore seems to be the archetypal Gothic ruin, abandoned, dark and gloomy, but Helen goes to extreme lengths to return there. Brontë thereby rewrites Gothic fiction, drawing on its conventions but offering her own innovative configuration of them. This reconfiguration is part of the recasting of gender roles and identities.

Eugenia DeLamotte’s study offers another useful perspective regarding the Gothic genre, showing that Gothic fiction is informed by a reciprocal structure in which the suffering and angst of individual protagonists shape and are shaped by problems and social issues in the broader community. DeLamotte argues that the Gothic involves an integration of the suffering of the

individual and the wider society. The individual does not exist or function in isolation, but rather in the context of the community at large, so that the plight of individuals and larger social groupings is intertwined because ‘...the Gothic vision has from the beginning been focused steadily on social relations and social institutions’ (DeLamotte, 1990: vii). This means that ‘its simultaneous focus on the most private demons of the psyche can never be separated from this persistent preoccupation with the social realities from which those demons always, in some measure, take their shape’ (vii). DeLamotte continues by saying that

Charlotte Brontë...of all nineteenth-century exploiters of the Gothic tradition saw most clearly, and portrayed most brilliantly, what the Gothic had always known: the ways the perils of the soul in its darkest night reflect, in magnified and revealing forms, the quotidian realities of life in the daylit world of money, work, and social rank. (vii)

But DeLamotte’s findings can also be applied successfully to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because Anne Brontë, too, exploits the possibilities of the Gothic to show the shared experience of the problems affecting Helen and Victorian patriarchy. DeLamotte’s reasoning, when applied to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, would explain that Helen’s personal misery as an unhappy wife is one specific example of the abuse affecting many Victorian wives, and precisely the sort of social and legal injustice that Brontë sought to address with the reform of the marriage laws. Helen is emblematic of the subjugation and marginalisation of all women in patriarchy. Similarly, the villainous behaviour of Arthur and his reprobate friends reflects a more general mode of male behaviour in Victorian society.

However, any discussion of the novel’s investigation of marriage must also look at Helen’s second, successful marriage to Gilbert Markham. Significantly, much contemporary Brontë scholarship is focusing on this marriage, and in particular on Gilbert himself, a character invested with much importance by Brontë. But I believe that Brontë’s criticism falls essentially on Arthur, not Gilbert. Despite my suggestions regarding his unhappy childhood and his incompatibility with Helen, it is definitely Arthur who is Brontë’s example of an unreformed villain, a patriarchal male of the worst kind who cannot or will not change. Gilbert, however, who initially believes that patriarchy is a ‘very convenient doctrine’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 53), does change, so that his role in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is to show how a conservative Victorian male can become

enlightened and emancipated. Helen is the catalyst for this change. However, Gilbert's new liberal worldview can only be truly appreciated if we understand his earlier conventional relationships with Eliza, his mother, Mrs Markham, and his sister, Rose.

Gilbert is a popular young yeoman farmer in Linden-car, but he is bored because farming is a 'quiet occupation' (9) and 'ambition urged me to higher aims' (8). The text therefore hints from the outset of Chapter 1 that Gilbert is a likely candidate for change: he has the capacity and inclination for this, and he rejects his father's conservative advice that change is 'but another word for destruction' (9), looking instead for a scheme 'for bettering either [his] own condition, or that of [his] fellow mortals' (9). But this progressive attitude does not extend to his patriarchal treatment of women. Gilbert acknowledges that he is 'a little bit spoiled by [his] mother and sister, and some other ladies of [his] acquaintance' (32), and he is accustomed to exerting an unconscious authority over them. He expects to be adored, respected, and obeyed. Patriarchal culture has instilled such arrogant values in him, but he is completely unaware that they are inappropriate. In terms of patriarchy, such gender-based values are normal and quite acceptable.

Gilbert fancies that he is in love with Eliza Millward, the second daughter of the local vicar, the Reverend Michael Millward. Gilbert infantilises and patronises Eliza, describing her in diminutive terms such as 'a very engaging little creature' (16) and 'a pretty, playful kitten' (16). He enjoys her reverential attitude towards him and her way of defining herself in terms of the male gaze. Gilbert's relationship with Eliza is thus typically patriarchal because they both acknowledge his power and superiority over her. Brontë deplores such a worldview, in part because neither Gilbert nor Eliza realises that in terms of gender equality, it is wrong. They have internalised patriarchal attitudes, and Eliza is blind to the idea that she is collaborating with her own oppression as a woman. Brontë reserves her most damning criticism for Eliza because, if young women such as Eliza cannot see that patriarchy disempowers them and thus continue to collaborate with it, 'the errors and abuses of society' (3) can never be reformed. Such reformation depends on young people's changing their attitudes, and while the novel shows that Gilbert, Ralph and Millicent do change, it deplores Eliza's lack of awareness that social change is an imperative. Eliza is Brontë's specimen of a stereotypical woman who is completely contented with her subservient place in the world. She is ostensibly passive, docile and traditional, yet engages in malicious (and often inaccurate) gossip. The first description of her significantly portrays her in a conventional domestic environment: 'I found her, as usual, busy with some

piece of soft embroidery' (23). The 'soft' embroidery symbolises Eliza's acquiescent, unthinking approach to life. Brontë therefore uses Eliza as a foil or contrast to Helen, whose autonomous and unconventional personality is antithetical to Eliza's limitations and superficiality.

There is, however, another way of looking at Eliza. This interpretation argues that, in one specific and limited context, Eliza is in fact a very strong individual in the Linden-car community, a woman who identifies a space within her subservient position in patriarchy to become powerful and influential. This power is evil because it involves the creation and dissemination of lies and rumours about Helen's alleged liaison with Frederick Lawrence. These 'calumnies of malicious tongues' (95) set the Linden-car world astir with such dire consequences that Eliza succeeds in her principal aim of alienating Gilbert from Helen. But she also causes angry scenes between the Reverend Millward and Helen, and between Gilbert and his mother and sister, and ensures that at Mrs Markham's tea party 'the vile slander had...been circulated throughout the company, in the very presence of the victim' (83). However, Eliza's power and revenge are temporary and ultimately fail: Gilbert and Helen marry, Helen's good name is restored, and Brontë punishes Eliza by having her marry 'a wealthy tradesman' (420), a stupid man without much personal merit. In terms of Victorian notions of class, respectability and gentility, it was humiliating for the daughter of a man of the cloth to marry a man in trade, and suggests that this man is the only husband that the shrewish Eliza could attract. On the other hand, a man of trade is appropriate enough for Georgiana Reed in *Jane Eyre*.

Gilbert's masculine complacency is, however, perhaps best reflected in the celebrated incident of the family tea, a simple occasion that is invested with profound symbolic importance by Brontë. It is on this occasion that Mrs Markham pronounces that patriarchy is a 'very good doctrine' (53), an ideology that, as we have seen, Brontë refutes vigorously in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Mrs Markham always insists that her three children arrive punctually for the daily ritual of afternoon tea, but one day Gilbert is late. Mrs Markham and Rose have 'kindly kept the tea-pot and muffin warm upon the hobs' (53), so the tea is still hot. Mrs Markham also 'readily admit[s] [Gilbert's] excuses' (53), before instructing Rose to make a new pot of tea for him. The family rules have been broken by Gilbert, but he is forgiven and receives favoured treatment because he is a man and Mrs Markham believes that her male children must come first in the family hierarchy. Rose, who has not transgressed the family rules, obeys her mother, but 'with great commotion, and certain remarkable comments' (53). As Sally Shuttleworth has shown:

‘[l]anguage and writing [a]re the only weapons open to women socially to express their dissent’ (1996: 214). Rose’s sense of justice is grievously offended, and some of Brontë’s most cherished feminist views are uttered by her in this memorable scene. Rose explains:

‘Well! – if it had been *me* now, I should have had no tea at all...but *you* – we can’t do too much for you. – It’s always so – if there’s anything particularly nice at table, Mamma winks and nods at me, to abstain from it, and if I don’t...she whispers, “Don’t eat so much of that, Rose, Gilbert will like it for his supper”...in the kitchen – “Make that pie a large one, Rose, I dare say the boys’ll be hungry; - and don’t put so much pepper in, they’ll not like it...” (53)

She complains bitterly: ‘*I’m* nothing at all’ (53) and ‘I’m told I ought not to think of myself’ (53) because Mrs Markham’s instructions are that

‘in all household matters, we have only two things to consider, first, what’s proper to be done, and secondly, what’s most agreeable to the gentlemen of the house – any thing will do for the ladies’. (53)

The patriarchal marginalisation of women is captured extremely accurately in Rose’s angry remarks, an anger that is hardly pacified when Gilbert smugly agrees that patriarchy is a ‘very convenient doctrine, for [men] at all events’ (53). In common with Eliza, Mrs Markham is criticised for her unswerving support for patriarchy. But Brontë’s criticism of Mrs Markham is less astringent and milder than her much more acerbic condemnation of Eliza. This is presumably because Brontë admires Mrs Markham’s role as a single parent, a woman of a different generation who has raised three fine children. Mrs Markham is older than Eliza, she is set in her ways, and a reformed society does not depend on her rehabilitation. The novel celebrates Rose’s sturdy rejection of patriarchal values, and argues optimistically that society can be reformed if more individuals such as Rose can identify the ‘snares and pitfalls’ (4) of patriarchy.

Gilbert starts to change and shed his arrogant attitude towards women when he meets Helen, who, as he recalls at the end of the novel, is ‘the lady whose superior qualities first opened his eyes to the folly of his boyish attachment’ (420) for Eliza. From the outset, Helen’s

unconventional strength of character, her dignity and composure both fascinate and threaten Gilbert. Despite Helen's vulnerable position as a widow, living alone in a strange community, she demonstrates her independence and a refusal to define herself according to the male gaze. These qualities initially alienate and disturb Gilbert, who is accustomed to Eliza's sycophantic adoration. When he first sees her in church, and their eyes meet, Helen turns away 'with a momentary, indefinable expression of quiet scorn, that was inexpressibly provoking' (15) to Gilbert. Helen clearly has a healthy self-image that does not require validation by male affirmation. Similarly, when Gilbert rescues little Arthur from his minor accident in the tree at Wildfell Hall, Helen adopts a 'proud, chilly look' (22), 'a look of repellent scorn' (22), 'and without another word or glance...with[draws] with her child into the garden' (22). In church, Arthur is immediately struck by her poise, strength and intelligence. He beholds 'a tall, lady-like figure' (14) whose 'forehead [is] lofty and intellectual' (15). Brontë cleverly conveys Helen's autonomy in the seemingly trivial example of her hair style: 'Her hair was raven black, and disposed in long glossy ringlets, a style of coiffure, rather unusual in those days, but always graceful and becoming...' (15). Her hair is 'raven black', suggesting her power and strength, and is arranged in a feminine but unorthodox manner, reflecting her refusal to adhere to social custom in an unthinking and conformist way. Her eyes are intelligent and expressive and 'full of soul' (61). And when she comes to tea and vigorously promotes her controversial ideas regarding the education of boys and girls, and the consumption of alcohol by small children, Gilbert is offended by the robust way that she challenges his conservative patriarchal ideas.

Nevertheless, without either Helen or Gilbert realising this, her unorthodox behaviour starts to teach him that not all women are supine, superficial and passive creatures that enjoy being patronised by superior men. Rather, women can be stimulating companions, individuals with whom a man can conduct an intelligent and rational conversation on terms of equality. This is a strikingly innovative, but liberating, idea for Gilbert, and in this way his rehabilitation commences. He quickly grows bored with Eliza's childish behaviour: 'Eliza's playful nonsense ceased to amuse me – nay, grew wearisome to my soul, and I grew weary of amusing her' (62). He recalls one encounter with Eliza: 'We chatted together a long time; but I found her rather frivolous and even a little insipid, compared with the more mature and earnest Mrs Graham' (48). Gilbert 'chats' with Eliza, but he 'converses' with Helen. The antithetical implications of 'chats' and 'converses' thus encapsulate the vastly different intellectual capacities and interests

of the two women. Where Helen's opinion tallies with Gilbert's, 'her extreme good sense, her exquisite taste and feeling' (60) delight him; where they differ it '[is]...her uncompromising boldness in the avowal or defence of that difference - her earnestness and keenness that [pique his] fancy' (60). But Brontë does not intend her readers to admire Gilbert's selfish behaviour towards Eliza. Despite her boring ways, Gilbert's fickle treatment of her, seen in his initial encouragement and then his subsequent discarding of her in favour of Helen, is not appropriate and is indicative of the entrenched lack of respect that patriarchal men such as Gilbert have for women.

Gilbert admits that he 'liked to listen' (60) to Helen, suggesting his new willingness to allow a woman, and not himself, to be positioned at the centre of the conversation. He is interested in literature and art, and so, when Helen 'had expressed a wish to see *Marmion*' (68), a fashionable poem written by Sir Walter Scott, Gilbert orders the book from London as a gift for her. He enjoys discussing an eclectic range of interesting issues with her: 'So we talked about painting, poetry, and music, theology, geology, and philosophy...' (68) He admits to Halford: '...by this time, you will see I was pretty far gone' (84), and his deepening love for Helen initially causes him to reject the rumours:

Did I not know Mrs Graham? Had I not seen her, conversed with her time after time? Was I not certain that she, in intellect, in purity and elevation of soul, was immeasurably superior to any of her detractors; that she was, in fact, the noblest, the most adorable, of her sex I had ever beheld, or even imagined to exist? (76)

Gilbert's frequent encounters with Helen have persuaded him that she is a woman of great integrity and nobility of thought, a woman to whom the very notion of sexually inappropriate behaviour would be anathema. He is utterly convinced that her qualities of virtue and moral rectitude would never permit her to deviate from the highest codes of moral conduct, and thus he contemptuously dismisses the sordid allegations that have been disseminated throughout the community of Linden-car.

Once Gilbert has read Helen's diary, all misunderstanding between them is resolved. The patience and loyalty that he exhibits as he waits for her, through all the vicissitudes of Arthur's last illness, the death of Uncle Maxwell, and her devotion to her widowed aunt, are exemplary, and prove his reconfiguration as an enlightened male who truly understands that Helen's familial

responsibilities preclude her from prioritising their relationship. His privileging of Helen's needs before his own, is very different from Walter's selfish approach. Before Arthur dies, Gilbert even submits to Helen's firm ruling about his future connection with her, that they must never meet again, must not communicate for six months, and may then 'maintain a correspondence [consisting of] all thought, all spirit – such as disembodied souls or unimpassioned friends, at least, might hold...' (388).

Brontë uses Gilbert's marriage to Helen to suggest a new construction of companionate marriage in which traditional notions of class, domicile, and money are either ignored or overturned. Gilbert is deeply aware that the marriage will be regarded as a 'mésalliance' (434) because of 'the undeniable difference between Helen's rank' (455) and his. He is a yeoman farmer of humble means, obliged to perform manual work himself on his small farm in Yorkshire; she belongs to the landed gentry, a very rich woman who has inherited Staningley as well as a large fortune from her father. Because the laws of coverture will, upon marriage, grant him automatic control of Helen's wealth, Gilbert knows that the world will misinterpret his reasons for marrying Helen. Traditionally, Helen would be expected to move to Yorkshire to share Gilbert's home with Mrs Markham.

But Helen rejects Gilbert's 'scruples of false delicacy and pride' (468) because '...the greatest worldly distinctions and discrepancies of rank, birth, and fortune are as dust in the balance compared with the unity of accordant thoughts and feelings, and truly loving, sympathizing hearts and souls' (468). Material considerations, Helen argues, are inconsequential when compared with other, more important issues such as love and unity. Thus Gilbert will move to live with Helen and her aunt at Staningley. He attempts to overcome the law of coverture by saying to her: '...do what you will with your own' (469), implying that he wishes her to exercise unchallenged control over her material assets.

Nevertheless, despite Gilbert's impressive conduct as a reformed husband, some feminist critics complain about the way in which Helen's voice is silenced at the novel's closure. For a novel that seeks to empower the female voice in different forms of first person female narrative such as the diary, letters, and important conversations between women, it is disappointing that we must rely on Gilbert for reassurance concerning 'how happily my Helen and I have lived and loved together, and how blessed we still are in each other's society, and in the promising young scions that are growing up about us' (471). However, it is unlikely that Brontë intended her

closure to be seen as sinister and indicative that Gilbert has reverted to his patriarchal ways. She may have been unaware of such dissonance between her feminist agenda and the novel's end; it may have been too awkward structurally suddenly to insert Helen's own comments into the last paragraphs of this very long letter; or it could be argued that concluding with an enlightened male voice is the best evidence of the success of the feminist agenda. Some feminists also dislike Brontë's implication that marriage is ultimately the ideal destination for Helen, a woman who puts up such a stellar performance as a 'single' woman at Wildfell Hall. But such criticism is unjust. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* never argues that the institution of marriage is inherently wrong; rather Brontë seeks reform of marriage. She works within existing societal constructions to show that 'matrimony is a serious thing' (125) that must be reconfigured.

Such a reconfiguration of marriage is the precise focus of Christine Colón's valuable article. Colón does not offer a feminist reading of the two texts, but is concerned primarily with issues of Christian morality and social responsibility. She argues that Anne Brontë's novel critiques Charlotte Brontë's celebration of the ideal of romantic love in *Jane Eyre*, because Anne Brontë suggests that this is an inadequate model of marriage and should instead be relocated within a more encompassing vision of a reformed and more socially aware community. In *Jane Eyre*, the lovers withdraw from the wider community to Ferndean, 'deep buried in a wood' (in Colón, 2008: 23). Colón writes that Charlotte Brontë 'ultimately reaffirms the value of isolation over community as Jane and Rochester escape into their romantic utopia. Once [they] marry, they become a unit complete unto themselves' (23). The closure of Charlotte Brontë's novel reveals no authorial interest in the reformation of society or in the broader community, because Jane and Rochester constitute their own complete and perfect world. Jane writes: '...I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolute bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh' (Charlotte Brontë, 1998 [1847]: 475).

But Anne Brontë does not deal with such unachievable and unrealistic ideals and moral absolutes, instead offering a more grounded and psychologically plausible construction of marriage. Thus, while Helen certainly does experience romantic love in her companionate marriage to Gilbert, she also plays a powerful role in helping to restructure and reform her community, an attitude that is indicative of Brontë's expressed wish to 'reform the errors and abuses of society' (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 3). Helen's attempts to help her friends and neighbours who are experiencing difficulties in their relationships, individuals such as Lord Lowborough,

Ralph and Milicent Hattersley, and Esther, may perhaps appear as insignificant because their lives do not change in any drastic manner. But Colón stresses the long term social and communal consequences of Helen's behaviour because 'these events...have important results, for each sets the stage for more positively nurturing families in the future and for the hope that society will eventually be reformed' (Colón, 2008: 27). Thus, at the conclusion of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and thanks in substantial part to Helen's endeavours, the community is populated with many happy marriages, such as those of the Markhams, Lowboroughs, Hattersleys, Halfords, Lawrences, and little Arthur and his wife Helen Hattersley. The boorish group of reprobates such as Grimsby and Arthur, has been replaced by a much more caring and socially cohesive community in which women occupy a more respected and less subjugated position. Colón's argument is persuasive because it shows that a woman such as Helen can combine her happy and fulfilling marriage with her powerful intervention in social reformation. Colón's reading of Helen is therefore consonant with this chapter's portrayal of her as strong and autonomous, an individual who works independently in terms, firstly, of her defiance of patriarchal conventions when she marries Gilbert, and, secondly, when she has the courage to criticise the behaviour and worldview of friends such as Milicent and Esther.

However, while Colón links *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* with *Jane Eyre*, another Brontë critic, as indicated earlier in this chapter, has pointed to the novel's feminist affinities with the New Woman fiction of fifty years later. By means of a comparative examination of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Sarah Grand's important New Woman text *The Heavenly Twins*, Jessica Cox shows that '[b]oth texts are didactic, and both address issues that were central concerns for the Victorian women's movement: the marriage problem, the licentious male, and the education of the sexes, for example' (Cox, 2010: 31). Cox looks at the many parallels that can be identified between the two texts, such as the shared 'petition for an end to the sexual double standard, for a married woman's right to protection from her dissolute husband, and for the equal education of girls and boys' (31). For a novel written in 1848 to have such powerful points of commonality with a seminal New Woman work written forty five years later, suggests that Brontë's feminist sympathies were strikingly ahead of their time and, as Cox claims, 'undoubtedly [mark] her out as an important early Victorian feminist writer' (31).

Cox's article looks carefully at Gilbert and Helen's marriage, as does another valuable essay by Judith E. Pike. Gilbert's frequently undervalued role as little Arthur's stepfather

receives warm affirmation from Pike, who argues that ‘Anne Brontë’s novels offer an insightful examination of fatherhood’ (Pike, 2012: 113), a relatively neglected institution in Victorian studies. Pike celebrates Gilbert’s fatherly treatment of little Arthur. She shows that Helen, herself the victim of both a father who is ‘a perfect stranger’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 256) to her, and of a husband who has proved to be a disastrous father, understandably warms to Gilbert when he treats her son with such affection and responsibility. Gilbert thus functions as a foil to Arthur’s ‘utter disregard for fatherhood’ (Pike, 2012: 119), so that Gilbert’s ‘paternal affection for young Arthur eventually wins over Helen’s...affections’ (112). Significantly, Gilbert meets little Arthur first, even before Helen, when he rescues the child from a minor accident in a tree. Gilbert writes: ‘...in an instant, I had dropped my gun on the grass, and caught the little fellow in my arms. I wiped his eyes with his frock, told him he was all right, and called Sancho to pacify him’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 21). The concluding image of Gilbert and little Arthur is equally favourable. Gilbert and Helen have reconciled and marriage awaits them. The boy, now eight years old, brings a natural history book to Gilbert:

I sat down to examine the book and drew the little fellow between my knees...I affectionately stroked his curling locks, and even kissed his ivory forehead: he was my own Helen’s son, and therefore mine; and as such I have ever since regarded him. (469)

I have found Pike’s article to be useful in highlighting the different parenting modes of Gilbert and Arthur. Gilbert’s tender, caring treatment of little Arthur is indicative of the warmer, gentler construction of fatherhood advocated by Brontë. Her positive depiction of Gilbert as a father is consonant with the reconfiguration of gender roles that informs *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and suggests that patriarchal notions of Victorian manliness must be discarded in favour of a new, more progressive type of fatherhood as evidenced in Gilbert’s relationship with little Arthur.

While Helen’s two marriages have received much critical attention, the marriage of Ralph Hattersley to Milicent Hargrave remains relatively neglected in the critical literature. This is surprising because Brontë shows that Ralph and Milicent both have the strength and determination to change their conventional ways in favour of a more enlightened approach to issues of gender, power and conflict within marriage. Brontë also uses this marriage to launch a

scathing attack on selfish mothers such as Mrs Hargrave, who force their reluctant daughters into loveless marriages for reasons of wealth.

Initially Ralph Hattersley is a typical patriarchal male, one of Arthur's boorish friends who wishes to marry an obedient, docile wife who will allow him to continue with his reprobate ways unhindered. Ralph tells Arthur: 'I must have somebody that will let me have my own way in everything' (209), 'some good, quiet soul that will let me just do what I like and go where I like, keep at home or stay away, without a word of reproach or complaint; for I can't do with being bothered' (210). Helen is horrified when she receives a letter from Milicent conveying her apprehensions about the marriage and describing the pressure imposed on her by her ambitious mother and brother. Here Brontë again uses the first person female voice so that Milicent can explain her predicament in her own words. Milicent's letter thus has certain narrative parallels with Helen's letters written to Frederick from Grassdale Manor when Arthur is dying.

Milicent writes that Ralph 'frightens me with his abrupt manners and strange hectoring ways, and I dread the thoughts of marrying him' (210). She explains that she had thought that she had given Ralph 'an evasive, half negative answer' (210) to his proposal, but her mother 'says it was as good as an acceptance, and [Ralph] would think me very capricious if I were to attempt to draw back' (210). Milicent 'cannot bear to disappoint' (210-11) Mrs Hargrave who 'is so delighted with ...the match...and thinks she has managed so well for me' (210). Issues of money are clearly uppermost in Mrs Hargrave's mind because Ralph 'is the son of a rich banker' (211) and, because 'Esther and [Milicent] have no fortunes and Walter very little' (211), Mrs Hargrave 'is very anxious to see us all well married, that is, united to rich partners' (211). Milicent's letter confirms that she can see no prospect 'of being able to love and admire Ralph' (211).

Brontë vigorously condemns Mrs Hargrave. Helen writes in her diary:

Alas! poor Milicent, what encouragement can I give you? – or what advice – except that it is better to make a bold stand now, though at the expense of disappointing and angering both mother and brother, than to devote your whole life, hereafter, to misery and vain regret? (211)

Helen wishes that Milicent would 'make a bold stand' and refuse to marry Ralph, but Milicent is submissive and too weak to challenge her mother and brother. The situation is exacerbated when

Helen visits the Hargraves at their family estate, The Grove, and realises that they are not as poor as Mrs Hargrave claims. Helen believes that Mrs Hargrave ‘has money to live very comfortably, if she only knew how to use it judiciously’ (219), but she is profligate with her money, throwing extravagant parties and ‘ever straining to keep up appearances’ (219). She also wastes her money on ensuring that Walter can ‘“hold up his head with the highest gentleman in the land” ’ (219), thereby turning him into a young man whom Helen perceives as ‘a man of expensive habits’ (219). Milicent has therefore been forced into this marriage as ‘a sacrifice to the manoeuvrings of this mistaken mother’ (220).

The marriage is not a happy one. When Ralph refuses to compromise his boorish ways, and Milicent is too timid to criticise him, Helen feels irritated with Milicent: ‘...if she used a little gentle, but serious remonstrance with [Ralph], it might be of some service’ (247). But Milicent has internalised patriarchal values and will not challenge her husband. Arthur tells Helen that in London, Ralph

‘...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...[but Milicent] never gives him a word of reproach or complaint, do what he will.’ (246)

Helen is shocked, explaining that Ralph makes Milicent’s ‘life a curse to her’ (246), but Arthur argues: ‘Not he! She has no will but his, and is always contented and happy as long as he is enjoying himself’ (246). Arthur’s description is of a ‘perfect’ wife in a patriarchal system, a woman lacking all autonomy and independence, who is willingly collaborating with her own oppression. Helen is increasingly peeved at such behaviour:

I do think that if [Milicent] had the courage or the will to speak her mind...and maintain her point unflinchingly, there would be a better chance of [Ralph’s] reclamation, and he would be more likely to treat her better, and love her more...(273)

Helen therefore suggests that to a substantial extent Milicent contributes to her bad marriage because she should have resisted parental pressure to marry Ralph, and should now be vociferously challenging Ralph's reprobate ways.

These reprobate ways are also evident in Ralph's physical abuse of Milicent. While Arthur causes much emotional and financial suffering to Helen, he never abuses her physically, and therefore the Hattersley marriage stands alone in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* as Brontë's one example of a marriage marred by physical violence. Chapter XXXI, ironically entitled 'Social Virtues', describes an especially debauched dinner party at Grassdale during the shooting party, when Ralph physically abuses Milicent three times. Her nervous remonstrance: 'Do let me alone Ralph! remember we are not at home' (266) suggests that this is not a unique experience for her. The first time Ralph abuses Milicent 'by shaking her and remorselessly crushing her slight arms in the gripe [sic] of his powerful arms' (266). A little later he gives her 'another shake and a squeeze that made her draw in her breath and bite her lip to suppress a cry of pain' (267). The third time sees Ralph 'throwing her from him with such violence that she fell on her side' (267). Brontë deplors such acts of domestic violence, suggesting that a husband's abuse of his greater physical strength, and of the power conferred on him by patriarchy, are both unforgivable and interrelated.

This chapter has already explored Christine Colón's consideration of Helen's attempts to help her friends and neighbours when they find themselves in difficult situations, and in line with this, we now see that Helen decides to intervene in her friend Milicent's troubled marriage. When an opportune moment presents itself, Helen speaks frankly to Ralph:

'I can enlighten you...I can tell you...that Milicent loves you more than you deserve, and that you have it in your power to make her very happy, instead of which you are her evil genius, and...there is not a single day passes in which you do not inflict upon her some pang that you might spare her if you would.'(277)

In the ensuing crucial conversation between Ralph and Helen, Brontë shows that Ralph has suddenly realised that having a dull and submissive wife such as Milicent is actually very boring and that it would be much more fun and stimulating to have 'a mate that would not always be yielding, and always equally kind, but that would have the spirit to stand at bay now and then,

and honestly tell me her mind at all times' (279). Ralph is discovering the error of his patriarchal ways. Although he is not in love with Helen, he admires her spirit and wishes Milicent could be more like her. Helen, Ralph enviously imagines, would 'make the house too hot to hold me at times' (279). This dialogue beautifully captures Brontë's validation of strong independent wives and her impatience with timid, supine wives such as Milicent. Ralph explains that he gets bored with Milicent's 'exceeding goodness' (276) and that she is 'too soft – she almost melts in one's hands' (277). He also suggests that his mistreatment of Milicent is the consequence of his frustration at her passive and silent ways:

'How can I help playing the deuce when I see it's all one to her whether I behave like a Christian or like a scoundrel such as nature made me? – and how can I help teasing [sic] her when she's so invitingly meek and mim – when she lies down like a spaniel at my feet and never so much as squeaks to tell me that's enough?' (278)

While Brontë of course refuses to condone such flawed logic, the subtext nevertheless suggests that Ralph's irritation is understandable and that Milicent's uncommunicative behaviour only exacerbates his aggressive tendencies. He complains: 'I don't like that way of moping and fretting in silence, and saying nothing – it's not honest. How can she expect me to mend my ways at that rate?' (278)

Milicent's explanation of her behaviour is one of the most important remarks in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* because it encapsulates the attitude of a woman who has internalised patriarchal values so deeply that she cannot change. Milicent says to Ralph: 'I thought you always liked to be yielded to; and I can't alter now' (276). Patriarchy requires women to 'yield' and defer to men; such an attitude is so powerfully entrenched in Milicent's psyche that she believes that she cannot overcome it. This is a depressing indictment of patriarchy, yet Milicent does somehow find the inner resources to change. Although the text does not provide specific details, it implies that she becomes 'less timid and reserved' (365), while Ralph changes much more drastically and becomes 'more kind and thoughtful' (365). Significantly, he is the only one of Arthur's reprobate friends to visit him when he is dying. Gilbert describes Ralph thus to Halford:

Avoiding the temptations of the town...[he] continued to pass his life in the country immersed in the usual pursuits of a hearty, active country gentleman; his occupations being those of farming, and breeding horses and cattle...enlivened by the occasional companionship of his friends (better friends than those of his youth), and the society of his happy little wife (now cheerful and confiding as heart could wish) and his fine family of stalwart sons and blooming daughters. (440-1)

Such a happy outcome to a marriage that had started so inauspiciously is in part owing to Helen's interventions, and Brontë thus shows that she is a powerful catalyst for social change. Her forthright comments to Ralph cause him to change, and this in turn fosters change in Milicent. Brontë argues that marriages in which oppressive patriarchal values prevail can change and rehabilitate themselves, and therefore her outlook is essentially optimistic. Such optimism is also part of the novel's didacticism, since it is essential for Brontë to show that reform is feasible if she is urging the necessity of change.

This chapter has already shown how in the Preface, Brontë explains that if *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* has 'prevented one thoughtless girl from falling into the very natural error of my heroine, the book has not been written in vain' (4). Her observation can be applied to Milicent's and Helen's strenuous efforts to prevent Milicent's younger sister Esther from making the same mistake as they both did in marrying unsuitable husbands. Hardened and matured by their unhappy marriages, Milicent and Helen are determined that Esther be spared such a fate. At first this seems unlikely because, during Esther's first season in London, Mrs Hargrave has already identified a rich husband for her. However Esther refuses Mr Oldfield's proposal: 'He was a man of good family and large possessions, but...old as Adam, ugly as sin, and hateful...' (358). Mrs Hargrave and Walter bring the same pressure to bear on Esther as they had successfully done before with Milicent. Esther tells Helen: '...mamma was very greatly disappointed at the failure of her darling project, and very, very angry at my obstinate resistance to her will' (358), continuing: 'Walter, too, is so seriously displeased at my perversity and absurd caprice, as he calls it, that I fear he will never forgive me...' (358).

However, Esther acknowledges that she has 'a strong will' (358), and she is also supported by Helen and Milicent. Helen's interventions with Esther are further proof of Christine Colón's claims that Helen's powerful influence on individuals such as Esther plays a major role in reshaping her community for the better. Helen advises Esther to 'stand firm' (358) and to 'do

nothing rashly' (360) because '[y]ou might as well sell yourself to slavery at once, as marry a man you dislike. If your mother and brother are unkind to you, you may leave them, but remember you are bound to your husband for life' (359). Helen's definition of an unhappy marriage as 'slavery' is indicative of the utter subjugation and powerlessness of a wife who is literally and figuratively the possession of her husband, a mere commodity who exists to serve his needs and whims. Helen continues: 'When I tell you not to marry *without* love, I do not advise you to marry for love alone – there are many, many other things to be considered' (359). This comment reflects Brontë's belief that, while romantic love is a centrally important strand in any companionate marriage, such a marriage must also be characterised by other, more practical qualities such as integrity and moderate wealth. Helen's disastrous marriage to Arthur serves as a useful example of a marriage that, from Helen's perspective at least, was the consequence of her romantic feelings for Arthur, but a marriage in which she was 'wilfully blind' (191) to his conspicuous moral flaws. She also rather cynically, if understandably, warns Esther that the single life for a woman may often be better than an unhappy marriage: '...though in single life your joys may not be very many, your sorrows at least will not be more than you can bear' (359) because '[m]arriage *may* change your circumstances for the better, but...it is far more likely to produce a contrary result' (359-60). While Helen's validation of the merits of the single life is hardly surprising in a novel that has consistently pointed to the 'snares and pitfalls' (4) of marriage, it is also strikingly unconventional in a society in which single women were stereotyped as old maids by the age of thirty. Thus Annabella Wilmot, at the age of 'some five and twenty' (135), already feels the societal pressure to marry and escape the mortifying persona of the single woman who has apparently been unable to find a husband. Esther listens to Helen's advice, and eventually she makes her own choice of husband and marries Frederick Lawrence, thus becoming Helen's sister-in-law.

This chapter has shown that Anne Brontë's feminist agenda in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is extremely ambitious. The novel's critique of marriage functions as the focal point for a number of specific lines of feminist enquiry that weave their way reasonably smoothly through the narrative. Helen is invested with much responsibility and frequently operates as Brontë's spokeswoman, voicing Brontë's most deeply held beliefs regarding patriarchy and its unjust subordination of women. Helen is thus positioned at the centre of the novel, and the chapter has argued that she has a direct or indirect, an active or passive, an articulated or silent, connection

with all the significant events and characters in the text. But, despite her powerful role in the novel, there is much more to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* than Helen Huntingdon. The novel is populated by a rich and varied group of characters and contexts that help to make this text such a valuable early feminist work. Brontë's skilful deployment of a number of ambitious narrative techniques contributes to her 'successful interpenetration of form and subject' (Langland, 1989: 118).

Agnes Grey had been published in December 1847, while the first edition of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* appeared in June 1848. I have argued that both novels are significant feminist texts, but that, while *Agnes Grey* looks at the position of the single middle-class woman, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* shifts the focus to that of the married middle-class woman. *Agnes Grey* constitutes an important strand in the revisionist critique of Brontë's fiction because, as I have shown, it contains much valuable material that interrogates single female experience in mid-nineteenth-century Victorian England. However, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* reflects a remarkable advance on *Agnes Grey* because it reflects Brontë's greater confidence in her investigation of feminist concerns as well as her more sophisticated deployment of narrative techniques. Indeed, when one considers that the two novels were published a mere six months apart, the development in the depth and rigour of Brontë's feminist agenda in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, is striking. I believe that *Agnes Grey* functions as a rehearsal for *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, and is best approached as a text in which Brontë introduces many strands of feminist enquiry which anticipate the much fuller and more assertive attention that they receive in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* refines and advances many of the feminist concerns first explored in *Agnes Grey*, and uses a much more elaborate and sophisticated set of narrative techniques to do so, especially in terms of Brontë's skillful manipulation of a hierarchy of first person male and female voices. It is tragic that Brontë died at the very moment that her fiction was starting to become so powerful in its feminist project, and so rich in its confident use of narrative strategy.

As suggested earlier, George Moore had observed that Brontë 'could write with heat, one of the rarest qualities' (Moore, 1924: 215), and had defined 'heat' as a 'torment of passion' (216), an 'almost animal emotion' (217) of 'the burning human heart' (217). This chapter has argued that Moore was correct because *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is undoubtedly informed by this very quality of 'heat'. The great complexity and depth within the novel's passionate polemic reflect the intensity of Brontë's conviction that women, especially middle-class women, were

treated unjustly in Victorian England, and that she must use her literary skills to tell ‘an unpalatable truth’ (Brontë, 1998 [1848]: 4) in order ‘to reform the errors and abuses of society’ (3). There is much evidence in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* that attests to Brontë’s ‘burning human heart’ (George Moore, 1924: 215) and her powerfully held belief that women deserved a better deal than they currently experienced under prevailing patriarchal conditions.

CONCLUSION

My study has shown that my work is revisionist in orientation and seeks to contribute to, and extend, the substantial body of revisionist scholarship that now exists with regard to Anne Brontë's fiction. For more than a century following Brontë's death in 1848, her work was consistently trivialized and contrasted unfavourably with that of her sisters Charlotte and Emily. Her novels were always regarded as being inferior to those written by her sisters, and there was what is now seen as a deafening critical silence regarding the merits and significance of *Agnes Grey* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Chapter 1 offers a detailed account of the reception afforded to Brontë's work from 1847 until the present day, and shows how the pejorative and disparaging remarks of Charlotte in her 'Biographical Notice to the Second Edition of *Wuthering Heights* and *Agnes Grey*' in September 1850, as well as the dismissive comments of Elizabeth Gaskell in *The Life of Charlotte Brontë* (1857), set the tone for a century of silences and misunderstandings with regard to Brontë's art. It is quite extraordinary, as Chapter 1 has shown, that Brontë was marginalized to the extent that there is virtually no mention of her at all in *The Brontë Transactions* until 1949, and that the first serious biography that discussed her life and assessed the quality of her writing, was that of Winifred Gérin in 1959. The literary world of this earlier period seems to have internalized the condemnatory attitude towards Brontë that was reflected in Branwell's lighthearted comment that she was 'nothing, absolutely nothing...next door to an idiot' (quoted in Gérin, 1961: 82).

However, my thesis has also focused on the contributions of revisionist scholars such as Derek Stanford, Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin, whose more enlightened readings of Brontë in 1959 were centrally important in liberating Brontë scholarship from the old conservatisms. I have suggested that in the decades since 1959 there has been a transformation in the critical response to Brontë's works so that there is now a new awareness of the importance and the seriousness of the core concerns that inform her fiction, as well as a greater appreciation of the innovative nature of her deployment of narrative technique. Essentially, her work is now treated with far more respect and with a willingness to consider her in her own right as a major novelist. The persistent tendency in traditional critical approaches that insisted on comparing her work with that of Charlotte and Emily, has been replaced by a revisionist trend that looks at Brontë as a serious novelist in her own right who deserves to be treated independently and separately from her sisters. The task today of scholars who are investigating the complexity and richness of

Agnes Grey and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is to continue to correct the unfortunate misunderstandings and suspicions of the past, and to explore her fiction in new and meaningful ways that will consolidate her claim to be a major and significant Victorian novelist, who made an important contribution to the social, especially the gender, debates of the mid nineteenth century. In keeping with this, my study has sought to link a close textual analysis of the novels to a range of important Victorian concerns, including the ‘Woman Question’ and the power of patriarchy.

While my research thus takes account of these important new revisionist studies, it also builds on and tries to extend this new critical approach towards Brontë’s work. For example, I am unaware of a full-length doctoral study or piece of critical writing that shares the conceptual approach that informs my own research. As I have explained in Chapter 1, my approach integrates two principal areas of enquiry: firstly, an investigation into how Brontë interrogates the position of middle class women in their society, and secondly, an examination of how that interrogation is conveyed to the reader. Brontë has used narrative technique in an innovative and creative manner to reinforce her assessment of some of the social, political, and economic issues that affected middle class women in mid-Victorian England. My work therefore has a double focus that appraises both Brontë’s social commentary and her narratology. Much of the recent revisionist literature has focused on the social enquiry that informs her novels, especially the feminist critique that is such a powerful feature of *Agnes Grey* and, even more so perhaps, of *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Critics such as Elizabeth Langland and Betty Jay, as well as many recent contributors to *Brontë Studies*, have offered perceptive and often ground-breaking readings of Brontë’s social commentary, to such an extent that her standing as an important early Victorian feminist is now widely accepted in academic circles.

However, the conspicuous paucity, or total absence, in my bibliography of critical works that look at Brontë’s adroit use of narrative strategy, is surely testament to the need for this context of her work to be addressed more fully and seriously. I believe that there is still much potential for new, relevant research into Brontë’s treatment of narrative, especially if this research is not limited to her narrative approach *per se*, but rather seeks to apply it to, and integrate it with, the core concerns that inform her fiction. Therefore I feel that a particular strength of my own study lies in its attempt to investigate her use of narrative technique, and to

attest to her considerable success in exploiting the potential of narrative so that it serves as a means of strengthening her already robust social enquiry.

While I have shown in considerable detail how Brontë uses the first person female voice in creative ways in *Agnes Grey*, my assessment of her narrative approach has given more focus to *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. To this end, in Chapter 5, I have argued that her thoughtful deployment of a veritable hierarchy of first person female narratives makes a significant contribution to her project of manipulating her readers so that they understand, and sympathise with, the vicissitudes of Helen's unhappy life with Arthur Huntingdon. For example, I have shown how Brontë uses the diary mode to reflect Helen's unhappiest moments, and I have argued that Brontë has done this deliberately in her quest for verisimilitude. Because a diary is an intensely private form of writing, written with the knowledge that there is no audience, it is legitimate for the reader to believe that the diary's author is writing honestly and sincerely. Thus Helen's diary documents the very worst experiences that she is obliged to endure at the hands of Arthur, experiences such as observing first hand his adulterous relationship with Annabella, as well as his debauched behaviour with his boorish friends. Brontë's reformist agenda requires her readers to believe that Helen's life is not some exaggerated, melodramatic fiction, but rather that it is indicative of the degree of abuse which some wives in Victorian society were expected to accept. However, when the situation is less degrading, albeit still very serious, such as occurs when Helen returns to nurse Arthur on his deathbed, Brontë now uses the epistolary mode, so that Helen's letters, written from Grassdale Manor to her brother Frederick, describe Arthur's last days in harrowing detail. But now there is an audience, not only Frederick, but also Gilbert, who is allowed by Frederick to read the letters and record their content in his own diary, to be used much later in his long letter to J. Halford. I therefore believe that my close analysis of Brontë's deployment of various first person female voices in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* is one of the strengths of my study.

The critical literature that considers the fiction of Brontë invariably focuses on *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, often, I feel, to the detriment of *Agnes Grey*. To a certain extent it could be argued that *Agnes Grey* languishes in the shadow of its more powerful sister work, *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, in the same way that Brontë languished for more than a century in the shadows of her more popular sisters Emily and Charlotte. However my sustained and carefully detailed assessment of *Agnes Grey* in Chapter 4 seeks to redress this imbalance. Even today, with the

revisionist trend concerning Brontë's fiction, it is true that *Agnes Grey* is frequently dismissed as merely being a governess novel, and even then, a mediocre one. The social commentary is often seen as being thin and lacking intellectual rigour. Other critics portray *Agnes Grey* as an apprentice novel in which Brontë rehearses those pivotal concerns on which she will expand in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*.

However, my consideration of *Agnes Grey* has aligned itself with the findings of George Moore and Elizabeth Langland. As I have already shown, Moore describes *Agnes Grey* as 'a masterpiece' (Moore, 1924: 219), while Langland sees *Agnes Grey* as an 'exquisite novel' (Langland, 1989: 97). My admiration for *Agnes Grey* is in recognition of Brontë's skill in taking a plain, ordinary, poor and extremely unprepossessing single woman and showing how she is in fact brave, strong and tenacious, an individual who successfully and cheerfully navigates her way through the difficulties and injustices of a patriarchal society. Brontë invites her readers to participate in the authorial celebration of Agnes's autonomy and integrity, and I readily accepted this invitation. In fact Agnes is extraordinary and utterly antithetical to the ordinary grey little woman her drab name might imply. My study has therefore argued that it is surely the mark of a fine writer to be able to take such apparently unpromising material as that offered by Agnes, and shape it into such a remarkable, richly nuanced character. It is true that in *Agnes Grey* Brontë does not experiment with narrative technique to the extent that she does in *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, but it is nevertheless important to observe that Agnes is allowed to tell her own story by means of her assertive first person female voice. In Chapter 4 I have extended existing analyses of the first person voice in this novel to show how Agnes wields considerable power over her readers: she has complete freedom to manipulate her account so that she can remain silent or mysterious on pivotal events or developments in the story, or she can confess her deepest and most private thoughts, such as those regarding Mr Weston, to her readers in a frank and full manner.

As I have already indicated, Chapter 1 of my study contains a detailed assessment of the critical response to Brontë's fiction from 1847 to the present day. I believe that my research is useful in its depth and breadth, especially in its very careful consideration of many articles in *The Brontë Transactions* and *Brontë Studies*. Many Brontë scholars would agree that it is in these publications of the Brontë Society that some of the most innovative, groundbreaking research, often in its infancy and still requiring further investigation, appears. One particularly interesting

and significant consequence of this strand of my research is that I have been able to prove the serious dearth of articles published before 1949 that offer independent or favourable readings of Brontë, if indeed she is discussed at all. Chapter 1 has demonstrated that the more customary situation is that these early articles remain completely silent with regard to her, with the implication that Charlotte and Emily Brontë are the only Brontë novelists of any importance, or, at worse, a tacit suggestion that Anne Brontë and her fiction never existed. This early absence of informed or favourable readings of Brontë's fiction reinforces my argument that it was only in 1959, with the revisionist studies of Derek Stanford, Ada Harrison and Winifred Gérin, that 'the stone [that had remained] at the mouth of Anne's tomb for over a hundred years...was [finally] rolled away' (Stanford, 1959: 245). On the other hand, my consideration of the more recent research in *Brontë Studies* has shown unequivocally that Brontë is now the focus of a much more robust and intellectually rigorous academic enquiry. It seems that Brontë scholars realise that Brontë still offers rich pickings in terms of original research opportunities, something that may now be less possible with her heavily researched sisters. I am unaware of any other academic study that offers the same detailed analysis of the critical response, and therefore I believe that my comprehensive overview helps to expand the scope of the revisionist literature.

This is also true of my critique of the priest in *Agnes Grey*. My consideration of three men of the cloth, Mr Hatfield, Mr Weston, and Mr Grey, has important implications for our understanding of Brontë's evangelical sympathies. I have shown how Agnes criticises Mr Hatfield for his arrogant, selfish behaviour and his dismissive treatment of his poor parishioners, such as Nancy Brown, who turns to Mr Hatfield for understanding and guidance when she feels that she has lost connection with God. On the other hand, Agnes lauds Mr Weston for his caring, respectful response to the poor, as well as for the evangelical beliefs that inform his plain, intelligent, articulate sermons. My chapter has also demonstrated the curious way in which Agnes is completely silent about her own father's religious practices and beliefs, so that her description of Mr Grey is confined entirely to his role as a father and husband. I have pointed to the enigmatic treatment afforded to her father by Agnes, and to the unusually secular context in which Brontë portrays this potentially important priest, important in that he is the father of the novel's central character. I have linked my critique of the priest in Chapter 4 with my exploration in Chapter 3 of Patrick Brontë's *Funeral Sermon for the Late Rev William Weightman MA, Preached in the Church of Haworth on Sunday, the 2nd of October 1842*, and I have shown that

this sermon ‘is an invaluable primary source for understanding “what every clergyman ought to be” in the eyes of both Patrick and Anne Brontë’ (Leaver, 2012: 345). My assessment of the priests in *Agnes Grey* argues that this can be seen as contributing to the feminist critique in the novel because of Agnes’s rigorously moral approach to the three men, so that her response to each priest highlights her unswerving distinction between behaviour that is morally deficient or morally acceptable. Therefore it is my contention that my critique of the priest constitutes original research and contributes to revisionist studies of Brontë’s fiction.

My study has also identified a number of areas in which further research may be undertaken. These include the powerful influence of Samuel Richardson on the shape and core concerns of Brontë’s fiction. I have suggested that Richardson is a significant part of Brontë’s reading history, and that the connections between the two writers have not yet been adequately explored. Therefore I believe that useful opportunities for original research exist, especially if the research extends to all of Richardson’s novels. Length constraints obliged me to limit my own analysis in Chapter 3 to the affinities between *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* and Richardson’s first novel *Pamela*, and I tried to show the remarkably close links between these two novels in that they both contain a powerful feminist critique as well as sharing a similar authorial interest in the potential of a hierarchy of first person female voice narratives. A meticulous consideration of the connections between these two writers would, I believe, constitute a major contribution to the revisionist literature. There is surely enough material of substance here to justify a full length study.

The neglect of Anne Brontë, as I have shown, was the unfortunate consequence both of the unhelpful remarks of Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell, but also of generations of Brontë scholars who seemed to internalise their views of Brontë and Gaskell without assessing the merits of these arguments in a rational and independent manner. My thesis has sought to position itself within, and to contribute to, the revisionist scholarship, to the rereading of Brontë’s fiction. The chief consequence of this revisionist scholarship is that Anne Brontë has finally emerged from the shadows.

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